

Fallout: Equestria - Murky Number Seven

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Synopsis:

To become a slave is bad. To be born a slave is forever damaging.

For young Murky, the life of the labourer and servant is all he has ever known, raised without knowledge of freedom or the concept of choice. But when the brutality of his newest masters in Fillydelphia becomes all too much and the heroic escape of a certain little mare takes place before his eyes, Murky finally discovers a life worth fighting for.

His own.

Broken from the indoctrination, Murky sets out to reclaim the freedom that has been denied to him throughout his entire life. Against abusive slavers, a fatal illness wracking his body and the attentions of ponies that often cannot be trusted, Murky sets out to achieve the impossible.

To escape Fillydelphia.

But when your cutie mark is a set of shackles... are you really supposed to be free at all?

Chapter 1: Flying Without Wings

The Equestrian Wasteland.

It takes everything, but gives only two things. Freedom and Dreams.

Freedom, to choose your path for yourself. Whether you will revel in the lawless expanse of the wastes and strike out for yourself at the expense of others. Whether you will remain an unknown survivor, to exist and accept the harsh reality to ensure your continued existence. Or whether you will attempt to rise up; to be a hero and attempt to fight the wasteland itself.

Dreams, to believe in the world that you wish to accept or deny. The darkened past, the cold present or the future that only you can see for yourself, be it an unchanging mire or a land filled with the boundless hope buried deep in those few good souls left in the wastes.

Everypony in the wasteland is given those two elements, to choose what to make of them for themselves. Everypony, that is, except for the forgotten masses.

The slaves.

Born into a life with no choice; taken from them not by the wastes but by other ponies. They toil, destined for nothing more than to be a cold statistic to the future.

They have no freedom. They hold no dreams.

This is the story of the slave who dared to dream.

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Fallout Equestria: Murky Number Seven

Chapter 1:

Flying Without Wings

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“Slaving in Filly almost makes you wish for a Winter Rad Up...”

“What was it like to be born a slave?”

I suppose I should explain something about the nature of being born into slavery, for it is somewhat different from the more common way of simply being captured and forced into labour. You never even know the concept of choice. Your life is little but instruction following order following demand. Many would like to believe the myth of growing up in a harsh environment to become a big and tough pony with the willpower to someday overthrow his masters. But unfortunately, that was never going to be possible.

The truth is that it more often stunts your growth, resulting in a sub-generation of physically small and weak ponies with no education and little true aspiration. How can a pony who has never known the freedom of the outside world ever know what to want from it? Sure, there might be some strong earth pony, powerful unicorn or rare and agile pegasus some place that once did as the stories say....

But let's just say that isn't possible for me and leave it at that for now. Instead, let me tell you about how I came to be where I am now.

I grew up a runt. The smallest of the bunch born to a weary mother sick with taint poisoning in a camp near Shattered Hoof to an unknown father. Suffice to say, given the way mares were treated in the slave camps, my father was likely one of the harsh figures giving us instructions and beating the ones who fell behind their quota. At first it was cart hauling, but as the years passed and it became clear I wasn't going to get any bigger or stronger to meet my master's expectations, I was instead sold off. My mother had begged and pleaded with them. She had offered anything, including herself, to make them reconsider and keep me there with her. Although the memory is now far gone, I still remember the slavers laughing her off. They told her that they could already have anything they wanted from her. We were slaves. We had no bargaining chips.

I was sold for a measly hundred caps to a rock farmer off the eastern edge of Whitetail Woods. Torn from the hold of my mother, I was immediately dragged into service upon the blank and lifeless duty of shifting rocks in some inane quest for gemstones. With a change in scenery came a change in hardship. While hauling carts and performing physical labour had broken me physically in the past and hurt my body's development, I now was a lone runt in a slave labour farm full of other delinquents just waiting for a new body at the bottom of the pecking order. They hurt me, bullied me and stole my food and minuscule amounts of possessions. I had to learn to sneak out and try to steal some back at nights...and I wasn't always successful. These days I still bear the scars of the lash upon my back.

Truly, I wish I could say that this foalhood had taught me to be an independent, brave and determined pony like the ones in the legends. But the truth is...I'm not. Being born a slave has one other problem, as I mentioned before. You do not know choice. You don't know how to think for yourself unless pushed to the absolute boundaries of physical needs like food or water. If a slaver asks you to jump...you ask into which radioactive crater.

The thought of escape and a life outside slavery does not occur to a mind who has only ever known the life of the servant to some overbearing master's wishes. I have no free will, no courage to make my own choices and few dreams of anything more than perhaps a painless death at the end of it all.

If any more proof is needed, all I need to do is look at my flank to see the contract that seals the deal. For my cutie mark bears a looped set of chained manacles, their metal bands open and ready to slam shut about my legs below them should I ever fall out of line. Attained the day in which I was controlled more than any other...it is a continual reminder of my subservience to any master.

I apologise if I cannot tell the rest of my life up till this point in great detail. From the day I received the most hated cutie mark a pony could have, I was locked into the bad hand I'd been dealt. I suffered the work set in front of me from a half dozen other masters as they passed the unlucky runt around for paltry sums of caps each time. I was bullied, beaten, starved and ignored to the point in which I even began to forget

myself. Each year everything became a little more blurry as my life became nothing but an unceasing cycle of work, toil and deprivation. I didn't even need to go into the wastes to find the worst it had to offer.

Or so I thought. For one day my master in Manehattan received an offer he couldn't refuse. A deal, from another master far across the wastes who was seeking any slave he could get his hooves on for large sums of caps. And so once more I was taken into a convoy of other hopeless ponies like myself and marched to the next place of labour. But this place was unlike the others...for my next destination was Fillydelphia. Serving under Master Red Eye.

Upon my arrival I discovered a hellcity of nightmare brutality made real. A living, breathing maze of harsh metal, red hot heat and a thick choking smog surrounding a crater filled with deathly magical radiation. The scale was beyond anything I had expected, the workloads beyond what any pony could ever hope to live up to and an authority commanding us that seemed devoted to a fanatical call for 'Unity.' Master Red Eye often spoke at length to us across the megaphone systems of how we were aiding in the unity that would save Equestria. To slaves like me, all unity truly held was the threat of being dragged away to partake in it. Those poor ponies never did return, nor did any stories on what 'Unity' truly meant.

To make matters worse for the slaves on a more personal level, that same authority had no hesitations to weed out the weak and use them as examples. To better encourage others to work hard.

Unfortunately, as I said...I am particularly weak...

I snapped. It was too much for me on my own. The workload broke me and drove me to a mad, cowardly dash for a hiding space where I might shun the forces trying to control me and just forget it all. I don't remember much about what happened upon that haunting night when I broke from my designated area and galloped into the smokey darkness towards the ruined buildings to hide away. All I remember is...they found me. I was punished with a sentence so severe that I scarcely even remember what they did. They hurt me and told me that I was to die soon as an example to others when they next held an 'event.' I was thrown back in my pen and put back on rotation until this occurred...an event I quickly realised was going to be the arena of death. The Pit.

The Pit was to happen tomorrow morning.

And so that is my story, leaving me sitting scared in my pen in Fillydelphia, alone and battered, waiting to die in the morning.

Short story, huh?

* * *

“Yo, runt! Looking forward to the show?”

Voices. They rang through my mind even as I fruitlessly attempted to sleep in my pen. I couldn't avoid them no matter where I hid. The disadvantage of being born to a mother sick with taint poisoning was the threat of minor mutation upon birth. In my case, that meant slightly differently sized ears that were a little too sensitive. Sure...it's a great advantage to eavesdrop, but try having a slave master screaming in your face. It's like shoving a gun barrel in your ear and pulling the trigger. Not content with a stunted growth, no education and eternal servitude until the day I die, the Goddesses saw fit to give me a damn mutation too. It's part of the reason I always tried to hide from other slaves.

The Fillydelphia FunFarm's petting zoo performed much the same task it once had two hundred years ago...keeping living things inside for the betterment of others. I pulled my meagre clothing closer to my torso and curled even tighter into the corner of the pigsty. The red haze of Fillydelphia drafted in through the one small entrance designed, presumably, for young pigs.

'What were young pigs even called?' I wondered, one more unknown fact tossed onto the pile that had, over life, accumulated in my mind.

“You scared? Frightened to die? Gonna scream? We want to hear you scream tomorrow! Or squeal

like a piglet! Yeah, do that!”

Well, that answers that. There were three of them just outside, long term slaves of Fillydelphia. Each had been dragged in through those gates kicking and screaming as they were welcomed to the pitiful existence that would become the rest of their lives. I regarded them as lucky, they hadn't been born into it...they had known freedom for a time. They celebrated their small advantage by immediately treating me as some sort of lower class the moment I had been hurled roughly into the same caged area as the unruly trio. I had been at the bottom of the pecking order many times, but this time it was a true threat. They stole my food, taunted everything I did and when angry at the slavers...often used me as a convenient toy to let off some steam by beating someone they knew couldn't return the favour. Before long, I had taken to hiding in the pigsty of the enclosure, the small entrance too low and narrow to be accessible by anypony bigger than my own small size.

It was cowardice, but I didn't care. I hadn't been taught to have any pride or bravery. All I had to do was stay alive until my masters next needed my presence to do work...even if that work was to walk to the arena to...to...

“You're gonna die, runt! Beaten! Stabbed! Shot! Melted! Bleeding out! Choked!”

...to that...yeah. I hugged myself tighter, half wishing that if I clenched tightly enough I could simply disappear into the corner. The sty was stifling hot in the warm air of the city, making it impossible to tuck my head into my own hooves without getting wafts of uncomfortable warm breath every time I exhaled. Sleep was not going to happen, not tonight. Between the taunts, the heat and my own crippling fear...dreams were the last place I wanted to be.

So instead, I remained still and cowered, clutching my few possessions to my underside and softly crying to myself again. It is somewhat embarrassing to admit, but I cried a lot in life, one of the only two ways I could find to let out emotion properly to cope at all. To weep and allow it all to flow out so often that it had become something of an involuntary reaction to hardship. As anyone could imagine, it had not done any favours for my position as the resident victim for every slave with even half a mind of wanting false authority. How many times I had simply toiled away pulling carts while sobbing openly or running back to my enclosure so I could hide and let it all out.

The other way was my one permitted vice in life...the item I clutched to myself as though it would somehow save my life.

My journal.

Under the crimson nightmare and heavy industry of Fillydelphia that had become my home and place of work under Master Red Eye it had taken on a greater meaning than ever before. I could not read or write; slaves didn't get taught such things in the wastes and my mother hadn't had the time or knowledge to teach me herself. No, instead I sketched.

It was the only way I could express myself...to put charcoal or graphite sticks to yellowed paper and let my emotions and feelings dictate what I drew. An outpouring of my own personal thoughts on what was troubling me or what things I secretly wanted. But after entering Fillydelphia it also held a second purpose...it was my one little anchor against the madness that threatened to drive me to something...something stupid. A manner in which I might drive back the closing walls of insanity around me of abusive slaves, painful workloads and terrifying masters. When I drew...it let me focus on something else for that brief amount of time. I never looked at my own drawings that much, preferring to instead do more.

The voices continued...beginning to expand, to go into detail of exactly how some badass stallion or vicious mare would end my life tomorrow. Part of me wanted to shout at them, beg them to go away and leave me alone. But it hadn't worked the first time I had pleaded them to let me be. In fact, it had only made things worse.

Instead, I sat up, shaking off the stray rotten straw from my malnourished body with a weakened stagger, and pulled out my journal. Biting the charcoal stick I had stolen from the small stocks we often pulled for work, I began to let myself fall into the trance. Trying to ignore the dirty taste of the stick I spread

out the paper from my journal in front of me. Charcoal met paper...a long sweeping arc that grew into multiple lines in the vague shape of something...somepony...

“Hey, runt! You crying in there? Come out and let us cheer you up! We'll give you something to eat...after we're done digesting it!”

Raucous laughter followed. Ignore it. Ignore it all. Concentrate on the lines...the shapes and the curves. Half the time I didn't even know what I was drawing...

“Live life to the full, runt! Cause it isn't like you'll have it for long! Oh wait...you don't have any life anyway!”

Ignore it...ignore it...I tried to let my mind focus entirely on drawing. The sound of charcoal on paper and the meditative bliss the process brought...let my subconscious do the work...

“How does it feel knowing you're going to DIE!?”

I was weeping still, even as I tossed the charcoal into the corner with a pitiful whine and clutched the drawing close...I blanked out the laughter and the voices. Their taunts washed over me as slowly I held up my art to look at the finished piece...

It held a small pony with different sized ears lying dead in a pit...bleeding from horrendous wounds, the leering face of his killer glaring down from above.

Trembling...sobbing gave way to fully fledged crying as I shut the journal sharply with a hoof and covered once more in the corner as the voices came back all too strongly once again.

* * *

I woke to a sharp rapping on the outer casing of the pigsty, sending jolts of shock through me, the sound echoing all the louder through my ears and the confined space. Instinct rushed in my veins as I quickly scattered to my feet, grabbed my journal and squeezed out of the hole into the harsh outside world. I hadn't slept well. Gunfire from some place nearby had disturbed my sleep multiple times...some stupid pony losing it and making a run for it probably. It wasn't the first time either, on my first night I witnessed a father blown in half by a huge rifle carried by one of Master Red Eye's griffins for trying to stop them taking his foal away. A bright red glare forced my eyes shut as I stumbled wearily to my feet and gazed about me as the world came back into view.

My world.

Fillydelphia. The ever reliable industrial heart of Old Equestria, now the reluctant industrial machine of the wasteland. Around that lethal balefire crater, its factories, forges and mills rose like shredded, but intact, beacons of potential. Under Master Red Eye's reign, the slaves here had reactivated many of them or carried out repairs with scavenged scrap brought from the many Stables that pocketed the nearby landscape. After years of renovation, the effect was less of a repaired ruin in some areas and more of a very unmaintained build if you didn't look too closely to see the weathering from two hundred years in the wasteland's weather. Despite the revulsion of my presence here...I found it all genuinely quite impressive.

I knew those factories well. They were where I had my slave work broken in tugging overborne carts of twisted scrap and newly manufactured ammunition. Where I had been driven through horrific work environments and made to labour in poisonous fumes that made me gag and choke for days afterwards. I dreaded for the condition my lungs must be in after my short few weeks in this living nightmare.

“Murky Number Seven! Explain to me right fucking now why you are not already on your way to your place of work!”

I blinked as my eyes adjusted, turning and immediately lowering my head to the ground in subservience to the unicorn slaver before me just as I had always been conditioned to do. The stallion didn't care for it...a fell blow with his front hoof to my face savagely laid me out on the ground two feet away, nursing a loose tooth and an aching jawline. I felt the unconscious instinct to cry as I cradled my head...but in the dry warm

smog of Fillydelphia, my eyes were spent and could not muster the effort after last night. But a place of work? What place of work? Didn't this slaver know I was scheduled to die in a few hours?

"I..." My voice was weak and hoarse, owing to a rough throat from little water and plenty of heat from the forges, "I am to attend the Pit later on this...this morning, Master...I'm sorry...I thought you'd know"

His hoof connected with my skull a second time, putting me right back on my rump again. Pain flared through my face as I felt my weakened body giving to the hulking slaver's strikes. Terror shot through me at the threat of further beating, I glanced up at him with one eye from beneath my hoof as I felt blood trickling from the edge of my lip...I must have bitten my own tongue...

"I don't give Celestia's right flank if you're heading off to die in that Pit, what makes you think that it gets you off work until the time comes?" he stated bluntly, leaning his face down to me, "Red Eye brought you here to work, now get your tiny rump in gear and *get to fucking work!*"

The unwashed stench of his breath nearly made me gag. Damn...but he was right, what choice did I have to not obey a command? Even if...even if I was trying to fight the unbridled terror wrenching my gut at the thought that I was about to be sent to my death. He was my Master, I was the slave. Without a word, I nodded profusely and got to my hooves as I glanced upwards at him.

My current Master (other than Master Red Eye, of course) was a dull blue stallion with a filthy cyan mane. He had introduced himself at first as having the name Whiplash. Well...it certainly fitted him, owing to the long coil by his side. He had one hell of a talent with it using telekinesis, something many slaves in the FunFarm petting zoo pens would attest to...myself included.

Looking into those yellowed eyes gave me all the incentive I needed to quickly turn and gallop off across the petting zoo. Slaves often were not kept under shackle and chain in Fillydelphia, nor in locked pens for the simple reason of...well...where could we run to? Master Red Eye's part of Fillydelphia was surrounded by a colossal wall to keep us in more than anyone out. As such, slaves were often trusted to run to where they needed to be. If they were not spotted in the right places at the right time...wham. Besides, the *real* chains holding me were upon my flank anyway.

As I crossed away from my pigsty home I got a glance at that wall in the distance and reflected on its defences pointing outwards. Who in their right mind would be so stupid as to attack Fillydelphia? If the wall wasn't bad enough, there was the chemical moat that had made me sick on my way in, the energised fences powered by some magical spark generator hidden behind the wall and towering guard posts lined with members of Master Red Eye's army. Oh...and the not-so-ignorable hideous pony head shaped hot air balloons that eternally gazed down upon us from on high with a pink pony's freakishly large eyes. The same pony who was strewn on every FunFarm sign, ride entrance, building and advertisement. That same ridiculous grin and poofy curled pink hair that was out of place with everything else in Fillydelphia.

After just a few weeks in the FunFarm...I really...*really* hated that pony...

I exited the FunFarm, glad only that my peers had been sent to their own places of labour before I had been woken. After last night, I last thing I wanted to face them again before I was sent to the Pit.

Inwardly...I hoped their workplace was some place dangerous that I might never see them again even if I were allowed to live for more than a few more hours. Perhaps the Parasprite Pits...or off to investigate a Stable death trap. I had never volunteered for such things, the big griffon who greeted my shipment coming in had told us you could earn your freedom through them. However, I was too afraid to risk death seeking something I wasn't supposed to have anyway.

Passing the entrance to the FunFarm I paused briefly...as I always did. Contained next to a sign (featuring that damned pony again) was a large mirror pointed at anypony who would be standing in queue to enter the amusement park. I couldn't imagine what it could possibly be used for other than making queues seem longer.

I moved in front of it. My form was thinner than normal. It was a shaped mirror...how novel. I reached out to wipe dust from the surface for a clearer look.

My hoof felt no curve. The mirror was not shaped...it was perfectly normal.

That scrawny, wasted figure...was myself after almost a month in Fillydelphia. Great Celestia, I had never been anything but smaller than normal and possessing thinner limbs, but this was horrifying, I could see my *ribs* if I lifted up my clothing!

I quickly tightened my patched jerkin about me again...

Giving myself a once over revealed nothing more than the ruin that was my body now. Dirty and dark blonde lanky mane? Check. Filthy dull green coat with patches of hair beginning to fall out? Check. Rad-sores on my back left and muzzle? Check. Slightly oversized right ear and slightly undersized left ear? Thin haired tail? Cutie mark bearing those gnashing manacles? Check, check and...I sighed...check. Just your humble and pitifully weak earth pony here...minus the things earth ponies are often known for. Not shown? The painful wrenching of my stomach crying out for sustenance and the fuzzy headed fevers that spoke of building radiation poisoning in my blood from the foul air and workplaces.

Even without the Pit...I began to rate my chances at survival for another month very low anyway.

I raised a hoof to my face, dabbing my damp eyes at the soul crushing sight of my own body being so irreparably hurt. Apparently my tears ducts weren't quite done yet then. I wanted nothing more than to collapse off my weary hooves and curl up on the ground...but long conditioned instincts propelled me to continue. I had work to do, even if I didn't want to do it any more.

Turning from the mirror, I set a pace toward the armour manufacturing facilities. Road signs were useless to me, my inability to read rendering them defunct. Briefly, I wondered if they even meant the right things anyway these days as I stared at the tall, rectangular sheet of metal on stands just outside the FunFarm. It was bent away from the crater, clearly having been jostled by the missile as it struck Fillydelphia and never truly fixed. The words on it were undecipherable to me...a mixture of dots and lines that held secrets I would never understand. Words were not my thing...shape and form was more my area of understanding to sketch and shade in those quiet moments between shifts. However there were three words that I knew...three words that I often wondered about.

Murky Number Seven.

My name. Like some sort of sick joke to poke fun at somepony when he's already down. The not so lucky one. Ha. Ha. Laugh it up everypony at the slave with the silly name. That said, the exact circumstances were a little unknown to me, although you could logically piece together some of it. I was not an only child. My mother had been the possession of a few Masters in her time and had the attentions of various slavers too. I had been the seventh foal she gave birth to. I had no confirmation that this was the exact reasoning...nor did I like to think it as the true one, for it pointed at my caring mother as someone devoid of imagination and life to the point she would number her own children. As for 'Murky'...well...you only needed to look at the colour of my mane and coat for that one. A particularly loathsome slave I had once worked alongside in Manehattan had once told me that it was because my mother hadn't truly cared for me at birth...because I wasn't an intentional child, hence the sick joke of a name.

I knew her better. Even if that were true, she changed as I grew around her.

Briefly, I paused in the road...it struck me suddenly that tomorrow, my own mother wouldn't even know I was dead...

...I galloped the rest of the way to the factory in tears, my eyes finally proving they could find enough effort to cry any time, as I sought only the familiar lonely toil of a slave's life to help me forget my own stupid wishes.

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The armour factory loomed over the motionless and ruined hovels surrounding it, the places where I presumed workers had once stayed close to their site of work. The run to the site had long exhausted the emotional hurt I had brought on myself. Instinct and conditioning forced it unwillingly to the back of my mind as I stepped past the thick metal gates, feeling my lungs already burning from the exertion of arriving at

all.

As I galloped past workers quarters, I briefly wondered what it was like back then, to have choice of what you do in life and no-pony telling you what your day is to include. I pictured a young mare, turning away from her cutie mark's proclamation of being a seamstress to instead do it only as a hobby while working as a baker. How did anyone choose what they truly wanted? When given everything, how do you know which route to take? What crusade would any pony undertake to find the thing that they truly *wanted*?

Sometimes I wondered if being instructed was not perhaps so bad compared to that insurmountable choice. Looking into the red hot forge ahead of me, the warmth mixing with the dry air to blast my wet eyes into dryness once more, I wondered who would choose to work in a place like this.

The factory office had been converted into the resident slave master's hub of activity. As I approached, surrounded by scalded and dire faced ponies slaving away on the metal presses and molten vats I could see her up above. Wicked Slit...a unicorn mare bearing just as wicked a blade that hovered alongside her. When not around her, some of the slaves made occasional jokes as to whether her name meant the knife or...well...something else. The one slave who rebelled and told it to her face had lasted three unthinkable days regretting why that had been a bad idea. Right now, her hooves rested on the railing, her horn magically enhancing the volume of her voice to be heard over the din as the blade floated casually to and fro beside her.

“You lot! No! *You lot!* Get up off the damned floor! You *wanting* dumped in the vats? Because it's all you're good for if you just lie around!”

I turned, seeing three ponies collapsed on the floor, two male earth ponies and a female unicorn. The earth ponies had scorch marks around their face from grabbing scalding hot metal by accident in what I knew to be from work in the refuse yard. Some of that stuff stayed hot for days without showing it, I'd once stepped on one myself. All were clearly suffering from a lack of water and too much heat inside. Even as I watched, under the factory master's barked orders, a couple of slavers began hauling them off...too weak to even fight back. For their sake I hoped the master was not intending to hold up to her sick promise. Only then did I notice her eyes watching me, foolishly standing alone with no work to do.

“You! Get up here now! You're late!”

Bobbing my head to show understanding, I quickly headed for the skeletal metal stairs rising above the shop floor of the armour facilities. As I climbed, the view let me fully grasp the weight of Master Red Eye's intentions. There were hundreds of ponies in this place alone...and this was only one factory. Sparks flew from heated metal as it was machined into place and cut upon conveyors. The sound of whirring cogs and the scream of tortured metal as it was warped and forced into new angles assaulted my eardrums. I had once asked for ear plugs. Wicked Slit had asked if I'd prefer them cut off instead.

Steam rose and enveloped the walkways that were thick with guards bearing long rifles and gas masks. Oh how I envied those masks...any relief from the poisonous air...

A few even wore battle saddles...I envied them too. Call it a silly wish, but I'd always wanted one of those things; even if I had no use for it. Something about the mechanisms and artful measure of weights and machinery lit a wishful appreciation to the artistic side of my mind. Perhaps one of those lighter ones that I could wear and hang things on would fit best. Briefly, as I trotted through the master's open doorway, I wondered if I might be able to get one in my last few seconds of life inside the Pit. That'd be nice.

The darker (and larger) part of my brain immediately reminded me that it isn't so nice when it means you are getting beaten to death, the bully's words came flooding back into my mind.

“How does it feel knowing you're doing to DIE!?”

Choking back a reaction, I clattered over the lethally haphazard catwalks toward Wicked Slit's door.

Inside, the office was marred with old furniture around a rotted wooden desk bearing one of the indecipherable terminals. I hated those things...whirring away with hidden secrets that I couldn't read, like

something put on Equestria just to spite my illiteracy. Wicked Slit sat behind it, holding a cigarette magically in front of her mouth as she typed up, presumably, a report on the three slaves she needed replacing. Around her sat various scraps of her life, cigarette stubs and packs, a couple of half empty bottles of Sparkle Cola and her prized possession, a wickedly curved knife that permanently stood upright with the blade embedded in the wood. Her desk was covered in the pockmarks of the tip from each day, but not as many as were left on her slaves. Once, she had slit my back just enough to make the wagon harness rub it all day. Wicked Slit had a fiendish imagination with that blade.

Right now she didn't even look at me as she spoke in a surprisingly polite voice, belying her ruthless attitude,

“Do you know, Murky Number Seven, how many slaves we lose on a daily basis?”

I shook my head, frankly it wasn't something I cared to think about. All I knew was it was no small number. ('About to be one less', my mind oh so joyfully reminded me) Every few days a slave in my enclosure just...wouldn't wake up. Toxic air was a major killer, smog in the lungs and infections forming within every small wound you received were lethal too. She didn't look up.

“I didn't hear you,” she intoned. The words carried underlying threat. Of course...she wasn't looking at me to see my shake of the head.

“I...I don't know, Master,” I replied, stammering. My voice sounded so small beside hers.

“I'm a mare, Murk.” She still didn't even turn from her work on the terminal.

“I...I mean, I don't know...um...Ma'am?” I tried instead. Funny, most female slavers preferred master as well. I presumed she had some trouble with her stallion peers to gain the same level of respect in an environment given to masculine ego and shows of strength. If anything, it made her seem all the more lethal as I risked a glance and saw the puckered scars across her face...even a crack running up her horn. Casting magic must have been agonising for her...it spoke volumes of her willpower, as loud as...well...as loud as her voice, I guessed. She sat up, looking directly at me. I had forgotten something...to say it at the end too, perhaps?

“I mean...I don't know, is it Ma'am, Ma'am?” I muttered, trying not to look her in the eye. Or perhaps she was one of those more militant types from Master Red Eye's army? They liked it at the beginning as well...

“Ma'am...Ma'am, Ma'am?”

Her left eye twitched dangerously as she shoved the heavy terminal away with her magic and leaned over at desk at me. Suddenly, I had some very nasty imaginative thoughts about that knife and varying parts of my body...

“Do you think you're being funny, Murk? Or clever?” she intoned dangerously, the knife pulling itself out of the wood without a sound. Damn that thing was sharp...

I shook my head. I didn't want to risk anything else. Why had I gotten so chatty anyway? Perhaps the knowledge that I was about to have my throat torn out and left to painfully bleed to death had made me careless. My imagination became a very imminent reality as the knife flew over and rested against my throat. My squeak of terror stifled itself as I dared not move my throat in the slightest, but I felt the sweat of fear running down the back of my neck as its oddly cold surface rested...ready to pull to the side if she decided to just get rid of me for back talking her...

“The truth is, Murk.” she began again, “Too many, and do you know why?” She didn't give me a chance to reply. “Lack of effort. Red Eye expects every one of you to do their utmost best...you have listened to his broadcasts?”

I could hardly avoid them. Every night they echoed around my pen, blasting speeches of a greater future...of our sacrifice being for the good of our descendants and the survival of Equestria into better days. I had often heard slaves arguing, some claiming that perhaps he was right and if they just put their backs into it they might somehow save themselves too. Others...well, others defied him, quietly of course, but would

happily curse his name into the ground all while grovelling for forgiveness if any of those fanatical griffins heard them. Me? I didn't really think either way. One way or another my purpose was to serve, if it were Master Red Eye that commanded me to do this, I'd do it. What else was there for me to do?

“Red Eye expects much of you slaves and of us slavers, Murk. And examples like those three down there are not good enough. It's enough to make me want to just start shooting every slave I see for insulting our great leader.”

Great. She was a fanatic too. Oh my wonderful life...

“Which brings me, of course, to you, Murk...”

Shit.

“Given you were ten minutes late, do you know how much you have delayed Red Eye's plans? Care to take a guess?” She grinned sweetly, finally looking at me. Sweet Celestia...she was actually so angry she was *grinning*. Shouting I could deal with...I'd been shouted at all my life, painful on the ears as it was...at least you knew someone who shouted wasn't about to do something...I gulped internally...unpredictable. Well...it wasn't my place to argue back, time to take a guess.

“Ten minutes, Ma'am?” I hazarded. After all, why wouldn't it be?

Apparently, that wasn't what she wanted to hear. Her hoof slammed on the desk, sending splinters of the rotten wood spraying to each side and leaned over it toward me, her knife moving away from me. Instinct kicked in...I bowed my head down and knelt my front legs.

“**Ten minutes?!**” Her voice echoed with magical power. I squeaked in pain as the noise assaulted my ears. “Try an **hour**, Murk!”

Huh? As I lay there, hooves covering my ears, I struggled to grasp just where this magical number had come from.

“One hour! You being late by ten minutes cost one trip with the scrap wagons to the ammunition factory where the smaller scrap would be needed! Now because they lack that extra cart, they will have to run an additional cycle of the pressing machine. This...as you can imagine, takes additional resources that they will now need to order in from the resource silos. I have, in front of me, a particularly poorly spelled message of swearing, sent from the slave master in the old Ironshod factories wondering just what I am doing wrong here. Tell me, Murk, if you are beginning to grasp the weight of you not pulling yours around here,” she bellowed, teeth clenching between each sentence, “**Well?**”

“I...yes,” I began, my words feeling like a whisper against a wasteland storm, “I understand my mistake. I am sorry for-”

“Don't be sorry,” she speared right into my sentence, “be better! That cart needs taken now, along with a dozen others. Everything has to act like a well lubricated machine in this city if we are to achieve our great leader's dream! I want to see at least seven more deliveries by the end of the next hour. Or so help me...I will personally ensure you will not want to return here tomorrow.”

“I won't be anyway, Ma'am,” I spoke up, finding at least some solace in that I would be escaping her after the next few hours. Her eyebrows rose with disdainful fury at the interruption, “I'm to attend the Pit later this morning.”

I couldn't resist it. She'd made my life a nightmare for the past week working under her supervision. I still bore a burn on my neck where she had put out her cigarette on me as her method of trying to show me that the molten metal sparks wouldn't hurt as much as defying her. The bullying last night had worn on my mind. The knowledge of death being so close anyway drew a certain carelessness to my words. Instinct led me to merely mutter them under my breath rather than blurt them out loudly.

“So...so I presume you will have to find a fourth slave as well after I'm gone, Ma'am.”

“Ex-CUSE me, Murk?” Her voice drew enough of a picture of what would happen if I had said that any louder, “Care to repeat that?”

I prayed to the Goddesses that she had only thought I had just not spoken loud enough. She must have seen my lips moving, of course. Instinct was currently bucking my brain hard for saying that to the mare whom had been threatening my windpipe with a blade a few seconds ago. Well, there goes my attempt to be snarky for the day.

“I said...um...Ma'am,” my voice was shakier than before, the imminent threat of that wicked curved knife all too clear as it slowly and methodically began to stab the desk in perfect beats, “that...I should probably...um...”

She had advanced towards me, trotting right up to glare me in the face. Oh Goddesses, not the face again, it still hurt from Whiplash.

“Go on...” she intoned, dangerously.

“That I should...hop to it?” I tried to smile, to grin my way past it.

She did not seem impressed, backing me up right against the doorway before turning away from me. “Then why are you still here, Murk?”

That was my cue, any slave would recognise a lifeline when they were thrown one. However as I got up to my hooves and made to turn to the door, warning bells rang in my mind. 'Wicked Slit doesn't throw lifelines...*she severs them.*' I tried to dive for the door as I caught her movement from the corner of my eye. Too slow. Her full buck catapulted me through the doorway with a cry of shock and pain as my ribs, half bruised already, screamed in agony. I lay against the catwalk's dangerously open edge (seriously, who designed these things?) clutching my chest as I looked up to see the door telekinetically slam in my face.

With a sigh, I let my head hit the metal plating once more with a sigh of relief as I tried to convince my aching body to get up.

All potential outcomes considered...I thought that had gone pretty well.

* * *

Perhaps it says something about slavery that in my last day upon Equestria, I used the time being whipped while pulling a cart laden down with sets of heavily armoured barding between a factory floor and the Ironshod Firearms depot on the far side of Fillydelphia.

Either that or I had some *really weird* tastes.

It was approaching late in the day by the time that the slaver finally, mercifully, detached me from the rusted and chaffing harness (I could swear it was going to leave a stain...) and sent me on my way 'home' to the FunFarm...happily reminding me that I was going to make his bets very easy later on.

The moment the harness was released my legs gave out. What little strength I had to carry half the trips of most ponies had worn me out completely to the point that if I had ever entertained thoughts of actually fighting I might have wanted to complain about how this was unfair.

Unfair? Heh, welcome to Fillydelphia, Murky.

I staggered from the colossal factory through one of the delivery doors. Along the edge of the storage flats were rows of non-functional and long rusted pegasus sky-wagons for hauling cargo from Filly all the way to...well...wherever in Equestria it were needed. I pictured strong, free pegasi swooping to and fro with huge weights upon their wagons...carrying them as though they weighed nothing more than a feather. To be met happily as they made deliveries of, well, absolutely everything. It was hard to imagine, for it required pegasi to be anything other than universally loathed by the wasteland I had seen. “Scummy sky dwellers” was the popular name to my last Master as he drunkenly ranted about how they keep it all for themselves and how he couldn't wait for them to come down to the wastes so he could give them a piece of his mind.

Yes...the wastes hated pegasi. I certainly hadn't heard of any living down here myself yet in my lifetime. Probably for the best, given how they might be treated.

Pulling my jerkin a little tighter, I cast a glance about me. Various slaves were trudging their way back

towards the FunFarm...clearly seeking a chance to rest their hooves before the slavers worked out where to send them next. A typical day in Filly...perhaps an hour of sleep, a little slop or oatmeal watered down (only *usually* with water) and almost every other hour dedicated to the work or travel between said work. I couldn't honestly say I knew a slave who had survived more than a few months at most. They looked a sorry sight, even by my standards, the 'veterans' of Fillydelphia. Boils and scabs of infected and savage wounds from Master Red Eye's workers, machines and even other slaves coated them. Most had tried to tie off wounds with scraps of fabric while others simply still just bled openly as they limped and shuffled across the broken landscape of the city.

Even to a born slave, the sight was horrifying.

My eyes traversed further, meeting the wary glances of various guards on tall catwalks running between the ruins that acted as their barracks throughout the city. One of them re-angled to point his battle saddle at me and made a jerking motion with his head. 'Move along.' I didn't dare hesitate for him to ask again.

I fell in step with the rest of the trotting slaves, just another little cog in the machine, albeit one about to be cast out. The crush became tighter as they filled through the manufacture sites gates, leading to me bumping flanks with other ponies on both sides. The smell was enough to cause me to almost dry heave on the spot as I witnessed their dirt and blood rub off on my own jerkin and flanks, smearing over my cutie mark. I shuddered, trying to block it out by closing my eyes and trotting on...it's not like I could get any dirtier anyway...right?

It was a mistake. My hoof caught a rock as I felt my balance stolen from me and I fell headlong under the mass of slaves whom were beginning to pick up speed. A gunshot sounded as they were given incentive to hurry and let the next group through...panic shot through me as I felt myself dragged down under their hooves (along with a few other unfortunates) and trapped underneath a stampeding rush of filthy slaves. I screamed, I begged them to stop, to let me up. None heard me as hooves cracked against my sides and face. Pain threatened to overwhelm me from the ceaseless crush...it was hard to breathe from all the dust kicked up. Claustrophobia fought with pain for my attention as both swarmed through my mind. I tried to pull myself through it all and away before anypony-

A hoof landed on my leg.

With a fierce intensity, pain flared from the joint as it was wrenched far past the limits of its movements. I am sure that my cry of pain was audible above the entire crowd as I felt hooves grasp around me and pull me out from under the mass of slaves...dragging my dead limb with me.

Dumped on the rocky piles either side of the road...I lay back and took a deep breath, feeling the air rush to my lungs away from the dust...before coughing heavily as my lungs rebelled from their infections. A movement beside me perked up my ears and caused me to half pull back in fear.

"Whoa there...you alright?" A mare's voice, I spun to look, yelping in pain as my leg reminded me that it still wanted my attention too.

A young unicorn was half crouched beside me, hoof extended as though about to have touched me. A gentle creamy yellow coat with a long, two tone mane of light orange with incredibly thin hazy red streaks. Her mane was, like every slave, filthy and bedraggled. I got the sense she might have had her tail as long as her mane...but the end looked like it had been torn off. Hell...her entire look would have been vibrant and flowing had she not been dulled and battered as a slave like myself. She wore an alien look, one I didn't properly understand until memory began to kick in and remind me that it was a face of concern...the last time I'd seen that was on my mother.

Internally, I forced myself to not break down again right in front of my temporary saviour and forced myself to speak.

"I...I guess so..." I hesitantly stammered, voice low. Social skills were not among my chief abilities. Wait...I guess so? While I'm sitting here with a possibly broken front right leg, a loose tooth from two blows to the face earlier, bruised ribs from Wicked Slit, lash scars on my back, sick, infected, probably dying of radiation and about to assuredly die in under an hour? Yeah...really 'ok', Murky.

She didn't seem to believe me either, leaning forward to gently help me to my hooves before some guards spotted us. Closing my eyes, I gritted my teeth as I tried to move the injured leg. With a grunt of pain I bent the joint as normal...it wasn't broken. Badly sprained...but the joint was still intact. I let out a sigh of relief before staggering and promptly fell over once again with a soft 'whud!' Perhaps I'll lie down just a little bit longer...

"You're lucky you weren't killed under there," the mare continued to speak, nursing my leg briefly before sitting back, her gaze passing over me. From the look on her face it was clear that, even though she was trapped in here too, she considered me a particularly weakened looking pony, "Now come on, we need to get going, I can't be late or-"

"Yeah...I know the feeling." I muttered with my eyes averted, talking too much wasn't my place. I half expected a slaver to come around any second and beat me for talking at all. Testing my weight on a limb, I stood. As I did, my saddlebags revealed themselves to have been torn in the stampede, my sketchbook journal tumbling out on to the ground before the mare. Blinking, she looked down, nosing it open with her...well...nose. She was probably too tired to use magic right now. I made a move to retrieve it, only pausing as I noticed she was actually looking...not laughing or trying to steal it. Instead I just waited, feeling oddly full of apprehension as she flicked a couple of pages while I trotted to and fro, trying to work the movement back into my foreleg joint.

I didn't even yelp in pain to not disturb her oddly peaceful looking investigation...well...not more than twice anyway. Certainly no more than four. Perhaps six if squeaks counted.

"This is...pretty interesting stuff," she commented, eyes not leaving a picture I'd drawn of the Fillydelphia gates. My first night here. She flicked some more, before smirking and stifling a laugh, "seems you have a liking of mares, though."

She looked up to me and grinned...I blushed and fell back a little, rubbing my head with a hoof as I tried to think of an excuse. Truth is...well...perhaps I did sometimes find my subconscious drawing out a particularly nice looking mare I might have seen or worked beside. I'd always intended to add the clothes...honest.

I stepped in, albeit painfully, closing the journal with a hoof. That stuff was still private, no matter what strange spell of peace she seemed to exude to make me not have grabbed it from her the moment it fell. I just blushed as she giggled slightly at the act, seemingly not offended before standing to her own hooves herself.

"I...I'm sorry," I began, trying to keep my voice steady above embarrassment, "I should go..."

She just nodded, apparently understanding before knocking a tangled knot of hair behind her ear with a hoof,

"Alright then, off you go before we get caught," the mare bit her lip and her eyes fell on the sketchbook again resting at my side, "I really do envy that...the ability to draw whatever you want...whenever you want. It's like an escape, isn't it?"

What? An escape? What on Equestria was she talking about? Drawing was just...automatic. I couldn't choose what to draw...

...could I?

The mare was turning to go. She trotted away toward the opposite entrance of the FunFarm, clearly a resident of another enclosure, possibly the Bumper Plow-Pit. I wanted to say something...to try and make up some excuse for some of the pictures...to ask what she meant by drawing what I wanted. But she was already too far away and I dreaded shouting with slavers around us with ever watchful eyes for dissent and rule breaking.

A little voice began to ask me in my mind why I hadn't been afraid of her.

And why I had a sudden urge to draw her, not like the pictures she had seen but as...well...what I saw. A strangely at ease slave.

The thought struck my mind...just one last sketch before I headed off to the Pit...what were they gonna do? Sentence me to death? Justification in mind I quickly (figuratively speaking...) made for the petting zoo and my hidey hole in the pigsty. I looked back once or twice at the mare heading off.

I could swear she was doing the same.

* * *

That was better.

Lines became curves...

Curves became shapes...

Shapes came to life...

Across the floor of the pigsty I had scattered picture after picture. From the moment I pulled myself through the small gap, hounded by the taunts and pursuits of my 'fellow' slaves, I had retrieved the charcoal (the taste of the floors corner reminded me to not throw it away again) and set to work.

I didn't think...I didn't consider. I just drew. As ever, allowing my subconscious to take over...to draw what came to my mind first. Soon my journal had a good few new entries. I had struck past last nights picture as fast as I could to add more and see what they would bring.

One page...ten minutes work...Wicked Slit's knife with her eyes gazing from behind.

Another page...five minutes work...myself and the cart with darkened lines to add the weight.

Another page...three minutes work...the Pit. Sketchy and terrible.

Page after page...filled with imagery of my time here. Even in my drawings I couldn't escape it. I had...wanted...a picture of her, before I forgot her face. But it just wouldn't come out, like a machine in Filly's foundries working to the same pattern I found my sketching fell into patterns I could not control. Once, a rare slave that actually conversed with me had asked why I never chose what I drew. How could I? Choice was not mine to have by birth.

But now I wondered, at the end now with nothing else to live for...no work to be done any more, what if I...chose...to draw something nice?

That mare's wondrous hope in her voice as she said that drawing could be an escape of itself rung in my mind.

I took another page, leafed the parchment over and gripped the dirty charcoal in my mouth loosely. Perhaps if I drew some random lines...then made what I wanted from it? Maybe that would work? Trembling, each sweep of the charcoal didn't seem to add anything...how could this ever work? I didn't have the mindset or the belief to ever think for myself...all I was doing was a...a...

I saw potential.

With gusto, my charcoal flew on to the paper. Instinct not restricted to my life kicked in. Artistic form. The things I look at. Specific memories flared in my head. Curling up next to my mother, stealing from my master back on the rock farm, running away to hide in Fillydelphia, mouthing off under my breath at Slit and sitting with another pony glancing at my journal without any hint of derision. For the first time in as long as I could remember...I drew for myself.

I jolted back from the paper, breathing hard, as I dared to let my eyes descend upon what I beheld before me.

It was me.

Just me. Just that small pony staring back at me from the bottom left of the page, not even filling the space I could have, like it was waiting on somepony else to fill the gaps beside him with something else.

It...it was smiling. My hoof went to my mouth, when had I last smiled? I honestly couldn't remember. But here it was, my sketch's lips curled upwards in a joyful, playful laugh that I wish I could have heard for real.

“Hey! Runt! You ready? They're calling for you! Time to diiiiie!”

I ignored it...this was more important. I threw the page over and grabbed the charcoal again. Lines into curves...curves into shapes...shapes into-

“Life is over, runt! We can see them coming to chain you all up and drag you theeeere!”

Charcoal flew, I drew faster than I ever had before. I was in control of this! Not them! I could control what I drew! The form came to be...the mare! She was looking curious, staring off the page at me as though trying to work out why I had drawn her.

I could choose! I could create anything!

“Murky Number Seven you are ordered to the Pit! Come out, be chained and lets get going so we can all win some caps on you!”

The voice of the enclosure master...oh Goddesses no...I had just learned how to do this, yet I could feel my legs trying to pull myself on conditioned instinct to obey. I tried to reach the paper once again...one more...I can go one more and just be late out. The charcoal snapped at the tip from how hard I was pressing...the drawing went messy...it didn't matter. Stains of tears were appearing on it, I choked down the embarrassment at crying over something as silly as all this as I felt a rap on the pigsty.

“You there! Slave! Is Murky Number Seven in here?”

“You bet! He's cowering like a-”

There was a crunching sound followed by the sound of somepony hitting the ground hard.

“I didn't ask you for your opinion! Guards, tear this damn thing apart and get him out here!”

Oh, Luna help me...I felt the sty shake and buckle under their savage hoof blows on either side. The drawing was only just taking shape, I knew what it was! It was...it was...

The roof snapped off, smog and dust seethed in from the outside world as a silhouetted gas mask glared in and spotted me frantically scribbling. I squealed as I felt a second slaver grab my jerkin in his teeth and effortlessly lift me, whining in pain as my bruised ribs protested at the sharp movement. I pulled down with all my meagre weight...one...more...line...

The pulling intensified as a second guard joined,

“No! Please...” I begged them as I felt the charcoal fall into my mouth, “I have to see her! Once more!”

With a great tug, I was yanked through the splintered wall of the pigsty and thrown on the ground, weeping in a heap. I spat out the foul charcoal and reached out for my journal as two guards magically hog tied me with chains before dragging me away. The journal had fallen open on its side, visible to me as I was pulled off, writhing and screaming through tears to be reunited with it. The picture I had so desperately tried to finish stared directly back at at me, tugging at my heart and stirring emotions long dead.

My mother...once again being forced to watch me being taken from her.

* * *

I was going to die.

I lay against the wall of the Pit's slave confinement area, feeling the cold concrete seeping its chilly touch through my torn jerkin. It was dark, the only light being that coming in from the Pit itself. A thick gate sat at the front of the area...the only thing that separated me from death now. Not that I could think too much about the gate...I was much too busy screwing my wet eyes closed and cowering in the back corner with my hooves trying to cover my suffering ears.

The crowd were like a sonic blast of pain. Their screams and bloodthirsty bellows echoed down into the enclosed Black Gate side of the arena with me. Their hoof stomps in freaky unison felt like a slap around the head each time.

I was going to die.

I...I didn't want to die...

The massive noise subsided down from an assault on my senses to being 'merely' uncomfortable as I heard the announcer start talking up the crowd, that big griffin...whatever her name was. Her words whipped them up into a frenzy. I could picture them salivating, eagerly sharing the stories of the little buck whom they will all get to watch being horribly torn apart. Opening my eyes I looked around, shivering.

At the front stood Numbers One and Two. Fillydelphia Pit matches apparently involved two teams of six ponies...you fought one on one. The winner remained to fight in the next battle. Black Gate was my 'team.' Numbers One and Two seemed to know one another, red mare and dull yellow stallion respectively. They looked tough...but then, *everypony* looked tough compared to me. Even that little unicorn mare who was Number Three looked like she could buck me senseless with that metal...thing...on her foreleg. Number Four was nothing special...some blue buck.

I was Number Five. The one to die after those four got killed off. It would happen, I had seen Pit fighter ponies before in Fillydelphia. They were hard as nails with a bad attitude that would revel in the howling of the crowd as they took apart their opponents with as much-

I gulped.

-as much pain as possible.

I was going to die...painfully.

Once again I found the corner, squeezing myself into it as tightly as I could and prayed that the other ponies in this team wouldn't hear me crying. Unfortunately, luck never quite was on my side as I sensed a hulking movement from beside me...Number Six.

"Put on a braver face there. Don't let them have the pleasure." A significantly deep, low and mature stallion's voice that almost trembled with the threat of painful volume if he really got going.

Okay, that I didn't expect. Through terrified and tear filled eyes I looked up at the source to see Number Six.

Looming in the darkness at the back of the Black Gate pen, Number Six filled the entire portion he took residence in. He was kneeling down on all fours...and was *still* taller than me. A huge muscular earth pony with a dark red coat and crimson mane looked down at me. He was...without a doubt...the biggest and scariest pony I had ever seen in my life, I could barely even tell where the thick muscle-ridden back separated from his neck! Wicked Slit was a little filly foal compared to this stallion. An ugly scar coated face stared back at me, one eye completely bloodshot and one ear missing entirely. Dyed tribal markings coated his body in black swirls designed to look like...well anything painful. I saw barbed wire rings on his forelegs, angular designs around his bloodshot eye and gang symbols upon his sides. Almost a third of his body was covered in them. Puckered scars intertwined with the markings. When he moved even slightly...the huge mass of muscle contained in his body became all the more obvious. But those eyes...wild and filled with the promise of absolute violence, they scared me to the point of backing away from him.

He was absolutely *terrifying*.

His face followed me as I crossed the darkened area, trying to get away from him. I glanced behind me, One and Two were staring out at the expanse of the Pit, Four seemed to be explaining something to Three...no-pony was paying us any attention. I squeaked in terror...I didn't like being left alone with this massive, half feral earth pony. He just sat there, staring at me trotting away from him. With a deep sigh, he looked toward the gate.

"I'm sorry."

Okaaay...officially confused now. I tilted my head towards him even while backing my rump right up against the wall.

“What?” I didn't dare raise my voice above that of a hushed whisper. Who knew what those other ponies were like up at the front of the Black Gate slave area?

“I'm sorry you need to end up here with me.” he continued, shifting to his hooves. By the sweet Goddesses he was huge! Add to that, none of it seemed to be anything but corded muscle.

Suddenly I felt pretty glad he wasn't in the other team.

“You're...sorry?”

“Aye...I'm sorry, that I cannot protect you,” his voice hit a low note...an odd ring of sadness surrounding the bestial imagery he evoked in his accent and appearance, “you don't deserve this. Not like some of the rest of us do.”

I...I didn't know what to make of that.

I wasn't given the opportunity to make anything of it.

“Round one!” came the booming voice of the griffon announcer.

I turned and looked out of the gate as it began to rise...

“May the games begin...” I heard the huge stallion mutter as he trotted up beside me, eyes narrowed. Suddenly, although I knew I wouldn't be around to see it...I felt pity for whatever poor mare or buck ended up going hoof to hoof with him.

I still felt more pity for myself.

I was going to die.

* * *

My composure was not improving.

I stood behind Three and Four as I watched whom I now knew to be called 'Blood' go out first into the arena and swiftly be torn down. I had to physically stuff a hoof in my mouth to stop myself from howling in fear as I shrank back, knelt down and tried to blot out the cries of the crowd as they spotted death in their sights. Part of my mind liked to pretend I could hear the bullies braying for my blood to be next. Beside me, Number Six stared down at me with those wasteland worn eyes before looking up, as though judging the opposition. I could hear him whispering something to himself...but with so much ambient noise, even I couldn't figure it out.

Oh Goddesses...that would be me in there...

Number Two stepped forward as the gate opened. The announcer cried his name as I saw him clearly go looking for revenge. Daffodil. Closer to the gate now I got a better look outside. The Pit itself was an old ice rink drained till only the concrete remained and sheathed in a giant cage, filled with pressure plates and old blood stains mixing with the new stains draining away from Blood herself. Some of it was splattered across her opponent, Sin...Sin something, I had missed his name from covering my ears against the painful noise of the crowd.

Once again, I witnessed death. Daffodil's opponent stood no chance. He even tried standing on a pressure plate to activate a bucketload of mines from above, trying to rain them on Daffodil. The big buck swiftly dodged the deafening shockwave...before delivering the most...the most horrifying death I had ever witnessed. One after another I heard, all too clearly, the snaps.

He broke his opponents bones.

All of them.

While he was still alive.

I felt my legs go weak...great heaves in my throat become choking sobs as my eyes flooded with tears and terror overtook me. I ran to the back of the slave area where the door was, where we had been brought in. I had to get out! I didn't want to die! As I approached it, the two guards assigned to supervise us, along with the third slaver whom had slapped these numbers on our flanks were waiting. With a laughing shove, the trio hurled me right back into the Black Gate area once again.

I curled up...more sickeningly wet cracks came from the arena...each in turn with a roar from the crowd.

I don't want to die...

I don't *want to die*...

* * *

“Round three! From the Black Gate, we still have Daffodil-”

I tried to tune that griffon out...each round brought this one step closer to me. Blood was down...Daffodil wouldn't last five more fights and the two ponies in front of me were...well...they weren't Number Six.

That behemoth of a pony still stood as silently as ever, just staring into the arena from beside me. Briefly, I tried to repress my terrified thoughts...to concentrate on the artistic side of his dyed coat and its designs. Let's see...barbed wire...sharp edges...

Not helping.

Shivering and trying to fight my imagination showing such thoughts of a drawn out end to me...I instead took a look at the other two ponies.

Number Four wasn't anything special...just another slave from Fillydelphia. I wondered what he had done to deserve this. Probably something a little less cowardly than my own.

Number Three...it wasn't often I saw ponies whom I could look eye to eye without requiring to tilt my head upwards to do so. Well...I would, if she wasn't facing away from me into the arena herself as Daffodil finished pounding the corpse of his opponent. Briefly my eyes glanced to that thing on her right foreleg. Some sort of...device. Recognition flickered in my mind, hadn't Master Red Eye worn one of them?

Momentarily, curiosity overcame fear as I gazed all the more...I couldn't see her cutie mark, that number sticker covered one side. Shifting quietly to the other, I noticed what it is.

Another of those devices...right there on her flank. Just...what? What did that signify? Skill with them? Given I had no idea what they were...I realised any guessing was a bit pointless. Whatever it was, it couldn't be deadly. The slavers wouldn't have left it on her otherwise, so I couldn't even imagine her bringing down every one of the fighters to protect my worthless hide either...

A momentary realisation hit me as I realised I was craning my head to stare at her flank to see said cutie mark...and Number Six was glancing down at me with a raised eyebrow. With a start, I shrank back, averting my eyes...damn it...why did everypony assume that about me? I wasn't looking *there*. I didn't stare at mares like that...

I just...drew them...that was different.

Number Six just seemed to chuckle quietly, a sound like rocks scraping together. He fell into indomitable silence as he stared back into the arena...and narrowed his eyes. I followed his gaze into the concrete pit and witnessed my killer.

A zebra.

The zebra.

Even I had heard of her, the most terrifying pit fighter in Fillydelphia; exotic, lethal and utterly without mercy they said. No-pony could hope to bring her down. A veteran of four events and a current crowd

favourite to coldly murder any pony that dared stand in her way. Truth be told I hadn't seen her before myself. I didn't know anything about her fighting style or capabilities...I didn't need to. Any zebra to gain that reputation must have one hell of an ability to back it up...

I couldn't help it, I cowered, using Number Three to block my view of her as I crouched down closer to the floor and shivered. This just wasn't fair...

Even on the floor, I could still see past Three's legs through the grill of the gate. The zebra...what was her name? Ze...Zen? I couldn't hear anything over the ambience of the crowd shrieking with excitement at the sick games they were witnessing.

The Goddesses seemed to want to please those vicious mares and bucks that took out all their frustrations on us poor arena victims...the sun baked down from above the cloud curtain. The effect was less of a direct heat and more of a stifling ambient raising of the temperature in the still air...uncomfortable and hellish to suit the carnage currently being wrecked in the Pit.

This was wrong...

I saw the combatants fight. I screwed my eyes shut as I saw Daffodil send the zebra to the ground...I winced as she returned the favour. Even above the crowd I could hear the savage hoof strikes on one another...

I couldn't do this...I wasn't built for this!

Daffodil was brutal and resourceful...the zebra lithe and deadly. I saw a mine kicked into the air and whinnied to myself as the savage detonation assaulted my senses.

This wasn't fair...

It certainly wasn't for Daffodil...even as I watched the zebra continually began to gain the upper hand...speed beat power...lethality triumphed over savagery. With one hideous crunch I heard his neck break.

My mind raced...one more of 'ours' down and one more towards my own presence in there. I hadn't lived a good life. Just a slave, a dirty and downtrodden slave with no freedom and no dreams of his own. As I watched Number Three bravely walk forward to her own death...I finally and completely broke down the moment the gate slammed shut. Emotion welled up, fear mixed with bitterness that I had never even been given a chance! Life seemed fit to just screw me over at every opportunity! All shame was thrown away as I did what I did best...cried. I cried more than I ever had...even more than the day my mother was taken from me, because now *everything* was about to be taken from me.

I didn't want that...I didn't want to go through the pain! I...I was afraid of what they would do to me.

I had thought that a thousand times today...but now it finally rammed home with the full intensity as the zebra launched at her newest prey.

I was going to be beaten to death.

The weight of that simple realisation was impossible to grasp, I emotionally spilled over, pathetically reacting with no hint of dignity or poise.

Number's Four and Six stared at me as I pressed against the gate whimpering, quaking violently and trying not to look as I heard Number Three being brutalised and beaten to death even worse than Daff was.

Why was it my life that had to go this way?

Why me?!

I didn't want to die!

...

...I didn't.

A spark, like a bright flare erupted from the Pit, catching my half closed eyes like a beacon and blowing

up dust from the Pit's concrete through the gate into my face. A sound of magic being ignited came from the middle. Hyperventilating still, I shifted and fell backwards, covering my eyes with my hooves before slowly glancing through them, struggling to see directly into the light...

An aura of unicorn power streamed from the centre, enveloping the zebra entirely as every barrel that hung above the pressure plates clanged open in unison. The green chemical flew from them, barely even touching the ground before being caught up in a swirling net of immense telekinetic magic. My jaw hit the floor, eyes unblinking as I witnessed the foul liquid spray beautifully in all directions, coating the cage and blocking all vision into it, I had seen unicorn magic plenty of times...but never like this! Only my position near the floor let me see under the green goo smeared across the gate.

I hadn't even blinked as it landed either side of me...luck, it seemed, allowed me to sit undisturbed before this miracle.

Number Three...she was...she...she...

Flying without wings.

I saw the scene that would be seared on to my memory until the day I died.

Amongst the drifting dust of the telekinesis spell, her horn bursting with overflow, Number Three ascended to the air above, taking with her the zebra that had so badly hurt her. A nimbus of magic surrounded them both as she flew directly upwards and away from all the blood...all the death and pain...away from slavery and to her glorious escape. Such courage in the sight of Red Eye himself! I could hear the bloodthirsty crowd bellowing in protest and shock; the griffins opened fire in vain, their bullets missing her at every turn like fate and destiny themselves guided that little mare to be unharmed. An angel blessed by the Goddesses, a lightbringer who's ray of hope speared through the darkness to ignite a fire in my heart.

I felt myself fall back and sit dumbly, my mouth hanging open as I witnessed the spectacle before me, feeling the light across my face. I must have been silhouetted against the gate, a small figure in the presence of a legend before my very eyes.

Defying gravity so boldly...she disappeared into the searing dust and out of my vision but for a steadily fading glow. To cast off the shackles of slavery and escape. The thought struck my mind as ridiculous, but here it was! The myths were true! A great unicorn of powerful magic escaping from her masters to live a free life...

As I watched that wondrous and beautiful sight flow away in the dust cloud through the rapidly fading chemical goo barrier...I felt myself smile. I had never felt joy like that before...it felt so good.

I just wanted to keep smiling forever.

I wanted to go with her.

My mind struggled to grasp the concept...to identify it and take hold of the urge. Even as I heard the slavers rush into the Black Gate area to secure us and the bellowing of the griffins to trap the breakout before it left the FunFarm, I had the first true inkling of something...a wish of my own.

I dared to dream.

I wanted...to escape.

* * *

“You! Slave! On the ground now!”

The slavers burst in from behind us, two guards and the third who slapped that sticker on my flank moving to keep us down. I barely heard them, I simply sat with my eyes trained on the roof of the cage within the arena. The goo had run its course and the dust began to settle. All that remained above was a

small opening, a previously padlocked swing door in the ceiling of the cage hung open; swaying in the aftermath of such magical fortitude.

Something about that door struck a chord with me, just idly swinging...the last evidence of the defiance against Fillydelphia's aim to keep us inside. I could still hear gunfire, explosions and all sorts of noises as the crowd stampeded out of the arena. A slaver's hoof dragging me by the jerkin away from the gate was the first thing to waken me from my reverie.

"I said, on the damn ground, slave," the slaver's voice betrayed a nervousness turned to anger. I didn't blame him, my own voice would probably be squeaky and incapable at the moment. I was still trembling after all.

With a twist, I was hurled on to the ground as I heard shackles being drawn by the slaver's unicorn companion (Hah, call that magic? Look at Number Three, buddy) as they moved toward me. Only as they began trying to pull my hooves up did I begin to finally shake my head clear and get a grasp on why they were being as deliberate.

The slaves were not taking this idly.

Behind the door leading to Black Gate I heard the sounds of rebellion. Slaves were crying out, rioting in the aftermath of one mare showing them there was more to hope for and that Red Eye could be defied. One slaver was watching the door...telling me that perhaps the slaves outside were not being beaten down as easily as the slavers would like.

It seemed Number Six thought the same way.

The biggest pony I had laid eyes on in my life seemed to me to be a slow and deliberate stallion. I had imagined that an attack from him would be like a boulder rolling slowly. Deliberate and implacable. Oh how wrong I as.

He moved like a boulder alright...but one tumbling madly down a cliffside. The slaver didn't even stand a chance as the colossal weight of Number Six barreled into him, one giant hoof ploughing the slaver's head into the concrete wall with enough force to make a sickening crunching sound. Suddenly I was very glad I couldn't see it all too well...

The slaver currently straddling me with the shackles looked up, eyes wide as he witnessed his brethren murdered in an instant before him. The third slaver turned from finishing his shackles on Number Four as well, both matching the cold stare of Number Six.

"You..." the slaver's voice quivered, "...you stay right there! S-Stay..."

"Funny. I was going to say the same thing," muttered Number Six, dangerously, before launching himself at the two. I curled up as I felt his size run over me to reach them, a series of panicking screams and dull thumps as the pair were set upon by the terrifying pony. I risked opening my eyes...

I saw Number Six moving like a blur, thick limbs lashing out wildly. He bucked one slaver against the wall hard enough to whiplash the target's head back into it, spinning himself around to dive and grapple his second opponent even as the slaver attempted to draw a baton with his mouth. With a grunt and a heave, the second slaver was roughly hurled across the Black Gate, clean over my head to land in a heap with his colleague, the pair groaning in pain. Even as they attempted to stand, the first nursing his rapidly bleeding head, Number Six was on them. His forehead collided with the first target, the sound like a rock hitting a wall. The slaver dropped, unconscious in an instant even as Number Six began beating the last slaver's head off the wall repeatedly. Eventually...a sharp pop signalled his end too as his agonised screams suddenly ceased.

Almost as an afterthought, wiping the sweat from his brow, Number Six raised a hoof and stamped it sharply on the unconscious buck's neck with enough force to...to...

I felt sick.

I had seen ponies beaten all their lives...but this was different. Slavers beat to intimidate...this pony had

simply been killing them. Cold and calculated, the stallion had taken three slavers apart in less than a minute with nothing other than sheer power and ferocity. Brute force at its most simple level.

No...that wasn't right. Even as I watched him now, his eyes flickered to and fro...he *was* thinking, watching for other elements. Suddenly, why he had been paying such close attention to the arena earlier made sense to me. He wasn't about mindless brute force at all...that violence had been driven by a cold and pragmatic mindset that simply went for the kill, using unreal strength and viciousness to reach it however was most practical.

Part of me wondered how he would have fared against that zebra, agility and precision against deliberate fury and power...until I remembered I would have been dead before I knew the outcome. I wasn't sure which scared me more, although looking at those mismatched and bloodshot eyes turning to glare at me...I reached a decision pretty quickly.

"D-Don't kill me too!" I shrieked at him, backing away toward the gate, eventually pressing my back against it to stay away from the huge earth pony, "I'll stay quiet! Please..."

I barely even noticed as I had pressed my back against the gate that the green goo was burning the back of my neck. Fear of Number Six overrode any such feeling. He simply trod over to me, staring down. By the Goddesses...his face was streaked with the blood of the slavers he had killed, the lines dripping off his muzzle oddly following the contours of his dyed coat markings. His face lowered to look me in the eyes...I found I couldn't even blink as I met his glare. That one bloodshot eye seemed to twitch a little on habit before he drew himself back a little, grabbed my jerkin in his mouth and swung me to my hooves.

"C'mon, pipsqueak," he intoned, heading for the door, "Tag along and you'll maybe get out of this alive too."

Surprise rang in my mind.

I...guess I didn't really have a choice.

* * *

The underside of the Pit was in absolute chaos. Even just outside the door to the Black Gate I witnessed slavers lashing and threatening their slaves with whips, guns and battle saddles. They were not going down quietly; for even as I crept out of the door in Number Six's shadow I saw one slaver pulled down by four weakened labourers after being beaten over the head with a magically hurled sledgehammer. Gunshots rang out every few seconds (*I really* needed earplugs...) sending scattered screams and waves of fleeing slaves down the hallways.

Number Six didn't appear fazed, he glanced around before picking a direction and galloping off. I struggled to keep up with his long and determined stride. Diving to one side or the other; my gallop was nervous and unbalanced. What was I doing?! The slaver told me to stay put! The little slave in my head screamed at me to cease and stop, that my masters would not appreciate this.

Weapons were strewn on the ground where they had fallen from now unlocked guard storage. Slaves unable to grab one in time were arming themselves with tools and the occasional bit of furniture. I saw them trying to break into what I knew was the armoury where all the Pit's more lethal weapons like firearms and magical auto axes were kept to be put in the barrels. Screams sounded in the air as the smell of gunpowder reeked around me. I almost slipped in a few puddles that I was sure were *not* water as I tried to not think about the wetness on my hooves.

Ahead, a slave and an overseer of the Pit came tumbling out of a doorway that held behind it a small fire. Even as they savagely wrestled on the ground, I saw scraps of paper rolling out behind them from the blazing room with no evidence how the fire had even started, misfired magic maybe? I ran through the smoke, holding my breath before tripping over a corpse on the other side so suddenly that I still felt my legs trying to run even as the world rotated by ninety degrees.

My lower jaw slapped on the ground with a painful rattle, jamming my teeth together. That loose tooth

from this morning took its time now to remind me of its presence with an uncomfortable little shimmy in its socket. Wincing and bringing a hoof to my mouth, I glanced around quickly before immediately feeling the urge to just stop.

I saw slavers regaining control here... 'normality' was being restored as more and more slaves waiting for the next rounds in the back were beaten, shackled or simply shot to quell their reactions. Before my eyes I saw many of them murdered when they had already surrendered... perhaps I should just lie down... let them shackle me, don't take any chances...

Flying...without...wings...

No! The feeling in my heart was still too strong, the bonds were heavy on my conditioned mind, but I had now been shown the light to 'dare to defy'. I turned and galloped after Number Six once again, seeing that he had ploughed ahead without waiting at all. Several slavers had tried to get in his way; their mangled forms lay in his wake. As I dodged around them I tried to not think about the fact that some of them were still wailing in pain.

He was up ahead, diving down a side corridor. For a second I wondered why, before I heard the clatter of griffin talons on the floor around the next bend. Silently thanking my ears for once in my life I dove into the double doors of the corridor after Number Six. To my great surprise he was right beside them, slamming them shut the moment I was through. I fell against the wall, my sides aching and... well... everything else aching too. A radiation sick and multiple times beaten little pony like me doesn't run too well.

Behind us, the griffins ran past, their talons making an all too obvious pattering noise. Given a chance to breathe, I looked up (and up some more...) at Number Six.

"Why... why are you helping me?" my voice was weak, panting and hoarse.

"Why not?" A deadpan reply. "You're not one of them, y'don't have the killer instinct in your eyes. I know a place where you'll be safe... er, than you probably are in whatever pit they have you. Tag along if you want, kid."

He narrowed his eyes, leaning down closer, "But I won't slow down... if you fall behind, you're getting left. I have to..."

He stopped, his eyes glancing away down the hall, before returning to me. Somehow, I got the impression he was only covering for having said more than he wanted. All the same, I nodded. Perhaps what he had was a little rebel outpost in the train tunnels of Fillydelphia! A way to get in and find other ponies to escape with, all of us together!

Only to go with him meant... defying my master. Escaping to where-ever this stallion wanted me to go.

Thoughts clashed in my head as I watched the stallion creep forward, warily glancing around him with that same pragmatic look as before...

I was a slave... what was I doing with all these thoughts in my head of escape, freedom and dreams? Even my damned cutie mark was a set of manacles, I wasn't supposed to be away from this!

But try as I might, that imagery of the little unicorn mare showing such defiance and escaping to the sky in front of me just would not go away. The freedom she had in the air like that! To be able to fly...

Taking a deep breath, I turned, pulling my jerkin a little tighter around me before trotting after Number Six. If I wanted out (do I really?) then I guess I would have to follow him, show that I am willing. Show *myself* that I can break these chains.

Briefly, I wondered if a cutie mark could change. That would be nice, perhaps a sketchbook on my flank... or a bird flying free...

We began moving again, passing staff offices of the ice rink and pausing only to check doorways. In truth, the back area wasn't particularly big, however ruined walls and collapsed ceilings made much of it more like a dilapidated labyrinth. Truth be told, I was not feeling particularly safe. Even if I managed to get

rid of the terror that my companion struck in me every time I saw him...well...at all, it was the fear of Whiplash, my master, appearing from no-where to drag me back for punishment at this defiance.

“This is the way.”

I blinked on reflex at his voice and didn't reply, somehow I had an imaginative sight of Number Six turning and breaking me in two for making any noise to disrupt his own escape. Whatever drove him...it was intense. I wondered what his name was...only now thinking to even bother checking his cutie mark.

Whatever it meant...it wasn't “cute.”

His massive body bore the mark of a battle-scarred and rusted shield splattered with blood on either side. It made sense, I thought. He certainly was battle-scarred himself. His dyed coat bearing those sharp tribal symbols were matched only by the lines of wounds he carried. My mind wondered on the shields significance...before settling on the obvious. He was certainly as tough as one to survive all that.

I saw some blood from light wounds in the chaotic hallway run down across the cutie mark itself, mixing with the blood permanently showing on the icon itself. Something about it was...darkly fitting. I found myself wanting to draw that...his mark. With a sudden realisation, I felt a pang of loss at my journal being left behind at the FunFarm, probably used as bedding by now by some other slave.

Even with that unicorn saving my life...I doubted I would see that picture of my mother ever again now.

Once again, I felt little tears forming in my eyes...sometimes I really wished I didn't cry so much in front of others...but it was like an unstoppable instinctive reaction.

I almost walked directly into Number Six's rump without thinking. He had stopped, staring at the doors in front of us.

One was a standard office door, the other a fire escape to the outside. A temporary leap of hope came to my mind as I imagined us sneaking out under cover of the madness I could still hear outside and escaping to where-ever this stallion had in mind. Reality came crashing home right back down to the wastes by seeing the clunky form of one of those damned terminals beside it.

The colourful swearing of my companion under his breath as he checked didn't seem to imply he knew what to do with them either.

“Locked...why are they *always* locked? Ridiculous pieces of intellectual-”

While reeling off a few words I had never even heard, he vented his frustration by bucking the wall with one leg beside him, the strike offering up a sharp crack as the plaster broke under his hoof.

I heard a squeak at the sudden sound...damn it, why do I always have to-

That hadn't been me.

My poor hurting ears had heard something from behind the office door. Motioning to Number Six (I really needed to ask his name...) I pointed with a hoof toward the office. With a narrowing of his brow he turned and bucked the door open.

Or rather...clean off its hinges.

“Out! Now!” he roared, diving into the room as I heard a scream of surprise and shock from within. Dragged by the tail in Number Six's teeth, a worker for Red Eye was pulled into the corridor. The big stallion dumped him in front of the terminal, but held the buck's head looking down the corridor away from it.

“Right. I'm betting you know the way out, aye?” he said, voice heavy but low and full of savage intent. He clearly just wanted this over with, I got the sense he didn't enjoy waiting around in the middle of what was fast to become almost a war zone if the riots escalated.

“No! No, I don't know any damn password to the terminal!” he screamed in the stallion's face. I had to hand it to him, that was bravery...or stupidity. I couldn't quite tell.

“So, you know the password then,” continued Number Six, speaking factually in a low tone with a lethal looking grimace.

“I...what?”

“I didn't tell you I wanted through a terminal.”

“Oh...” the buck looked around at the terminal...and back to the big slave holding him, “...shit.”

“Got that right.”

Number Six immediately turned him around and bodily dragged the worker over to the terminal. I stood in just as much surprise as him...I hadn't spotted Number Six's simple ploy either. Clearly he wasn't stupid. All the same though...I began to fear him again, he had that look in his eyes that I had seen before, when he pounced the slavers back in Black Gate.

This wasn't a slaver he was holding though...for all I knew he might be just a promoted slave.

“I ain't giving you the password!” he bewailed, “Stern would gut me!”

“I'll gut you if you don't do it now,” countered Six, “or perhaps I'll just start skelping your head off the wall until you do. Trust me, I know how to keep you conscious.”

He lowered his eyes,

“And even if you do pass out...I am very patient.”

“Screw you! Stern would kill me!”

There was a loud **CLANG** as the buck's head impacted on the metallic wall near the terminal, leaving a painful looking indent.

“The password!” roared Six into his ear, I winced, holding my own ears and backing off as far as I could...I didn't like how this was going.

“Fuck you, slave!”

CLANG

A second indent. Blood sprayed from his nose and he wailed in pain, before spitting some in Six's face,

“Red Eye has things he could do to me you never could! I'm too...too scared of him to worry about you!”

CLANG

A third indent...deeper this time.

“Shit...shit...” he seemed to pass out until Six batted him across the face with a hoof. I didn't like this at all, this wasn't persuasion or defence...this was simple outright torture.

Despite what he said to me...I did not feel reassured by this stallion one little bit...there was something just...unrestricted about him. Like he chose to ignore all barriers of morality. If it hadn't been for his words earlier...I would probably just have ran.

However he was making progress...the worker's survival instinct had seemed to kick in, now begging for his life. I tried not to listen...to shut it out and perhaps just hum to myself. Anything to avoid being a part of this. Annoyingly, only one of that ridiculous pink pony's songs came to mind from the FunFarm speakers.

Right now...giggling was the last thing I wanted to do.

KRICK!

“YEEEEARRGGHHH!”

I had to duck into the office to be sick, feeling my shrunken stomach doing its best to evacuate the little

it had.

“*DARING!*” I heard the worker wail, “It’s *Daring!*”

“Now, wasn’t that so simple,” uttered Six, his gravelly deep voice not even showing a hint of emotion before turning and unlocking both the terminal and then the door. It clicked as the bolt unlocked. With a satisfied snort he turned to the worker. I saw murder in his eyes...he didn’t want anypony left alive to spill the beans.

“No! No, I told you!”

The worker clambered, crying in pain as he tried to drag himself on one snapped leg (oh Goddesses...it wasn’t snapped at a joint...) as Number Six snarled and dove for him.

I managed to close my eyes in time as I saw his hooves reach for the worker’s neck. But even holding my ears didn’t cut out the begs for mercy being cut short by an agonised squeal.

* * *

Inside had been chaos.

Outside...was war.

Slaves poured from the ice rinks stadium doors still in huge and snaking surges of desperation. I saw slaves being crushed under the writhing mass of dirty ponies heading in all directions when two different currents of crowds collided, they fell screaming before being trampled to death. My own bruises from earlier seemed to throb in sympathy, no helpful mares were around to pull those poor souls out. Throughout it all, slavers galloped to and fro, pointing guns and screaming to round workers up. Many slaves made a break for it before being shot down, their cries standing out above the overall ambience of panic and disorder. Even here, a few feet from the side entrance I was almost bowled over by terrified ponies trying to escape the lashes or to attempt to head for their own enclosures.

How could anypony move through this? It was simply madness.

But above the crowds, in the FunFarm still, even more was happening. The FunFarm rollercoaster had somehow become active, the carts hurling around the tracks at breakneck speed. I witnessed guards opening fire on it...who would end up in that thing? And why were they firing at it with a-

“GET DOWN!”

I felt the stallion grab me roughly by the jerkin in his teeth and hurl me behind the garbage bins kept at the back of the ice rink stadium before diving in himself. The rocket intended to detonate on the rollercoaster had missed, before arcing on an unclear trajectory to slam into the ground nearby amidst a crowd. The concussive wave blasted my eardrums into a ringing deafness even as I felt earth and wet mud splattering down around me while holding my head to the ground. Shaking so badly I felt I might just fall over...I stood up and opened my eyes, before closing them all right away.

That hadn’t been wet mud...

I felt the stallion move, he was heading away already, forcing my eyes open I began to limp after him, my sprained joint aching on every step. With a start I noticed my jerkin had been half pulled from my body by the stallion’s rough throw, I staggered as I reset it around me properly before following as best I could. I couldn’t avoid looking to the side, seeing the horrific aftermath of the missile strike on the crowd, a small crater surrounded by mutilated bodies and shrapnel torn slaves. No doubt they would simply be left to die...no-pony else helped them, they all just continued to run in panic, fearing another missile any second.

Guilty feelings reminded me that I was hardly stopping either...terror clenched my gut like a vice as I struggled to see the stallion up ahead. He stood a head above anypony else in the area, but with my size, fighting through a crowd was next to impossible. I had to keep moving; any second another missile might land or a slaver might open fire indiscriminately on the crowd. I had seen a couple doing just that earlier.

Above, a wing of griffins soared over toward the rollercoaster as I heard an immense crash from the building that housed Red Eye's operations in Fillydelphia, the FunFarm Barn...had the coaster's cars crashed into it?! Smoke billowed from one side as I saw Red Eye's forces moving to congregate on it.

My attentions were brought back to the ground as a group of ponies rushed across the crowds line. I saw three of them fall, taking out a dozen more with flailing hooves as they all collapsed to the ground amidst the panic. There wasn't any order now, ponies all ran in differing directions, even some back to the stadium. I dived, ducked and weaved my way as best I could through the insane obstacle course of flailing hooves and bodies...all it would take is one stray hoof and I'd be helpless on the floor.

“Slaves! Halt or you will be fired upon! Halt where you are now!”

My instinct kicked in...I faltered, hooves trying to stop, but the crowd swept me on. The air was filled with screams, shrieks and angry cries of bitter ponies trying to push their own way through. A young mare nearby clutched a lifeless buck, wailing as she cried over him, trampled to death. I saw two slaves begin fighting over who bumped who on purpose, hooves flying as they collapsed to the ground together. All around me looks of terror ignored the commands across the PA system. I wondered if that had even heard it, perhaps only I could.

“Guards! Open fire!”

Battle saddles unleashed a torrent of firepower from the walkways above. Miniguns roared, huge anti-material rifles boomed and magical weapons lent their own unique and disturbing zaps to the volley. Griffin handheld weapons joined the cacophony of weapon sounds as they picked out individual targets from above the crowd.

Only now did I realise what had been happening...the slave crowd I had ended up in was heading for the main gate. It may have been accidental, I would bet most didn't know where they were going in the mad rush out of the gunfire going on around the stadium and rollercoaster...but I saw what Red Eye's forces had to do. To their eyes, the slaves were making a break for it and they intended to punish it with enough blood to quell any rebellion amongst the shapeless masses.

Briefly, it occurred to me that the majority of these slaves were not the ones whom had actually rebelled beneath the ice rink...

The front ranks were torn asunder. Ponies fell in droves as the fusillade of gunfire ripped into them. I could not see it, being too far back, but I heard the horrible sound of bullets impacting on flesh alongside the unsettling flares of ponies atomised or melted by magical energy weapons. The crowd swung to a halt and tried to double back, meeting the rest all coming behind them in a collision that broke bones and bloodied muzzles that met another unexpectedly. The sound was shocking, bodies slamming into one another making far more crunches than they had any right to do. Trapped between gunfire, ploughing collisions and panic I...I didn't know what to do...my instincts said 'Go to your enclosure', my heart said 'Keep going! Escape!' but I didn't know which to follow.

Instead I did the only other thing I know how to react like...

I cried.

Fear, surging emotion and adrenaline were surging through me. I had never felt like this before. Emotion was not something I often knew outside of my crying, so now with so much of it at once...

I fell in the crowd and was thrown to and fro by it, unable to choose or know what to do. I felt my eyes water on sheer reaction at my inability to comprehend what I was actually doing even as I felt myself knocked to the side by a large mare trying to fight her way back through the masses of ponies.

“Squirt!”

My eyes blinked open, wiping my tears before shrieking and diving to the side to avoid a pony crashing to the floor near me, stone dead from a bullet to the forehead. Ahead, off to the side of the crowd was Number Six, the stallion. He wasn't waiting, but he had shouted to me as he ran off down a side street deeper

into Fillydelphia. Many other ponies were all trying to escape that way off the main road. I could see gunshots trying to stop them, clearly Red Eye wanted to herd us together. There were two choices...one followed the stallion into whatever place he was heading for. But to get to him...I would have to charge through an area pock marked with bullets and sizzling with magical energy. A few ponies were making it through without harm toward that side street fine...but not all...

The other was to stay here...already I could feel the crowd quietening and beginning to falter under the brutal tactics of the slavers to restore order...I would perhaps be safe enough until led back to my enclosure.

To dare...or to falter...

I looked out over the gunshots raking the area...

I took a breath...

Master Red Eye's voice boomed from the speakers.

“Great workers of Fillydelphia! Cease this pointless violence!”

I faltered...

“You have made such great strides with each passing day. Did I not reward such effort with the promise of a day of rest by the break of dawn today? Yes...and hear me, know that I am not given to breaking my promises to your generous efforts. This day shall remain yours. But this trivial panic will serve none. Not you. Not me. Not the Unity that we all dream of attaining. But most of all, not the children that we strive to take to a better place with the great effort that we...together...have made. I ask of you all...would the future ascension of a safe and secure Equestria be the result of panic and disorder? Was chaos itself not the hell that we, long ago, escaped from? Remember your potential, fellow Equestrians, remember your sacrifices and remember the generosity that we all must show.”

I couldn't move...his voice...my Master...the one who paid for me...

“And it is thus that I must ask you to return, to go peacefully to your places of rest for now. My attendants will inform everypony of when we may return to the day of rest and joy that has been promised. We have all given so much, together. I swear to you, it will not be long. Now go, return with order befitting a better Equestria and let no more blood be shed this day.”

The decision was made.

My Master had asked.

Even as I felt my heart screaming at me to remember what the Pit had shown me...I obeyed.

His words were backed up by reinforcements of slavers sending groups of slaves in directed funnels towards enclosures. I presumed that they would be sorted later on...for now, Master Red Eye only wanted them safe and docile. Well...far be it from me to disagree.

My mind *screamed* at me that this was wrong...

I ignored it. I had to return to my enclosure...my shift would be starting soon.

I saw Number Six disappear down the street...he survived. Well good for him. I stood still as slavers ran down the lines, directing us one way and another. I don't know how long I stood there, looking at my hooves, tears still dripping from my ever flowing eyes as I simply awaited my turn.

“You there! Get to the damned FunFarm!”

“Mare! No not you! That one! Get back to your normal enclosure!”

“Head down to the other side of Filly, follow the griffins!”

“You!”

The last was me. The slaver loomed over me (who didn't?) with a whip magically floating beside him.

I couldn't help but keep my eyes trained on the serrated and bloodied edge of the whip itself. With obedience, I lowered my head.

“You go back to the FunFarm, slave!” he shouted over the din around us, of a mass of slaves simply standing and feeling sorry for themselves. Corpses still littered the ground around us from the execution of them earlier. I began to see the reason...a simply practical solution to kill a few to stop them all instead of an ongoing riot killing so many more.

Just like Number Six killed that worker to remove evidence...it was just being practical. It wasn't my place to question, I was only ever the cog in the machine. In my thoughts, I didn't realise how much of a rush the slaver was in until I saw the whip raise.

“I said, back to the FunFarm you little dirty cu-”

The FunFarm Barn exploded.

The building which I had seen the rollercoaster crash into shook as its roof blew out with a gradual cracking and shattering of structure. Something *colossal* rose from it, sending shards of wood and brick flying in all directions around a glowing sphere of magical power. It rose slowly, gradually gaining height with swirling smoke cascading around the sphere, driven by the magical energies being unleashed. Unlike in the Pit, this didn't give me a feeling of hope and inspiration...it terrified me to the core.

I didn't wait to see what it exactly was...clearly something happening due to the mare's escape.

Whatever she had done, her presence had woken some seriously big powers in Fillydelphia that were struggling to keep hold of her. Silently, inside, I imagined (hoped?) that none of it would be enough.

Shutting out the sounds, I darted to the side as the slaver was distracted, staring wide eyed at the massive monstrosity on top of the FunFarm. Dodging through freshly startled ponies I made for the petting zoo, perhaps I could just hide in a corner until all this blew over.

Debris rained down from above as the conflict went on above us all. Ponies began running again, slavers among them. Only this time to panic was in all directions as they sought not to flee Fillydelphia or to get back to their areas...but simply to evade the scrap piling down from above. I saw a few ponies crushed under light wood, recovering in dazed confusion. A few took shrapnel hits to the side, crying out in pain.

From the stadium to here, my mind was only beginning to catch up with the consistent onrush of activity all around me. I dived into an old decrepit stall by the side of the FunFarm roads to take shelter.

Once inside I simply shut my eyes, held my ears...and waited. Whatever powers were being unleashed out there, it was far too big for me. Better to just wait it out...then go back to being who I was.

Even as I heard a second and even greater detonation above me that set off a minor earthquake across the FunFarm, I simply hid and prayed that none of it would affect me; even as the dust cloud washed over the stall and blew the roof clean off.

All the while, my mind fought with itself between the slave and the newly found hope.

But old habits die hard.

Hope lost. I had faltered back there...when given the choice between the free stallion and obeying my master, I had chosen to obey.

* * *

Silence.

Finally...there was silence.

I didn't know how long I had hid. Perhaps it had been a few minutes...maybe an hour. The stuffy sky and the red haze of Fillydelphia do not offer much perspective on the time of day. But when I finally crawled out, choking on dust and bones aching with exertion...it was quiet. The crowds had dispersed for the most part. I still saw some slaves clustering in ditches beside the roads or under what shelter they could, nursing wounds or huddled together for support. Occasional corpses still littered the FunFarm's pathways and the street outside. About a hundred metres away, I saw Master Red Eye's guards beginning to clear the mass of

bodies from the road where the slavers had opened fire on the crowds.

No slavers were nearby. The majority were no doubt busy with the recovery efforts to bother with a few stragglers who would be rounded up soon enough. Plus, Master Red Eye himself had said this was still a day of rest for us.

Some rest that turned out to be.

But even as I turned in a full circle...I saw no sign of Whiplash. I saw no griffins shooting at me. No stallion urging me to break the rules and follow. No...no unicorn mare inspiring me to shake off the chains at last...

As I stood in the aftermath, I felt incalculably lonely.

* * *

The peace wasn't to last long. My day had one last horror to inflict. One final challenge to overcome.

As I made my way back to the petting zoo, intent on searching for my journal...I saw *them*.

“Oh look who it is! Little runt didn't die after all!”

I did as I always did. I put my head down, tried to ignore them and head for the pigsty.

...the pigsty was no longer there.

I heard them trot up behind me, before turning to face the music. I could sense this wasn't going to end well at all. I had no place to hide any more and there were no overseers around to stop them. I felt my sprained leg ache prematurely at the no doubt large amount of running to be involved soon.

The trio were filthy. Covered in grime, wounds and dust from the massive crush earlier...I could only guess they wanted to take their anger out on somepony and I had just wandered right in on time. They were all earth ponies, not exactly burly but giants in comparison to me, two bucks and a mare. I could swear they were related or something, for each of them had the same dirt brown coat with only their manes to tell them apart. Black, dirty yellow and crude green for the mare. Each wore the ruined scraps of rags they called clothing. I was sure that they were simply for the intimidation factor of ripped fabric about their bodies.

Their cutie marks were, in turn, a plank of wood with a nail through it (what?!), three small rocks (he threw similar sizes at me...a lot) and the mare's was a lasso. She had once proven that talent by binding me in rope and hanging me from the fence until Whiplash found me after her apparent brothers-in-harm had used me as a piñata.

...apparently that had been my fault, somehow.

They were despicable ponies...but they had never been truly deadly, just an aggravation and at worst a torturous presence that brought pain and suffering to an already miserable life.

That seemed to be changing.

“So...we was thinkin',” spat the mare, “You was meant to die in that Pit, right?”

“And you didn't, somehow,” the black maned buck added while circling around me slowly. They had lethal looks in their eyes. I began to feel the fear creep down my back...their voices were different, rebellious and full of menace, not the whiny posturing of before. I backed away, trying to keep all three in my sight.

“I...I was let out...because of what happened,” I muttered, my head low. I didn't want to look them in the face, “and...and told to return here. I just want to go to sleep, I won't disturb y-ARGH!”

While I had been speaking, the first buck rushed me from behind and barrelled me over into the mud in front of where the pigsty used to be. I hit the ground hard, letting out a little whine as my injuries flared all the more from the fresh impact. Behind me the three gathered together, grinning wickedly.

“So we was then thinkin',” she continued, apparently the de facto leader for today, “if you died now...to

entertain us...no-pony would ever notice nor care right? Could just blame it on the riots earlier before that big sphere pony thing blew up atop the FunFarm!”

Oh Goddesses...they weren't wanting to just beat me.

They wanted blood.

I swivelled on the ground, twisting to look at them as I felt that damn tooth had come loose again, why couldn't I just be left in peace to slave away? The fear from before returned...only now this wasn't the arena of my nightmares. This was reality. Three ponies wanted to kill me and were going to do so.

This just wasn't fair! I had chosen to avoid dying to stay with Master Red Eye and now they wanted to kill me! This just...wasn't...

“FAIR!” I screamed, my thoughts exploding into reality. The surprise on their faces made them cease in their steps. Any other pony, that stallion maybe, might have seen an opportunity to attack...to hit them first. But I wasn't like that. I ran.

They didn't take long to recover at all, for even as I slipped and staggered out of the mud to gallop toward the exit of the petting zoo, I heard the clatter of their hooves behind me. In my mind, something clicked, the instincts of a runt who grew up having to avoid the “big brothers” of the world wanting to find and hurt me. I recalled the time the slaves at the rock farm had chased me through the field because my lack of work had earned them all punishment. I couldn't outrun other ponies with their longer strides...

Instead I tried weaving, diving over bits of fence and ducking under stall doors to stay ahead of them as the chase broke out into the FunFarm. Other slaves and the occasional busy slaver glanced at it...seeing three larger ponies chasing after a little runt scampering about with tears in his eyes ahead of them. My size let me dive into areas they couldn't. I saw an area between a Funhouse (“**Where you can keep smiling forever!**”) and a merchandise stand ahead of me...a thin alleyway. If I could get through, perhaps I could escape! I could go find that stallion again, take up his offer and escape these ponies forever!

“Can't run forever, runt! Gonna breeeak yooou!”

The buck's voice rang out shockingly close behind, turning my head I saw him approach, running low and catching up horrifyingly fast. Whinnying in fear, I ran into the space of the alley...and got stuck.

Even my malnourished body was just a little too thick. I got jammed in the first six inches, my head and front legs held in the air as the back half of my body scrambled fiercely on the ground to try and push myself through. I could sense them galloping closer, hear their screams of triumph and cried out as I felt myself not budge...

“Got you now, little runt!”

“All jammed up for us!”

I panicked, my hooves could barely reach the ground...I felt myself pushed an inch forward...I had a few seconds at most. I couldn't even look back to see them...the gap was so thin. Claustrophobic feelings rang in my head as I shook and felt myself jam all the more tightly in place.

“Got you!”

No!

I felt hooves grab my rump, strength more than my own beginning to pull me back out of the gap. Incoherent shouting came from me, I didn't even know what I was saying as I lashed out in fear at the unknown assailant from behind. With a sharp crack, I felt my back right hoof connect with something, the impact shoving me forward into the gap far enough to pop past the thinner areas into the alleyway.

Twisting at last, I saw the black haired buck lying on the ground nursing a bleeding muzzle before looking up at me with wild fury in his eyes. His companions had split off...running around.

I couldn't waste any time.

Beyond the alleyway there was a small fence, the few seconds it took me to find a box (Celestia send

my small height to the damned moon!) gave them an opportunity to catch up, only just missing me as I dived out of the FunFarm into...

...actually...I didn't even know where I was going.

As it turned out, it wasn't a particularly easy fall on the other side.

It wasn't a particularly short one either.

I screamed as I fell the ten feet to the sloped back areas of the FunFarm, rolling and scraping down a rocky embankment into a muddy refuse pit filled with piles of old scrap from the rides of the park.

Crashing into the ground at a high speed, I felt my entire ribcage buckle from the impact as I lay still, struggling to breathe and feeling the burns on my body from the mudslide down the ditch wall.

Annoyingly, that pink pony's mantra to "look before you make that hop, skip and jump!" from the auto-recorded FunFarm play parks speakers seemed like all too good advice right now. Oh how I detested that happy-go-lucky voice reminding me of making mistakes...

I staggered to my hooves, glancing around before falling again in the same spot. The ground here was without any grip, even to a pony with perfectly fit muscles and good balance...of which I had neither. Perhaps if I had enough time...

"Gotcha! Ya little slippery bugger!"

The second buck's distinctive accent shouted to me as I turned to witness them sliding down the same embankment with greater care than my haphazard fall. Oh come on Goddesses...cut me a break...

I didn't even have time to move before he charged directly into me, sending me sliding back cross the mud into a pile of scrap. The unbalanced pile came roaring down around me, distracting the bullies as they slid their way across the mud, dodging random appliances and hunks of metal from rollercoasters that had rolled off the main pile with a sound like an ironmongers being demolished. I felt a slab of metal slap me across the back of the head, knocking me face down in front of them.

"Well...well...well..." the mare was out of breath as she reached down and plucked a broken and sharp looking pipe from the scrap with her mouth, "geff we get to haf fun nao."

I just lifted my weary hooves in front of me...I could run or fight no more. The days exertion and mental exhaustion was taking its toll. My body simply could not bring itself to move with any urgency.

"Please...please, don't...I'll...I'll be *your* slave too...whatever you want..."

"All we want is a chance to let off some steam...do the things we got to do before we were brought in here," commented the black haired buck, stamping his hoof with intent on using just them, "and after that little buck you gave me...I've half a mind to return the favour tenfold..."

The things they did outside...these ponies weren't bullies...they were gangers. Stripped of their freedom to do as they wished, their claws had been neutered, so to speak. Today's riots had reminded them of who they were...and I was their celebration.

"Time to die, runt...it's been a fun few months."

I closed my eyes, not even crying any more...perhaps life just knew that my time was up after all.

FWHOOSH!

The raiders screamed, but not in anger...in fear.

I dared to open my eyes before shutting them quickly again. The entire environment was...was green! Above us, roaring through the sky, was something flying *with* wings, glowing so brightly with its massive size that it was like a miniature radioactive sun in the air!

I had seen one of these things before...

A Balefire Phoenix.

Only this one was *massive*; it soared above us, the sight terrifying the gangers as it flew close to the ground, the heat emanating from it making me squeal in discomfort as I saw the raiders simply flee to escape the heat. Only the mud caking me acted like a coolant to allow me to bear the conflagration that now soared toward a building top in Filly surrounded by multiple pink pony face balloons.

Something else was going on...

At that moment...I began to get a sense of how small in the world I truly was. If powers like this were at work, then truly I was meant for nothing as I witnessed the passing of a greater story. Even as I lay there and watched along with every other slave and slaver in Fillydelphia...we were in awe as the massive beast stood atop the building. We couldn't see what it was facing, but somehow my heart just...knew.

It was her.

We were onlookers...the crowd gazing at the passing of history as we saw the phoenix curve from balloon to balloon, igniting them with scorching green radflame. I couldn't help a little satisfied grin as I saw at least a few of that damn pony's leering faces go down in flames...never to immortally stare at me every day again.

It had come from no-where. Not for me. I was just the witness, just as I had been to the mare's escape and the colossal beast atop the FunFarm. I could not know the context or connection between them...all I knew was that it was all a signal.

A signal to make a choice. The Goddesses...or that mare and her allies, had granted me a second chance.

To dare...or to falter.

* * *

I lay down there for hours.

The phoenix had long gone...the commotion on the building, whatever it was, now finished. I knew in my heart that the mare had escaped, with allies like that...that huge radioactive beast...how could she not?

But now...I just sat in the mud. What else could I do? I couldn't go back to the petting zoo until I knew I would be protected by slavers from those gang ponies. I couldn't strike out alone, the guards were ready to shoot on sight.

So instead I just wandered the refuse slowly, limping and trying to make sense of the day. My mind was at war once again. Part of me wanted to avoid all this...go back to what my cutie mark and my life told me I should do. Be a slave...that was what I am.

But the other half could not forget that mysterious mare who had defied Red Eye before my eyes in such iconic fashion. To escape to lead your own life...how could I not want that too?

But what would I even *do* with freedom?

I couldn't make sense of the emotion. From the mare in the Pit...to the mare who had looked at my sketchbook. From the gang trying to kill me to the stallion murdering and torturing ponies to help me escape with him. I realised I didn't even know *any* of their names. I thought back to drawing my own pictures. To wailing as I saw my mother in my own charcoals rendition. A whole day of coincidence, luck, discovery, pain and miracles...more than in the rest of my life combined. How could I, a slave whom never had to think for himself until today, make sense of all this?

I bucked a scrapheap in frustration, before screaming as the resulting toppling revealed not more scrap...but the skeleton of a pony. The blackened bones clattered out, knocking against my legs even as I back-pedalled furiously and fell on my rump again. Staring with wide eyes, I saw it was covered in rags and metal plates like makeshift armour. It was buckled and burned...probably from the megaspells.

It wasn't the first time I had seen a skeleton...hell...I had lived in the wastes most of my life. But something struck me.

Around its foreleg lay what at first appeared scrap metal, but memory pipped into my head.

That mare's cutie mark...

Before me lay a devastated and wrecked version of one of those devices. With shaking hooves I tugged it off the skeleton's leg and began to turn it over a few times, studying it through wet eyes. The lock that kept it attached to a leg was broken...in fact it wasn't even there at all. The screen was cracked and some buttons were missing entirely. On the inside...I saw exposed electronics and magic crystals that had shattered inside.

And yet...I saw a small light flickering on it...the device was still active!

Curiosity overcame fear. I started prodding at the machine, hoofing the buttons and turning dials. I even started fiddling with the wires...but to no avail. The most I could get from it was a sort of white noise when I hit one button that lasted until I hit it again. With a great cry of frustration I threw down the device, the button clacking on again to fill the air with white noise as I let out every wound up emotion I had on the offending device!

I had been changed by one day! I didn't even know what I was thinking, let alone what to do! How was I meant to make sense of all of this?! Mysterious mares and stallions? Huge balefire phoenixes and random monsters popping out of buildings? A chance to escape and my damned instincts forcing me to stay and act out the slave life I was meant for? Learning to draw for my own? Being within death's reach twice in one day? Or more, who knows how many bullets missed me! I was beaten, bruised, scared, bleeding, sick and probably dying within a month and **now this damned device refused to tell me anything I needed to make sense of it all when I thought I had found a fucking link!**

With one hoof I screamed and hurled the device away from me with a great cry of rage.

“HOW AM I MEANT TO MAKE SENSE OF ALL THIS?!”

I galloped over, weary and sore, shouting at the device as though it were the cause of all this.

“I'm just a little slave! I don't have *any* freedom! I don't have *any* dreams! What am I meant to do?!”

I collapsed...my head resting against it, nudging a dial to twist it.

“I...I need someone to help me...anyone...just someone to show me the way...”

The dial twisted one bit more...the white noise stopped.

*“-ello Wastelanders! This is, of course, your friendly little light in the good ol' horrible Equestrian Wastelands day in and out, DJ-Pon3! I'm here with...you guessed it...that thing that **used** to give us all the blues. Yup! It's the news! And let me tell you, little ponies...do I have some good stuff for you today following the activities of everypony's favourite Stable Dweller out in the blasted pit of Fillydelphia...”*

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Lucky Break! - Whatever has changed for you, it has been for the better. Perhaps you have been working on a sixth sense or maybe you found a lucky charm.

You gain +1 to your LUCK statistic.

Thank you sincerely for reading, I genuinely hope you enjoyed the opening chapter to “Murky Number

Seven.” Future chapters are plotted in for future dates which can be found on the story hub. If you read and enjoyed it, please consider leaving a comment on the EQD Side Story page which can be found here. That’s where I most often check.

[The Side Story Update Page](#)

Till next chapter...

- Fuzzy

Chapter 2: Every Pair of Wings

* * *

“Item 1: Create checklist of the things I need to accomplish by the end of the day.”

“What did it feel like to be alone?”

For the longest time I had never known. To be alone, you must have had a presence to lose. For me, that had been my mother. To witness her slowly getting smaller as I was dragged away over the wet mud into the barn of the rock farm was the first time in my life I had felt the painful sting of loneliness.

But they say time heals all gaps in the soul whether you want them to or not, for the life of the slave took over. I missed her, but I no longer felt the loss of her presence so keenly as I once did. After all, my time around her had always been preordained to end, a small bone thrown to me early in life that eventually was to be lost. A childhood safety blanket that, after growing up, was thrown away once I had come of age. No, I had never truly felt alone...because I had always known I was going to be so one day. I had been prepared for it, however subconsciously by the conditioning that had become my forced instincts.

Yesterday in Fillydelphia changed all that.

A mother is a requirement. Everypony has one. It is the people you meet who you do not expect that defines your feelings around others. From birth till death sentence I had never known a single pony to come under that label. But approaching my darkest hour I had been shown not one...but four.

Number Six. The fearsome pony that had attempted to set me free and fought with terrifying brutality to escape. I had been nothing but an acceptable tag-along to him, yet such an act was unique in my life, for no pony had ever lifted a hoof in my defence. He had shown me the will to fight; to pursue and attain something. But as my mental instincts kicked in...I lost him to the Fillydelphia ruins, presumably forever.

The unknown mare. A pony whom had shown me kindness and concern when I had been injured. Who had seen my somewhat more...risqué... pictures and only grinned rather than judged. For the brief few minutes I had seen her, she had given me hope that perhaps not all ponies were so quick to leap to assumptions. However, she too was now lost to the masses of slaves, never for me to know if she was still alive or even in Fillydelphia any more. Despite that...I could not remove her from my mind.

The Stable Dweller. The pony who defied a Master. Who alone had fought and escaped from his clutches by ascending to the heavens above, taking with her the zebra whom had tried to kill her. A merciful act from a better soul that had lit an inspiration in my heart and soul forever. The sight of her rising in the Pit; bright, fearless and wreathed in magic would never leave me. I would have drawn it...had I still a journal to draw in. Amongst Red Eye's best efforts...she had escaped and proven that leaving Fillydelphia *was* possible. That if somepony were to show that same courage...they too could take for themselves the freedom they desired and dare to dream of better times.

But even as she brought us hope, that fleeting time in which I had 'known' the so called Stable Dweller ended. Fillydelphia once again took control with no real visible change. For her impact was not in our environment. It was in our hearts.

One by one, I had lost the three ponies who had shown me what it felt like to have another pony there for me. To protect me. To aid me. To inspire me.

Now they were gone. And now, for the first time, I had felt true loneliness.

It had consumed me. Down in the muddy refuse pit I had lost my composure, my temper and all

understanding of what to do. Personal emotion was not something I was tailored to feel or deal with, despite my regular tears. But in my lowest moment, filled with rage at the solitude I could not comprehend, I was handed by fate the fourth, a voice that could not leave me. Who I could see as a guiding light through the darkness of the wasteland.

So long as the airwaves were open...I would never be alone again.

* * *

“So you see, my little ponies, today we bring you the first of a new wave of goodwill to all the unfortunates out there in Fillydelphia. Yeah, that's right, all you slaves in that foul end of the wasteland can have a little cheer once more. Until recently you've been denied the privilege of my oh-so-wonderful tips and tunes. But no longer! DJ-Pon3 is in the airwaves! Ol' Red Eye can't stop this signal! Thanks to the efforts of the one and only Stable Dweller, these broadcasts can now reach you all down in Fillydelphia to bring that little glimmer of hope to your lives. Warms the heart it does, that finally...I can let you understand that no, you haven't been forgotten out there.”

My pig sty hiding spot was gone. But I'd always had something of a talent for finding the little nooks and crannies in which to wriggle away and hide. In this case, an old feed cupboard within the petting zoos that stank of rot and damp with a collapsed roof. The fallen timber created a hidey hole that I could slink off into.

And listen.

“Now information is still creeping in to us from out that direction, but from what I know thus far, it seems our Stable Dweller got right into Fillydelphia itself. Not only that, but she made one heck of a show in front of that egomaniac himself, messed up his operations something fierce and got the hay right back outta there with another slave by her side! Tell you what, folks. I've seen some amazing stuff in my time, but even just hearing about this...she really is something special, that little mare.”

Isn't she just?

I felt that smile creep back into my face again. I had stuffed the device inside my jerkin to hide it as I had crept back to the petting zoo a few hours later. Whiplash had returned, a nasty deterrent for the gangers to not attempt murder again. Not that it had stopped their more 'normal' activities however. My rump still stung from the half buck as I had wriggled my way into the feed shed. I could hear them nearby, discussing things about mares I felt best to avoid my imagination thinking too deeply on.

“So take heart, little slaves. I'm with you all now, DJ-Pon3 as a lovely alternative to all that nonsense Mr Eye loves to spout all damn day long. Better music too, much as Pinkie can bring a smile that stuff does get a little grating after a while. But that's not all we offer here at Tenpony Tower. We've got wasteland tips, tricks and lessons to help give you all an edge to stay alive in there as best your little souls can, my little unfortunate ponies. But above all...you can come to this signal for respite. For an escape. Just be careful, I can't imagine Red Eye appreciates superior radio. So find your hiding spots, relax and get ready to experience some real sound. To let that hard and death defying work shift slip from your mind for a few hours and relax with a little Sweetie Belle, Sapphire Shores or our wondrous new Velvet Remedy! Speaking of that hot singing and hot looking mare...hey come on, credit where credit is due...here's some of her right now.”

I clutched the device tight, the volume down so low that only my strange hearing could detect the noise. The absolute last thing I needed was for the gangers to know about this device...this precious device. I would never leave it elsewhere, better to remain strapped around my torso under my clothing. My jerkin was pretty good at keeping things hidden after all; it had done it for a very long time and now would do so for even longer with this device. Its volume could be low enough that only I would hear...and remain hidden from everypony else. Only here, safe in a small place could I take it out and hold it close, almost nuzzling

the thing as I sought comfort from the hellish life that I could at last recognise as my own. Since yesterday, I had spotted a few slaves clutching similar such radios, hiding them from slavers to tune in to the new broadcast. DJ-Pon3 had brought a silent, almost undetectable revolution of hope to them. I had witnessed some being caught...the guards had standing orders to stamp it out where-ever they could, both the radio and slave apparently.

As the music began, a wonderful uplifting beat and beautifully struck first note caught my attention immediately. I heard this 'Velvet' sing of hope and better times, lighting the colour in my imagination to follow what she sung of. I curled up, eyes clenched tightly shut as I held the device close, its small speaker against my ear. Music and voice in such perfect harmony blessed with a stirring tempo and words that seemed to reach my very soul. The song rose to a triumphant and motivating crescendo before the quiet and oh so gentle end. Almost before the dead silence between tracks became unbearable...another began. DJ-Pon3 was showcasing her to us, the wasteland's own born talent.

I felt wetness on my hooves from holding the device to the side of my face. Even as I imagined the same beauty that she sung of, my body shuddered with emotion at the first *real* songs that felt like they were meant to help me continued through the night. I wanted to hear more...I wanted to see her...I wanted to try drawing her, even though I didn't know anything about her. I just wanted to lose myself in that tune and stay imagining forever.

Filled with the emotion by the music and voice of Velvet...I cried myself to sleep at the impossibility of ever managing to find the beauty she sung of, hearing her voice in my head gently hushing me to not worry through the medium of her music, even as I heard a growing wind building in force outside.

* * *

I had fallen asleep with Velvet Remedy. My dreams of colour, light and optimism afforded me the first real sleep that did not contain the recurring night terrors of my masters deciding they did not need me any more.

I only wish it could have lasted longer.

With the comfort of DJ Pon3 and the music in my ears, I wanted to just sleep forever.

To just not wake up and have to face the day once more.

* * *

Fillydelphia is rarely that kind.

Yesterday I had been woken by Whiplash beating on the pig sty. Today differed only in that the pig sty was a feed cupboard. A sharp rapping jerked me awake all the same. Murmuring and groaning quietly I hastily hid the device under my jerkin, not daring to leave it behind where it might be stolen. Outside, I could still hear the wind whistling between the FunFarm's stalls like an ongoing howl in the air.

“Murky Number Seven! Slaves tell me you're hiding in here now, get your little rump out here!”

Whiplash.

Normality had returned to Fillydelphia. The day was about to begin again.

Hazy eyed, I rolled my neck and crawled slowly out...each hoof that left the hiding spot hesitating with the wish to just dive right back into my cosy hole and go back to sleep. Judging from the light in the air...it was still the same night as I had returned to the FunFarm from the refuse pit. All the same, some air away from the rank stench of two hundred year old rotting feed cupboard was easier to breathe. Well, until you remembered it was radioactive and poisoned anyway. My throat felt dry and tight while my stomach ached with neglect. It occurred to me that I hadn't been given any food or drink for over a day now and the lack of nourishment was beginning to tell. Once in Fillydelphia I had been reduced to drinking from a sink in a

workplace just to survive until the next rations appeared. It hadn't helped my radiation sickness. Already I could feel my rad-fevers creeping back in as a stinging sweat all over, why couldn't they just let me die in peace or something?

I pushed myself more fully out from the wooden door that had collapsed inwardly and immediately felt every muscle in my body stiffen in shock. Sweet Celestia, it was *freezing* out here! Where had that stuffy heat gone? What was with this wind? The gusts hurtling through the petting zoo felt like they went right through me, chilling to the bone never mind the body as a whole. Looking off to the side, I could see what looked like a growing storm over the nearby hills outside the Wall. The clouded sky had become dark, rumbling menacingly in the far off distance. Thunder, probably a storm coming this way too. I shuddered...no-pony had told me about the rain in Fillydelphia on my first night. Coming through the poisoned cloud of radiation and industry...it *burned*.

Fillydelphia was known for its blistering and stifling heat, but the wasteland, ever powerful in Equestria, could do as it willed *anywhere*. Including making my personal hell freeze over, apparently.

Any feelings of cold or long off sounds were quickly driven from my head by the clip around the ear I received for not immediately turning to attention for Whiplash. Caught off balance and still physically exhausted from yesterday (well, more exhausted than usual...) I stumbled and fell from the stinging strike, only barely catching myself before my head rattled off a rock.

“Get it together you filthy little wretch, get the hell up!” Whiplash's voice was like his signature item, sharp and cracking for emphasis as I felt him wander forward kicking me in the ribs every second I delayed as I attempt to get my sore hooves under me and rise.

Wincing in pain already, I reflected this probably wasn't going to be a very good day. Well...another one to add to the pile since I was bought by Master Red Eye. Turning, I bowed my head before looking up at Whiplash. Clearly I had been just in time, for that length of leather was already drawn, his whip ready to strike me if I had delayed any further. He must have seen the twitch of fear in my eyes, for the whip moved forward to lightly bat my face to either side on each word major punctuation of his speech.

“You will come when I tell you! No delays, Murk! I'm getting tired of this dragging you out of holes. Do you think I have the fucking time to waste on you?”

I shook my head. A reply, I had learned, more often bred twisting of words and a fierce lashing.

“Good! The only reason I'm not having you strung up and whipped till your back is raw flesh is because your shift changed,” he sternly announced, walking back to the main zoo area, “your number came up. Lucky number seven, right?”

He sneered at me as I tried to fight the urge to roll my eyes...if I had a morsel of food for every time I'd heard that 'joke' I'd only be slightly malnourished instead of ghoulish. I back-pedalled into the wooden side of the petting zoo feed hut as he approached, reaching into his saddlebag. My imagination went wild, Whiplash not using his whip? What was it then? Pliers? A mallet!?

It was a piece of old yellowed parchment and a quill. He threw them at my feet.

“Take a note, Murk. I need you to remember this precisely.”

I simply stared at the parchment and quill like it was an indecipherable puzzle.

“Um...master?” I started, “I...uh...I can't write...”

Whiplash turned his head to me, eyes narrowing as his magic picked up both the quill and whip, a look of “You're kidding...you're kidding, right?” on his face before grunting in annoyance and drawing the parchment up before him as well.

“Well, I'll write it then-”

“I can't read either...” I muttered, closing my eyes and whinnying as I lowered my head.

CRACK!

I screamed, leaping backwards on instinct, half falling into the feeding hut hole again as the line of agony tore across my head and face. My hooves came up to protect it against further strikes from that whip, feeling a small trickle of blood dripping from my forehead onto them. I hesitantly opened my eyes to see the whip raised ready to strike again.

“I swear to Luna's almighty royal *arse*, Murk! You are the most useless slave I have *ever* had the misfortune to own! Now you listen up, boy, you listen good! I'm going to tell you this message once and if you fuck it up then I promise you'll be working the Parasprite Pits from tomorrow onwards!”

I opened my mouth to plead or beg. The Parasprite Pits were a death sentence! Those little flying critters had been twisted by the radiation, taint or something into carnivorous little demons. We had all heard the story of the pony who got one in her mouth and been eaten from the inside out by an ever growing swarm. I didn't know if that nightmare inducing situation were true, but I had seen a pony who fell in the Pit without a hazard suit devoured by a loose swarm in mere seconds. Make no mistake, working in the pits to incinerate them was tantamount to danger beyond any other appointed shift, even more than exploring the crater or a Stable. However, I was not given the chance to voice my begging against being sent there.

“I need somepony to run a message for me,” he continued, throwing the parchment and quill back at me anyway, “I've got a request for four new slaves from Wicked Slit after yesterdays work shift. Apparently three of them fell into a vat of molten metal or something. The fourth was sent to the Pit.”

He narrowed his eyes for a second, before shrugging.

“I guess that means she'll only need three, given the last one is probably you. But that psychobitch could probably do with another one to keep her mollified anyway. You go straight to the manufacturing foundry, Murk. She'll not be on the shop floor this time of night, so you'll need to go find her in the overseer huts near the factory.”

I groaned out loud, my own sleepiness had been warning me but here was the confirmation. This was out of hours shift work and in this case it involved potentially having to wake up a slaver who I doubted would be too pleased to see me, let alone have me interrupt her sleep. If Whiplash cared for my obvious discomfort, he didn't show it, simply letting his instruction sink in before continuing.

“Tell her that the slaves will be delayed today, she won't have them. The groups are still too messed up from all that...pandemonium...yesterday.”

Oh great. It's *bad* news. This just got better and better...

“However, on account of you surviving, somehow, you are to mention that she will have you back again to continue work in her foundry.”

I wanted to just start beating my head off of the feed hut's wall. Back to that routine again for another few months until my inevitable poison aired death? Is that what I'd been through all this for?

“Now she won't be too happy, so that's why I'm sending you.”

Oh come on! What was this? I had to speak up, but mentally I was already preparing how to best tell Wicked Slit to not shoot the messenger. A neon sign from three miles away seemed the best option at this point. Accompanied by a very fast train to get on.

“Master...I...I don't think that's a good idea. She isn't too fond of me as a worker,” I squeaked out, eyes warily watching that whip of his, “in fact, I think she outright doesn't want me.”

“Then that makes two of us,” Whiplash retorted, snorting and turning away, “as far as I'm concerned now, Murk, you're expendable. If I have to lose a slave to Slit being in a sick mood waking up to get a message on time, I'd rather it be you than any slaves that the overseers actually want from my stock. Now, leave in ten minutes time, I've cleared the guards for you to leave at that point, understand?”

“Yes master...” I lowered my head, sighing to the ground. Luck, it seemed, may have helped me yesterday but was turning its head from me today.

* * *

Whiplash wandered off soon after. I lightly stomped the ground in frustration at the new role as “messenger to be shot.”

On the other hoof...at least I had ten more minutes to hide away. I wriggled on the ground to fit under the locked door. I had spotted the rotten wood around the bottom when I arrived back at the FunFarm from the refuse. A swift half buck had given me some room to squeeze under.

Inside, I didn't own much. Well, I didn't have anything at all actually other than my jerkin, sticks of charcoal, a parchment and quill now and finally, of course, the device. Or radio...or hoofmachine...whatever the thing was called by ponies who had an education or experience of the wasteland. I set it to the side on what used to be a feed box, turning up the volume just slightly, half hoping to hear the DJ's sweet soothing words to help me feel safe. No such luck, although the unknown singer's voice (not Velvet...I'd recognise that voice anywhere now) brought a smile to my face as I sniffed and lay down again.

What now? Was I just meant to go back to daily life in Fillydelphia? I doubted it could ever be the unthinking toil to inevitable death it used to be now. Several ponies and the music of the wastes had shown me there was more to life. I had shown *myself* there was more to life when I started drawing for myself yesterday. How could I just turn my head away from all that? How could I go through the agony, sickness and deprivation until death with anything more than a constant fear for losing the small things that I had gained?

A hacking cough sent a flare of pain into my lungs. Radiation sickness reminding me that it too was still present, its fever hidden by the chill wind outside. I covered my mouth with a hoof. The last thing I needed was the gangers knowing how bad it was getting.

The hoof came away bloody.

Ooooh, not good...

Only now it occurred to me that my saviour yesterday, the balefire phoenix, had perhaps been a double edged sword. The same green fire that had driven the gangers off had given me a severe dose of magical radiation on top of what Fillydelphia's smog had already done to me.

I shook my head, driving the thought from my mind. I was dying anyway. This didn't change anything. If anything it was more important I did this right now. I needed to concentrate on what I was supposed to be doing before I was too sick to do anything. Tossing the quill to the side, I drew my charcoal stick instead and pulled the parchment across.

This would be different. I had ten minutes with no interruptions. The gangers were asleep. Whiplash wasn't coming back for now and I had control of my own drawing. Yesterday before the Pit had been...it had been something special. I had ignored a command to want to draw something. I had to use what time I had left to feel that again...and again. Lacking my journal, it fell to the parchment.

Here we go...

There was only one thing I truly *could* bring myself to draw.

The parchment was large, I wanted to make use of it. I drew rough lines, like before I was simply throwing things at the page and seeing what stuck. Eventually the way shone through to me and I set to work.

Down at the bottom of the parchment, I drew a small figure. Glaring upward with wonder of its face, eyes open and full of realisation. He held limply in his hooves a small device. I dearly wanted to draw what was above him...but it had to wait. Some things needed finishing before it.

To the right, bigger...no, much bigger! Dark and brooding, sharp designs and a look of absolute cold determination. I even felt fear just by looking at him on paper from my own charcoal's rendition. On the right of the drawing space, he stood ready, head low and ready to unleash imminent violence. As my charcoal darkened the tribal designs, I began to notice that I had unwittingly drawn him to be looking away from the small pony in the centre, as though protecting him.

To the left, I began to draw a second pony. Quickly, I changed, instead doing just her face. A mare with a flowing mane looking off to the left of the parchment with concern and kindness. I remembered that face. Gently, I brushed away some of the blackened markings nearer to the centre, giving it the illusion of light.

I paused...I knew what I wanted above those three. But I was afraid that my skills would not do it justice...

Slowly, I touched it to the parchment.

Gently, I began moving it to form shapes and curves as always. I could feel sweat stinging my brow from concentration. I could not mess this up. A pony took shape, weightless and heroic, floating in the air itself. Growing in confidence I drew heavier lines, magical wisps and beams of light from her horn that would have lit all of those below watching her ascend. The centre pony below was staring directly up at her with wonder on his face.

I sat back from the parchment and took in what I had done. I felt a smile creep on to my face, allowing me to almost forget my predicament or sickness as I touched the parchment with a hoof. As though I could somehow let that image become my life before my eyes once again.

I could see mistakes. There always were, but they didn't matter. What I drew was what I felt. My journal was full of such things, most drawings telling my emotional state or hidden wishes, however large or small.

I knew I had to retrieve it. But I also knew that I had no help.

I wasn't alone. DJ-Pon3 had seen to that.

But I had to do this by myself. Through all sickness, fear, slave duties and unclear dreams I could see the one thing I knew I had to retrieve.

That journal would be mine again before I died. I would find it, take it back and then...and...

I looked down at the ponies before me, each surrounding the one in the centre who looked so afraid and lost behind his wonder. I saw the Stable Dweller flying free.

I was going to...

No. One thing at a time, Murk.

Flipping the parchment, I quickly sketched my journal on the back corner. I would track my things to do in the day to avoid as much harm as I could. The journal was the signal to find and retrieve it. I placed a curved knife beside it, to go and find Wicked Slit and deal with that job. The last thing I needed was to be thrown in isolation for failing to complete a task.

Two tasks added to the parchment, I rolled it up and stuffed it inside my jerkin along with the device. Pulling the frayed cord tighter about my body, I ensured as best I could they wouldn't slip. If I lost my jerkin...

Shaking my head, I sat and for the remaining minutes tried to figure out why, despite an objective to go for and something to accomplish...I still didn't feel brave or heroic at all.

I was willing to bet the Stable Dweller never felt this way.

* * *

The ten minutes had passed. My resolve to begin acting for myself and seek what *I* wanted had not wavered. But as I crawled out into the reality of Fillydelphia, the safety of my drawings and wishes fell away to the cold and harsh weather through the normally stifflingly warm city. No, I was not brave, no doubt there would be tears, whining and pain to go yet...but I held tightly in my mind the hope that it was all leading to an end soon.

I shook, trying to work some feeling into my quickly numbing limbs from the biting wind before moving out. I could see the other slaves clustered together in corners, sharing body heat against the wind. A few, woken by my yelp of pain earlier glared with hateful eyes at me, apparently jealous of my ability to fit

into small places for warmth. The gangers in particular seemed to be looking at me with grim intentions. They had taken shelter in the ruins of the pig sty, the only remaining wall dragged around as a primitive wind break. Seeing it sparked a memory in my mind of being dragged along this very ground, chains around my legs as I watched the sketch of my mother disappear from view.

Whiplash wasn't nearby any more, I couldn't linger much longer. But as I harboured the quest to reclaim what was mine a thought struck me. Those gangers had come back here after chasing me down last night and I knew for a fact that no other slave would touch the spoils of their 'conquest' over me, lest they become the new target. So it stood to reason that those gangers knew what happened to the small sketchbook.

After a second it occurred to me that perhaps standing and staring at them wasn't the greatest plan of mine thus far. The black haired buck in particular was eyeing me up with murderous intent. His muzzle still looked swollen from where I had given it a good kick. Perhaps I could get a few clues...

“What do you think you're looking at, runt?”

“Nothing!” I whinnied as I turned my head away from them, “I...I just wanted to find my journal...”

“What?” The second buck looked around, before grinning. “That thing of yours? Oh don't worry, it went to a better cause, got some goood swag for it on the slave market.”

The what? I had never heard of such a thing in Fillydelphia, although it didn't sound impossible. Everywhere I'd been, slaves had traded things behind slaver backs or sometimes even in direct view if the material was innocent enough. But a market? I didn't suppose it was impossible, after all, Master Red Eye wasn't stupid. Allowing the slaves a small area to trade their meagre belongings would go a long way towards keeping them in line.

“You wanting trouble? What you doing just standing there, runt? Looking for your head bucked in?”

I drew breath quickly, backing away and shaking my head. Oh please let them think I was just frozen in fear...please please please...

“Yeah, you better back off. Just wait, runt. Just wait till you've got no-place to hide in at nights,” the mare threatened menacingly, spitting into the dirt, “after all, you're 'expendable' now, remember?”

I heard her sick laughter even as I turned and galloped off out of the FunFarm, struggling to not show any more terror on my face until they were out of sight.

* * *

It took me a good ten minutes to build up the courage to go back again. I wasn't done in the FunFarm, not at all. For as much as they terrified me, I wanted that journal. I *needed* that journal. The one thing that I had shown to myself that I could break the chains on my own mind was lost to me.

I had to reclaim it.

I had to see her again.

The pig sty had been located near the edge of the low scrap wall surrounding the petting zoo that marked our enclosure. My idea was to sneak back around and hide just opposite the gangers on the other side. If I kept low and crept, I could lie unnoticed and do something I hadn't done for years. To eavesdrop and sneak around using my size to remain hidden behind small objects. I had once used it to steal food from my master in the rock farm.

Part of my mind, the one trying to push me to ignore this and go and do my slave duty before I was noticed seemed to take sick pleasure in reminding me that 'Yeah, I did sneak out then. *I got caught.*' This was going to stretch my time thin. Being late to bring a message to Wicked Slit often meant being late getting back to your enclosure on account of having to limp the entire way.

Circling around the petting zoo while trying to calm my beating heart from their threat, I hid behind a small stall. What it once sold was indecipherable, or perhaps I just couldn't understand the letters. Possibly

both. My entire body was sweating with the effort it was taking to overcome my fear and do this...but only they held any clue to where my journal had gone. I needed to listen for any clues they might stumble out. Names, places, shifts or anything that might give me a lead.

The petting zoo wall was about twenty feet away across the blasted remains of what I guessed was a field where larger animals were kept in the FunFarm's heyday. No noise came from the other side and I could only occasionally see the top of one of their manes popping above the top of the wall. Made of scrap metal and rotting wood, it functioned only as a border. If they were to spot me, it would prove no obstacle and there was no humongous balefire phoenix to save me this time. (Not to mention I doubted I could survive another rad-burst like that) Gulping down fear, I put one shaking hoof in front of the other and began creeping forwards.

Every small step lit another part of my brain instructing me to just turn around. The still bleeding wound on my forehead from Whiplash's strike throbbed to remind me of what would happen if I weren't done on time. I blinked the dripping blood from my eyes, lowering my torso to the ground as I slid forward. Great Goddesses...if they only turned around they would see me, I would have to hide right up against the wall itself. Less than a foot from them through it.

It took every effort I could pitifully muster to not squeak in terror as I dragged my tired body forward inch by painstaking inch, scooting carefully toward them. The harsh gravel pulled at my jerkin, leading me to take a few heart stopping moments to pull it back into place and ensure the device was still held snugly inside. I couldn't lose my jerkin, not for anything.

Just a few feet to go. I could hear their voices just fine with my hearing, discussing me and their sick pleasure at scaring me off. I trembled as I realised their threats were not idle should they ever get me alone. However, I couldn't stop here, I had to be closer or they could simply turn around and see-

The mare turned.

I didn't have time to think. With a quick shuffle, I flung myself forward the last few feet and rolled on my side in behind the wall.

"The hell was that?"

Crap!

I could hear her getting up and turning towards the wall. Panicking, I started trying to sneak as quietly as I could along the edge, keeping my mouth clamped shut that my instinctual whinnying wouldn't give me away. Every small movement felt deafening to me, my heartbeat alone would be loud enough to hear, surely!

The mare's head peered over the wall behind me...please don't look to the left...don't look to the left...

"Anything?"

"Nah, radroach or some shit."

She moved away from the wall as I took the first breath in over a minute. Resting my head on the ground, I tried to ensure my staggered breathing wasn't too loud as I closed my eyes and shivered on the spot. I was in position. I could still hear them just over the wall.

"Swear, the moment I know I'm dying, I'm bringing that bastard overseer down with me."

It was the black haired buck, I recognised the slight muffling on his words.

"Fuck that noise, only pony he's getting throttled by is me, Lemon."

That was the mare. But the brown and black buck was called *Lemon*? I...that didn't make any sense at all! Perhaps he dyed his mane. I'd occasionally wondered if I'd like that done, get rid of this murky (yeah yeah...) colour and get something brighter. I listened to them complaining about who I guessed was a shift overseer from where-ever they got sent each day. Apparently, this stallion was a pretty mean apple who delighted in giving gangs a hard time.

Briefly, I sent a little thanks in my thoughts to the overseer and wished him the best of luck in his future for the act.

“Eh, no matter,” continued the mare, “you can get rid of your frustrations on the runt when he comes back. 'Ere, Lemon, after the food comes round? Get those hooves of yours into smashing that feed shed. Doubt Whiplash will complain and it'll lose his only place to hide. I'd like to see how his raggedy little coat takes this wind chill when he 'aint got no-pony to bed up with. Even the other slaves avoid him, 'fraid we'll take em on!”

I had to bite my lip to stop myself from whimpering out loud as I felt tears well up in my eyes in abject terror. One way or another, I was going to be badly hurt by the end of the day now. Either from Whiplash, Wicked Slit or the gang. Holding my head in my hooves, I wracked my brain to think of a way out of this...how could I avoid the beating? Thoughts were slow in coming, like some cogs in the machine of my brain just weren't there at all, never mind being slow. I wasn't brought up to make decisions or be decisive! I just...followed.

The Stable Dweller would know what to do here. I didn't...

That fact hurt. It hurt bad, because I knew that my day was taking an inevitable turn. No matter what, it would end in me returning here for punishment of some sort or another. The most I could do was steel myself against it.

Yeah. Me. Steeling myself. What a joke, I'd probably just cry and beg, like I always did.

“Hey, you got that Wingboner magazine there, Noose?”

“Yeah!” the mare I now knew as Noose lashed back, her voice savage and filled with possessiveness, “I'm not done with it yet!”

“You've had it since we got back from the damn market!” Lemon threw back, “C'mon! I've never seen them pegasi like that before!”

“Then you'll wait your turn to read it,” Noose spat, “fucking pegasi don't deserve anythin' after what they did. All they're good fer these days is sitting on clouds and being pictures in old magazines for our benefit, so I'm gonna enjoy it as long as I damn well want!”

“Like you could ever enjoy anything like that for 'long', Noose.”

I heard a curse screamed incoherently before what seemed to be a small pony on pony brawl broke out between them. The sound of them scuffling on the ground, swearing colourfully and beating one another around the ground reminded me all too much of the sounds I had heard in the Pit. Well...at least at first. I sighed about the hatred of the pegasi, no pegasi could ever walk the wastes without being hunted now. The slave in me understood all too well.

Slowly, the sounds dulled, being replaced by a somewhat more...telling series of sounds that implied their brawl had become another type of activity altogether.

Oh Celestia...I didn't need to hear this, what vile ponies.

I heard the remaining, yet unknown by name buck reach forward and pick up what sounded like a magazine, muttering something to himself about 'those two weirdos...' before shuffling around.

“While you two mess about, I'll take this.”

I heard him pick up the magazine.

“Little runt's pictures of mares were just shit anyway.”

I slumped a little. I'd always thought they were pretty nice looking...

Deciding to trust the mare from yesterday's judgement more than this ganger's, I kept listening, trying not to listen too hard to the other pair. Oh Celestia, what I would give for selective hearing right about now.

“Least Sooty Morass was willing to give us this in exchange for it and a couple caps...heh,” he muttered,

before leaving a silence, “ah, not like you two fuckers are even listening...”

That was it! Elation flew through my mind, I had a name to who now owned my journal! The slave in my head came to the surface once again, mentally waving a clock at me and trying to drag me away from the wall. Finally, I could obey and get back to normal. It was time to leave, to go and find Wic-

The pair tumbled against the wall just beside me in their exertions.

I didn't expect it. I squeaked loudly.

“Hey! Noise again!”

“What? I thought that was you.”

“Screw you! I don't make sissy runt noises!”

I heard the three of them scrambling to their hooves. There was nothing else for it. I upped and galloped around the wall, hugging it closely. Behind me, shouts and more foul mouthed curses as they heard me take off. The wall shook as they climbed it. I didn't even look back as I turned the corner of the wall, going for all I was worth to find a hiding place before they got over the wall and came after me. I could only pray they hadn't identified me...

Ahead, I saw nothing but road. I tried not to curse out loud (after the gangers, I almost didn't want to swear again) as it gave me nothing but flat ground. Hooves on gravel sounded behind me as the gangers began to come around the wall. For one of the few times I thanked my height. If I had been a normal sized pony the wall wouldn't have hid me at all while running. I made for the road anyway, what else could I do? The hard surface and my hooves while galloping were hardly quiet, but little choice remained. So long as I could reach the other side...

My sprained front leg clearly thought otherwise.

A clenching pain burst through it, the hoof stomp from the crushing under the slaves yesterday made its presence known again through the mass of bruises and pains I had as it felt my hooves landing on solid asphalt repeatedly. I fell with a cry of pain, going head over hooves to collapse off the side of the road and down the embankment, the pain in my leg throbbing wildly. I could run no more...yesterdays exertions had caught up to me through my wounds.

“I heard them fall off over there! They're over the road!”

Noose's vile tongue echoed between the ruined buildings as I lay in the blackened gravel at the side of the road. A foul stench was in my nostrils, making me gag as I lay, awaiting them to appear over the top and do whatever it was they were wanting to do. No phoenix to come to my aid now and I highly doubted Number Six was going to stop doing his own things to come out and rescue me. Sweet Celestia, that smell was horri-

It was a sewer drain under the road.

I blinked and stared at the small entrance, dripping with mould and slimy substances. Immediately, I knew how I was meant to survive this.

I didn't like it one bit.

The sound of Noose's hooves coming closer reminded me that I disliked dying even more.

Crawling with three hooves, I pulled myself along the ground, smearing over the exuded gel-like liquid coming out of the drain. There was no way this wasn't going to be highly radioactive or filled with disease. But at this point, I doubted my life expectancy would really be worth worrying about. Trying not to breathe, I pulled myself into the small tubular drain and curled up inside it, feeling wet mushy material squelch beneath me.

The gangers ran over the road, their hooves sending echoes down into the drain as they leapt above the entrance. I stared upon them from behind as they stopped and looked around. I had never noticed this drain until I had been lying down randomly from falling. Surely they'd never notice-

“What's that smell?”

Oh, come on!

They paused, looking around and wandering past the drain a few times, muttering about the smell it was making. They couldn't miss the entrance, but if they thought to look inside...

“Eh...forget it. Whoever that little perv was, he's long gone.”

“Unless they hid in the drain?”

I froze, every muscle tensing up, my foreleg aching from the injury all the more. I could feel my sickness building, the stench and tension in my stomach wanting to make me cough again.

“The hell? Only that filthy little runt would do that and he's way too scared of us to eavesdrop. Just come on...I don't want that bastard Whiplash giving me another doing.”

I heard them wander off, the buck who had offered to check the drain reluctantly trotting after them. With relief I pulled myself from the drain, a hideous sucking noise as I pulled my rump from the smelly slime that composed of the bottom of the pipe and waded through the damp muck surrounding the entrance. I fought the urge to vomit as I let out the rasping cough that I had somehow held in. Checking myself over once again, I felt the radsors on my back left leg stinging and burning from the rubbing on the ground. I was coated in the drainage gunk...my jerkin was damp and well...I didn't even want to identify what was clinging over my cutie mark.

I just wanted to stop. To go into the building to throw up and just lie down...to let myself just...expire for the day. Or forever. But instinct, for all the Stable Dweller's inspiration, still existed in my mind. I pulled my jerkin tighter, made sure the radio was still intact and set about being a slave.

What a pathetic little sight I was. A small pony limping slowly down the roads in the howling cold wind with a yelp of pain on every step of his front left. Covered in the stinking slew of a drain...crying openly to himself as he always did, stopping only to let a hacking cough out from his radiation sickness. All while walking to his eternal place of work to no doubt be hurt more. With nothing more than a promise of pain on his shifts end.

I couldn't take this...

Not any more...

I needed something to give me hope, more than just the scrawls on a piece of parchment. That journal had to be mine again, to see my mother once more.

I silently pleaded to the Goddesses, praying that I was right. That by doing something for myself I might finally break the chains and have the courage to do something more.

Something greater.

To follow *her*.

* * *

Waking up Wicked Slit went much as expected.

Even a pained, exhausted and dizzy pony like me can muster enough strength to high tail it out of her scrap-built hut at high speed. Especially when I see a huge knife like that being magically lifted with great purpose from the dresser beside her bed.

Lacking any support from her guards to wake the overseer, I had been reduced to simply prodding her with a hoof. From as far away as I could. While getting ready to run.

I think I'd had time to blurt out “Slaves late, one extra, I'm back” before I saw the fury in her eyes and immediately scampered for the door. My mind caught up with me, only now realising that there had been

another lump under the dirty covers beside her. Oh this wasn't going to be good at all...not only had I woken Slit, I had woken her up while sleeping off-

Actually, I didn't want to quite think on that one too hard.

Diving out her doorway, I stumbled down the metal stairs leading to the second floor workers quarters she inhabited, falling onto the broken concrete road outside. I saw Wicked Slit scramble to the door, teeth bared and a bed-mane sitting messily about her head.

“Murky Number Seven! I am going to make you wish you'd never been born!”

I fought the temptation to shout back “Agreed!” as I got to my hooves and galloped for the gateway out of the factory. All around me, ponies working with the magical auto axes were tearing hunks of metal into fragments for the melting pots. They glanced up in curiosity at the sight of me diving madly from their overseers hut.

“I am going to fuck you up so badly, Murk! You get back in here right now! Close the gate!”

To my horror, the guards outside reacted with enough speed to slam the door shut in my face. I hit the thick metal just hard enough to come off of all fours and fall to the floor with a groan. As I turned to look behind me...I could swear some of the slaves were trying not to giggle at the misheard context of her last sentence. Wicked Slit advanced, devoid of clothing (not that we normally wore clothes other than to protect against the elements anyway) but still carrying that knife magically in the air beside her. I closed my eyes, half expecting the knife to descend. Instead I just heard the sound of magic as she dragged me by the tail back toward her hut with her own telekinesis.

“I swear, I'm going to strap you down to stop you running away some day you spineless wretch.”

I saw some slaves snort in laughter...and some of the guards. I facehoofed, even through my fear. I could almost hear the rumours already.

“Now get in here, I'm not done with you.”

She telekinetically hurled me inside, shooed the buck from the bed out and slammed the door as I heard the entire work yard roar with laughter.

* * *

I sat meekly in the middle of the floor as Wicked Slit paced across to her small desk. Sitting on a cushion behind it, she glared at me before slamming the knife point down into the floor a few inches from me. Wrinkling her nose, Slit made sure to keep me some distance from her desk.

“I'm not even going to ask why you're covered in shit, Murk. Alright, you've got five seconds to explain why you woke me...and why you had to do it with a hoof that's been in some latrine somewhere.”

I wasn't going to waste them.

“Uh...uh...Whiplash! He says the slaves will be late because they're all messed up and stuff but...um...you get an extra one!” I tried to smile, “and it's me, M-Ma'am!”

Some day I was going to learn that smiling was not something that would help with Wicked Slit. Why oh why couldn't I learn to just nod and shake my head again? Breaking the instinct that had kept me chained all these years was not without its consequences...

If Wicked Slit was 'mollified' in the slightest by the news that she had me back, she didn't show it.

“So...” she said, her knife plucking out of the ground and lightly stabbing the wooden floor in a circle around me, tapping incessantly, “basically...you're saying I'm screwed for work efficiency?”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Well, maybe not screwed, Ma'am...”

“So you have an idea on how to cover for three lost slaves and my replacement being the most pathetic slave in Filly? Or do you have any talents other than becoming the worst smelling slave in Fillydelphia?”

If I had any real pride about my life as a slave, that would hurt. Born to be a slave and given the cutie mark to lock me into it forever...and I was even bad at that. Ouch.

“Well...”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“...perhaps there's another way?”

Oh why was I even trying this...

“Do tell, Murk.”

Her voice held no promise of her actually listening. Judging by how the knife missed my tail by a scant inch...she clearly was just drawing this out in anger.

“Perhaps...perhaps...” I searched and searched my mind for anything, “...perhaps one of the machines could be fixed to do the work of three? Like...get the parts and put it all together so you work better than ever? I mean...um...Ma'am.”

I was proud. The machines in Fillydelphia were still in the process of repair, many didn't work at all, hence the need for such huge numbers of slaves to often manually operate them on giant treadmills or turnwheels. The war had not been kind to the more complex machinery the ponies of Old Equestria had cooked up.

Wicked Slit's expression changed only from fury filled rage to abject annoyance.

“And what makes you think, Murk, that we haven't done all of that already? Do you think we are idiots, Murk? Do you think Great Red Eye is a fool who doesn't know when a machine cannot be fixed?”

I saw the traps waiting for me...years under slavers had taught me that much. Don't argue back, go with the flow and make your point.

“No!” I cried out. “Master Red Eye is very wise...but I think I may know...know...”

Crap...what did I know? The knife was even closer to me.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Think Murk...think...

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I had nothing, I lowered my head as the knife rose up...

“Thought so,” she muttered, lowering her head, that horrid cracked horn sparkling wildly as she moved the knife in front of me, “now you have disturbed me...for bad news, waking me up and bringing nothing but crap to my desk again. In this case, literally.”

I fought to not wail in fear as she spoke, her knife floating out in front of me, point down.

“Hold out your hoof, Murk.”

I had bitten off more than I could chew here. I should have just kept my mouth shut, accepted the beating and moved on to get my second beating on returning to the FunFarm too. I shivered, my hoof not moving as I locked up, whimpering.

“Hold out your hoof!”

I yelped, fear escaping as I felt my eyes cry, as always. I literally couldn't help it, like my body was hard wired to cry at anything I didn't like. Wicked Slit only looked at me crying, swore to herself and stomped out, screaming into my ear with enough volume to cause me to scream in aural pain.

“HOLD OUT YOUR HOOF, SLAVE!”

Instinct kicked in, my master demanded...I obeyed. My hoof shot out, holding shakily under the knife as I saw it rise up. I shut my eyes...

...I heard the voice...so quietly from under my jerkin only I would notice...

“Welcome back, wastelanders! DJ-Pon3 here with your daily tip of the day! Now remember what I said about scavenging? No? It's the same thing I always say. It's safer to trade than it is to search, ponies. Yes yes I know, you'll be paying something-

Eyes clenched shut, I heard her magic begin to spark to move the knife down.

“-but it's better than paying with your life! Remember, kiddies, trade is what helps everyone in the end. Just be prepared for a haggle, y'here??. So visit those markets, you never know what others have dug up!”

“The slave market!” I screamed! “THE SLAVE MARKET!”

The knife stopped. I drew a breath, my eyes opening as I saw the knife midway to my hoof. I didn't dare move it...

“What, Murk?”

“The...the slave market, Ma'am! Perhaps they've got something...something they found and hid!”

Wicked Slit paused, the knife spinning on the spot (seriously, did she *ever* stop moving it?) as she clearly thought this over, before glaring back at me, the tip of her knife lifting my chin up.

“Listen here, Murky Number Seven.”

Listening! Very much listening!

“You know where the market is?”

I couldn't shake my head, “Um...no?”

Wicked Slit sighed, letting the knife go from my throat and embedding it in the desk a few times instead. It glinted from the small magically powered gem light on the roof each time it came down.

“The old terminal building at the pegasi chariot airport. It's another slave enclosure in the baggage handling and waiting rooms for the slaves that deserve a roof. They think they're subtle, but we know all about them, Murk. Red Eye isn't blind. We just let them do it because it's just all pictures of mares, rotten food we don't want and ragged clothing. Sometimes they get something valuable, but really...the advantage of them keeping the slaves down there in line is worth it. But perhaps you can be of some use...”

I didn't like where this was going.

“Go there, Murk. Now. You come back with parts to fix either a machine press control panel or a conveyor belt engine and I'll let you keep your hoof intact. Use however you want to get them. Beg, trade or steal...but don't you show your face around here again until you have them, understand?”

Not entirely. How I was going to convince anypony to give up valuable parts was beyond me...but it was better than an eighteen inch knife in my hoof. I nodded, taking the slim cue to get the hell out of here. I got to my hooves, limping away toward the door.

“Oh, and Murk?”

Oh here we go again...I turned to look back at her, trembling.

“Y-yes, Ma'am?”

“You interrupted my sleep for some very shitty news, don't you have anything good to say before you go?”

She was fishing for an excuse to hurt me. I could see it. I looked around for inspiration, nothing. Even DJ-Pon3 (Oh thank you for earlier!) was talking more about something I didn't understand. My eyes fell back to Wicked Slit, standing there near her bed, mane hair fluffed out madly from being woken suddenly.

“I...really like your...mane?” I squeaked.

I only barely managed to dive out the door and tumble down the steps as the knife embedded itself in the door frame with enough force to puncture out to the other side of the hut.

* * *

Entering another slave master's enclosure was not particularly difficult for a slave. After all, if you were indeed a runaway you'd be missed at roll call each morning anyway, so they had no real objection to a slave without a shift wandering into their territory. The fact that most of Fillydelphia was still confused and recovering from the slave riots only harried Red Eye's force's efforts to control the exact location of each individual within the Wall.

Besides, I had Wicked Slit's approval to be here now, if no way to really show it. If confronted, I had to hope that her name carried enough weight to permit me access or avoid the guards simply throwing me out the door again. If that happened, suddenly this would have to become a lot more covert than before. There was *no* way in Equestria I was returning to Wicked Slit empty hoofed. I *liked* having four functional legs.

As I trotted over the concrete expanse of the airfield, I winced in pain as my injured front leg caught one of the many cracks and small fissures. I fell back onto my rump, rubbing the fetlock gingerly.

Okay, three and a half functional legs.

Ahead of me was the expanse of the pegasus chariot airbase. Pegasi didn't need a runway, of course, but some of the larger sky wagons of the past had clearly needed a little space for them to reach some momentum. Strewn across the field were the mangled and blackened wrecks of every type of chariot imaginable from small personal transports to huge antique flying skytanks as well as everything in between. Many were jumbled into one colossal pile of twisted scrap on the eastern edge of the airfield, the opposite side from the crater. Their light materials had simply been blasted away by the force of the Zebra megaspell to become a small mountain of metal against the walls of the hangers that lined the eastern border. Briefly, I imagined what it might be like to fly with one of them tied behind you. I kept an eye on the vehicles, tightening my jerkin. Even as I watched, slaves picked over them. They sought small components, magic spark matrix gems or cut the fuselages apart with those ever whining auto axes. No matter where I went in Fillydelphia I could spot or at least hear them in the background.

If I ever got out of here, a silent night would be the first thing I would desire.

Red Eye had not let the airfield go disused. Much of the forces stationed in Fillydelphia used it as a makeshift arrangement ground. In between the wrecks, teams of his army checked weapons or stood ready for instructions on their next task. I suspected they mostly lived in the masses of buildings (ruined, of course) nearby that used to belong to the residents of Fillydelphia. I always wondered how they dealt with that...sleeping in rotten beds that had once contained somepony's entire life and sense of safety before the megaspells. How could anypony stay sane invading such a sacred place of memories? The FunFarm had been bad enough, but a pony's own home?

A memory sparked, I remembered the first time one of my Masters had sent me scavenging in an abandoned farmhouse. Inside there had been bones...two sets of them, huddled together on their bed with limbs curled around one another for reassurance. The wall had been facing a balefire crater. I imagined them lying there, trembling and saying their last assurances of love as sirens blared and the world ended around them, before the terrible force of the megaspell surged through their home...

In the next room I had found another skeleton, even smaller than I, alone in a cot surrounded by foal's toys.

I cried a lot in life. But that day I had done so more than most. To be standing there, alive and lost in a far flung ruined future, seeing the preserved horror of the moment that Equestria had died simply broke me. It had taken my master himself to come in and find me huddled up in the corner. I had been clutching a little woollen doll that had somehow survived, as though it would somehow help relieve the pain.

I kinda missed that doll...aside from my mother, it had been the only thing I'd ever hugged.

Shaking my head, I let my eyes traverse toward the airfields terminal and away from the homes of Fillydelphia. One farm had been bad enough, to linger on the hundreds of households holding all sorts of memories would probably drive me insane if I stopped to think about it. Getting to my hooves, I began the journey to the entrance from the runways.

The terminal was a strange building. Most huge public buildings I had witnessed tended to try and be somewhat fancy or stand out. I had once glimpsed Tenpony Tower whilst being dragged through Manehattan toward my next master. The colossal building had struck me as rather pretty, as though some of its elegance had survived the bombs. The terminal however was...bare.

Concrete pillars supported a flat topped dome in a slight throwback to the architecture the pegasi of old used to have in their cloud cities. A book my mother had once called an ensico...ensiclo...

Ah, forget it, I couldn't remember. Some big book with lots of pictures about the old world. She had pointed out the cloud cities to me, wishing I could be up there and safe instead of down here in the muddy ruin like all wasteland born ponies.

But this terminal had none of the light and gentle flair of the cloud buildings. It was built from the same dull material as the rest of Fillydelphia to clearly be functional and affordable in the face of a city that had become the centre of materials industry in Equestria. Only the barest roots of pegasi architecture were present, save for a single mural above the main entrance from the airstrips bearing a motif of six ponies.

Including that damned pink pony.

Some day...I was going to escape her gaze. She was even glaring right at me off the mural!

The size was deceptive, what I took for a small mural above a door simply kept growing as I crossed the wreck filled fields toward it. By the time I neared the terminal, the reason it had stood from the balefire was obvious. Whoever built this...built it to last. The pillars were a good six feet thick and the entire building made of huge concrete blocks now coated in sprays of graffiti from two hundred years of abuse. No wonder it showed little real exterior damage.

As I moved inside the entrance, noting the guards who watched me warily growing in number from the mostly empty airfield...I had a sense that it would also make getting out a hell of a lot tougher than getting in should I need to leave in a hurry. Concrete wasn't well known for little gaps I could squeeze through to escape this time...

* * *

“Oi! What're you doing here?”

Twenty feet from the main door, the buck's voice rung out just as I had approached the gateway into the slave enclosure. It encompassed an entire wing of the terminal building, barricaded off by a huge wall of piled up scrap and metal sheets. I could only presume the slave market was beyond it, somewhere Red Eye would be happy for it to function where they could keep an eye on it.

Even as I approached, timidly trotting, the voice had made me stop dead. I looked to the right and left, but saw no pony at all.

“Oh you...up here!”

I backed off, my head looking upwards to view atop the interior scrap barricade to see a slave with broken shackles stuck on each hoof glancing down at me. Tall and lanky, he attempted an indignant look as he stomped a hoof on the scrap in annoyance.

“I know every slave around here, I do!” he shouted. I could only presume the act was to try and make him seem intimidating. Well, I had seen a pony beat almost half a dozen to death with his bare hooves yesterday and had a crazed mare try to impale my hoof earlier. This slave hardly ranked too highly on the 'Murky Scale of Run the Hell Away'.

“So if you ain't a slave from here, then you's here for the market, ain't you?”

Well, not exactly arcane science.

The buck's face twisted at my general look of confusion and wonderment, lacking the reaction he presumably wanted. At this point, there were greater things in my life threatening my health than this weedy looking slave. All the same, I allowed him a brief glance of worry...he clearly had a modicum of authority to be up there. Best to play it safe as per usual.

He stomped a hoof even harder, seeking a reaction as he snarled...and promptly screamed. His hoof dislodged the scrap beneath him. With a horrid creaking sound...the entire top layer of the barricade came crashing down, the buck tumbling over it all. Squeaking in shock at the sharp metal barrelling toward me I dived to the side before feeling the buck collapse on to me from above. The impact led to my crying out in agony as my still damaged ribs and masses of bruises were struck. The pair of us rolled to the side as I felt a horrid tug on my jerkin before collapsing to the ground with a solid thud.

Vision hazy from pain, I tried to wrench my pained body up. Exhaustion was kicking in from yesterday once again from sickness, malnourishment and the lack of any decent sleep. Perhaps I should just stay down for a few minutes...at least until the spiking lance of pain on my side went away. I could pick up my radio device from over there later...

Wait!

With a shout of effort that ended in a spluttering and bloody cough, I dragged my body inch by inch toward the device. I needed to hide it! I felt panic rising as the buck began to rise on the other side, shaking his head from the fall. I just...couldn't...move...

My hoof limply flopped down just short of the device by the time he picked it up. I lay flat, feeling my body beginning to fail. A month had been optimistic...I doubted I could last...well...long at all really. I could barely stand until the pain died down.

“Tho wuth thith hen?” the buck spoke as he held the device in his mouth, leering down at me. An earth pony, he was almost as dirty looking as myself with a dull orange mane and a coat that could only be described as the colour of vomit. Including the specks and lumps made instead of boils and scabs from the sickness that pervaded Fillydelphia.

“N-Nothing!” I shouted as best I could, reaching a hoof up, “It's nothing! Just a bit of old scrap I...I wanted to trade with!”

The buck spat out the device to the side before stepping on it with a hoof to keep it still.

“So you want into the slave market, huh?” he said slyly, inclining his head toward me.

“Yes...please?”

He rolled his eyes and gave me a nudge with his hoof to get up. With a grunt of exertion I obeyed, before almost collapsing again as I spluttered and choked on a dry cough. The buck backed off quickly as he saw the light splatters of blood on the ground.

“Aaah...so you're after medicine, I see,” he muttered, before laughing and kicking the device just behind him, “well I guess you'll have to submit to a search when you go in and come back out.”

“Oh and of course...” he added, “pay the fee to get in. This isn't your enclosure.”

Wiping my mouth with a hoof (urgh...forgot about the sewage pipe...) to clear the blood I shook my head.

“I don't have anything to give...”

The buck tapped the device with his back hoof lightly.

“Not any more.”

Oh no...no way! That device was the only thing that kept me going! I was living on borrowed time with a sickness and untreated wounds that were eating away at me. The blood dried on my scalp from the whip still stung as much as my near broken hoof from yesterday ached while my lungs felt ready to pop out my mouth on my next cough...without that device constantly broadcasting I...I don't think I could have made it without the hope it gave me.

The hope that I could do something before I succumbed in here...

“No!”

I shouted, stumbling forward to try and grab the device, only for the buck to simply knock it out of the way again with a hoof. Damn it! This was like a child trying to get something away from a grown parent. If I'd been healthier...I knew I could have been more agile. But in this state I was just a little weakling pawing at him, as small as he was too.

“Oh no, no, noooo...” he cooed, “you gotta pay the fee to get in, or you's doesn't get any trading!”

“I...I need it!” I screamed as I tried to duck around him, slipping and falling each time. I fought to not cry...not in front of this pony. I had been shot at, put in the Pit (well...kinda) and survived a riot. I was not going to cry in front of this little slave! I wasn't! I...I...

I couldn't get it back...

I stepped back after my last desperate grab for the device, strength leaving me as my stamina failed. I had to cover my eyes with a hoof that he wouldn't see me.

“There we go, accept that this is mine, and you can go in,” he sneered, “and get me something on the way out to for you to pass this border again. Red Eye doesn't care what we do, so long as we don't have any items he wants in our enclosure or get in the way of our work shifts. So this is *our* job and right to claim!”

I stomped a hoof and shook my head in frustration. The buck was right. I'd been so damn close. Not only was I having to risk everything for Slit, now I was losing my radio device hoofmachine thingy in the process. As I dejectedly turned, another buck's voice rang out. This one less nasal as the first buck, but filled with a curious tone that implied the owner of the voice preferred things explained to him.

“Hey...what's goin' on with that midget out there?” said the second buck as he trotted out. This one was almost as short as I was, but a lot more thickly set.

Figures, I thought, that the tall skinny and the short and stubby one would be together. There seemed to be one in every slave farm I'd been to in my entire life. Perhaps every generation had their own ones in Equestria. Only briefly, it occurred to me that myself and Number Six had been almost the same thing for a short time.

“Little slave here wanted into the market, I was just taking this as the payment.”

They continued to talk, boast and snigger between themselves. But even as I cowered slightly further away, trying to tear my eyes from the radio device...a thought entered my head. I had one ace left up my jerkins sleeve. I began pulling out the parchment and quill, before taking the quill and pretending to write something. The obnoxious slave pair finally noticed me.

“Hey! What're you doing?”

I looked up, spitting out the quill briefly.

“Oh, me?” I began. “I...I'm just taking your names down. Wicked Slit will want to know who stopped

her messenger getting in.”

To their credit, they hid the look of stark terror well after the first three seconds. The skinny one grinned.

“Hah! You don't know our names!”

“Yeah,” interjected the smaller buck, “you ain't got nuthin' on us! We're not gonna tell you our names...are we?”

The smaller glanced up at his colleague before receiving a clip around the ear with a hoof. Damn, they were slow...but they weren't completely hopeless. However for once in my life I felt like I had an advantage here. I could do this without resorting to violence from Wicked Slit to get in or to having to break rules. Call me crazy, but hearing the device playing Velvet's music seemed to clear my terrified and conflicted thoughts just enough to know just what to say for a little to get by them.

“I'm afraid you have to,” I continued, nudging the quill and motioning with me eyes toward the skinny one, “what is your name, so Wicked Slit can find you and gut you?”

The stubby one looked a little panicky at the mentioning of gutting, he stepped from hoof to hoof with nerves as I spoke before blurting out to his comrade.

“D-Don't tell him, Pike! I don't want to be gutted!”

Aha! Success!

“You idiot,” screamed the taller one, batting the shorter around the head with his hoof, “what did you tell him that for?!”

“I...” the buck stopped as his comrade's hoof belted him across the face a few times, “I didn't mean to, Pike-”

“Stop it!”

“Sorry, Pike.”

“STOP IT, COSH YOU BLABBERING IDIOT!”

I couldn't resist it.

“Pike and Cosh...” I muttered, “right, I'll report that you barred me entry...”

The pair turned from screaming at one another to glare at me. For a second I was afraid they'd simply try and attack me...but it seems they figured that Slit would want to know where her 'agent' had gone. They simply shoved the device back to me and stood aside without another word to allow me through. I'd done it. Okay, they weren't particularly intelligent foes...but I had managed to pass without any beatings or injury!

As I retrieved the radio, a happy little note of Velvet's struck a high pitch in my ear from the small speaker, making me smile as I trotted into the enclosure, too low volume for any but I to detect. With a silent thank you I tucked it back under my jerkin, pulling it back over quickly.

That little device had been meant to guide me. I knew it.

* * *

I had envisioned a bustling market of slaves in an enclosure under the watchful eye of guards and slave masters. What I saw was entirely different.

Set among the waiting room that passengers in the past would have sat to await their pegasi transports, the slave enclosure had few boundaries and a lot of slaves simply lying on the floor. What envy I had for them having four walls and a solid roof quickly evaporated as I witnessed the bare stone they had to sleep on in here. At least the FunFarm Petting Zoo had dirt...

The ponies were all sore looking, usually on one side from lying on the hard surface for so long each night. The old areas where seating cushions might have sat were long gone, leaving only sharp metal fixtures in their place from the ravages of time. Around the edge of the walls were blown in shop fronts. In these lurked what I was searching for. Three were on this side of the waiting room. Through some arches I could see a few more, one boarded up and the other two bearing another couple of 'merchants.' At the back of the room was another large corridor like the one I had come in by showing a sky deck over-viewing the runways and presumably leading further into the facility. All was just as blighted and bare as the concrete exterior. Any carpets I presumed had been removed long ago and only the shattered hunk of a massive departures (or arrivals...I couldn't read) board remained where it had collapsed and shattered a portion of the floor.

The slave market was definitely not how I had imagined it. There was a stillness. It occurred to me that the crowded rush theory was born only of my brief time hearing about Tenpony Tower in the past. Here, slaves simply had nothing *to* trade except in rare cases. I could see the 'traders' lying down like any other slave next to their wares. I wondered how they didn't have it all stolen when they were called to a work shift. Perhaps they were all pretty lethal and beat anyone who dared take goods...

There was about six of them. None seemed to specialise, simply having whatever they could scavenge instead. I didn't imagine any valuable goods would be on display where the slavers could see and confiscate them. Five of them followed this pattern, rough looking slaves with more rags than the others, patched into warmer and tougher clothing to protect themselves. They seemed better fed too. Three mares and two bucks made up their numbers and there seemed to be at least one 'guard' nearby to each shop as well, also a slave. Red Eye's guards were beside me at the entrance, clearly more for a presence inside than any real purpose. A sixth merchant caught my eye though...a unicorn with an old saddlebag bearing the imagery of three butterflies in a yellow and pink pattern. I knew that design, I'd seen it before in the home I'd been forced to search years back in the bathroom as a kind of medicine cabinet.

Medicine!

I could get something to perhaps save my life!

Well, time to start looking. Even my journal could wait to see if the unicorn could get me something. Or better yet, heal me!

I trotted as fast as I dared on my now wobbly leg through the arches into the second half of the waiting room. Dejected ponies lay on the ground around me, watching me with hazy and hopeless eyes as I moved toward the healer. Many moved away from me. At first I presumed due to my sick appearance but after a quick sniff...it was probably the fact I was still reeking of drainage. Well...bartering was going to be such fun while smelling like a latrine.

All the same...the slaves backing away from me only served to remind me I was in dangerous territory here. Slaves were opportunistic. If any of them thought of a reason to bring me down they would. I was alone. Truly alone. No-pony was waiting in the wings to save me now. Fear bit at my mind and gnawed at my determination to achieve my aims and get my journal back. Was it worth risking dying for a few scraps of paper I never even really looked at?

The unicorn healer seemed to regard me with some distaste as I approached, his eyes following my clearly sick self right up to looking down his own nose at me past the small set of glasses. His cutie mark didn't fill me with great confidence...a bonesaw.

"I...uh...heard you can get healing here," I hardly even knew what to ask for, "could I be healed?"

Fairly basic, but what else could I ask for? I certainly didn't know exactly what was wrong with me and if I started listing everything we'd be here till the end of time. The healer snorted, spitting to the side (and this is a doctor?) and moving around me as his horn flared into being.

"Check up is free, shrimp," he began muttering as his glowing horn flickered to and fro across my body, "but the healing costs. What you got to trade?"

I sighed, my head drooping. Just typical...healing equipment would be rare and valuable to slaves, but healing magic was hardly a finite resource to a *unicorn*. Yet he still charged? Oh come on, this just isn't fair.

As he trotted around to look me in the eye and cock his head, awaiting the offer, I could only lower my head again and shake it.

“So, just another sick little slave who thinks I give out everything for free just because I'm medically trained. What did you honestly expect? It's a buyers market among slaves these days, only reason I'm not drafted to heal his army is because I've not got any stamina for this at all. I can only do one pony a day with magic perhaps and still have enough left in me to work my shift.”

He eyed me up, eyebrows narrowing.

“And here you think I'm going to waste that on you?”

“Please...isn't there anything?” I couldn't hide the shaking fear in my voice as I was forced to admit the truth. “I...I think I'm dying, sir...please...”

“You certainly are.”

Shit! I'd had theories, but to hear it straight from the horse's mouth (in more ways than one...) was chilling. I felt my eyes beginning to well up as I stared at the healer. He just tossed his mane and sighed, turning away to his inventory in a bag. I could see little orange packs and small bottles of sloshing liquid alongside a few syringes. Why did the slavers allow this? For a second my heart leapt, until he simply sat on them instead of fetching anything, crossed his hooves and fixed me with a stare through his glasses.

“You have an irradiated lung infection on top of some pretty severe radiation poisoning, kid. Throw on top of that a minor taint mutation...that'd explain the ears...and a high level of toxin in your general respiratory systems from Filly's oh-so-lovely smog. Not so uncommon around here, I get about a dozen or so a week who want healing without anything to trade. For you? Well, the taint isn't curable, that's a given.

But the radiation poisoning and the rest? It'd take about five Radaways and a few healing potions with a charge of magic to save your life. As you might imagine, I'm not about to give them away from free. You can wander off and die in your sleep like all the rest who want handouts.”

I felt my hooves going weak, I had to lie down to avoid collapsing.

“A pony in good health might survive a week or so with all this. But you've got multiple barely healed lacerations, bruises everywhere, acute radsors on your leg and face, a partially dislocated front leg and bruised ribs. Couldn't see how many, that jerkin got in the way of checking. With all that? I'd say you're for the off within perhaps a few days time out there in the smog. Hell, you might drop off any night at this rate.”

I was trembling, wet dots appearing on the ground in front of me. My rasping breathing led to a few coughs as I attempted to keep my emotions in check. I...I was dying. There it was, right there. The confirmation that my time was up.

I could barely believe it. Yesterday morning I was ready to accept this happening any day...but now after being shown what was truly possible with life I didn't want it to happen any more at all. In its own way, this was worse than the Pit. At least there I could have run away or tried hitting back! It wouldn't have saved me...but that feeling of resistance was a small, if important, comfort.

But sickness...I couldn't get around that.

“Please!” I was whining, but I could barely help it. “You must want something! I...I'll do anything!”

I reached my hooves forward to his, only for him to pull them back in disgust and scowl.

“Get off, you irradiated little shit!” he screamed, moving away from me and zipping that bag of his closed. He made to turn away, before stopping and looking back, a different glow in his eyes as he looked up.

“Actually...anything, you say?”

I didn't like his tone. Not one bit. But I still nodded.

“Well, how'd you like to earn your healing?”

I hardly had a choice. I nodded again.

* * *

I walked away from his booth with a fearful mindset.

I had stolen before, but I wasn't sure if I could do *this*. I had stolen to *survive* before, but this was taking someone else's property for another pony's gain.

But really...wasn't this stealing to survive too?

He had asked me to knock out his competitor across the hall. An earth pony buck (why did it always have to be bucks and their egos I dealt with?) who sold a couple of illegally hidden medical items to some slaves for lower prices...thus taking business away from the healer himself. The healer (I really had to learn to get names of ponies I dealt with...) had said he'd give me a piece of medical supply for every two items I stole from his competitor. I had no idea how that would be possible. The earth pony looked hard as hell, tall and strong with an equally big guard of his materials sitting watchfully nearby. Clearly he was confident...I could see the items all laid out on his table. Bits of rags, bandages, small bottles of dirty water and oatmeal stored in plastic tubs from past dinners. He even had a thick brown sketchbook that looked a lot like my...

...oh sweet Celestia!

I ignored the pains of my protesting body as I full out galloped to his stall so fast that his bodyguard raised in defiance to block my way. I didn't care, I ducked around him and grabbed the journal in my hooves, hugging it tight. It was mine! I recognised the feel, the size and even the smell. As fast as I had it in my hooves, it left me as the bodyguard's magic yanked it from my grasp roughly and held it above me. The merchant, seemingly not having been ruffled at all, rounded with a sly grin and approached. Tossing his braided grey mane before leaning on the counter to look down at me. He spoke with a high voice, his accent similar to Number Six, if a little more flighty.

“Well well well...eager for that little bit of merchandise there, aren't ya laddie?”

“It's mine! It was stolen from me! I just want it back, please...”

Somehow I doubted my bargaining was going to work, but what was the harm in asking?

One look at the bodyguard reminded me to never ask myself that question again.

The merchant took the journal from his bodyguard, balancing it in one front arm as he leaned on the counter and flipped the pages with a hoof. He glanced, but his eyes never left mine. Immediately, I realised just how shrewd this pony was to have carved out such an inventory as a slave in Fillydelphia and somehow managed to bribe enough guards to look the other way. Despite that, the scars and scabs across his body indicated even it didn't help him avoid the punishing work details.

“So y'say this is yours, little lad,” he murmured, before chuckling to himself and continuing, “well I'm afraid I don't see yer name on it, my boy. I got this from some fine ponies who took some quality merchandise off me in exchange for the fine item I hold here and a few caps for my oh-so-loyal guards at the entrance there.”

Fine ponies. Yeah, right.

I let my eyes glance to Red Eye's guards. Almost to my amazement they were looking over questioningly until the merchant shook his head. They relaxed. Great Goddesses...how many pockets was this slave *in*? The guards didn't just overlook him, they actively helped him flourish. I wondered what their cut was...

“Now you want this...hmm...piece returned, do you, laddie?”

I was really beginning to hate that accent, like every word he spoke was pronounced simply to condescend me and pretend I had nothing at all on him. Okay, that was absolutely true, but still!

“Yes, yes please!” There was no sense in hiding it, he clearly had me judged before I even spoke a word.

“Then let us do business, lad. Me name's Sooty Morass, what about yourself? Shackles?”

He managed to sneer and laugh at once as he patted my brow with a hoof. Urgh...even slaves looked down on me now. Sometimes I really wished I could hide that damned cutie mark. But this was the pony the gang had mentioned! So this was definitely the right place, my journal hadn't gone to anypony else first. His bodyguard snorted with him, but maintained a watch on the merchandise while Sooty Morass dealt with me.

“Murky Number Seven...” I muttered, looking to the side.

“Well, lil' Murky,” he began, flicking *my* journal from hoof to hoof almost hypnotically, “for a lovely bound book with thick good quality paper pages filled with all sorts of...interesting pictures of mares for a good buck's enjoyment...”

Oh come the hell on! Those weren't for others!

“...I'd have to say we'd be looking at requiring something to produce more enjoyment. Any chems or even certain medical supplies like Med-X. Normally I'd say about three doses or so. But for you laddie? Ten.”

What?!

“Ten?!” I almost screamed it, before choking on my own words. Almost degradingly, I felt him slapping my back to help me with my coughing. Felt like I was about to cough out my own ragged and bloody windpipe soon...

“Well you see, son,” he began, lowering himself down to my level, “I'll give you one bit of information about this world. Nothing is free. Not us, we're slaves, laddie. Not trade, it's a ruthless market and we're all out for ourselves. Last of all...not information. I'm being all nice and telling you this because I know you ain't gonna be around much longer, are you?”

He grinned wickedly as he saw the shocked look on my face. His voice lowered again, becoming airy and dry.

“Yeeees...you think I didn't spot you over by ol' Artery over there? I don't need to be a medical trained unicorn to spot an irradiated little pony on his last legs. So I know you need them there medical supplies more than anypony. As such...I can afford to raise my price because I know no matter what happens...you're going to try and do it for me, ain't you laddie?”

I gulped. He was right. Anypony who knew the position I was in would realise they had me over a figurative barrel when it came to haggling a price.

“Oh and also...” he continued as he rose up and turned away, picking up a few bits of what looked like arcane gem circuitry, “I also know you aren't here just for your own little book, eh lad?”

Oh *crap*. He knew about Wicked Slit? How?

Then it occurred to me. Those two idiots on the enclosure gate were in his pay to find out in advance for him...oh that sneaky bastard...

“Fifteen, Murky,” he finished, “fifteen for the parts and the book together. Put that unicorn out of his supply and you'll find me a very able trader. Then we can negotiate your next job for me...perhaps you might like to earn your survival day to day, eh?”

Oh no, no, NO! If I took his offer, I wouldn't just be solving one thing, I'd be putting myself in for a whole new level of control from other ponies above even Master Red Eye! He'd hold my very life in his hooves by controlling the substances I needed to survive in small doses.

“I...I'll think on it...”

“Don't think too long,” he sneered, “wouldn't want you to...expire...would we?”

I heard his chuckling even as I wandered away from his booth in defeat.

* * *

I lay between two slaves in the terminal enclosure. They were asleep, twitching as nightmares no doubt interrupted their brief rest. Both had come back from their work shift, backs raw from whips and choking on what I could only guess with either smog or dust from the mines. They had been too tired to notice my smell or sickness before collapsing beside me.

Me? I was deep in thought.

I sat with the parchment, my charcoal sketching on my makeshift checklist.

My journal sat at the top. My main goal to regain it. To have it sitting mere feet away beside Morass was loathsome to think about. It was not directly attainable right now. I needed to think around the box.

I crossed out Wicked Slit's knife. I had already spoken to her and relayed the message. Instead, I added a small magic gem to represent the parts I needed to get for her. Without them, I was due for nothing other than a bloody demonstration to the other slaves.

I added a syringe. That was for Sooty Morass and his will for me to acquire chems from the unicorn healer. Briefly I wondered why he couldn't deal with it himself. It wasn't like the guards were going to stop him. Hell, they protected him. Must be some sort of slave market unofficial ruleset from Red Eye on how it could run without becoming a nuisance to him.

A small magic potion was drawn below it...to steal Morass' smaller medical supply for the unicorn, to monopolise the market in his favour for healing. Contrary to what the unicorn said, I doubted it would put Sooty Morass out of business, but it would assure the unicorn's rise within the slave ranks and pecking orders.

I added the head of a ganger. Whatever happened, I still needed to figure out how to evade their attentions tonight. Perhaps if I could find another slave master or get transferred to this terminal building?

Finally...I added the symbol I knew was that of magical radiation. My own poisoning that was slowly taking my life. I needed to survive.

...as I looked at the growing list of jobs and tasks before me...I had a sense of impossibility. Some of them countermanded the others. Without Morass, I would get killed by Slit. But without Artery I would die anyway!

I wanted to run away. I wanted to hide. But it wouldn't help any more. No-pony would be wanting to help me and I had nothing of my own to exchange other than a broken radio that wouldn't cover the costs.

I...I didn't know what to do. I clutched the radio under my jerkin, holding it tightly down...but only the thick and full voice of Sapphire Shores greeted me. Almost on cue I felt my eyes watering. I closed them, tucking into a small ball as best I could to just try and escape it all. Perhaps I could find something painless...just take the easy way-

“Haha! Who'd have thought they'd miss our shift, eh, Moose?”

“They didn't 'miss' our shift, Lemon you idiot,” I heard the mare reply, “we got rotated into a different master for tomorrow who doesn't need us right now, you think Filly ever gives a proper break? We'll be worked to the bone anyway.”

“Same difference,” he snapped back, “means we get to come back here and see about some more trading for a few hours.”

I looked up to see the final nail in the coffin. The gang marched into the enclosure loudly and proudly. Behind them I could see Pike and Cosh cowering away.

Well...that was it then. All I needed was Wicked Slit to appear and then it'd be a full house against little

Murky Number Seven. Hell, these slaves didn't even like each other, never mind lonely little...

Wait...

An onrush of sudden hope blossomed in my mind as the pieces fell together. It wasn't perfect but...but it was something!

I got to my hooves, tucking the parchment carefully beneath my jerkin.

* * *

“Oooh look who it is, everypony!”

The gang stopped in their tracks after intimidating a smaller slave merchant into giving up some month old oatmeal for a few bits of scrap metal to look at my mangy and weakened self trotting up. Briefly I realised that if they dared smell the sewage stink about me they'd be informed very readily about who was spying on them earlier.

Well, best not give them a chance to get their bullying started.

“I've got a deal for you.”

The silence that followed seemed to last about a year. I wasn't sure what shocked them more, the fact that anypony had approached to ask them about it...or that it was me. My wondering was answered promptly, as the trio collapsed to the ground in laughter loud and raucous enough to wake every slave in the terminal waiting area.

“I'm serious!”

“Oh, boys, he's serious!”

“What does he want? He want to bargain for his little hidey hole? Too late!”

This wasn't getting anywhere, I decided to play my trump card.

“I can get you chems.”

Their demeanour changed almost immediately, the two bucks perked their ears as the word triggered an instinctual reaction. Mentally, I leapt with joy that my wild shot in the dark that these gangers had experimented with chems in the past seemed to be right on the money. Okay Murky...hurdle one crossed. Time for the meat of the issue.

“I know where to get them...help me and I'll tell you.”

That didn't go down well. The mare particularly stayed right where she was without so much as a twitch in her eye. I guessed she perhaps hadn't partaken, not good if she was the de-facto leader at the moment of their little gang.

“You're playing a dangerous game, runt...”

Her voice was low, ignoring the glances of the two bucks...if I could just get them talking.

Hell...if I could keep *myself* talking...I felt like I was about to go rigid and just fall over. These were the gangers who promised to *kill* me after all! Noose was right, I was playing with fire by even coming this close to talk to them. She seemed intent on reinforcing the fact, advancing close enough that I had to lower my hind quarters to give my head enough range to look up at her. I was trembling, I knew it...but that wasn't different from normal for them...right?

“So what do *you* want, runt?”

Right...here we go. I couldn't give out my entire plan or it'd all fall apart. If the gang knew then they'd be able to pick out every problem with it immediately to benefit themselves.

“G-get me some t-too...I can't get them myself.”

“And what's to stop us just taking the lot for ourselves?”

I wasn't wanting them to spot that little fact, guess it was too much to hope for. I really didn't want them figuring out the entire story...especially because it sort of swung in my favour a little instead of them in the end.

“Because I'm...uh...I'm on a job for somepony,” I said, stammering over my words enough to make me mentally kick myself for being an awful liar, “if I get some of it back I can...I can get better deals with Sooty for you!”

Okay...technically true, maybe. Perhaps once he had no real competition he'd lower his trade prices?

Also, Princess Celestia might descend from on high and whisk me off to my marriage with the Stable Dweller in Canterlot Castle.

Noose narrowed her eyes, shook out her mane and looked back at her two comrades. Their eyes betrayed a fervent wish for chems, to add some spice to their hellish life in Fillydelphia. Eventually Noose sighed and sank her head.

“Fine,” she said, deadpan delivery very much intact, “but this isn't a 'deal', runt. We see something we want or prefer...your loss.”

My heart leapt...perhaps this had a chance after all!

“Oh and runt?”

I froze on the spot.

“Don't think you're off the hook.”

Her face came right down level to me. I bit my lip, trembling so hard I feared I might shake a tooth loose.

“Your little hidey hole is gone, runt. Y'see...we got tired of you being all cosy in there. Why? Cos' we're just nasty ponies like that. We still remember that you bucked one of us in the face...we don't let that shit go easily. You listening?”

I nodded a little.

Her hoof struck me across the face hard enough to cause the bad tooth from yesterday to come loose again. I yelped loudly enough from the pain that everypony in the area stared for a second.

“I said...you listening?!”

“YES!”

“Who's in charge of this little thing then?”

“Y-you...”

The hoof struck again, the other side. I felt the tooth wrench slightly further as I fell to the ground.

“Don't forget it. Love taps, is all they were. When we're done with you...you'll wish that we just taunted you like before. Fuckin' runt...”

She wandered off to join the bucks. Teary eyed, I got to my hooves unsteadily, trying to avoid coughing up more blood as I held a hoof to the loose tooth. Of course I couldn't lead this...I was the slave at the bottom. They would lead...I would follow.

Just like always.

* * *

I explained my plan to them. They were not attentive listeners and I had an uneasy sense of them just watching to look for loopholes in it. We sat in the baggage exchange of the terminal, a good thirty feet from

the slave market. I knew Sooty had ears everywhere, I couldn't take any chances.

I nursed my head as I sat with my back to the way out. If they made a hint of a move...I was gone. I didn't like being so close and alone with these three, but right now they were my only hope.

That thought alone scared me to the core. Being forced to deal not just with one devil, Sooty...but three demons too.

“The medical unicorn, Artery, has the drugs.”

The two bucks seemed agitated at the mere mention. I sincerely hoped they wouldn't just go for them instantly. Lemon in particular seemed to have a nervous twitch...I wondered if he was fighting addiction to something.

“I...I need to get the drugs out from him to trade with Sooty. If you three distract him...cause some disturbance? I think I can sneak his pack away from him and take what we need.”

Noose stared hard at me. She didn't like the plan, that was obvious. I could tell what she was thinking. 'Why not just take it?'

“We can't just take it openly,” oh Celestia please don't hurt me, “because Sooty Morass is watching and he wants it done quietly...I think. The guards are there anyway.”

Noose didn't relax at all. Her stare was beginning to make me uneasy.

“So...um...if we were spotted then we'd all be thrown in the Parasprite Pits or...something.”

“Runt, I assure you that if you mess this up for us I will ensure that a parasprite swarm would be the least of your worries.”

Her voice was cold. For the first time I began to grasp the weight of this situation...this wasn't just them bullying me or seeing me as a target any more. This was a gang member making a promise.

“I won't!” My voice was higher pitched as fear ate at my confidence to speak.

I couldn't falter...I needed that journal and medicine!

“So when I have it, we'll take what he wants and then sneak it over to him in a bag. Then he'll...he'll give us stuff.”

“What stuff?”

Oh come on! Enough with the questions! I really didn't want them to know so much...given the last part of my plan.

The one that relied on me betraying them.

It had been inspired really...by my standards. I would take all that Sooty wanted...but also take 5 Radaways and as many magical healing potions as I could manage. Artery had claimed that I would need magic to repair myself, but I figured that if I took enough healing it'd restore me to a point where I'd at least live...right?

That was how it worked right? More healing was good...it had to be...I didn't want to think about the alternative. Perhaps I could sell some of his stuff back to him in exchange for magic?

But for the gang, that was the next part. After Sooty got me everything I wanted from him, I would also give some of the stolen syringes to them as their payment in chems and immediately get back to the FunFarm after delivering the parts to Wicked Slit. Once there...simply tip off Whiplash about the gang having contraband chems and they'd no longer be around the FunFarm to hurt me!

Sooty got what he wanted. I got my journal and life. Wicked Slit got her parts.

Of course this meant I was going to be effectively killing three ponies by turning them in. The thought lingered in my mind...no doubt ready to crop up in guilt later. But at this point, surrounded by self admitted to-be murderers I realised it was them or me. Artery would lose his business...but perhaps it would make him

rethink how he used his magic?

“What. Stuff. Runt?”

My thoughts snapped back to the present.

“Chems!” I screamed. “I said I'd get chems for you and I will!”

The panic in my voice was evident. There were so many ways this could go badly wrong for me. Most especially the rogue element of these three gangers. I couldn't tell them how to distract Artery. I couldn't guess what they'd do when they saw the prizes. To them, gaining that entire sack might be worth more than anything Sooty could do for them. My weak assurances wouldn't hold long. It dawned on me how quickly I'd have to get that sack to Sooty and get my own share before the gang finished and moved to claim their prize.

I could see it in her eyes...she had no intent of me getting anything at the end of this.

They were using me. Just like Whiplash was...just like Wicked Slit was...like Artery and Sooty Morass.

But then, I was a born slave, wasn't that my role in life? Did my cutie mark mean everypony got to use me how they wanted? Even other slaves?

I'd once heard stories of pegasi having their cutie marks removed for coming down here. Right now...I had the feeling I'd *pay* to have that done.

Noose turned without a word and moved off...negotiations were done then I guess.

“Just be ready, runt. We do this our way. This fails, you're coming down with us.”

* * *

'Their way' turned out to be pretty much what I expected.

I watched Noose wander up to a group of rough looking slaves. Given their ruined clothing, I presumed they had used to be caravan guards. She had no subtle notion to her approach in the slightest as she saw the guards glance up at her. Gangs and caravan groups did not get on very well in the wastelands. In fact, they were mortal enemies. More than once a slave transfer caravan including me had been attacked by gangs.

“Hey boys, lose any good caravans recently?” Her voice was jovial, taunting and just as despicable as ever when she spoke to me. I could see Lemon and his buddy wandering around the long way to sneak up behind the guards.

“Are you wanting your head cracked on this concrete, mare?”

The lead caravanner stood. He was over a head taller than Noose with a shotgun for a cutie mark. Boy...didn't that bode well.

If Noose cared, she didn't show it. Pretending to back off by turning away, she launched a full buck without any warning aimed for the caravanner's throat. Her legs moved fast enough to blur as she made the cheap shot and the foe collapsed while gasping for breath from his crushed windpipe.

Very quickly I became significantly more afraid of Noose than ever before. I watched as the two bucks ambushed the caravan guards who were still getting to their hooves. In a flurry of hooves, screaming, cursing and splattered blood on the concrete floor I witnessed the three on three brawl break out as more gangers and caravan guards from across the room rushed to join in. I saw Lemon floored by a unicorn hurling a fragment of concrete while another stallion choked out a gang member with his front hooves. The ganger didn't seem to be alive. Sheer brutality and senseless beating between both parties descended into a frenzy of pent up aggression and simple minded violence.

After Number Six I thought I'd get used to seeing this sort of thing...but as I witnessed wooden fragments stabbed for the eyes and the sickening sight of Noose stomping a hoof onto the back of a badly hurt mare's head forced me to turn away in disgust.

She had still been grinning.

I was hidden at the side of the room, taking shelter in a small space of the boarded up shop. I could fit between the boards to hide among the entrance, mere feet from Artery's shop. But until he looked away or moved I couldn't do anything...

He was indeed looking at the brawl, but hadn't moved away from his supplies yet. Damn, he was made of sterner stuff than I...all I wanted to do was creep into the shop and hide away from the violence now raging around. Even not looking, I could still pick out screams, thuds and sickening crunches every so often. The entire centre of the waiting area was one giant brawl now. Slaves rushed away in all directions, fearful of more riots. I could hear guards screaming for order to be restored, gunfire sounded in the air as warning shots were fired. I didn't have much time. I had to go now and just hope Artery moved.

Creeping out of the shop door, I hugged the wall edge of the waiting area as I cautiously approached his shop from the side. The front desk was passable at both sides, while Artery himself stood on the far side. I could get in and out...but if he did anything to turn I could be seen immediately.

I froze as I approached it...I wasn't guilty in this spot, just a little buck hiding away from the fighting. But if I moved further it would be obvious. I fought with my fear to allow me to try...to allow me to try and save my own life!

Dare or falter, Murk...dare or falter...

I saw Artery move forward. He was going for an injured pony who was screaming for his help and offering his stock of caps!

Dare!

I rushed forward, my little hooves almost silent on the ground as I ducked in behind the front stand of his makeshift shop. The big saddlebag was sitting there. Tugging it open with my mouth, the Radaways and potions spilled out alongside boxes of chems. Most of them I didn't even recognise or want to try. I couldn't read their labels to check.

But I could count.

Oh...that...bastard.

There were only fifteen medical elements in the entire saddlebag. Five Radaways, five potions and five boxes containing a few doses of chems each.

He'd known. He'd damn well known the entire time. He never intended to save me at all.

A scuffling sound came to my ears over the screaming and shouts of the guards striking and controlling slaves, Artery returning with his patient in tow!

I no longer had time to think. I grabbed the entire saddlebag, stuffing everything back inside it before simply charging back out of the shop the way I had come in. For once, my luck held as Artery was focussed on his patient to pull them telekinetically to his shop. I ran back toward the boarded up shop before using the cover of de-cushioned seats to crawl my way out of the area.

Behind me, I heard the screaming of Artery. I had gotten away clean. For once, no overly close calls. No chases. No being spotted. An elation passed me. I had just stolen a whole ton of medical supplies! Go...me?

Moving out of the waiting room, I bucked open a shaky cupboard door and hid inside.

Radaway and healing potions! The two things that would save my life, right here in my hooves! No more sickness...no more rad fevers and aching hooves.

But yet...I couldn't. If I didn't get those parts, then Wicked Slit would make sure my new found health was very short indeed. Not to mention my journal. After yesterday, it meant more to me than my entire life! The first thing I had ever been truly creative with, the first thing I had shown faith and resistance to defy my masters to achieve!

I couldn't abandon it. Or the parts.

I needed a plan. But suddenly resources were so much more limited and I had to go *now* before the gang returned from their brawl to seek chems and no doubt their own healing from the violence too.

Wrapping the saddlebag in an old cloth from the cupboard to help Artery to miss that it was his, I moved out again. My limp returned...the fast rush having aggravated the joint. Biting back the pain, I took solace in knowing that if all worked out...it wouldn't bother me for much longer.

With the adrenaline lowering...the sickness returned as well, like a crushing wave. I had to hang back for a minute as my vision swam and my centre of balance lost its way entirely as I fell against a wall of the side corridor in the terminal. Breathing heavily, my breath thin and airy...I stumbled on, sweating and shivering.

Not far now...not far now till I would be better...

My lungs *burned*.

This was cutting it close...it really was.

* * *

By the time I reached Sooty Morass, I could barely carry the saddlebag. I could feel it tugging at my jerkin the whole way. Trotting slow enough to avoid attention had been one of the longest walks of my life and I had to keep stopping to pull my jerkin tighter around me. Fears played in my head...if I was this sick, what if I never even woke up tomorrow to enjoy the journal that I had reclaimed? Was it too late to heal it? Could the Radaway get rid of the magical radiation that infected my body so much for so long?

Dumping the saddlebag down before the sly merchant, I knelt down to merely catch my breath, before tipping the saddlebag out behind his counter, hidden from Artery. The medical unicorn was arguing with the guards...but I could only presume Sooty had paid them off.

“So, little laddie,” he began, “seems you held up your end of the bargain. Now I may be a ruthless and sly old devil...but I always honour a deal. You don't stay a merchant long if ye don't.”

I looked up at him pleadingly, while using a hoof to push my jerkin back into position carefully...dumping that saddlebag had almost made it ride up.

“Please...I need this medicine now,” my voice was barely a whisper as my throat fought to move without pain, “I...I can feel it getting worse.”

“Well of course it would, exertion won't help your sickness,” he sneered, counting the materials, “and I can only presume that you have exerted yourself a fair amount while worrying a lot. Now...”

He nodded in approval at my efforts, before tapping a hoof on the counter.

“What say you and I discuss your employment, lad?”

That grin could have launched a dozen balefire missiles with the sheer hate it brought up. Here he was...looking at a dying pony and all he could think of was how he could exploit him further for his own ends. I had met horrible ponies and seem the work of tyrants like Master Red Eye...but this was a whole new and personal level of evil.

“I...if I agree, can I have some medicine now? Please, I don't think I'll live past tonight.”

It was begging, but I had nothing else to bargain with. A ruined hoofmachine thingymajig wouldn't be worth anything, right?

“Oh now, Murky lad. Don't go getting eager now, we've yet to find out what you can do for me before I give you something. Far as I see it, you've got to earn your medicine...not to just take it then not come back, see?”

He had me trapped.

I agreed.

He explained his job. It was quite simple really, but deceptively important. I would have to carry bribes to various individuals both slaver and labourer. Scrap workers to pocket goods, guards to look the other way for said goods and of course, deliver merchandise. He would pay one medicine per job...just enough to keep me alive from day to day. That was my only payment to work as his little courier.

My life was entirely in Sooty Morass' hooves now. A slave to a slave.

“Now in accordance with our deal...I'll present to you the things you *did* earn from putting me competition out of business, lad.”

He had continued talking even as I sat in the back of his shop, listening to the guards restoring order. The trio would be along any moment I could guess. I hadn't cared. I simply sat on my rump, a good little slave awaiting Morass' command or my time to return to the FunFarm for a shift. I wondered if Morass could get me to stay here with him rather than at the FunFarm with the gang...

Wait...the things I earned!

Even as I looked up from my hooves, he let both my journal and the arcane component drop from his mouth in front of me. I didn't hold back, taking the journal in both front hooves and hugging it tightly. I felt my eyes water.

Sooty left me alone to return to his merchant front...no doubt preparing to argue with Artery when the unicorn noticed Sooty's sudden increase in merchandise. He said I was to be sent out at night to take a bribe to a guard near the gate who might be able to hook him up with a small supply of Apple Sugar Bombs from the slaver kitchens. Until then I was just to stay quiet and hidden in the back of his shop unit. To remain nestled next to an old broken cooking unit (home cooking in an airport shop? Old Equestria must have been a lovely place...) and be as invisible as I could be to his operations until called.

Right now at least, I didn't mind that...I had something to look at.

I sat the arcane circuit board to the side.

I tuned out the slaves crying out in pain as Artery helped them with his magic...he hadn't ever learned anaesthetic spells.

I laid the journal before me and slowly...oh...so...slowly...opened it to the page I knew.

...

“...hi, Mom.”

Reaching over for just a second, I crossed off the checklist image of my journal. I didn't have a real home, but looking now at her before me, drawn by my imagination and memory...I felt like I had come home to something. Even as tears dropped on the page, I managed to smile a little as I saw her comforting gaze.

I paused.

She was just a drawing...but seeing this, I remembered.

I remembered the feeling. To have shaken off my Master, to ignore Red Eye's demands and try to stay inside and draw this when they were demanding me to leave.

I had taken my own path.

Looking from the beautifully comforting face of my mother to the back of Sooty Morass...I knew that there was no way he was going to keep me under his hoof like this.

I was getting out of here. I was going to live.

“Thanks...Mom. Glad you're back.”

* * *

My plan was not entirely advanced. There was little I could really do here but simply attempt to steal the medical supplies from behind Morass' back and then hoof it for the exit before finding a way to blend in outside. Morass wouldn't come chasing me all the way to the FunFarm across Fillydelphia...even he didn't have that influence.

Nope. It wasn't too fancy a plan but it was surrounded in dangers. From Morass and his bodyguard to the guards at the exit. If ponies tried to grab me they could stop me. Or worse, they might even tear off my jerkin...the device and everything else would be lost among other things too. I pulled it as tight as the frayed cord around my torso would go, feeling the radio, parchment, journal and circuit board stuffed inside. I was going to use the saddlebag I'd brought in to leave with the surplus items Morass had left behind his counter but even so...the amount stuffed in my jerkin felt unsteady and cumbersome. I was not going to risk it being anywhere else, however, they were all too important.

Even as I readied up quietly...I felt another wave of nausea wash across me. Coughing loudly, I stuffed my mouth with a hoof as I attempted to stop myself from drawing too much attention. Stomach retching from the harsh coughing, vision hazy from the pain and exhaustion...I lay back for a good time simply trying to get my strength back. I couldn't do this...not physically. My limbs were too weak and my injured one only getting worse. I couldn't run on a hoof that was mildly disjointed! If only I could dull the pain...

My eyes fell to the syringes around the bag left by Morass.

I didn't know which one was...what were they called? Med-X? There were a few styles. One with two little pipes to send extra drugs in with it, one thin and simple, one constructed out of a bottle with a greyish liquid in it.

In my condition...to take the wrong one would probably kill me through system overload.

The one with two feeds looked tempting...it was fancy. Pain removal was fancy wasn't it? The simple one would be just some chem drug, right? I rolled the third one, the bottle over. It had a picture of a broken hoof...then a cured one. Aha! That was just what I needed, right?

I glanced around before gently putting the bottle up against my injured hoof, the needle pointing at it.

Wait a minute...

I remembered last night, listening to DJ-Pon3. He had been warning about a drug made from the grey blood of a hydra beast. I glanced down at the bottle before almost kicking it away in shock and disgust. My face clenched as the thought of what I had almost done slammed home.

No chances.

I took the simple one. The simpler the better...simpler couldn't kill as easily, right? Maybe it was the right one. With a little whine, I plunged the needle in and hoofed the plunger.

...okay, not very much change going on. I didn't feel any-wooooooah booooy...theeeeere we go...

My vision swam as I wobbled and then fell to the side, my *everything* utterly numb. A bliss of relief as my hoof stopped aching and my lungs dulled off entirely. Sleep felt tempting as the waves of pain receding from my body. Slowly, I began to feel a return of control to my limbs after a minute or so...but in my mind I felt so different. I felt...nice. Like all the pain of the world had just disappeared. If only I had more of this stuff to take...

As I awaited my limbs to regain enough feeling (and to be frank, my mind to stop thinking "pretty lights, wheeee...") I began to think about my plan a little. Perhaps I was thinking about all of this wrong...trying to take a ton of medical supplies with me. If I was going to be waiting to regain the ability to move...perhaps I could sneak a Radaway and a healing potion to get ahead of the game...in case anything went wrong?

Couldn't hurt. Not that I'd feel it right now anyway! Hah!

I realised that I had a smile plastered on my face when I saw my reflection in a metal oven door opposite

me. Wow...it even made me smile! Med-X! Best. Drug. Ever!

Whilst enjoying the high of a painkiller, I lay back, hiding around the back of the oven from Morass...sipping a Radaway while glancing at my mother's picture. It made me smile for real...even through the haze of medically induced relief from life.

That was a feeling I'd always-

“URGH!”

I almost sprayed the Radaway right over my journal as I sickeningly swallowed the horrid liquid. It tasted like orange *paint!* The cover featured a little foal enjoying it with a straw, smiling like a little puppy. I *seriously* questioned the taste and *sanity* of any pony who enjoyed this stuff. It'd take clinical craziness to see this as anything but just disgusting.

Sighing, I kept drinking. All things considered...I had no right to complain. I watched Morass from behind. Clearly he believed me to be a broken in worker given that he was paying me little heed.

I'd show him. I'd show them all. Soon as I could gallop again I was going to get out!

* * *

I didn't hesitate.

For once, I didn't falter. I didn't hold back or restrict myself. I couldn't feel the pain any more. I didn't feel as sick after a Radaway and a healing potion. They'd taken the edge off things, I knew I'd need more to actually combat the sickness. But I had to go suddenly, Morass was coming back from the front to inspect...so I had gone for it.

I barrelled past him, ducking to one side and grabbing the saddlebag I had stuffed in my mouth as I darted out into the waiting area. Slaves looked up at the commotion as I saw the guards look ready to repel another riot. The entire place was already on high alert, even as ponies lay on the ground injured still from earlier. I felt my jerkin bounce about a little from all the items stuffed in it, including one healing potion for quicker access.

“Get back here you little thief! Chisel Hoof! Get 'em!”

Morass bellowed behind me, sending his bodyguard to chase me down. Finally able to gallop properly, I put my head down and pushed harder, ducking under chair platforms to avoid the huge bodyguard with his longer strides. I felt his mouth try to grab my tail even as I wriggled between two rows of seating, the ensuing tug pulling a few strands of hair out with a horrid snap. I felt the tug, but still under the Med-X induced relief, I felt no pain other than a slight mourning for my already lacklustre and patchy tail losing even more...

Up ahead there were two rows of chairs on either side of the pillars that went all the way to the exit. I could see the two guards already galloping towards me from ahead. Crap! I hadn't anticipated them openly helping Morass like this.

Hurdling the chairs with a quick hop, skip and jump apiece I kept ahead of the bodyguard. There was only one hope to make it by them as I witnessed a huge pile of mangled chairs thrown together in the waiting area near a barred window. Presumably the megaspell shockwave had blasted them away from the large open area near it. Two choices...jump the window or hide in the chairs...

As much as the Med-X dulled pain. I knew leaping from two stories up with a damaged hoof would be asking way too much of it. I dove into the pile of chairs, wriggling in among the twisted metal and sharp edges as only a small pony like me can. The bodyguard and two slavers arrived and just stared at it, before starting to hurl wrecks off of the pile. I could hear the other slaves milling about in fear or confusion while Morass was arguing with Artery over what I had really stole. Somehow, I doubted I would have many friends after this around here.

I crept through the wreckage of the chairs, invisible to the guards tugging on them frantically. I could hear them screaming for me to come out and be punished. As terrified as I was...I had to agree to the snarky part of my mind that they were not using the most persuasive argument to convince me. Fighting down the overwhelming urge to curl up and shiver...I kept creeping. I had to get out, I had to get my Mom out too, even if it were just my drawing! Sneaking through the chairs, I noticed an error on their part. They were all on one side of the pile, assuming I was just hiding.

Quietly, I pulled myself from the opposite side, silently praying no watching slave would give me away. Cautiously, I trotted off...the guards were still pulling at the pile! They hadn't even looked up as I began to canter and then gallop again, looking behind me. Hah! Hahaha! I felt an elation as I saw them get smaller and smaller, not noticing me. What idiot wouldn't watch everything around them?

I promptly felt myself run into something with a dull thud.

Well...that answered that question.

It hadn't hurt, but the impact had knocked me over...spraying the chems across the floor. In a panic I reached out to reclaim them before seeing what I had hit. My mood dropped like a stone from the top of the Terminal control tower.

"Hi," sneered Noose, as her two buck companions spread out around me, "come to give us your prize? Or just to report for the flank kicking your going to get for trying to betray us?"

My blood ran cold. No no NO this wasn't supposed to happen! I was so close to being out!

It began. She didn't hesitate. She had taken a heavy blow to the head during the brawl and blood still matted her mane. She wanted payment...and she wanted revenge. Her front hoof *slammed* into the side of my head hard enough to whip my small frame clean around and launch me a good three feet to the side. Even through the Med-X, I felt that hard as pain lanced through my mouth and jawline. Whimpering and trying to get up, I saw her shadow. Noose raised up on two legs and slammed her front ones home upon my chest. I couldn't hold it in. I screamed at the top of my voice as I felt ribs buckle and a spray of blood come from my mouth. High pitched and raspy, I howled as she beat down on me. Hoof after hoof after hoof. I went blind in one eye as it blackened and began to swell up. She picked me to my hooves and bucked me into the wall. The hard concrete re-awoke my sickness as I felt the wind knocked out of me through a rough throat and lungs, only to wail as she kicked out my injured leg.

"Don't, please Noose!" I pleaded, trying to stand back up, but it was to no avail, "Don't k-kill me! Don't!"

I collapsed against the wall, sliding down. I had been beaten before...but this was different. She wasn't aiming to knock me around...this was true combat with the intent to take out your opponent. I...I wasn't built for this!

"Please...Noose, I'll do-"

With a sudden removal of gravity, I was hurled back toward the centre of the entranceway. Landing on my front, I cried out as my ribs crunched on the floor directly. My legs didn't even bother to stop me. Without the Med-X...I'd probably have passed out.

I tried to stand...if I could just reach another healing potion...gulp it quick. Or another Med-X! Anything! Just enough to give me a boost to run! If...if I could just get away! My efforts led me to stumble and collapse as every joint shivering and failed me. Gritting my teeth I sought to crawl, whinnying as my eye pounded with the pain of quick swelling around it. The feeling of not seeing...oh Goddesses was it permanent?!

They weren't willing to allow me to move. Her hoof descended on my injured leg...putting pressure on it enough to make me howl in pain as she grinned wickedly. I could see Morass and the guards approaching. He had that look of justification on his face as he looked on me...beaten and bloodied. I shivered constantly...my body retching from coughing and feeling pain from my legs, ribs and face. I could feel blood running from...from somewhere on my face. Oh Celestia it hurt so much...please...please just make it stop...

The bucks were approaching, clearly wanting some of the game too. Noose only glared at them as she looked down at me, her prize to beat on. As I stared upwards, my tears mixing with blood from stinging wounds flowing around the already swollen parts of my face...I saw the lack of mercy and the cold sadism that drove her. My chest moved sporadically, my breathing irregular as I struggled to regain breath.

“Hey! Noose! He didn't drop many chems, where's the rest?” Lemon seemed intent.

“Fuck if I know, just wait, we'll get em later.”

The third buck wandered up to me, looking down.

“Maybe not...” he grinned, his eyes looking at my jerkin, “He's hiding something, there's lumps.”

No! I struggled, pulling my hoof with a wrenching pain from under hers and trying to flail to me feet. I received only a half buck for my troubles sending me staggering even as I forced myself to my hooves. They would get my journal again! And...and...

“C'mere! You're hiding my chems!”

They advanced, I felt them on every side, grabbing, pulling and trying to get at the things I had hidden beneath my jerkin for so long!

“GIVE!”

“No!” I screamed forcibly, lashing out to little avail as my little hooves were batted aside.

“GET HIM!”

I felt teeth grab my jerkin and *pull*, I tried to pull away but the pressure only increased!

A horrible ripping sound met my ears as I fell forward, the pressure released. I hit the ground without my jerkin, feeling the concrete across my whole body. Adrenaline overcame the searing pain enough to turn and hobble backwards. My journal...my radio...the parchment checklist and the arcane circuit all fell on the floor beside the medical equipment and the torn remnants of my jerkin...

But none of them were looking at them. Everypony in the entire terminal simply stood and stared at the battered little pony before them who could barely stand up, who was crying with pain as blood from small cuts dripped to the floor. They didn't even look at his swollen and blinded eye or the bleeding lips.

They all looked at one thing. And one thing only.

“What?”

“Is...are...”

Lemon broke the ice proper.

“What?! He...*he's a fucking pegasus!*”

* * *

I...may not have been honest with you.

No, I'm not an earth pony. I am...indeed...a pegasus.

I...

I'm...sorry.

I owe you an explanation, I know.

But believe me when I say...how could I just admit it? The Wasteland *hates* pegasi with a degree that I would likely have been killed long ago in Fillydelphia. Hell, I've been lucky my past masters were content to have any slaves, regardless of what type of pony they were.

I do not know how it happened. Perhaps genetically, my mother was related to a pegasus lost in the wastes. Perhaps my father was one and my mother never told me. Maybe it's just blind chance of long lost genes from two hundred years ago. One way or another...it happened. I was born with these two stupid wings on my sides. More than my size and timidness, they have been the reason that every place I was sent to work as a slave immediately treated me like dirt. I would be blamed for mistakes that pegasi made before the balefire bombs or for the continued rumours of them surviving up there happily and ignoring us all. I would receive less food, have my wings prodded or struck by other slaves. They used to call me "flightless." Many of them used to make up stories that I had come down from the clouds because my real parents didn't want me any more. But I swear, this is the honest truth...I am a born wastelander...a born slave.

My mother told me while I was young a little saying.

"There's a story behind every pair of wings in the wasteland, Little Murky."

Pegasi were so rare that every one of them had a story to tell about the places they had flown to, such as what the world was like above the clouds. About how they had survived in a world that generally hated them or the things they had done thanks to their unique abilities. Pegasi were incredible, unique and every single one of them had some sort of tale behind them.

But...I am not truly a pegasus. They can fly...I cannot. My story is nothing but one gradually worsening situation.

When I was at the rock farm, I was still very young. I hadn't yet grown up enough to fly, but once I was developed enough, my wings began flapping. They had moved and twitched about however they wanted and I kept imagining that if I could flap them hard enough, then my mother and I could have gone some place safer. My master had spied them beginning to move and...and he took steps...to ensure his slaves did not leave.

A blunt mallet in his mouth, he had ordered two other slaves to drag me into his storehouse where an anvil had waited. He...he didn't want me to fly. Ever.

...he broke me...

I had never recovered. Damaged while too young...unable to develop properly, I had never grown the required muscles while my wings were fragmented and poorly healed to not have enough strength to withstand the forces required. I can't even move them from my side any more to open or spread them! They just sit there and hurt...

I've tried, believe me I've tried. But I cannot even get them to raise never mind even think of flapping. Even then I doubted I would ever understand the mechanics of flight. No, I will never fly. Not like the Stable Dweller. She didn't even need wings at all. She would see the sky I could never hope to witness...to see the sun rise and set. To see Luna's glorious moon or to view the wastes from the safety above. I had no place up there.

So now, I have these two useless and painful ill-developed things on my sides that had no place with me. They are hated by everypony, myself more than any. So you see why I had to hide it? Why I had to wear that jerkin and try and prevent anypony from knowing. No...I'm not a pegasus. I am like the earth ponies, only without the things they are known for. I have all of the disadvantages of both types with nothing to consider a helpful trait at all.

As far as I am considered...I'm not a pegasus. I'm just a weak pony.

If anypony in Fillydelphia were to know...I could only look forward to a very short life. The slaves would seek to probably kill me immediately. I've tried to hide it every place I've been...Fillydelphia longer than the others. But somepony always finds out somehow and all the hate and bigotry begins again...

Now they know too...

* * *

I didn't have long. Their confused stares and disbelieving mutterings as the crowd gathered would only distract Noose and Sooty for a short time. Even as I heard some voices begin to raise, hatred and bile spilled forth with shouts demanding I be brought in to take revenge on. I knew not everypony in Equestria hated us pegasi...but the slaves, often prone to emotional simplicity and seeking to vent anger would see me as a common foe.

I reached down, grabbing a healing potion in my mouth and simply letting the liquid fall down my throat without even swallowing. The act almost made me choke and vomit it right back out...but the refreshing feeling of my new wounds beginning to close gave me enough strength as I scrambled to pack my things into the fallen saddlebag. The entire crowd began to move as one...a surge of screaming faces still hopped up on violence wanting to express their anger on one of the race who had abandoned them.

I could see Noose trying to force her way through. Sooty Morass' bodyguard was behind her...I only had seconds to get away. Lemon was still standing beside me, with a scowl he attempted to grab me with his front hooves. Panicking as I heard the stomping of the fanatical slaves gunning for my blood I lashed out. My back right hoof flicked out just like before, connecting with a...much softer area. I felt Lemon squeal and fall right off of me.

Throwing the saddlebags over my torso I immediately galloped for as much as I was worth. Ahead of me, whistles blew and warning shots blasted into the air as a line of guards galloped into the terminal building past the scrap wall. Pike and Cosh dove for cover as the large ponies thundered through. Stuck between the two, I opted to keep going, trusting to my small size compared to the huge crowd behind me.

Praying silently for safety, I dodged as best I could around them, even diving beneath a guard, shouting out in pain as his battle saddle opened fire right next to my ears. I scrambled out the back of their line just as the slaves collided behind me into the guards.

One guard looked at me for just a second before being pulled back into the terminal by the rush of slaves. Assuming they were rioting, the guards paid me little heed, presumably, as the saddlebags hid my wings. I stopped for just a second as I glanced back, seeing the rush being barely held in by the guards from charging onto the airfield after me. All of their eyes were on me...or rather on my torso. I heard shouts, like 'Tear his wings off!' or 'Revenge for the wastes!' A hundred ponies crying for my death...

I was alone these days when not able to sit and listen to the radio.

Now more than ever.

I galloped off, trying to not cry so much I couldn't see where I was running as I hunted for someplace to hide...anywhere.

* * *

I didn't have to travel far. With adrenaline dropping off quickly, I couldn't go too far. On instinct, I sought out a place no-pony else would ever go normally.

The Fillydelphia Pegasus Airport's control tower.

Old scaffolding had been torn around it from the blast, but to a pony with nothing to lose right now it was an acceptable risk to climb. I sat on the top, the roof above the control centre watching the expanse of industry and red haze of Fillydelphia around me in all directions. On the horizon I could see the sunset, blurred and impossible to properly view given it was behind the cloud layers above. Just a deeper smudge of orange, but something in me, maybe driven by my status as a pegasus just...*knew*. That sunset escaped the darkness of the night each day...what lay beyond it? Could I ever follow it into the unknown?

Funny. If I were a *real* pegasus I could have just flown away from here...I was higher than the wall after all. That sunset would be a beacon to call me to freedom. But now...it played only to my deepest and most impossible wishes.

I sat under a small tarpaulin that had once been used for observation to hide from the griffin patrols. I doubted they'd be looking for me, their jobs were more specific and never involved hunting on top of control towers or other high places. Indeed, most of them flew below the height I was sitting at.

I was crying. Of course, why wouldn't I of all ponies be? My eye had slowly regained sight a little, but everything on that side of my face was still hazy from swelling.

My journal sat open next to me. The parchment sketch of the Stable Dweller, Number Six and the unknown mare was beside it. The radio was playing DJ-Pon3 as he spoke of the efforts of heroes all around Equestria. But none of it seemed to make a difference any more.

Word would spread. A pegasus was in Filly. Then the witch hunt would begin.

Not that it mattered. I may have the parts for Wicked Slit, but even now I realised a stupid point I had overlooked. Like Morass, she had tricked me. The machine would count for three ponies...she never really intended to let me off the hook at all, given I was her fourth allotted replacement. Everypony could take advantage of me, it seemed. Even when I thought I had been solving things myself.

I lay down, covering my head with my hooves as I sought to somehow make it all go away. No more merchants tricking me and withholding medicine until I worked for them. No more sickness eating at my lungs and blood. No more gangs trying to kill me. No more slavers abusing my life to suit their needs. No more everyone judging me because of some idiots centuries ago!

I had perhaps bought myself a few days...but my sickness hadn't gone away, only alleviated a little from the small amounts I'd taken before leaving. Even then the healing potions had mostly gone to use on what Noose did to me...

Still didn't fix my tooth though. I wondered what would if pony healing potions couldn't. Perhaps zebra mixes?

My blood was rising just like in the refuge pit. Scrambling my hooves over my head in frustration I stood up, pacing back and forth as I tried to think. Come on...think....think think think! I beat my hoof against my head as I stared out over the city. I could see the Funfarm, its rollercoaster ruins widely recognisable as were the giant pink pony balloons above it. I could swear each one of the massive laughing faces was looking at me. Damned freaky laughing pink mare...I really hoped I could never see her again! That I'd never see *anything* again! Just to leave and go some place it could just be *me* and my *drawings* and *no-pony else ever again!* ***Who needed others anyway?! All they ever brought was more pain!***

I sighed, not even finding the energy to stay properly mad. I was exhausted. Two days of running, being beaten and aggravating my radiation sickness. I couldn't move properly. I couldn't even think properly to come up with a swear colourful enough to describe this life. But as I turned from the FunFarm...an idea sprung to mind. A little thought that I realised had always been in my mind. An inkling that had remained with me all throughout my life but until today had never quite surfaced on how to protect myself from all the pain.

There...there was a way.

I trotted forward to the edge, not quite feeling my conscious thoughts in control of my body. I looked down at the ground thirty feet below.

...just one way I could avoid anypony else ever hurting me again...

Shaking frantically, I climbed up on to the parapet. I could feel my breathing getting faster. I...I...this was the best way, right? To not give them the pleasure...right? One hoof raised as I felt my balance waver in the wind.

...was this high enough? Would it hurt?

I felt my centre of balance adjust, drifting out a little. The ambience went silent as though waiting for me, other than the rush of wind by my ears. I fought down the sense of vertigo. Just one little bit of pain more and that'd be it...

The wind caught my mane and wings, as though trying to remind me of what kind of pony I was. I ignored it. The wind and the sky had no place for me.

I leaned out.

Beep!

I stumbled, my hooves skittering about as I fell back from the ledge to land solidly on the concrete of the balcony again. Hot pain lanced through my body as I impacted on my side, before coughing twice in response. But I didn't notice that...what had beeped?

Beep!

My radio...the music had stopped.

I scrambled over, picking it up. Wonderment at this little device was over-ruling my mind. I couldn't well jump without figuring this out could I?

I almost dropped it.

...I had been about to jump. Oh...oh Goddesses...

Shivering, I clutched the radio tightly...what in all of Equestria had I been doing? I had been about to leap from the control tower! I screwed my eyes shut, shivers turning into furious shaking as only now the reality of how events were affecting my mind became clear. Emotional discovery could go both ways...

My stomach churned at the thought of what I had almost done. In fact, it did more than churn.

Dragging my belongings further from that location, gasping for breath after my stomach had been done emptying its pitiful contents, I sat down with the radio. Concentrate on it...it saved you before...it'll do it again! It'll...it'll be the Stable Dweller or something right? I honestly didn't care, I needed something, anything, to stop me thinking about what I'd just come so close to doing.

On cue...the speaker started up.

...ffzzzssshh...

"...uhm...hello? Oh wait, why am I saying that? This is a diary thing, isn't it?"

I blinked, the voice was that of a young sounding buck. Hell, he even sounded a little like me. Our ages were perhaps similar.

"Well, what can I say for a first entry? My dad told me I should keep this up to date, for the record, he says. Well, I don't quite get what he means by that, but there's no reason I shouldn't, right? What's the harm it could do? Plus I kinda owe him...he bought me the Stable ticket after all. If things do go bad at least I'll be safe underground while dad should get evacuated with the pegasi. We'll be safe..."

It was from before the war...I found myself captivated, holding the device gently between my hooves as the little speaker played out the apparently voiced diary.

"So I got sent this thing, right? Came with the ticket, they said. My PipBuck. Crazy little device really, pretty cool. I get my radio, audio recording, a little light to brighten up the darkness of the night and it even interfaces with the terminal dad bought me for my birthday! Some places don't get them early, but many of them are manufactured right here in Fillydelphia, so I guess they just send them direct because there isn't any shipping. Well, I can say I'm glad for it, this thing saved my life already!"

You aren't the only one...

"I was coming back from picking it up, right? Well...Equestria's not how it used to be. Happiness, joy and understanding, right? Things are just, well, different these days. Some earth ponies tried to take my ticket on my way home. Came right out of the alleyway down Old Woodtree Road! I...I mean this thing, it

saved my life. S.A.T.S. saved my life tonight, I mean. Oh dear, I'm all shaky again. Ponies aren't meant to fight, so why do we have to?"

There was a pause, as though he was considering something. I could swear I heard a sniff.

"I just...I want this to stop. I don't want to go into a Stable knowing that everything out here is going to die. But it won't happen. My dad tells me it's just all posturing and no-pony would ever be so stupid as to do something that would endanger us all. All the same, why would he spend almost his entire life savings to get me this ticket? I don't want to know what it feels like to be the last of a generation...if the worst does happen, what will we be left with? What poor ponies in the future will have to live not seeing the things I have here in the lovely city of Filly? Grass, trees, pure water?"

I looked around at Fillydelphia and saw the slave driven hell industry and radioactive poison filling the air.

There were no words to describe the weight of that thought.

"I...I guess I should wrap this up. I need to go find a job since I moved here to get the ticket. Well, bye I guess, to whoever listens to this. Probably me. I can look back and realise how silly I'm being to believe that any of this will actually happen. Well, my name is Sundial. I'm a unicorn, I guess it's worth saying. Maybe I'll tell this thing how I got my cutie mark or something next time. Till then...I guess. Bye?"

"Bye..." I muttered, before wondering exactly why. I heard the speaker cut, before it switched right back to a song by Sweetie Belle. A PipBuck then...that was the device's name. Sundial's PipBuck.

With a sudden and horrifying realisation, it all slammed home.

That skeleton...that...that had been...

...oh Goddesses...

I collapsed, hugging the PipBuck and crying my little weakening heart out.

* * *

My return to the FunFarm was as ignominious as it was inevitable.

I had returned the parts to Wicked Slit. Her 'reward' was a week of shifts working on the molten vats.

My saddlebag had a couple of chems left over. That might be able to mollify the gang enough to not kill...ah who was I kidding...they would kill me as soon as look at me.

With a little biting, I had torn up the cloth I'd put over the pink and yellow medical saddlebag to make a rough vest for myself to hide my wings. Only the gang knew at the FunFarm, provided the word didn't get out from other slaves across Fillydelphia. It'd only be a matter of time till Whiplash knew. If he found out...I was screwed.

Wandering past the mirror, I only merely glanced at it...seeing myself dying all over again since the medicine had delayed things. I didn't want to look at myself. Yet my eyes were drawn to it, that big silly image of the pink laughing pony sweeping her arm towards the mirror as though encouraging me to look at it again.

Nothing. Just a sick little pegasus who couldn't fly with a group of slaves moving by behind him reflected in the mirror.

"If it weren't Wicked Slit I'd sent you to, I'd probably have you up for delaying coming back. Thankfully for you I know she's crazy."

I squeaked, jumping as I spun and fell into the cold glass of the mirror. Whiplash had moved with uncharacteristic silence up behind me from out of the mirror's line of sight. From the grin on his face, I could

imagine he had meant to scare me.

“Y-yes...master,” I whispered, “she...kinda held me back...”

“Whatever. Get back in the enclosure, I have a meeting with a liaison from Protégé.”

“Um...master?” I had to at least ask. “Are...are the gang members back in? I think they want to kill me...”

“Murk, shift your arse.”

“Yes master...”

Worth a try I guess. I slumped and wandered past Whiplash as we both headed into the Petting Zoo to his slave groups. Waiting beside the old staff office that Whiplash used as his quarters, I saw one of Stern's griffins waiting for him. Much bigger than a pony and bearing sharpened talons, the mercenary nodded curtly to Whiplash as he wandered over. She was clad in tough looking body armour over her almost jet black feathers. Even the areas most griffins had lighter colours were still only a thick grey. Across her back was slung two long looking firearms, one a magical weapon and the other looked like some sort of scoped rifle, I had no idea of any specifics...I was no gun master after all.

Her eyes watched me carefully as I moved past her, trying not to let my eyes stare as I sought out the gang. I needed to avoid them and find some place safe, though every instinct told me that there were none left. Behind me I heard Whiplash begin talking to the griffin. It quickly escalated into a near on argument...apparently she was wanting slaves for this 'Protégé' from his stock. Whiplash didn't seem too happy.

Neither did the gang. They stood in the middle of the enclosure.

Waiting for me.

Noose had a look of murder. Her back showed signs of lashing from the guards.

Lemon stomped impatiently. I didn't imagine a hoof to the loins was going to give him much mercy toward me.

The third buck (did I ever hear his name?) simply snorted.

Well...here it comes...

“Stuff your wishes, Whiplash! I'm taking the ones I want and there is no way I'm going to let your little worries stop me, **understand?!?**”

Even the gang perked up, their gaze turning to look at the situation with Whiplash and the griffin. Where they had been talking previously, now a third presence had entered. What a presence as well...yesterday I had been sure I had seen the biggest pony in Equestria from Number Six. This earth pony stallion seemed to be even bigger...if only through girth. He had simply barged in, the griffin clearly aggravated at her own organisation meeting being interrupted by this new arrival.

Number Six had been the single most terrifying pony I had ever met. This one was perhaps the more disgusting. Mangy dark brown made up his coat while his mane (and several patches of his coat) had a filthy grey to them. His huge girth came atop powerful looking legs and while he wasn't as tall and muscular as Six had been...he looked astonishingly strong from such a massive centre of force. He was not obese...rather just largely built with a lot of weight and power, even if a lot of it was fat. Across his hide were strapped high quality leather barding and metal plates that hung with trinkets and small bags. Whips, clubs and what looked like a magical energy stun rod hung within mouths reach. I tried not to look at his mouth, filled with rotting and often missing teeth, I could almost smell him from here...even over my own drainage musk. I had to fight to not gasp as I saw his cutie mark and almost checked my own flank to be sure. It was a single unbroken loop of chain! The pattern was almost identical to my own shackles.

He dwarfed Whiplash and even put the normally larger than a pony sized griffin to shame somewhat. By how he was standing and addressing them both...he was clearly higher in the pecking order of Red Eye's

slavers. In fact...to my astonishment, Whiplash, the hard faced terror of my life, looked ready to whimper before him. Who *was* this pony?

“That little coltcuddler Protégé won't let me anywhere near the slaves in his stock, so I gotta come to you, understand? Now I asked you, which ones do you not mind...missing work for a few days? I got some games I wanna play, can't seem to keep them alive...hehe...”

That rasping and filthy mouth grinned at Whiplash, before glancing at the griffin.

“Unless you wanna start anything, Ragini. You still loyal to the code, eh?”

The griffin nodded sternly without a word. I could see her talon resting tightly on the strap of her weapon. Whiplash looked between the two with nervous eyes...this was clearly an animosity well above his level.

“Look...I'll give you one slave right? Go ask the lads at the terminal, I hear they want rid of some troublemakers after today, alright?”

Oh boy...couldn't I just guess where this was going. I stood rooted to the ground, wishing I could somehow make myself invisible in plain sight.

“One, eh? Who?”

“...Murk! Get over here!”

I didn't move. I didn't want to get any closer to that horrid beast of a pony.

“Murk! Move yourself over here right now!” Whiplash's voice was a mix of anger and fear as he glanced to the intruder again. I was getting the feeling this wasn't entirely official business for Red Eye, judging by how the griffin was lurking to the side.

I still didn't move. I couldn't have. My hooves were locked firmly in the ground. With horror I saw the new slaver instead simply follow Whiplash's glare before advancing toward me. Standing barely two feet in front of me, I almost retched on the stink of him alone. I trembled, clearly shivering and hyperventilating as he stared at me, looking me over.

“Interesting...not often you see a small pony like this these days. Pity I couldn't get a hold of that other one while she was here.”

He seemed to lick his lips. I had to close my eyes to not dry heave on the spot. The thought of this disgusting slaver anywhere near the perfect Stable Dweller offended me to the core. The thought of him anywhere near *me* just felt like it was violating my sanity by his mere proximity. I felt his hoof reach out, lifting my chin and roughly shaking my head from side to side, examining me from angles. Bruises and sprained muscles screamed in pain, as did I. He didn't relent, judging my size and shape. My saddlebag was pulled from my back as he reached for my makeshift vest...

No!

Almost on instinct my back right hoof shot out again as he spun me around, aiming for the one spot I knew I could hurt him. He was too big, his back half too far away! I missed! No...no! I tried again...

A bellow of rage blasted my sensitive ears as he slapped me across the side with a hoof hard enough to catapult me over into the fence. Crunching against it hard enough to set the entire fence wobbling, I fell to the ground beneath it and curled up. The slaver had murderous eyes as he shook on the spot at my impertinence to try and strike him.

“You...little...runt...”

He slowly started stomping towards me, one hoof at a time.

“You think...you can just try bucking me in the loins...and get **away with it?**”

I squealed in terror as I saw Whiplash not moving to interject. The griffin had disappeared.

“You wanna know who I am? I am going to be your new owner! How do you you like that? You might

have been dragged in here and given tough times, but I'll tell you now you haven't seen the real depths of Fillydelphia yet! My name is Chainlink Shackle, worm! But you will only call me by one thing. To you, I am nothing but The Master, **understood?!**"

His hoof slammed on the ground, driven by his weight to leave an actual indent on the hard surface itself. Every instinct I had kicked in, this was not just any slaver. I had been born a slave, named as a slave and gained my cutie mark as one. The Master had clearly been born a *slaver*. He was the opposite side of the coin, born to command me. I could *not* disobey. In seconds, he had asserted himself over my subconscious greater than anypony before.

"Yes!" I screamed, "Yes, Master!"

He didn't stop advancing. Everything about him seemed designed to be the antithesis of myself, large where I was small, strong where I was weak. Number Six had terrified me. The Master had an effect more profound...like I knew he had been destined to be the one to own me.

"Now get back over here, I want to see what I'm getting, so get that vest off!"

No...I couldn't allow that! But I felt every muscle rushing to obey...DJ-Pon3 had broken me free, but the everlasting chain of The Master I could feel locking me back into place.

"Hah! I'll tell you why he doesn't want it off!"

I looked up, the third buck was running up to The Master. The gang member skidded to a halt before him, pointing a back hoof at me. The Master merely glared down at him with stern eyes and a scowl. I was terrified, if my place as a pegasus was revealed here I would be nothing but dead! Or paraded in front of Master Red Eye by...by *The* Master and probably hung or gutted to show solidarity against pegasi! My imagination outran my horror and revulsion so far that I almost didn't notice for a second as The Master's hoof slammed the buck to the ground mercilessly.

"I didn't!"

A hoof shattered the buck's mouth.

"Ask!"

His mouth drew a knife so big it almost looked like a sword.

"YOU!"

The knife descended with enough force to puncture clean through the buck's neck and embed itself into the ground beneath. Twitching and gurgling, the buck died within seconds as lifeblood pumped out over the dead grass and dirt. His hooves continued to spasm for a few seconds before everything went still. The blood ran around my hooves...but I was too frozen in fear to move them as I felt the dull warm creepy over each hoof. Whiplash looked too terrified to react. The gang simply fled into the Petting Zoo.

"Enough!"

The griffin landed beside The Master. Mouth splattered with blood, he rounded on her. The rifle was drawn as she looked him in the eyes and stood firm...if cautiously.

"Slaves aren't transferable until tomorrow night anyway, Shackle," she barked, "you know that. You'll get to see him then, you'll get your prize. I'll have Protégé look elsewhere tonight for a replacement to fill the gaps."

She was trying to mollify him by giving him precisely what he wanted without any more bloodshed or brutality tonight. I had seen Master Red Eye's griffins display such behaviour before, their loyalty to him absolute. They would often protect slaves against overly eager slavers to keep Master Red Eye's stock intact for work shifts if they felt the production was threatened. "Shackles" narrowed his eyes before bellowing in laughter and angling his head toward me.

"You're just what I need, Murk!" He shouted, voice rasping on the air, just like mine. "I'll be back promptly tomorrow to take you to my...hmm...special stock. We'll have fun for sure little Murky...find you

some *real* work in Fillydelphia that you slaves should be doing, none of this pulling carts rubbish!”

That decaying grin made me break down on the spot. I had heard the rumours...slavers who kept “special” stocks of unofficial slaves for extreme work environments that they hoped would gain them more influence with Master Red Eye. Some rumours even said they were little more than sick death games with slavers gambling on the survivors...or the ones who didn't live through them.

To go with him was a death sentence. The second one in two days. The Master was something bigger in Fillydelphia, part of the layers that led to such a heavy cost of lives. Inwardly, I cursed my life...everything I did just seemed to end in further slavery. Was that really all my talent was? To simply put myself into the service of others all the time? Today alone I had run almost a half dozen errands for various ponies both slaver and slaves and I had not one thing to show for my efforts other than a couple of extra days till my sickness consumed me or The Master throwing me into some brutal “game.”

Even as The Master left and Whiplash hurled me into his storage cupboard I just felt numb.

“Now you're staying in here for the night. If you get brutalised in the night by them, Shackles will not be pleased. You're still working tomorrow though, so sleep.”

Of course I was. Why wouldn't a good little slave be?

* * *

I didn't sleep all night.

My imagination kept me awake filled with pain and bitter ends. Perhaps I had been right in my belief...a slave's life only ends in one of two ways. A slow lingering fade from sickness or a painful and violent killing.

I kept pawing at the PipBuck, willing it to say the right thing again. It had broken me free before...it had stopped me taking that last step...why couldn't it do something now? All I was getting was music from Sapphire Shores. I didn't even like her, why couldn't it be Velvet Remedy? Hell, at this point I'd even like to hear more from Sundial. But with no way to understand how to control the PipBuck's diary settings, I could only presume it had glitched out before or something.

I really was without any help.

Alone.

I couldn't see too well in the dark to spot any of my pictures I had before me. I had tried drawing, but with no light to see by it had failed immediately ever since Whiplash had locked the door. All I could do was wait until my shift, work myself to death and then be handed over...over...

I gulped, breathing ragged.

...to The Master. He had haunted my thoughts since the moment he had left. A giant pony who had been born to keep me in line. It was his destiny to find me, just as it would be mine to be under him. But I didn't want that! I didn't want to die! Hadn't I just spent two days trying to prove that to myself?

I thumped the wall with a hoof, trotting around before settling, my head in my journal with a hoof over the PipBuck.

Click

There was light.

I jumped, startled as the sudden brightness seared my eyes that had adjusted to the darkness. Covering them with a hoof, I glanced carefully out to see the source of the light. The PipBuck sat across from me, the smashed screen emitting a glow that flickered and occasionally died for a second or two from the faulty arcane technology inside. Sundial's words echoed in my mind.

“...a little light to brighten up the darkness of the night...”

Thank you, Sundial. With the light that his little legacy brought, things changed. Slowly my mind found the solace I had fought so hard for. To push back the slave in my thoughts.

I could see. If I could see, it meant I was not alone.

Before me lay my drawings. Myself in the corner of an empty piece of paper, smiling so joyfully with no injuries or sores at all, my wings spread out. My mother, forever beautiful and comforting who looked at me off the page...so proud and hopeful for her lost little foal. Number Six, strong and relentless, his stoic manner defending me from fear. The mysterious mare, aloof and filled with intrigue yet an undying kindness radiating from her eyes. Above them all...the Stable Dweller, bringing light not to one hurt buck but to everypony that laid eyes on her.

I grabbed my charcoal. I began to draw again. I needed more, if this were to be my last night on Equestria then I would die surrounded by those who meant something to me. I scrambled to the parchment, filling it with images of myself standing with the others. Of the mare helping me up and giggling as she looked at my more...uh...personal, pictures. Of Number Six diving with a scowl in my defence.

The parchment filled, I grabbed my journal and by the flickering light of the PipBuck I could not stop. My eyes strained, but page after page filled with images of anything and everything I had seen from Pipbucks to Tenpony Tower. My mother cuddled into me in one, hushing away a little foal's fears. I imagined what my six other siblings looked like...I drew them too. Velvet Remedy, DJ-Pon3 and so many more. Charcoal raced and scratched, covering page after page...

It wasn't enough!

The journal was ditched, the walls themselves would be my canvas. With each flicker of light from the PipBuck, more was added. A frame by frame patchwork gradually coming together each time it was visible, a stop motion wonder before my eyes as I swivelled my head from side to side with the charcoal in my mouth. My eyes dried, my movements grew confident and my heart, while weak and sick, began to beat with the adrenaline of purpose.

I moved from wall to wall, my movements hidden by the darkness between each spark of light as shape after shape appeared. Eventually...exhaustedly...I lay back, holding the PipBuck in my hooves. As though driven by destiny, its light finally became a constant to witness my work.

Around me, on all sides...was the outside world. A gigantic montage of the things that held hope from the Wasteland still. I saw Tenpony Tower and the little settlements I had passed by like New Appleloosa. I saw ponies moving as friends helping one another. The Stable Dweller was running to the horizon into the glorious sunset, floating in the air as ponies gathered around her in awe, she knew what lay beyond the horizon. My own mind's vision of DJ-Pon3 was imprinted behind his tower in Manehattan with a microphone. Velvet Remedy, the most beautiful design I could imagine chosen for her, was singing her heart out, notes drifting around her from where she stood in the images.

I saw the world I had left behind when I had been locked in here. The world with ponies who wouldn't hate me or simply want to abuse me. Yes, there were bad ponies out there too and even worse on top of that...but there was good! Ponies who might call me a friend...or heal me to save my life...

I sat up taller.

...who might save my life...

...there was a way. If only I could...could...

With a fervent rush, I pulled my journal over and grabbed a new piece of charcoal. I had plans to make. I needed supplies, weapons, armour, routes and above all...a method with which to make the terrifyingly real concept in my head come to life that would make my montage into a reality. To allow me to travel into that sunset and find out just where it went to escape the darkness.

I *would* escape it. My life depended on it now.

Tomorrow, I had one day to prepare and execute my plan. To escape Fillydelphia. To go beyond the walls and run from this slavery that had held my life for so long to seek a pony who could heal the radiation and diseases that were killing me. I caught my breath, holding a hoof over my frantically beating heart. After so long of not seeing it, not knowing what I wanted...it was finally to happen.

It was time to stop crying.

They say there's a story behind every pair of wings in the wasteland.

Tomorrow, I was going to start mine.

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Low Hoof! (Rank 1) - You have something of a habit to let your attacks go for those somewhat sensitive areas. In other words, you fight dirty! Your first unarmed attack of any given engagement has a small chance to stun your opponent immediately!

Chapter 3: Forlorn Hope

* * *

“Stitch by stitch, stitching it together...deadline looms....”

“What is it like to desire freedom?”

If I were asked what it was like to *be* free, the answer would be simple.

I don't know.

But a desire...a driving instinct to seek to take for myself the freedom denied to me my entire life, what would *that* feel like? I...I'm not sure. Even as I drew my dreams upon the walls of Whiplash's storage cupboard there was a niggling doubt in the back of my mind. That part of me still chained to the ground and held to the whims of Master Red Eye would let doubt trickle into my thoughts even as I made my decision. I didn't know what it was that gave me the will to fight it off. Perhaps something in my pegasus blood about wanting freedom? I couldn't imagine it, how could I want what I could never truly achieve in the sky?

But there was going to be no turning back. I had beaten the slave in my mind, I knew what I wanted now. I was going to escape. I had thought that might make my mind shut up, to let my subconscious finally die off and give me a break from the torturous duality that had become my own thoughts these past two days. But no, it didn't slink away and cower as I smiled, drew and wished for a better life at last. It just lurked in my mind...feeding doubt and questions to try and unsettle the new parts of me that wanted out. But it would not win. I wouldn't let it.

After all, I had another reason now. A very basic and utterly driving one. I needed to escape to live. Before the Pit, I had been perfectly willing to slave away until I eventually keeled over and simply expired. To be nothing more than a statistic of caps for Red Eye to replace in short order. But I had been shown the value of life and to what extent it should be fought for. My sickness claws at my lungs and blood. Irradiated, mutating and aggressive, the disease is accelerating at a rate that, had I not taken action in the Slave Market, would have probably killed me in my sleep within hours. Even as I lay in the dark, surrounded by visions of a happier future and the drawings of those that mattered...I could feel it in my lungs. Burning, strained and only growing. My coughing was under control for now, but my mouth still had the sharp metallic taste of blood at the back of my throat.

Instead of trying to make me stay...the born slave in my mind merely sought to make me question. Did I really desire freedom as I thought I did? Or did I just want out to continue living out of fear? The fear that I would die soon? Look, I am not a brave pony. I cry, whine, squeak and when threatened...more often beg for mercy than resist. Was this the right thing for such a weak pony as me? What if I got out and found a world I could not survive? I'm a pegasus, what would happen when I no longer have slavers to protect me from others? Is my desire for freedom truly wishing for me to become threatened by a world that required decisiveness and strength? Could I even think for myself after...Goddesses...I didn't even know how old I was to know how long I had simply been taking orders. Even when I set out to do something for myself yesterday I was still just following orders the entire time.

I just...didn't know. I didn't know *how* to be free.

There were other things though. I had always known a certain range of permitted boundaries. Whether it be the walls of an enclosure, the length of the chain that held me or an assurance that if I moved over a line I would be shot immediately...something had always stood that told me where my world ended. What would I even do in a world with no limits but my own choice?

But that world was now calling to me. I could not deny it any more than I had obeyed the beck and call of every master from here to Shattered Hoof and Manehattan. I didn't care if it was a desire for freedom or a desire to simply live. That voice in my head would shut up. I would overcome it, I had to! To escape *was* to live. Perhaps I just wanted both.

I won't say I wasn't afraid. Indeed I was *terrified*. Perhaps that fear was what propelled me to actually take these steps? To wish for a better tomorrow where I might live for longer than a few days...

...a few days...

The same time it took me to realise why I needed to live is what I now have left.

I can't fail, it's do or die.

No time to falter. I had to dare.

Dare to dream.

* * *

The colossal length of piping crashed down behind me. Scrambling back to my hooves I began coughing as the dust and dirt flew up in my face from the shockwave. My dive to dodge it had only just carried me out of its path, but the weight striking the ground had still shaken me to the core.

Spluttering and fighting the urge to continue coughing (I would not let it win, not now) I began untangling my harness from the pipe I had pulled free. Slaves began to move in with auto axes, whirring ready to cut the pipe into smaller chunks for transport to the steel mills. Whiplash had come to fetch me in the early morning, thankfully not noticing my drawings on his wall, to bring me out for the first of my multiple daily shifts. In this case...helping dismantle a section of rollercoaster wrecked by the Stable Dweller's escape. Surrounding me in the cordoned off section of the FunFarm was a whole bustle of activities. Ponies pulled the rollercoaster's struts apart with ropes tied to harnesses while others clambered over the coaster itself to tear down the metal from all the damaged sections. Old dust and dirt beneath the coaster was kicked up from so many hooves galloping back and forth or small craters from the explosives used trying to catch that elusive mare two days ago. It was dangerous work, requiring ponies to pull free huge lengths of the scaffolding after they had been bent out of position and then pray it didn't land on them. Somehow I had been allotted to that job, despite my weak physicality.

The irony of being in danger from the aftermath of her escape was not lost on me.

Like every other role I had gone through in my time in Fillydelphia, it was back breaking, lethal and exhausting. Already I had witnessed half a dozen slaves carted off to...someplace...for failing to meet quotas. Three others had been crushed by the pipes, one's scream wouldn't leave me any time soon. They hadn't died immediately...

More than ever I was taking care, however. My makeshift vest had nothing near the same reliability as my now sadly lost jerkin for keeping my wings hidden. Many times I'd had to risk being lashed by pausing to ensure it stayed in place. I guess I was just lucky that no slaves from the Terminal enclosure had been sent here. Already rumours had spread. I heard them as I worked.

“Did you hear? Red Eye got himself a pegasus slave!”

“I heard we're getting an execution of a pegasus soldier in a week...”

“They say some pegasus killed three slaves already, pushed them into a vat of molten metal!”

Just like every encampment before. Hearsay and gossip travelled like wildfire among slaves who had little news or input from any source other than rumour and stories from other slaves.

Even as I picked myself up and trotted to find the next pipe on weary legs I could hear the buzz word around me. But let them. I wouldn't be around here much longer to be affected by what they had to say about pegasi. Perhaps they were all evil and killed foals up on their cloud fortresses...I just didn't care. I had

never been a pegasus in any sense of the word. I had more in common with my 'fellow' slaves than I would to any so called "Pegasus Enclave."

Indeed, none of it mattered. Not even the work. For the first time in years I didn't mind the dreary toil I was expected to do, for I now knew these were the last shifts I would ever work. I think I even let a smile creep across my face in the down times between tasks...just imagining everything that was waiting for me. In my wildest dreams I imagined escaping past the Wall, finding a small settlement and encountering a lovely doctor. A...a mare, that's right. A lovely mare doctor who would heal my wounds, cure my disease and maybe have some directions to Shattered Hoof. There I would find my mother and we'd both escape and go off to live in Tenpony Tower...somehow. Safe forever. Maybe I'd even meet the Stable Dweller there, DJ-Pon3 talked of her enough to imply she occasionally visited. I'd get to say thank you, shake her hoof...maybe even give her a hug. I could offer her a home with me and my mother, good ponies all. And there was so much the two of us could do! Save the slaves in Filly...explore the wastes. We could travel together, get to know one another more, get closer and...and...

...and my imagination was getting a little too carried away.

I lightly thumped my hoof to my face and shook my head. Crazy dreams were great and all, but now was the time for planning. I had less than twenty four hours to sort everything out, find my route and go for it.

"Hey! That damn pipes still attached up there!"

My reverie broken, I turned my head to look at the slaves behind me. They were trying to attach the ropes from my harness on to the next scaffolding pipe of the rollercoaster's broken track section. The filthy slaves were using grapple harnesses to pull themselves up to separate the pipe from the track. I was a bit envious...a grapple harness was a bit like a battle saddle really...I kinda wanted one still. But none of the ones they had would fit me, so I was left grounded (as always...) while even earth ponies got to fire hooks and tow themselves off the ground.

Pegasi got to fly...unicorns powerful enough could self levitate...earth ponies got gadgets.

...when would it be my turn?

But no, no helpful things for a little pony with no unique features at all bar hearing that made it hard to sleep at nights and a mental conditioning to obey whatever he was told.

I sighed...lowering my head to stop looking at them as they started sawing into the pipe with mouth held hacksaws. At least I'd get a brief break while they took care of it. Immediately, two ideas came to mind. I could look around the rollercoaster area for anything handy to escape with...or I could use the time to work in my journal. The former was perhaps the most practical one, but looking around me at the dusty work area filled with teams of ponies tugging on larger scaffolding, slavers barking orders and whipping the slow ones or the danger of consistently tumbling scrap from the auto axe wielders up high made me reconsider. Sure I might find something...but I was still trying to plan my work, randomly searching would only lead to a beasting from a slaver if I was late back here. No...I'd need to take risks to get supplies soon enough. Don't gamble it all on an area with little worthwhile loot.

Besides...I was in a quieter section nearer the FunFarm Barn...and I got the pleasure of watching a gigantic pink pony statue being torn apart. One more face to not always seem to be staring at me. That was worth something, right?

When I got out of here, I'd never need to see her laughing face ever again.

I lay down as the slaves behind me got to work setting up to pull the next pipe down. They wouldn't disturb me. No-one disturbed me today, word had gotten around that I was property of The Master now. Apparently, you did *not* disturb his prize if you planned on living another day in Fillydelphia. The mere thought gave way to trembling as I pulled the journal from my acquired saddlebag. Dropping it, I curled up around it as I tried to fight the terror that he gave to my mind. By some distance...the most vile...horrifying...intimidating pony I had ever met. His cutie mark seemed burned into my mind almost as much as the imagery of watching the Stable Dweller rising into the air. The eternal chain...a symbol of

slavery. I feared that he would show up right at the last moment to prevent my escape by destiny itself...observing his right to own me. Born slaver to born slave.

No...no I couldn't let the fear overtake me. He was just a pony. A big scary one, but a pony all the same. I'd met a stronger pony, I was sure Number Six could have flattened The Master...

But he wasn't around...

The fear wouldn't go away. I could reduce it, but in the few minutes I had met him, The Master had left a mark. I wondered if ten years down the line, in my dream castle of living in Tenpony Tower, I would still be afraid of him turning up to reclaim me. The nightmare of waking up in the middle of the night to find his rotten grimace smiling at me as the chains locked home...of him dragging me away with no-pony, not even the Stable Dweller, hearing my cries.

I...I couldn't even bring myself to open the journal...I was afraid I'd just end up drawing *him* and being stuck with his image forever...I felt my eyes beginning to water. I knew I was going to try...nothing was changing that now, but I was so afraid...

“Heads up!”

My eyes sprung open to look upwards before screaming as I saw a shard of scrap falling from above, a panicked looking mare with an auto axe glancing down in horror. Slaves scattered, I tried to follow, but my harness was still tied to the rollercoaster pipe! I screamed for somepony to help, trying to unfasten it as the massive object hurtled vertically towards me. I was pretty dexterous with my mouth and hooves, I had to be, really. But the buckle was jamming on rusting parts and frayed cloth.

A weight crashed into me. But not from above...from the side. Pulling me sharply to the side hard enough to cause me to squeal in pain. I felt my body stretch against the harness, before the deafening sound of the scrap hitting the ground knocked out my senses entirely amidst a miniature storm of dust kicked up by the impact. A sudden pressure was released as I catapulted backwards away from the scrap, barrelling into somepony else to land in a heap on the floor.

Gradually, the noise of metal fragments landing and screaming slaves died down...my own voice probably last of all. I could feel somepony holding on to me before quickly releasing, the pair of us scrambling up.

“I *really* hope pulling you out from under things isn't going to become a habit...”

My heart almost skipped a beat as I whirled, ignoring the bodily pains as I saw...saw...saw...

Creamy yellow coat...light orange mane tinged with red...

It was her! The mare from outside Slit's factory two days ago! She stood up, shivering with adrenaline from the death defying dive she had used to save my life. I just stood gaping. Never had I ever expected to see her again, such a random happen-stance before becoming a second chance. I had been too nervous, shy and brutalised last time to really respond to her or show proper gratitude. I had to make up for that.

“...y-you...”

Smooth, Murky. Smooth.

She tilted her head, as though confused, but grinned anyway, reaching out to steady me on my hooves with a front leg. Without a word, she simply led me to the side, encouraging me to lie on my side upon a dust mound. Feeling the adrenaline pass...the shock overcame me enough to half lie and half collapse down. Only now I noticed my harness had been cut by the shard that fell, the razor edge severing me from the pipe as easily as it would have cut me in two.

“Woah...careful there,” she whispered, catching my head in her hooves, “just take it easy, okay? Geez...you look even worse than when I last saw you. You sure you're alright?”

No. I'm dying of an irradiated lung infection and ever-growing rad-poisoning thanks to Fillydelphia.

“Yeah...” I muttered, rasping a little on the dust thrown up from the impact, “I just...just need to get my

breath. Thank you...I mean, really, thank you. For both times.”

“Well, I couldn't stand by and just let you get crushed.”

She sat down beside me, a couple feet away.

“Seriously, you look terrible. Those rad-sores...you've not had a very good time, most of those cuts look barely healed. Say...what's your name? Sorry, I never asked last time.”

I was about to simply say it...but part of me stopped short of saying my full name. I really didn't want to explain it to her. Mostly because I tended to cry whenever I thought of it.

“Murky..”

“Well, Murk,” she said, oddly brightly, “glad to see you again. It's a rare day in Filly you meet someone who isn't out to abuse you somehow. Pity we don't seem to share shifts more.”

She glanced out at the other slaves, most of them being directed to harness up to the shard and drag it away to continue work on the scaffolding around the rollercoaster. Apparently, the whip happy guards were too busy and occupied to notice us on the other side of our dust mound. Nearby to us, one of the odd little 'Spritebots' buzzed around. This close to the FunFarm's big barn, they were fairly common. Honestly, I hadn't a clue what they were other than sources of irritating music. This one was a little different, showing an old cracked video screen as it glanced at us for a second, before buzzing away silently.

“That said,” she continued, “I wouldn't wish anyone to be around the FunFarm...this place has some nasty ponies, even by Filly's standards.”

“I...I'm from the FunFarm,” I said quickly, coughing for a few seconds, “I'm held up in the petting zoo near the entrance, Whiplash's stock.”

“Oh no, no, Murk. Don't say that...”

“Say what?”

“Stock. You aren't just some stock, Murk. You're a pony. A thinking being. You aren't just some number.”

If only...I even knew which number I was.

“But you're from the petting zoo? I'm from the Bumper-Plow pit. Huh, if only we'd known we were so close, y'know? I could have done with somepony to talk to...”

What?! This entire time, she'd been less than two hundred metres away? Hearing her say that...and talking to me as a person, not just a slave. I...I wasn't entirely sure what to respond with. Social interaction wasn't really a skill of mine, I was conditioned to be led. Well...I guess I could let her lead the conversation, right?

“So, drawn anything else lately? I have to admit...I couldn't stop thinking about that. I even tried my own, y'know? But I'm no artist. Can I see again, please?”

That I could do. My silence in the conversation felt awkward, but I couldn't imagine she'd be too interested in anything I had to say anyway. I was just that kind of pony. Handing over my journal, I realised it was still clutched under one hoof from the escape. Taking it with her magic, the mare began looking through more of it again. I blushed as I saw her grin going past...well...*those* pictures, again. She looked at ones of Number Six, whistling at the sheer size of him beside a to scale version of myself. I sat in silence, trying to calm my rampant hoarse coughing every few seconds. Something about somepony else looking at my drawings just helped them feel...justified. Is this what ponies who draw are supposed to do? Show others?

“Wait...”

She pointed a hoof down as she looked at one of my more recent drawings.

“This is you, right?”

I nodded, slowly.

“...why do you have wings in this?”

My heart skipped a beat. Gasping, I glanced from side to side fearfully, no other slaves were paying us any heed. The slavers were still sorting them out...

“I...I...”

I didn't need to speak.

“Shh...” she whispered, her eyes trained on my vest, “I...I think I get it. Not a word more, okay?”

I couldn't believe it, that was it? A pony who didn't care what I was? Did she just see the pony in front of her? The poor slave? No bias? No bigotry? I knew I should have felt happy or liberated, but frankly, the concept was so alien that I couldn't even bring up the courage to speak about it. But as she continued to turn pages and came to my ones of the Stable Dweller, I couldn't keep quiet. I was so proud of them, so happy to know I could draw for myself.

“That...that one's the Stable Dweller...”

“The...who? Oh, that mare from the Pit? Oh, wasn't she incredible, Murk? Wow...it's really nice to see her again in this...”

“She...I mean...yes, she is something. I wouldn't be alive without her...”

“Why is that?” She looked up, suddenly serious.

“I...I was number five...”

The mare just seemed to take a breath, before moving forward quickly. I recoiled, startled. Could you blame me? Everypony who moved toward me yesterday had wanted to hurt me. Sensing she had scared me, the mare sat back, waving a hoof.

“Sorry...I just...” she seemed to search for words, flicking her long mane behind an ear with a hoof, “it's horrible...to be sent there. I'm glad you got out.”

“Me too...”

“Think she'll come back for the rest of us?”

“Huh?”

“The Stable Dweller.”

“I...I don't know. I can't wait anyway...”

Wait. Oh boy...I'd let something slip. I mentally bucked myself hard in the head, I couldn't afford to mess up like this. But...it was her. How could I lie?

“I'm going to try and escape, like her. I need to.”

She was silent. Her eyes stared as though trying to discern if I was serious.

“I wish I could too...”

My head sprang upwards, eyes wide. She wanted out too? I wasn't alone?!

“I need out of here. I can't live forever in some slave pit...hell, I can't live a year in here. I'm sure you feel the same, Murk. But I just don't know how.”

My heart felt aflame...a kindred spirit to escape. I dragged myself up, looking around.

“Come with me...”

What was I saying?

“We can go together, two ponies are better than one, right? I'm going tonight, I have a plan and everything...kinda.”

I...I barely knew her, but she was nice! She was being nice to me and a friendly face could be useful out there.

“No...I'm sorry, Murk. I can't.”

My rising hope fell like the scrap from the rollercoaster, I felt my legs buckle under me.

“Oh...”

“Sorry, Murk. But, please, it's not you. I...I have to wait for someone. My...”

She paused.

“My buck...my lover. We were brought in at the same time and well...just found comfort in one another. Such a strong spirit...he always wanted to plan to escape, you know? I think you'd like him. But he was taken to the Pit...the same one as you. I convinced my slave master to allow him to come back to me if he survived, you see, instead of going to the place he originally worked at. I did a job for my master, stole something from Wicked Slit's factory the day I met you. But he hasn't come back yet. I didn't see him in the Pit, so I can only guess it's all been held up by the confusion after the Stable Dweller and the riots. So...I'm sorry, Murk. But I need to wait for him. We promised one another we'd escape. Together...or not at all.”

She was crying. Not much...but I could see the sparkles around the edges of her eyes. I felt the urge to do something...but I didn't know quite what. As though I just didn't understand how to react or help her...

“I won't abandon him, Murk. Even if it means having to turn down your offer...if you could wait for us...”

“I can't,” I interjected softly, struggling to not cry myself at her tragic tale of two lovers separated by slavery, “it...well it needs to be tonight for me. The Master...”

Something about the way I said those words led her to know exactly who I meant. Fear crossed her eyes before she nodded slowly, wiping tears with a muddy hoof.

“I understand. Then good luck, Murk. Don't tell me your plan, keep it secret. Go with the Goddesses and if you do get out...draw a little picture of me, will you? We often will meet people only briefly...know so little about them and never know the truth. Fleeting glimpses and random luck to bring two ponies together...never to meet again. Some things are never explained, like why I saw you dragged under those ponies and knew it would be good to rescue you. Perhaps good attracts good in the horrible wasteland we have to live in during these dark days. I don't doubt I'll never see you again after tonight, Murk. Just remember the mare you met, to show that even in the darkest of places, ponies can be nice to one another...okay? That is all we need take away to know that Equestria isn't dead yet...”

I presumed she had missed that I had already drawn her...multiple times, or was that on the parchment? I couldn't remember. My eyes were wet...her words were just...beautiful. The idea that you might any time meet wonderful people even if only for a few moments of bliss and relief from pain. Her eyes were dripping tears still, leading the mare to wipe them again and go back to looking at the images, smiling sadly as she saw pictures of ponies, myself and the mares I had once drawn in rather...interesting...ways.

“I'll do that,” I whispered, completely failing to keep my own tears away, “I'll remember you.”

“Thank you, Murk.”

“Hey, you two slackers!”

The foul voice rang out, making both of us jump in shock. I turned and looked over at the workplace, seeing a thin but muscular earth pony mare stomping over.

“Slaves don't get breaks! Get back to work!”

The mare hopped up,

“He's hurt, Nightfall, I was just-”

“SHUT UP! Back to work!”

“Please! He-”

CRACK!

The mare recoiled as the whip lashed across her side, yelping.

“I said!”

CRACK!

“Back! To! Work!”

Two other slaver cronies galloped forward as the mare fell back, aiming to drag her forward. I don't know what drove me. I knew I should have snuck off and gotten back to work. But before I even knew what I was doing, I felt myself charging forward in front of her, taking the third lash to my own brow to protect her. The two thugs backed off in surprise.

“Leave her alone!”

I could see the stunned look on the slaver's faces...probably not as much as mine as I realised where I was standing and what I'd just done. The pain from my head stung badly.

“Get out the way, Murk. The Master has plans for you, I wouldn't want to affect his “prize.”

“I...I...”

I didn't know what else to do...I didn't know why I'd run forward. The slavers grabbed me with their magic. I felt the telekinesis working together to yank me away from the mare, my legs pulling from under me as they began roughly yanking me to the dirt, dragging me toward another work area to separate us. I struggled, kicking and writhing, my hoof trying to land any sort of blow.

“Don't fight them, Murk!”

I glanced up, seeing her standing there, crying as she waved a hoof softly before turning away.

“Don't fight them, please...I'll be fine. You go do what you need to...”

Noting my lack of resistance, I was pulled at a frightening speed away, feeling the ground rub against me enough to sting as I fought to hold my vest around me. I tried to find my voice, to fight the dryness of my throat...I hadn't even...I needed to...

“What's your name!?” I screamed, as loud as I could.

But over the screaming auto axes and crashes of falling scrap...I couldn't hear if she replied, even with my tainted hearing. The last I saw her, she was being shoved towards her workplace again...the slavery would not end even for one so nice. I cried openly as the dust swirled around us again, making me choke up.

I would remember.

* * *

I hadn't been left in a good mood.

The slaves had dragged me back to Whiplash's enclosure in the petting zoo. He was not happy to see me being rejected from a workplace for causing trouble, but the normal punishment and reallocation was held off. I could only guess being at threat from The Master had its short term advantages for my workload. However Whiplash was not deterred, as though seeking to regain some face, he arranged for me an additional two shifts.

No matter. I would take whatever they threw at me now. They were too late. Meeting the mare should have made me sad. Any other day I might have curled up and cried my little heart out until I fell into a restless sleep. I might have let the weight of sadness crush me.

But not today. I couldn't cry. Okay...maybe I had at the moment, but after being thrown in the petting zoo again I had felt something change within me. A determination I hadn't felt before speaking to her again. Yes, her separation for a second time saddened me, but for her I would dry my tears and continue on.

I crept across the petting zoo. The gang probably wouldn't cause a problem any more since their encounter with The Master. I could see Noose and Lemon resting nearby, waiting for the food run for the day. The pair had been on a night shift among the factories, apparently. I didn't pay them heed, instead watching Whiplash resting just outside his office, the old petting zoo staff room. He wasn't asleep, I didn't think he *ever* slept, but he was certainly less watchful right now. I used the opportunity to creep around the back of the petting zoo stables and find a more secluded spot.

Nestled between the low scrap wall and the burned out stable, I gently pulled my belongings from the saddlebag. My journal, parchment drawing, old quill and of course...the Pipbuck. Since hearing Sundial's message it had taken on a meaning to me. This was no lucky piece of scrap. It *belonged* to somepony, a pony who had died wearing it when the world ended hundreds of years ago. I couldn't help but feeling that it was better in my hooves than somepony who might abuse or harm it. Besides...I couldn't help but feel a certain curiosity to find other messages. I had spent some of last night while sleepless toying with the controls to try and find more messages, but all I'd ended up doing was tuning into the "Ministry of Morale Perk Up Twenty Four Hour Party Line."

"You gotta share! You gotta care!"

Sorry, Sundial. But if I hadn't figured out how to turn that off I might have just smashed your Pipbuck in an effort to preserve my *sanity*. Hearing her damn voice coming from the speakers inside the pink pony's statue's mouths was enough...but to have it on my Pipbuck now? Not a chance.

I thought I had an idea on how to activate another message, I'd made the first one play again, but time was short. I had more pressing concerns right now than listening to another diary entry. No...I had another message to listen to. I'd heard the announcement yesterday, DJ-Pon3 was going to hand out survival tips for a large chunk of today. I'd need everything I could if I were to survive outside.

Switching to his station through memory, I turned the dial until I heard the cute voice of Sweetie Belle. It hadn't started yet.

I sat it to the side, dialling the volume down to the level of only my hearing before drawing my journal across. Before opening, I had a thought...the mare had looked at my drawings from about when I had started drawing for myself today. Two days before she had looked from when I had been drawing from my subconscious. She hadn't looked at my own drawings from longer back, from when I first got my journal.

It was for the best. Before the day of the Pit, I did not want to look at my own sketches. I still remembered drawing my own death. I still remembered a few that I'd done just prior to that, since I'd been sent to the FunFarm. A few of the slavers, some...uh...more personal pictures of mares and not much else.

But anything before perhaps a month ago...I didn't even remember.

It wasn't a small amount either. I'd been drawing my entire life, but the more I had drawn the more it began to blur together and just become something I did to let out the pain or seek solace in. Thus, before me sat a journal in which I didn't even know the contents of more than half of it. Pages filled with mystery, drawings I hadn't remembered doing.

Some days I felt tempted to look at them. But not any more. That part of my life was done. Perhaps one day, when I had escaped...I might look back when I felt safe. But not now. What resided in the earlier pages of my journal would remain a mystery to the blurry past when I didn't care to remember or really think about anything. I just worked, suffered and drew pictures of whatever was causing me grief. The here and now was too important to risk the emotional turmoil if I found a picture of an anvil and hammer...or of my mother being dragged away...

"Come on, Murky...keep it together..."

I muttered if only to remind myself of my place right now, concentrating on the pages leading further

ahead in my journal. Occasionally I stopped to glance at a recent one. I even took a minute to sit and stare at a picture of a mare I'd done just after arriving in Fillydelphia. A gorgeous mare with flowing mane and a long bushy tail lying on her side with the angle of posing tailored toward...

Um...perhaps I should move on...now wasn't the best time to admire my perception of beauty in mares...

Picking an empty page, I sat quietly, my mouth tracing shapes idly without any real idea. Part of me wanted to draw the mare (No, not like *that*) but somehow...I felt that I shouldn't. She had asked me to do so once I had escaped.

Escape...

I knelt down, instead drawing several thick lines in an arc across the page. Smaller wisps of charcoal began curving around the middle. I had no procedure, not patterns to always follow, I simply drew what I felt like and let the eventual picture come to be. Others may have mixed opinions...but to me they were simply my own little rebellion against the chains on my life, quality wasn't so important as the process of just...drawing.

The thick lines became a structure...

The curves became somepony...

With every shape I drew, I could feel the theme emerging, more and more.

The structure became long and strong...a Wall.

The pony became a pegasus, above the Wall.

Delving deep down into my wishes, the things I wanted for myself.

The Wall had slavers on it, light wisps of charcoal showing gunshots missing the pony.

The pegasus was flying free, heading for the open wasteland.

I sat back, smiling. It no longer shocked me or gave massive rises of emotion. I could draw for myself any time I wanted now. I would fulfil my-

A wheezing cough hurtled through my system, causing me to collapse to the side, eyes screwed shut. My stomach ached. The lack of sustenance hadn't been helping. I'd grabbed a quick drink from a rain barrel meant to gather water for primitive purification near the rollercoaster just stay *alive* away from dehydration. But I could still feel the brutal effects of no real food for...oh Goddesses, how long was it now? I couldn't remember...

Ok...I'd fulfil my promise to the mare. My picture proved my will to escape for my own life. My cough only reinforced it. To stay was to die.

Briefly, I tried not to think that I'd been prepared to throw that life away to end the pain...

"Hello out there, wasteland!"

My mind snapped back on track, that hated subject falling immediately as DJ-Pon3 came on the airwaves through the Pipbuck. This was it.

"Now I bet many of you are wondering, 'Hey Pon3! Why are you callin' out all these basics to everypony in the wastes? We all know this stuff!' Well, my little veterans out there, sure you might...but recently I've been thinking. Since about, what, a month and a bit ago, we've had a big rise in ponies going out into the wastes themselves. I swear, it's like every settlement and Stable from Filly to the Hoof is waking up and finding its own little hero to go out there to save Equestria in one way or another. Not all of these ponies are getting on too well, so I figured...why not revise some of the stuff I've been teaching you all these years? Besides...judgin' by the news, I figure some of you 'vets' could use a tip or two remembered...remember children, the wasteland is the real enemy and it doesn't like pride or ego."

I had a new page in my journal out, it stung to lose my imagery of escape so suddenly, but this was

important.

I couldn't read or write. I couldn't write a plan.

I was going to draw it. Little images to remind myself, step by step of what I would need. Of my routes and timings. Of any handy little tip I could remember from the education to come. I would be a good little student and listen closely...

“So...without messing you folks around any further, allow me to cut to the chase, wastelanders. Here's survival one-oh-one for the Equestrian Wasteland...”

So it began. I prepared myself, this was to marathon itself all day, I'd have to listen on and between shifts, collect everything I needed...and be ready.

...here we go.

* * *

“Now, for all those of you who want to fight the good fight, all power to ya, if only more would do that. But first things first, know that the world may be dangerous and a Hellhound would tear you in half...there is something much more basic. Food. That's right, children, you gotta eat and drink! Store all you can, you cannot rely on the wasteland to provide for you. Last thing any would-be hero wants is to die of hunger. While we're on it, make sure you got everything tied safely to your body where you can reach it quickly. Nothin' worse than finding you lost your water can half a mile back in the wastes to a faulty knot, right?”

I drew lines...

* * *

The gang were arguing. Or rather, Noose and Lemon were arguing. I didn't know if they really counted as a “gang” any more. One way or another, their bickering distracted them from their food. I'd thought about it, and simply could not bring myself to take the food from anypony other than them. While I was sure the other ponies would not hesitate to beat me just as bad if they knew my winged secret...this gang I had a particular loathing for.

“So what, Noose? You want us to just cower away because some fat pony killed Nails?”

“That 'fat' pony would tear you in two for smelling the wrong way, Lemon, know when you're beat! We lie low...our time will come...”

I was using the wreckage of the old pigsty to creep around behind them. They'd taken to storing the bowls of oatmeal inside it to prevent them from falling away in the wind. Most slaves devoured the oatmeal immediately, hell, my half portion (thanks, Whiplash...) was long gone to sate my days long hunger.

Wow...it really said something about slave life that such a meagre amount was enough to almost make me feel full...

I could only presume they had left the food to, as some slaves claimed, 'settle.' To be less 'fresh' and become a thicker and more substantial feeling meal instead of the watery goo that we were normally given. I hadn't ever tried it on the few occasions I'd ever been given a meal, but for the sake of supplies...I was willing to try.

“Yeah, when? Both of us are sick, we're being put on the foundries soon and that bastard is back again to shove us around at the workplace.”

I leaned forward, my mouth closing around the first wooden bowl, gently pushing a small tin can forward...please don't make noise...please don't make noise...

“Can't even take out my frustration on the runt either...if he hadn't bucked me in the danglies I might have felt so-...ah hell what am I saying, bastard pegasus can get raped to death by The Master for all I care...”

I tried to not let my imagination take over as I felt my entire body shiver in fear, not just from being nearby to the mare who had almost beaten me to death yesterday, but the sensation of even remembering *him*. The oatmeal slopped and gurgled in a way that food really shouldn't into the tin can. Taking a second to catch my breath and calm my nerves...I reached for the second, trying not to let the realist side of my mind catch up to what I was doing.

“Just shut up, Lemon. Go eat your oatmeal you stupid buck...”

“Are you crazy?! I'm not touching that stuff till I *know* it'll stay down this time. Shit tastes even worse coming up!”

Okay...ew. All the same, I remained thankful for their continued distraction of conversation to not turn around as I poured the second bowl into the tins. Ducking back, I began wrapping them tightly in a wad of cloth with some mouth and hoof work to keep as much of it inside as I could. It wasn't much...but it was all I'd reasonably get that wasn't already being eaten or liable to poison me. It'd have to last till I could scavenge something outside the walls.

I began sneaking away, scooting as quickly as I dared along the wall, hiding behind other slaves as best I could. Most were sleeping, any that did see me wouldn't say a word, no-pony particularly liked the gang. As I began to re-approach my hiding place, an unusual sound made me dive for cover.

A sound like a screeching saw through rotten wood had startled me. Poking my head out from behind the old pig trough, I glanced in the direction of the horrid noise before sighing in relief.

Whiplash had finally fallen asleep, head lolling sideways on the fence from his resting point to drool over the metal. The noise matched his breathing...he was snoring loudly and proudly. I could hardly suppress a small giggle at the sight of such a fearful pony in my life completely left without any poise. If The Master had done one good thing...it was make Whiplash seem not so bad any more.

I was about to turn and go back to my hidey hole, DJ-Pon3 was going to continue with which towns to avoid soon after Sapphire Shores was done singing. But something clicked in my mind...

“... *make sure you got everything tied safely to your body...*”

I had no real rope or twine, but a long piece of leather might work...

Every part of my mind that remained sane was telling me this was a bad idea. All the same, I felt my hooves carry me as stealthily as I could towards Whiplash and his little office.

I had just stolen food from the gang. What in the Goddesses' great eyes was I doing thinking about stealing from a *slave master*? I moved one step per snore, fearfully struggling to keep my breathing as regular as I could. I found it was matching Whiplash's snoring patterns out of sheer habit.

Ten feet...

Whiplash snorted, shifting. I froze on the spot. After a second...he rested. I let my hooves carry me forward. Three slaves were watching me, rolling their eyes at this stupid runt about to get himself killed. The gang were around the corner of the building, oh so thankfully. I could still hear them arguing about who else they should pick on after I got lifted.

Five feet...

The door was right there. Inside I could see a short bed stuffed into the corner, surrounded by old bottles of alcoholic drink. Whiplash had often taken to sneaking shots whenever he thought a griffin hadn't been looking. Stern, the fanatical leader of the griffins, was legendary for coming down hard on slavers who drank on the job, but the allure of taste I guessed was too much for many. A schedule was drawn on the wall in Lash's crude handwriting...or at least I guessed it was. Either that or he was into abstract art beyond what I could fathom.

Sitting near the door in the tiny room (how did he even fit?) there were four whips of varying sizes. He even numbered them. The number one whip he always carried, whips two through five were of ever changing sizes. I immediately regretted the fact that I could probably recognise them specifically by the feeling of being whipped after only a month in Filly...

I went for the number three whip, the thinnest and made of strong brahmin leather. It was the one that left the stinging lines longer than the others, often allowing a slight breakage of the skin and making a sound akin to a gunshot with...

Stopping on the spot, I shook my head fiercely. Geez...my perception of life was *really* messed up.

I realised that I'd have some real explaining to do to anyone outside the Wall why I knew so much about whips and chains to avoid them getting weird ideas about my tastes in life.

The whip was hard, very hard, but flexible and if pulled tight, incredibly durable. Perfect for the idea I had in mind. I quickly stuck my head in the door and plucked it up into my mouth.

Whiplash stopped snoring.

I collapsed backwards, trying to run around the hut, but his eyes opened long before I got the command to my frozen joints from the fear.

"...mm...hmm? Murky Number Seven?"

It took him a second to see. His eyes lowered in fury as he snarled and twisted to look at me, the number one whip levitating up.

"You have precisely three seconds to explain why Betsy is in your mouth, Murk."

I gulped, too scared to even drop the whip.

"Because...because..."

"One, two and three."

His whip cracked around my hooves, leading me to stumble backwards, dropping the leather.

"Wicked Slit wanted it!"

I shouted it at the top of my lungs, not very much given all illnesses considered.

"She wanted to borrow one to do her shift! She wants to...um...broaden her horizons!"

Whiplash didn't look very convinced, but his eyes were still full of sleep, to the point where he waved a hoof.

"Whatever, but if it isn't back by tonight, I'm holding you responsible, Shackles be damned. Least it'll maybe stop Slit bitching about slave efficiencies again to me..."

He turned, aiming to go back to sleep as I made to run...I could rest up somewhere else before moving on to my shift anyway. But as I turned, breathing a sigh of relief, I heard Whiplash speak up.

"Oh, and Murk?"

I didn't even dare look around. I wish I had, for the next thing I knew a burning line of pain whipped its way across my flanks and rump, leaving me to squeal loudly and hop away rather pathetically to fall on my side, rubbing a hoof on one flank. The lash had went right across my cutie mark...

"That's for waking me up. Now bugger off to your shift."

I said I wouldn't cry...but I couldn't avoid tears of pain from that blow as I felt it throb and sting. I could hear the other slaves laughing at my lashing across the backside.

How I wasn't going to miss this after tonight...

* * *

“Now I can't say I enjoy this bit of advice any more than you will...well...some of you anyways. See, as much as the good ol' Equestrian spirit should run free and solve everything through just talking out your problems, there's a whole lot out there that begs to differ. Gangs, ghouls and if you're real unlucky...raiders. Hell there's even worse on top of that. So as much as it pains me to say this, children, if you're going to go out into the wastes, make sure you go out there packing. Get some weapons and armour, whatever you can. Better to live, folks...better to live.”

Lines became curves...

* * *

The cart's harness was already giving me a nasty burn on my back where I bore the brunt of the weight when I pulled. Wicked Slit had set me right to my oh-so-favourite activity in her factory...cart delivery. Weighing what felt like half a ton per cart, the exhaustion factor didn't so much creep in as slam home. Five deliveries throughout the day, one to each of the ammo mills in Fillydelphia carrying various types of metal for even more varied types of rounds manufactured to feed Red Eye's army. Copper to the Ironshod Foundry. Steel to the Saddlesore Manufacturing Facility. The others I didn't even know the names of. I just put down my head and got on with pulling weights far too large for my somewhat less than stellar levels of strength.

It still didn't matter. These were the last five carts ever to be pulled by Murky Number Seven, I'd see to that.

Plus, I had a little plan. Wicked Slit believed me broken in and too cowardly to try anything. It was why she sometimes left me unsupervised or without a handler to better serve her “efficiency ratios” elsewhere. As such, I'd been able to dump my saddlebag at the side of the factory by the road and use it as a dead drop location. Each trip I made I had stopped my cart, slipped free of my harness (the builders clearly didn't factor in ponies of my size when they designed it) and shoved a slab of flat metal into it. Five trips, five sheets of differing types of metal. I knew nothing of the composition of metal, so I hoped they would each do the job.

I tugged the empty cart into Slit's factory, limp hoofed and gasping for air in the sweltering air of machinery and industry. The drop off zone was heavily guarded by slavers who directed me into a port to store the cart for some poor pony on the next shift. It had become almost a tradition, actually, for them to take bets on how long it took me to back a heavy cart into a bay with my pathetic levels of strength. The current longest time, I believed, was six minutes after a day I'd been overloaded. My record was two minutes.

Rather embarrassing really...but that is what I'm like after a full shift of pulling those damn carts and having jelly legs by the end of it or a back sore enough to cause me pain by just *turning*.

I heard, rather than saw, the guards bickering over amounts. It was never much, none of them liked betting more than a few caps or a couple cigarettes on me. Sighing, I once again played their game. In theory I would just dump the cart, but I had to judge every time which slaver was most likely to beat me up for not having him win...then try and aim for their timing. They hadn't yet worked out that I could hear their whispering rather clearly. I let my ears do the thinking, hearing a couple bet high, citing my time in the Pit and sickness to slow me down. A third voice, a buck, commented on his bet he'd made in advance...as well as the annoyance levels if I didn't do it in under three minutes.

Well...crap.

I tried my best, I really did. But my aching muscles, barely healed injuries and low energy levels just wouldn't make the cart move at all. With a slip and a surprised shout, I fell to the floor while straining to push the cart on its rusty wheels.

“Oh for the love of...get a move on you whelp!”

“Thirty seconds or you're getting it, Murk! I got a full pack on you!”

“Get it in less than thirty seconds and *I'll* get you for it!”

My muscles just wouldn't give...I couldn't risk forcing them further, I had to retain enough energy for tonight...what little I'd have left. I sighed, falling over and tilting my head against the cart. Some days you just couldn't win...

“Oh are you kidding me? He's giving up! C'mere!”

I looked up, breathing deeply and simply hoping to myself that the beating wouldn't be *too* bad.

“Hey! What did I tell you bastards about interrupting slaves?”

The trio stopped dead in their tracks, two of them even made to leave immediately. The third who had advanced on me turned, immediately sweating. Wicked Slit was stomping her way towards us all across the delivery room floor out of the manufacturing areas. She had old pegasus flight goggles on to protect from foundry sparks, her knife floating obediently beside her. I felt envious of her stamina to keep magic up like that all day...

“You beat them, they work less! Beat them when they *aren't* in work hours. You think I can afford you to lose me ten minutes of labour every damn time you feel like smacking something? Go hit up a slave in their pen after your shift is done!”

Of course...even slavers had shifts, albeit shorter and less laborious than the slaves. I couldn't imagine Slit would be any happier about losing her slavers than her slaves from their workplace...

“Yes, Ma'am!”

“Right away, Ma'am! Sorry Ma'am!”

They scurried away, leaving me to get back on my hooves and with great effort, shove the creaking cart back into the bay. An eighteen inch curved knife on a sadistic slaver mistress has that sort of incentive effect on even weak ponies like me. I collapsed against it, breathing hard as I felt the five or six miles of pulling take a toll on my stamina. My front right hoof was aching, a dull pulsating pain making itself known every couple of seconds while every muscle in my torso hurt to move. A familiar pain...I had endured it after every shift under Slit for the past month. I tried to take a few breaths, get to my hooves, but my lungs reminded me they were yet uncared for by medicine, causing me to hack and cough for a good few seconds, even as I heard the rough tread of Slit nearing me. Clearly the medical potions from yesterday were beginning to lose the temporary effect they had granted me. Judging by the pain in my throat and the swimming of my vision...I figured I had till tomorrow morning before the sickness kicked in again.

“Guess it's up to me to unharness you, stupid morons...”

Slit was muttering to herself as she reached out with her magic, unlatching the harness from my body. Clearly she hadn't clocked that I could simply slip out myself. Dragging my tired body across the floor with slow, deliberate and laboured movements, I collapsed just beside her. I couldn't help it...the tiredness went to my brain, a night lacking any sleep and only a small portion of foul oatmeal to power me just drained my energy reserves completely. With a snort, Slit roughly knocked me with her front hoof a few times.

“Get up, Murk. You've still got four minutes of shift time left. Make yourself useful and carry that bag of scrap into the factory before you go, I'll show you where.”

“Urggghh...” was my well thought out and dictated reply.

“Shut up, get up and *hurry* up!”

Her half buck gave me enough reason to find some strength deep down to dodge the flying hoof and clamber to my own four legs to nod quickly. My eyes were hazy, I just wanted to lie down somewhere and sleep...maybe a massage to my aching muscles...would a bit of food go amiss? Proper food?

With a sigh, I stretched out and trotted over to the sack Slit was motioning to with her knife. Biting the

neck of the bag, I didn't even bother throwing it over my back but rather just began dragging it. Rolling her eyes, Slit merely turned and cantered into the factory.

“Celestia help me from hopeless slaves,” she muttered, “or banish them all to the fucking moon where they can't bother me any more.”

I had to bite my tongue...the urge to quip something off at her as a last action before I never saw her again was so strong. Thankfully, I allowed the slave in my mind to take control for a few seconds to remain *alive*.

I followed her, dragging the sack a foot at a time, the heavy leather tasting disgusting in my mouth from old dust and grime across it. Pull...step back a few feet...pull...step back...

Inside the factory, the heat hit me like running into a wall. The massive metal vats radiated warmth so strongly that mere proximity was enough to dull the sense and cause me to whine from the added exertion it took to keep up in such a harsh area. Already I could feel my loose tooth wobbling around as I yanked the sack with my teeth. Metal shards stuck out of the bag where they had pierced the lining, their scraping sound was not helping on top of the mass of noise within the factory. My ears ached, almost missing Slit's command to stop before walking right into her rump. With a sigh of relief, I dumped the sack where her knife tapped the ground before kneeling down again. One of the shards fell out. While Slit was still glancing at the industrial presses to observe the slaves, I quickly shoved one down my vest...I had an idea for it, courtesy of DJ-Pon3-born inspiration.

“Shift's over, Murk. Get out of here, I hear Whiplash has some more work for you over at the threshing mills. They need a small pony over there. Go straight there.”

“But...”

“No buts, Murk,” she spat, “so get *yours* over to the damned mill before I ensure you can't sit down again for a long time!”

She removed her goggles, sitting them on the bottom of the stairs that led to her office so she could pull my face up to her eyes.

“I don't think I need to explain to you how much I do *not* like you, Murk.”

The knife gently seemed to caress my forehead, the tip dragging my lanky mane from my eyes for her to see clearly.

“So I'm going to tell you this,” she continued, her voice so low I began to worry she knew about my hearing, “I don't want you back. I know that Chainlink Shackles is coming for you. 'The Master' will not be so forgiving as I have. He isn't like me, Murk. He won't threaten you. He won't scare you with imagination or promise implausible things.”

She had my attention, not from the knife that rested between my eyes from above, nor the hard hoof holding my chin up to her face. It was her tone. She spoke almost with reverence, as though she wished she never had to meet him. The Master even made her terrified of his reputation among the slavers. My eyes were wide, if the burning heat of the forge wasn't present to dry them out...I might have cried on the spot.

“He breaks slaves, Murk. As far as I'm concerned, I'm glad you're going there. Perhaps you'll learn something about why you should have tried harder in life. My little slave...so woefully pathetic. You *never* tried, Murk. You think I can't see your destiny? Look at that tiny flank of yours, a set of shackles? I sometimes wish I could just close them around your hooves and leave you out to die because *you are so fucking useless to me*. Born into slavery and you still can't hack it.”

Her hoof roughly shoved me away. I fell on my side, shivering as I pulled my hooves in.

“Get out of here, the Pit was too good for you.”

I shakily got up, nodding my head. No...she was...was wrong. I wasn't going to go to The Master. I was...was going to...to escape. I stared at Slit, looking her right in the eyes. I wanted to tell her, so she would know by tomorrow that she was wrong. If Slit saw my defiance she didn't make a sign, instead

turning to scream at some slaves for stopping as they fought for breath from the heat. I wanted to whisper something...to shout something! Just one last word that proved I wasn't going to be beaten by her cruelty any more!

I couldn't think of anything. I never was good with words. She scared the slave in me too much to dare speak out against my masters...

So I stole her goggles instead.

I took great pleasure in her scream of frustration as I high tailed it from the factory at top speed toward the threshing mills, collecting my saddlebag as I went to add my new acquisitions into it.

* * *

“Now there's one unfortunate truth about the wasteland, children. I always tell you, I bring you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts and that is exactly my point. If you go into the wasteland, it will hurt you. Physically, mentally, hell, even spiritually for those of you who believe. So make sure you have those potions handy, as much Radaway and Rad-X as you can get your hooves on too. Keep some bandages if you can, they're light and you never know, you can't rely on just potions. Now a gun or a nailboard may be an obvious way to experience the pain of the wasteland, but let me remind you that we are all dirty. Yes, children, it's true. We scrounge around in the dirt scavenging all day or go out in weather no pony has business being in...so remember. Disease and illness is the greatest killer. Wrap up. Keep yourself as warm as you can and dress appropriately. Take the advice from Daddy Pon-3, children, you do not want to get sick in the wasteland if you can help it.”

Curves became shapes...

* * *

The threshing blades missed me by a scant inch as I dived to the side and rolled over to land out from under the machine. Hissing and clicking, the blades skittered across the ground, improperly calibrated to score the floor as they moved. The huge machine stretched fifty feet down the mill hall, threading string into greater shapes as it worked ceaselessly. Like a piano's strings it held thousands of strands beside one another down its whole length, the whirling machinery racking up and down the material to slowly and gradually bring it together into something useful. Beneath the machine lay the refuse, an empty space filled with the fallen threads and lint of severed lines that usually was only used to give the machinery's mechanics space to move. An automated scrap collector was installed, but was far beyond repair.

As such, the smaller ponies got the glorious job of rushing under it once the blades retracted, grabbing as much thread as they could and then diving back out before the blades caught up with them. It was lethal work, hours of death defying movements against a time space of only perhaps ten seconds. Slavers waited with canes for the slaves who didn't bring back enough on each trip, leading to gradually more daring runs every time. The thread was more important than our safety, apparently.

Oh, and that's the kicker, the space is only two feet high, so you can't gallop or even stand up. You crawl, on all four hooves. Many slaves rolled sideways, but aside from emergencies, I found that hurt my wings far too much. I couldn't afford to be yelping in pain, drawing attention to my sides. Even now I was still nervous, the rumours were spreading still about a pegasus in Fillydelphia ever since the accident at the Terminal. I really wished I could just fly away from all this...

More than most, to me, that wish was cruelly denied. Just one mallet and anvil to...

I shook my head as I dumped the threads I had collected down, I couldn't go back to thinking about it. I still woke up screaming sometimes as I imagined seeing it descending again and again, finding myself huddled up with my hooves trying to cradle my inert wings as best they could. If only they didn't still hurt so much when touched...

“Ready up! Cycle's coming back again!”

I pulled myself to my hooves. They ached from the cart pulling earlier, but the immediate exhaustion had worn off. Thresher grabbing may be dangerous and in the short term tiring, but the rests every few seconds to dump the light material and wait were the closest thing to a rest in Fillydelphia sometimes. Of course...that presumed you didn't get caught even briefly. I'd lost at least a few pints of blood to this machine over the weeks.

The blades spun, I watched them twine the thread, twisting it into thicker lines approaching string. Alongside me, another thirty smaller ponies waited ready for the mad dash. Many of them bore scars or even open cuts from the blades if they had missed getting out. I myself had almost come close before I got used to the rhythm again. Annoyingly, even among this bunch of small ponies...I was still the smallest.

The blades stopped, before detaching and spun back along the threads.

“Go!”

As one we dove under, sliding as far as we could on our bellies. I saw some of the others 'scooting' with their back legs, grabbing with their front. I didn't like that, too easy to get stuck or be unable to turn around. I used all four hooves, crawling to the back of the machine, as far as I dared. The trick other slaves missed was to go as far as you could, turn and then push as much as you could back. It saved time. On my first day I'd tried scooting and gotten my side sliced open as though with a scalpel. Only the timely intervention of a new slaver not wanting to lose slaves on his first day had saved my life...and given me pain for the next week for almost screwing it up for him. The next time back I'd watched the ones who seemed to stay alive better.

The space was claustrophobic, my throat and nose felt clogged from thread fibres in the air kicked up by scrambling slaves. My legs scraped and burned on the ground as I madly dashed forward toward the spinning blades that moved back ahead of me. As far as I dared...

I heard a scream from further up the line, somepony had caught their front left and cut themselves.

The noise shook me, I bottled and turned, shoving as much as I could back. Even as I moved I heard the noise of the blades whirring toward me from behind. Closing my eyes I pushed as fast as I could, whimpering as I dived out from under the machine. Behind me, the blades met the end, a second or two behind me.

Five seconds spent under there...it had felt like five minutes.

“Ready up!”

We didn't have a chance to rest. I saw the slave with the cut being beaten with canes for crawling back out with nothing but an injury, he was being told to run back in next time. My own pile was small. I hadn't been taking risks, but that wasn't right...I needed to be able to stare death in the face.

“Cycle's coming back!”

I bottled at a scream...how could I face the Wall and its guards if I did that? I needed to prove it to myself, here and now...there wasn't another chance. Go as far as I could...come as close as I can...

“Go!”

I dived in, scrambling as fast as I could. I felt my head brush against the threads above and ducked down again. The blades spun away less than a foot from my face as I crawled after them, waiting for them to stop. The noise of the machine assaulted my ears as I went deeper and deeper into its workings. Around me, other slaves turned.

The machine changed noises, I faltered, wondering for a quarter second if it were coming back...before back-peddalling and pushing another line of wool out. I dove again, feeling the machine roll up a second behind me. I beat my hoof against my head, I was still too cowardly, why couldn't I be brave like Number Six or the Stable Dweller? *Why couldn't I just be brave?*

“Ready up!”

I stared the blades in the face. I had to learn to dare. I'd...kinda...done it, when stealing. When sneaking. But that was against injury...this was death.

“Cycle's coming back!”

I took a deep breath. I willed myself, please...be brave. Dare, Murky...dare.

“Go!”

I kicked off the wall rolling on my side to hurl myself right at the blades, stopping just short before crawling in after it. Inches from my face, I followed them, feeling my entire body trembling in adrenaline and terror as I stared unblinking at them. I swore I could see bloodstains...

Deeper...deeper...three seconds...four seconds...five...seven...

Wait...*shit!*

I had missed the turning point. It flew back in my face.

I screamed. My hooves scrambled, rolling on my side, diving, crawling, crying out in pain as I felt it nick past a hoof or when my wings hit the ground. I couldn't properly move, the place was too small, the whirling blades pressed closer...closer...if I could just dive...maybe...

I dived as hard as I could, it was too far, I wasn't going to make it. I tried to pull all my hooves back from it, maybe I could-

The blades sheared down and I felt my vest tear. A hideous, screeching and disgustingly crunching sound filled my ears. I screamed out loud, closing my eyes as I tried to drag myself out. I fell at the side, curled up and whimpering before finally opening my eyes.

...I was unharmed. The machine had jarred and jammed.

A second scream split my ears, ongoing, agonised and wailing for far longer than a scream should. Begging, squealing and crying as I stood up and looked down the line before almost being sick.

Red.

A pony had become caught in the machine, one I had seen trying to take too many risks. His...his back leg...it wasn't there...red blood coated the thread and the blades.

I wanted to be sick, I didn't deal with that sort of thing well.

He was thrashing on his three remaining legs, screaming without stopping as slaves and slavers tried to pull him free. Yanking him out to the side, I saw the slavers discussing amongst themselves. I could only just pick out their voices.

“We've got some potions in the back, want me to get 'em?”

“No.”

“But-”

“He's just a slave, useless to us now.”

I didn't even have time to process that before I saw the revolver magically float from its holster and fire a single shot. Everypony in the entire line screamed, flattening to the ground as the shot rang out. The screaming stopped immediately even as the echo of the shot rang in my ears painfully for a good ten seconds. Feeling a light draft waft against my right wing, I looked around to fix my-

My wing was showing through the tear.

Stifling a shout and a curse, I backed against the wall as fast as I could, frantically trying to twist my vest around and hold the tattered fabric in place.

The slavers stood up, most of them bloodied from the wound of the slave. One of them looked disgusted, another merely annoyed.

“Get a slave to drag it in the back, we'll take it out back to the pit for the incinerator tonight.”

It. They had called him 'it'. The mare's words came back to me...we weren't stock, we were ponies. But to these slaves, we were just a statistic. Wicked Slit's efficiency, The Master's games and tasks, Red Eye's industry thrived on statistics...no matter his smooth words.

Even as I heard the inevitable call for it to be me to drag the body out, I found myself with a sensation of absolute worthlessness to anypony's eyes. Just a little cog to the machine. To run inside the machine to clean its workings in a mill. Fighting with my vest, I nervously approached. I needed out of here now. Now. Right now.

I put my shaking hooves around the body of the dead slave, trying to avoid his blood. I wasn't strong enough to pull or push him with any dignity, but I'd be damned to the moon if I was going to simply treat him like a piece of meat.

“Hey, you got cut on your side?”

I drew breath sharply, shaking my head madly.

“No! I...uh...just a tear!”

My hooves were the only thing covering my wing. The slaver glanced down at it, as though looking for blood. An aching slow moment of him examining.

“...carry on.”

I hoped my sigh of relief wasn't too obvious as I moved to the body.

Gently, I closed his eyes once I was sure the slavers weren't watching me any more. As I pulled the body away towards the back of the mill, I heard the whirr of the machine starting again as though nothing had even happened.

“Ready up!”

Like good little cogs, the slaves stood ready again, even through a mask of tired tears. I didn't see them as the work was restarted. Moving through double swing doors, I moved the dead slave to the back door and tried to arrange him as best I could. He wouldn't be treated well, dumped in a mass grave and then left until incineration rounds reached the mill. But at least I could give him something approaching peace for now. Perhaps his soul would be gone by the time they came to make him into ash.

I sat back.

Then it hit me.

I began shuddering, unstoppable heaves of my chest as suddenly it all landed at once.

This...this poor pony...had saved my life. This would have been me, if he hadn't gotten stuck. Without him making a mistake, my back hooves would have been torn off and shredded...I would be the one with the magnum round to the forehead.

I felt my eyes watering badly as I fell to the side, trying to stem it and failing completely. It wasn't sadness, I saw slaves die every day in some way or another. But this was so close...so random...so without reason or purpose! What kind of world was this for ponies!

I looked up, trying to find *something* to help me, anything! I'd left everything in my saddlebag in a safe location, hidden in an old pipe, so I didn't even have my journal or Pipbuck to help me. The walls were coated in slime and rust, cracked paint gave way to bare concrete so popular in Fillydephia. Some posters ran the walls, one had an all too familiar and hated face watching me, apparently forever. A couple had military advertisements, huge metal ponies and swift blue and gold pegasi.

The last had a gentle yellow and pink mare sitting amongst a peaceful field watching a sunset. A tranquil scene. The colours were that of my saddlebag...was this a medical poster? I didn't care, all that mattered was the peaceful scene.

Was that old Equestria? A place where you could sit upon hills and gaze with no worries?

I looked to the slave again, I looked to my own grimy and scarred hooves and felt the trembling return.

What *was* this world I had been born into? I had never even known a hint of the past, but still...the feeling of dislocation from what I was supposed to be living like was so strong. It led me to not even care that it made no sense to feel that way as I let tears stream from my eyes and hugged myself tightly. Ponies shouldn't have to go through this...

I couldn't stay here...my mind was too fragile, too newly open to things other than the work and my masters for this sort of...of...horror. I sniffed, got to my feet and stuffed as much material as I could along with a needle and thread into a bag before leaving the mill via the back door, stopping only to grab the one healing potion I could find left by the slavers.

* * *

“Aaaaand we're back again with the continued wasteland survival one-oh-one today! Now this next part is pretty vague, so I'll try to be clear. Exploration. It's a big world out there and if we want to help it, to fight the good fight we'll need to get out and see it. Now, first up, stay away from Stables. Death traps, every one of them from what I've heard. But other things? The more we find out and know, the more we understand, the better we'll be to handle the future, children. Make maps, chart where you're going, get to know your own area well. It'll always pay off in the end when you get lost or need something specific to help you. Speaking of finding things, here's the fun bit...loot! If you can find it, think about taking it! It may be scrap to you, but somepony might need it. Just like I said before, folks, trade will help us all. So don't just throw away that wonderglue or scrap electronics, y'hear?”

Shapes came to life...

* * *

The wind roared about my head as I squinted my eyes into the harsh and now warmer gusts that blew around Fillydelphia. My mind was whirling just as much, trying to locate the best positions, the safest routes and the cosiest hiding places I could think of. My small talent to find hideaways being strained as best I could at this distance. In all, I was trying my best to not think about a dead slave in a threshing mill...

I sat atop the pink and...uh...more pink helter skelter of the FunFarm with a rag tied around my mouth against the smog up this high. Okay, perhaps I was coming back to the FunFarm just once, but not to the petting zoo, that counted as never coming back, right?

Towering above everything other than the huge Barn and the rollercoaster, it afforded the best view of Fillydelphia I could manage within my limited accessibility. Within the small cage meant to contain, presumably, a staff member for setting small foals on their way I cast my eyes across every street, building and scrap pile that made up the horrifying vista that was the slave city. The burning pits dug into the concrete and covered with wire mesh forever spewed smog into the air from parasprite incineration. Armed guards cantered to and fro around them, occasionally glancing off to the axe pits. In there, slaves were cutting up old scrap and passing it on to carts to be sent to places like Slit's factory. In fact, I could even see her giant concrete block of a workplace nearby, the furnaces adding to the dirty cloud that permeated the air. Further out I saw the slaver camps surrounding the entire work areas, just short of the Wall.

The Wall...

That gigantic obstacle to my escape lurked not an impossible distance from the FunFarm. Piled high, crammed with guard towers, magically charged fences and beyond it a tainted moat. What lurked beneath the sick slime there I could only hazard at, but if regular gunshots from the guards were any indication, the threat of what remained in there was better suited to those outside it than the occupants of Fillydelphia. I had to cross it somehow...and simply pray I didn't meet the rumoured...things...that existed in there. Even being

exposed to a slightly tainted mother had given me a mutation on birth, not to mention whatever effect it had on my development and organs.

All my planning failed the moment I reached the Wall, but I'd find something. There had to be other ways than the main gate. I had a knack for finding small spots, maybe a drain or a hidden escape route to flank attackers...

It was too horrifying to think on for long, I let my eyes drift closer in between scrapes of my charcoal to draw up my map.

I could see the entire FunFarm, still filled with toiling slaves as they worked in shifts to drag off all the unneeded scrap metal and scavenged items. I'd be doing some of that later myself, according to DJ-Pon3, who knew what I could get for some oddities? I needed trade items for the wasteland, especially as I owned no bottlecaps myself. Hell, Pon3 had even said that someplaces would trade three hundred caps for certain drugs or types of healing item that I had almost come close to getting away with yesterday.

I was *painfully* aware of the fact that those items were worth three times more than my own price on the slave markets.

I wondered what my listing would look like now. Tiny and weak young buck, slight taint mutations, non-functional wings, twelve previous owners, answers to the number seven, has no talent for anything other than failing, apparently.

I lightly tapped my head with a hoof to clear my mind, I couldn't let that kind of thinking get a hold of me again...I didn't want to go back to the grind, I didn't want to be a slave any more.

Flicking my loose tooth with my tongue, I began to wonder if my slave instincts were somehow tied to it. Like I was close to casting it off and getting rid of its pain but just not quite yet gathering the courage to actually go through the effort. Sighing, I went back to work, comparing a mental defect to a loose tooth...what idiocy...

My map was almost done, as was my perceived route. I had drawn thick lines for buildings and roads, dotted lines for patrol routes I could spot from up here and small crosses on where I knew there were hiding spots. Dumpsters, drain ditches, piles of metal crates...

Who made those damn metal crates? No matter *where* I had been sent to work in the wasteland there were always the same shaped and coloured metal crates. They ranked just below the pink menace on the creepy scale of always seeming to follow me around! Who made them? Whatever pony came up with the design must have been rolling in...in...what did they use...bits! They'd have been rolling in bits!

I looked to my left at the life size pink pony cut out on the wall, a hoof and a smile showing all the foals the way to the helter skelter's slide exit. Her eyes were fixed on me.

“Don't suppose *you* know? You were around back then, weren't you?”

It beeped at me.

After I had pulled myself to my hooves from behind the nearest corner and breathed into a bag to calm my hyperventilating down, I realised the beep had instead come from my Pipbuck. I was fairly sure that no-pony had heard me yelp in terror.

Okay, it was more of a scream. I was a pathetic little slave, what can be expected of me when I get scared by a freaky pink pony thing?

I looked down at my Pipbuck.

Beep!

The same noise as last night on the control tower...

Beep!

With a small click, the speaker cut the music that had been playing (how dare it interrupt Velvet Remedy!) and replaced it with the somewhat faded and slightly distorted ambience I'd heard from the last diary entry. Holding it close, I left my plans to listen...

"Oh, gee, I hit go already...um...ok. Hello!"

"Hey..."

I don't know why I did it...it just felt wrong to not answer Sundial.

"Day two of my continued Pipbuck recordings to tell of my pretty boring life amongst a not so boring period of history. They said on the radio that somepony took a shot at the Princess out near the front today, no reports back but they have said she is still alive. I dunno...rumours get everywhere these days. I swear, Pinkie's Ministry seems to be everywhere to catch the bad ones, those posters creep me out."

I glanced back up at the cut out, staring right at me. 'Pinkie', huh? I considered the colour of the helter skelter and rolled my eyes. Of course it would be...

"Well, I guess I'll tell you..whoever you are, about my day at work. See, I work at the Ministry of Wartime Technology in Filly now since I last spoke to this thing. I figured it only makes sense, they're always looking for ponies for the expansion efforts in Fillydelphia. Only catch is it's in weapons. Yeah...Dad didn't like that. He's a healer, of course, so I guess his buck son making guns really isn't too good for his mind. We argued...but frankly I don't care. I need the money. I'm sorry, Dad, I know you paid for my Stable insurance and the Pipbuck, but I need to live day to day and taxes are so high right now with the war effort. See, if I work in a war factory, I get exempted from them."

This didn't sound like the picture perfect Equestria I'd seen in the posters and heard Sundial talk about last time. I wondered just how much changed so rapidly back then on the lead up to, well, Doomsday. The close of Equestria and the dawn of my dreary world.

"Now, anyway, I don't like to ramble so I'll cut to the chase, okay? I met a mare today. See, I was trying to get a letter through to the Equestrian Mail Service in time, but my supervisor was having none of it. It was to my Dad! I couldn't see him any other time so I was trying not to lose my job as I explained the importance. But then...she...came along. Oh what...I mean...heh...yeah I think you can hear where I'm going with this, eh? She's a pegasus, offered to carry the letter there for me during her time off. I won't lie, she's quite pretty, lovely blonde hair, some nice flanks if you don't mind me saying...heh...oh why did I say that..."

I could imagine him blushing. Yet another similarity between Sundial and myself, a mare who helped us both. This co-worker for Sundial and the Stable Dweller for me. Both willing to help others, both flying and both had pretty nice-

I sat up straight, blinking. Oh my...I think I was blushing too...

"Well, no matter, maybe I'll just look back on this and laugh at myself. Wait...I said that last time too, didn't I? It has been a few days since...oh well. Look, I've got to get to work, alright? The Ministry doesn't like workers not turning up on time. Pinkie is always watching for stuff like that..."

Again, I glanced at the cut out. I wondered what it thought of me about to not turn up for any shift ever again.

"I'm hoping to see her again anyway, her name is Skydancer. Maybe next time I'll actually work up the courage to ask her out, say I'm just thankful for her help? Anyway, gotta go. Oh yeah! I said I'd talk about how I got my cutie mark...well, maybe next time, okay? G'bye!"

"Bye."

I set the Pipbuck back down beside my crude maps and plans. Sundial's journal was so different from my own. Detailed, full of opinion, emotion and a connecting voice. Suddenly my own scrawls on paper felt

utterly worthless beside this fancy machine. Maybe I could work out how to make it operate some day myself, but all I knew were the volume button and the light. Any other buttons or flips were far beyond my ability to understand, especially with a broken display. Not that it would have helped, I didn't imagine they catered to illiterate slaves. No, I was stuck with my scratches on paper, understandable only to me, interpretable only to the creator. What kind of journal was that?

Briefly, I remembered the mare looking over them, remembered her smile as she looked at what I had done. Did she really understand what I was trying to say in my drawings? Or did she just like the pictures? Did every...what were they called...drawer? Art pony? Did they all feel this way, that only they truly understood their own creations?

I reached out to grab my journal as a foul smelling wind blew in over the factories into the helter skelter's top cage and flapped its pages away from my map. Muttering a half curse, I stomped a hoof on the page to stop it before leaning back against the rusted cage wall that once was used to stop foals from falling. Only then did I look down at my journal.

I saw a broken wall, sunlight shining through from behind it, sketched clearly in my own style. A small pony stared at it, his wings spread as he seemed to be waiting for something...

The page was from years ago...far back in the areas of my journal I never went back to, never remembered and never ever touched. I wanted to slam it shut, I didn't want to know these things, I didn't want the temptation. But this picture seemed to stand out to me...what had I been thinking back then?

Suddenly I began to regret a lifetime of slavery indoctrination to not pay attention and simply put your head down and not think at all.

With a sigh, I closed the journal and set it back in my saddlebag. The sun was going down. I needed to get to the ground, pick up whatever I could find in the helter skelter's bottom areas and then get ready. The Master would arrive within the hour and they would soon realise I was gone. No time to think about old pictures, time to act, to move.

But first...how to get down. Those stairs were pretty steep for four legs...

My eye caught an old rectangular cord mat sitting in the corner. I couldn't help a small grin coming across my face.

Tucking everything in the saddlebag safely, I reached out and dragged across the foul old fibred rug to rest on the helter skelter slide before sitting on it, holding myself in place with my front hooves. Well...perhaps *some* things related to this Pinkie could be good!

I let go, quickly sitting back on the rug as I felt the lack of friction take hold. With a slow acceleration, the rug began to slide down the helter skelter. The wind caught on my mane and face as I felt the momentum picking up. I couldn't resist a big grin as the rug began to twist around the tower and hurtle at great speed down the tower, spiralling and throwing me from side to side as my entire body felt the bumps in the notched wood beneath me. Two hundred years hadn't made helter skelters any less fun! Whee!

I closed my eyes, feeling the sensation of movement, of free speed and momentum carrying me without any effort through the air...well...kinda. My mane whipped backward hard as I felt my eye sockets and lips blown wider by the rush of air before me. I could feel the g-forces trying to push me outwards from the tower by the speed, if I opened my eyes I could see nothing but a blur. Finally...a chance to not see Fillydelphia as I spun and spun down the tower...

With little effort, I imagined it as it was in Old Equestria, beautiful and wondrous. I was out for a day at the Filly FunFarm with my friends. At the bottom I'd find that mare, the Stable Dweller and...and my mom! We'd been having fun, no worries in the world. No work and no slavers at all! Balloons, foals squealing in happiness came to my ears from the whistling wind on my descent. Everything was so bright...so colourful...

I laughed, I had thought of a fun joke to tell them when I got to the bottom. Then we'd go get some ice cream and go watch the ice skaters, ice and ice right? That made me laugh more.

The slide tossed me from side to side, making me instead just start giggling, I lifted my front two

hooves, holding them up as the wind brushed them. Cool air from the warm sunny day. I could see the crowds around me, all smiling and laughing. A peaceful Equestria.

Suddenly, the feeling of the rug sliding disappeared entirely as I felt my entire axis of balance invert.

“Woo-yargh!”

Before I could even react, I felt my rump strike a harder surface and flip me forward into a soft lump on the ground that seemed to envelop me completely as the soft sponge pit at the bottom absorbed me into its safe embrace. I couldn't stop laughing as I reached upwards, waving my forelegs to and fro.

As I pulled myself out and stared upward at the helter skelter, I felt dampness in my eyes as I woke to the reality once more around me. Harsh, unforgiving and ruined, nothing like my dreams. But even as the bittersweet ending to my fun settled in, I did not feel upset. These tears were...different.

Collecting my saddlebag from where it fell, I made to walk to the nearby scrap yard, even grinning widely at a confused looking spritebot as it slowly rotated, following my path before buzzing away erratically. I still enjoyed the ability to close my eyes, smile...and just imagine. To remember that feeling...those blissful seconds of fun and happiness.

I drew pictures to express myself. But my imagination was the greatest canvas I could ever imagine. I couldn't wait to go out and make it a reality.

* * *

“Before I go any further, I'm going to pause for a second and just consolidate the things I've been teaching you all for so long. We have the world we do today because of mistakes. Yes, children, no-pony would deliberately want this severely screwed up living in the wasteland, so listen closely. It was a mistake. But the reason we survived and continue to survive is down to those ponies who can dig in, find something to believe in and get stuff done. Be it a faith, a virtue to hold on to or perhaps even somepony else, the good fight only began because of those who would dare. So I ask of you all, think carefully before committing, many of them have paid the highest of prices in the fight to save Equestria from mire and ruin. But if you do decide, 'Yes!' then you have to pursue it as best you can. We've all seen that, we've all heard of the Stable Dweller. Hell, she even took a side in this developing civil war between the Rangers. So trust me, wastelanders, it is possible to make progress, but only if we're willing to dare...”

Life...sat before me.

My plan. The method by which I would take my life back was finally ready. All day, bit by bit, lesson by lesson I had adjusted it, gathered what I needed and gradually come a step closer to this moment each time. Now...the life that was to be mine was right there. The word kept running over and over in my head...life...life...life...

I ran the plan over and over in my mind as I set about preparing my equipment, hidden inside an old Hall of Mirrors in the FunFarm near the bumper-plow pit. The temptation to go there, to visit the mare once more, was so strong. However, I knew that she wouldn't appreciate it, for me to hurt my chances by taking an unessential risk. I was in a bad enough state as it was. My lungs ached and breathing induced a burning sensation within my throat. Bruises, knocks and small cuts covered my body from the slave work as small burns from the harnesses and carts irritated me from clothing touching them. Despite the healing potions, my eye still felt swollen from Noose's beating, affecting my peripheral vision to that side.

I had one potion, that'd help me though. Time to get ready.

Step one...escape the FunFarm across to the roads I had run to while evading the gang yesterday, I knew at least one hiding spot to use, the old drain.

I pulled across the dark fabric I had acquired from the threshing mill. Tearing it with the sharpened shard of metal from Slit's factory clenched in my teeth I set about creating something better than this rough vest. I dumped it from my back, feeling the pressure ease from my wings for once. I wretched myself in the material, taking rough measurements and cutting appropriately. Double layered for warmth, DJ-Pon3 had

told me that. I also added small areas for pockets, two on each front leg, multiple within mouths reach. I had come to accept that I was, by and large, a thief. I may be forced to steal again, as such, I decided to prepare for it.

Frankly, I'd always been one anyway...today had only proven it. A little cowardly thief, but it had felt good, taking the items from those who had tormented me...

I stitched the material, roughly and heavily with little real skill, but it worked. Clambering about on the floor, I pulled my new fleece over me. Darker to hide, warmer for the weather, pockets to store things in and some slits in it for the next stage...

Step two...Creep from the road into the old ruined houses there, overcome my fear of old living spaces and continue toward the industrial sector, using them as cover against griffins watching from above.

Pulling the fleece off quickly, I drew the metal plates from my bag. With some tapping on the ground and a bit of chipping with the shard, I assessed which ones were the strongest and began to slip them into my fleece. Hidden armour within my clothing to be more inconspicuous. Slaves didn't wear armour outside of dangerous work and I'd rather be able to move fast and duck around small spots without huge layers holding me back. I was escaping, not going to war.

I placed one over my back and two on my right, side and flank. One more went over my left flank while the last went over my chest, the smallest piece. My front left was exposed, but that would be covered by the saddlebag which would, hopefully, absorb most impacts. My thick journal would hopefully help in that, as painful as the idea of it taking a bullet would be.

Step three...make a dash from the ruins towards the threshing mill, plenty of hiding spots and minimal guard cover after viewing from the helter skelter. A low risk environment.

I rubbed the shard against a rock I had dragged in from outside, smoothing off the serrated edge to make it cleaner and sharper. It took time, but tapering to a rough point as best I could I fabricated a somewhat rudimentary knife point. As I scraped it off, I glanced around me at the old mirrors...it was almost darkly funny to see the mirrors meant to make a pony look fat made me look like a normal pony. I didn't even glance at the thin ones...no-pony needed to see that. Turning back to my knife, I grabbed a little spare fabric and some wonderglue I had found in the helter skelter for repair work to make a grip for my mouth.

I stared at it...could I use it to kill somepony? I had been around death every day. Could I take another's life to attain my own? Not an issue...no...I couldn't think on it, I'd defend myself, but it was more a utility tool now.

Measuring it against my left foreleg, I made a little sheath for it with some fabric, giving me easy access to it should I ever need it...hopefully not.

Step four...move from the mill toward the slave camps. Stay hidden, stay stealthy. Use what I had learned about moving quietly to sneak by them under the cover of dark and in the shadow of their huts. Most slavers stayed around fires, ruining night vision, use that advantage!

I ripped up the remaining fabric, rolling it into tight bundles and pouring a small section of the healing potion onto each one. DJ-Pon3 had mentioned the trick to create healing bandages to help close wounds faster. I figured that one healing potion wouldn't help me for serious injuries anyway...if I got wounded, these would have to do until I could locate better supplies. I made a small bag for them, keeping them separate and safe, they would go near the top.

Beside them, I placed my two spare Med-X's. I still had them from yesterday, Whiplash hadn't even bothered to check me over while in fear of The Master. They were my insurance to keep moving. Find a place to hide, stab one of them in me and ride the high time express to movement again. The DJ had talked of the dangers of addiction...I didn't want to risk it, but I was prepared to take both if I had to...

Step five...the camps are near the Wall. Wait until the guard changes each half hour and then move in

the blind spots up to the wall itself, a huge shadow from the sunset makes it very dark behind it, use that space.

I dragged my saddlebag outside. The bright yellow and pink was lovely, yes, but it stood out.

Reluctantly I placed it face down in the mud and smothered the entire thing to ruin the colour. I rubbed dirt into the metal links to prevent them shining, used differing types and colours of dirt, mud and grime to camouflage it better and finally tore off the small plastic glittering dots on the butterfly antennas.

Back inside, I began to fill it. First the scrap. Wonderglue, some old tins, a small box with some old wires poking out of it, a small tin of cleaning fluid, old duct tape and a few old bits of magical circuitry.

Then came my food, old tins wrapped in cloth and filled with rapidly solidifying oatmeal. I still smirked at taking them from the gang. On top of them I placed my journal to slide along one side closest to me, the quill and parchment and my medical supplies. Snapping the saddlebag shut, it weighed more than I'd like but...needs must. With a quick flick of my mouth, I downed the remainder of the healing potion, feeling the whip scar on my backside along with various other cuts and bruises fade. My stamina returned somewhat as the disease was beaten back by the healing magic briefly. It'd be enough to get by.

Step six...find a way through the wall. Ideally a drainage pipe or something. I'd seen a ditch running the length from my perch earlier...that had to lead somewhere. A wall could never have only one entrance, that'd be suicide if it were taken by an enemy, there would be something, I just had to find it.

Time to gear up. I struggled into my armoured fleece, pulling it tight about me and shaking out my neck. With a slight heave I lifted the saddlebag across my back, shifting till it was comfortable. A few adjustments to make sure it didn't make noise when I moved and it was ready. With some mouth work I strapped on my sheath for the knife to my left foreleg, ensuring I could reach it at a moments notice. I dropped a healing bandage into my front leg pocket as well, setting a syringe into my front right for emergencies. With a little smirk, I snapped Wicked Slit's flight goggles onto my head as well.

Just one more thing left...

I turned to it. I'd left it sitting in front of a mirror deliberately until last. The Pipbuck.

She had shown me the way. I couldn't not show my respect by carrying it like she did. I used Whiplash's leather 'number three' to weave between the metal joints that used to hold the mechanism onto a pony's leg. The entire holding mechanism was gone, leaving only the top section, but with some tying, pulling and a good few knots, I pulled the Pipbuck proudly onto my right foreleg...just like hers. It flickered its light once or twice, as though recognising it was now being worn properly...if held in place by old leather cord.

Step Number Seven...this was pretty unsure. What would I find? I knew the one thing I had to do...hide and run. Keep moving. Don't stop until you are miles from Fillydelphia. Use Med-X if you have to, just keep galloping until you cannot gallop any more...find a healer.

Have a life.

I turned, dressed ready, all my equipment and supplies borne on my back or body. I felt proud, ready to fight the good fight. Ready to show Equestria that the slaves need not sit idle in the dark.

I saw myself in the mirror. The third time in three days I had looked at myself.

The first time I had seen a dejected slave, too broken to even complain about his imminent death.

The second I had seen a dying buck with little hope for anything but trying to stay alive however he could.

But now...I saw me. I saw Murky Number Seven, tooled up and ready to go. Stuffed fleece covering his malnourished body and eyes that showed a hope I had never before imagined that they could own. The Stable Dweller...the mare...Number Six...the Pipbuck...Velvet Remedy...Sundial...DJ-Pon3...they had all

helped me, prepared me and given me things to hold on to. Now it was time to act on my own.

I hoped they would be proud.

I didn't look strong, indeed I looked pathetically weak still. I didn't feel confident, only that my hoof had been forced to ensure my survival. Biting my lip, I touched a hoof to the mirror, like two days ago, just...just to prove that I was what I was seeing, that I was actually standing up and about to do this.

A wave of cold shot through me at the touch. I gasped in shock, recoiling as I looked at my hoof. As fast as the sensation had come...it left. I looked up, trembling from the sudden effect of the glass.

Before me in the mirror...I saw myself.

But not me here...it was me as a colt, standing with innocent little wide eyes filled with tears, my two stubby little wings flapping pathetically as I stared at...well...me. Sweet Celestia...I was *tiny* as a kid! I felt locked in place...looking down at this little colt slave's mouth gasp open, like he was as shocked to see me as I was to see him...I mean me...it...

I felt frozen for a second...unable to process what I was seeing, before shaking my head roughly and frantically, waving myself away from the mirror.

Stunned, shocked and confused...I looked at the now empty mirror with an open mouth, just like the image had borne. Taking a deep breath I tried to control my thoughts. No time to think on it...no time to think on old drawings either...I had to get going. I'd work it all out later, definitely. But not now. I galloped to the back door.

For now...I had a life to claim.

My own.

* * *

Step one would be easy. I'd left the FunFarm so many times in my life within Filly that I knew every route and little object by heart. The slaver walkways and towers only covered the areas approaching the Pit and the Wall, considered important. No slave would attempt to escape *into* the rest of Fillydelphia, it was presumed. Or at least, I hoped that was the case. Whatever the reason, they was why my route had such a roundabout manner through the ruins and the threshing mill rather than directly for the wall.

I stuck to the back staff areas, small alleyways between rides and stalls that employees would, by my guessing anyway, have used to travel between places of work without being held up by the cheering crowds. Briefly, I wondered what they might think of their place of work now, before dismissing the thought. This was no time for an idle imagination.

Moving at a light canter, I stopped only occasionally to adjust my bag and pockets to not rattle or shake during movement. Everything I had learned across my life about staying silent and hidden to avoid harm had to come together here. If I were caught, I didn't want to think about what they would do to a little thief like me.

I stopped in the shadow of an old games stall. Within it stood milk bottles stacked in perfect towers, challenging players to knock them over. Apparently even a Balefire Megaspell hadn't been enough to make those rigged things budge. Gently easing open the creaky door, I stepped inside and used a fractured hole in the back to observe the side exit to the FunFarm. No guard towers, this was a route only for those going to shifts with no requirement to stop them before they got to the Wall. Beyond it I could see the road I had escaped to yesterday, the drain waiting on the other side as a reluctant hiding place should I be spotted.

Tensing my legs, I prepared to go into full gallop across open ground, but something gave me pause.

A sound...a flutter...

I craned my neck upwards, glancing left to right and checking every perch I could imagine. Nothing

disturbed the FunFarm at this level. Higher up I could see teams of griffins soaring on the warm currents of Fillydelphia, but they were much too high to have caused that sound. Minutes passed as I hid, awaiting another occurrence. Slavers wandered past me on the road, trotting and laughing on their way to the Roamer Bar. I waited for a gap, the flutter was just another ghost noise from my freaky hearing. I often picked up sounds that I didn't want to hear or were too far away to matter.

The moment any slavers seemed to be absent from the area I made my move, galloping immediately, keeping low to the ground and moving as fast as I dared for the opposite side of the road. A shiver passed down my spine as I felt open ground lose all sense of cover or concealment from my escape, but I pressed on.

“Eh, shite! I forgot something, mate. Gimme a second!”

I heard the clatter of hooves running back down the road from around the corner of the FunFarm and increased my step to dive off the over edge of the road. Skittering down the ditch side, I frantically looked for the drain, sweat dripping from my face already. Panic set in, I couldn't be spotted this early!

“Hey, hear that? Somepony trying to hide away?”

“Ain't no shift to come out this time, one goin' AWOL for the market?”

Rotating all the most colourful curses I knew (which wasn't saying much) I ran to and fro, searching for the drain before the couple would appear up the road and look down at the ditch. Was I in the wrong place? No! There it was! Staying as quiet as I could while moving fast as I dared, I quickly (and rather sloppily) stuffed myself into the drain once more. Strangely enough, it didn't feel quite so bad this time...although perhaps the threat of imminent selection for the Pit again may have had something to do with preference. The fit was harder with my thicker clothing and saddlebag, but with some curling up (and a rather unpleasant form of lubrication) I squeezed myself in, turning to face out of the drain itself.

Right...safe.

The pitter patter of hooves sounded almost directly above me as the slaver pair wandered on the road above the drain.

“You sure? Get all sorts of things running about in the ruins, why, ol' Sticky Crescent said he saw a baby hellhound in here once! Dug its way right in!”

“What? Stop talking shite, you wally!”

“No, I swear!”

“This the same buck who told you he once saw Princess Luna herself flying alongside Red Eye's chariot?”

“Yeah...”

“Absolute bollocks, mate.”

Good...banter and argument meant no serious searching. I was still undetected.

Skritch skritch...

I sighed, more random noise to become distracted b-

A sudden pinching pain shot through my back right leg, I screamed loud in shock, bucking it backward and feeling it connect with something unpleasant...segmented, chitinous and slippery. In a blind panic, my back to an unknown threat and unable to turn to face it, I scrambled, pushed and crawled as best I could. Feeling small bites on my back hooves between half bucks before I dove from the drain and twisted to look back. Staring me in the face was a gigantic insect, a radroach, crawling out of the drainage pipe with smooth movements from its filthy hide and clacking legs. Behind it, I could see at least three more following it. I felt frozen in fear...I...I had been in there yesterday and not known at all...

My fear broke like a wave as I saw them advance. I turned to gallop off into the ruins, I could out-distance them without a worry. Setting off, I glanced quickly back at my legs. They bled from several small

bites, nothing serious, but I'd have to get the bandages on them soon before infection set in. Yeah...like there were any infections left for me to *get*.

I came to the nearest ruined home, two stories and missing its roof entirely. Built from brick and concrete, it spoke of an old workers home, rustic and practical. A quick buck hoofed the door open before heading inside.

“I swear, you forget anything again and I'm not waiting...”

My eyes flickered wide open, how could I have forgotten, they were just picking something up, of *course* they'd be back! Okay, I didn't expect it to be less than a minute, but still!

I looked back, seeing two neutrally coloured slavers coming back down the road. The radroaches seemed content to have left me as they milled around in the spilled sewage, but they were hardly hidden to the slavers.

“Hey, check this mate. Roaches, what got them stirred up?”

“Could be our little runaway. What do you think? Coming or going?”

“Shackles is at the FunFarm tonight, definitely going, whoever it is if he's in the area. You ain't seriously saying we take a look are you?”

“Look, if we're being watched and Stern hears we *didn't* it'll be us getting devoured by parasprites before the morning.”

“Urgh...fine...”

The pair moved off the road toward the ruins. I was hidden behind the door, keeping it open only by a tiny fraction to observe them, trusting in my shaded clothes, coat, mane and my small size to hide me. One of them, a brown buck, stomped on each radroach in turn with a satisfying and somewhat disgusting crunch. The other, an almost jet black unicorn, however, was glancing around before bending down...and suddenly looking directly at the house I was in. In shock, I backed away from the door.

“Tracks...”

Shit! Of course! I'd been in such a rush and panic to escape the radroaches I'd forgotten to watch what was coming off my hooves from the drainage. I'd led them right to me! One brave little glance confirmed he was heading this way, I didn't have time to get out quietly.

I looked down, finding a dirtied pink matt sitting just inside the door with some writing on it (what would you write on that?) and wiped my dirty hooves on it frantically before tu...before turn..turning...oh sweet Luna...oh sweet Celestia...

...oh...*Goddesses...no...*

Before me were the entire family of the home, a collection of skeletons spread around the full front room and open plan kitchen. Pony shaped sets of bones, stripped bare by balefire and weathered by time yet still roughly posed enough to indicate they had been taking shelter as best they could when the warnings had sounded in the city two hundred years ago. Some were smaller than the others...

A memory was unpleasantly reminding me of a certain farmhouse. I was intruding upon their memory. My hooves were locked to the floor at the visual imagery of everything wrong with Equestria now-a-days. I could hear the slavers moving to the house, their hooves slopping around in the mud, but still I couldn't move a muscle in my body. I almost felt like I wanted to just tip over, my hooves stuck in the air.

I shouldn't be here...

Empty eye sockets stared in random directions, concussive force had spread some bones out. I could see a faded family photo on the wall, earth ponies all. Lovely warm coloured coats between the entire group. Pots and pans sat scattered on the kitchen top where they had been making dinner. An old work bag rested near me from being dropped after a shift.

I should have known, I couldn't handle scenes like this, I'd never been able to! I'd just been hoping everything would be ash and gone, but the horror froze me in place as the weight of memory landed squarely on my newly opened mind.

The slavers were just outside, I could hear their breathing. If they found me, I'd perhaps join the skeletons, would I be sent to them? Would they be unhappy with me?

The terror of the thought finally gave me purpose. I darted forward, almost prancing in circles as I searched for a hiding spot.

“Sorry...sorry...I'm so sorry...”

Muttering under my breath, I pulled open a kitchen cupboard and hid inside it after levering open a back window ever so slightly, just to unlock it.

The slavers burst in. Their hooves knocked over the work bag, I heard the tools clatter out. Pots and pans rung as they moved around, knocking things over in their blundering check. The simplicity of my hiding spot suddenly felt all too vulnerable, if they decided to do more than just glance, I was caught. Unable to see, I could only hear them moving through the sitting room adjacent as I shook terribly. Around me were cleaning agents...at least I thought they were. Even if I could read it was too dark to tell inside the cramped cupboard.

“Hey, back window.”

“What?”

“Whoever it was, they're long gone, left through the window. See? It's unlocked.”

A clatter of something lighter...was that bones?!

“Perhaps this lot just left it open.”

“During a balefire drop?”

“Clearly a pane of glass would make *all* the difference, mate”, came the reply, sarcasm dripping on every word, “Look, let's just get moving, alright? No-one saw it but us and if we're late to the Roamer it'll be our round.”

The pair seemed to delay for a brief glance before moving out. I heard a horrible popping crack, a muttered curse and finally the door slamming shut. I waited for a few minutes, just in case they doubled back, before opening the cupboard and almost bursting into tears immediately.

The slavers had, in their simple visit, destroyed what was left. The kitchen utensils were scattered all the more. The undisturbed work bag had been kicked over the floor. Worst of all...the largest skeleton's ribs had been snapped from a careless hoof.

I couldn't stand this any more, I'd bandage myself up someplace else. I had to get out of here. Moving to the back door with a resolution to stick to the outdoors until the threshing mill...I paused only to check the surroundings before creeping out into the dead gardens between the rows of houses. Sticking to the fences, ducking below lifeless branches of long dead bushes and moving only when I could see no griffins, I pressed on.

It'd been close, I was behind schedule, but I could still do this.

I...I knew I could...

* * *

I'd had it easy thus far, despite what it may have felt like.

I sat atop an old rickety garden shed, hidden behind a dead tree beside it as I glanced over at the threshing mill past the small wall. In days gone by, the low and long building must have been a local business to be so close to these houses. Built mostly from wood, it had been repaired by hastily bolted on

beams and sheets of rusty metal by the slaves over the past few years. As such, it gave a very patchwork appearance, oddly traditional next to the industrial nightmare surrounding it from Fillydelphia. I imagined this must be a pre-war building in the sense of existing long before the first shot of the first skirmish was fired at all.

Thick lines of slaves were being led in and out. Good, I had to go through it to reach my destination. From the helter skelter I had seen masses of guard walkways between larger factories and warehouses around the entire area. Comparatively, going *through* the threshing mill would be safer, if only in a sense of having cover should I be spotted as opposed to a large open area watched by scoped rifles. I sat on my haunches, tapping a hoof on the shed as I contemplated my next move.

All that time I was still trying to fight off the slave in my mind. It taunted me, chided me, screamed that this was wrong and urged me to turn around. Go back to my master, go back to the predictable life where I knew my place. Sacred Goddesses, what was I doing here, trying to escape? I was about to run under their guns in some suicidal urge to try and save my own life, that wasn't for me to decide!

I fought the tears, my head lowering. However as I did so, my eyes found the Pipbuck, strung to my right foreleg tightly still. I'd wanted it visible. I *needed* it visible. The Stable Dweller's inspiration was all that was keeping me going. She had escaped this place to evade death, so I could do the same. This reminder of her strapped to my leg was the symbol. She had one as a cutie mark, now I knew why.

Mentally bucking myself back to reality to be careful, I placed myself closer to the roof, hunkering down on all four legs as I crept to the edge. I almost squeaked as I looked over and saw a row of slaves passing by the street not twelve feet from me that I'd almost missed. Trudging and weary they, like before, were of a smaller stature like myself. As I watched their despondent faces, dragging hooves like iron weights and scarred sides from the thresher machine I began to think. I didn't have long, any plan would have to do to get inside when not on my own shift. Perhaps I could sneak among them, hide in plain sight?

Time was short. Drawing my saddlebag off, I began to wind some spare cloth around my Pipbuck. It was a dead give away if unhidden. The rest could pass around the dirty slaves I hoped, but I swung my knife around to the inside of my leg instead to keep it better hidden. Checking the bandages on my legs were tight, I dropped with a soft *whud* from the garden shed (I never was one for landings, it was perhaps a good thing I couldn't fly) and waited for the slavers guarding the procession to look away. With practised depressive steps, I silently trotted into line, fighting down the chains binding my mind from tempting me to fall back into actually being a slave. A filthy green mare looked sideways at me as I gently shoved my way to the middle of the slave march. I tried to smile back, receiving only a scowl in return. I put my head down, glancing only briefly as I heard a little flutter from nearby, probably an old piece of cloth in the wind.

Every muscle twinged. Guards were looking at me, scanning the crowd from above and beside. Whips cracked, urging the smaller slaves into the mill's cavernous doorway after passing through the fence gates. Feeling myself being bumped from side to side by the thinning space for so many ponies to squeeze through, my concentration was entirely on staying on my feet, to keep moving like your average slave and don't draw any attention.

'Like your average slave', I thought. Looking around me, I saw ponies shuddering, crying and fearfully looking around. I hated my fellow slaves, they would kill me as soon as look at me if they knew about my wings. But seeing them on the night of my hopeful flight from Fillydelphia I began to feel a sadness for them that was entirely new. I'd get out of here, but these ponies were to be left to work, hurt and die with no change brought by my leaving. There was to be no escape for them. Normality would drive them to their deaths, whether sharp and painful or slow and lingering.

With practised and weary steps, they made their way to the threshing machine. It still ran full tilt, the last shift only having just vacated. Even from the crowd I could see the stains on the floor, red marks of long past and the recently dried ones of the pony who had unexpectedly saved my life.

I had to stop, the trembling of a close shave with death still passing through me whenever I thought on it giving me pause to lean against a wall for a moment. Death from Fillydelphia was without favouritism...what if it had picked me for a random and messy end? What if it picked the mare? What if I

returned with a team to liberate them all and I found that she had been killed by some drunken slaver for no reason at all?

“Drop the saddlebag, slave.”

I blinked my eyes open, gasping in shock as I turned my head slowly, painful inevitability reared its ugly head as I gradually focused on the sight of a dark red and black clad unicorn mare staring down at me. A cane hovered in her telekinesis magic field as her eyes inclined towards a storage locker.

“You won't be able to move without getting caught with that thing on, dump it in the room. You can pick it up later once you're done.”

Her colleague, an earth pony buck with an entirely shaved mane, moved up beside me.

“We'll keep it safe for you, honest. We only take ten percent of your caps, other slavers go for higher amounts. Best deal.”

Oh you had to be kidding me. Really?

“Come on, get ready, take your place. Dump those clothes and those ridiculous goggles too, far too bulky to work under the thresher. Well come on!”

Not good, not good, not good at all! I had hoped that I could slip right into the threshing line and make a dash for the back door the corpse had been taken to earlier. Since when did slavers start to care about safety? I glanced back and forth at the pair, searching for the words.

“I can't, um...see, this is stuff for Wicked Slit...”

“Good! That bitch killed two of the slaves we lent her last week. Do you know how hard it is to find unicorns who can pick locks in this damn wasteland? C'mon, give us the stuff, you can just tell her you got mugged.”

Somehow I doubted that would work even if I wasn't lying through my teeth. Dammit, this plan wasn't working! I had pictured me perhaps having to run under gunfire, overcoming fear to charge out into a free life, but this was just stupid!

“Come on! Hurry up and drop the goods, slave!”

“Please! I'll be fine,” I practically begged them, lowering my head, “I...I'll take the risk with it on.”

If I could just get past them then I could slip out. Other slaves were beginning to pay attention to this, some slavers casting eyes from outside the doorway into the threshing room as well.

“Oh for Luna's sake, Barehoof, just take it from him, slaves shouldn't have bags anyway.”

I felt the earth pony grab a-hold of my saddlebag strap with his teeth from the side. Struggling, he smacked me with a hoof a couple of times as I tried to shake him off in a blind panic. Terror struck me, what if he pulled my vest off?! I'd gotten lucky earlier...

“Shtay shtill!”

The buck shouted through clenched teeth, I kept moving from side to side, grabbing on to my saddlebag however I could, a fight to keep it on me quickly becoming a small scuffle that almost ended the moment that I felt his hoof attempt to beat me on my side to keep me still. A metallic clang rung through the room as he pulled back, more surprised than genuinely hurt as his hoof impacted on the metal plate I had hidden there.

“What the hell? Grab him!”

If I'd moved faster, that would have been my chance, but a momentary pause to check my fleece hadn't shifted gave Barehoof an opportunity to grab me again. I felt his front hooves wrap around my torso as he launched at me, his weight pulled me to the floor with a crash from both out belongings impacting in their bags. I could smell his rotten breath just above my head, feel every bit of his weight pressing down across my back and rump. The pressure on my wings gave way to a pathetic squeal of pain, the continued rubbing as he shifted, trying to pin me down with his weight was like being rubbed against a grindstone to my wings.

The unicorn wandered over, she would cut off my only route in a second...the slaves had parted to stay away from the confrontation. No slave wanted to be near an angry slaver like I'd just done.

“Good! Now just stay still like an obedient little slave while we get all this off you...”

Thankfully, through my pain and fear, I remembered one way to get a buck off me. I struggled up just far enough to lift my back right hoof and fire it backwards as hard as I could. My hooves were tiny, small enough to fit right into that gap with all the force focussed into one little point...

“*Aaiiee!*”

On the crunch of contact, Barehoof's weight entirely disappeared as his strangled cry pierced the air, hurting my ears from the proximity. I couldn't hesitate, I needed every bit of my supplies and any delay would give time for the alarm to be raised once The Master realised I'd made a run for it. Even as Barehoof fell sideways, clutching his loins with both front hooves and crying in pain, the unicorn and other slavers looked almost too stunned (one was laughing!) to react to their comrade's plight. Using the space, I turned and galloped as fast as I could into the mass of slaves around the machine. Behind me the shouts quickly went out, calls to stop and threats of punishment. I didn't stop, panic and fear wouldn't let me. I'd already gone past the point of no return now, I'd attacked a slaver and went on the run...I had no illusions about what would happen if I were caught now.

I needed to get out of here...lie low and then move on!

Slaves dove to either side of the thin corridor between the wall and the threshing machine edge as I weaved between them. The slavers were in hot pursuit, shoving slaves brutally away as they levitated batons, knives and whips. They were faster than me and, unfortunately, I only had a straight corridor for the huge machine to run down. Beside me the whirling blades of the thresher continued their work even as everypony stood watching the chase.

Wait...

I felt a slaver right behind me, the swish of a cane. In a moment, I ducked, rolling sideways to be under the machine once again. Ten seconds time to use.

I crawled forward, trying to get beyond a big mass of slaves nearby before the blades came back.

Leftover refuse and thread built up around me as I moved in the confined space, rubbing the string above me from the saddlebag. The strands got in my mouth, eyes and nose. I could see the other side of the crowd standing, that would slow them down! It would take them some time to force their way through the slaves in the thin gap between machine and wall.

But I could circumvent it under the machine. Ha! Who said being small was-YARGH!

Two hooves stretched out, grabbing my back leg. A slaver had crawled under the machine itself to get me. Too big to properly fit, a maniacal grin covered his face as I tried to kick at him.

Up at the top, the blades reversed, hurtling back towards us. The slavers didn't know how short a time it was under here...

“Let go!” I screamed madly, sweating and whinnying in panic as I saw the blades coming. He didn't even see them! Just holding on to my hoof like grim death until his comrades arrived.

I bucked, kicked and thrashed wildly as I felt myself being pulled *back* further into the machine! It looked so close! My own dive and the slaver grabbing me must have only been a few seconds, how long did I have!?

The battle to free my hoof caused him to try and pull me harder. His head, hooves and my back leg were becoming tangled in the thread from above. Rule one of the thresher, don't get caught in the thread! I squealed, trying to free myself even as the slaver began to realise his predicament. Even if I got free, there wasn't enough time to...to...

No! Don't think about it!

I leaned in, swinging my Pipbuck as hard as I could at his head. The connection shook the bandages free as the slaver reeled from the hard metal impact. Mentally, I apologised to Sundial even as I felt my hoof freed from his grasp.

Not that it helped, the pair of us were still stuck in the thread like a spider's web...

The machine was being slowed by the tangled thread, but the blades kept advancing slowly, sorting the thread back properly. If they reached us then we'd be 'sorted' with it! The slaver was starting to panic himself, thrashing all around and making his predicament even worse while I struggled to pull my hoof free from the winding thread. I felt tears on my face, my limbs shaking as the *thum thum thum thum* sound of the blades came ever nearer. Forget how handy it was, I would have given a lot to not have hearing that picked up sounds in so much detail right now!

I didn't know what the other slavers were doing, watching, probably. Would they be trying to stop the machine? Would they leap in to try and cut their fellow slaver free?

Wait, cut free! My knife!

Twisting, I dragged the hidden blade from the inside of my leg free with my mouth. Not wasting any time I tried to saw through the toughly strung thread, the bouncing and movement making it exceptionally difficult.

*Thum! Thum! **Thum! Thum!***

Come on...come on! A few bits of string popped free, but it was wound tight around my hoof, almost cutting off the blood!

*Thum! Thum! **THUM! THUM!***

Nothing else for it! I dug the knife under the string on my hoof, screaming in pain as I felt the edge cut into my flesh too. It was all I could do to not drop the knife from shouting as I saw a trickle of blood before I fell backwards with a sudden jolt. Free! Not soon enough!

I turned, scrambling harder than ever before to escape, rolling was impossible from the size of my saddlebag for anything more than a dive.

I needn't have bothered, something slowed it down.

I would try long and hard for some time to attempt to forget the sound the slaver made as he was 'sorted' by the machine. Both his voice and the sickening sounds of a pony being caught up fully in the industrial scale machinery assaulted every inch of innocence I liked to think I still had. I didn't look back for fear of freezing in horror, only taking the advantage of the sickened slaves and slavers who *could* see to get a few seconds head start. I saw one slave throw up on the spot, another had gone pale while one was actually *smiling*. I wondered what that slaver had done to her...

I paused only for a second to check my hoof. The cut wasn't so bad, just a shallow nick to get under the thread...nothing to worry about. I threw my weight into the slaves as I fought to get away before the slavers regained their senses from the horror show and chased me ag-

“He's getting away! Get that little murderer!”

Alright, maybe not *much* of a head start then!

I ran down the linear pathway, the double doors to the back rooms before me promising hiding places and safety.

They burst open.

Two slavers came running through them, hearing the commotion. One of them had a pistol.

I screeched to the halt right in front of them. Somewhere else! I needed to move! Move! I turned and ran along the side of the machine, up the stairs on to the walkway the slavers used above it. Behind me the

two new slavers finally gathered what was happening and gave pursuit. My hooves clattered on the metal as I passed above the thresher. At the far end was another stairway leading to the roof, below me I could see slavers running for the stairs at the entrance again to cut me off.

BRRRACK!

Around me sparks flew from the catwalk as the slaver unloaded his mouth borne automatic pistol after me. The sound made me scream alone as I kept running, seeing holes ripped around the metal. He had missed, the slavers often didn't get a chance to try out their weapons in this place, I presumed. Even I could see the recoil had caught him by surprise. I heard him swearing as he reloaded. Slaves were screaming, diving to the ground as the gunfire rang out while the slavers ran on to the cat walk after me. Pushing my little stride to its limit, I galloped for all I was worth, trying to outrun the ponies below before they got to the other side.

I realised I was still whimpering, more scared of being caught than determined to actually escape. The entire catwalk shook with the four or five slavers rushing after me, the imagery of it collapsing into the whirling machinery below scared me enough to increase my rate as much as I could. Funny, I hadn't ever even seen the entire machine was mirrored on the other side of the hall too, another row of slaves had stopped to gaze upward at the scene.

The slavers pulled ahead on the ground...I wasn't going to make it!

BRRRACK!

I hit the ground hard, rounds spraying over my head. The deadly whizz past my ears almost led me to think I'd been hit before I saw the burst had struck a supporting girder on the roof. Along with the mass of weight and thumping hooves, I felt the entire structure tremble.

Ooooh not good...

The slavers down below stopped, unwilling to run on to the slowly twisting and shuddering walkway after witnessing what had happened to their friend before. Galloping at an angle I ran to the second stairs, diving for them just as I felt the entire walkway collapse beneath me. A shriek of tortured metal bit through the air as the entire construction bent and tore from the roof, the long walkway bending to the side and landing atop the sensitive machinery. Screams and swearing sounded behind me as the slavers tumbled down it, landing amongst the threads as the blades shattered and shuddered to a stop. Slaves ran in every direction as blades of metal flew from the ancient machine as the edges bit into the walkway and then themselves flew off. The noise was absolute, crashing mixing with screams, the thunk of metal embedding in walls crossed with the twanging of thousands of pieces of string at once being severed.

I heard the slavers cry to get outside and surround the building, another shouted to go and fetch griffins to bring me down. One bellowed to watch for me leaping off the building.

Emerging on to the roof, slanted and covered in disjointed slates, I ran away from the hole as fast as I could before-

BRRRACK!

Bullet holes punched through the roof, one tearing close enough to glance off my side, the heavy steel plate receiving only a small touch from it, but the impact alone knocked me from my hooves. Tumbling toward the edge I cried out as I slammed my hooves on the roof, only stopping as they caught a downed power cord rested over the building.

“Come on...come on Murky...”

Panting to myself, I fought to keep myself balanced across the roof. I could hear slavers rushing out into the yard surrounding it, shouting to the guard towers behind me at the entrance. I ducked behind a set of chimneys, hidden among them from any snipers.

I *needed* a hiding spot, but they knew I was up here! How long till griffins arrived?

I couldn't stop shaking, I was scared. Oh, so scared...no, terrified! They were hunting for me, all alone with no-pony to help me. I wished Number Six were here, or the Stable Dweller, they could tell me where to go, what to do. They'd find some daring thing to jump into!

Enlightened by the idea, I stuck my head out. Slavers hadn't come to this side yet over the diagonal roof. At the same time, sickened horror and a life-saving idea came to mind as I looked down.

Below me was the mass grave. Hundreds of ponies, dumped in death into the old waste pit. I could even see the slave from earlier splayed across the top, the most recent corpse.

Surely...surely the slavers wouldn't spot one more 'addition' to the pile...right?

My mind rebelled, of all things I'd hidden in, this was too far! I'd taken refuge in pigstys, rotten food cupboards, spider infested holes, drainage ducts and musky cellars...but this was too much...I couldn't...

“Got word from Stern! She's sending a wing over to locate him!”

...I had to. This had gone too wrong already. I'd been spotted and called out as an escaping slave. I didn't have time to hang around and try for a different way, I needed to move my plan along before word got to the Wall. If they found out...

I steadied myself on my hooves and clenched my teeth. This wasn't going to be pleasant at all. Oh how I longed for my pigsty again...

With a short canter, I dove from the roof. It was only a single storey high, but to a small pony like me it felt so much higher as I tumbled, hooves first, towards the mass grave. With a hard thud, I landed heavily, the air knocked right out of me as all four hooves protested at the jarring impact. My cuts stung badly at the exertion as I tried to get up. All the time...I tried to not think about what I had landed on.

It was impossible.

They *squelched* under me. A rotten stink threatened to make me vomit. Flies buzzed around my head. I had...I had *stains* on me. Suddenly I was very glad for my stolen pair of goggles. Their eyes stared with lidless purpose, their poses un-natural and I could swear I recognised a couple.

“He must have leapt off where we couldn't see, come on!”

My ears twitched as I heard the shout over the screams of slavers keeping control of the terrified slaves. Looking down, I immediately regretted this idea, the mare below me had been burned to death somehow. I could see her teeth had been removed...why would they even need them?!

But she was to be my temporary saviour.

Muttering apologies through a mouth I dared not open very far, I knelt down, fighting the churning of my stomach as I pulled myself under a couple of the bodies and fought the urge to move as something dripped on my goggles. I needed to stop shaking!

Around the corner they came. Five slavers, including the one with the auto-pistol. They galloped over. I could see them looking up at the roof, turned away from me. Could I just have slipped out in that time?

“He must have jumped.”

“Are you kidding? Kid was terrified, he'd never get that far!”

“Well he's not here now!”

“Shut up, both of you! He's gone alright, so where?”

They turned, spreading out. Some wandered to the broken fence posts, I had considered running through them, but I'd never get away from the slavers in a straight race. I needed to misdirect them first. The buck with the auto-pistol in his mouth wandered closer, his hooves coming near the mass grave's edge. He glanced over it, before turning to his comrades, spitting the pistol out. I could see it hung from his neck on a cord.

“Hey, didn't that stallion try and hide in the grave a few weeks back?”

Every effort it took to not move was strenuous, to not throw up my hooves and beg them not to shoot. By Luna...they'd shot at me! At *me!* The weight of that was just sinking in. I'd been beaten and attacked brutally before, but a gun was a whole new level. If I'd been a few more inches to the right when that bullet struck I would have been down.

“Yeah, just give it a spray and come on. The griffins will find him. Damn, Red Eye isn't going to be happy about that machine.”

The buck turned, taking the pistol back in his mouth and pointing it seemingly right at my face. I closed my eyes, before praying that he didn't see that slight movement. I was only one of hundreds...he might miss me...he might miss me...

BRRRACK!

I felt corpses move, kick up, shudder and jerk under the barrage. For a second or two, it felt like they had all come to life again...clammering...grabbing...pulling me deeper into them. I began to slip downwards as the bullets disturbed the awkward balance of the grave's contents.

I squeaked. I couldn't help it. But as I opened my eyes and saw the buck wandering off, I felt every muscle release from the self induced rigor mortis I'd been in out of sheer terror. The echo of the weapon still rung in my ears as I mentally checked everything.

The moment he was gone, I pulled myself free and galloped without a care for noise. It wasn't until I was past the fence and running into the outer edges of the slaver camps that I finally stopped behind a ruined sky wagon and began to clean my goggles and fleece with some spare rags.

I stopped only as my stomach twisted, reality caught up to me and I realised what I had done. I spent the next ten minutes getting rid of everything I had eaten lately at all before collapsing in a shuddering heap inside the sky wagon.

* * *

Ahead of me lay the end run.

Behind me I could hear slavers and griffins searching for me.

I'd thought being shot at was the point of no return. I was wrong. This was it. If I moved past here, I ceased to be a slave attempting to get away from a guard trying to harm them and became a slave trying to escape entirely. There would be no warnings, no punishments, no Pit and no hope if caught. Punishment for going into the slaver camps around the edge of the Wall were immediate death or painful death, depending on the mood of the guard who caught you.

I was stuck. Fear had taken me at every joint and muscle against moving further. The slave in my mind was begging with me, bringing thoughts of other ways to survive. Perhaps I could find enough things to convince Artery to heal me instead to live! What if I stole things to survive and just hide?

I fought them down, I knew they weren't possible. Not truly. Besides, I needed to get out to draw the picture for the mare as well. It was a tiny reason, more an excuse to tell myself to go, but it did the job.

I took the step. One hoof over the border before galloping toward the most dense concentration of tents and shacks I could see. Any cover would be needed, guard posts and rings of Red Eye's soldiers sat around camp fires were situated everywhere. It was a true shanty town of tight spaces and thin alleyways between encampments.

I'd told myself to dare a lot. But this...this felt like a truly daring endeavour.

I just hoped it would end with the same victory the Stable Dweller had...

* * *

One thing I quickly realised was lots of cover also meant lots of places to run into guards without meaning to. I quickly trotted backwards before slipping inside the shack, listening carefully as a battle saddle laden huge earth pony clomped past. Breathing a sigh of relief, I quickly turned to check the shack, only to very quickly begin making my way back out as I spotted four soldiers sleeping on makeshift bunk beds clearly taken from an old barracks somewhere in the city.

I was sweating profusely. Not just from exertion, not just from fear, but the heat reflected inwards off the massive Wall nearby noticeably made things worse under my heavy fleece. Trotting the way the guard had come, I stuck close to walls, trying to convince myself everything was fine. The Stable Dweller had done this from the Pit, right? She'd been spotted right away! I'd gotten to the camps without a single pony following me! Did that mean I was doing better?

Remembering the iconic waves of magic swirling about her as she had ascended, I quickly put my ego back in its place. She hadn't *needed* to sneak.

Ducking low, I stuck behind a shack's corrugated metal fence. I could hear guards muttering to one another on the other side as I moved hoof by hoof past them. Asphalt and hard rock made silence difficult as my hooves touched ground, dropping my speed to a painful crawl. Briefly, I realised that I should have made pads for my hooves from the rags too. Above me, a guard tower watched the area, although I couldn't see the sniper within it from this angle. Those towers were making life hell. I stuck to the edge of the fence, carefully watching it for any mo-

A barrel appeared.

As fast as I dared, I skipped to the other side of the narrow lane, hiding against the back of a tent to stay out of the line of sight. My breath was sharp and quick as I tried to not fall into the tent from my quick movement.

Moving on, shack to shack, fencepost to tent, I gradually moved my way through the thick camps. Racks of weapons attracted my attention, but all were exposed and honestly, I had no idea how to use them with my mouth properly anyway. Ducking behind a flaming barrel, I watched a soldier wander past wearing a midrange battle saddle that bore double shotguns. I fought down the sting of jealousy. I *really* wanted one of those things. The way the mechanics worked, the angle of the springs and tiny gears into such a tiny package, the precision weights and guidance of the saddle itself to allow it all to sit properly when recoiling. If only for the amazing content, I wanted to steal it from his back.

The fact that it looked like it could turn me into a fine mist was all that stopped me from wanting to somehow find a way, that battle saddle was *gorgeous*. I knew nothing of how to actually repair or understand the mathematics behind it, I just appreciated them and their artistic beauty of design.

Behind me, I heard the stomping of somepony as they got up from their fire, I was about to be spotted!

As quietly as I could, I was forced to follow the soldier with the battle saddle. Creeping right behind him, I simply hoped that he would pass a turning before the one behind me turned the corner. Mere seconds before he did, I found the space to hop between two tents and crawl behind them. They had their backs to a fence, but with a little light hoofing the ground, I dug a hole just deep enough to allow my small size to squeeze under, pushing my saddlebag before me.

I emerged *inside* a tent I hadn't even known was so close to the other side.

With no flooring, I clambered up without obstacle, taking it inch by painstaking inch as I saw two bucks were sleeping at the side with their weapons leaning nearby.

“Mm...mmfph!”

I froze as one shifted, hooves rubbing his eye. Carefully, I tried to move before he woke up.

With a stretch, he dumped himself right back down, still fully asleep.

“Eeh...oh Luna you naughty Princess...”

I wasn't sure whether I wanted to laugh, roll my eyes or wrench in disgust. Many ponies of the wasteland didn't believe in the Goddesses any more, even if they still swore by them. But I'd been brought up by a mother who knew better. To think such things of the great Goddesses, what a sick buck.

Edging around the tent flap, I noticed it opened into a large communal area with a roaring fire at the centre. Guards surrounded it, passing plates of unidentifiable meat between one another from a grill plate over the flames. Sitting on logs, they all stared into the fire or at one another as they conversed loudly, at least four or five conversations going on all at once. I could sneak by this, I'd done harder things before in quieter areas...

It may have been loud. But it was about to get much louder.

It started slow, but with the inevitable volume carried within its wailing drone, the Fillydelphia Balefire Warning Siren began its deathly eerie klaxon scream. Growing in volume second by second, it roared into the Fillydelphia sky, raising hairs on everypony's backs for miles. Even now, two hundred years on, the sound struck absolute terror in many, me especially. Louder and louder, my ears began to hurt as every guard in the area shot to their feet, the clattering of weapons, rush of hooves and screams for what was going on filled the air. I felt rooted to the spot as the sound seemed to penetrate my entire body, images of skeletons in dead homes, of balefire wreathing through cities, of a world ending and the goodness of Equestria being burned out from an unstoppable and indiscriminate wave.

Back then it had signalled the end of the world. Today, it was the call to arms against attack...or for escaping slaves.

The Master had alerted them. The thresher slaves would have confirmed the direction.

My head start was over, they were coming for me.

I took off, stealth was pointless now. Guards would be searching *everything* with enough determination born of the screaming siren's incentive. Above me, waves of griffins took to the sky and every guard tower lit their magical energy bulbs to shine red glares upon the area near the wall. Galloping at top speed, I sped past the guards, not caring if I was spotted. I no longer had the time to worry for that, if I didn't get through the Wall before the guards atop it were settled, I'd never get a hundred feet from the borders of Fillydelphia.

"He's right here!"

"OPEN FIRE!"

Booming retorts of rifles followed by the staccato clattering of automatic weaponry sounded in my wake, stopped only by the mass of cover in the shanty town the guards lived in. Diving around a corner, I rolled as best I could to come to my feet sideways and rushed for any small hole I could find. Sneaking was gone, but I could still evade! The wailing in the air and the screaming of guards was too much commotion for me to even think about fear as I wriggled between shacks and jumped tie-lines from tents. I spilled a crate of rifles as I crashed into it, before screaming and running inside a tent as soldiers piled into the clearing. Drawing my knife, I cut through the back of it as fast as I could, a hole so small only I could fit through. Behind me, a heavily sleeping mare was cut down by incoming rounds as they attempted to hit me through the tent's canvas.

How many times I ran from gunfire. How many sniper shots rang out as they caught a tiny glimpse of me between buildings. How many times I was screamed at to stop.

I kept going. To stop was immediate death. To keep going was survival! Escape!

I burst from the edge of the camp, collapsing and staggering to my feet. Gunfire pocketed the mud around me as I weaved, dodged and ran for all my worth.

"Fucking hit him!"

"You *seen* how small he is?!"

Guards were pouring from the camp, sweet Celestia, how many were there?!

The ground was open in front of me all the way to the wall. My memory flashed back as a booming speaker of Red Eye's voice opened up, demanding the rogue slave to halt immediately. Standing in the road...Number Six bellowing for me to follow...stopping scared in the wake of gunfire and the demands of my Master...

No...

He was not my Master.

Not.

Any.

More!

I screamed an incoherent cry, charging forward, I could see a drain at the bottom of the wall, just like I had imagined! Gunshots fell around me, pinging from rocks and churning up mud. If I could just reach that drain, I'd be safe until the other side. I didn't stop once, running side to side and galloping until my hooves were in agony from striking rocks. The sunset passed behind the wall as I chased it, determined to view it on the other side, find out where the Stable Dweller had gone over the horizon!

I mounted the rocks, diving off them even as a rocket propelled grenade blasted them into shrapnel. My rump stung as pieces flew into me, but I was too determined to stop now! To either side I saw guards running for me, but even I could tell they were too far away to catch me in time. A smile crossed my face, I dodged left and right confidently, knowing all along I had been meant to do this!

Their gunfire missed me completely, their attempts to hit a fast moving and small target camouflaged against a night's darkness were met with failure so long as I didn't run in a straight line. Tracer fire struck the wall, shouts for bringing me down went out.

Above me I heard a flutter in the sky. Like a glass pane shattering, realisation struck me.

Hearing it once was random.

Time seemed to slow.

Hearing it twice was coincidence.

Terror began to clench my stomach as I began to turn my head to look upwards.

Three times was a definite sign I had been followed the entire time...

I saw the jet black griffin with the long barrelled rifle hovering in the air in slow motion. I tried to bend my legs, to dive out of the way, into the drain.

Ka-POW!

It struck me mid leap. The force of a sledgehammer slapping into my side, I felt the hot pain of the bullet crash through my torso and rip its way out of the other side, my armour plating completely failing to even so much as delay it.

I fell, tumbling in the air in a slow arc before landing in a heap.

All the gunfire ceased as I went down and briefly blacked out from the overwhelming force of immediate agony. Immediately, consciousness flowed back and brought with it a world of pain I had never once imagined could exist.

I screamed.

Loud, rasping and full of hurt, I clasped my hooves to my side. I couldn't even remember if that was the entry or exit, my entire body was wracked with agony. I forgot my escape, I forgot the sunset and my freedom. All that was in my mind was panic, pain and fear of dying ever so suddenly as reality shattered my imaginative fantasy. Thrashing in the dirt, my eyes clenched shut, I wailed for anypony, somepony, to come and help me. To save me. I cried for Number Six, I cried for the Stable Dweller and hell, even Celestia

herself to help me. My legs had gone numb. Forcing my eyes open, I almost fainted on the spot as I witnessed the pool of blood spreading from beneath me. Beside me...tauntingly...the drainage ditch sat, its Murky Number Seven sized hole forever to tease me with untouched potential.

Oblivious to my pain and crying, the griffin landed beside me as the guards moved in, weapons pointed. Ragini! That was her name! The griffin from yesterday! Whimpering and moaning loudly, I looked up at her, my tears mixing with the mud and blood on the ground as I raised a single hoof toward her, begging for help, to not be killed on the spot.

She batted it away with her muzzle, before reaching down, her talons pulling my fleece up to examine the wound. I screamed as the wound was aggravated...and as she began to yank my clothing away.

“NO-ARRGH! PLEASE! D-don't...you'll kill me!”

My word went unheard as she pulled it up. I cried out anew as I saw the injury myself...the exit wound. I had imagined bullets made small holes, but it had blown a chunk free of me. Whimpering, I looked away and shuddered. My limbs shook...I...I was going into shock...

The guards broke their calm as they, and Ragini, saw what lurked beneath my fleece.

“A pegasus,” she said, quietly and full of immediate hate, “well well...the rumours are true, then.”

I couldn't respond, I just tried to keep my blood in, trying to hold down on my wound. The pain of even my own hooves touching it gave way to more pain and shouting from the feeling.

“R-Ragini! Please! I...I'm sorry! Let me live...please!”

It was not dignified. I held no pride. I held no shame. The slave who dared to dream was realising his limitations. Ragini shook her head and drew the rifle, the barrel aiming directly to my head.

“Pegasi, only deserve one thing.”

Her eyebrow twitched, before removing the weapon.

“But in your case, I think it's better to let these pathetic wretches do it. Given I watched them fail to catch you, spot you or alert the proper people all night from the FunFarm to here...I have a feeling they are going to be angry with you once they hear that they will be receiving only half rations this week for their failure.”

The guards shocked reaction came in the form of a large degree of hate and bile, spitting and insults of both pegasi and griffins. Ragini merely smiled at me, a devilish smile that promised without a single word that my death was not going to be pleasant.

“I just hope you don't bleed out too quickly...”

She took off, her huge wings spreading and showing that a true flier has no limitations as she flew to the top of the wall to perch. Angry guards looked back down at the one who had earned them their failed test. As one they began to advance, dozens of them. I tried to move, but every time I did I simply cried out in pain. My pitiful screaming, begging and whining as I looked from them to the fatal wound did nothing to dissuade them as they converged from every direction, weapons raised to simply beat me to death. Gasping, shivering and filled with the shock and light headedness of blood loss, I quickly felt consciousness fading as the weapons descended with brutal efficiency and means with which to kill me.

Even as my head was snapped back by the stock of an assault rifle and I screamed from a hoof being pounded on my wound the darkness began to creep into my vision. I didn't even move, I couldn't! Blow after blow descended. But as quickly as it started...it stopped, as I witnessed the guards cease and part. My hazy vision gave way to a horrible croaking from my throat as I struggled to open my one functioning eye from the swelling that had blinded the other one again.

The last thing I saw was a figure advancing through the crowd. Red and black. A single, baleful, glowing crimson light emerged from one eye socket. Before I could even utter the word 'Master' to beg for forgiveness, I fell into the black void that awaited me...and I felt no more.

* * *

“Now listen, children.

DJ-Pon3's gonna have to get serious for a moment. No, really! Yeah, I know it ain't something that we like to do all too often. But I've been telling you all about this stuff for the entire day. But I've been thinking and it feels only truthful that I mention something.

You will fail.

Now, don't treat that how it sounds! What I truly mean is, no-pony can expect to go out there and make it all happen on their first try. The wasteland didn't last two hundred years just because a few ponies were lazy, ooh no. To fight the good fight, we need to learn not only to stand up and try...but to know when we're beaten. To know when we've failed. To learn from it, get stronger and try again. I'm sure all those legends we know of thought the same, hell, a certain mare knows that more than most. So I implore you all, my little wastelanders. If you go out to fight the good fight I keep telling you to...there will be times when it will hurt more than you can imagine. But don't give up. Don't ever give up. The moment we do...that's when Equestria dies.

Bit of a downer note to end on, I know. But I care for you all out there, I wouldn't want to finish this tutorial day without letting you know the harsh reality you'd be in for.

Now back to something happier, this is Sweetie Belle with a song to send us all to sleep tonight peacefully. Hush Now, wasteland, one more painful day is over.

This is DJ-Pon3, bringing you the truth...no matter how bad it hurts.”

* * *

...

...

...

...death wasn't the end of my story, it seemed.

Even amongst the black abyss of pain and defeat, I could hear voices. Some I knew, Velvet Remedy or DJ-Pon3. Some I did not recognise. They rang in my head, my ears picking them up from time to time.

The pain flared...became worse. It threatened to overwhelm me. A sensation of drowning, of fighting to stay afloat.

I felt somepony grab me. Hooves around my body, lifting me up desperately. Lying on my back, I opened my eyes to see nothing but darkness and one mare staring down at me. Light orange hair, streaked with red...

I tried to speak, to reach out, but I just lay silent, unable to function in my own body. Every sound began murky and muddled, as though hearing from underwater.

She spoke five words...I couldn't understand any of them...it looked like she was pleading.

What did she say?!

She glowed with light, the brightness expanding before it contained my entire vision.

And I woke...

Hard metal and red haze greeted me as I awoke.

I was lying on my side, distinctly not dead but possessing a weariness that was hard to quantify to myself. Red smoke flowed from grills on the floor, searing my lungs and half choking me. Whoever put me in here to recover clearly had little care about my ongoing health.

Wait...

I twisted, checking my side. Scar tissue remained, hairs growing back already. It hurt badly, feeling weak and somehow I knew I'd never properly feel the same ever again...but it had healed. My lungs felt clearer, despite the smoke in the small, cramped metal cell. Whatever they had used to heal me had affected my disease as well. It still felt present, but toned down.

In many ways...I felt healthier than I had in years, recovering wounds non-withstanding. What...the...hell...?

I gave myself a once over. I was chained to the floor, all four hooves shackled to colossal iron rings welded to the sheet metal. All of my clothing had been stripped. Fleece, saddlebag and even my goggles. With pain, I realised that along with everything else I had lost my Pipbuck and journal. All I had left was my own skin and a cutie mark that all too harshly reminded me of where I had gone wrong...

...no.

I hadn't gone wrong. It had been a wake up call. I had failed, but somehow, I had realised that it didn't matter. It didn't matter what they said, or what my cutie mark said. Even if I had to wait longer...I was going to get out, somehow. From the moment I had sallied forth under the scream of the siren something had changed within me. I was a different pony now. Not a slave...well...kinda. I was still a slave, but the crucial difference, I no longer *wanted* to be one! I may be scared and liable to being terrified back into line, but the crucial choice had been made.

I was no longer controlled by my slave instinct...regardless of what had happened.

I heard the sound of hooves in the hallway outside the thick cell door.

An authoritative, well spoken voice.

“Open it, please.”

Without a word or hesitation, the door hissed open, spraying steam from the complex mechanics and spraying the smoke in a whirling cloud. From within it, strode a pony.

Red and black...

Glowing crimson eye...

I shrieked, trying to run backward before the chains caught and I collapsed on the ground. Once again, I cried out as my wounds slapped the ground hard, before curling up and just shivering in the wake of...of *him*.

Red Eye.

“Do you know why you are still alive?”

His voice was startlingly young, incredibly well spoken and fluid. I shook my head. He was not my master...but this pony had the authority and ability to control a superpower in the wastes.

“Then perhaps I should regale you of the manner in which you were spared, Murky Number Seven.”

He knew my name.

He strode forward, clearing the smoke. He...he..

...was not Red Eye.

Standing before me was not an earth pony, but now properly revealed was a unicorn. Younger than Red Eye, yet older than myself by a few years. A charcoal black coat with a two tone red mane, he bore a well kept uniform that seemed to be half practical and half scholar coloured in a grey and dark red.

His left eye housed an intricate looking eyepiece. Not cybernetics...but a monocle of sorts of highly tuned technology that hung from one ear. It glowed much in the same way as Red Eye's bionic replacement in his *right* socket.

I had missed the differences in my terror and the cloying smoke. He stood with the grace and poise of an educated pony as he looked down at me. Yet somehow...he didn't look *down* at me. His eyes (well...eye) stared as though viewing an equal. Over the years, I more than anypony had learned the difference.

"I saved your life, Murky Number Seven," he began, taking a breath and lowering his head slightly towards me, "I had heard there was a rumour of a pegasus in Fillydelphia and when the escape siren sounded, well...who else would be most likely to try than a 'hated' pegasus? Naturally I was interested and you are indeed a very interesting pony."

I glanced down at my sides, those pitiful useless wings sat without comment.

"Now, it may have cost me many favours and I had to pull some strings to avoid you being shot on the spot for attempting to escape, so I do hope my...investment...shall prove worthwhile. You are something of an anomaly among the higher ranked overseers, you know?"

I shook my head again, but forced myself to lie against the wall, supporting my still healing wounds. The unicorn's horn lit with red magic, drawing a bowl of stew in from behind him to sit before me. It was...warm.

"They don't often encounter pegasi, hence my interest in acquiring you to here. Now. Come, eat. You are severely malnourished, Murk."

I sniffed it...proper apple stew. I didn't wait, digging in before it was retracted. The unicorn patiently waited as I slurped it down, the first proper meal I'd had in over two months. The taste...the freshness and oh...the warmth. I wasn't very dignified as I gulped every piece down. I even licked the bowl before sighing in relief as my stomach, for once, properly filled. He smiled, before calmly resuming.

"Now, Murky Number Seven, I am sure you have questions."

I felt given to talk, thus far, any threat was being disarmed...but I could not prevent a wariness. Regardless of heart-warming food, he was still one of Red Eye's ponies...

"Who...who are you?"

My voice sounded rough and weak next to his strong tone. He spoke politely, intelligently...yet there was no hint of the "scholarly poshness" that I had once heard in Manehattan when a librarian from Tenpony Tower had come seeking a slave for keeping his library clean. I'm sure anypony could guess why I didn't last long in that job...

The buck smiled, a thin and deceptively friendly looking one. I kept my wits ready, that kind of smile often was not to be trusted. I knew. I had seen Red Eye once use it. In fact...this buck was reminding me a lot of him in more than just image.

"My name is Protégé, a fourth tier ranking work leader within Master Red Eye's endeavours in Unity, Fillydelphia and beyond. I was trained, educated and eventually handed responsibility by his teachings and ideologies. Although too old to have had the same upbringing as he affords foals, I have integrated myself to his plans rather fully in my time under his advice and guidance."

"So," I decided to dare speaking, this buck at least seemed willing to answer questions, "basically...you're his...um...next in line? His hair?"

"I believe you mean, 'heir', Murk," he smiled almost too smoothly as he spoke, "and no, as much as I

would appreciate the offer, I am not. Stern is his second-in-command. However I have had the benefit of much contact with Master Red Eye himself, including opportunities to be taught directly, one to one. Such times when I have sat with him and listened to his wisdom and teachings. To hear of the great Unity he intends in his own words to my ears alone. As such, some might regard me as his student, as he charts my progress week to week, via reports if not in person.”

Protégé looked to the side, leaving me with only the slightly unsettling view of his eyepiece.

“Indeed, I consider myself lucky.”

“Lucky to be trained to kill ponies like me?”

I couldn't conceal the question. Every ounce of me hated what he stood for. I had lived my *life* in slavery and now this clearly intelligent buck considered himself *lucky* to be taught to make *more of it?!!*

“To kill you, Murk?”

“Ponies like me!” I shouted, still riding the high of knowing I had broken the slave in my mind for now, “We're out there dying every day for this place!”

“Murk, I assure you, I make no attempt to hide the casualty rates among the workers,” he spoke with incredible diction, almost rehearsed, “but you must understand that this is necessary. In a hundred years, could Equestria survive when stored food runs out? When we have expended every piece of technology? No, we could not. Fillydelphia, Master Red Eye's great dream, is to build a new world for us, Murk.”

His eye seemed to light with fire, he was passionate about this!

“Have you seen the foals? The fillies and colts?”

I shook my head...I hadn't seen any since I came to Fillydelphia, a slight irony in itself...

“Exactly, Murk. Master Red Eye keeps them safe from all this. All this work...this toil that we all sacrifice to, even me, is in their safety. He protects them, heals them, educates them and trains them for when we, those fighting to save Equestria, eventually manage to build enough industry that the world may operate once again.”

He closed his eyes and sighed.

“I...realise this is a tough world, Murk. Some workers may not be entirely willing. But for the good of Equestria, it is the only way. For what it is worth, I am sorry that yours, that *ours*, is the generation that must go through this. But for every mill, factory and piece of technology we create, we bring us one step closer to our goal. To give our children a better world at the price of our own lives. Is that so evil?”

I listened, I heard and yes...I was even slightly moved by his words. But...a life of slavery...I couldn't let go of what it had done to me. To hear that Fillydelphia served a purpose other than simple greed and power was...mind boggling. Red Eye had often spoke through the loudspeakers about such things, but I had never believed it...until now.

“I...” I couldn't quite grasp what to say for a few seconds, “I don't know...”

Any reply fell away from me, I was not in a condition for an ideological debate.

“Well then,” continued Protégé, “perhaps I should move on to the next obvious topic...yourself.”

I perked up, but remained silent.

“You tried to escape, Murk.”

He wandered from side to side, pacing as he spoke.

“However it was, to be frank, a rather unthoughtful attempt, for all your efforts. My subordinate, Ragini, had you tagged the moment you left the FunFarm, as I'm sure you know. However I must point out that she actually saved your life...”

“*She shot me!*”

“And you,” he continued, without so much as a breath, “were about to crawl into a drainage tunnel filled with tainted chemicals that would have killed you in moments in a rather...distasteful...way. Did you not read the sign?”

His voice dropped at the last sentence as I sighed and shook my head.

“I can't read...”

“A pity, lucky for you that your choice in armour was fairly uninformed.”

“She shot me with an anti-machine rifle, what good would any armour do?”

Protégé almost seemed to grin.

“An anti-machine rifle, Murk? She shot you with a low calibre sniper rifle she keeps to fire from flight. If she had used an anti-machine rifle...I assure you, I would have been using a mop to bring you here rather than my magic.”

Somehow, I didn't find the joke funny. This entire conversation was weird, I had thought myself free...then dead...now once again in Red Eye's stocks in a prison cell. This was...this was too much to take in at once really. Only Protégé's strange calmness and polite nature seemed to be holding even me together. Even so...I could not help but feel threatened, I had seen Red Eye's cruelty through his silver tongue...

“Now, I shan't even go into your choice to take oatmeal which goes off in a day or the scrap not worth more than fifty caps or so that weighed you down so much. Instead I would rather denote that you owned some things of great interest that showed you were serious about escaping.”

“I was.”

“So I see. However, you want freedom badly, Murk. I can see it in your eyes, but I am going to tell you the reason why you failed, more than any.”

That caught me by surprise. I lowered my eyebrows, trying to stand up.

“You failed, Murk...because you do not know what it is you want.”

What?

“I...but I did! I was...am...dying! I have an-”

“An irradiated and marginally tainted infection, Murk. I know. My personal physician detected it when he was healing you. He did not remove it, I only have so many resources to expend and while he is capable, he is not a surgeon level doctor. But that is precisely the point. You tried to escape because you wanted to *live*. I will tell you, Murk. Escape from Fillydelphia is not impossible. But you must be willing to die for it. To try so hard that it goes beyond what we can possibly predict. To push so hard that nothing could ever hold you back. But you cannot harness that, not yet anyway. You sought to live, a basic function. But what you say you want is *freedom*.”

He lowered his eyebrows, looking almost saddened by the fact himself.

“How can you truly want freedom hard enough to escape, when you have no idea what freedom is?”

...he was right.

I had no idea what freedom entailed. I had never had it, no matter how much I said I had no master...I did. No real choice or will to do as I pleased. It seemed blindingly obvious now in retrospect.

“Yes, Murk. If you want to desire freedom enough to escape, then you will have to first *taste* freedom.”

I lowered my head, feeling a wave of depression seeping in. How would I ever know that?

“But thankfully for you, Murk. I am going to offer you your freedom.”

My eyes almost flew off my head in how wide they became. Joy catapulted in my mind, held back only be a wariness born of a life of disappointment.

“H-how? What? I mean...”

“What *I* mean, is that Master Red Eye offers ways to *earn* your freedom. In this case, two years service on special operations such as exploring Stables and other similar buildings. Now Murk, I *am* a work leader who specialises in the workers who wish to attempt to find their freedom that way. Some seek only the violence it provides while others truly seek to become free through service to the cause. I have signed you to it.”

Wait, what? I had known about it, any slave could do it, but I didn't want that! It was dangerous! You had to kill Stable dwellers if you found them! I...I couldn't do that!

“In greater service to Master Red Eye, you are now under me. I am your new master, Murk. I hope you will show great enthusiasm. You are an interesting pony, not just for your pegasus wings either. I do hope you attain your freedom, truly.”

He looked honest. But the thought of the dangers I would have to face...for *two years* only echoed in my head as I felt tears drift into my eyes. I had sought to escape. All I had found for myself was years of work in a harsher environment, no matter how polite or...or...strangely *nice* this Protégé seemed!

“Now, Murk. I shall leave you to my personal overseer who will take you to the Mall. Four walls, a roof and better meals than you have had. I am not a brutal leader, Murk. I seek only ponies who wish to serve Master Red Eye and help us to create something beautiful for the children of Equestria. Please, take comfort in knowing I will only permit you on tasks that truly will help us. I am not given to wasting special resources in the ponies that I locate to work for me.”

I didn't know what to feel. I just stood as he turned and walked back outside. I heard a heavy pony approaching. From Protégé's look, it was his overseer. Heavy clumps of hooves and a large shadow mixed with a low, deep and almost uninterested voice.

“Take him to the Mall. Get him cleaned up and something to eat then put him with the workers. Try to keep him away from the raiders.”

“Mhm...whatever.”

Protégé left...and in his place walked...

...*him*...

“Hey there, cutie pie...”

The Master grinned wickedly as he passed his bulk through the thin doorway, backing me into the cell as he drew the key to my shackles. A deep, rumbling and taunting laughter set my eyes to water once again as I huddled in the corner.

“You and I are going to get along so well, little Murky...”

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Runt of the Litter – You were never the largest, subject to a series of beatings and bullying through your life. You gain a small damage resistance bonus against non-critical unarmed attacks. Doesn't hurt any less, mind you...

Footnote: Quest Perk Attained!

Shadow Canter (Rank 1) - Whether for crime or survival, you have begun to show your ability to stick to the shadows whilst objects strangely go missing in your passing from both pockets and homes. You gain + 10 to sneak and any thefts you make are twice as likely to succeed.

Chapter 4: The Sinner

* * *

“Nervous? Don't be ridiculous. You're only facing a large crowd of ponies who will be watching your every move and silently judging you.”

“What is it like to be trapped?”

Like being alone, this is something I guess I didn't properly realise until I was shown directly. In this case, my unsuccessful attempt to escape Fillydelphia.

I'm sorry...whoever you are, Stable Dweller. I failed you. Looking back I made every mistake in the book by not preparing properly or knowing what to really do when I got to the Wall itself. I guess I'm not like you, not as strong or heroic as you are. Maybe someday I'll know the sweet taste of freedom that Protégé spoke of. At least, I imagined it would be sweet. It's not something that I had any knowledge of...

And that...is pretty much the entire point.

I was trapped. Stuck in the one place that you need to know how important freedom really is to ever hope to have the sheer determination required to escape. A harsh lesson learned in pain and blood that I would never forget. However, my mind began to wander to the discussion with Protégé and his promises of freedom. Whether he was telling the truth or not was unknown to me. So far as I've known no pony has ever survived the two years of hell to earn their freedom from Red Eye. Who could? Two years of Ministry Hub exploration, Stable recovery and brutal underground skirmishes in, around and away from a highly radioactive balefire crater? Not including, of course, any random tasks slaves might be assigned.

Not only was I trapped behind walls, I was trapped to the whims of a new master. A master who had further bound me into a schedule likely to kill me with no choice otherwise, all the while talking of my service to Equestria.

I may have been further from the Wall now...but I could feel the walls of my life closing around me ever harder with every step that I took. From the Pit to the time limit of harsh sickness and now to even greater odds than ever before. Indeed, I began to wonder what would kill me first. Would I die from some rogue security system in a bunker? Shot down by Stable residents defending their homes? The radiation sickness growing to harm me once again?

Or would it be The Master to break me?

Chainlink Shackles, although I could never bring myself to call him that, now had a hold on my life. Granted permission to oversee my day to day pursuits, I could not imagine a worse figure to be around. For all of Protégé's apparent calm of mind and kindness to his 'workers,' I sensed that all the wickedness he could have shown was instead communicated through The Master.

I had sought to escape the trap of The Master's everlasting chains around my throat and hooves, pulling me down and setting in concrete the rest of my life. I had overcome my fears to charge the Wall simply to escape the pain he would bring. Despite my newfound emotion and...and hell, even courage, it was not enough to allow me to exist near him. He was my foil, my true Master. A living symbol of slavery.

All my efforts had been, subconscious or not, to escape either him or what he represented in Equestria. That was why I had tried.

That is why that now, in the aftermath of my failure, I felt trapped. Broken...

That is why...I'm afraid. So very afraid of what he might do to me, the slave he had always wanted.

One born to be under his control.

I...I'm so sorry...I don't mean to repeat myself over and over...I just...

I'm so scared of him...he said he had raiders at his stock hall, they kill pegasi!

I...

...

I need somepony...the Stable Dweller or...or...anypony who can help me...

...please...

* * *

The water hit me like a buck to the face.

They used a seemingly unending jet stream of liquid from a hosepipe to 'clean' me. Due to the unclean and dirty water, a high pressure hose was hooked up to blast the dirt right off me quickly and efficiently. At least that was the theory.

Instead, it was borderline torture.

Blasted back against the old shower room wall, I struggled to breathe. If I opened my mouth it was filled with water, if I wailed they only laughed as I staggered and fell repeatedly as the liquid stream washed over my body, legs and face. I was beginning to go numb, both from the ice cold temperature and the feeling of an unending blow to my body where-ever they sprayed me. Flailing my hooves, I tried to signal to them. I couldn't...I couldn't breathe!

The water stopped, gurgling away through the grimy shower block into the drain that led to the basement. I presumed they had a recycling machine set up to use this much water on just a slave...

“Get up, Number Seven.”

The voice rumbled from the unlit areas near the door.

I trembled, unable to even speak. Only tepid gasps left my sore throat from the feeling of every limb beginning to freeze up in unfeeling numbness. Turning my head, I tried to plead with them through sight alone. My watchers were invisible in the darkness, my vision further hampered by hazy vision from a dizzy head.

“Get *up*, Number Seven!”

Spraying water even as I coughed and attempted to even breathe normally, my body awakened with brief spasms of activity, attempting to get even one leg under me. I had not been given my clothing back or any of my possessions. My wings drooped lifelessly at my side, painfully blown by the force of the hose from where they were normally locked in place by dead muscles. I was soaked through, dripping water even as I shook almost violently.

Sweet...sweet Goddesses I couldn't even cry out in pain...the c-cold...

“Too slow. Again.”

The *clack* of the hose's nozzle sounded in the darkness outside of the pale blue light of the showers before the water struck my face once more. With my tooth loosening again and feeling like I had just taken a gun stock to the head, I was whipped around before they swept me from my feet with the stream. My side and inverted wing crashed to the mossy tiles where I lay.

I had thought I could shout “I'm clean!” or demand that it stop...

But *he* was in the darkness there, shouting commands. He would decide when...

Shaking furiously from the cold, I kept my eyes screwed shut, trying to block it all out as the water washed over my prone body. I couldn't...my knees stung from striking the hard ground so often, my teeth were chattering so much they *hurt* and The Master was no idiot. The breaks to force me to stand were not for

my benefit, no, they were just to ensure I didn't pass out and miss all he had planned in his sick interpretation of Protégé's instructions.

The Master knew exactly what he was doing.

The water ceased, the painful pressure on my upturned back relented, leaving behind what felt like lines of bruises and seized up muscles thick with cramps. Through clenched teeth, I lowly moaned...the most I could possibly muster to express that I couldn't handle this. I wasn't even being cleaned...

“Get up, Number Seven.”

Number Seven. His new pet name for me. How overjoyed he had been to hear I had a designation to use. To demean me with and make me nothing but a statistic.

I dragged my hooves across the tiles, whimpering softly as I tried to get them beneath me...maybe if I was just fast enough I could please The Master. Maybe he might stop-

“Too slow. Again.”

I didn't even get up before I was knocked head over hooves to the wall. Only a tiny degree of forethought led me to not concuss myself against it by keeping my head forward. The pressure of the water jet blasting from the darkness increased, searing across my face, filling my mouth, choking my throat, stopping my airflow...

I panicked, trying to move, but unable to breathe, unable to see and losing all balance from the roar of the water in my ears I could do little but flounder. I...I couldn't feel my hooves any more...

“Get up, Number Seven.”

“...pl...please...”

“Get *up*, Number Seven!”

“C-cold...can't feel...”

“Too slow. Again.”

* * *

I was left to drip dry, standing amidst a darkened room across from the cells I had first woken in. The slavers had told me if I moved or sat down, I would be put back in the showers for another 'cleaning.'

Clean was the last thing I felt. My body ached all over...yet no visible marks came through for anyone to know of The Master's treatment of his new favoured slave. I could almost feel the sickness about to set in, for my own fatal disease to flare up any second. On top of that, I was alone.

Once I had believed I would never be alone again. DJ-Pon3 would never leave me so long as I had my PipBuck. Now that machine was long gone, taking with it the sweet voice of hope and truth. I couldn't even see the walls thanks to a single dim orange light above me ruining my night vision. My hooves trembled from both the cold and the exertion of standing upright in one place for...for how long? Hours? A few agonising minutes?

Time held little meaning in Fillydelphia. What felt like three days could turn out to be a few hours thanks to the red haze, interior workings never ceasing and the irregular shifts. I had no perspective of time even while outside. For all I knew it had only been one day since the Pit...not three. In here, however, was like a void.

Worse...the room was soundproof. After living my life with hypersensitive hearing...dead silence other than the drip of water from my body was like being cast adrift on to the moon for a thousand years.

But at least it gave me time to think.

I wanted out. That would never change now. The Master could hurt me, break me...he could make me

his obedient servant, but I would never lose track of my own fantasies. Of my wishes to someday taste the freedom Protégé had so teased me with and of my hopes to leave this whole hellhole behind. I didn't want it in two years of destroying myself to do it...I wanted it now.

Or...well...in a bit. That sounded good...too weak right now...

...too scared...

I was still trembling. I may have *wanted* out...but all the courage and determination I'd had scant hours ago was just...gone. My failure had broken something. Was it my confidence? My spirit? I honestly couldn't tell...all I knew was that if I could do it all again...I'd probably falter. The tearing pain in my scarred gut from Ragini's bullet led me to quiver and shake every time I even imagined being brave again. I tried to tell myself it was only the dripping cold water making me shiver, but I knew it was terror incarnate. Both for my life...and of *him*. What was he going to do next? Brand me? Cut off my wings?

My eyes began to water. I dared not even blink lest I be accused of moving, what might he do if I shifted an inch?!

The door opened.

“You are learning, Number Seven. Good...good...”

The Master strode through, turning his body to fit through the narrow doorway. Even then, the segmented leather and steel plate armour he wore scraped and ground against the sides of the door as his huge frame entered the small room. I met his eyes, before lowering mine. I had seen crazed slavers...but in one brief glance I had witnessed nothing but pure, unadulterated hate.

“Now we're going to play a little game, y'see, Number Seven?”

His voice was indeed playful, almost whimsical in his rough throat. I got a brief glance of those rotted teeth grinning at me. *That* grin...like it promised he would enact all of his life's most sadistic desires should I try to disobey. I tried to not look at that cutie mark, the everlasting chain...I didn't want to *ever* think about the idea of spending all my life under him.

“It's where I try to guess things about you,” he continued, circling me, “see how much I can guess just from looking at you, eh? Nod if I'm right and just answer me if I'm wrong.”

I couldn't see behind me and I dared not move my head. But I could feel him...his mere presence behind me, he could be drawing anything. He had knives, a magical shock rod, whips...

“First off, your name...Number Seven, was it?”

“Murky Num-”

CRACK!

“**AARGGHH!**”

Whiplash's blows were *nothing* compared to this, I screamed as loud as I possibly could as every leg collapsed beneath me from the force of the blow. I immediately wept openly as it felt like my back had been torn open entirely.

“**No it's not, you stupid foal! Your name is *Number Seven!***”

I felt his head lean down to me, bellowing in my ear. He turned away, replacing the whip and lowering his voice...immediately regaining the heedless playful rough tone from before, as though nothing had happened. I stood up again, crying and quivering on all fours.

“So your name is Number Seven, then...”

The Master advanced, bending down to hold his lips inches from my own, gazing into my eyes. The stench made me want to heave on the spot as he spoke.

“So, you got family?”

I nodded.

“Enclave?”

“N-no...”

His hoof slapped me across the face hard enough to make me stagger to the side a good four feet. Great Luna...his hoof was almost the size of my *head*!

“No, **what?**”

“No, Master!”

“Better, so let me take a guess...”

He wandered again, before stopping. I had to fight to not cry out in violation as I felt a hoof of his run across the cutie mark of my left flank...I felt it follow the chains. I couldn't see him! Feeling his cracked and ragged hoof drifting across my own flesh made my skin crawl. It...it was wrong, I wanted to pull away but...but I couldn't...

“Cutie mark of shackles, I like it. Ready to catch you if you'll ever run. Born slave, eh?”

After three seconds of trying to muster the courage, I nodded, a quick and nervous shivering nod. A whimper escaped my mouth as I felt him tap the ends of the shackles permanently etched upon me as a reminder of my lifelong contract to slavery.

“So what happened, slave? Parents from the bastards on the clouds?”

I couldn't move, I just screwed my eyes shut, trembling. I wanted him to go away...just *go away*...

“No? Well then...” he drifted off, before coming back around to face me, “what do we have here then? You an accident, Number Seven? The seventh one? Your mommy get beasted by raiders, eh? How'd you like to think about that, eh? The son of a **fuckin' cannibal?**”

I whined out loud, shaking my head, only to squeal as I was flattened to the floor by another agonising blow to the side of my face. I tried to curl up, but his hoof pressed flat on my face, making me squirm in panic that he might drop his weight on it.

“**I said to tell me if I'm wrong, slave!**”

His voice was as loud as Slit's magically enhanced shouts! The small space amplified the volume that even this earth pony was causing me physical pain by merely talking. Gasping, I screamed out,

“I think...I think my father was a slaver!”

“Oh yeah? Where was it, near Shattered Hoof? I went out there for Red Eye once long ago, you know? Got a few slaves in my room to pass the time...how'd you like it if it was *me*, eh?”

My blood *froze*. Even as his hoof lifted off, I just lay there, eyes wide open.

“One way or another, you're just a dejected little worm, you are, Number Seven. Your mother wouldn't even have wanted you if she hadn't been done up by some slaver with a mind to get some tail that night! Born to slavery, living in slavery and going to *die* in slavery! But I like you, Number Seven...you know why?”

I didn't move, just glancing up at him, before his hoof slid down my body (Sweet Goddesses save me...) to prod my wing not too gently.

“Pegasus. A real Goddesses damned pegasus right in front of me where I can do whatever I want to him.”

I tried to shift back and hide my wings, as though it would actually make a difference. I couldn't even think straight, he was in complete control here.

“You lot, you winged bastards, you've killed a lot of my partners over the years. Fancy Enclave soldiers scouting around or lone Dashites all thinking they're some hot shot in the Wastes. Never been able to get my hooves on one...until now. I was born to do this, you see, kid? Old Equestria would never have let someone like me run free, but here...I *thrive*. All my life, never had a pegasi slave, let alone one who looks like he was born just for me.”

I couldn't contain my voice.

“I don't know any of them! I can't even fly! I...I didn't do anyth-”

“QUIET, SLAVE!”

His hoof slammed down on my torso, knocking all the wind from my lungs, crushing my wing and causing racking pain through my ribs around the swollen healed flesh of the bullet wound. Concentrating on merely breathing again, I couldn't do much but listen.

“Pegasi should have been exterminated back when the world ended! I've waited *years* for somepony like you, Number Seven. Oh how I love all the slaves, even the ones that resist...that try to beat me. They all fail, you know? But you, oh perfect you...”

He stopped pacing, his grin spreading as his whole bulk leaned down. His voice took on a predatory and sadistic tone.

“How I wish this could continue. I wanted you for myself, but Protégé got to you first. See...we're going to The Mall now, as per his orders. Pity I don't have time to deal with you one to one before you're under that little upstart's 'protection.' Don't think you're safe though, I'm *still* your overseer. Consider this a little taster of life with me had he not gotten you instead, slave. I may not have free reign, but...

He paused as he raised up, cackling to himself.

“...who's to say we can't have a little...accident...en-route to have some more fun before it ends? After all, I am *sure* I heard Protégé say to put you in with the raiders...”

I screamed. I begged, throwing my hooves forward, reaching for his hooves.

“NO!” I wailed, shaking my head furiously. “They...they don't just kill pegasi! I heard it before! They hate...they *hate* pegasi! Think they're all to blame...”

His eyes betrayed that hate again, directed at the fact I was born with wings...

“Because you all are, you feathered wretch. Shackle him! Same kind as your little cutie mark there, eh? Don't you like that? It's what you're meant for after all.”

With a motion, two unicorns moved in, shackling me up by all four hooves in a complex chain that made all leg movement difficult. They also fitted a heavy rusted collar around my neck. The Master tied the chain to his armoured barding.

“Come on, little Murky,” he cooed, “time to go meet the sick fucks your kind helped create. I don't suppose you'll survive them, but even if they do decide not to kill you, don't worry. I'm sure they'll make it interesting enough for me to watch.”

“But...I didn't...I'm not...”

He didn't care, instead simply dragging me from the cell. Only as I emerged into greater light did I realise I hadn't a single mark or bruise on me. Despite all the agony of my preparations for Protégé's stock under The Master, there was no evidence and no proof of his abuse. The Master was, in his own sick way, a genius.

In just ten minutes he had nearly broken me. Already I could hear that familiar voice, the slave in my mind, demanding that I simply obey him and hope that he would treat me as any other slave. I knew that wouldn't happen.

But above all, one thing terrified me more.

The dreaded thought of what would have happened had I not attempted my escape and simply went with The Master to be entirely owned by him alone echoed in my mind. This had been nothing but a small slice of what would happen. What if Protégé wasn't there? What if he had the freedom to keep me in there and...and do whatever he wanted to me? The feeling of his hoof tracing my cutie mark made me want to throw up on the spot even through memory. I couldn't stop repeating it in my head, like the thought itself disgusted me enough to take control of my imagination. I fought back, trying to think of my conviction. Escape...escape to the world. In some way...in some small way, it was a tiny and quickly forgettable comfort to consider the outcome. To know that my failed attempt had some purpose in my life still, to have avoided his full and complete attention and be picked up by Protégé instead.

However, as I plodded along behind The Master...My Master...it helped little as I was marched outside and toward his 'accident.'

Raiders.

I felt myself simply wanting to cry as I walked...but I could not muster even the courage to do so in front of The Master for fear of being told not to.

* * *

It's true that there is a story behind every pair of wings in the wasteland.

Unfortunately, it's doubly so. For every unique story a pegasi owns there is a single, defined and accusing one held by many of the ground's residents that pegasi are inherently to blame for the state of Equestria. My mother once told me the story. When Equestria looked set to die, Cloudsdale, the capital of the pegasi, was struck first and wiped off the map entirely. Knowing of many more Balefire spells, missiles and bombs approaching, the pegasi shut up the sky and hid themselves from the destruction. They left a wasteland below, abandoning it to the flames and the scouring destruction while they kept their eyes pointed ever upwards. In two hundred years, they have not returned to help anypony. If it weren't for the odd tale of rare pegasi in the wastes, no-pony would even know they existed at all, it seemed.

But for those of us down here, unlucky enough to be born with the genes of the pegasi long dormant in family lines, we still bore the responsibility and bigotry of leaving earth ponies and unicorns to die alone. Whether we wanted it or not, in our wings, they saw the lack of the sun and moon to guide them. They saw dead fields bereft of weather designed to grow fresh food. They still felt the anger of those lost while the pegasi flew away from the flames into the sky.

I couldn't help but feel this was something of a metaphor for my life in reverse. I had watched the Stable Dweller leave this hellish place for somewhere better without taking me in much the same way. But I didn't hate her...much the opposite. Every time I saw her in my mind I loved everything she stood for more and more. Why couldn't the others do the same? Had the pegasi really been so selfish? Surely it was all a big twisted mistake through uncharted history...

As I was dragged outside, everypony else begged to differ.

It was a long trot to 'the Mall' and I am sure The Master made it longer. Refusing to permit me any clothing, my wings were on show for all to see. Slaves ceased their work, unattended by guards who stood and stared. Confusion gave way to disbelief which in turn became a slow building anger. Before long I was attempting to dodge tin cans and hurled rocks. Guards held slaves back, hell, they held their *comrades* back!

I cantered as best I could. At first I tried to blank it out, to just close my eyes and follow the pull of The Master's leash around my neck as I was paraded like a prize for all to see.

"Fucking pegasus!"

"Why don't you just fly away, eh?"

A tin can hit my side, making me jump in shock more than pain. But my eyes opened to see groups of slaves rushing to the side of the road, screaming insults. Not every slave did...many remained and some even

looked sadly at me as the bigots of the world made their opinions known.

But it was enough...with shouts, screams and pathetic reminders of a long gone past they now numbered enough to force The Master to acquire an escort of griffins with a hoof signal to the sky.

“You see, Murk?”

I was shivering again, this time *definitely* from terror, as I watched a unicorn buck trying to get close enough to hurl a brick at me. The griffins warded him away with a flash of claws and the aiming of numerous high powered rifles. I saw faces I recognised. Moose and Lemon were jeering, hurling whatever they could at me. I saw a blue earth pony with a red mane hurling something from a length of rope to build it's momentum. The half brick impacted against my side as I screamed out loud. I tried to run, but The Master pulled the chain, keeping me on my slow parade. I heard him announce to the crowds that here was the pegasus who tried to escape and leave them all behind like all pegasi did long ago.

“You have no place in the outside world. They don't *want* your kind.”

A griffin had to dodge as some telekinesis fired a length of rebar at me. Alerted by the movement, I only barely dodged as I became tangled in all the chains tugging me along. My face felt damp again, only this time from my own eyes, not the hosepipe's water.

The noise was becoming intolerable. I heard a mare screaming of some lone 'Dashite' that murdered her family and sold her to here.

I saw Whiplash. He fixed me with a stare, that cold stare of anger he often did before striking.

Others demanded I go back above the clouds and stop taunting them. Some begged me to fly them out of here to atone for what my kind had done in the past. I could only drag my hooves and keep walking.

“I...I'm sorry, I can't...”

“*I bet you're in league with the slavers to sell us all out! That's what pegasi do!*”

“But...I don't...”

“*Take him to the Pit, I want to see a pegasus get clobbered!*”

“I...I...”

“*KILL HIM!*”

“*Hey look, he's crying! Bet Shackles is gonna kill him now, serves you right you traitor!*”

“*Betrayer!*”

“*Selfish bastards!*”

It was *everypony*. Every age, every gender, every type that wasn't a pegasus (of which there were none) and from every accent. I backed from side to side, always and forever being dragged by the chain around my collar, trying to stay away from them as the small crowds jeered and screamed. I broke down before them all. I screamed back at them, trying to convince them. I wanted to take out my journal and show them the picture of my mother, show them that I was one of them! I screamed about my cutie mark, didn't it prove I was just a slave? I...I told them my wings didn't work.

They didn't even listen. They didn't *want* to listen.

A passing cart held Sooty Morass. His dry cackle as he witnessed me set even my emotions to anger at the arrogance and condescending tone as he reached off the cart to pat my head. From the looks of things...he was even running a few slaves ragged to pull his stocks around on a work wagon.

He took me through the streets, through the pens and through the industrial zones. We passed the

threshing mill on the way from the old prison. We crossed the fractured main wagon roads to pass by the factories. Slaves I knew laughed at it being me, calling they “always knew” I was weird. I saw Wicked Slit chasing down a slave earth pony buck, throwing him to the ground and magic and resting that curved knife on his throat. She was screaming at him for not performing as well as he could.

My passing drew her attention as she even forgot about the buck to wander over next to her guards. Her eyes fell to my wings and to my chains before settling on The Master. I tried to hurry up, but The Master half bucked me back again with savage blow to my chest. Lying on the ground, being lightly dragged, I saw Slit looking down as The Master continued to pull his prize away.

I expected her to say something. I expected her to scream.

She just grinned...as her knife pointed at me a few times before drawing itself lightly in front of her own throat. I gulped, shivering as I gathered the meaning of her gesture as she began to cackle before eventually roaring with laughter. An evil shrieking as I was pulled away from her factory toward the care of one even she respected and admired the teachings of. Even as she turned away and began bucking slaves and guards to get back to work she continued laughing, only stopping as she noticed the buck high tailing it away. Her all too familiar outcry of fury and the sound of her galloping hooves was the last thing I heard before she fell out of sight.

Amidst the humiliation of being displayed to the populace of Fillydelphia as the failed escapee and being revealed as a pegasus...I guess I took some comfort in that she still didn't know who took her goggles...

Everypony who had demanded me to do work seemed to have seen me. My heart was tight with the hate flowing freely from everypony, slaves and guards alike. The Master had planned this...he must have known it would affect me...

But as he dragged me past a forge filled with slaves, even he couldn't have planned the heartbreak he was about to cause me.

Amongst the slaves rushing to the sides to view this rare pegasus I caught a glimpse of somepony running and pushing their way forward. Ponies made way...as *she* came to the front of the crowd. Her back hoof held by a chain to a post to keep them working, she pulled her bedraggled yet forever beautiful light orange mane away from her eyes as she saw me being pulled in chains as a demonstration of futility.

Never could The Master have done anything to me that hurt more than seeing all the bright hope and optimistic wishes come crashing down from her face. I gazed back, trying to not cry even as I saw her own eyes well up. She followed me, trying to keep up as best she could through the crowd. They started chanting, 'Death to pegasi!' I saw her pleading look and her mouth move just enough to allow me to lip read her words.

“I'm so sorry, Murky...”

I could feel dampness in my eyes. No! I...I wouldn't cry...not now! Not when she could see me. I had to be strong, for me...for her...I didn't want the last sight she had of me to be one of a pathetic wretch begging. I could almost hear DJ-Pon3 telling me to stay strong, stand up and keep fighting. I stood taller, prompting an interested glance from The Master and an increase in our pace. The mare cantered to keep up, moving up until her chain locked and firmly stopped her from following any more.

Scarcely believing myself...I only knew I couldn't let her spirit break, even if I had failed. I tried to think of what to shout...

“Come on, *slave!*”

I felt the tug, tripping me over the heavy chains to force me to stagger onwards.

“He has a name!”

The Master stopped.

He turned.

She stood as tall as she could. Ponies split from near her, retreating quickly as The Master lowered his head and began to stomp slowly toward her. My heart skipped a beat as I saw him ready up his knife like before with a nudge of his jaw. I shook my head to the mare, wanting to scream at her to back down.

“Care to repeat that, slave?”

The Master's voice was dry, his mouth still grinning through horrid teeth as he pulled me with a tug of his hoof up beside him and forced me to the ground, one hoof resting on my back to keep me there. His little pet underneath him.

“He *has* a name.”

The entire yard was suddenly silent. I wished I could move, to dive in front of the knife. I was no doubt being killed off anyway, better to die saving her. But no, his hoof held me solid on the ground, making me whimper as he placed some weight on my spine. The mare looked from me to The Master, right in the eyes. He cackled.

“Tell me, little mare, what *is* his name?”

“Murky.”

“Ah, so you *do* know him, eh?”

Oh no...no no no...

“Enough to know he isn't just some cog in your machine! He deserves freedom more than any of us after how he's been treated! Look, you know he's worn out as a slave and you must know he's badly ill! He isn't any good to Red Eye like this. Why can't you just let him go?”

“Good...good...”

The Master turned away from her, letting me up. I felt her lean forward, offering her neck and shoulders to help me stand. I wished I could just stay here with her...forget Protégé's offer. Her voice whispered in my ear,

“I'm so sorry it didn't work, Murk,” a soothing tone, “please, just hang on. My buck and I...we'll try to help you if we can when we're together again. Shackles...he won't make it fast, I'm so...so sorry...but please, don't give up, there *is* a bright future. You will find your courage, Murky.”

Those words...like last time, filled with promise, hope and ever comforting assurance. I wanted to reply, but I dared not raise my voice, she couldn't hear like I could. Softly resting her head against mine for just a second, I took comfort in feeling another pony so close and caring. A blissful moment, frozen in time for the half second it lasted, before the mare then turned back to The Master. He was grinning maliciously, his head held high.

“Hah, isn't that cute, then? Two little pathetic slaves, deluding themselves that anypony actually *cares*...”

“He's been in slavery all his life. Does he *really* deserve this?”

The massive earth pony turned away from the smaller unicorn once again, as though having to decide. Without warning he spun back, faster than I ever believed he could move.

“**Yes!**”

His hoof *fired* out, striking her so hard that she hurtled over six feet away. With a crash, she hit three other slaves, knocking them all clean over a pile of wooden stands ready for tools. Clutching her side with a gasp of pain, she still managed to look up from the wreckage as he reattached his knife to the belt, apparently deciding not to use it.

“But I'm going to let your insolence go, little mare,” he casually intoned, “because he clearly means something to you. It'll be all the better for you to know he's got a date with the raiders. You can lie around,

nursing those broken ribs and just imagine the things they'll be doing to him...far away where you can't ask them politely to stop, eh?"

I tried to run to her side, but my own chains caught as The Master stomped on them before I could reach her. The mare looked breathless, unable to talk. I saw a couple of other mares rush over to her, helping her onto her side. At least she had some allies.

"Perhaps once I'm done with him, I'll come looking for you too. I don't imagine he'll last too long after all...hehehe..."

The look in her eyes as The Master dragged me away gave rise to a new hatred...one of my captor and my overseer. Chainlink Shackles would...I don't know...pay? What could I do?

The most I could for now was try to assure her to not worry as best I could through trying to not cry as I once again left her behind. I tried to walk as tall as I could even as the jeering resumed, only looking back to try and mouth that it'd be ok...

Only once we had turned the corner did I let it all hit me as yet another street of pegasi hating slaves remained...

* * *

The Mall.

Finally and mercifully the crowds ended. My ears ached from the hateful words and screams that had been directed at me, simply because I had two extra appendages on my torso. But here we were. The Mall, Protégé's 'worker camp' rose from a clearing like a giant that had fallen on its front. A massive shopping centre of old Fillydelphia that hadn't fallen due to the massive size. Multiple storeys tall, its roof was too low to be seen over the factories and their towering areas but was well over fifty feet in height still. Angular, strange geometry covered most of it in diagonal triangles or designed scaffolding to hold it all together like some giant metal and very angular flower facing to the sun. The large glass dome in the middle of the roof acting as the centre with metal plates and angles floating out in all directions to form petals. Despite the horrid makeshift walkways leading from upper floors to nearby manufacturing factories and scrap watchtowers, it must have looked incredible from the sky. I tried to remember the flowers my mother had showed me in books...

The main entrance loomed before me, covered in razor wire and barricades, it sealed access with multiple guards under the looming triangle of skeletal metal designs. I couldn't read the name, but I could see all of the letters of the middle word had fallen off so I could easily presumed the two remaining ones left spelt out what I had heard.

"The Mall"

I felt his front leg descend around me, as though hugging me with one arm. He stank of vile sweat, grime and...and things I didn't want to think about. His other hoof nudged the bottom of my chin up to keep me fixated on the building.

"Beautiful isn't it?"

I agreed, it was a marvel of construction and tragic to see lying blasted and weathered from two hundred years of improvised repair. But as much as the artistic appreciation in me wanted to linger on the details, I could barely think about the building. I could feel his barding leaning against me...sweet Goddesses I could feel the warmth of his body. This was too close, I didn't like my personal space being invaded. It took every ounce of restraint and fear to not flick a hoof backwards like before.

It got worse as I felt his head move down, inches from my ear. I could feel that hot sticky breath of his crawl over my sensitive ear lobe...

I could feel tears dripping from my eyes...even through I was too scared to blink.

“Home to the slaves who don't know any better and just want to kill things. Now, it's home to you as well. Protégé may say it's all for the cause but I know the truth, slave...I know ponies only come here who are too afraid to survive the lifestyle and want out. Them and the ones who don't know anything but violence. Four walls and multiple levels of slaves too desperate, violent or deluded to go anywhere else. Think you'll survive it? Think you'll be able to resist taking a plunge to the bitter end from the rooftops?”

I shook my head by less than an inch, closing my eyes. I didn't want to risk my ear coming any closer to that mouth. For a moment, my mind panicked that he knew, somehow, about my...my...insanity on the control tower. What had I been thinking? But then...was it really so bad compared to what staying alive had brought me?

With relief, I felt him move away and reattach the chain to his barding before striding forward.

“Good...because you won't. Oh and by the way...”

His face became deadly serious, the hilt of the huge knife tapping me across each cheek as he spoke.

“If you so much as hint to Protégé about our little time together, I promise you...that mare will be getting a 'visit' earlier than you might think. Slaves disappear so often in Fillydelpia...hehe.”

The chain pulled me before I could even stand back up. I pulled back, prompting a sharp look from the big earth pony. He had just threatened the one mare I knew I wanted to protect. The surprise made him cease pulling as I stood up on my own accord. I was a coward...yes...no doubt I would beg once we were inside.

But as I trotted on my own without him pulling, I wanted him to see that of all the things he had broken in me...of my lost confidence and lack of drive to dare do anything brave anymore, I still had one thing. He hadn't broken my link with her to take comfort and strength in her example to stand up to him.

* * *

Raiders.

The scourge of the wasteland.

Gangs were bad. They took over areas, attacked other ponies, killed merchants, stole goods and generally made life a misery. Keen to be better and bigger, they made examples of those who crossed them and attempted to wrest control of areas from civilised ponies.

But raiders...

There were beyond sanity. Savage, ruthless and powered by a drive to simply ruin the lives of everypony they met, they sought nothing more than just enough to see them through to the next day. They had no mercy, little wish for simply embarrassing somepony and did not hesitate to take what they wanted...preferably if they got to murder, torture or rape along the way. I had once been in a caravan attacked by a small band of them between slave camps. The guards had fought them off, but only at terrible cost. Raiders had slaughtered my master's mistress, not even waiting till the firefight was done to desecrate her body. I remember wishing that she was already dead with the...the things they did.

They were living symbols of freedom taken in the wrong direction. Their sick dreams realised by the lawlessness of the wastes to act out mentalities that had no place in pony society.

Now I was meeting them.

The Master dragged me through the Mall's corridors before emerging into the main hall. I had seen factories before and their cavern-like interiors, but something about the high glass skylight (how had it survived?) and curved surfaces designed to please struck me. They had been ruined, worn away and replaced by crude imitations and flakboard surrounded by bars of metal and wire to hold together guard posts overlooking the shopping area, but they still held a timeless strength.

The layout was, simply, impressive. A giant balcony with no railings (*why?!)* lay before The Master and

fell away twenty feet below into an area closed off by heavy scrap walls. Two levels of shops made up the outer edges, reachable by stairwells at either side near the back. Along each wall were re-purposed small shops, each custom designed to one feature a cage wall and door across the front for containment of slaves in smaller groups. Right now they all lay open, allowing slaves to wander amongst a common area around an old fountain still filled, somehow, with water, tepid and murky as it was.

I tried to discern the old style, but the smooth rock design was so worn that I gave up at “creamish if you screwed up your eyes and pretended really hard.” Rotten banners hung on all sides, six mares of various colours, two of each type of pony. I recognised the yellow and pink pegasus from the poster and my lost saddlebag as she smiled an impossibly peaceful and honestly quite relaxing message of love to all looking upon here. There was also...

...oh no...oh *please no*...

She was *here* too. 'Pinkie.' Even now, her banner fluttered in a draft to turn and look at me briefly. I had to cut my own temptation to mutter under my breath for her to leave me alone just for once. The pony was as maddeningly whimsical as ever, hanging upside down on her own banner. Slogans embellished on the fabric were a mystery to me. Probably advertisements for the damn FunFarm...

I felt a weight release as magic gripped my shackles, unlocking and pulling them from me along with the collar. I shook, groaning as sore muscles gave their offended verdict at the unwanted movement. The Master's cronies trotted away from him and I into the irregular ranks of slavers who looked if anything like smaller and less imposing versions of The Master. His personal group, no doubt.

The Master chatted to his slavers briefly, informing them of some “fun” that had to remain a “surprise.” No doubt code to not let this slip to Protégé. Briefly I wondered what Pinkie would think of this type of surprise fun...her broadcasts in the FunFarm mentioned it often enough.

Blowing about in the draft (where was it even coming from?) the banner of her briefly fluttered out of sight.

“Raiders of the Mall!”

The Master's voice bellowed around the huge area of the Mall. It must have housed almost a hundred slaves with the amount of shops in the market area the cages were set into...

“Get out here! Get out where I can see your filthy hides!”

There was a commotion down below. I heard swearing and muttering before...they emerged.

They came slowly at first. Emerging from the ground floor in ones and twos. Groups followed, before the upper floor began to fill too.

There were *dozens* of them! I counted at least thirty raiders as my heart began to beat far faster than it had any right to do. But I didn't properly sweat with terror until I actually looked at them.

Terrifying...foul...wretched. Mangy hides covered in scars and disgusting piercings. Some had scrap shoved through their flesh, others had *bones*. I prayed they were not from ponies, but they looked all too likely to be just that. Dyed and braided manes fell in greasy clumps around faces filled with the hate of the wasteland. Some looked so savage they barely seemed sane, snarling and howling up at even my small head poking over the edge. I saw two bump into each other before launching immediately into a snapping and brutal fight.

Even the saner ones seemed to lick their lips with some sickened mentality as they angrily saw what had disturbed them from their rest or...or whatever else they were doing. Blood streaked the floors in places to give indications of past involvements and brawls. I saw non-raiders cowering at the back, presumably only alive due to the presence of the guards. There were far more of them than the raiders, however they clearly lived in terror of them. Despite that...they seemed unharmed. But then...none of them were pegasi...

Many wore ruined pieces of torn cloth and barding. Some had face masks or wrapped scarves around their head. As they clumped together, their noise increased, as though in a greater mass they fed off of one

another's energy to act up and cause commotion.

“Raiders!”

The Master shouted down to them, prompting them to scream back a mass of insults that he only smiled at.

“You have shown great fury in your work in the last Stable! The dwellers stood no chance against your frenzied assault!”

A huge chorus of screaming and bellowing emerged from the raiders. Some brandished trophies...I saw one with a thread of ears around his neck. Suddenly my own mismatched and tainted ears felt a lot less repulsive and more like a prize...

“As such!”

They began to quieten down.

“I have brought you a gift for your entertainment!”

Their stomping and howling returned, even louder than before as they saw my scared face. Thirty or more raiders all glared at me with enough lust and dire sick wanting to make me shrink back from their horrid laughter. I could hear them begin to call for me to be sent down, for 'another toy.'

It dawned that I was not the first...

The Master held up a hoof. He clearly controlled them like this, offering sick rewards in return for owning a powerful workforce of brutal raiders adept at slaughtering anything in their path.

“...and it's a pegasus!”

A deafening explosion of screams, cheering, howls and curses swarmed up and around the entire area. Even as I winced, I felt The Master's unicorns telekinetically shove me forward on to the balcony before The Master, my whole body on show to the raiders. Suddenly I felt very exposed...

Like an announcer, one hoof holding me in place, The Master crowed to them as though teasing a new item for sale.

“You want him?”

“**YES!**”

“You want him?!”

“**YES!**”

“Have him!”

I quickly turned to face The Master, kneeling, placing my head to his hooves. I hadn't even noticed my instinctual tears any more. I...I couldn't go down there. The thought of all the things they might do to me...

“Please, Master...please! I'll...I'll do anything!”

He looked down at me, wearing that malicious grin only he could pull off.

“Really, Number Seven?”

“YES!” I screamed, “ANYTHING!”

“Well...there's just one problem with that.”

I trotted back from him, shaking my head,

“No...please...”

“I already promised them their prize, Seven. Hah! ENJOY!”

He twisted, turning and full on bucked me hard enough to catapult me off the balcony. A horrible explosion of pain along my side gave way to an oddly calm and pregnant moment of terror as I felt weightless...

Briefly, I wished that I could only open my wings and fly away from all this. I tried...but they just didn't move. Instead, I hugged myself as tightly as I could, praying the fall would kill me. In that oddly long moment while tumbling, I wished to the Goddesses...please...make it quick.

They did not smile upon me. The Master was a good shot, as I landed in the fountain. I didn't even have time to scream after I felt my front right shoulder strike the marble wall as I ploughed into the surprisingly deep water. All sound deadened as the harsh *slap* of the surface knocked me senseless. My shoulder was wracked with pain, I wanted to cry out, but my mouth only filled with disgusting and filthy water. Alone in the brief quiet of the dark water I didn't even know which way was up!

I...I realised I couldn't swim...

Not that I needed to. Masses of hooves reached in, I felt mouths biting, hooves wrapping around me and a huge strength pulling me out. The muffled silence of the water ended as my head broke the surface, gasping for air and trying to cry out at the same time as I saw dozens of frantic and frenzied raiders grabbing hold of every part of me they could to pull me out.

I pleaded with them, they only laughed.

I begged them, one of them mocked me as the rest took delight in my lack of pride.

Hurling me over the side, I wailed like a foal as my now obviously dislocated shoulder rattled off the ground and they began clustering around. They were fighting each other over me, I saw snarling bites and bucks as scarred and pierced ponies of foul appearance and savage looks clawed at me with their hooves. Despite my protests, I was pulled to my hooves and shoved around between them, much to their amusement. Efforts to keep my shoulder protected felt pointless as it impacted again and again, the loose joint sickeningly moving around the socket. One bit my larger ear until he fell away from the crowd pushing him. I felt hooves bash my wings, knocking me too and fro. Unicorn magic lifted me up, the raiders leaping after me as the unicorn tried to bring me to him.

My senses span...the crush of bodies, the stench of blood and filth, the sound of them braying for how they should deal with me only reminded that their argument was my only reason to be alive.

It wouldn't last long. A larger earth pony dived up, grabbing one of my wings in his teeth to drag me back down. Bucking another raider unconscious, he dragged me to a clearer area beside the fountain as the raiders prowled in a circle, ready to try and get the prize back.

“I got him! I got him! It's my choice! Back off you fucks!”

His hooves pinned me to the ground. I heard the others cease their argument to instead shout at him, what they each wanted. I heard many things. Some called to bash my head off the marble until it broke. Others wanted my teeth. One screamed to break my legs (one quarter there already...) and was shouted down as 'boring.'

But I whimpered and whinnied as I heard the overwhelmingly popular choice...

“Rip his wings off!”

The earth pony brayed into the air, stomping with a hoof on my head to hold me down. Without hesitation or anything like Noose or Lemon's posturing or taunts, he simply reached down and grabbed my right wing in his teeth before pulling sharply upward with all his might.

I screamed.

Before my eyes instinctively clenched shut, I saw The Master far above, standing with that grin...

My wing stretched, underdeveloped muscle and broken bone structure bending and being yanked out of place as it extended for the first time since I was a colt. A sudden release of tension slapped it back to my side as I felt something pull free before a tingling pain began to creep along my wing. Daring to open my eyes...I saw a few feathers in his mouth. Spitting them out, the crowd fought over them. A sickening sense of loss prompted a muffled and strangled cry from me as I witnessed a piece of me taken. He reached down again, grabbing the stem itself tightly in his teeth, determined to get the full thing this time. With an almighty yank, it began. The pain was *unbearable*. My head thrashed, my hooves kicked but they held me down, chanting.

“Pull it off! Pull it off! Pull it off!”

I felt the muscles stretching...they...they weren't listening to me!

“Pull it off! Pull it off! Pull it off!”

My entire torso side felt ready to rip off with it...oh Goddesses...*please!*

*“Pull it off! Pull it off! **Pull it off! Pull it o-***

KREUNCH!

Every bit of tension disappeared at once with a snap as I felt my torso fall to the ground again. Everything felt like time was crawling as I opened my eyes during the sound...I saw blood...

I turned...

My wing...

...was intact.

The sound had come from above me, in the quarter second of realisation since the noise, I saw my tormentor's face *deformed* around a colossal hoof driven by immeasurable force.

The flow of time returned.

As did Number Six.

Driven by a gallop and dive over the fountain, his momentum carried him into the raiders like a dark crimson cannonball and the bone crunching sound of harsh impact. The raider above me collapsed atop me, utterly lifeless as the massive stallion thundered into their ranks. Six raiders alone were crushed under his sheer size and huge bony hooves as he powered on through the crowd, they rolled on the ground holding wrecked limbs and battered ribs. But the rest were not cowardly Pit guards, they swarmed, pressing their sheer numbers in a frenzied counter charge. The stallion whirled on the spot, teeth clenched as he bucked, swung and bodily charged through them. Raiders fell, receiving sickening stamps as he passed to their chests. I saw him grab one by their leather jerkin with his teeth and spin so hard he actually threw them with his *mouth* across the room into another two struggling to catch him from behind.

Their great mass broken, Number Six went to work on the individuals. A dull thud sounded as his forehead collided with a unicorn, horn or not, putting him unconscious on the spot. A full buck sent another flying into the cage door used to access this area via normal means.

It bent.

Three raiders galloped and leapt, landing on his back or dragging his sides. I saw him snarl as one bit into the back of his neck before he reared up and allowed himself to fall backward. The screaming raider, unable to let go, found himself crushed under the entirety of Six's considerable weight. The other two ran across, hurling rocks with magic, making him back off to cover his face before charging them. Shocked by the speed of such a huge pony, they were caught and brutally disabled as he reared up and lashed his front hooves out to slam their heads together. The sound was like two rocks colliding in mid air.

The remainder of the group, well over half of the raiders, swarmed.

Number Six growled, turning to face them, standing between them and myself...

KAPOW!

The gunshot rang out from above. Groaning as the adrenaline faded and the pain began to return from my reverie watching the massive stallion at work ending, I saw The Master spit a rifle back to a subordinate.

“Enough! I give you lot a prize and all you do is fight over it like foals! Get back in your damn cages before you put us out of work for a month you wretches!”

The raiders hesitated, they glared at Number Six, pounding the ground with their hooves and snarling. He matched them, his own hoof pound drowning the rest of them out.

“I said ENOUGH!”

The raiders began to disperse, one by one, like they had arrived only now with furious disappointment in their bloodshot and yellowed eyes. On the floor lay half a dozen raiders that needed dragging off with broken limbs. Some just were not conscious at all. I had a nasty feeling the one on top of me had been killed instantly...

Gradually, they cleared the floor, other than the pony over me. Number Six simply watched them, snorting at any that got too close to us.

“Keep him for yourself then!”

“What you trying to do, get a little family, eh?”

“Can't hide our prizes from us forever, traitor!”

“Just you wait, betraying bastard!”

Number Six did not even reply. After they had gone, he cast a glance upward.

I saw the two largest, strongest and most terrifying ponies I knew in all of Equestria lock eyes. Even from here, not knowing much about either of them...I could see every ounce of wishful violence between them. With a snort, The Master departed, moving out of sight, his fun spoiled.

Without a word, I saw Number Six turn and stare directly at me. In the odd silence, despite The Master leaving...I did not feel particularly safe. Not with a colossal pony I had witnessed take on an entire gang of raiders and win moving toward me. Immobile and lying down, my perspective on him was all the worse to look at. Frightening tribal dyed hair on his coat mixed with lavish scars of gunshots, blade wounds and everything else across his almost grotesquely powerful body. I couldn't help but look at the flapping bit of skin remaining on his left ear. Those mismatching, one half bloodshot eyes stared down at me as though contemplating something.

He pulled the dead raider from me, dumping him at the side before leaning down. I closed my eyes, squeaking loudly in fear as he came closer...

...and lifted me on to his back. Groaning in pain from my shoulder even through my fear and abject disbelief, I felt myself slung over him (higher than I had ever stood...) as he turned and began to trot back the way he had come towards an open shop's cell cage door.

* * *

I was naked...bereft of everything I had ever made for myself. I wanted my journal so badly...to look upon the comforting images. Crushing desires to once again hear DJ-Pon3's voice clenched my heart. A guilt that I had lost Sundial's only message to the future began to creep in even as my drifting thoughts wandered from hardship to hardship while in the thrall of near unconsciousness from pain and adrenaline downtime.

Once again, luck had thrown me a small bone to just barely keep me alive. But they had never lasted in the past. Why would this earth pony be any different? He had abandoned me before, why come back now? Why was he in here?

Somehow, I couldn't quite feel the elation I wanted to be able to. I just wanted my things and a cosy pigsty until I could figure out another escape plan...one that would work this time, taking the mare and her buck with me.

The huge stallion lowered me down onto a rough bed made of multiple layers of damp cardboard inside the shop. The movement gave me enough of a shock to open my eyes once again before squeaking in terror, pressing back against the wall. The squeak only heightened as the movement dislodged my right shoulder again. Staring with wide eyes, I dared not shift as I gazed upward at the colossal earth pony who's immense shape blocked all light coming into the shop through the door. He had yet to lean back, his gruff and ugly face staring directly at me for a few more seconds before standing tall (and taller) once more.

“D-don't hurt me...I'm sorry, really...”

“Why?”

I curled up, trying to protect my head for all the good it would do. Why should he not hurt me? I had ignored his help before and now I was his prize as much as anypony's.

“I'm a born slave...I could help you. You can have my food! I'll watch your stuff! Just please, I don't want any more pain.”

I felt myself choking up.

“Everypony already hates me and wants me dead because of these two stupid things on my body. Please, Number Six, please...”

His head tilted to the side, the bloodshot eye narrowing in minor confusion. In the back light from outside, he was little more than an imposing sentinel of imminent violence. Even I could tell eyes that had seen too much blood and death. Only now I could get a better look and see that he was a good bit older than I'd thought. Maybe double my age? I tried to remember him from before, when he had apologised, saying I didn't deserve death. I hoped that still held true...or did he want a 'prize' just as much?

“Number Six?” His voice rumbled, repeating my words carefully.

Of course...I had gotten so used to thinking him by that name I had just blurted it out.

“My name,” he continued, a slow drawl, “is not Number Six. Nor do I want to harm you, pegasus.”

I simply stared upward in near shock, elation and hope began to spring in my heart until it was beaten down by the reminder that nothing that I ever did quite ever turned out right...why should this be any different?

“Then, what is your name?” I inquired quietly, desperately not trying to step on any thin ice.

He didn't reply immediately, glancing to the side before closing his eyes. Was that an element of sadness I saw briefly?

“Brim.”

I blinked, watching his mouth slowly roll the single syllable out. He paused, before continuing.

“Brimstone Blitz.”

“Murky Number Seven. Pleased to...uh...meet you. Thank you, for saving me, I mean. I...I just...”

I tried to stand so I could kneel to show my thanks. It was how I had treated every master when they had fed me, it was the only way I knew how to show a reverent gratitude. But the moment I moved, harsh pain wracked my shoulder, making me stumble and fall again. Breathing hard, hissing through clenched teeth, I whined into my other leg while cradling it.

“Lie back.”

Brimstone Blitz sat down beside me. It did nothing to reduce the impact of his height at all. His massive hooves reached out, taking my injured leg with an odd care.

“Where does it hurt?”

I was shivering, but the threat of his terrifying presence and size was enough to prevent me from resisting.

“M-my shoulder, please...don't...”

I felt his hoof brush around the area. I could hear raiders wandering the common area snickering at my rather pathetic little yelps and whines as he rolled a hoof over the joint.

“Aye, it's merely dislocated.”

“*Merely?*”

“Hold still, Murky Number Seven, I can reset it.”

“I...I'm not sure...please, I need a doctor...Protégé has-”

“Shut up and bite the cardboard below you. On three.”

“I...no, I...”

“One.”

“Can I-”

Pop!

“Yeearrghh!” I yelled out loud, pulling my hoof back from his grip.

Brimstone seemed to grin with only one side of his mouth. I could hear shrieks of laughter about the “filly whine” I had made from outside.

“You said on three!”

“Stopped your whining, didn't it?”

I tested my leg, it moved again, if incredibly painful and stiff to do so. I didn't want to imagine if I had left it longer. My head fell, resting on the cardboard as sweat dripped off me.

“I wasn't whining...I was just complaining...”

“Sure.”

Brimstone moved away, sitting against an old counter and watching the door. Only now did I get a good look around at the area he had clearly made his home. Most merchandise had gone, but a few old posters showed images of various forms of clothing. I saw dresses on pretty unicorn mares, tall and strong bucks wearing suits and other, more casual, attire. I imagined the empty stands crammed in the corner had once held the stock.

A great many posters in one corner, though faded and wrinkled, showed nice looking mares wearing socks. I had to fight down the urge to want to try drawing one of them to refocus back on the important matters at hand. Besides, my journal was gone...oh Goddesses...

There wasn't a huge amount else behind the cage door that still stood open into the common area. The counter covered the front quarter to the side of the doorway, bereft of any cash machine. Behind it, I saw a door leading, presumably, to a stock room. Despite the fuzzy-headedness, I could swear Brimstone was sat as though he was guarding the doorway...

He looked back at me. I shrank back out of sheer habit.

“You didn't deserve what they would have done to you, Murk.”

“That's not what everypony else thinks...why do you not hate pegasi?”

Brimstone blinked, sitting back before giving out a long sigh that ended in a snort.

“I *do* hate the pegasi. Those feathered bastards sit up there on their clouds, taunting us all by refusing anything to make things right. You wonder why so many of us turn to stuff like that? If you'd been a Dashite I'd have just left you, probably. But you're wasteland born, clearly.”

He inclined his head toward the raiders mostly clustered on the opposite side of the Mall.

“Besides, I'm not in a position to judge anypony else so...I couldn't sit by and watch them do what they were about to.”

I shivered, curling up a little more tightly with one hoof rested over my wing. The sight of lost feathers...of the pain that still burned in my side...they had been about to...to...

The pulling...feeling it begin to tear away. I hated my wings, but they were *my* wings. The shock of the entire traumatic day began to land home. Hundreds of slaves and guards all knew what I was now. All my things were taken. The Master had...oh Luna...he had hurt me so much.

I couldn't...I...

Regardless of the embarrassment, I simply began to cry in front of him. Shuddering and sniffing, I tried to look away. Brimstone followed my gaze before simply shaking his head.

“Too weak...I don't know how you survived this long if all you do is start greetin' at everything.”

Through wet eyes, I turned to him.

“I don't know how to be strong. I tried to escape...it made things worse.”

“This *isn't* worse.”

That genuinely surprised me. Brimstone Blitz furrowed his brow, snorting loudly.

“The guilt of being a pegasus. To bear the hatred of most for the sins of the past. You can ignore it, avoid it. Some things, you will learn, you cannot simply turn a blind eye to.”

Trying to calm my breath, I sat up, wiping my eyes with a filthy hoof and wincing as the rad-sores on my muzzle stung from the contact.

“What did you *do*, Brimstone?”

His front hoof stomped the hard ground loud enough to make me squeal in shock, holding my ears. Opening my eyes a little, I saw his teeth clenched as he swept away from me, each step of a hoof coming down far harder than it needed to.

“You make it sound like it was one thing, one little thing that was wrong, Murk. Try a *life*. Believe it or not, you are sheltered. Protected. Abused, perhaps. But kept safe all your life from what's really out there. There are gangs, ghouls and taint...then there are ponies like me.”

Something clicked into my mind. The raiders...they had called him 'traitor.'

“You...you were one of them...you're an ex-raider!”

One of those giant hooves reached forward, closing the cage door over far harder than was needed. The loud *clang* made me almost jump from the floor. With a shake, he hung his head, before turning and marching toward me with what amounted to fury in his eyes. The dyed hair tattoos rippled. The scars shifted. I began to back away before discovering the wall disappointingly close behind.

“No. I am not an *ex-raider*.”

Before I even knew what was happening, the massive pony had swept me from my feet with his hooves around my body, holding me in the air against the wall with one foreleg pressed against my neck. I tried to scream, instead spluttering out a choked gasp from the pressure. My struggles were pointless as I felt my hind legs dangle helplessly a good two feet from the floor. My eyes locked on his as I heard the growl of

unhinged madness and anger. Staring into his gaze, I could see the years of borderline insanity still in there, furious that I had suggested anything other than the harsh truth.

“I *am* a raider,” he intoned with barely suppressed anger, “a life, longer than many in the wasteland, dedicated to the pursuit of free madness. You sat in your guarded little pens while I stormed the wastes. Had I met you, Murk, I would have used you as a toy like those eejits just tried to. Aye, I would have plucked those wee wings myself. I have killed, tortured, raped and broken anypony that wasn't in my clan for longer than you've been alive. Once, I burned a little buck like you alive on our camp fire for not giving me his young mare friend to have in my tent that night. I took her anyway.”

Fear clenched my gut as I stared toward the massive raider. Those eyes...he was telling the truth. He was angry, whether at me or himself I couldn't tell. I felt him draw a long breath before lowering me to the floor and looking the other way from me.

“You don't simply turn your back on so much agony caused to others, so much fucked up stuff like that and say 'that's it, I'm an ex-raider now.' It doesn't work like that!”

I was almost hyperventilating. My mind kept imagining myself as that poor buck. This was..a raider. Even bigger than the psychopaths outside. Despite the Pit...despite him saving me, I was in the thrall of a *raider*. I prayed that I was right in my assumption that he was implying he sought to avoid falling to the madness any more.

“So...so why did you stop?”

His eyes closed as he took a breath, seeking to calm himself, apparently. I could see the thin line between now and the fury of the raider fought back down. Did he have that voice in his head? The raider in his mind? Just like I had a slave?

“...the Goddesses are forever watching us, Murk. Do you believe in them?”

His voice had dropped, was he embarrassed at his outburst? I nodded shakily, thankful to see his face slightly relax from the rage that had overcome it.

“You might say that Fillydelphia gave me some...perspective. To see what it was like from the other side. It's a good place for ponies like me, out of the way, forced to work to do something greater in the place of ponies more innocent. Like you. But I don't labour just to rebuild Equestria...no.”

He fixed me with a stare. He was deadly serious.

“I accept my slavery. Only through this place could I ever hope to even begin to atone for the sins I've done in the eyes of the two Goddesses. That was half the way to making me see past the insane rage...the other half...”

Brimstone lowered his head, looking outside at the other raiders milling around. I could see them still snapping at one another with pent up and yet to be vented aggression from earlier. Eventually, he turned sharply.

“Perhaps you should see for yourself. Can you stand?”

“I...I think so...”

I was wobbly, but the motion back in my leg felt better than locking solid in pain. Brimstone nodded to the door, but immediately stopped me with a hoof. It was like walking into a brick wall.

“I will warn you. If you try *anything*...I will kill you where you stand. Understood?”

I nodded briefly, trying not to shake my head and back away. I'd faced the Wall...I could obey this command. Lowering the hoof, he led me into the back of the shop. I tried not to think too hard as I saw that it was very dark...

* * *

The sound of the raiders quietened through the walls. Free from their sick taunts and shouts at one another, I found a measure of peace in the surprisingly warm and still back room of the shop. I couldn't see further in for Brimstone Blitz's massive bulk in front of me, but a small light shone past him from the far end of the room.

He stopped. I only discovered this by walking right into the back of his leg before staggering backwards with a sore muzzle and limping on my front right leg. Brimstone merely turned, almost seeming to smirk at my staggering about.

“Would you have run into the Wall that blindly?”

“I'm just tired,” I muttered, “Being unconscious through a medical procedure from a gunshot was the closest thing to proper sleep I've had in a long time.”

“You can rest in a moment, then. We won't be needed for another little while for any jobs.”

He moved to the side, lifting a hoof. I saw the look in his eyes, watching me very carefully.

“Now...the other reason why I put away the life of the raider?”

I followed where his hoof pointed in the dark. I could see stock shelves and an old sofa near the one magically enchanted gemstone light that flickered with a dull orange. On the sofa, however...

...a mare...

I don't know what I expected, it to be *the* mare? But no, that mare I had met before was the same age as me. Although this one was a unicorn too, she looked older than myself by perhaps six or seven years.

Despite lying covered in a cloth blanket stitched together from every colour imaginable, I could tell she was lithe.

She was asleep. I found myself trotting forward out of curiosity, what about her was special? But a look from Brimstone made me immediately stop in my tracks. Ok, ok! Not trying anything! Really! Look at me here not doing anything! Not even moving, not even breath-

The mare coughed, shivering...

She was sick. Her pearl white coat seemed slick with sweat while her shorter than normal (albeit still relatively thick) light and dark pink mane fell tangled around her head across the sofa. Around her lay, presumably, her and Brimstone's possessions. Not much, but a small case filled with little twinkling and sparkling orbs drew my eyes for just a second. The mare shifted, groaning, as my eyes flickered back to her, I saw her awaken rather lethargically.

“B-Brim...?”

The voice was weak and stammering with fever. I recognised these symptoms all too well as acute radiation poisoning. Brimstone advanced slightly before kneeling down beside her with shocking gentleness.

“I'm here, Glimmer,” his voice was softer than I'd ever heard it, “just keep resting.”

She didn't. Instead I saw her eyes casting about in the darkness, apparently missing me for a second before they refocused and settled upon my presence in the gloom.

“Who...”

Her eyes blinked, showing a surprisingly bright azure sparkle to them. Even while sick, I could see a spark of energy and life to this mare.

“Come here...don't be...scared...”

Her hoof inclined me to move closer. I looked to Brimstone, who stood and trotted backward with a small nod. Even now, I could see the look, 'One wrong move and you won't leave this cell alive.'

Limping, I trotted over as quietly as I could, head low, into the light.

“Oh...a little earth pony, aren't you...cute...”

She exhaled with great effort, before trying to smile through the clearly harsh fever affecting her. I presumed she didn't see my wings camouflaged by my dark green coat and feathers against my body in this gloom.

“I'm, uh...Murky. Sorry...Murky Number Seven.”

“Gli-”

She shivered so hard that her words failed amidst a harsh gasping shudder.

“Glimmerlight, pleased..to...oh my...”

The unicorn seemed to sag, the conversation alone exhausting her. But even so, she extended one hoof, gently moving my head to the side with great care. I closed my eyes, figuring it was the wings...

“What a beautiful cutie mark...”

Her voice was but a whisper, smiling before murmuring with dizziness and lying down again. I heard Brimstone trot up behind me with his slow, heavy steps.

“Rest, Glimmer. Save your strength. Murk? Back outside.”

I found it hard to move. What had she meant by *beautiful* cutie mark?! This gnashing and savage shackle on either flank was an insult to my wishes to be free! I wanted to reach forward, wake her up to ask...but somehow I couldn't quite bring up the courage to do so. I guessed it was the fever, she had probably seen something else, hell, she hadn't even spotted my wings. Besides, why would I want to hear any comments on my damned mark anyway? I knew what it meant and I was going to prove it wrong some day.

Of course, having a colossal raider behind you who promised to liquefy your head should you make a wrong move was a pretty big deal breaker in not inquiring further as well...

* * *

Back in the front of the shop, I turned to Brimstone Blitz the moment he followed me. This Glimmerlight intrigued me, just what did she mean to him? I stood up straight as I could on three functioning legs (why always the legs?!) and followed Brimstone with my head as he moved to plant himself down at the counter again.

“So...you and her...I mean...are you two...uh...”

“Are we what?”

“You know...together? Is that why you stopped raiding?”

He laughed. A deep, rumbling and somewhat disturbing noise before shaking his head.

“Kid, I'm a good twenty years older than her, where'd you get your relationship theories?”

I felt my face flush. Okay...that was a good point. But the level of care he showed her...

Brimstone coughed into his hoof, continuing even as he leaned his head back and looked at the ceiling. I could swear his voice changed, becoming less rough and more of a melancholy tone. I hadn't given the big brute enough credit as I once again saw that little light of civilised intelligence form from his words. That tone that gave me hope that the pony I was looking at was more than the brutes outside.

“When I was brought to Fillydelphia, I got thrown on the hard work. Huge load carrying, powering gears and servos, that kind of stuff. I got properly into it, from being brought down a peg or two myself, the idea of somewhere I could work off my sins in the eyes of the Goddesses was...appealing. But I bullied others, harassed them and when guards attempted to prod me around too much...killed them.”

The way he said that, so simple. Like it was just any other action...

“Eventually I met Glimmer after my second Pit victory as punishment for murder. Three of the raiders

just outside were trying to drag her off between shifts. I intervened, crushing them all. But even as I held one down, my hoof ready to split his pathetic skull...she begged me to not do it. I found Glimmer pleading with her saviour to spare those who would have violated her with no remorse or regret. After they had left, I knew I had to protect her.”

I could see him glancing back at the door, as though hurting over her sickness, something he couldn't stop.

“Glimmerlight is something unique in the wasteland, Murk, at least as far as I have witnessed. She can forgive. Her home was destroyed by raiders, those she regarded close enough to be family raped and murdered before her eyes. Glimmer herself was taken by them, abused and eventually sold into slavery with Fillydelphia. She had her whole life ruined forever, every ounce of innocence stripped from her.”

I whinnied softly, lying down as I felt a couple of slow tears trickle on to my face. But she looked so full of life in those bright, if sickly looking, eyes...

Brimstone sighed, before doing something I did not expect.

He smiled.

“But she doesn't hate any of them. I don't think she is capable of it. After the pain had passed all she wanted to do was make the best of things and forget the bad times as quickly as possible. Somehow she still thinks that the world can be better, that some day she will get out of here and go back to a good life like nothing had ever happened. That's why I have to take care of her. Glimmer is a better pony than I ever could be any more, she deserves my protection until she either completes her plan to escape or passes the two year work mark. It's like a quest sent to me by the Goddesses. As though she was sent to be moral compass to salvation. There are nice things in the world, Murk, yes. But...”

Was...was that a dampness in *his* eye? He turned away too quickly, walking to the cage door, placing a hoof on it even as he gazed upwards at the glass dome far above in the Mall. I looked up myself from the cardboard bed, glancing across at the big earth pony standing with a mixture of sadness and happiness etched on his big worn face, lit by the dull yellowed streams of light from the skylight. Slowly, he turned back to me with that same sad smile.

“The wasteland took everything from Glimmer, Murk. It destroyed her...and she forgave it for what it had done. Can you honestly think of anything more beautiful than that?”

* * *

I had been without my journal before. I had been without my...I mean, Sundial's PipBuck before.

This was the first time I didn't have either while waiting for the world to move on and for something to happen. However I was not without things to consider during the long times that Brimstone spent checking in on Glimmerlight, most especially the peculiar tale and somewhat tragic reality of this strange pairing of ponies. Brimstone was not what I had expected in either direction of thought. A raider by trade and filled with a thirst for violence held back only by the curious search for redemption and a sick mare that had touched even his heart.

Try as I might, the thought of somepony like that sort of touched mine as well.

However despite the obvious wonderment of their incredibly rare companionship...all I could keep repeating to myself in my head was one thing.

Glimmerlight had a plan to escape Fillydelphia that she fell too sick before completing.

Since I had been shot at the Wall...my entire mindset had been turned on its head. Broken by The Master and condemned to servitude for two years...it seemed as though my efforts had only rewarded me with a greater burden of slavery. I had been ready to collapse into the routine and accept the horror. But out of no-where...one last little hope. That mare in the back, Glimmerlight. Brimstone had said she had a plan.

It wasn't much. I knew nothing about her or this plan. Perhaps she wouldn't want me along. No matter! I had to try! There was nothing else left...no directions or obvious ways to try and only broken confidence driving me to stay alive. I couldn't get out alone now...so Glimmerlight was hopefully going to be what I needed to get back on my hooves properly. I had to help her somehow...to help Brimstone save her life. Whatever it took, like it or not, an unknown sick mare was the only path I saw open to me in discovering another way out of Fillydelphia.

Brimstone had left me in the front of the shop, citing that I was a distraction encouraging Glimmer to exert herself to speak to me instead of resting. I had thought to ask what was precisely wrong with her, but frankly, that was just to be able to say something. Since his admission...Brimstone had been oddly morose, as though shamed that he had spoken so openly to me at all in the first place. The truth was, however, I knew what was wrong with her and what she needed. After all, I had the exact same thing, right? Radiation sickness. Sure mine was a little unique in that it stemmed from an irradiated lung infection but the theory was the same. Rad-sickness needed Radaway. Not exactly a common substance to slaves in Fillydelphia...as I had found out the hard way.

I shivered, curling up on Brimstone's cardboard bed and rubbing my shoulder. Things hadn't settled in yet about my relocation. Too much all at once...too many emotions. I was afraid, an understatement, yes...but what else was there for it? Fillydelphia detested me before as the runt, the weakling who made mistakes and got everypony else in trouble. But now I was hated. The pegasus prize of Fillydelphia, a beacon to which they could all come together in unity and despise. I had tried to make my life better...but I had only made it worse. Everypony who saw me would call me out or turn me over if I tried anything. Perhaps I should just give up. How could somepony like me escape anyway? Not when everypony in the city wanted me dead.

Why me? *Why did it have to be me they hated?* I didn't want to be hated...

That thought hurt. It hurt bad. To look outside and realise that all it took was a few choice words to an uneducated mass to swing them to call for the death of one little buck like me who had never done anything to anypony in his life.

What if *Glimmerlight* was the same? What if Brimstone was subjective or exaggerating because he didn't know anypony better? What if...if she saw my wings and refused to help me?

Try all I might...the fear of rejection was in my mind. I needed to fight it down. It was surprisingly easy...for one other terror was all too ready to fill the space.

“Oi! You lot! Get your flanks back down to the storage rooms for the meeting! Move!”

That voice rang around the Mall's main shopping level as I heard some slavers jump to their hooves and gallop off.

The Master.

Even now I was still struggling to grasp his threat. The horrible way in that his influence wasn't over me by the fear of pain or punishment...but by the fear of realising that he was the pony who deserved me as a slave by dint of destiny. The unsettling way he knew just how to get into my head and hurt me, often without needing to lift a hoof in anger was if anything, proof that he was born to command me and understand what made me tick. Try as I might, I couldn't shake the harsh fact that he had brought the slave back to me. I had tried to escape him and when under the presence of the mare I had even stood up to show I wasn't afraid. But leave me alone with him and...and...

...your name is Number Seven...

...cutie mark of shackles, I like it. Ready to catch you if you'll ever run...

...you an accident, Number Seven? The seventh one? Your mommy get beasted by raiders, eh?

...how'd you like it if it was me, eh?

Born to slavery, living in slavery and going to die in slavery!

I tried not to whimper too loudly, the raiders outside seemed afraid to come near Brimstone's cage but there was no sense in advertising. All the same, I couldn't help but bury my head in my hooves. Where did I go now? What would happen?

A familiar fluttering sound made the hairs on the back of my neck crawl. Instinctively, I jumped on the spot, squeaking and clutching my scarred side. With a clatter of talons on hard concrete, the griffin, Ragini, landed heavily outside Brimstone's cage, magical rifle drawn and glancing warily at the raiders wandering back and forth. With a snap, her beaked head swivelled towards me. I had an uncomfortable feeling like I was being targeted again.

“Murky Number Seven?”

I nodded, hoping for Brimstone to re-emerge at any point right now...

“The Master requests your presence in his office. Alone.”

Every muscle tightened. I wanted to run. But where could I go? She had flown in and the cage door to the upper slaver and guard levels was locked, barred and guarded (and bent). The only other way was Brimstone and I didn't imagine he would protect me from this if I endangered Glimmer by running in with an angry griffin at my back.

“Don't make me have to carry you, flightless. Don't think I won't if you're going to mess around and whine like a little baby again.”

I caught her smirk and the look in her eye. This was the griffin who had shot me...then laughed and left me to the mercy of ponies who would tear me apart. She had heard me screaming in agony as I begged for help and could only smile now. I guess hatred of pegasi extended to griffins too...

“I'll...I'll come...”

I felt a part of me yelling that I should be trying to delay her until Brimstone got back out. If Whiplash or Slit had been demanding me, perhaps I might have. But The Master was different...

“*Today, Murk!*”

The taloned foot stamped into the shop, her voice of authority springing dormant instincts I thought I'd beaten into action. The Master had beaten me in more ways than physically...I was beginning to feel like I had before the pit.

“I'm sorry, right away.”

Meekly, I got up and limped out toward the cage door. Ragini kept her magical energy rifle held ready, the low power sniper rifle that had almost taken my life slung across her back. Looking up at the griffin standing on her hind legs, a new wave of sheer envy crossed me in terms of size. Why did everything have to be bigger than me? Oh Stable Dweller, where are you to be someone who understands what it's like to be a midget?

“Follow me, flightless. Make a move and I'll not miss your face next time.”

'Flightless?' Oh come on, that's just mean...

As I followed the black griffin, I saw one of the raiders waving to me. Stopping only partially, he held up three of my feathers tauntingly before laughing hysterically. Shuddering and trying to control my emotions, I kept close to the griffin. Only as I saw the cage door swing open did it really hit me that I was due for more treatment from The Master. The thin hallways gave way to a guard area made out of the old mall security rooms and eventually stairs to the management and storage rooms on the upper floors. With every step I found myself becoming slower and more reluctant as we passed from the staircase into an old staff canteen, enough that Ragini clipped me across the head with her rifle barrel a few times. The stinging

pain gave me a reason to move...but when we finally arrived down the dismal corridors at the thick oaken door that clearly was an old manager's office...realisation struck. We were here. My legs jammed up, every instinct not wanting to go near him again. Oh please...not again...not again...

“Ragini-”

“Don't use my name.”

“Sorry,” I whispered, not quite sure what to use, “you...you don't have to do this, please?”

Ragini whipped around, talons extended before grabbing me by the throat. The sudden change of mood caught me before I could even shout. My throat condensed.

“Get in, he is expecting you.”

“Please!” I pleaded, finding myself dropped only to try persuading her with tears in my eyes and terror on my face, “I can't take any more...”

“*Get in!*”

Ragini threw open the door, virtually hurling me inside before slamming it shut. I curled up on the floor as I heard hoofsteps nearby turn to face me before advancing steadily. Eyes shut, I wondered if I could just blank it all...ignore everything and use my imagination...like the helter skelter...right? Imagination canvas, ignore the pain...ignore the pain...

“Murky, I must question why you cower. I assure you, I will not harm you.”

That voice...

I opened my eyes, rubbing tears away (and rubbing the transferred dirt away afterwards) to look up and see the master Ragini had meant.

Protégé stood before me, holding a couple of books in his telekinesis with a genuinely curious look. That curiosity turned to slight confusion as I almost passed out on the spot with relief.

* * *

“I wanted another chance to speak with you, Murky. I regret that we did not have much of an opportunity last time. Although I had hoped that after being cleaned up and fed your condition may have improved...”

I sat on the floor before his desk atop an old red carpet that perhaps once was thick, but was now dull and thin. Protégé's office was, simply put, something clearly different from anywhere else I had ever seen in Fillydelphia. The old office had been renovated with either high condition or even newly remade objects including a thick and ornate pre-war study table, large wooden bookcases crammed with a mixture of old frayed tomes and freshly printed thin books of Red Eye's industry. High quality gem lighting gave an amber radiance to the entire area, while the large window had been reinforced and replaced to overlook the corrupted majesty of Fillydelphia's industry. Between a couple of bookcases, a thick safe was embedded in the wall. I could see attached rooms, their flapping doors open, that led to an attached bathroom and two bedrooms. I couldn't see much, but one was clearly his own and a much smaller one converted from a big cupboard. As polite as he was, even I could tell that big chart on the wall was the schedule for sending us all to our deaths in Stables and irradiated bunkers.

Also, it was all a bit of a mess.

Books lay strewn everywhere, over his desk, on chairs near the door and even on the windowsill. Hell, I could see some even sitting on his bed through the doorway. The bulky terminal on his desk (another book resting on top of it, naturally) also seemed to be peppered with small sticky notes to remind him of things.

“Yes, this is indeed my home, Murk.” He spoke with a thin smile, watching my head pan around.

“Ragini is a top rate associate and bodyguard...but she isn't tasked to keeping many things in line. I do

apologise for the mess.”

This nice talk wasn't sitting well with me. The black unicorn had passed back to the desk, sitting and leafing something in front of him, the pages were completely hidden behind a stack of papers near the front. Between sentences, I could see his visible eye scanning each page for a few seconds before turning to the next.

“What did you want me for?” I spoke with deliberate wish to break through the nicety.

Protégé raised an eyebrow, looking up from the book of interest.

“No 'master', for me? How unusual amongst slaves, usually they would be afraid of being punished for ignorance. But then...you are unusual to begin with, Murk, in more than one way as well. The pegasus who tried to get over the Wall to win the freedom he was denied by birth...there is a certain romanticism to it, don't you agree?”

Technically I planned to go under the Wall, but I didn't figure pointing this out would win me many points here. Try as I might, though, all I could remember was fear, pain and blood. Nothing 'romantic' came out of lying in your own gore screaming for mercy from a griffin who had shot you.

“I failed, you know this...”

“Yes, Murk. But clearly I am not alone in how I feel, despite what you think.”

His horn sparkled red, lifting what he had been looking at. I almost rushed his desk on the spot. My journal! I could see the last image I had drawn, that of a pegasus flying free above the Wall. Witnessing my clamouring excitement to get it back, Protégé held up a hoof.

“Worry not, I intend to return it to you before you leave today. However, I have spent the last hour or so going through it. Images...drawings...it's such an interesting and alternative way of interpreting life compared to the words that I love so much. You seem to sketch from the heart, judging by the emotional nature of some of these...”

The pages flickered, revealing the last picture I drew from my subconscious before the Pit, lying before my killer. Lowering the journal, he continued to flip and glance as he went backward through my life as told by pictures. I was somewhat glad he had hidden it...I didn't want to see what I'd drawn while under the influence of slave indoctrination.

“You also seem to have a certain appreciation of shape and form as well, particularly with regards to mares...you seem to be rather observant of all angles on them. Well, some angles more than others.”

Wait...he'd been flicking through *all* my pictures?

Protégé looked up. Was that a smirk or just normal for him? “Murk? Why are you blushing?”

“Um...I'm not! No reason...” *Shit*. “Just, um...nervous, new place...and stuff...”

“I see...”

Not letting the smirk die, he sat the journal down before crossing his hooves on the desk. I tried not to headbutt the floor in an attempt to feel less embarrassed.

“Well, judging by your environmental pieces, you've been around. A slave all your life...it's not fun is it?”

I shot him a look, shaking away the blush (I really needed a second sketchbook just for myself...) and gave him my best 'What could you possibly know?' look that I could. If he cared, he didn't show it.

Instead he smiled, returning to his own books. They were picked up in his magic, before settling down, changing subject with little warning, he beckoned me closer to his desk. I sat before it like I did with Wicked Slit.

“I must admit, I was rather disappointed to hear that you had been denied the opportunity to learn reading or writing skills. Almost tragic really.”

He held up an old red tome. I did my best not to look annoyed at my illiteracy being pointed out once more.

“The history of Equestria prior to the war, a very old volume. The ability to sit down, read and study what things were like before it all happened. If only more ponies would take the time then perhaps most of this unfortunate business need not happen. I do feel sorry for ponies like you, forced into such lives.”

He must have caught my disbelieving look.

“Truly, I do. That is partly why I expended so many favours to track you down and get Stern to let you live. You interest me, Murk. In a way, we are not so different. I know how you feel through all this, you know? If I may say, bringing you here, I do perhaps have higher aims for you than simple freedom.”

What did he mean by that? Nerves began to fray as I heard that last sentence...higher aims? My heart was still beating faster than normal, better than The Master or not, he was still my more 'official' master. Still a slave driver, no matter how often he said 'worker' instead and still liable to use me as a resource rather than another pony. I looked to the side, unsure, biting my lip.

“Murk?”

Protégé stood, moving toward me. Something clicked in my head, that red eye advancing on me...I recalled lying dying under the Wall...or The Master advancing on me in that cell to...to...

I shrank back, hooves skittering as I backed away from Protégé. Hearing a slight whimper from me, he stopped, mouth half open in surprise. To his credit, he backed up and gave me a little personal space.

“Are you alright?”

Alright? *Alright?!*

“N-no!”

I managed to get back to my hooves, favouring my injured shoulder.

“Of course I'm not! I'm...I'm a slave! How could I be alright? You're just...just another one of them, no matter what you say! I want out, now! But no, ponies like you stand in my way! How can I be...” I shuddered, losing my momentum from a slight tremble and a sob, “...al..alright?”

“Murk, I am trying to assure you that you are safer now. I had you healed, cleaned and fed before being brought here. I offer you the return of your artbook. Does that not say something?”

I just lay down against the wall, sniffing and trying to catch myself before I entered another crying fit. This was horrible...all these 'nice' things were nothing more than a façade to placate me into slavery! I knew it! I wanted out...but I just didn't have the confidence in myself after failing so badly any more. I couldn't control it, sniffing and wiping my eyes as I tried to avoid him noticing my reaction.

Instead, I heard Protégé sigh, before a slight click sounded in my ears. Looking up, I saw his magic remove the eyepiece and set it upon the desk before glancing back across to me with both eyes. Despite his youth...I could immediately see a slight pain to his expression now. Somehow, despite not understanding why, it defused how I saw him. As though I was no longer looking at a slaver...

“Murk...” he spoke quietly, trotting around the other side of the desk and taking a stuffed bag from a clothes hanger nearby. I could see battle barding bearing Red Eye's mark upon the stand beside a holster containing what looked like a scoped revolver. They shook as Protégé removed the bag. “Are you afraid of something?”

Despite myself, I nodded.

“Please...answer me. Did Chainlink Shackles harm you?”

Protégé would have had to be an idiot to not spot the sudden widening of my eyes. I had to almost shove a hoof in my mouth. I wanted to spill it all, to cry and beg Protégé to help me. Surely he had some sort of way to stop The Master? But what if the cronies were to carry out the threat on the mare in his

absence? What if her slave master was in on it? What if he slipped a word to the raiders to kill me for talking?

“Murk?”

Protégé actually lay down on all fours near me. He genuinely did look concerned, had he suspected The Master for some time now? I wanted so badly to just grab his hooves, tell him everything...

“No...I just...sorry. The raiders...”

Well...it wasn't a lie. Protégé nodded slowly,

“Yes...I did hear about that 'accident' on your allotment.” He lowered his head. “I am truly sorry, Murk, for what happened. Perhaps I should have accompanied you myself. However I hear our resident warlord has taken you under his protection.”

Wait, what?

“W-warlord?”

“Yes...if I'm not mistaken, Brimstone Blitz was the pony who saved you?”

I shuffled up, sitting properly. My eyes were wet, but this genuinely intrigued me, what did he mean by 'warlord'?

“I suppose being a slave all your life, you wouldn't have had opportunity to know, but our Brimstone is not your average raider.”

Given the way he took an entire swarm of them apart, I had that sussed already, but I didn't imagine Protégé was talking about just his combat skills.

“Brimstone wasn't just a tough raider, Murk. He actually led one of the largest raider clans in the entire Equestrian Wasteland. The Great Raider Warlord, Brimstone Blitz. For the last ten years he and his group laid waste to a significant portion of settlements and were something of a thorn in the side of even the larger factions, Master Red Eye included as well as other raiders. He would discover them and often challenge their leader to one on one combat for leadership of the tribe. He never lost once and believe me, Murk, his ferocity was near legendary amongst those savages. But, at least to me, his most heinous act was the destruction of Ponyville.”

He turned to a large and frayed map on the wall near the window. His magic levitated a feather to point to a small town near a large forest.

“Settlers had finally begun to make that place into a little repaired haven when his clan descended. Such a pity...it has such historical significance, that little town. The megaspells and poison were bad enough, but if you go there now all you'll find is devastation and whatever raiders are left over from his clan's passing.”

I wasn't really listening too closely. All I could think of was that massive earth pony and seeing him at the head of frothing and screaming raiders as they descended on a settlement. How could such a beast become what I had just witnessed?

“How he changed is rather interesting, albeit unknown to me. After Master Red Eye captured him as an example to the wasteland, he seemed to be rehabilitated by the work here. Possibly the only pony I've seen that happen to, actually. It's a great pity he refuses to tell me of why or how. Not that I am complaining of course,” Protégé let out a small laugh, “I am rather glad of his presence to help keep those raiders with him under control if only by fear. He is an exemplary worker, probably my best.”

I glanced back at Protégé's bright red eyes (how fitting...) sadly, that word, 'worker' still stung badly. Was that what I was now? An enforced worker? All the same, I felt calmer for the discussion. Protégé was speaking to me as though we were equal...despite myself I couldn't help taking at least a little comfort in it. He got up, trotting backward.

“I should stick close to him if I were you, his protection even in passing will aid you on your quest

significantly.”

“My *what?*”

Seemingly pleased whenever I actually engaged in conversation, Protégé nodded.

“Your journey, Murk. Two years stand before you filled with tasks to overcome in service to Master Red Eye. You can earn your freedom, improve yourself as a pony and help Equestria all at the same time.”

His eyes narrowed, the smirk turned to a proper smile.

“Isn't that what you want to do, Murk? Isn't that what *she* would want of you?”

She. Okay...that was it. He could act all intelligent in front of the dumb uneducated slave, but that was where I drew the *line*. I proudly brought myself up to be standing as high as I could and stared him sternly in the...neck.

One little sigh of exasperation later I stepped back with a muttered curse about my height ruining moments when I was *trying* to be confident and looked him in the eyes. My voice wasn't designed to sound big and imposing, but Luna damn it I was going to try! He wanted me to talk as an equal about what inspired me to run at the Wall? Well fine, he'd get it!

“The Stable Dweller would not want me working for you or Red Eye! You saw it, didn't you? How she broke free right in front of him and saved herself and another zebra too! She showed everypony there that there is something better to fight for than helping some mad pony!”

To his credit, Protégé did not reel or act offended with my little outburst, his reply was calm, but held a certain passion.

“The Stable Dweller, hmm? So...you were inspired by her? I suppose I should have guessed, you wore that PipBuck on your right forehoof, just like her. Only Master Red Eye does the same and I doubt you were taking his example. The numerous images in your sketchbook were also hints to this end, I suppose. But Murk, can you not see? Master Red Eye is saving Equestria, I mentioned this to you before. If I were permitted, I would show you the children, safe and in a state of education just waiting for a better world to inhabit.. They are well fed, fit, healthy and have never been forced to kill anypony or consume meat just to survive. They truly are innocent, Murk and we only have our Master to thank. Can you not see the need for ponies like you and I to give all we can? Was generosity not one of the sacred elements of old Equestria?”

“She has another way! I...I heard it on the PipBuck! She's out there, saving ponies and helping places to survive. If we all just helped each other rather than fought all the time then we wouldn't need to use slaves and...and...take children away!”

“Murk...you say that if we didn't fight, but you use her as an example? She has killed more ponies in less than two months out of her Stable than I have in my entire life in the wasteland. How can this truly be the way to help Equestria? To keep shooting the bad ponies until none are left? Isn't that how we *got* in this mess in the first place? By starting shooting? Here in Fillydelphia we take the raiders away from those they could hurt and set them to tasks that help everypony.”

“But...but you have thousands of ponies who just wanted to be nice and live their lives. There are good ponies in here! There are good ponies *dying* in here! I've seen the executions, I've been beaten, whipped, fed almost nothing for months and the work is killing everypony slowly and painfully. You know about my sickness! I've seen ponies taken and tortured or raped by slavers just for their fun!”

Protégé sighed, for a second I saw him have to think. In that moment I found a sense of triumph in my side of the argument.

“There are...not as many good ponies as there used to be, Murk. To have this work, we need the skills of anypony who can manage it. I don't particularly like having Shackles around, but he is a necessary evil to keep the raiders in line. We must sacrifice things if we are to save Equestria. Better us than the next generation of foals.”

“What if the Stable Dweller is right?”

“Then she is right.”

That caught me off guard, I had thought Red Eye and his little student Protégé would be insistent on their viewpoint. Weren't they evil?

“Master Red Eye possesses, and has taught me to have, humility. If she is right and we are wrong...we will gladly aid her cause. Interestingly, LittlePip and Master Red Eye do share one common goal as of the moment, you know.”

Wait...wait...who was this Little-

I remembered her size, she had been about the same height as me, if slightly better fed. She had a PipBuck as a cutie mark. Even my uneducated brain could piece that one together.

“LittlePip? Her name is LittlePip?”

“Indeed so, Murk. I felt that, given your obvious inspiration from her, you would appreciate knowing her name.”

His smile caught me unawares, hadn't we just been arguing?

“I do want to help you, Murk. That is why I have brought you here. You may not agree, but I promise you...I do genuinely wish to see you attain that freedom you want so badly.”

Bittersweet care...I shook my head sadly, probably looking a little dejected, but he was my master, it sort of came with the expectation. I couldn't keep the saddened plead from my voice.

“Then why can't you just...let me go? I'm useless to you...”

“Useless?” He laughed. “Please, Murk, you do injustice to yourself. I am sure that you have it in you to overcome the odds when given a little encouragement. I have confidence that you will be a good worker for me. Do not feel I am unapproachable should you have any problems, I wish the same for all those under my roster. To be able to help Master Red Eye save Equestria...and then be on their way, hopefully a better pony than when they came in.”

Despite myself, I couldn't help but be swayed a little by his words...what if Red Eye was truly wanting to just help? What if this student of his and his more progressive attitude was a better system? Would more ponies succeeding convince Red Eye to abandon the brutal slave routine?

No! I batted my head with a hoof (no doubt Protégé was becoming slightly perplexed by my expressions evolved from a lonely life...) and tried to remember LittlePip. DJ-Pon3 had spoken highly of her, about helping everyone! About fighting the good fight! Just believe in the goodness of others and try to do so yourself while staying free! Regardless of how Protégé talked it up, this was still slavery, ponies like The Master were still abusing and torturing others like me and the conditions of living were lower than anywhere I had ever been a slave before!

Protégé could see I wasn't in agreement with him. With a sigh he turned and trotted backward, lifting that bag from before.

“I can see we share differing values, Murk. I respect your wish, but I must deny it. However, I must say I have enjoyed an opportunity to talk to you properly. You are an interesting pony, Murk, I hope we can talk again in the future. If you are not required for work, feel free to come to me. For now, however...”

The eyepiece floated back to his face, clipping around his ear once again. The student of Red Eye was back. I lowered my head.

“You are assigned under me. You will begin work on the next available assignment for those who have selected or been chosen for two years of high value target clearance and retrieval. I wish you luck, it is not easy and indeed can be very lethal. However...”

The bag floated over to me, before opening and gently tipping the contents out. I gasped as I looked down.

“...perhaps these may help your mood for now to overcome the shock and help protect you from those

who would judge you for your wings.”

My customised fleece, Slit's goggles, saddlebag and PipBuck.

Regardless of Protégé standing watching, I immediately began throwing on my jerkin, almost rolling on the floor in an effort to pull it over and cover those blasted feathers as fast as I could. Protégé seemed to let his eyes linger on my wings before they disappeared from view.

“Interesting, really. A pegasus...simple family genes and random chance or is there something more to you, I wonder?”

Feeling warmer and safe within my fleece, I reattached the PipBuck to my right foreleg with the leather cord before snapping the goggles onto my head and finally throwing on the saddlebag. It had been emptied...but in it I found three Radaways. Surprised, I turned back to Protégé with an open mouth ready to ask. He simply held a hoof to his mouth.

“Consider it my apology for the way Ragini treated you, Murk. Good day.”

He turned to his desk and picked up his quill and parchment again, clearly that was my signal to leave.

As I closed the door to his office, I couldn't help wondering about him. Was he really as nice as he seemed? Everypony else seemed out to get me or use me for something. Not to mention he was Red Eye's personal student.

As I trotted off down the corridor, following the waiting Ragini, I heard him speaking quietly to himself after he *thought* I was out of earshot.

“To my Master Red Eye...I feel I have an interesting report of what I have learned for you this week regarding the feelings of those who we rely on to rebuild Equestria...”

* * *

The moment I was past the cage door I galloped for Brimstone's cell. It hurt my shoulder terribly, but I knew exactly what was going to happen.

“Heeeey pegasuuuus!”

I heard clattering hooves from behind me as the raiders cantered out into the light from the shops near the entrance. I didn't even look back.

“Come on out and play, don't you even want those feathers back?”

They lightly chased me close to Brimstone's area, only after I had ducked in did I look back. The ragged leader was wearing my feathers around a band on his head! The small group of them clamoured around near the fountain, wearing clothing I could only hope looked like skin rather than...

Ergh...not a nice thought.

Brimstone was waiting inside. With a few stomps he made his way to the entrance, glaring back at the raiders through the cage.

“You can't keep our prize away from us forever, traitor! Not both of them!”

With a shake of his mane, Brimstone gave little heed to them, merely ushering me further inside while he watched the raiders back off. Not for the first time, I began to hate my sensitive hearing as I picked up the remainder of the raiders laughing in their own spots. Alongside them I could hear the groans of those slaves not lucky enough to enjoy Brim's protection...

“Try not to entice them, Murk,” Brim's voice was as rough as ever, like gravel, “the guards, Shackles and I keep them in line as best we can. But they are just waiting to let all that aggression out on somepony. You can't pen raiders up...”

“But I didn't-”

“You appeared. For them, that's good enough reason.”

“I...”

Really, I didn't know what to say, but I got the hint. Stay hidden, stay low. I'd heard too many tales of what raiders would do. Torture, rape, cannibalism and everything in between. Hell...I'd almost been their toy earlier.

“Look, Brimstone...I got something for her.”

I tapped my saddlebag, attracting Brimstone's attention more properly. Without a word more, he encouraged me into the back of the shop.

* * *

“Useless.”

I slumped down on my haunches with a sigh as Brimstone gently nudged the Radaway. There had never been any question that I would give it to her instead of using it to fight off my own disease. Already I could feel my lungs beginning to clam up a little more after the healing from Protégé's doctor some hours ago.

Why? I...I couldn't put words on it. But seeing her lying there, sick and dying...after being there myself and going through hell to get just enough to survive for one last desperate run for freedom and life, I realised how it would look to deny somepony else what I had sought. But useless?

“It's simple really,” Brimstone turned back to her, resting silently for now, “I could have got some from the slave markets...but Glimmer can't take Radaway. Something in it sets off an allergic reaction.”

“Oh...I'm sorry...”

“No matter, just means the first plan still has to go ahead, find the alternative.”

Brimstone clearly went into deep thought as he began piecing together his plan. Hesitantly, I sat and watched Glimmerlight. Her chest was moving so little when she breathed while sweating and quivering under her blanket. A bucket for rad-induced vomiting sat nearby. I could have sworn it had been red when I'd trotted by it.

But I didn't simply see a mare who was sick. Past my natural distrust of all ponies I hadn't met, I saw in her one last chance. Alone, I didn't have a hope in hell. I was weak, scared, uneducated and utterly naïve of the world around me that wasn't a slaver demanding I work. (And I wasn't even very good at that work either) By all my heart...I wanted out. The sketches of apparent freedom I had left in my journal and on Whiplash's walls proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt. But since my failure...the thought of running at that Wall again felt like madness. Once again I arrived at the same horrid feeling.

I was exactly what I had been like before the Pit again...too afraid of repercussions and punishment to have the courage to do it. Whatever had driven me before was beginning to fade fast. Waiting was unacceptable...but I couldn't do it alone!

But that was where Glimmerlight came in.

By Brimstone's story of her life...she sounded like my best chance to find somepony who wanted the same thing as me. Who wouldn't judge me (please...don't...) and would be willing to maybe...just maybe...help me. The mare had shown me that ponies could be nice...now I had to trust in her belief about there being other good ponies in Fillydelphia besides her.

If I ever wanted out of here...I'd need them. Right now I had no direction, no drive pushing me to do something before an event happened like before. My life had been thrown into the grind of slavery once again. If I were to just let it happen...I knew I would be lost forever to the slave in my mind.

Glimmerlight might be my last hope. She could very well be the first step to...to doing *something* to build toward an escape attempt again! No matter what...I couldn't let her die, or I might see all my chances go with her.

“So what do we do?”

Brimstone looked sideways at me with a severe expression.

“We?”

Truth be told, I hadn't properly thought this through, but I knew I wanted to.

“Look...you say she wants out. So do I, right? But I tried to escape and failed badly, Brimstone. I...I'm scared of doing anything, even if it helps me in the end. *Really* scared! Protégé seems okay but...but The Master...”

I lost my train of thought, the feeling of him beating me to the ground...the harsh sensation of his cracked hoof playing along my cutie mark. Shifting back into the dark of the gloomy back room, I heard Brimstone glower a little at my natural habit to seek a dark hidden place to hide in. Even the big raider could see the pain in my eyes.

“He hurt you.”

“...yes...” Little more than a tiny whimper. “Water...and hitting me...I...I thought he was going to break me...”

Brimstone's expression didn't change much, but I know he'd seen The Master buck me to the raiders. I tried to dry my eyes, moving out and standing up before Brimstone to attempt an appeal to his respect of bravery.

“But if Glimmer's who you say she is...then I need to save her, Brimstone, just as much as you need to. That and...I've been where Glimmerlight is now. That's why I wanted to give my Radaway to you, I knew I'd want someone to do it for me.”

Still that stone faced expression didn't move. For a good half minute he simply stared at me, before shaking his head.

“I must be getting too much of a softie these days...alright. You could come in handy anyway. If you could get to the Wall you can clearly stick to the shadows. But know this, like before, if I feel you are ever threatening the success of this then you can trot home and explain to Protégé yourself. Understood?”

I gulped, wondering just what I'd gotten into...

“Okay...so...what are we doing?”

* * *

His plan was remarkably simple, yet fraught with intense levels of danger.

There was a renovated hospital nearby to the Fillydelphia crater edge, just outside of the exclusion zone of the most intense radiation. Due to the ambient radiation however, it was often more used for important slave workers rather than any of Red Eye's group. As such, it was a lot less defended or guarded and held overall less medical supplies than those closer to the hub of the city. Brimstone explained the name to recognise it as the “Hearts and Hooves Hospital.” Of course, I'd never be able to identify it by words alone. He had said he'd simply point it out instead. I had asked why Protégé hadn't gotten any for her, but the answer was simple, “none available.” Even with his influence. As such, Brimstone was aiming to find whatever stock they kept that he was sure any slave physician would keep for themselves out of sight.

How we got there was most interesting. The cell had a back door that was jammed shut. It led to the outside, an old delivery door apparently. Protégé and the slavers believed it unusable because of the thickly rusted hinges, but Brimstone had a theory that it was simply blocked on the other side. With a little clearing and his strength to push it...the door might open. The problem was doing so, he was heavily guarded whenever taken for work detail due to killing guards in the past. As such, my part of his plan was to crawl through the airducts and drop off outside, then clear the doorway. As a pair, we would make our way to the hospital around the edge of the crater away from attention, Brimstone would get me past whatever guard

existed at the supply door and I would sneak in to find the medicine. Hopefully, I might be able to steal some RadAway too to help with my disease.

I didn't particularly like my roles, if I was honest. Sneaking through cramped air ducts in pitch blackness, skirting a balefire crater and sneaking into a place I didn't know to find something I probably couldn't read the name of didn't feel too reliable.

Of course there was another problem. Me.

Today had not been easy. I was still partially a nervous wreck, held together only by a mission to achieve and the fact that I possessed my journal and PipBuck again. But even with my fleece again, I had a horrible feeling that everypony would still recognise me...know I had wings. To be judged...it was horrible. Even as I sat flicking through my journal, waiting for Brimstone to give the go, I gazed almost longingly at the sketches I'd done of myself *without* wings...

I was tired...oh so tired...if I closed my eyes I began to sweat in a fear that The Master would be the one waking me up. Sometimes if I saw Brimstone in the darkness of the store's back rooms I would yelp in fear and turn to run before I remembered it wasn't the horrifying form of The Master. The closest I took to solace was glancing at Glimmerlight. Even while sick, she looked somewhat peaceful, her white coat would have shone had it not been coated in the dust and dirt of slavery. But her two tone pink and shortened mane still held so much colour. Briefly, I regretted only having charcoal and not coloured chalk to draw with.

Who was I kidding...I was only seeking distractions from the real problems...

How could I do this? What had I agreed to? Brimstone had let it known that if I wasn't up to it I was getting left behind. My shoulder ached, I was sure I'd caught something from the freezing water of the hose and my mind was a mess trying to stop the indoctrination of the slave from controlling everything I did again...

Only my drawing was keeping me ready to do this at the minute. I sat in a corner of the back room, using the flickering light from my PipBuck to lighten up my journal. Muttering my mantra in my head (Lines became curves...) I sketched out the first thing that came to mind. Imposing and terrifying, Brimstone Blitz stood over the weakened form of Glimmerlight, steadfastly protecting her against anything and everything that dared come his way. Even as I drew it, an envy crept in. I found myself wishing I had somepony so determined to help me as that. Somepony to watch over me.

Well, there was the mare, but destiny seemed forced to separate our paths at every turn.

I flipped away from the image, going back a few pages. Quite by accident, I landed on the one of just myself in the bottom left of the page, the rest left completely empty. Looking at my smiling face, I tapped a hoof against the paper...almost pathetically really. I just wished I could be that pony...the one who seemed to be laughing through that big grinning smile, his wings spread proudly either side of his body, worn openly.

Who was I kidding? Dreams and fantasies...that's all I drew. I was no free pony...just a pegasus too scared to show his wings for the judgemental hate he would receive. I was even afraid of ponies on *my* side...

“Murk.”

The rough voice was spoken just loud enough not to wake Glimmerlight. I saw Brimstone looming in the darkness.

“It's time.”

* * *

I'd been in the Mall less than a couple hours and already I was about ready to sneak back out of it. Despite my fear, some part of me congratulated myself for not having lost all of my momentum...even if I still wasn't mentally ready to start preparing another full escape attempt.

But if this all worked out...perhaps I wouldn't be alone in that endeavour.

Brimstone settled down low enough that I could clamber on to his back (those muscles felt like bands of iron!) and reach the ventilation shaft. A little dexterous hoof and mouth work with a steel bar and I had prised the mesh cover free just enough to slip in. The ventilation was located near the back of the slave area in the Mall, just off one of the staircases leading to the upper level of slave cells. Tall and wide enough to permit me to at least turn and moderately sit up, it was almost a perfect fit for me...even if I knew it would cause a stooping pain by the end of the run. Even so...compared to the filthy drain pipe I'd inhabited before, it was wondrously dry and surprisingly cool against the humid heat of Fillydelphia.

I turned back to Brimstone to pull the mesh shut, seeing his beady and mismatching eyes from bloodshot injury staring up at me.

“You alright finding your way, Murk?”

“I think so...just keep heading toward the walls until I find somewhere I can prise though, right?”

Brimstone nodded. I'd hoped for a smile at least, but he just remained grim. “Aye, that's right. Knock four times on the shop's back door when it's clear and I'll buck it open...just make sure you stand back. Remember, **four** times, or I won't open. Got everything you need?”

I checked myself over. My now unarmoured fleece (Protégé must have been against armour on slaves...that said it was mostly useless anyway) and PipBuck stayed with me in addition to a length of rope Brimstone had within his own possessions in the cell. While waiting, I had cut my fleece down a little. Fillydelphia's atmosphere and temperature was far too high for a fully covering tight thermal fleece like I had designed for the wastes outside. Now, it only went down to just before my cutie mark. It left my hind legs uncovered to fight the heat while still having enough leeway to hide my wings rather reliably. A noticeable absence of my inventory was my butterfly yellow saddlebag and journal however...

“Don't you worry your head about that book, it's safer with Glimmer right now than clogging you up in the tunnels.”

Was my face really *that* transparent of what I was thinking about? Celestia help me if I ever got a marefriend in my life...

I pulled the mesh back over with my mouth, pausing only for a second more.

“B-Brimstone?”

“Aye?”

I bit my lip...talking to this 'warlord' had always been somewhat awkward, even when he opened up a little...

“Thank you...I mean, really...for helping me. I hope I don't let you down...I'm not too reliable at succeeding at anything in life. Even...even aside from that Glimmer is the only hope I've got to find somepony to help me right now, I just don't want to fail you.”

Brimstone looked almost confused why I'd even spoken, hell, *I* was confused about what I'd said. But the big raider just tapped the mesh lightly before, to my surprise, smiling slightly.

“Do this for me, Murk,” he almost whispered, “and you'll have at least a modicum of my trust. She means everything to me, Murk...*everything*. Not many ponies would even try to help the way you're doing.”

“I...I'll try...”

“Good. I'll wait in the shop. Try not to get bucked off another balcony without me around to raise some hell for you, okay?”

I could swear he was grinning as he turned and trotted away from me. Taking a deep breath I turned and crawled away into the vent systems. The thick darkness ahead of me made my skin crawl...but I couldn't help but feel I wasn't quite out of the saddle yet for finding a way out of this nightmare.

Time to go save a life...a life who could possibly end up saving mine in return.

* * *

There were many ponies I had to thank in my life. The Stable Dweller. Brimstone. The mare. My mother. DJ-Pon3. Hell, even Glimmerlight already for being a goal to me in these times when I feared I might lack a direction to work towards an escape.

But right now, Sundial was the one directing light into my life...quite literally.

His PipBuck's flickering and half broken torchlight was about the only thing keeping me away from a panicked state of claustrophobia. Wait...did I have a phobia? I hoped not, how were you meant to tell? How would I ever tell? I was scared of my own-

“ARRRRGGGHH!”

I dived away, rolling and curling up as I saw the shadow of somepony else crawl...oh.

Well, didn't I feel an idiot.

What could I do? I was nervous, trotting along a hoof at a time in almost pitch black. Of course I was jumpy! I honestly didn't have a clue where I was. The creaking and often haphazardly bending airducts seemed to threaten a collapse any time and worst of all...I heard things. Skittering noises and clicking from down other tunnels. After the drainpipe before, I didn't dare imagine what little horrors lurked around in the darkness waiting for an almost blind pony to stumble across their lairs. Often I'd had to turn back from a route after the duct had gotten so thin I could barely crawl under it. Why were some bits pony sized and some not? Didn't they think of tiny escaping pegasi when they designed it? (Why think of a glass roof to resist a *Balefire Megaspell* and nothing to let somepony get back out again? What kind of builder made this place?) On rare occasions I had passed a vent going downwards, sometimes with faded light drifting in from the room below.

Every tunnel felt like an inaccessible wall of black...I wasn't making any progress in a quiet and terrifying environment like this. Reluctantly, I reached to my PipBuck and flipped the radio on a low volume. Technically a bad idea...but I wasn't getting anywhere without some moral encouragement.

Now...what was DJ-Pon3's station position on the dial again?

Click.

kkkzzzzzzzhzzz...

Click.

...remind every worker of Fillydelphia, you have given again and again for our great cause. Fear not for the future, for you are ensuring i-

Click.

...fffzzzzzaaaaaffff...

Click.

You gotta shaaa-

CLICK!

-many times do I need to tell you, wastelanders? Ghouls are ponies too!”

With a relieved sigh, I relaxed as that soothing voice came to my ears for the first time since my escape

attempt. Something about that familiarity, that informal intimacy of just me and his messages helped give me a better feeling that I wasn't alone in this dark and dreary place.

“Hasn't our resident muffin lovin' trader shown you all something? Well let me set the record straight once and for all. A ghouls is just a pony without the hair and skin with the added ability of being more or less immortal so far as we know.”

Making better progress with the comfort of sound to only my ears from a friendly voice, I felt happier about this mission. I could see a small bit of light up ahead...perhaps some place to get my bearings.

“They feel, they care and they hurt just like any of us. So next time you see one, do ol'Pon3 a favour, will ya? Give em a little brohoof, just to remind them that not everypony out there is a judgemental old relic of the past, eh?”

Stopping for just a second, I sighed. Ghouls I was alright with, one of my masters had been one and I hadn't ever judged him for his skin...or lack of it. Okay, I *did* once call him “rotten corpse” in my head once...but only because he hit me first! But I wasn't hearing any big calls for an ease up on pegasi any time soon...

“Of course, zombie ponies? Yeah, give them the fast track to a little peace at last, everyone. Just learn to tell the difference. It's no fun living in a world where everypony else wants to shoot you for just looking a little more varied than your average pony we see every day.”

Lying down on all fours, I gradually scooted up to the vent the light was peering from. I could hear voices...

“Now, in further news...how about those events over near the old Sweet Apple Ac-

“Master, why didn't you let us finish off the basta-”

*“**Silence.** You know why.”*

Click!

I felt a chill pass through me. That voice...even just the one word, *silence*, made me freeze on the spot and not dare make a sound lest I be punished for speaking out of turn. I tried to remind myself...I was only staying quiet for remaining undetected...

...I wish that were the only reason. Peeping down, I saw a filthy room with an old metal table, racks of slaver tools like whips, knives and magical shock rods and a single bed more filthy than most ones I'd seen exposed to the *outside*. I couldn't see much more although it seemed relatively cluttered with random bits and bobs...but I had a single chilling thought as I looked in from the vent above the bed...

This was *his* room.

I could see The Master standing behind the metal desk, the raider he was talking to was out of sight. I was shaking so much I could feel my loose tooth rattling. Part of me began to worry it'd fall out and give me away.

*“That pegasi bastard can offer much more than just one quick event to me, raider. I'm a *slaver*, I don't make my life by killing those I have control over.”*

*“Not how *we* do things.”*

*“Well you better get used to it. I got plans for him, the moment Protégé isn't around to do his whole “best little student” act that little green buck is *mine*. You just keep me informed, that is all...your prize will come.”*

I was shaking. Part of me wanted to drop down...give myself up. The slave spying on his Master was wrong! Disgusted that my mind even still responded to him, I cursed my indoctrination and tried to fight the

urge. Thoughts of a dying unicorn on a sofa were enough to solidify my thoughts for now. Concentrate on the goal...not on the slavery. Instead, I reached out, stretching over the vent to try and get a look at who the informant was...

“When we were out there with Brimstone Blitz we-”

“Frankly, raider, I don't care.”

The Master's voice had dropped...I still couldn't see the raider. I stretched out just a little more...pushing my hoof forward to balance myself on the other side.

“You are not 'out there' any more! I keep you from the worst of things because you are useful to me in keeping the various packs of your kind in line down there with their old leader now under some fucking stupid 'repentance' crusade. Now get out of here and return to your cell...I'm not in the mood for you.”

“Just one thing...”

He must have been right at the doorway, trotting away just as I thought I was about to find out. Dammit! Sweating, I brought my whole body weight forward over the vent to try and glance right down through the grill from the opposite side. I could feel my aching shoulder beginning to shake.

“**What?**”

His voice slapped into every instinct of mine to perk up. I faltered, jerking and struggling to stay upright...oh this was a bad idea...a *very* bad idea. I could feel my hoof slipping.

“What do you want with him, anyway? If it's pain you want...we could arrange that.”

Oh Goddesses help me and give me the strength to not slip...

The Master chuckled lowly, a sick sound promising all of his sadistic nature.

“I'm a born slaver, raider. I simply want him to be commanded. To be my plaything. To do everything I tell him. He is a born *slave* you know? Everything I could want, a hated pegasus and a weak little slave all in one. I don't want to *kill* him...oh no...not unless I could make a spectacle of it. No...I would rather he be worn down...day by day. I'm not a simplistic sadist brute like yourself, raider. I don't want his death. I want his *life*. He dropped into Fillydelphia so perfectly. It could only have been better if he had dropped right into my *room*.”

My hoof slipped.

I felt my entire body weight collapse downwards toward the vent cover before jamming to a halt just as quickly with a painfully loud squeal. My PipBuck! The edge and the tough leather had caught on the gap between vent and mesh! Praying for it not to break I pulled my weight back up. With a leap as silent as I could, I dove over the vent with a dull thud and turned off the light as quickly as I could.

“The *fuck* was that?!”

I curled up in a ball...afraid to move. The raider's voice had shouted that, but The Master's hoof must have come crashing down, for I heard a painful smack of hoof to skull.

“**Don't you step toward me in my room!**”

Okay...that was pretty hair triggered...I might have thought more on why he had been so suddenly angry, but I was too concentrated on trying to make no noise as I sobbed from the sudden fear of what had almost happened.

“Okay, *okay!*”

Another harsh cracking sound and a dull cry of pain.

“**I don't like your tone one bit, raider! You are the slave! I am The Master!**”

“Yes, Master!”

Despite the beating, I could still hear resistance in the voice. I imagined raiders used to independence were more resilient to The Master's beatings and overbearing nature than I was. Really, was I that pathetic? The imagery of the everlasting chain in my mind begged to differ. The Master was right, I was meant to be his.

But he wasn't going to get me...not forever. I couldn't bear the nightmare, to have him control my entire life. I had to escape him...

I had to...

Even as I heard The Master throw the raider out and return to sit upon his bed, muttering about radroaches in the ducts, I lay right above him...silently crying myself out of a frozen state of terror. Even without seeing me...he could still hurt me.

I had to escape him. I *had* to...before he dug his chains in any deeper to my life.

* * *

Remaining still until The Master had left, my continuation through the ducts was hesitant and without the illumination of my PipBuck light. After one near miss, I didn't dare turn it on again. At first the cloying darkness had led to near disaster by almost falling down a thinner shaft. My heart still raced as I imagined the implications. To be stuck, unable to move and wedged in a thin shaft, vertically...with no-pony ever able to respond to my screams...

But since, my eyesight had began to adjust a little as I got used to it. There was actually some light, staying only on natural sight allowed me to better follow it to my destination at last.

Bucking the vent off the wall, I dropped into the darkened room. Dust swirled around my hooves, making me choke and cough as I found it to be untouched completely since, presumably, before the war...

Pre-war...I didn't want to spend much time here. I *didn't do* pre-war investigation...

Coughing into my hoof every few steps and rolling my sore shoulder out from the scamper through the air ducts, I made my way through the preserved space. It looked like an old janitorial station, thick with centuries of dirt and dust and occupied by creepy thick webs covering the roof, furniture and corners that caught on my hooves and dragged behind my everywhere. I could see two doors barred and locked from the inside with thick metal bars while masses of empty food, drink packagings and a ton of used Radaway sachets littered the space. Most was situated around a central desk that held various terminal monitors that flickered and fizzed eternally from some error. One of them was flashing a message on screen, on and off, a large red word seemed like a warning while scrolling text ran over and over beneath it.

Somepony had barred themselves in here to survive. But if there was barred doors...then where were they?

A little hunting for a way to unlock the doors later, I found him.

An old buck, preserved, even in death, in this still place lying on a small makeshift bed in the cleaning cupboard. Around the bed's side lay dozens upon dozens of inhalers. The smell was not fresh, but a sweet, musty and sickly defilement that had lain here for generations. My heart began to tighten as I felt my imagination begin to take off...

Imagery and visualisation...it was doing it again, piecing it all together...working out the last moments, the reasons why and the visual memory of what had happened here when the spells detonated across Fillydelphia. Had I missed photos? Did he have family? What did he hear? What was that little glint coming from his saddlebag? What was it like living alone in one room until you slowly died...

“No!”

I literally slapped myself across the face with a hoof. (Before shivering as it flung icky web in my face) I couldn't afford another breakdown of sadness about the past, Brimstone and Glimmerlight were relying on

me now! I turned and ran from the cupboard, leaning against the monitors to catch my now rasping breath. Taking a few seconds to compose myself, I moved to the door that clearly led to the outside and shoved the crates out of the way to reveal the lock.

I knew where I'd seen the key. Of course it would be on him...

I knew I had to hurry...but I had to take a few moments to rest. My shoulder ached and throbbed while the stiffness from The Master's treatments and raider beating were coming back to haunt me.

“Okay...okay...just a corpse...just a fresh looking corpse...you've been in sewage...”

I continued my mantra until I was back in the cupboard. Shaking, I lowered my head to the saddlebag and bit the thin loop of string that held the key. There...nothing...nothing to it...

My imagination was hard to turn off. This felt *wrong*. I was disturbing the gentle sleep of the long dead. This poor stallion had died alone in his probably workplace...desperately trying to stave off sickness and radiation and now I was stealing from him? Was I really that kind of thief already?

The key came loose as the saddlebag dropped to the floor, the long worn canvas loops simply falling apart at a mere touch. The body shifted as it lost the extra weight, gurgling from expelled air. I fought the urge not to be sick even as I tried desperately not to breathe through my nose. Carefully, so as not to disturb his long rest further, I stepped back with my eyes closed in respect (not to mention disliking a sight of internal organs...) as I shoved the key for now around my neck on the string.

“Please forgive me, it's for a good cause...I promise. Goddesses let you rest...”

I opened my eyes.

And found his face staring back at mine less than an inch away...eyes open.

It howled. A dry intake of air before gurgling and growing into an unholy screech and wail of corrupt and petrified vocal chords that filled the room, echoed in my ears and froze every muscle in my body through a terror I had *never known in my life*. The corpse's mouth distended, opening far more than a pony's mouth had any right to be. Lacking control, I felt myself collapse before it, mouth open, unable to scream at all as my eyes watered and then felt a rush of tears from eyes I dared not blink.

The corpse began to thrash with spasms, old muscles long underused coming back to life in necromantic horror. I began to scream as it began to claw its way on broken and limp legs across the bed toward me.

Survival instinct kicked in as I began pulling myself from the room. I begged my body to work well enough to stand! I...I couldn't...petrifying fear filled me, freezing every moment I wanted to make but the very basic ones! Behind me, it screamed again, yanking itself across the covers furiously.

Falling against the desk, monitors fell from the table, smashing and fizzing as I used the table's edge to get to my hooves. Shifting and flopping, it fell from the bed, a ruined body animated even after all this time! Finding my hooves, I galloped for the door. Fumbling, I tried to get the key in my mouth...

The thing howled, wailed and screamed as it pulled itself on one good front hoof after me across the janitor's office. Its mouth waggled loosely as it began to claw and tug for me with a frenzy that seemed beyond anything I had seen any raider do...

“Come on...come on, please please *please!*”

I almost dropped the key before working it in to the lock and turning it. The door refused to move. Was this the wrong key? I could hear it just a few feet away behind me, but I couldn't look! The sound came closer...closer! Nothing for it, I bashed and pushed against the door, begging at the top of my voice for it to open, praying to the Goddesses while trapped in this tiny space with...with whatever that was!

Ramming my whole weight into the door, it finally began to budge...by an inch.

“*Come on! Help! Somepony!*”

Ramming myself against it again and again, I didn't even notice that it was my injured shoulder bashing

on the hard metal outer door, such was the terror that propelled me as I turned and saw the...the...ghoul? Was it a zombie ghoul? It was flopping over the monitors, hooves outstretched to drag me in. On my fourth strike it was close enough to rub my back hooves with its front ones as I felt cold dead flesh drift over me.

Screaming, I pushed myself through the gap, kicking backward and struggling on the other side to shove the door shut. With a final wail, I slammed the door shut...hearing it screaming after me from the inside, dulled by the doorway. Slight thumps impacted against the door as the beast rattled itself against it in an effort to get at me. Sitting with my back to it until the thumping stopped, I listened to the groaning shifts as the ghoul pulled itself away inside to...to do whatever it did alone for now. Before me sat the open nightmare of Fillydelphia and a vista of the Balefire crater glowing an unearthly red in the haze of the smog covering this city. That scar on the world that had caused such abominations behind the fire exit.

I might have thought that despite this, the open world was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen, to be out of the claustrophobic ducts and deadly abandoned halls.

But I was too busy laying down on the catwalk fire escape and crying to even care...

* * *

“Hey, buddy?”

I sniffed and kept trotting slowly around the Mall.

“Hey! Hey buck! Buddy! You alright?”

Raising my head, I wiped my eyes to look at the speaker. Another slave, a bright young earth pony buck of cold blue and a fiery red mane. I could see radsores like mine on his flank, actually damaging his cutie mark of a bouncing ball. He was cantering across from a small group that were passing by toward the industrial lines. The rest didn't stop.

“What's wrong? I've seen upset slaves...then there's you.”

He seemed to have been on his way to some workplace judging by the slip tucked into his clothing. Some slavers gave them to slaves to deliver to new work masters with instructions. He kept trying to walk in front of me as I plodded along looking for the doorway to release Brimstone.

“...I'm fine...”

“Forgive me, buddy. You don't look it.”

I cast him a stronger look. Not that it said much for me. I was becoming a little tired of meeting just bucks. When was I going to meet a nice caring mare who wasn't either a wasteland legend, sick or constantly taken away from me?

“Hey, sorry...just asking...”

Stopping and sitting down, I rubbed my eyes and sighed. Perhaps I'd been too harsh on him, how often did a slave ask to help anyway?

“Hard day, more than most.”

“I hear ya. What's your name?”

“Murk.”

“Flippy Bit, glad to meet you. Could swear we've been near each other on shifts, y'know. I'd remember a pony as small as you...”

Gee, thanks. He was right though, I didn't tend to remember faces. Before I'd been woken up by the Stable Dweller I had simply existed as an ongoing bad dream not paying much attention to anything. That said, the bright blue face of this pony did ring a bell...

“Us slaves, y'know? We need to stick together, buddy. Support one another to get through this as best

we can.”

After the horrid encounter minutes ago, the sound of somepony saying things I could agree with was an unimaginably thankful thing to hear. Almost surprised at myself, I allowed my head to turn to him with a smile.

“Yeah...slavery isn't great. I've only gotten this far because of the help others gave me, Flippy. Gonna get out one day though, I gotta...”

“Hah! High order for yourself, Murk. Gonna take all us with you?”

“If I could!”

We laughed. There was something simple here...a genuine little acknowledgement of a shared hardship I hadn't ever had before. The mare was so...so different and determined for her place in life to change. Brimstone was...well...Brimstone. But this 'Flippy Bit?' He was just...just normal and friendly.

“You know Murk, I know I recognise you from somewhere. You ever work the Parasprites?”

“Nope, thankfully...”

“Hm...on reinforcing the south wall?”

“Sorry, no.”

“Then where in the hell do I recognise you from, buddy?”

“The riots? I was caught up in it...”

“Maybe...maybe...”

He turned and looked at me up and down. I looked back.

“What's up, Flippy?”

“Just admiring your fleece...what's it? Cotton?”

I sighed into a smile...really, I was too paranoid. Here I could be proud of it!

“Yeah, kinda...acquired it...from the thresher. Got this too!”

Waggling my PipBuck, he initially seemed to wonder why I had scrap metal tied to my hood with a whip, but after a few seconds he recognised it, before letting his mouth widen.

“Woah...how in the hell do the slavers allow that?”

“Eh...Protégé's ok like that...guess I'm lucky, all things considered...”

“Lucky Murky? Not so murky luck!”

Again, we laughed.

“Seriously nice fleece though...”

He reached out, stroking it with a hoof. With a sudden movement, he pulled it up even against my offended shout. A second later, he was on his hooves...the friendly smirk was *gone*.

“*I knew it!* I knew I recognised you!”

“No...I...please it's...”

“You're that fucking pegasus!”

My mouth hung open...I wanted to just plead. Please just forget about them, we'd been getting on! We could have been friends!

“Flippy...I-”

“Don't say my name, betrayer!”

The scowl came back to his face. I recognised him at last. He had flung the half brick at me in the parade off of the lasso. Why? He knew I was friendly now!

“You don't have to hate me...”

“You? It's not you, it's *all* of you! What do you think you're doing being down here taunting us all with your wings and not helping! I bet that's what the PipBuck is! It's for spying, isn't it! I can't fucking believe I was being nice to you! In fact...no...fuck it I can't stand you being here!”

He reached into a small pouch, to my horror he drew a slave's craft knife...the only thing we were allowed to carry sometimes for certain work.

“C'mere! I can't let it be known I talked to you!”

“FLIPPY! PLEASE! I...I can't fly!”

“You're just lying! Stop it! If I know one thing from growing up it's that pegasi are all the same! I knew if I ever met one that my momma and papa would be right!”

Taking the knife more fully in his mouth he flew at me. Squeaking, I fell backward and rolled, narrowly missing the slash from his mouth held weapon. I had just faced a zombie, I wasn't going to freeze here! With a scrambling of hooves I upped and galloped off, hearing him chasing me with the knife swinging around his neck on a small leather line. Diving over a heap of scrap, I used it as a barrier.

“We're not all the same! It's just...it's just how I was born, I didn't ask for them!”

“The Goddesses don't care for your choice! I try to be nice for them! But I just...I draw the line at pegasi! I'd rather know a ghoul! At least with them you know where they stand!”

“You've never even met a pegasi?! How can you...how can you hate us?”

I was almost pleading. How did this make sense? The Goddesses were against pegasi to him? That didn't make any sense! The Goddesses loved us all!

“Thus in the wake of their betrayal did the Goddesses turn their favour from the winged ones! To forever cast them from the guiding light of Harmony! My folks taught me well to know the truth that so many ignore!”

“The Goddesses love us *all*! We...we shouldn't hate anyone—”

“STOP LYING!”

He galloped and dove over the scrap. I screamed over my back while I galloped myself as fast as I could. But I was limping every few steps, losing ground. I tried to convince him, but it fell on deaf ears. Had he been indoctrinated? But clearly a life of being told who to hate was driving even this...this *nice* pony to murder simply for the difference of pony race. What was wrong with this world?! When ponies were being born and cast as slaves...raiders and now in sheer hatred!

The chase continued around the back of the Mall. Only one thing came to my mind...find the door and get back inside with Brimstone, he would frighten Flippy off! Spotting the door (the logo was the same, how helpful!) I began to gallop for it...until my injured limb gave out with a sharp jabbing pain.

I was really getting tired of injured legs.

Rolling on to my back, I saw the knife descend and even while shouting in panic got my PipBuck in the way of the blade itself. The jarring impact knocked both of us flat to the ground where hooves began flailing. Hoof to hoof combat was never a particularly clean affair, given more to throwing yourself in with luck and guts. I apparently had neither...but it was enough to find one of my hooves connect with his mouth and knock the knife out. In return I felt him pound on my chest, driving the wind from me.

Scrambling, we separated even as I dived back at him again. I couldn't give him time to retrieve that knife in his mouth that hung around his neck. Rearing up, I tried to emulate what I had seen Brimstone do and use my front hooves to slash and strike. Flippy was faster, diving forward into my midsection and taking us both down again. Rolling, I swung him off to one side by tucking my side in to stop him getting a grip.

Hearing him curse about my lack of size to get a hold of, I took the opportunity to limp as fast as I could for the door.

My heart leapt as I saw it was only kept in place by a few metal pipes that had fallen from the overhang above. Although enough to stop it opening, they shouldn't prove much of an obstacle to shift. Simply barging into one and yelping at the shocking impact down my back it fell to the side. The second fell away with it! Putting my back to the third I began to push even as Flippy caught up with a stinging blow to the shoulder. Crying out, I went down.

“Dammit...why couldn't you just stay away from us all? Your kind chose to save yourselves at the cost of betraying all of us. Do you think I like having to do this? But I will...for the Goddesses do not abide the pegasi to hurt her subjects any longer. You brought this on yourselves!”

“Flippy...why do you have to do this? I...argh...I don't want to even know you never mind harm you! I'm not a cloudborn peg-”

“All I know is my old folks were never wrong when they told me to be nice to everypony but fear and do justice unto the pegasi! You all gave us this waste!”

“BUT I DIDN'T!”

“I DON'T CARE! YOU'RE ONE OF THEM!”

I...I didn't understand...how did a couple of wings make such a difference? It didn't change who you were...

I saw him raising the knife even as I pushed the third pipe away with my front hooves and desperately rolled to the side as the knife clattered off the ground and away from his mouth. I leapt for the door, hammering...how many times was it? Three? Yes, it was three! One, two, three!

The moment I was done I felt Flippy dive for me a second time, his front hooves grabbing me to try and bring my neck up to slit. A horrid moment passed as I felt the cold metal slide lightly against my neck. Why wasn't the door opening?!

We struggled, thumping into the door one more time before I finally was thrown to the ground painfully, mewling in pain as he stamped a hoof on my shoulder to keep me there.

Lying at the side of the doorway on my back, I felt Flippy round off and take the knife in his mouth. He walked in front of the door towards me.

“Hate to do it...least I'll know I did my pa and the Goddesses proud...”

Brimstone bucked the door open with a force that defied belief.

Trotting out, the massive earth pony looked around before settling on me.

“Murk? What happene-”

“BRIM! BEHIND YOU!”

My warning seemed to fall on deaf ears (well one was effectively missing in Brimstone's case...) as the raider warlord turned nonchalantly. Nothing happened. With an annoyed glance that told me to stop shouting he closed the door again.

Only then did the dead body of Flippy Bit fall to the ground, his neck broken from being struck by the door.

* * *

Hate.

He hadn't just hated *me*. Or my wings. He had shown a real...underlying and educated hate against anything I stood for, minuscule or otherwise. So many ponies had done the same this morning while they

pelted me on my parade from The Master. He hated pegasi too, to the point he wanted to ruin my life. The raiders had wanted to pull my wings off. Ragini had called me “flightless.” Even Brimstone admitted he hated the pegasi...

I'd been running ever since the Pit. From my slave life, from death, from The Master and from the opinion everypony had that just because I had feathers I deserved nothing. But the truth was, I had been running all my life time and again from master to master, fellow slave to fellow slave. Even while covered I knew I couldn't get too close to most ponies. I hadn't been exiled from the clouds. I was no Dashite, but I was an outcast all the same from the entire pony race. No-pony wanted me. Even those who accepted it like the mare...I'd be bringing them into danger if others knew. The guilt would forever be with me, even if it wasn't my own. Weighing me down and hurting for the rest of my life, no matter how long.

No longer could I handle it...

These wings had been useless to me. They had hurt me, taunted me with their inability to even *move* or spread out and now brought danger upon me for the last time. I trotted toward Flippy's corpse and closed his eyes. They had still stared with abject shock as I gently pulled them shut with a hoof before searching around for what I knew he'd dropped. What I knew I needed, a ticket to end the hate once and for all. A feeling like that from the control tower had returned...but I realised I didn't need to *kill* myself to make the pain go away this time.

No...I'd save that choice and last resort for when there truly was nothing left. It sickened me to think that I even considered these...these responses to the pain. But they always felt so easy and tempting...

As I retrieved what I wanted from Flippy's corpse, I stopped Brimstone and, nervously, trotted over to a suitable looking flat rock.

The big pony simply looked passive as he watched me move over and dump the knife before him. He looked deadly serious even as he looked into my blubbering eyes, red with soreness and rubbing. As I pulled my fleece off, the raider grumbled lightly. I ignored him, trying to keep my mind focussed. I couldn't believe I was doing this, but the blissful thought of a life where I could have been Flippy's friend kept running over and over in my head. *I didn't want to be a pegasus any more.*

“I'm sorry mom...I'm not going to be among the clouds like you wanted and to be honest...”

I sniffed, whimpering as I forced myself to mumble it to myself.

“...I don't think I would have wanted to go either...”

Settling down beside the rock, I looked at Brimstone. Part of me, some new emotion, was begging with me to not do this.

“You hate pegasi too...h-here's...y-your chance...to...to hurt one...”

He simply looked at me as I painfully used my mouth to pull a wing off my side over the rock. My entire body was shuddering, the feeling like I was atop the control tower only grew. Of being on the edge. But this time I wasn't ending my life...I was just removing the things that made it harder! Maybe...maybe they would all leave me alone! Yes! They'd leave me alone and I'd be like any other pony at last!

Brimstone looked at the knife. Then at me, sitting with my wings revealed, waiting for the brief pain that would end the cycle of hate.

“Do it yourself.”

His hoof shifted the knife towards me.

“I don't help cowards.”

“Coward?!”

How could I be called that! Well...I could...but not for this! Well I'd show him...

Picking up the knife in my teeth, I laid it back across the stem of my wing. Just...just some pain, I

wasn't losing anything...nothing important...nothing I'd ever need! The judgement they all gave me, just ending that...just...ending...that...

I pressed down with the knife and closed my eyes, whinnying around the handle. A horrible second between applying pressure, feeling the cold metal and actually doing this. A whimper turned to a whine before I cried out and with a single swift motion swept the knife sideways...away from my wing, throwing it across the ground before collapsing and letting the wing flop back on to my side. What...*what* had I been doing? Why did I think like this? Every part of my mind was fighting itself over what was best for me or not. I was terrified of the hatred those wings brought me, but I was scared of the pain it would take to remove it. There wouldn't be any turning back...why didn't I just have the willpower to go through with it? What was wrong with me?!

As I lay shuddering, trying to make sense of what my screwed up mental state was thinking, I heard Brimstone advance on me. With a sigh and a glance at the direction we should have headed in, he stared down at me.

“You helped get that door open. So I'll give you a little respect, Murk, and offer what I can say. Look at you, not able to do it. What does that tell you?”

I sniffed, trying to hide soft sobs as I glanced at the knife.

“...that I'm just a coward, afraid to do what I need to in order to fit in...”

“Wrong. Well...you *are* a coward, but only from standing up to what they think. You're a pegasus, wings don't change that, Murk. You'll always be one. Something inside you, your soul, magic centre or whatever. It's always going to be a pegasus. Born for the clouds, bound to the open sky and all that other airy nonsense. It's who you are.”

He leaned closer. I could have sworn I saw a knowing rise of an eyebrow.

“You don't just turn your back on stuff like that. It doesn't work that way.”

I stared back, before daring to rise to my hooves and lowering my head.

“I'm just afraid...that buck wanted to be my friend until he saw them.”

“Not all ponies are like that. You met many, but not all are. Glimmerlight wouldn't care if you were a winged *zebra*. What do you think I go through? I'm the raider who many ponies can say killed someone they knew through commands to my clan. You learn to live with it. Besides, by not doing it, I think you're proving to yourself that you don't truly want to lose them. Hate them or not, they're a part of you just as much as those chains on your flank.”

He glanced away again.

“Now come on, I'm no good with this youthful cheering up crap. Once we're moving you'll have more things to consider than depressive escapism. Not like I could cut off my clan markings.”

My mind was still reeling. My wings...*my* wings. But surely if I didn't have them it would be better! Or was Brimstone right? Would they hate me even without them? Would I have put myself through agony for nothing? Did I really still want to own them?

I glanced back at the unmoving things on my side. Often I tried to forget about them. Could I ever learn to truly love them as a part of me just like my eyes or ears? I needed time to think...to delve right into my own thoughts about myself. Other things to, I still hadn't quite come to terms with the thought that not a day ago I had been close to hurling myself from a tower. I...I needed time to let it all out and truly realise what I was thinking. Maybe Protégé would listen...

But later...right now I didn't have time to sit and think at all. Of how The Master was slowly eroding every facet of free will I had gained since The Pit. Of how I desperately needed to find my confidence and a source of strength now that LittlePip was gone. But later...yes, later. We didn't have too long to make this journey happen. As I saw Brimstone start to trot off, I cantered after him, limping badly and pushing everything I could to the back of my mind. I didn't quite manage it, but the action of starting this small

dangerous journey galvanised my mind to think more actively on the moment.

“Wait, wait, Brimstone! What about Glimmerlight?”

“She'll be safe, aye, safer than us. The raiders think I'm sleeping in there guarding her, they won't come nearby to her or your little mare book.”

I was a mess...it'd take me time to think this through and come to terms with what I had been wanting...what I perhaps still wanted...to do. But that caught me off guard enough to splutter and blush. Why did this always happen to me?

“Y-you looked at my journal?”

Brimstone actually grinned as he looked back and down at me.

“I told you before, patience isn't my strong point. I got bored. Seems you have some interesting tastes...”

My mouth just hung open as I stumbled on limp legs and fell, covering my face with my hooves in embarrassment.

“Oh come on, Murk. It's not like I'm going to judge you...”

Looking up, I saw his dry grin. True to his word at least, he seemed to have at least a small degree of tolerance for me after helping him to get out of the Mall.

He terrified me. He had often spoken of how he would leave me behind or kill me if I caused him problems. That in Fillydelphia ones own needs came above temporary companions.

But right now he was my ally and I had attained a certain level of trust to follow him in a quest to save his friend. To save the mare that promised him salvation...and promised me a step towards escaping one more time.

As the pair of us prepared to canter into the red haze of Fillydelphia, I flipped down my goggles, shuffled to get comfortable in my escape fleece and tightened the strap on my scrappy damaged PipBuck before standing as tall as I could. I had faltered...failed and been hurt by the ramifications of my decisions, but so long as I had a direction...some goal and something to hope will help me...I was not about to stop yet.

What is it liked to be trapped? It's hell. The Master was a symbol of all my life, the fear and authority that sought to keep me in line.

But the Stable Dweller was the symbol of freedom...and as I cantered after Brimstone and turned my radio on to hear of her latest exploits...I knew I hadn't abandoned her ideals just yet.

I'll follow you out of here yet, LittlePip. Just you wait and see.

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Luna's Moonlight – After some time to get used to the dark surrounding you, things have began to seem much clearer now. Your eyes now adapt well to low light conditions, who says the night need last forever?

Chapter 5: Blessing of the Stripes

* * *

“Is it...zombies?!”

“What is it like to have a goal in life?”

It's all too easy to say that I have something to shoot for. Something to aim at and hope beyond all wishes that I can sometime attain it. But the more I thought about it...the more I began to realise that I was wrong.

Did I want my freedom? I wasn't sure anymore, not after speaking with Protégé about what I truly understood or not. That great outside world could hurt me more than even a life of slavery for all I knew.

Did I just want to escape the pain? My mindset had led me to consider this route in the wrong way one too many times before and would continue to do so. When no exit is given, I found myself more and more beginning to turn to options that would make it all stop no matter the cost.

Was it to discover somepony who would love me and care for me as much as I could in return? But then, who truly would? Pegasi were hated and I certainly wasn't the most charismatic and confident pony who ever lived. If asked my name by someone I didn't know, chances are I'd just squeak and avoid eye contact.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised I had only one real goal; to survive anything that came my way. But is that really a “goal?” Isn't that just what everypony seeks to do? It didn't particularly feel something I was convicted to enough in order to make the death defying attempt I'd have to in order to finally escape Fillydelphia. I didn't know what I really wanted, but the thought of going beyond the wall was the sole remaining thing that kept me from going mad with grief at the hand I had been dealt in life.

But after meeting Brimstone, Glimmerlight and Protégé, that had been changed. Now, I had been given two paths to trot down. One a lifeline, tenuous and vague but a desperate hope all the same. To save Glimmerlight and pray that she agreed to help me in the escape. Her brief words gave me reason to believe this was worth trying for at the very least. I couldn't have done it alone and my confidence in myself had been shattered. To attain the aid of somepony else would go a long way towards a successful attempt.

On the other hoof...there was Protégé's offer. Two years service and danger in exchange for my eventual freedom. The callousness he showed to even smile as he signed me on to this “operation” spoke volumes of the reasons behind my shaky trust of that pony. Good intentions and a supposedly caring mindset mattered little when he was still the pony holding me against my will and forcing me into dangerous situations. All the same...somehow, I couldn't shake the feeling that he understood me better than anypony else. If Brimstone and Glimmerlight cast me out, he might be my only vague ally in the nightmare that was Fillydelphia with a road left.

I let all these paths, thoughts and opinions flow through my mind. But still I felt held back, like I had no real drive to shoot for the stars anymore. The Stable Dweller's influence was beginning to falter over time without seeing her. I desperately needed a figurehead, somepony to give me a reason. Perhaps that's why I was following a raider, who had once abused ponies like me for fun, in an effort to just be doing something, anything at all to give me purpose. Or was it just because he had the authority that I couldn't say no to? My duality of personality was still a tough obstacle in my head from the authority of The Master. What kind of life was this? Moving from slave work to pathetic tag along? Sure, it was saving a life...but I doubted it would matter much after. She would heal and then I'd be back on my own again after Brimstone cast me out to keep them safer.

I really wished I had something better to hang on to. I had only had to take care of myself in the past. To survive. To get my journal back. To attempt escape. I'd had a certain confidence that The Master had broken once more.

I needed it back, I needed something to prove to myself that I could still do this sort of thing and not go back to being the mindless slave I once was.

I needed to save Glimmerlight, not just for her life, not just for the vague wish that she would become an ally, but also to give me something to cling to, something that I could use to remind myself that I was not beaten yet.

It wasn't much of a goal...

But for now, it was enough.

* * *

Hearts and Hooves Hospital had clearly seen better days.

The building was old, sandstone and brickwork mismatched from different generations of renovation and surrounded by a ripped and wrecked barbed fence of the war era. On top of it all, wasteland style scrap and rough repair jobs had further broken the balance of visual appeal. It offended every artistic sense I had to merely even look at the sprawling complex's low buildings that seemed to expand outward rather than upwards around the higher central wards. Old wagons lay on their side, their pink and yellow design marred and dust covered. I could see at least a dozen of them, prompting me to wonder why they hadn't been renovated for use by Red Eye. A closer look explained all...they were sky wagons. Without pegasi, they were useless to him. But even they had been stripped of anything useful, owing to Red Eye's insistence to use anything and everything.

That same ruthless mindset had created Fillydelphia and repaired much of what it could do. Before me sat another element of proof to that claim. The hospital was not exactly bustling, but I could see lights inside, slaves on watch duty outside (I presumed a medical area dedicated to more important slaves didn't warrant a full guard routine) and even hear the hum of arcane science from healers doing their work within due to my rather freakish ears. Why did people concentrate on my wings when I had these mutated things on my head anyway?

Brimstone and I had been holed up within a warehouse across from the hospital for an uncomfortably long time now already. I had taken to looking around with observation to try and stop my mind from settling on the uncomfortable conclusions about how to stop all the bigotry towards my wings. Unfortunately...there was only so much to look at in Fillydelphia. Ruined home. Big crater. Ruined home. Ruined hospital. Big raider pony. Ruined home. Factory. Brick wall. Back to a ruined home again...

Dropping from the ledge with a sigh, I had found my companion not faring any better. He had said patience wasn't his strong point and this was only proving it. As such, I'd decided to try conversation and found myself met with a surprisingly amiable response on various topics. For example, now I knew the best way to break a pony's leg was to buck it just *above* the kneecap and that apparently swearing was a subject that I was most uneducated in...

“So what you're telling me,” rumbled Brimstone, “is that you've never said 'fuck' in your life? Never?”

He seemed almost shocked to meet somepony who just didn't swear. Brimstone scared the life out of me with almost every movement he made and social interaction on a conversational level was clearly about as new to him as it was to me in many ways. Throughout speaking, I had always seen that glint in his eye whenever I'd began saying anything that offended his “survival of the fittest” mindset.

“Well, I've *thought* it a few times...”

“But never just shouted it? What plane of innocence are you from that you've never given out a right good swear? Aye, we're going to change that. Go on.”

I sat up, what was he asking me? Huh? I blurted out an answer without too much thought.

“Go on? I...what? I don't get you.”

Brimstone sighed and shifted his weight to lie on the other side in our secluded little hiding spot I'd found. I'd felt so proud when he'd nodded in appreciation at it.

“Say it! Can't have a midget like you unable to swear properly when the world decides to fuck him up.”

“I'm...not sure I really want to...”

“Try.”

“Please I...”

“Just give it a go. We're bored here anyway. Amuse me.”

My jaw was hanging open. I'd always felt nervous when I'd even thought the word! Or any swear word for that matter! My mother had always taught me not to, that to swear or curse in the Goddesses' name was bad. Over time I'd broken the second one a few times (sorry, sorry, please don't send me to the moon!), but always kept control of my voice. But then...perhaps I'd fit in better if I talked like them?

“Um...ok...I'll try?”

“Aye.”

“Alright...what about?”

Brimstone rolled his eyes, muttered something about 'bloody sunlickers' and shrugged.

“Anything, something you hate. Who do you really, really not feel safe around?”

My first thought was 'You!' but I doubted it would help my present situation of being on the better side of this massive and potentially dangerous pony. I still remembered him choking me against a wall for daring suggest the wrong thing about him...

But who did I hate? Wicked Slit was a particularly loathsome presence in Fillydelphia, as was Sooty Morass and of course Noose. I hated Protégé for his insistence to not let me go. I hated Red Eye for buying me in the first place and putting me into this nightmare...

But really, there was always going to be one answer.

“I...really...hate The Master.”

“Shackles? Pisspot of nasty that bastard is. See? Now you try. Say you fucking hate him or something.”

I sat up and took a deep breath, closing my eyes. I was actually shivering. What if he heard me? What if word got back to him? What if Celestia and Luna heard me? What if Brimstone laughed at how bad I was at proper swearing?

Really they paled in comparison to the real worry.

What if somepony told my mother?

“I...”

Right, I can do this, rebel a little! Show The Master he can't take your freedom of voice!

“I...really...really...f-”

I felt my face screw up and the word fall flat suddenly. Brimstone just shook his head.

“What is wrong with you? It's just a wee word, nothing to get worried over. Try again.”

“I...I really f...”

No! I wasn't gonna give up, I'm doing it now!

“I really *fudging* hate him!”

There was a dull 'thunk' as Brimstone facehoofed. Hard.

“This could take some time...couldn't it?”

I just nodded meekly, muttering small apologies under my breath. However my ears pricked up as I heard a sound from outside. The sound we'd been waiting for. Noticing me perk up, Brimstone peered above the ruined windowsill.

“Looks like a bit of waiting paid off. Guard change. New ones won't be as keen to do the night shift so getting past them shouldn't be too hard. You distract one and I'll take him out.”

“Wait, you're going to kill a slave?!”

“Yes. And?”

His eyes glanced over at little me, the buck so pathetic he couldn't even swear, as though asking wordlessly whether I really was as useless to him as I was seeming. But it slammed home again, he might act nicer sometimes...but when it came to saving the one he cared about...he would become the raider all over again to make it happen. Eventually, as I stared with a horrified look, he seemed to deflate slightly and shake his head.

“You look like her when you stare like that y'know? Fine...I'll *try* not to do it.”

As we climbed down, I heard him muttering to himself about going far too soft around mares and little bucks. I clambered down as best I could on my injured shoulder before we began to creep toward the hospital itself.

I wanted to help save a life with this...not end others. The slaves hated me for my wings, but I would be damned if I was going to hate them back for the same stupid reason.

“Damn it...I hadn't counted on them nailing the guards to the wall...”

Brimstone had spotted something I had overlooked. The slaves were chained to the wall beside the door. Any knocked out or dead body would be out in the open and easily spotted while they could never leave their posts no matter what happened. I wondered if The Master had come up with that one for Red Eye, it had his horrific practicality all over the concept. As such the plan to use me to distract one before knocking them out had been thrown completely out the window now that the guards could not leave their highly visible locations where a body would be noticed within minutes. As we advanced and crouched behind the outer wall, we both looked around the corner (Brimstone normally, me crouched beneath him) and hunted for ways in. Brimstone Blitz nodded suddenly and lowered his voice.

“Got a way in.”

“Where?”

“First floor. Pull across a wagon, I'll stand on it, then you stand on my back. You'll have to do it alone, now. But it's better than leaving an unconscious guard where they'll find it immediately. Just don't get stepped on.”

My heart skipped a beat as the meaning of his words drove home. I'd have to sneak through a slave hospital run by...well...the slavers, and steal medicine with no back up inside? Also, what was with all the shortness quips? I wasn't *that* small. No-pony messed with LittlePip, I had heard so on the radio and she was about the same height as me!

“I don't know if I can do this Brim...how will I even know the medicine?”

“It's called RadPurge, some rare knockoff brand but it's safe for Glimmer to use to avoid RadAway's ingredients that she's allergic to. Just look for that.”

“But I...”

I backed off, looking off to the side with a sigh...I really hated admitting this.

“...I can't read.”

“Are you kidding me? Seriously, Murk, are you kidding me? You're *how* old?”

I didn't quite know actually, only a rough estimate. I didn't even know my birthday, not that anypony truly knew dates outside of fancier settlements. Even then they differed. I just hung my head in embarrassment as Brimstone groaned and shook his head.

“Damn it all...look, it's like RadAway, you know what that looks like?”

I nodded.

“Right, good. It's like that but a much darker orange. Almost a brown. Alright?”

Okay, that I could do. I nodded before glancing back round again. The sky wagon he intended to push up was nicely out of sight, but my nerves were still shot. Alone in vents was one thing...creeping past slavers? That hadn't ended well last time...

“Come along, Murk. Just get started and you'll figure it out.”

“But I-”

“Wheesht.”

“Huh? What does that-”

“It means 'shut up!' Now come on.”

His voice held a tone of authority. I'd forgotten he had led others. I felt the slave in my mind bidden to obey the command as I trotted quietly after the big earth pony toward the wagon, wondering if I really was making this choice on my own or if it was only because he was telling me to help him...

Some days, I wished I could tell the difference of choice from obedience.

* * *

Inside I didn't find much I hadn't expected. There were wards with little cleanliness and rather disturbing traces of red stained into the floor. Slaves groaned from open wounds while anypony with a degree of medical ability was moving around, checking the patients. Too many times I saw them sigh dejectedly and move on.

Thankfully, no-pony seemed to mind me being there amidst the strangely slow paced yet chaotic scene of pain and half hearted healing that took place around me. Even so, I quickly snatched some bandages from an empty bedside and used them to cover my PipBuck. It mostly looked like scrap, but there was no sense in taking the chance. Perhaps they might think I was injured and had a right to be here.

The thought quickly occurred that I *was* injured. Just I wasn't considered valuable enough to send to this place for treatment. I guess Protégé's admittedly appreciated efforts to protect me didn't extend to getting me on to the list of “valued” slaves. Perhaps they just didn't like pegasi.

The corridors were of an old wooden construction, clearly very old. I could feel them creaking under my hooves. Indeed, some areas looked about ready to give way and fall. Whatever renovation efforts Red Eye had made were clearly minimal in priority. How could slave marketeers like Sooty and Artery get away with having so much stock and yet there was never enough for those here? It just wasn't fair...

I passed a young earth pony buck about my age. Teal and white, he whimpered on an old mouldy mattress in the nearest ward. His two front legs were just...gone. Had he stepped on a mine? I found myself standing and watching him for a second, just lying there crying into the mattress and trying to move limbs that weren't there. Very quickly, I felt my eyes dampen and guilt clench around my heart as I realised that not an hour ago I'd been about to put myself in a similar position voluntarily. But he hadn't asked for it, only for it to actually happen. Now he'd never walk again.

The fate of the one poor slave that lost a leg to the thresher came back to my mind.

Shuddering, I found myself forced to move on. There had to be a medicine cupboard somewhere.

A sudden door banging and agonised screaming dragged me from my thoughts as I saw a stretcher magically pulled before me. Ducking into the ward to let them by, I squeaked and hid as I saw Whiplash following it at top speed.

“Don't you dare let her die! She's one of my best slaves to get requests for!”

“Yes, master! Bloodbank, get to the stash and bring a brace with a syringe of Med-X!”

“Yes, doctor!”

Peeking out from the ward, I saw a light pink mare thrashing in pain on the stretcher as two unicorns desperately tried to hold her down. I saw a red pony in a bloodstained overall gallop off down the hall even as the stretcher and Whiplash disappeared around the corner. After all I'd been through, he really didn't seem too much of a threat these days...

At a canter, I followed Bloodbank as the procession disappeared through another set of doors. Even further away I could still pick up her squealing in the distance. The sound made my stomach churn as it heightened when they undoubtedly began work to fix whatever had happened to her.

Bloodbank moved fast, charging around to a doorway. The fact he stopped to get a key was the only real reason I even caught up without moving too fast to seem overly suspicious. Even so, I nearly ran into a couple of orderlies magically carrying trays of implements, prompting some shouting to watch where the hell I was going. By the time I found him, he was coming out of the room again and locking it once more. Damn! But at least I knew where the medicine was kept now.

Waiting for Bloodbank to leave, I crept up the door, watching left and right for anypony coming. This was a more deserted area of the hospital, clearly to keep the chems away from those who might seek to acquire them from their beds. To an extent, I had to marvel at the organisation for how little they had. These ponies were trying to help those brought to them, Bloodbank *had* looked concerned. Not for the first time, I wondered if casting Red Eye and his forces as absolute monsters was a truly accurate conclusion. Perhaps The Master was just the exception? The others were harsh, yes, but...

Shaking my head, I pushed on. This was no place to get involved with inner thoughts. I tried adjoining rooms, finding only some old bathrooms (why I still felt guilty for glancing into the mare's room by accident I had no idea) and eventually a less vital storage cupboard. Well, better luck than none. Pulling the door closed behind me I began to hunt. Metal boxes of the ever-rich designer were mixed with random scrap. Judging by the rust, this hadn't been touched in quite a while. In fact, if I had been in this place more permanently...I may have made a hidey hole in here. The last item was a small toolbox. Out of curiosity, I opened it. Perhaps it'd have something to get that lock open?

A hammer, small saw, nuts, bolts, metal ruler (truly a lethal weapon), wonderglue, a screwdriver and some bobby pins.

Nothing that could be used to pick a lock. I stifled a curse, or what amounted to a curse by my standards, and took just the ruler. It'd help me make straight lines on my drawings at least. I stuffed it into the pouch I'd sewn on the bottom of my fleece and sat back against the wall to think.

This just wasn't my area. Sure I was a little thief, that I'd come to accept, but getting through obstacles was just beyond me. The mare would probably have known how, she seemed intelligent. Brimstone would probably just knock and the door would open from sheer terror of the alternative. Protégé...well he would just use the key.

But for a little thief like Murky Number Seven...like me...what could I do?

Tossing ideas around, I gave up somewhere around hoping I had an undiscovered talent for making explosives out of wonderglue and lint before realising the obvious.

I was a thief. There was a key.

Well...duh.

* * *

It took a few minutes to relocate Bloodbank as I followed the same wailing that still sounded through the hospital. I trotted through a cloth hung above the corridor and stopped. All this walking and running was not doing my shoulder any good at all. I wondered if they had anymore Med-X in that cupboard, that had worked last time pretty nicely.

Bloodbank was standing outside a room separated by a clear perspex viewing window. Behind it, I could see the mare thrashing as a unicorn tried to get the syringe of Med-X into her. I dared not look too closely, I didn't particularly want to see some gruesome injury to keep me up at night. The sound of a pony being 'sorted' by the threshing machine still made me shiver from time to time. Bloodbank's key was rather convenient, hanging from his side lapel for easy access with magic. However, even as I began to slowly approach, I could see how reflective the perspex was. Any attempt to sneak up and lift it would be spotted instantly.

I tapped the goggles on my head while thinking. Bloodbank had acknowledged my presence with a brief glance, but seeing the bandage just grunted and looked back into what I guessed was the operating theatre.

“If you're a visitor for Pettle Leaf here, you'll have to wait.”

I spotted a quick chance and an idea. I couldn't sneak up to him, so I'd do the next best thing.

“Pettle Leaf?! Sweet Celestia, is she alright? Please! I have to see her!”

I threw on my most dramatic and pained voice, letting my pitch go almost to breaking point as I galloped forward toward the window. Bloodbank sighed, turning to block my way.

“I said I am sorry but you cannot-”

I 'tripped.' Slamming into Bloodbank, the pair of us tumbled to the floor. I was given an unexpected lesson in swearing as he rose to his hooves and battered me around the head once or twice for acting so moronic in a hospital. Shooing me out, I pretended to struggle and whine as I was almost thrown through the curtain again. With a final scream to never get in the way again, I was painfully half bucked across the floor. Groaning, clutching my side, I cowered into the corner of the reception as everypony else stared.

But at least I had the key hidden in my mouth from one pickpocketing little swipe.

* * *

I was feeling at least moderately proud. I'd gotten in without harming anypony and I could just leave the key behind the unlocked door when I left so the doctor's would still be able to access it and treat others. We'd save a life without hurting anypony!

Well...almost. Flippy Bit's hatred still resounded in my mind. But that had been an accident, right? Brimstone would have let him go if he hadn't died on the doorway, right? Right?

I knew I was wrong, but right now I needed to stay as optimistic as I could. I was trying to build confidence to pursue something bigger again. I couldn't afford to always second guess myself.

I was moving back toward the medicine cupboard again when I spotted another doctor leaving the room once more. I had to fight to not gasp as I galloped back to the last corner and hid behind it while he passed by. He was carrying just what I needed! Elation filled me as he left and I galloped back to the door, unlocked it and triumphantly ran in. This place definitely had the right stuff!

It didn't.

The shelves were stocked with pretty low size and quality medicine with only a smattering of higher dose or quality chems and medical supplies. There was a clear gap beside the RadAway shelf where only one

of the orange packets remained. Truth be told, I'd been planning to steal some more, they'd get restocked right? But seeing the pitiful amounts...and remembering the suffering of slaves all around me...I couldn't. It would be as bad as becoming a slaver myself.

The words of the first Doctor came back to me. '*The*' medicine cupboard. Singular. This was the only one.

I'd failed Glimmerlight...

I collapsed onto my knees in the middle of the cupboard, sobbing as I remembered her wonderfully peaceful and energetic look even through her sickness. I realised just how much I'd wanted to meet this wonderful mare who Brim had claimed didn't care what type of pony I was. But now she wasn't going to survive because I couldn't figure out a damned lock fast enough to beat the last of the stock being taken...

Unless...

Tears dripping as I stood up, I turned back to the entranceway and hobbled out as fast as I could. There was one more of them in the building...and I was going to get it no matter what! She deserved life! She didn't hate me! That Rad-whatever belonged to her!

* * *

It had taken some searching, but eventually I located it. This run around the hospital had been beginning to annoy me and a few orderlies were starting to get suspicious as well. I had tried the 'messenger' trick again, but even then most of them kept glancing as I moved past. I avoided whoever I could, but no-pony could truly hide in these boxy wooden corridors with proper lighting installed.

But it didn't matter. I had found the patient the medicine had been taken to. A nurse had been about to connect it, but one quick crazed shouting from me later, they had galloped off thinking they were urgently needed for an emergency.

Now there was just me and the RadPurge. That sickly brownish stuff lay on the side table, unconnected and fresh. All it would take is for one quick snatch, shove it in my pouch and then make my way to the entrance and trot out. No-pony would question somepony *leaving!* I felt my heart lift, I had done it! Reaching forward, I bit down on the RadPurge...

"Mm..? Who...who's there?"

I yelped and hopped back, holding the RadPurge in my mouth as I stared at the source of the noise. On the bed lay a mare covered by a thin blanket who turned to me, eyes still closed from weakness.

A sense of déjà vu flowed over me. The symptoms were precisely the same. The illness the same...

This mare was suffering the exact same problem. She lay there, pale grey with a wondrously coloured blue, black and white long mane tied into a ponytail with two braided strands across her face. True to form, she was also a unicorn who looked a good bit older than me, like she could have been my mother.

She was also very...very...sick.

"Did...did you find some?"

I glanced at the mare, then down my own muzzle at the RadPurge. They...they would get more, right? They would restock! I could just turn and walk away...be a good little thief...

Glimmerlight deserved it...more than...

...any...pony...

She looked so weak. My head lowered, feeling a shuddering start throughout my body already. Too late, I noticed my ears warning my off somepony approaching.

"What are you doing!?"

Shocked, I squealed out loud and dropped the sachet before stumbling back and falling against the side of the bed, startling the mare. The unicorn red and yellow mare nurse had returned and stood directly in the doorway, quite out of breath.

“Were...were you?”

Her eyes fell to the RadPurge before falling back to me. Having it all laid before me, I realised what I had truly been reduced to. To stealing from a critically injured pony with no proof of them being good or bad to help somepony else. To simply take the easy way out...and lose all morals and ethics in the process. Not once had I even stopped to *think* and realise the path I had been walking down. Who was I to judge life against life?

It quickly overcame me, as I imagined my mother, DJ-Pon3, the mare and even LittlePip looking down upon me disapprovingly. I collapsed to the floor in tears.

“I’m sorry! I...I didn’t...I needed...I...”

Words came with great difficulty as I cried my heart out. Partially because the overwhelming guilt and partially from terrifying thought that Fillydelphia was slowly but surely beginning to corrupt me. I’d never had much a sense of who I was or what morals to uphold, but LittlePip and DJ-Pon3 had shown me the way. How to be a better pony.

This was not it.

The nurse picked the sachet from the floor with her telekinesis, placing it beside the bed of the frankly stunned mare. The sick patient wasn’t sitting up to look down at me, being too weak. But the nurse advanced across to me. Her expression seemed to have softened...

“You were going to take it...but this patient will die by tomorrow without this last sachet. She has an-”

“An...an allergy! I know,” I sniffed, “but somepony else does too, but I...hmk...I don’t think she’s able to come here...I just wanted to help her...”

Her face dropped any remaining sternness it had possessed as she drew breath lightly.

“I can sense you have an irradiated lung infection, a serious one. This isn’t for that? Look me in the eyes and tell me.”

Opening my soaking wet eyes fully, I quivered as I looked up at her. How had she known about my infection? I guessed she must have some sort of empathic medical sense spell active. But I had never once thought of using it for myself!

“I would never have. It’s for somepony else who...who means a lot to...to...a friend. She is in the exact same position as...as...”

I raised my hoof to point at the patient. The nurse was quiet, before dropping a small cloth for me.

“Dry your tears. I can see you’re honest. This was wrong...but...your heart was in the right place at least. I wouldn’t be a nurse if I couldn’t respect that to some degree. Even if I work for Red Eye, that doesn’t mean I don’t follow the same code that Doctor Weathervane taught us, he’s pretty intense about that stuff. Look, I’d give you some, but we have none spare. Well...”

Well? Well what? As I got up slowly, I could see the mare had seemingly fallen into a restless sleep even with us two talking. She really was in a bad way. Why hadn’t I seen that?

“There might be some in the basement. But that’s dangerous, you see. When the megaspells hit, it was flooded from a waterline that came from the impact site. The water is long gone, but the radiation is intense down there. It would badly affect your lung if you were to try...but there is an old supply room that we’ve been unable to reach. Usually Doctor Weathervane brings enough that we don’t need to bother even considering going down but...if you really are willing to go to these lengths...”

I didn’t even need to think. If anything, I now realised more what drove Brimstone Blitz. I had damaged my own innocent nature here. If I had to risk life and limb to get that medicine to make up for my

act...so be it.

* * *

That is, what life and limb I had left.

As I wandered around the hospital compounds after the nurse had let me out, I began to feel that ever present 'slave condition' creeping in all over again the moment the cleaner hospital environment ended. My throat was dry from the air around the crimson hell of Fillydelphia the moment I stepped outside, not to mention hurting from my illness beginning to make itself known once again. Very hastily I regretted not stashing away one of my RadAways that Protégé had given to help me stay healthy. My shoulder ached terribly, albeit still being mostly functional. My stomach however was tightening itself and growling every so often as I felt myself shake from lack of sustenance or any form of proper nutrition. The last thing I had eaten was the apple stew given to me by Protégé and in my still recovering state...it just wasn't enough.

If only I found fresh food and RadAway as much as I found ponies I left without knowing the names of...

Very quickly, I wondered why my cutie mark talent was to be a good little slave and not one of finding mysteriously strange unicorn mares. Furthermore, why did they all have to be either too old for me, taken or sick? Well, there was one, but she was a wasteland legend whom I'd never have a chance with in my entire life, no matter how simply awesome she was.

I stopped briefly, I'd shoved those thoughts aside before...but they did keep coming back. I remembered Sundial's words about the mare he liked, Skydancer. Sure, I appreciated the look of a mare as much as the next buck, (especially if they were actually the same size as me...) but did I really think of LittlePip like that? Was it just misplaced pining for the dream of being alongside a hero? Was it the slave in my mind wishing for someone I could follow and obey and know it was for good? I'd only seen her briefly and never even talked to her.

No...no, not the time for those thoughts...dangerous irradiated area ahead, Murky. Concentrate!

All the same...they may be confusing, but I couldn't admit to somewhat enjoying the feeling of perhaps a little crush...

One way or the other...it gave me something nice to dream of to help keep my mind from feeling too guilty from my thievery until later when I could let it all out by drawing.

* * *

Brimstone found me spluttering and coughing through a bank of contaminated dust blown in from the nearby crater. Dropping on my side near him for a breather, I reflected that I should probably have asked for something to fight the radiation while inside...especially given where I was about to go.

"You don't have it."

The words held a *lot* of potential for violent anger at my coming out empty handed. Perhaps it would be best he didn't know that I had turned down some...

"No, but I know where now."

I pointed a hoof toward a swing door that led to the basement. It was locked as well, but that wouldn't prove any real obstacle to Brim. I explained about the radiation, but as I had guessed, he didn't care in the slightest. One slap with those 'Murky Number Seven's-head-sized hooves' and the basement lay open before us. A darkened and dusty hole in the ground, probably untouched since the war.

Pre-war. Irradiated. With a raider.

Why didn't I ever get to go some place nice?

* * *

Not for the first time since we had descended was I beginning to realise how out of my depth I was. I was just a little slave who tried to run away, not some die hard adventurer like Brimstone or LittlePip. Every ounce of me was fighting my resolve to help redeem myself for almost slipping into doing something truly awful in order to make me just turn and run. Protégé would understand, surely, if I turned up and just explained. Maybe he'd help out and get some for Glimmerlight somehow?

I almost hated the fact that I was genuinely wishing I could just go back to one of my old masters outside Fillydelphia so I could live in a radiation free area and just toil away until I keeled over with a lot less scary things and pain all the time...

I could just barely see down here. Already the radiation was noticeable as I felt my chest begin to burn. Each breath was laboured and I had to stop and cough every so often, much to Brimstone's annoyance. I'd enjoyed a brief period of relief thanks to what I stole from Artery and then the healing I'd received from Protégé...but this place was bringing it all back. The sick little slave buck dragging his hooves and coughing up blood had returned.

Around us was little of note. Almost pitch dark janitorial rooms (no bodies...) littered each corridor. Supply cupboards proved to be filled with junk. Large pipes creaked and groaned as we disturbed the environment around them. Or rather, as *Brimstone* disturbed the area. If I ever needed to feel like I was better at something than somepony else...it was that he had absolutely no consideration nor thought of the term 'stealth.'

“Hey, Murk?”

“Y-yes?” My voice trembled as my rough throat caught the words, leading me to splutter and grab a pipe to keep myself on my feet. Brimstone seemed unaffected thus far...perhaps he just didn't show it.

“Had a thought. If we need to gallop back and split up. We need a better password so I know it's you to let you in.”

I was about to comment that a number of knocks had seemed to work. But then, I was the moron who'd got it wrong.

“So what do you suggest?”

“Easy. The password is 'fuck.’”

Oh...not fair.

Brim turned back to me, I could see him grinning in the darkness. I guessed he liked to use a bit of banter to help relieve times when you could cut the tension with an auto-axe.

“Aye, that'll do. Now, you should go up front, you seem to be able to see better than I in the dark. These eyes don't work as well as they used to before that little scunner with the flamethrower a few years back.”

“You sure? I...I mean...”

“Aye.”

Was he grinning? What was the joke with simply saying-

Oh. Wow...I was slow today. Sighing, I staggered up front, glad that at least Brimstone would be able to see if I were to be about to collapse. Perhaps he'd carry me back out again...perhaps he'd just leave me here? The worry shaking me led to another foul cough. At least I wasn't vomiting blood yet...

Each step I made was hardly without worry. My eyes adjusted well to see a vague outline of thin corridors and irregular doorways that hardly seemed shaped for ponies at all. I began to wonder if the designer had even thought of those who might have to access it during operation. Thick layers of dust were not helping my breathing one bit as I carefully edged around old tools and murky objects that I couldn't even

discern the original use of.

My ears worked just fine though...and I didn't like what they were hearing. Light shuffling trotting. I froze on the spot, leaning down and hoping Brimstone would get the message as I closed my eyes and just...listened...

Clack...ssshhh...clack...shhhh...clack...ssshhh...

The thick concrete ceiling kept all sound from above out. Whatever was moving was...was down here...

My quivering became a fearful shake as I remembered the hellish zombie janitor thing in the dark...that howling mutilated and rotten face inches from my own haunted my every thought. What I could hear was moving idly, dragging its hooves behind it and moving aimlessly.

Just like that monster before. I whined, fighting the urge to flee.

“Brim,” I whispered, “I think there's a zombie...”

“Not surprising, it's contaminated down here. They live off that stuff. Just find a room, we're under the main building, so it should be nearby.”

I really wished I could detect where that sound was from, but the ambience and thick walls were giving me no clues. Now if I could just stay quiet, we might find the medicine and get out before whatever it was found us. A nice doorway just close to me, that'd do...

Placing my front hooves on the door, I pushed. In my weakened state, the door felt heavier than I could even attempt with a slow push. (Not that me being weak was anything new) Slamming forward, I shoved it open roughly, before a wall of dust exploded in my face out of the undisturbed space. It went in my mouth, in my eyes and shocked me to yelp and fall back.

My throat began to tickle.

Oh no...no no no....please not now...

The tickling rose, a painful building of pressure as I fought to keep the cough in. Unfortunately, the dust had done its damage. My throat was like sandpaper, I felt both lungs searing with the effort to breathe and making spasms as I tried to just inhale normally. I couldn't hold it in. Even with my hooves covering my mouth, the coughing went on for too long. I fell, crying out between them as I felt my entire mid torso light up with the pain I'd began to forget from my illness. It wouldn't stop...hacking and spluttering, I cried on the cold dusty concrete floor as it felt like my lungs were about to erupt from my mouth.

It took a good ten seconds to die down, leaving me lying frail and weakened on the floor, scarcely able to breathe.

Whatever *it* was. It heard me.

A sickly howl of hunger and rage echoed through the basement as I heard rapidly moving hooves galloping. Brimstone leapt between me and the rough direction, a metal shard in his mouth ready. A ferocious crash boomed through the area as I saw the far oaken door shudder from a colossal impact. Even Brimstone seemed to be taken aback by whatever force was slamming on the door.

THOOM!

I got to my hooves, leaning my hoof on a pipe, wincing in pain as my shoulder reminded me why I shouldn't put weight on it.

THOOM!

The door was holding, but I could feel the impacts through it. A high pitched shriek sounded as I saw a glowing haze emerge and fade from below the doorway.

“For the glorious love of great fuck, will you *shut the hell up in there and stop that endless fucking*

bullshittery?!?”

The sounds ceased. Everything became deathly quiet as Brimstone and myself stared sideways at the second pony who had approached us under the noise of the zombie ghoul pony...thing...attacking the door. My mouth dropped...and not just at the rather imaginative cursing.

Another ghoul. If I could have screamed, I would have.

A unicorn stallion, dressed in a torn and faded doctor's outfit. Underneath it was nothing but rot and sinew with visibly moving muscles and surrounded by a sickening smell. He glanced to the door and slammed a hoof against it. A face bearing the straggled remnants of what could have once been an impressive beard scowled with enough disgruntled fury to make me wince.

“It's just me you old bastard! Now calm the fuck down and let me get back to sleep!”

His voice put even my sickened one to shame in terms of roughness and rasping quality, but it held authority and poise beyond any I had met...even Protégé. As soon as he had heard the monster back off, he turned to us, looking furious.

“Follow me! If you want to live more than one more fuckin' day, you'll come right the fuck in here this fucking minute! Fuck sake!”

* * *

I had expected some squalor filled with radiation enough to outright kill me. I had expected darkness, damp mould and rotten smells.

I had not expected to find a surprisingly well functioning medical laboratory.

Shelves of old liquids and materials lined the walls around workbenches, chemistry sets and sinks. I saw a small flame lit beneath a beaker that was bubbling a nasty purple substance. Curtains at the back concealed patient areas that between the gaps looked long unused. In one corner, I could see a few blankets to make a rough sleeping areas. The *entire* place was filled to the brim with chems, medical potions and anti-radiation kit.

“Now, would either of you two moronic dipshits care to tell me why you came down here into an irradiated basement when neither have you have taken any Rad-X, neither of you have any RadAway on you and the pegasus there has a severe infection susceptible to balefire corruption?”

I had been about to compare the volume of his swearing to the amount of chems in the lab, (I now knew where my share of swearing talent had gone) but it only took me a few seconds to register quite what had been said immediately. I stumbled into the lab, almost falling against a bed before holding myself up on it. Brimstone marched in impassively without a word as he looked around. I imagined he didn't care for the ghoul, only caring for the RadPurge.

But I had much bigger problems.

“P-Pegasus? I'm not a pegasus...”

“You fuckin' are, little one,” he responded sharply, before sweeping the blanket from the bed and tapping it with a hoof, “I don't need to see your wings to know. Get on this, right away!”

His voice held an authority to it, without really knowing what I was doing I climbed up as the ghoul magically threw a couple of RadAways to Brimstone.

“Knock yourself out looking for what you need while I tend to the stupid bugger here who didn't stay away from areas that'll fuckin' kill him! There's no rads in here, but Luna fucking damn it you two. Just don't take anything without asking first.”

“Fine.”

Clearly, Brimstone was content just to search and let me deal with this strange undead stallion.

“Get that fleece off, come on I'm not going to laugh, not often I get to actually work my expertise on pegasi here, so hurry it up!”

It was like he was late for an appointment. What was going on? Who was this ghoul? Why was he being as fast and to the point? How did he know I was a pegasus? Why was he helping without even hearing a word from us about what we wanted?

“Wait a minute! I...I don't understand, who are you? What are you do-YARGH!”

I felt myself lifted off the bed entirely as the ghoul doctor muttered a colourful term (What was a 'douchenozzle' anyway?) to himself and just used his magic to systematically draw my goggles, fleece and PipBuck off me.

“Always with the fucking questions...fine, listen while I work.”

He moved forward, dumping me back on the bed before walking around me with his horn angled toward me. I felt exposed...not for any sense of being embarrassed, but simply for my wings being on show.

“I am Doctor Weathervane, trauma surgeon from Canterlot Royal University and don't you fucking smirk because I am no hoity toity prick like some *others* I could mention. Pegasi specialist, lead surgeon general to the Shadowbolts under Ministry Mare Rainbow Dash and previously the personal physician to the Wonderbolts. That's why I recognised you the moment you walked in. I don't need to see wings to see a pegasus. The way you trot. The way your head bobs. Fuck, even the average size of your hooves for your...scale.”

Alright, *enough* with the shortness already! But immediately, I remembered Brimstone's words about wings not being the only thing that made you a pegasus. I quickly had a sense of just how right he had been. I had been born to be what I was and I shouldn't be trying to change that. Silently, I muttered an apology to my own wings for the horror I had even began to scarcely contemplate inflicting upon them...

“Could say I'm one of the most experienced surgeons in Equestria more than likely...I certainly haven't met any others with two hundred and seventy shit filled years of experience. So consider yourself lucky you found me...stupid bastard...wandering into an irradiated area with...hmm...so that's what it is. Interesting...”

I didn't even know where to start. Every ounce of social capability I had was simply being run over by this ghoul surgeon. Best to start basic...on the present...

“W-what was that thing outside?”

“Oh? Flowerpot? Don't mind that cranky old ass. Used to be one of my colleagues until the balefire gave us both a suntan till the end of fucking time. I locked him in that quarantine cupboard. Don't worry, that door's reinforced metal behind the oak finish. He can't get out. Good thing too...big radiation leak in there, he's probably strong enough to knock your head clean off by now. Now hold still and raise your wing.”

Oh here we go...

“I...I can't...sorry...”

I buried my face in my hooves, blushing red. This unicorn had seen pegasi in their glory days. How pathetic would I be in res-

My right wing screamed in pain as it was magically pulled out. I screamed in a more literal sense.

“Oh stop whining. I tell ya, back during my time with the Wonderbolts? Mare called Spitfire had her wing snapped in three places from a crash landing. I reset all of them in the dressing room and did she give so much as a squeak? Hell no she didn't. Not like Soarin'...always whined on his check ups that big foal did. Now come on, worst part is over. Hold still and it won't hurt a bit.”

“Why...why are you doing this?” My voice was gasping under the rough treatment, coughing every time I took a breath too quickly.

“Are you a bloody simpleton? I'm a fucking doctor! What do you *think* I'm meant to do when I see a

pony dying and injured in front of me?”

Silence reigned for just a second. Hesitantly, I cast a glance up to see for once he had stopped moving to match me. Only then did I finally catch the look in his eyes as I shifted uncomfortably. That look of pain...because he was seeing another pony genuinely suffering before him. How many times had he seen that same look over the long years in the wasteland? Those centuries of dedication to a craft did not allow him to ignore me. I quickly began to gain a respect, even through the rudeness. He had taken the wasteland's horrors for longer than...well...possibly any pony ever. Yet he still helped.

Pain scared me...but for once, I nodded. Even if he didn't truly show it, he was a true doctor.

I finally saw exactly what DJ-Pon3 had meant. Ghouls truly were ponies too. In many ways, they were better than any of us, for they knew where this world had come from and what values had to be held on to.

“Now hold still while I get the other wing. Celestia's fantastic arse, kid, how long has it been since you washed under these things?”

* * *

Much wailing and cursed comments of how much of a foal I was, I eventually learned more as he went about his business. Weathervane, despite his somewhat abrasive manner had taken to clinging on to his principals to help him stay sane across the centuries. The result seemed to be somepony who was more determined to heal others than was generally socially accepted. An odd combination...to say the least.

It was also why he had started working for Red Eye. Weathervane had lived in Fillydelphia, or at least had originated here, before the war. This basement was his personal research and chem lab for the hospital he had actually founded and run above. Very quickly, the haphazard artistic design made sense as I learned more about Weathervane's insistence of efficient quality over aesthetic requirement. Even now, two hundred years after the apocalypse, he had remained at his post. No matter who now ran the city. Part of me was tempted to ask him about before...but I sensed it might be a sore spot and I knew how badly I reacted to stories of the past anyway. Perhaps it would be best just to stay quiet on this one and treat him as an individual of the present rather than a relic of the past.

While checking me over, his horn had flared as he spoke. My shoulder's pain had numbed and eventually faded before he strapped a tight wrap around it. Bruises and cuts I didn't even know I had disappeared as I was fed a stale tasting healing potion. He seemed greatly interested in my wings, however, tutting and shaking his head.

“Somepony really did a bloody number on you, kid. Would I be right in guessing blunt trauma?”

I think I must have twitched as the unpleasant memory of being dragged into an old barn by fellow slaves resurfaced. Eyes clenched closed and fighting not to have a minor breakdown, I nodded. Dr Weathervane's tone had softened after his scathing anger. Indeed, he only *frequently* cursed now. For him, that was a step down.

“Old injury too, but that will have to wait. I'll perhaps be able to give you some more information or treatment or some shit to get rid of the pain at least later on. But for now we have something a bit more...important...to discuss.”

Setting some RadAway beside me, he motioned to drink up whilst he moved backward and settled against the counter. I could hear Brimstone still stomping around, becoming aggravated as he hunted for RadPurge in the back of the room.

“Well, Murky Number Seven...”

Weathervane's voice rasped and echoed from the walls to give it a somewhat fading slimy quality. He brought a pair of reading glasses to his face as he gave me the look that told me I should be sitting down.

“...I'm afraid I do not have very good news for you.”

I'd known I was screwed long ago. But something about hearing it from a qualified medical professional really rammed it home...

“What you have isn't a simple infected lung that got a little radded up. What you have is something we call pulmonary ebolism. A clinically severe affliction that provides the symptoms you have demonstrated. Basically, the arteries...you know what they are?”

I shook my head. To tell the truth, he had lost me at 'pulmonary.' Weathervane shook his head, tapping it and cursing lowly before continuing.

“This isn't technically right, but something in your lungs is clogged up by an unspecified substance. In this case, it's your birth defect. Your ears show signs of taint mutation. Were you ever exposed?”

“My mother was exposed while still pregnant...”

“Makes sense. You were exposed to taint as a foetus and thus were born with severe defects. At first I thought it was the chemicals in the air that might have started it, but on closer magical observation, it seems your ears are not the extent of your tainted afflictions from the womb. Your internal organs have mostly harmless but noticeable warped sections. However an internal mutation in your lungs has begun to clog your arteries. Now this was never enough to really cause you trouble...until you came to Fillydelphia. The ambient radiation aggravated it, causing the tainted inner flesh to react, inflame and begin to cause much more problems around your respiratory system. The more radiation you took in, the worse it got. Right now it's just a big angry fucking blob of irradiated flesh mutated out of your primary lung systems. Symptoms are just as you say you experienced. Shortness of breath, burning lungs, nausea, retching up blood and immobilising periods of coughing. Untreated, this will likely kill you within days. You already know that RadAway can stall or slow the process...but...”

Even Brimstone had stopped to stand, almost respectfully nearby. He looked at me with impassive eyes as I lay on my front on the bed, slowly sniffing. I couldn't even work up the energy to properly cry as I heard it all laid out bare...

Then he dropped the megaspell bomb.

“I'm sorry, Murk. The taint is not curable.”

That did it. My I felt my breathing heighten as my chest rapidly moved from hyperventilation...before I finally felt my tear ducts let it all out. Curled up on the bed, holding my head in my hooves I just shook...and cried...and cried...

This...this disease, it wasn't curable at all. Artery had lied or had never really known. I heard Weathervane explaining it all, how taint that had been with me for so long could not be purged. About how even Tenpony Tower's prodigious medical facilities would not be enough now.

“The most I can offer you is that regular use of RadAway will keep it benign. However I know how hard this might be in Fillydelphia. I can give you a good amount to get you started but I must consider my long term patients. Murk, I must stress this. You *have* to avoid radiation as best you can from now on. Even with RadAway, an intense burst like the one you mentioned from the phoenix could, and probably will, kill you without immediate action and lots of anti-radiation medication. I'm so sorry...but you'll have to live with this for the rest of your life...”

I didn't reply...I couldn't. My forelegs were soaking damp with the overflow from my eyes as I just buried my face into them, wishing it would all just stop. But he continued, to get it all over and said rather than leave more harsh words for later.

Weathervane explained what to watch out for. I would become dizzy, tired and very short of breath like I had while around Sooty if it was reaching critical stages. Further than that I would go into convulsions, bring up blood and likely fall unconscious within the hour. I'd need somepony else to save me if that happened.

If not...I'd...I'd...

...oh Goddesses...please give me the strength to face this...

...if no-pony did, I would quite literally choke to death on my own blood...

The limit for ambient radiation was a few days. To avoid serious symptoms I would have to ingest at least one RadAway every day or so to keep it at bay. He had given me five in the bag. In combination with Protégé's gift I had eight.

Eight days...plus however long it took the radiation to build up to kill me. Perhaps a couple at most. Less than two weeks, but I needed to survive two years if I didn't get out!

It was all so unfair...

Why me?

Why *always* me?

* * *

I ignored Brimstone and Weathervane as they talked. Instead I simply lay down quietly and found myself staring blankly at the wall in Weathervane's lab. In a fit of need, I had switched on my PipBuck's radio to listen to DJ-Pon3. I needed something, anything, to help give me hope now.

“Now I've been getting an interesting little question lately, or at least I've heard it's been asked in all those little towns around the big ol' Equestria wasteland these days. DJ, they ask! At what point have we won the good fight you always want us to follow?”

Well, children. That is a very good one. You know that I am known for the truth, fellow ponies, so I will not lie. I really had to think on this one! At least...all the thinking I could manage while I could find silence what with my number one assistant and her new found friend both together in the area. Now I'm sure they were just moving some furniture around and were agreeing a lot over where it had gone but what a-

Oh...sorry, off topic. Ol'DJ here just doesn't know when to shut his mouth these days does he? Now allow me to answer you all. The good fight never ends. Even all those years ago when ponies lived in peace they were fighting it! By making cakes for a picnic to share with friends they were fighting! By helping a friend finish their preparations for a relative visiting they were winning the war! You see, my little ponies out there, there is no end because it's something to strive for. To be better. The obstacles in our path can be overcome if we just work together. So don't abandon those you care about y'hear? These days that which we fight against is bigger, more obvious and deadlier than any ponies in the past ever had to deal with. Only by sticking together can we truly save lives and make ourselves better...no matter what horrors we all must share along the way.”

I imagined Pon3 out there in the wasteland some place. What had he been through to know it with such conviction? What had other ponies had to withstand? How many of them had been killed outright by taint or horribly mutated beyond life? At...at least I was still *me*.

It was a small comfort to be reminded that we were all in this together, no matter how far we were separated. Not much, perhaps, but enough to allow me to clutch the PipBuck close, close my eyes and try to pretend that some day I'd be able to thank him for all the help...to pretend that my life would actually end well.

“Now for all you newbies to my broadcast over in Filly, I figured I'd bring you up to speed on what that little mare you all saw has been doing these past few weeks over my broadcasts for the next few days. For example, did you know the Stable Dweller severely messed up Red Eye's operation coming out of Old Appleloosa a while ago? Dropped a boxcar on an alicorn too. So if you had family out that way, you can rest a bit easier knowing that there's a chance they might not be headed for the hell you're in. Take heart in that mare, slaves. She'll save you all somehow.”

I tried to smile, closing my eyes as I imagined seeing the Wall falling. Of seeing LittlePip charging over

with the ponies that support her racing into the city and taking out the slavers, griffins and those monstrous abominations of the Goddesses' image, the alicorns. They were the elite beasts under Red Eye's control so far as I knew. Mute and lethal, their magic was feared by the few slaves that had ever had to directly encounter one. Usually, they were seen in the crater basking in radiation or accompanying Red Eye. But for LittlePip to kill one?

Well...it helped bring a smile to my face as I fantasised that she might one day save me and all the others. What would I say to her? Would I introduce her to the others?

“Now until the next time of news for you all. Keep smiling, ponies and if you see that little mare in the Stable suit holding a scoped revolver? Give her a little hug for me.”

Oh I would.

“Till then, here's Pinkie Pie with, You Gotta Share, You Gotta Care!”

My eyes jolted open, no! Oh Goddesses, no! Even DJ-Pon3 had fallen to her-

“Haha! Gotcha all! Ah, I'm just kidding folks, here's Velvet Remedy!”

Through all the pain, the horrible news confirming that my life hung by a thread and the ongoing torment of being isolated from the life I desired outside of Fillydelphia while the world kept turning without me...he had actually managed to make me smile.

I held the PipBuck closer, almost nuzzling it with my tears still dripping from my eyes. I needed to hold on to these feelings. Without them...I knew where my mind went. The control tower was too vivid in my mind. Too easy a route to avoid a life of pain the disease would leave me with. The Stable Dweller, LittlePip...she was the main source of my hope and inspiration to continue.

“Thank you...”

Brimstone's deep voice cut the moment harshly and made me wince as his tone rose to fury.

“You want me to go *where?*”

* * *

I had missed the majority of Brim's debate over the RadPurge. Waking from my depressive daydreams, I found Brimstone Blitz and Dr Weathervane engaged in an argument over 'payback' for him whipping up a new batch of RadPurge. Apparently, he was actually the *inventor* of the brand that had never really made it in the market the same way RadAway had. As such, he was now the only source of the medication.

“There are sixty eight fucking slaves in this city that have this particular allergy, raider! You bring her to me, I'll heal her. But I do not give away my grade A medication on a whim to somepony without any pissing proof! You're a raider! I know your name and reputation, 'Great Warlord'. I know what you did to Ponyville, to those defenceless ponies only trying to repair a broken town. If you want it, you've got to bring me what I need or bring her here!”

“She can't *move!* Don't you think I would have? Now make that RadPurge, you know who I am, *you know what I will do to get what I want!*”

“And what? Harm me? Ha! Do that and you'll never get any and your friend will die anyway! I'm offering you a chance here, get me the materials and I'll make some up while you're away! You won't be losing time!”

Brimstone looked about ready to crush Weathervane's head completely. I could see the same look on his face he had worn against the raiders. His front hooves were scratching at the ground, itching to strike something. I heard the light snort and growl before a hoof raised and slammed down on the workbench beside him. The thick wood actually cracked.

“Fine!” He scowled, matching Weathervane's glare. “I'll go. But if you don't have the RadPurge by the time I get back...”

“I will. Just remember, as much anti-radiant fluid as you can find as well as the silver sphere-”

“I know! I'll get them.”

This could go badly, almost suicidally I decided to try and intervene, shuffling across.

“Um...excuse me...”

“All of it! I won't be adding the final ingredient until you're back!”

“...if I could just...”

“If you double cross me ghoul...you will not survive this.”

“...could we please be calm a second...”

“They told me the balefire would kill me too. Fat fucking lot that did.”

Brimstone growled, baring his teeth as he pulled himself to his full height. I could see the anger in his eyes as he began to raise a hoof to lash out with it.

“WAAAAAAAAIT!”

I screamed at the top of my voice as I hurled myself between the hostile pair. Throwing a hoof up and waving it to get their attention, I succeeded in stumbling around just enough to fall between them. Looking back up (or further up, in Brim's case) I sighed and tried to divert their attention from killing one another.

“I'm lost here...what are we doing?”

Brimstone was the first to snort and cast a glance back at the ghoul.

“Fleshy here wants me to go into the crater and retrieve some of his old stuff from a pre war research facility. Ingredients for more RadPurge to replace what I'm taking. That and some ridiculous old project.”

“Not ridiculous...typical raiders. It's a stored spell that is just short of a megaspell in potency.”

Okay, things were getting beyond my understanding, a megaspell?

“You mean, like, a bomb?”

“No, a megaspell. The balefire brand were the destroyers, this one is a healer. Basically, a megaspell is just a normal spell with a turbocharger shoved up its arse. In this case, it heals. There was a pretty tragic incident when a healing megaspell brought a zebra army back to life on its first deployment, so we were tasked with making ones that could focus on one pony at a time instead and use less energy. Not so easy, getting a megaspell to reign in its power. We never quite finished it, but the prototype I am sure still works.”

“I didn't know you could store spells like that...”

“Normally, no. However the Ministry of Arcane Science in Fillydelphia were involved in an interesting project to use the same spell that created memory orbs to 'store' pre-cast spells that anypony could use, as the energy required was all bundled up. It never properly worked...you still needed a unicorn to direct it after using one and they had a nasty habit of dissolving after their first use. But at least it allowed some unicorns to utilise spells they didn't normally know...if only temporarily. We used them to store the spell prototypes, no unicorn alone would master a spell this potent and if we wanted individual healing...we couldn't rely on a larger device like a full blown megaspell that would spread it all around. Ministry Mare Rainbow Dash was still bitching the entire time I was fixing her wing about that 'double battle' incident...rightly so I may add...”

My head hurt. All this magical sciencey stuff was way beyond me. I was no smart headed unicorn or technologically gifted earth pony. (Or a proper pegasus either for that matter...) I knew roughly about memory orbs and how they allowed a unicorn to see into the past like a...a visual diary or something. But I didn't even know what they looked like, never mind any details.

“Well...okay, it's important, a little silver ball you said? Like a bouncy ball?”

“Urgh...fucking wasteland ponies and their uneducated thoughts...yes it's a little silver glowing ball. I had to leave it all behind when Red Eye took over, I'm not permitted near the crater. Too much risk of a ghoulish becoming a bit too powerful for his tastes in there, y'see. But I can't risk Red Eye's crater teams stumbling across the technology anymore, I heal for him but Celestia fucking damn me if I ever let him have that power. That's why I want Brimstone to get it. Not you Murk, the radiation is too high in that place.”

I wasn't sure what to feel. Part of me was relieved. The crater was legendary amongst slaves for killing you in mere months from exposure while working. What it might do to me with my inherent weakness to radiation...

On the other hoof, I was disappointed. I had come all this way to seek a reason and purpose in my life. To be doing something to prove I could still face my fears and break my mental chains of servitude. To save a life. I...I found myself wanting to go.

That thought terrified me. But I couldn't ignore it.

“No...no. I need to go...”

For once, the two of them seemed agree on something. My idiocy.

“Look! I'm small and can sneak around, you've seen how it's handy, Brim! I...I need to do this! Above in the hospital...I almost took medicine from somepony who needed it.”

I would leave the fact it was RadPurge WELL away from Brimstone's ears.

“I feel guilty for that, I want to do this to help prove to myself I'm not afraid to take a harder path! I could lie down and let somepony else try, but what would I be telling myself then? I...”

Oh come on...why could I feel tears again...why couldn't I ever just be brave? My head fell away from their witheringly strong eyes.

“I'm so scared but...I'm scared of dying even more. I need to know I can face death if I'm ever...ever going to escape. DJ-Pon3 said we all need to stick together. Please, helping you is all I've got...without it, I'm...I'm just a slave again...”

There was a long pause. Eventually, Brimstone sighed, shook his mane and rolled his eyes.

“If you want to come, you can. Just know that you will not be my priority if I have to choose between you and Glimmer. If you get sick, you can crawl.”

Weathervane matched the rolling of the eyes as he turned away to his instruments and began setting up beakers and small flame burners.

“The times when I could hold a patient back are long gone now. If you do go, I imagine I'll be seeing you very soon. Either in intensive care or an autopsy. But...”

He sighed and magically grabbed two bottles of pills to toss to us.

“If you are going, take this. It's Rad-X, it'll help your immunity levels a little. You take it too, raider. Grab that healing potion from the far desk too, chances are you'll need one. Fucking hell...what is it with wasteland ponies being so bloody stupid these days? The rads in there are liable to kill you in less than an hour in your condition, Murk. Just move as fast as you can or something...still a fucking stupid move...”

I thanked him, even if Weathervane didn't show it, I could see he was saddened by my choice to put myself in danger. I didn't dare ask him about it...or I was afraid that I'd be swayed to stay out of fear by any logic or frank common sense he might use to convince me. The Master had broken my confidence to rebel...but the urge to save a life, to gain an ally, was all I had left to prove he hadn't completely shattered my freedom yet. Even...even if I had to put myself into the very environment I'd just been told was the most dangerous thing I could ever do...

The healing potion went into my saddlebag along with the RadAway, I'd have to leave most of it at the Mall to not risk carrying every piece of my required medicine with me. As Brimstone left, I turned back, there were a couple things I wanted to ask.

“This megaspell...it wouldn't cure taint, would it?”

Weathervane just shook his head without even looking at me. His entire body seemed to slump a little. I hadn't held much hope for it doing that...but even so I felt a painful pang of inevitability setting in again. Okay...one more question then, I had to get going. Just for my curiosity.

“Doctor...why do you swear so much?”

Weathervane turned back to me, raising an eyebrow.

“Son...I grew up in a world of peaceful glory and happy memories. I remember leaving my door unlocked during the day because I knew it was safe. I remember the days when you could trust anypony's word. When I could smile as I woke up next to my beautiful wife because I knew that it would be a good day. It always was. Then the war happened...and all that changed. Torn apart by senseless fighting and death, I witnessed what we once had corrupted by those who sought to save it. You don't know what it was like, son. I saw the perfect world burned asunder by the flames. I awoke in a land I no longer recognised. Those first few years were a living hell. There were no settlements like now. No factions or groups. No trade. It was everypony for themselves in the most brutal chapter of our entire history amidst the baleful, warping and still burning devastation. Ponies gutted one another for anything. Violence was the only answer. Even after seeing our world scorched we still fought. Things mellowed...but the more I see of this 'future' the more I'm convinced it's all just an ever lessening shadow of what we once had. Like a dream that fades the longer the day goes on. You think we could ever go back to the way we were before? And here I am, cursed to witness it all through the years...such long years...”

My imagination was overflowing, I fought to not cry again as I watched his eyes glance listlessly to the side, before he laughed without any true mirth. A horrible sound from a ghoul...

“And you ask why I swear a lot? You could say...I've learned to just not give a fuck.”

* * *

I had thought Brimstone intended to go to the crater, but to my surprise he led me back to the Mall. Apparently, roll call was kept to ensure slave attendance over time and that none had escaped. As such, a pit stop was required to ensure search teams didn't go looking for us.

Brimstone had returned to Glimmerlight to watch over her. Since returning and pulling the door shut again, he hadn't left her side. He didn't even do anything other than just sit and silently stand vigil over the sickened mare in the amber light of their old gem lantern.

I, meanwhile, had returned to my journal. Getting back to it had given my pained heart a little spike of joy (I even hugged it!) as I immediately fell into its comforting unreality to keep my mind from settling on the medical condition being diagnosed. Maybe if I could just forget about it enough...forget that I was going into a place that would probably destroy my immediate health...

Nosing open the pages, I took up my charcoal and began to sketch. As much as I considered LittlePip's intervention my moment of awakening...truly the first indication of it had been when I drew for myself. That had opened my mind to possibilities beyond what I was told. I had once drawn what my subconscious told me to. The walls had been closing in all my life steadily. The good little slave who simply did what he was told. Now I drew for myself. By drawing, I forced back the walls the threatened to overwhelm my sense and beat me back into line. It was my way of staying free...to sketch the things I wanted and take comfort in the freedom of expression, probably the only true freedom I had.

Imagination flowed through my mouth holding the black writing tool and onto the yellowed parchment as flowing lines began to piece together the shape I knew they would. I wouldn't enjoy the result, but I needed to remind myself of this forever.

A pony's head...yes, but all mostly covered by a blanket...loose hair from braids and a ponytail...

I sat back, thinking and looking over at Glimmer, shivering from her illness, she clearly wasn't going to

last much longer. A pang of sadness flew around my mind at imagining her dying after having gone to these lengths.

Immediately afterwards, I looked back at the drawing and saw the mare from the hospital. I had drawn her curled up, eyes clenched in pain as her own sickness reached the same point. It hurt to look at, to know it was immortalised in print. But I needed it...I needed that reminder to keep myself in line. What if she had somepony she cared about, a special somepony who was out there trying to help her as much as I was trying to help Glimmerlight? How would I have felt if somepony had taken Glimmer's last hope?

I had become a thief to help myself survive as a slave. I had stolen from ponies who I felt deserved it.

This time, I'd come dangerously close to falling to the other side. DJ-Pon3 would not have approved...oh no...

"I'm...I'm sorry..."

My hoof patted the paper lightly as I sniffed lightly (hearing Brim muttering about me crying *again*) and finally added in the caring nurse bringing the RadPurge. No. I drew the line at harming others to get what I wanted...if that was ever the price to get out of Fillydelphia then it was much too high a cost.

My lungs ached and convulsed. Only barely in time I got my mouth away from the drawing before coughing all over the floor. Despite it all, Weathervane's healing had helped for now, the cough was harsh but held none of the burning that signified true danger. Combined with his Rad-X...perhaps I stood a chance after all. Getting to my hooves, I slid the journal into my saddlebag and turned to Brim.

"How long till roll call?"

"Fifteen minutes. If you aren't back in time I go alone."

So much for saying I was about to go out for a bit, clearly Brimstone guessed ahead when he could, but then that was probably pretty important to be a raider warlord.

I trotted out into the Mall, finding most of the raiders were asleep or off on work detail. Glancing upward at the balcony overlooking the shop area that acted as our pen I wondered just how to justify to Protégé that I'd figured out about the illness...

The entire area was pretty dark, was it night? In Fillydelphia it was easy to not quite notice sometimes the difference between heavy smog cover or a true night. Heavy shadows drew odd lines across the Mall from the skylight above while slave pens were voids of black mystery to my eyes. Did they contain raiders? Normal ponies?

"Hehehe...so much for the little sneaky pony..."

I froze. I knew that voice...where had I heard it before? Carefully, I looked around. The only ponies in sight were sleeping or wandering at the far end of the hall near to one of the 'secondary' lines of shops that went away to either side of the main area. But they were almost seventy metres away in the giant space...too far for that sound.

"What's the matter? Can't see me? I'm most disappointed. How about this?"

I felt the touch of cold steel around my neck. I was shaking again...why did I *always* shake? Why couldn't I just be brave like LittlePip and do something?

"W-what do you want?"

"You to not scream like the little filly you are...like before when my boys had your wing. Now turn around, I want to speak properly."

A raider...but this one sounded, well, not well spoken, but clearly more intellectually capable. The only reassurance I had was he wasn't killing me immediately...

I turned. He was standing right behind me, where had he come from? In the last couple of days I'd begun to feel a little happier about my ability to sneak around...but this was something far beyond me. He was a unicorn, clad in shredded black leather with a dark blue coat so close to black it almost matched his

clothing. His long mane was a dark grey, almost black itself. No wonder he'd blended in so well...he was just off-black enough that you might pass your eyes right over him. What shocked me though was his magic...the glow around the small scrap craft knife was black and almost entirely invisible.

“There we go, little filly...heh, think I'll call you that. Seems to suit, you ain't strong enough to be a buck. I mean look at me, I get by through being a sneakier bastard than anypony and even I look like the ol' Warlord compared to you. Now I'm not gonna talk long, so you best listen. As I hear...you can do that well.”

I gulped and nodded, internally...I was praying for Brimstone or Protégé to appear. This buck was terrifying me...what was that on his cutie mark? A loop of razor wire?

“My name's Barb, filly. Used to be one of the Warlord's 'Big Four' until he went queer on us. Yeah, it's Barb, cos I'm sharp as a razor and I don't need something big to sever your life quietly when you least expect it. Now listen closely...I know you got out. Simple really, you went out an air vent and came in again through that shop. I was watching...I'm more patient than that old bastard ever was so don't try and claim otherwise. But it's nice to see somepony like you trying to walk the path I did, stealing and sneaking to get by...”

I highly disagreed about the path, but for preservation of my throat, I nodded.

“So let me cut you a deal. I'm gonna admit to you something here, Shackles thinks I'm an informant for him so I'm in a good position in this here place. I feed him what he wants to hear about us raiders, but he doesn't realise we aren't just mindless idiots. Some of us...but not me.”

The informant! I knew I'd recognised that voice in the vent.

“That's all you get about my long term goals for now, filly. But here's my deal...you want to be sneaky, I'll teach you how. You get me supplies to make explosives from out there back in and I'll reward you with survival skills. Oh...and if you turn this down? Better watch the shadows. Leave anything in that vent you got out by. I'll check it by the hour. Now go about your business and don't say a word to the Warlord of me or I'll shiv you in your sleep. You don't want to cross me...but Barb's Bloodletters could be a very valuable ally in helping you get out. Now go...don't look back at me and don't you dare fucking think of turning me down. Shackles may be your true Master...but I'm the master of the shadows and I am *the* most absolute peer you will ever need to know in our...field of talent.”

I nodded, trying to fight back tears as I tried to process all this. So many ponies wanted some things in Fillydelphia...why did they keep demanding it of me? Why did I have to be the weak one they all saw as easy prey to bully into doing things?

Barb seemed to melt back into the shadows as he grinned at me, oddly white teeth being the last thing to disappear as he once again became one with the darkness.

* * *

“I'm afraid this isn't the best time, Murk,”

Protégé was speaking quickly as he cantered back and forth in his office with urgency. I sat on the floor amidst his activity, watching somewhat amazed at how coordinated his telekinetic abilities were at knowing exactly where everything was in this mess of an office. I hadn't wasted time coming here...Barb had lit a new fire of terror in me. A pony who even I couldn't hear coming and who was forcing me to steal for him in return for tuition at theft and creeping around in return. The skills could come in handy for escaping...I couldn't simply cast it aside. He wanted to wreck Red Eye's operations? Well...that was fine by me. If I learned how to sneak by the Wall in return that was fine too. But...he was one of Brimstone's old raiders, I hadn't known how honest he was...so I had galloped toward Protégé's office as fast as I could...sticking to well lit areas.

It hadn't been hard to get to him, the guards had standing orders to allow me through and escort me to his office any time I wished. But after knocking and entering, I had found the curious slave master in the middle of packing materials and loading ammunition into his revolver even while he skimmed a book with

his eyes in front of his face. Looking around I could swear that even in the hours since I'd been here every single book had changed places...

"I'm...I'm sorry, master, I'll be going then," I stammered. Disappointment struck me as I turned to exit. Perhaps I'd try back later on-

"I said it isn't the *best* time," he continued, "not that you had to leave. However I will be going in a few minutes, I've received an urgent message from Master Red Eye requiring my immediate attention."

I looked at the revolver as the scope cover slotted into place and it floated to his foreleg holster. He was wearing the battle barding that had once sat on the hook and loading two saddlebags full of RadAway, medical potions, ammo and...of course...a book.

"Why? What's going on?"

Protégé stopped for a few seconds to look at me with a hard glance. Despite his politeness, there was an edge to him. I was seeing a hardline mentality setting in as he prepared for...something. It looked like he was deciding whether or not I should know, before finally resuming his packing.

"I told you of Master Red Eye's children, the foals he cares for in their hundreds within Fillydelphia and abroad. One of them has went missing, a small filly by the name of Starshine Melody. A lovely little foal, really, very curious. Possibly too curious...she ran off to "see the sights" as her bunkmate said. She was last seen around the edge of the crater so as you can imagine, Master Red Eye is greatly concerned for her safety. He's called in everypony he can trust with kids to hunt for her."

For all my hatred of Red Eye, that was something I could agree with. In the past, foals had often been the only ones to not look upon me and my wings harshly. They were innocent of the prejudice they would later gain. As a result...I felt quite strongly about them being protected.

"Here."

Seemingly without extra effort, a small piece of paper slipped from his armoured saddlebag and floated across before me. It held a picture of a little light grey filly with a well kept and groomed white mane. It seemed to have been cut from a larger image, I could see others around her like some sort of...group photo.

"Master Red Eye insisted we test the recovered photographic technology on the class, let them see where they came from in the future. He claimed that having a sense of historic progression is essential to rebuilding our spirit as well as physical world. I had that section cut out to help track her down."

She looked impossibly innocent for a world such as this. I began to see why Protégé had so much respect for this angle of Red Eye's. They looked clean, well fed and intelligent. Sitting there smiling brightly with that childish joy. Starshine Melody in particular had a big jolly and somewhat cheeky grin. I began to feel my own worries for her safety tug at my heart.

"I hope she is alright. I...I'll keep an eye out for her."

Protégé stopped immediately, rounding on me.

"I'm sorry, Murk?"

What was he...*crap!*

"I mean! Uh...as in...if I'm ever nearby to the area...y'know?"

I grinned as wide as I could, trying to shrug.

"Like...with the slave work and...you know...stuff?"

Protégé didn't look too convinced, but his haste to make tracks led him to apparently cast his doubts aside as trivial for now. Trotting toward the door, he signalled me to follow as he closed it behind him.

"My apologies if you could not broach your own topic of conversation, Murk. I assure you, I shall try to find some time to talk to you. I am glad to see you're looking healthier than when I first met you."

Yeah...look a little deeper...

He began to canter down the corridor. Not knowing what else to really do, I followed him until my own corner back to the shops levels. In the darkened night, they were scarcely lit only by an ambient red hue through the boarded up windows. Protégé didn't even stop at the junction between the entrance and the shop area, kicking up centuries old dust in his wake that continued to swirl in the airless corridor long after he was gone.

“Um...good luck, master!”

“Thank you, Murk. Good day. Ragini!”

He accelerated into a gallop as I saw his associate and bodyguard come bounding down another of the concrete hallways and join him. Watching them go, I sighed and turned to head back to the Mall.

* * *

I should have known.

Protégé was gone.

Who *else* was going to take roll call?

I had made it to the ground floor, heading for the cage door when I heard his heavy tread approaching. Never mind 'hear'...I *felt* him approaching. Like my mane and back tingling with fear within mere proximity...

No..no, I needed to get back to Brimstone, right the hell now!

I galloped, surprising the guards as they saw me suddenly accelerate and gun for the door back in. He'd see me at roll call...but at least I'd not be alone with-

“**Close that gate!**”

It slammed in my face. Slapping to the ground, I quickly threw myself at it, pounding at the cage bars and trying to pull it open. Oh Goddesses please, I didn't want to turn around, I didn't want to acknowledge he existed! Just let the door open, please, please, pretty please...

“Well, well, well...looks like our little Number Seven decided to start being teacher's pet to the upstart. Isn't that cute...looking for an easy ride, eh? Pity we don't got long...but I want a little chat with you before we do roll call...c'mere!”

I felt repulsed, screaming as I felt his hoof pass right around my body and yank me backward and upward to be held against him. Holding me forcefully close he eventually ended up dumping me in the corner of the guard room outside the cage door. My natural instincts were to find a small place...I retreated right into it and cowered...I hadn't looked at him yet, I didn't want to...

I'd fallen right into what he'd known I would do. With sadistic glee he trotted forward, his huge bulk filling my peripheral vision as I was backed right into the corner. He kept moving forward, far closer than I had any real pleasing of...anypony outside would have barely seen me in the corner below him...

“So you survived the raiders...good...good. I can see I'm going to have a little more time to properly...hmm...'break you in' shall we say, Number Seven. You'll understand the chains that bind you soon enough all over again.”

“Y-yes...”

“**Yes what?**”

His hoof slapped me around the face so hard my skull cracked off the wall. I felt that tooth loosen again after Weathervane had just fixed it. He...he was my Master, that tooth was beginning to become my recurring reminder every time he struck me for being disobedient. It made my eyes water, or was that with fear? I

didn't know, I just curled away from him as best as I could, shrieking what he wanted to hear.

“Yes, Master!”

“You tried to escape me once...that won't happen again will it?”

“No...no Master!”

At this point...in this situation, I couldn't say otherwise. Try as I wanted, I couldn't beat the slave I was born to be from forcing itself to the fore and controlling me while he was around. Someday...someday...

“Good...no point in running away from those closest to you after all, is there?”

He laughed sickly right into my ear. I still hadn't looked directly at him. I kept trying to picture my drawings...please...anything but that face so close again...

“I suppose I mean a lot to you. I should. We're closer than anypony else in this place. Each of us born to be around one another. But more than that...I did a little checking on the records of your slave life that are still around. Turns out I visited Shattered Hoof where your mother was a slave oh...some months before you were born?”

I hadn't forgotten his 'theory' before...but this brought new levels of chills to my heart...

“But then I noticed something else. Look at me, Number Seven.”

No...

“**Look! At! Me!**”

His hooves wrenched my head around as I felt spittle spray across my head, with a yelp I opened my eyes out of fear alone as that sweaty, filthy and disgusting face bearing a rotten grin bore down on me from mere inches away. Between the wall and floor behind me, he was leaning right over into my personal space once more. His oddly light green eyes wouldn't let up from staring at me, unblinking. I could see every detail this close...every filthy strand of his mane, each rotten tooth, that odd scar I'd never noticed before that ran under his mane from his left ear to just above his eye. One hoof pressed me right down into the corner, backing away all my space to less than about my own body's size.

“Recognise anything?”

I couldn't even shake my head.

“How about now?”

He held a mirror up with the other hoof. I saw my own tear filled eyes looking right back at me. I didn't understand...that was me, what was...

My eyes...

...light...green...

I didn't know if he was simply lying or not. He could have been making everything up, for I had no way to tell. But as he drew the mirror away and I saw the colour...shape...everything remain almost exactly the same...I couldn't help but believe him.

Through that moment. Through him laughing in my face and roughly hurling me back in the shop pen, I had to force myself to believe he was lying.

I had to. If I ever started believing that he was truly linked to me somehow...I'd never be able to escape his chains ever again. But those eyes were imprinted on my memory. For the rest of my life, I knew that any time I ever looked in a mirror I would see him staring back at me. Even if I somehow got away, left Fillydelphia, left Equestria...he would be with me every step of the way.

The Master trotted in behind me. A unicorn buck assistant, skinny and clearly a hooflicking type, levitated a clipboard nearby to The Master's face obediently. Lying on the ground before him, I tried to crawl

away into the crowds that were forming up for rollcall. As best as I could, I hoped it was towards Brimstone. There were a *lot* of ponies in here, more than I'd thought. The multiple dozen raiders were actually outnumbered by the slaves who merely kept their heads down, hoping for freedom at the end of two years. In total, there might have been about a hundred and a bit slaves in here. That said...with my eyes to the floor that was a best guess.

“Right! Every slave get down here to the ground floor! **Rollcall!**”

Hooves clattered. The Master hadn't threatened them. He didn't *need* to.

Shoved around by slaves seeking to not be the last there, I was knocked from side to side, trodden on or simply bucked out of the way. Moaning, I eventually settled against the fountain inside the crowd, taking relief in the cool stone against my now swollen cheek. So much for Weathervane's newly healed state lasting long...these ponies didn't care about stamping all over a pegasus to get by.

“Settle down! Now, we've expanded our numbers since yesterday, so we're gonna do this a little differently...”

Holding my breath, I could only imagine this was something to do with me.

“Earth ponies! Get on the left hand side there! Get separated from the hornies!”

A vast swathe of the ponies here, perhaps more than half of them, all began shuffling over to the far side away from Brimstone's area. I saw the reluctant warlord stomp over himself, eyes never once leaving the entrance to where I knew Glimmerlight was no doubt still resting. If any raider dared go within a few feet of it, I could only imagine the imminent violence. Indeed, I saw a few raiders bearing injuries snapping and snarling at him as they found themselves beside him.

Unfortunately, I could see where The Master was going with this...

“Unicorns! Get on the right! Come on, **hurry your horned selves up!**”

A near stampede of the remaining ponies rushed to the right hand side and lined up like an opposing army to the earth ponies. Those limping on injuries or rotten wasted limbs staggered after them.

I was alone next to the fountain...a million miles from any feeling of being hidden. Crouching still, I hid next to the fountain wall from at least one side...I was clear enough, he couldn't want me to-

“**Pegasi! Get yourselves into the centre! Into the open area!**”

Despondently, I cast my eyes around hoping against all hope that I'd see somepony else wander out to join me. Somepony that would share the obvious charade of a roll call to be displayed before everypony else...

Please...somepony else move...

A movement caught my eye...somepony moving at the side. Or was it-
...just somepony staggering while in the grip of a fever.

I was alone.

“**Come on, all pegasi! Get out here!**”

He could see me, but he wanted me out of hiding. Visible. The entire mall area was now silent other than the tiny pitter-patter of my hooves as I stood and trotted with my my head down in front of everypony else. Being forced to stand in the middle of the entire open space of the shops, I became the one little source of attention. A single point to be focussed on...remembered...known...hated. I kept my head down, if I dared open my eyes, the distance to any sense of safety would be further than any road to freedom had ever felt.

“**Head up, slave!**”

CRACK!

“Arrgghh!” Howling in pain, I stumbled and fell as his whip lashed the side of my neck. Quaking on the ground, I looked up at The Master, standing ten feet before me.

“I...I'm here! I'M HERE!”

CRACK!

“I'm here, WHAT?”

The whip slapped off the ground near my legs just enough to skiff them, stinging like rough slap to the skin. Skittering to the side, coughing on my scream, I tried to get to my hooves.

“I'm here, Master!”

“Now **get up!** I have no need for any troublemakers...pegasi worst of all.”

His intent was obvious. The failure of his plan to use me as a gift to his raider slaves required The Master to reassert his position over me. I was nothing more than a public display. Whimpering, trying to hold tears back, I stood up, cradling the whipped leg off the ground.

The Master began his routine. Names were called by the slaves, along with their slave numbers and type of race. Breezy Day, Number Eight-Zero-Nine, unicorn. Harshhoof, Number Three-Three-One, earth pony.

Brimstone Blitz, Number Six-Six-Six, earth pony.

He also quoted Glimmerlight's on her account, Number Zero-Zero-Five, unicorn. The Master didn't look too pleased at her lack of attendance, scowling as he nodded for her name to be checked. Name after name...number after number...earth pony after unicorn.

Amidst all of it I stood alone in front of everypony else, shaking as I saw The Master maintain eye contact with me even while others shouted. Seeing me looking, he grinned and winked at me. Mewling, I looked away, seeing raiders snickering at me from both sides, so exposed between both sides. I felt so vulnerable...exposed...

I didn't even notice that silence had fallen.

“Come on! One more to go, where are ya, eh?”

The Master looked around. Everypony knew who hadn't spoken...but he made a show of it. Breath seemed impossible to find...well he was only a bit away from me...

“Murky Number-”

CRACK!

Screaming, I staggered away as my face welted in pain diagonally over my muzzle. Dropping to my rear, I held both hooves over my already bleeding nose.

“That's not your name, slave! Don't lie to me!”

“N-Number Seven, Number...um...”

What *was* my number? Oh Goddesses, *what was my number?*

“...seven?”

CRACK!

“Number Seven is your name, slave! I want your **number!**”

The whip had landed close enough to just whisp harsh air near my face again, making me fall over backwards in shock. Raiders laughed, other slaves grinned, enjoying seeing the *pegasus* the source of their

overseer's attentions.

“I...I don't know, I wasn't tol-”

CRACK!

On my right, I yelped and rolled to my left, scrambling up to my hooves again as my ears ached. Why were they aching? Was his whip coming so close to them that it was affecting the sensitivity? Was it just the sound?

“You don't know?! I told you, Number Seven!”

I wanted to scream, to frustratedly bellow that he *hadn't!* But I saw it in his eyes...that baleful look...he knew just as well as I did that he hadn't passed on the number to me.

“Your number is Zero-Zero-Seven! Now remember!”

“Yes...yes, Master!” I added the latter part as I saw the whip raise again. My shrill voice pitched out and broke on the word 'Master' out of sheer fear, causing a group of raiders to mockingly laugh. From the other side I heard some unicorn bucks mock my voice themselves. Somehow, I felt that if it had been *me* to talk...I'd have been punished. Double standards were very active when it came to pegasi in Fillydelphia.

“Now, repeat it.”

“Number Seven...”

“Good. Heh...we have progress!”

The surrounding slaves and raiders lit up a small snicker with him, taking their cue well.

“...Number Zero-Zero-Seven...”

“Very good...we'll make a little obedient slave out of you yet. Now...last part? Come on.”

My voice almost sighed as I spoke.

“...pegasus...”

“What was that? Speak up, Number Seven!”

“...pegasus.”

CRACK!

That one didn't miss. It landed directly on my fleece, striking my right wing beneath it. I felt the fragile bones and dead muscles spasm and flare in pain. Crying out, I staggered to the side.

“I said speak up! Loud and proud, so that everypony can hear!”

Twisted genius. “Loud and proud”, the feeling many people had about pegasus attitudes...arrogant and self centred. The Master...he just...he knew *exactly* what he was doing to me...

I took a breath, the whip looking all too likely if I didn't. Tears in my eyes, I closed them and shouted to the skies above...the ones that would never hear me to answer or come down to aid the one pegasus it had lost.

“Number Seven! Number Zero-Zero-Seven! *Pegasus! Master!*”

He mockingly looked impressed, before grinning and chucking.

“Oooh...how proud you are, eh? Well...get used to being down amongst us land-lovers here, slave.

Back to your dwellings! All of you!”

The slaves moved. Brimstone headed directly back to watch over Glimmerlight without so much as a

glance at me. Raiders joked and raucously laughed at the display they had witnessed. Some slaves still saw my voice as some sort of running gag. Others scowled as they muttered about the sky-lovers.

Alone, I just lay down on the spot as everypony whirled around me on their own ways. Stuck on the ground amongst hatred, I cried into my own hooves amidst one of the few remaining beams of light that centred right down on me, spotlighting me against the entire darkened nighttime Mall. I didn't care...I'd already been held out on show enough that this was nothing for them to see me cry. I didn't even move until Brimstone finally returned to lightly nudge me and signal that we were leaving.

* * *

An alien world.

Stories in the past had spoken of places that were unlike anything ponies would ever, should ever, see. Now I was standing in one of them.

The Fillydelphia crater expanded ahead of me. A colossal scar upon the planet itself that would no doubt remain as a painful reminder of past sins longer than any picture I could ever draw. I had imagined it as a perfect circle, but really that wasn't quite true. Tougher areas of rock or buildings had reflected the shockwave or fire just enough to slow its progress. As such, the colossal border stretching in all directions was more like the ragged edge of an irregular cliffside than a geometric shape. There was no beauty here...only a mercilessly indiscriminate and vibrant horror.

The entire thing had blown the earth away so harshly that to walk to the middle would seemingly take you a significant height below the usually flat surface of Fillydelphia. A serried and ruin pocketed surface flowed down each of the slopes from the sides in ways I could never have imagined. Smooth, glass like surfaces were in my mind, but the truth was that there was wreckage, collapsed housing that he fallen below the earth and even small hills from chunks of rock too hard or solid to actually be shifted by the balefire. It was almost like a small war zone contained in a weird shaped bowl.

No...there was nothing here but wretched and twisted devastation curled into its most heinous shapes. No wonder Red Eye was still sending slaves in, to hunt through all that refuse and loose earth for radioactive material would take decades to complete! Honestly, even as I stared down from the massive piles of earth that surrounded the entire crater I began to realise how easy it would be to get lost in that skeletal jungle of rock and metal.

“You...you know where we're going Brim?”

The warlord had been standing watching into the crater himself. We'd had to get by Red Eye's defences around the crater by claiming we were on a work detail. I had still been depressed and hurt by the roll call earlier enough that the guards believed rather genuinely Brim's story that I had been sentenced here for stealing. As such, we'd been lumped with large saddlebags each that they used for the materials. I had wondered about the defences...why would they want to stop somepony going in?

Then I'd noticed the guns had pointed *inwards* and suddenly the harsh reality made perfect sense.

“The rot's old lab should be near the rough outskirts, we shouldn't need to go in too deep. He said to look for an angular metal shaft that would probably still have survived at that depth. Keep your eyes peeled, Murk.”

Even Brimstone was allowing me the freedom of working together here. Even he had been shaken by the sight of the direct impact zone that ended this portion of the world. Alongside us we saw ponies retching and coughing with radiation sickness that even outstripped my own wandering into the crater for their work. They almost looked ghoulish...their very flesh seemed to sag and hair was coming off in patches. Very quickly I realised how glad I was Weathervane had treated me before leaving...and for his Rad-X. According to him, I'd have about half an hour before I started to feel it...hopefully enough time to get back to him. Approaching an hour would be death...assuming I didn't encounter any higher radiation areas in the process.

“Come along, Murk. No sense in hanging around with this much rad activity in the air.”

He clambered over the earthworks and dropped down the slope with the rugged capabilities of a pony that was born to the wasteland's troubles. My own descent (delayed until I could push myself to take that last step...) was somewhat less capable as I hopped, floundered, fell and promptly rolled down the remainder before coming to a halt upside down, half buried in the earth. It was dry and almost warm, like a heavy sand with absolutely no real tension around me. I struggled not to breathe as I tried to pull my head and front hooves from the ground. Mumbling and trying to shout for help I ended up just making something more akin to 'Mmphmmph!' while wagging my rear legs around. Even by my standards this wasn't particularly dignified.

Life, I decided, sucked.

A quick tug on my tail ripped me free as I dangled in front of Brimstone, my tail in his mouth.

Swinging back and forth like a pendulum, gasping for air and spitting out mounds of foul tasting dry dirt, I eventually sighed as I grasped how hard this was going to be. There was absolutely no way to move other than to plough through the loose earth that had been chopped up by the balefire and shockwave. Urgh...it wasn't helping that my body was aching across my side, muzzle and legs from the rapidly swelling whip marks. Perhaps if I could-

“YARGH!”

He dropped me. Landing sideways, I flailed around until I managed to force myself up. No wonder so many ponies got irradiated here. Even aside from the ambience, the loose earth kicked up in your face, nose and eyes every step you had to take. I'd heard of such an effect after large explosions...like a loose earth problem, but how did the ground remain this way after two hundred years? Were megaspells so powerful they corrupted the ground to never truly heal on its own?

It wouldn't surprise me, after all, that's what the blight of Equestria had done to my lungs.

We staggered on, Brimstone's heavy hooves not finding good purchase on the very unstable ground. Very quickly I felt my stomach twist. Fear clenched my heart as thoughts of the radiation piercing through my Rad-X based resistance entered my mind. They were quelled as it rumbled.

Oh...yeah. Malnourishment...that old hateful presence across my entire life was still with me. It dawned that I hadn't eaten a thing since Protégé's apple stew gift other than drinking foul RadAway. (A substance I suspected was dehydrating me even more if my dry and cracked lips had anything to do with it) I could feel my limbs trembling lightly from the hunger. That ever present feeling that you never got used to as a slave, of never truly having enough food in your to feel full or properly fuelled. Really the only thing keeping it from affecting me too badly was the greater threats ahead of me in my mind.

What I would do for more apple stew...or even the foul oatmeal...oh please, *something* to fill my stomach...

Shaking my head harshly, I looked around to try and take my thoughts off of my aching belly. Around me I saw many of the “regulars” to the crater were wearing planks of wood on their hooves to spread out the weight. Those without were like us, their hooves disappearing up to the knee or, in my case, torso on every step (I really needed stilts) and kicking up dust and earth everywhere. The entire operation was truly grim...scrambling through fallen houses on their sides and under mounds of loose earth they sought out scraps and valuables to throw into their saddlebags. I could see the mouths of the earth ponies were raw and scarred from the ragged edges they had to dig and scramble for. Unicorns lazily levitated things with little real power. Every few seconds I heard somepony shouting...either in a fight over who found what or in a panic over some injury. The sound echoed in the lonely maze of ruin that towered above me on every side.

I had been a slave in some horrible places. I had been an illiterate librarian assistant. I had pulled carts and tugged scrap. I had been a forced labour servant to a trader. *I'd farmed rocks.*

But this...this was the most dreary and depressing sight I had ever witnessed.

Half skipping and half almost swimming I kept up with Brim as best I could after snapping my goggles across my eyes. Wicked Slit had some weird ways but clearly she knew a comfy set when she found one! At least in my service they'd keep all this loose earth from my eyes...especially kicked up by Brimstone Blitz.

His massive presence kept some of the more opportunistic hunters at bay as we headed for the location Brim had been told of. He had seen it from the lip of the crater already after we'd climbed up the refuse pile. A single flagpole still oddly standing among all of the ruin. (or perhaps raised again afterwards by the most determined flagbearer in *history*) No-pony would think anything of it but for an oddity, but according to Weathervane if we looked for a small formation of little rocks the entrance would be nearby as a hidden underground metal shaft.

It seemed close. I really hoped we could just poke our heads in, grab what we could near the door and then gallop off. We were about five minutes in off of my thirty minute limit before Rad-X would begin to wear off and I'd start to suffer at a vastly increased rate. That thought still clenched at my heart. Given a moment of hesitation I might lose my nerve and gallop for the exit. What was I doing here? Brim didn't need my help and...and I still had Barb's offer, right? But I couldn't...if I paused now then I just knew I'd treat it as a failure and never be able to rise up like I had ever again. I wanted to be brave and determined...but I just wasn't. The fear of failure was so great in me that even one slip might convince me that it wasn't even worth ever trying again...

As such, I was fearing everything that might aid in that failure and of course, chief among it was the radiation. In a way, it was somewhat creepy...I couldn't see the radiation. I couldn't feel it right now either. Only through *knowing* was I aware of the malignant magical aftermath accumulating in my body from the crater. I needed to take my mind off of it, get my mind off it *all*...perhaps Brimstone would be open to conversation?

Truly I had reached the end of things available to help distract me if *that* was my option.

“Brim?”

“Aye?”

Well...it was a start.

“When we first met, I thought you were escaping. Did you honestly just run back to your pen? To Protégé?”

“Aye.”

It wasn't much, but anything for now to build some conversation to stop my imagination running rampant in this place was good.

Or to stop it settling on my lungs...or my eyes...

“What was your clan like, anyway? I'm sorry, but I hadn't heard of it.”

“You probably didn't.” Success! “You were kept sheltered.”

“Didn't feel like it...”

“Whatever. There were about a hundred of us, one of the biggest single clans. Some called us a gang or a warband but we chose the term clan. It speaks of a proper bred group rather than just a motley collection, for we only took in the toughest around. Enough that other raiders paid us tribute just to not steamroll them. Caravan guards used to pay us in advance so they knew they could promise safe passage to their clients. Anypony who wanted to join had to survive a ten minute beating from the others. Sometimes I joined in...those ones never made it, other than one. But because of our size we often split up into five groups, spread the misery around, y'know?”

Okay...lots of talking. I was surprised as we trotted along. Perhaps this place was getting to the big stoic raider. I'd never get used to thinking of him as good or bad...he just seemed to drift too easily without, presumably, Glimmerlight around to guide him. Sometimes he felt like a noble redeemer...others like an unstable mountain of carnage ready to unleash its rage on anypony that rubbed him the wrong way.

“You had other leaders then?”

“My Big Four. The toughest or nastiest ones in the entire clan...except me. They're all in here, actually.

Three of them went to the Pit, the fourth is a nasty piece of work called Barb who took over the clan after I gave it up. He won't dare confront me directly though, he knows what would happen. But back in the day, I sent them places...they went and did the job, got the loot and brought back any prisoners to our home camp. We hunted other raiders just to prove we were better. Sometimes we all got together just to scare the shit out of the wasteland in some big attack. Took Ponyville that way...heh...most of the guards just galloped off the moment they saw us.”

I saw a grin spread onto his face, like a good memory. Perhaps this wasn't a good idea to go poking around...

“Pity for them Barb and his lot had their retreat cut off, he always was good at that sort of thing. It's why I made him one of the Big Four. Not one of the Ponyville settlers survived that day. We made sure of it. An example. Don't fuck with the Great Warlord Brimstone. Anypony who goes to Ponyville now? They'll see my legacy.”

There was something disturbing about hearing this from his own mouth...that last sentence had sounded suddenly regretful amongst what else sounded like a boast. He stopped, that same melancholy seemed to overtake him briefly.

“Sometimes I wonder how many I killed as a warlord...how many I sold into these pits to die under Red Eye before he betrayed us at the hand over and took us too. How many families curse our name and weep at night for their lost ones? How many colts or fillies growing up without parents because of what we did? How many only growing up *because* of what we did to their mothers?”

Brimstone stopped, turning toward me. It looked like he was having trouble knowing how to emote something.

“Makes you wonder what history will see of us. Will they remember the Warlord or the repenter? Or...just...ah, fuck it.”

He stomped off ahead of me with a manner that implied I was not to follow or go too close to him. Somehow, I got the feeling I'd stumbled on a side of him I shouldn't have seen. I'd seen him angry plenty of times. I'd seen him show regret or a more melancholic side before too.

But that time he had honestly seemed, well...upset.

* * *

“Get away! This is *my* scavenge spot! I find stuff here, so you go away! Go away!”

We had come to the flagpole after ten minutes of laboured trotting only to find a scavenging unicorn mare poking around. I couldn't even tell her mane's colour, it was too dirty on the few strands remaining from weeks of radiation poisoning. Her bony looking pink body only seemed to be in a worse state while her cutie mark of some meat on a stick was almost obscured by scars. The rest was covered in rough fabric bandages of festering wounds. She was waving a chunk of rebar at Brimstone after he had entered, her eyes full of panic and seemingly well prepared to attack out of a desperate determination to protect the location that aided her in survival of this job.

Brimstone was less than subtle about how he dealt with the problem.

“Move away now or that same rebar will cave in your head. I'm in a hurry.”

Ooooh boy...I could see this turning violent very quickly. Even I could see the mare was just terrified! I knew what it was like to live under the ticking clock of rad-poisoning. I moved toward Brimstone slowly, his mood had been turning slowly from regret to an aggressive anger. Whether at himself or the situation with Glimmer I couldn't tell.

“Look, let me talk to-”

“I said **move**, mare!”

“I said you go away! This...this is my place! It has the scrap I need! I'm almost done my

months...I...just two more weeks I think! No-pony has ever done it, I think I can! I...I know who you are! So go away, Warlord! You brought me in here, you won't take my work for freedom away from me! GET BACK!"

I moved over, hopping onto my rear legs and placing my front two on Brim's upper front leg to get his attention.

"She's just scared, Brim! We don't have to-"

"Enough of this!"

The air was knocked clean out of me as he swept me to the side roughly and charged forward. The rebar was grabbed in his teeth as I saw him barrel into the mare and knocked her behind the collapsed wall out of my sight. I heard her shrieking and the war cry of a raider as the my ears picked up the hideously meaty and sick sounds of a pony being savagely beaten to death in the space of under a minute. I huddled into a corner of the ruins, trying to get my lungs to work properly again.

Brimstone emerged, spitting the bloody rebar out and motioning to me that the door was inside. I could see the wild look in his eyes as his entire body trembled with the frenzy of the kill. It took a lot of willpower for me to get up and follow him to the hidden door half buried in the ground. It was disguised as an old radiator...apparently just as Weathervane had explained to Brimstone. I kept my eyes averted, not wanting to see the sight of the poor mare.

Darkness awaited inside as I crept in ahead of Brimstone. After a few seconds he followed. But hidden in the corridor I caught him taking a last look at the mare's corpse, before snarling to himself and slamming his front right hoof into the wall with enough force to dent the metallic corridor and send a ringing noise down it all.

"Fucking damn it, too much like before. I can't lose you..."

It was barely a whisper, but my ears heard it. It was becoming apparent to me just how badly this was affecting the big raider, knowing that the only saviour to his life's direction was at death's door and he was so far away from her. Seeing him advance, I quickly turned and pretended I'd seen nothing before. Glancing at the thick darkness ahead of us into the heavy metal corridor I flicked on the faulty light of the PipBuck before leading the way.

I was terrified of the dark, yes. Not to mention scared of what it was Red Eye was worried about coming out of the crater. But right now, I was too afraid of the raider behind me to even consider hesitating in the job. I wanted to cry...was it for him? Either way I couldn't risk it and fought down the urge (when had I last been able to do that?) as I pulled off my goggles and left them around my forehead to see better.

Inside was what amounted to a bunker entrance. Heavy metal stairs led down underground. Clearly this was a larger complex than we had been told. Particles of dust floated in the air from the still atmosphere, but somehow I got the impression it was just as contaminated as outside. We were fifteen minutes in...this had to be quick.

The hooves of my companion clanging off the mesh stairs hardly hid any way in, not to mention made me wince from hypersensitive hearing on each step. I took the opportunity to move ahead a little and try to stick to the shadows. It gave him some space to think and kept me away from that noise, but the further I went down the more I was beginning to realise that this wasn't going to be full of doorways to either side very much at all. The entire stairway was just one long cramped way down. The dull metal, thick darkness and merely flickering light didn't do much to make it seem anything but an intimidating stairway into the underbelly of the crater. Hidden away for years even from Red Eye, I couldn't help but feel like I had stepped into something distinctly *not* in Fillydelphia. Feeling the stairs creak, I wondered what the standards of this place remaining upright and strong were...

Wait, there was *one* door, like a small guard post intended into the right hand side wall. I waved to Brim before disappearing into it. I don't know what I expected...but it wasn't much. A small desk, smashed terminal on it beside a lot of strewn papers and small relics of whatever guard used to spend his days sat

away down here. Given the minimal security, I imagined the building above that had once existed was the main centre of protection. After all, this entrance used to be a good forty feet below ground until the balefire wiped it all away.

I sifted through it all as I heard Brimstone stomp in after me. Nothing really made sense to my eyes, all written notes and documents beyond my ability to read. Briefly, I contemplated asking Brimstone, but at this moment I doubted what he needed was me badgering him to be read what this old skeleton's groceries were-

Wait...ske...skeleton?!

I flipped. I hadn't even noticed him, but letting out a terrified yelp I made a dive over the desk. The pony skeleton had been dumped in the corner, bones cracked and hollow lying around the main body. I heard a snarl from Brimstone as I shouted, casting me a dangerous glance for disturbing the silence as he wandered over to the remains.

“Now this just ain't right...”

“I...I *hate* skeletons,” I was whining and I didn't care, “the past...it's just horrible to think about. I don't like being reminded of it all. I see him or her and then I see a few things on a desk and...and I just can't help putting it all together. These ponies died as they saw their world come apart around them...”

Brimstone snorted and poked at the desk, before rotating a small picture. On it was a montage of six images stapled together. Each showed a buck standing with a toothy grin beside a mare. Wait...weren't those the same ones on the banners in the Mall?

Yes...yes they were. Pinkie was there, her eyes staring at an odd angle out of frame...right at me from the way Brimstone was holding it. I shivered at the uncanny coincidence before he pulled her glaring eyes away. I could swear they followed me as the angle changed...

“You want the past? This is it. This idiot believed in them but from all I've heard, discovered and seen...they were the idiots who messed it all up. Put their hooves places they shouldn't, made things that never should be and meddled in magic and technology ponies never should have touched. I don't know the details...few ponies do. But at the end of the day? It was under their guidance and leadership that the world ended. Too optimistic...too stupid. The world wasn't the perfect paradise you see, Murk. These ponies ruined it with their...their so called 'Ministries.'

I could see the remainder. One was clearly the 'Rainbow Dash' that Weathervane had mentioned. I saw the medical poster one too, but with that pink mane and innocent look surprised at the buck grinning for a photo with her...how could she have caused anything? I surmised that perhaps the others just did things, Pinkie probably. That yellow and pink one was too nice looking to do anything, I was sure of it.

“That buck really loved them didn't he?”

“Foolish idiot. But that isn't him lying here.”

His back hoof tapped the skeleton, nudging the skull to fall to the floor. I winced, before turning back to the raider. He nodded at the skeleton.

“That's fresh. No cobwebs, no mould. Somepony died down here within a week or so. Wasn't rad-poisoning before you go on that theory.”

I blinked as he wandered out of the room.

“Why? What tells you that?”

“Rad-poisoning doesn't crack your bones in two for marrow, Murk.”

I felt every hair on my neck stand on end as the shattered leg bones suddenly made horrifying sense. Backing away into the corridor, I averted my eyes and shook as I leaned on the wall. I might have cried for them, but my attention was instead drawn by an all too familiar sound..

Beep!

I was getting used to it. I didn't jump or even squeal from the sudden noise.

Well, perhaps a little hop...and maybe a squeak.

Beep!

Brimstone's harsh glance looked accusingly at me as my PipBuck began to blip and beep. I'd turned off the sound! How on Equestria had that dial turned around again? Was it on automatic? Sighing, I turned it back down to a level only I might hear what the apparent automated audio diary had to say.

"Hah! Sundial scores! Heh...sorry, wanted to try opening one of these things a little excitedly. Oh boy is that gonna sound embarrassing when I listen back to it..."

I couldn't stifle a giggle. After today, after all that had happened in my life since the Pit...I couldn't help but enjoy Sundial's more innocent times. His worries that someone might laugh at something he said? What a world when that was your real concern. Not like mine...

"So...uh...basically, yeah. I asked her."

Oh!

"And well, she said yes! I got a date! Well, I had one, since I'm recording this at night. Skydancer...she's just...she's just wonderful! Everything I said, she responded to. She makes me laugh! I tell you, she has a mean sense of humour too. We're meeting again tomorrow night before she heads off to Manehattan on a delivery. I just...wow...how did she come into my life like that? To just appear from nowhere, help me and then immediately become so important?"

I could believe it, I'd met two mares who had done the same for me. LittlePip and...well...the mare. I really wished I could see her again....

"So yeah, times are good. Well, my times are. Equestria wide...not so much. My old man's not too pleased that I'm still working for the Ministry of Wartime Technology. You know, Ministry Mare Applejack came to meet us at the new factory yesterday too! She's incredible, really. Totally on our side, aiming to have us make more armour than weapons and even hinting that we may get to work on some new project soon. I coulda sworn she looked a little upset as she spoke of it being made to protect the ponies from having to die like...yeah...I had guessed it was about her brother. Big damn hero, that stallion. But I've signed up to the work. Longer hours, sure. But a higher pay and I get to protect ponies! These Ministries aren't so bad, really. They do want to help us, I don't believe what they all say quietly about them. Although Pinkie Pie is kinda...freaky. A little grating to see everywhere you go. Heh...she even sent me a hand written birthday card this year. Nice but, well, weird."

Conflicting reports...but between a lovely young buck in Equestria of old and a borderline psychotic raider trying to drop the habit of anger and killing...I knew who I would trust to believe. Although, I sensed Sundial and I would agree mightily on the merits of being watched forever by Pinkie Pie.

"And just to end off, I kinda need this higher pay. I've decided to start saving now. If Skydancer and I become a...y'know...thing? Well, somepony has to be able to pay for a second Stable ticket, right? Okay, night shift time, wow I'm...I'm properly happy. Hopefully all this war business blows over and Skydancer and I can just spend time. Well, I'll um...see you later. Alright, that just sounds weird every time, what should I say though?"

Beats me.

"Argh! Dammit, I forgot to talk about my cutie mark again! I promise! I'll get to that next time! So...yeah, happy Sundial signing off. Bye bye!"

"Bye..."

“What was that?”

My eyes shot upwards. I'd been following Brimstone further down into the complex without even really realising.

“Oh! Um...nothing. Just me being weird I guess.”

Brimstone seemed to take that as a satisfactory conclusion (hey wait...) and turned back to what was in front of us. The complex had opened out into a room lit by a single almost non functional strobe light above. It was pretty big, stretching perhaps ten feet upwards and about fifteen to the other end where a huge metallic door was clearly locked shut up a flight of mesh stairs. All around us there were vents in the floor, long since disabled no doubt.

But my eyes were instead drawn to the way it was decorated. Little slips of paper covered the walls and floor. Were they pamphlets? Tribal designs were haphazardly coated on the walls...I recognised them. They were like Brimstone Blitz's.

“Zebra war paint designs, I chose them to scare other ponies...but this...”

He leaned closer, reading the words of a slip of paper.

“It says, 'The Blessed Children of the Striped Way'. Well...there's a mouthful. What the hell is this...zebra cults under Fillydelphia?”

I honestly hadn't got a clue to even answer. But even as I stood up I jumped on hearing a light scuffling nearby. What was that? Where did it come from? I backed off toward the door in fright as my eyes ran from side to side...*where had that noise come from?!*

“Murk? What's wrong?”

“Something...in...here...”

I heard another...and another...little dry shifts of material on metal. Then clicks...I knew that sound. I'd had enough of them pointed at me over the years to scare me...

Safety catches on firearms. But...

Below!

“Brim, watch out! The vents!”

I was almost too late, the first vent erupted open in a burst of dry air as a black and white rotten figure hauled itself up from the duct beneath it. Ghouls!

Brimstone was just adjacent to it. If I hadn't shouted, they may have got him. But forewarned, his back left lashed out and kicked the vent right back down on its hinges so hard it left a dent as the lid crashed down on the occupant. A sickening crunch of metal colliding with flesh and bone dulled as the vent slammed shut again.

It wasn't enough, all around us more were popping up. They weren't zebras! I could see them clearly, ghoulish ponies painted in zebra stripes over their barding and weaponry. Clambering from the holes in an ambush, they completely surrounded us. Behind me I heard a crash as wall panels ripped out and two more galloped down the hall at me. Hideous dry war cries filled the chamber.

Brimstone either didn't notice or didn't care for all the intimidation as he hurled himself at the nearest ones. One front hoof roughly knocked a pistol from the magical grip of a unicorn while he threw his entire weight on one that was half clambered out. Flattening it, his hooves beat the first ghoulish head off the ground twice before a quick twist hurled the unconscious body at his comrades. Three more fell as they attempted to cluster together for a charge.

A shotgun roared. I saw a zebra coloured ghoulish collapse against the wall as Brim threw him in the path of the shot. Struggling to sort his aim from the massive recoil, the ghoulish was bucked square in the chest into the wall where he lay silent.

There was nothing I could do...I ran. In these places, with no way out, I did what I had always done.

Found a corner and curled up.

Gunfire roared. How they missed Brimstone was beyond me or was he just *that* good that he had known when to dodge behind some wounded ghouls? He was using the cramped inside arena and their thick numbers against them even as his colossal size allowed him to simply pound anypony he met into the ground with unyielding force.

But that same size was his weakness. It didn't take them long to figure it out before I heard the carefully aimed shotgun blast.

I wanted to scream. But as I saw the mighty raider rock to the side and grunt in pain before staggering into the wall...I knew it was over. Blood flowed from his side where buckshot had split open a dozen wounds. The ghoul took aim to finish it.

A flare of green magic flew across the chamber, striking the ceiling and casting everything in a bright haze. Under a trickling of molten metal from the searing wound in the roof, the ghouls turned in shock before backing off immediately. I had just screamed and hit the floor. Whatever that was...that was one *intense* weapon.

“Stay your judgement, my children!”

A ghoul. A unicorn buck by the looks of it, bearing black and white robes. Straggly dyed white hair fell in single strands from his head. Held in his magic was an ornate yet rusted and old magical energy pistol that looked like it could incinerate a brahmin in a single shot. As every ghoul in the chamber bowed to him, I galloped over the Brim before realising...what could I really do? His front right was badly wounded to the point where he could do little but limp. With a snort, he cast me away before pushing himself up and swearing colourfully enough to make me blush. How dare he talk about Luna that way!

“Pilgrims! You approach our sanctuary with strange intent. Tell me, do you bear the signs that shall stay our hand?”

The ghoul...priest? What was he? Whatever he was, he moved toward us. I stood between him and Brimstone...before realising how pointless that was.

“We...we came to find some things for a friend! Things we were told were here, anti...um...anti ra...some sort of stuff that helps against rads used in making medicine and some silver bouncy ball.”

Yup. Definitely a born trader, Murky.

The ghouls hissed to themselves as their leaders eyes narrowed, before trotting around me.

“You speak of heretical relics, little one,” he spoke with a raspy voice while waving his glowing horn over me, “ah...it is good you survive! For they have brought us a gifted one! You are blessed!”

He must have seen my confused look, blessed? *Clearly* he had no idea about my life. Before I could voice my reasons, he continued.

“I speak of the gift within you that I can sense...an ever expanding source of the great striped blessing!”

Wait...the striped blessing? Inside me? It took a few seconds, but even my brain began to piece it together...only for Brimstone to voice it first.

“You...ergh...you idiots believe the zebras blessed you with radiation? What a load of-”

“Yes, warrior. Did we not once worship the sun? The zebras brought many suns to eradicate the misery we had become in the shadow below the moon of nightmares! In their wake we have been blessed with the purity of the flame! To be converted and blessed for all eternity that we may continue the work of the striped ones! You have been chosen, little one, by birth I sense...”

I could see his horn glowing again...he must have had medical training to spot my irradiated infection. Had he been an associate of Weathervane back in Old Equestria? I glanced at Brimstone to check his

condition, but much to my surprise, barring the injury holding him back, the big raider seemed to be fairly calm and conscious. Judging by his scars I could only assume he had been through worse in life.

“Look...I...we can take those 'heretical' things off your hooves, no trouble?”

“No...they are a reminder of our past, little one. But I do invite you and your partner inside. His markings denote he has a liking to our blessed faith. Perhaps you will learn...and understand why you are special. But we cannot risk the great deceiver or the bringer of the past to touch the items that would give them power.”

“The who?”

“The great deceiver! The one of us who left our cause in early days to commit heresy! To create substances to purge the blessing of the stripes from those who would be its children! Who took our great prophet and leader to hold him in eternal confinement!”

Weathervane...they were talking about Dr Weathervane. Had that crazed ghoul he had locked up been their old leader? Just what had happened over two centuries between these ghouls?

“As for the bringer of the past...he is the one who conquered the surface who we will one day hope to bring ruin to. We liberate the blessed from his baleful gaze.”

Red Eye! They were fighting him? That explained the defences around the crater...it was against ghoul attacks in the past from a hidden lair they hadn't known about.

“Now, I must ask you to enter. My children here are...eager and do not see the gift within you. Come!”

I wasn't sure. These ghouls were *insane*. Radiation as a blessing? Becoming a skinless rotten and living corpse was the true way forward? The gift of the zebras? I wanted to just get out of there. But the items we needed were no doubt inside. Besides, looking at the fanatical and heavily armed ghouls...it's not like we had a choice.

* * *

I genuinely hadn't expected it. My mind had imagined cold hard metal labs and a layout similar to the chunks of Stables I'd seen in Red Eye's scrapyards. Instead the inside was warm, full of rich wood textures and more open than I might have ever expected. Above us lay a mural bearing three butterflies in a glittering pattern of polished artwork. Clearly Equestria's medical research enjoyed their comforts of the hidden workplaces. I saw offshoot corridors, stairs to a higher open plan level and several secured rooms. Dozens of ghouls wandered around, both mares and bucks. I saw two of them sharing a tender moment of an embrace nearby. They were all speaking a language I could not understand, zebra, I guessed. How did they know that language? Traders existed, teachers were explaining how to repair a spark generator to three others...this was a full community! The only real marring points were the tribal markings everywhere in white and black paint and the dead plants that languished as unclean piles near the corners. Only that made this seem anything other than a perfectly peaceful little ghoul home. Given how lonely I normally was...I could appreciate the comfort of it.

It was also just as irradiated as everywhere else. My Rad-X was beginning to wear off...I could feel my windpipe beginning to itch. How long had it been? Twenty five minutes? We *had* to settle this now...if I could gallop the whole way perhaps I'd be fine...

“Tell me, little one. Why do you desire the relics?”

The ghoul advanced beside me, a good few feet ahead of the others that formed a protective barrier around Brimstone. I wasn't sure for which side. It seemed this leader had taken me as the speaker for us here due to my tainted lung infection...

“We have a friend...she is dying.”

“My condolences, what of?”

“Radiation poisoning.”

Every ghoul in the vicinity paused. There was a moment of silence before a delighted and sick cheering went up from every ghoul I could hear. Wincing, I fell to the ground and desperately covered my ears.

“Bless your friends soul! For she is blessed to travel down the path without even requiring our aid! This is a wondrous event!”

It took fourteen guards to restrain Brimstone. Snarling, biting and bucking he was eventually pulled to the ground in his efforts to kill the leader. Four of the ghouls were injured in the process before they finally got a good grip through numbers. After a gun butt to his injured hoof, the big stallion growled in pain before lying very still...his eyes fixed unrelentingly on the ghoul. I mentally pleaded with him to remain still...I didn't want to see him hurt.

I wanted to protest it, but the moment I did that all too hated feeling returned...that convulsing cough that signalled that my radiation poisoning was beginning to grow. My airway was rougher...beginning to burn...

“You show good signs yourself. Come, little one. We should be away from this place...allow me to show you what we truly aspire to.”

“One...one second...please.”

The ghoul nodded gently as I cantered back to Brimstone. Kneeling down beside his head, I spoke quietly to him, hopefully that none of the ghouls watching him from a few feet away with weapons would hear...

“Brim...I...I think I can do something here. I'm the little sneaky thief, remember? Look, you're injured, please, let me do this for you, Brim. Give me some space here. Let me help Glimmerlight.”

The big raider almost got me to run scared from his glare. But eventually, he nodded.

“Just scream if you need me to kick things off. But in ten minutes I'm going regardless. She can't wait.”

“I'll try...look, take the potion. I know it's for me but...you need it.”

Brimstone looked almost confused for a second, shocked as I drew it from my saddlebag and passed it over. Eventually, taking it closer to him with a scornful look of being 'helped', he shook his head.

“Why do *you* care?”

“I...I just do. I'd want somepony to do it for me...”

He looked about ready to say something, but thought better of it and looked away. Rising to my hooves I struggled to comprehend the responsibility I'd just given myself. I'd wanted a chance to prove to myself that I...I wasn't just going to always hide and run away. Greater fears would eat at me in many places...but in this moment, I had to take the chance that perhaps things could go right. That I could still fight for an escape.

* * *

“My name is Magister Heartcare, little one. Yours is Murk. We heard you coming in to lay our prepared defence, did you not think we would have detection grids? Now...what I am to show you is our home and our most sacred place. In preparation for my question to you.”

He wasn't lying. Home truly was the word. We passed through corridors that showed sleeping areas, living rooms with musty old cushions for sitting on and chatting or various shops of scrap or other valuables. It wasn't large, perhaps fifty ghouls according to Heartcare (I guessed it was from his old medical profession) but it felt oddly...safe and secure. I quite envied them.

“This is our weapons armoury, an unfortunate stance that we must kill those who would seek to harm us. You are lucky I saw you for what you are...a potential convert blessed by radiation. Some day these will be the tools to bring about the revolution in the name of the striped blessing.”

I was taken into a cramped old room with a single workbench in the middle surrounded by rows of stuffed shelves. I saw firearms of all shapes and sizes...including a few...oh my gosh! Battle saddles! The Magister seemed to chuckle in amusement as I hopped to and fro, handling and looking at them all. That was it! Sign me up! They had ones that could fit four small guns, two big guns and even ones for big single barrel artillery! All the handles...the gears...oooh they were amazing! I wanted to try them on...I'd have to draw myself in one later!

“I see you enjoy our stocks, Murk. We have learned over the many years what kinds to keep and which to throw away. For example...”

He floated his magical energy pistol out, checking the battery slot as he did so. I watched the little release slide cause the housing to retract and expose the internals alongside the battery itself that acted as, I presumed, a magazine for shots. Pleased that it was still holding charge from the shot earlier, he closed the slide. Surprisingly, he drifted it near me. Staring at it, I noticed him nod for me to take the pistol.

“Do feel the weight, Murk. Understand we care for our things. Of course, I also wish to show that I trust you to not do harm...I want to know you as one of my people. That is the first step to any companionship, is it not? Trust.”

I wouldn't really know...I'd never been able to fully trust anyone other than the truths that DJ-Pon3 spoke of. I reached forward, biting the grip in my mouth and immediately overcompensating. The energy pistol was light! Not just without much weight but almost like a feather! Twisting my head about...I quickly understood both how well made this weapon was to my rather basic knowledge...and how awkward mouth held guns really were. Give me a battle saddle any day. (Really, please do!)

Heartcare moved around the armoury, turning away from me to tidy one of the benches while tutting. I let the pistol drop into my hooves and turned it over a few times, playing around with it.

“I do so try to have them keep it organised, these mines should have been put away hours ago. This is also where we keep the minor elements of heretical material. For all their harmful traits to us, the unblessed 'medical' liquid makes a good lubricant for our tools if properly prepared.”

He pointed a hoof to a locked glass cabinet. I recognised the clear liquid sachets from a couple in Weathervane's lab. Anti-radiation water...gel...stuff. I winced as I saw the keypad lock. So much for stealing a key this time.

“Murk, I realise I am dodging around the issues here. There is your future to show. Please...follow me.”

I didn't particularly feel like hearing much talk right now. After hoofing over the pistol again, I felt my chest clench badly before I began to walk. This was taking too long...too much chit chat and nicety that was letting the radiation slowly build up...soon I'd be feeling-

My thoughts died that moment as I felt my entire body quake...oh no...

The coughing took a full twenty seconds to subside. I almost blacked out from the pain in my lungs as I felt a metallic tang in my mouth...blood. I must have fallen against the desk, dozens of various coloured mines had collapsed all around me. Shaking and feeling tears drip from my face at the sheer pain, I clenched my teeth and got up. I...I wanted to run away. I wanted to just abandon all this. But then what would I be left with, the guilt and a lack of self confidence all over again? I had to press on...I had to. For my own freedom of thought I *had* to prove that I could do something. I had to prove to Brimstone that I wanted to save her too...

Heartcare had moved on to await me catching up...good. With a cheeky slip in the saddlebag I added a little...insurance...to my presence here before pushing on after him. Even if things turned out fine, it'd do well to keep me in good stead with Barb.

* * *

A temple. This place...had a temple. Were the doctors of old highly religious? Was it for ponies who

were being treated in this odd underground place? Whatever the reason, it was here...and it was...well, strange.

White smooth and polished rock raised up high to a pitch dark ceiling. Recognising the colours and shapes embossed on them I lowered my head respectfully as I looked in the entrance before offering a small prayer to Celestia and Luna for my deliverance. However the architecture wasn't what drew my eyes. Inside there were several small pods like large eggs...each one about big enough to fit a pony inside it. They were hooked up to what looked like some sort of radiator that was half embedded in the 'shell' of each pod. All were connected to one generator at the back. Just what was that? However all of the ghouls present reacted to my sudden and somewhat revealing gasp as my eyes spotted my objective!

The silver sphere sat to one side of the room on a pedestal! All I had to do was grab it!

The Magister nodded to the two guards and turned to me.

“Murk, here you see our nexus of worship. We like to remind ourselves of the past...of the Goddess we once loved and the Goddess we once feared. These incubators are the basis of our purity. Furthermore, to centralise ourselves we have kept the heretical silver orb you referred to within this room. Its presence is, like the Nightmare's ceiling, to remind us of the dangers the blessing faces from those who seek to corrupt it or remove its purity. Now I must leave you briefly...there are matters that need attending to decide whether to offer this to your companion as well. I shall return momentarily. Feel free to look around, however there are some restrictions as I am sure you must understand. Any guards will instruct you on the particulars.”

Incu-whats?

Throwing the question away, I nodded, beginning to feel a little bit more at ease with all this. The slave in me was happy to follow instructions...especially if they helped the more free part of my mind do what it wanted too! Watching the ghoul sweep away in his fancy robes, I immediately turned to the shrine they had built. The two guards stood unmoving, wait, were they pegasi?!

They were! I could see the rotted wings drooped at their sides. These ghouls...they didn't care for it!

A part of me almost broke down. Here was a place that truly didn't care and it was one place that I could never settle in...their environment would kill me within the hour. I could feel my limbs beginning to shake and my skin itch already...

I couldn't wait around, time to go in there and see about snatching that orb! I trotted forward, only to find those rotten ghoul wings snapping into a cross before me.

“Halt!”

“You may enter, but know this!”

“The unconverted within-”

“-may not leave!”

I leapt back, staggering on my hooves before realising they weren't attacking me. Suppressing the urge to let my envy of moveable wings get the better of me, I trotted back up. I nodded to them, fine, I wouldn't bring whoever was in here praying or whatever back out...geez...

The wings descended as I trotted through, hearing my hooves making sharper taps on the marble flooring. This place was so clean...I'd never seen anything so smooth in my life. If those big pods weren't there...and that huge doorway at the back locked over with a powered barrier...

In fact, perhaps this room wasn't so beautiful after all. Freaky pods, a stored megaspell and a strange barrier door under the guard of ghoul pegasi? Something was amiss...

I desperately wanted to take my RadAway...but I had a horrible feeling the ghouls wouldn't appreciate it in their more sacred place. No...something was definitely not right here.

I found it the moment I looked in one of the pods...

...and saw her.

A little filly. She lay in a small curled up ball, crying quietly into her front hooves. Barely more than six or seven years old...

...a ghoul...

I almost screamed at the thought. A foal! She was just a foal! Did the balefire have no mercy?! Even as my hooves clunked on the clear glass of the incubator to look in I saw her stir and turn while I found the urge to break down on the spot.

“No...I don't want to stay here. I want to go home...”

Her voice was corrupted. What once would have been a high pitched and almost-breaking cute sound was just like any other ghoul only so much more tiny and tragic. I couldn't help it as I felt my eyes become wet. Her tiny hooves hopped up onto the inside of the glass opposite mine as she saw I wasn't one of 'them.'

“I...you...”

“Can you take me home? I want to go *home!*”

Suddenly it all made sense.

Protégé had been hunting for a filly of Red Eye's that had gone missing. The ghouls claimed radiation was their purifying blessing. They had talked of 'converting' those with the gift. Then the last piece of the puzzle...these pods.

My blood ran cold. I backed away from the pod slowly as I saw the ghoul filly tapping the glass, her remaining hair from her mane flopping to and fro.

They were *making* ponies into ghouls!

They had made Star....Starshine Mel...oh...oh Goddesses...

...no...

My mind ran amok. I wanted to throw up...to corrupt healthy ponies into this, how many of them had been forced through this? How many had been simply killed by whatever these pods did? Yet at the same time here lay my own salvation! If I were a ghoul...then my condition would be cured, radiation would *heal* me, not harm me! If it weren't for looking into those pained foal's eyes...I might have been tempted. Maybe...but there was too much wrong here. Children didn't deserve such horror, if Red Eye and I shared one thing, it was *this*.

“S-Starshine Melody?”

“That's me! That's me! Please, mister! I want to go *hooooome!*”

The last line was wailed at a high pitch that rasped and broke in equal measures. The filly was being traumatised by her own speech changing as much as her body having been ruined. I *had* to get her out of here.

“I...I'll try Melody, I have a friend, he'll get you out, okay? Just...uh...please don't cry, it'll be fine. Protégé, you know him? He's looking too.”

'Don't cry', yeah, that advice was just *fantastic* coming from me. Her eyes lit up at the mention of Protégé, was he known to the foals? I cast my eyes around for anything to help. That silver sphere still sat there...while I could hear strange noises from behind the barrier. I'd heard them before...behind the oaken door in Weathervane's home. Zombie ghoul ponies...and lots of them. For a second I didn't understand...before it became obvious. The ghouls here were capturing them or...or putting the ones who turned into them through the poisoning process into a containment room for use in their eventual war.

How many ghouls did they have locked away in there, ready to surge across Red Eye's operations from within? This entire thing was *messed up*. They were forcibly contaminating, killing and degrading ponies into these things! I had to tell Protégé, if they got loose then so many slaves could die...

“Little Murk. I see you have met our latest convert and accepted our offer yourself.”

I swerved to face the Magister. He stood resplendent in his robes, flanked by the two guards as they marched in. I trotted toward them, I needed out to get Brimstone Blitz, but stopped as I realised, they weren't just standing in the entrance, they were blocking it.

“What have you *done* to her?”

My question was not as confident as it sounded beside the anguish I felt at the foal's life being *ruined* by these fanatics! I felt my voice break as I tried to articulate it all into voice.

“She has been saved. Joining our-”

“*She's just a foal!* I've seen enough, I want out. I need to talk to my-”

“Did the guards not tell you, Murk? You may enter...but the unconverted may not leave.”

“But she's there, she's not...”

Oh...damn. They hadn't meant just her. They meant *in general*.

I panicked, galloping suddenly to rush past them until I felt the two guards, driven by pegasi agility to match my own, wrestle me back in with little effort.

“Oh I am sorry, Murk, if you did not realise. But you must see this as the best solution. You hate Red Eye...that much I can see. The bringer of the past shall fall to us and you shall help! Bless you, Murk! For we grant you a rare gift not seen in aeons since the great fire!”

He raised his hooves in the air as he reared back, before looking down at me.

“Slumber in the incubator, Murk...immortality awaits.”

“I...I...don't want it. I just want to see Brimstone...”

Heartcare smirked, before nodding the guards forward.

“You imply you have a choice. Bless this poor pony, children. He will see the truth eventually.”

The guards lashed forward, grabbing my hooves and torso. I struggled against their foul sickly bodies, screaming and thrashing as best I could. Slowly, inexorably, I was pulled into the pod beside Starshine Melody. I could see her wailing and hammering on the glass. Despite my best efforts, the guards stuffed me in. There was only one other thing I could do, I took a deep breath.

“BRIIIIMSTOOOOONE!”

The cry ended in a spluttered cough as I was bundled in and the pod shut while incapacitated. Blood sprayed over my hooves from my mouth as I struggled to breathe.

“Bless him! Purge the corruption from this poor child's body! In the name of the great zebra stripes we commend him to *purity!*”

The pod activated as I saw the three ghouls bobbing their heads, chanting and screaming verse in the zebra tongue. A low pitched whirring gave way to a pulsating hum as the air became warm. The radiator like machine beside me in the pod began to glow...a sickly incandescent lime green that quickly filled my vision. The throbbing of the pressure was making my head hurt. I thrashed around, kicking up the pillows and covers for more willing participants as my hooves battered the tough glass.

My PipBuck *screamed*, a horrible mess of static as something in it reacted to the overwhelming levels of radiation, like a whirring, clicking and squealing all combined. The screen was trying to flash something. My entire body was warming up as I felt my inner chest cavity swelling...burning...convulsing. I...I couldn't see! The green had filled my vision and imprinted on my eyes that I couldn't even see the outside. Only the cacophony of their chanting resounded in my head as the machine worked up a gear and I began to feel my very flesh burning. Vision swam as I collapsed.

No...becoming a ghoul...I didn't want it...*I didn't want it*. I hadn't realised before but that would just

make me a slave for...for all eternity! A fate worse than my own even now!

No! Please, NO!

One last desperate idea formed as I reached into my saddlebag for the mine I'd hidden in there. I heard the Magister scream something as he saw it from outside. Well...better dead than enslaved! I slid the safety catch away and hoofed the pressure plate before jamming it into the radiator machine thing and then just praying it wouldn't kill me too painfully, at least I'd stop them!

I was a little disappointed when it didn't explode.

I was very *surprised* when every single machine in the area started exploding instead!

The mine hadn't blown up, instead it had whined and sent a blue arcing magical spark that enveloped the entire pod and gave me a shock that was more uncomfortable than truly painful as I felt my mane stand on end. A whine from the machines grew louder until the generator the pod was attached to detonated with a sharp bang and sent shrapnel flying and pinging off my pod and all around the room.

The green glow died away as it popped off of the lock. Taking the small chance, I put my shaky and weakened strength into pushing it off. The Magister and guards were down, staggering around with wounds from flying machinery when I dropped to the ground, vision swimming as cables sparkled and pods popped with 'rad-radiators' discharging the magical energy that was dying from the disruption that mine had caused. I guess it only made sense...a mine designed to stop machines without killing. That sounded like the sort of thing Sundial's 'Applejack' might have approved of.

But it didn't help how I felt.

My body was weak. All the flesh on one side of my body felt singed and tingly while my throat was swollen and half wheezing on every breath. Even as I staggered up I felt my stomach churn before throwing up next to the pod...

Oh...that was a lot of blood...

Pulling my goggles on against the smoke, I looked for Starshine Melody. Almost falling from hoof to hoof, I dragged out my RadAway and set a sachet in my mouth before almost tripping rather than trotting toward the next pod.

“Star-”

I coughed again, spraying RadAway over the dead machine. No, no! I couldn't waste any! Desperately hoofing the packet, I tried to rescue as much as I could while looking around.

“Starshine! Are...where are you?”

The little filly was terrified, curled up near the edge and wailing in that raspy little ghoulish voice.

“Come on! We're going home...ergh...”

Her wet little eyes were quivering as she stopped and looked at me.

“Are...are we?”

“Yes! On my back, quickly!”

It wasn't fast enough, the guard was on me. He was badly wounded, but managed to shove me over with sheer weight and howl in my face before trying to restrain me. I felt a hoof slap the side of my head once...twice. The third I felt being pulled back...before ceasing as the guard fell sideways from Starshine leaping onto his head and biting his ear. Brave filly! She'd bought me a second...but what could I do? I had no weapon...

Oh wait...yes I did!

I reached below my stomach, grabbed it from my stash pocket and with a sharp swing, swiped the metal ruler across the face of the ghoulish. With the sharp slap of impact, he cried out in agony, going down as it left a searing mark across both eyes and his snout. Hah! Never underestimate the metal ruler! At least I knew he

could regenerate...no guilt from this one!

“Quickly, Starshine, hop up!”

I knelt down, trying to ignore my stomach twisting in all directions as she clambered up. Feeling her hooves around my neck, I was very glad for the collar as I saw her wasted away skin. Staggering over I grabbed the silver spell sphere, sliding it into my saddlebag before trying to find my way to the exit in all the machinery's dying smoke plumes. My entire body was failing, but I'd survived! I'd even knocked over a guard and was rescuing a foal! Was this what it felt like to be a hero like LittlePip?

“Watch out!”

Starshine's warning turned to a scream as I felt somepony grabbing her, trying to pull her off me. The Magister had found us and was howling as he yanked at the poor kid.

“You will not take my child! She is mine! MINE!”

I was weak. I was a coward. But I did *not* appreciate foals being harmed! Stopping all resistance I hopped backwards, raised my right back hoof and shot it directly under the Magister to impact that little sweet spot that *anypony* could do harm to, no matter how weak they were!

As it turned out, ghouls made very strange sounds when bucked in the happy sack. I felt him writhe and fall off of Starshine before I kept moving for the door. Almost there...almost there...my energy was running low, I wasn't built for fighting...

I was stopped as a blaring alarm sounded in the room, causing me to stagger when my whirling senses were further impaired. The noise was so loud it threw off the balance from my ears. I heard a *whoosh* behind me as the great barrier door began to rise once the locking mechanism finally failed from my anti magic thingy mine.

“Get him! Get him my purest of converts! He seeks to take her from us!”

A dozen green glowing eyes and organs illuminated from within began staring at me...more and more adding on the further the door rose. With throaty roars they began to lurch forward...too many for me to quickly count. Foals...bucks...mares...every one a feral nightmare.

Oh...*fudge*...

* * *

I found Brimstone in the main corridor smacking a ghoul into the wall so hard that I heard the spine literally snap in half. Clearly he had found and raided the armoury for I saw multiple bent weapons all across the ground and a sack of anti-radiation fluid across his back. Great! Just great!

“Murk! Who's the filly?!”

I didn't even stop. Racing by him I just kept going.

“Run, Brim!”

“The sphere-”

“I've got it! *Just run!*”

“You...you got it?”

I just screamed over my shoulder as I worked my little hooves as fast as they could go toward the exit.

“BRIM, JUST RUN!”

Brimstone snorted before turning and seeing what was following me. His eyes went wide.

“Oh...*fuck!*”

* * *

We burst from the hidden doorway at top speed. The moment I hit the looser earth my speed slowed from the extra weight of Starshine on my back. She was still squealing at the howling of the ghouls behind us, making me wince every time as she screamed in my ears. I felt myself go down, tripping in the loose earth until Brimstone threw her on his back instead. I could swear her scream was more at *him*.

Pandemonium broke loose the moment the ghouls emerged. Exploding forth like a tide of rotting zombie flesh and galloping with uncanny ease across the dusty crater base they quickly drew attention. Slaves cried out, panic broke loose and everypony in the immediate area fled in all directions. Most went for the edge and slipping all over the raised slope. Those wooden 'shoes' were good for balance but terrible to gallop in. All around us I heard screams and shouts to the defence wall for aid. Blood curdling howls sounded as the ghouls fell upon such a target rich environment. Streaming through the ruined carcass of a few buildings, I saw slaves being run down by the horde as they fell to the ground. Agonised wails as they were bloodily ripped apart set my heart to clump...or perhaps that was the radiation...every step I could feel my lungs complaining. My vision was darkening...I couldn't fall now, not now!

Above us, I could hear screams for the guns on the smaller wall. Slavers were running to and fro. Spotting the ghoul rush I saw griffins dive from above. Somewhere nearby a slaver actually *in* the pit itself was trying to direct slaves toward a gate. The voice was familiar, was that Protégé?

I wasn't given the time to think as a zombie spotted me, it's glowing eyes seethed as it brayed and galloped for me. Screaming myself, I hopped on top of a wooden plank amongst the scrap, using it to give me purchase. I heard it thrashing in the earth, kicking up dirt in all directions as it ploughed toward me. Gunfire was whizzing to all sides across the gap between juts of burned rock, cutting down ghouls and even slaves who were just in the wrong place. I saw the wounded ghouls still pulling themselves to the now lame injured slaves...

Without a thought I galloped for that gap and dove aside as a burst of gunfire slapped with a dull noise into the earth, kicking up little plumes in my wake. Maybe somepony would shoot it! Maybe! Brimstone had disappeared, please, someone shoot it! The ghoul leapt, hooves extended as I cried out. With a horrific rip of flesh it landed on me, hooves scrambling at my body as blood splashed all over me.

It fell limp...I didn't feel any new pain...

The blood was coming from it's neck stump, a sniper's bullet had blown it clean off. Above me I saw a griffin throw me an obscene gesture. It was Ragini.

Some of the cult had stormed outside, fire was exchanged with the griffins above as zebra war cries emitted mixed with staccato gunfire. Ragini swerved in the air, gliding off behind buildings as I heard that voice again. Protégé! I could see him through the gaps, leading guards down into the crater itself to form a cordon against the oncoming horde...there must have been dozens! I saw him directing the guards with gestures of his hoof as his revolver slapped rounds at the oncoming cult and forced them into cover. I wanted to run to him, obey his instructions and clear orders to help everypony get out of here in one piece...but everything was too chaotic. Ghouls were mixed in with slaves fighting for their lives around me while griffins weaved through buildings dropping grenades on large concentrations of the horrors. The kick of the explosives blew earth across everything. Bewildered, sick, dizzy and tired, I found myself lost amidst it all.

I ran, I needed to find somewhere safe...to get out of the crater. But my hooves were like lead, slowing me down and becoming clumsy. Even taking a second to sit on some wood for a breath in safety led to the entire thing cracking beneath me and plunging me down the slope once again. The noise was absolute, nothing standing out but for the screams of the slaves caught and torn up. Beside me I saw a dead-

It wasn't dead!

The ghoul had been blown in half by the grenades, but continued crawling toward me, it's distended tongue lolling out to the side. Unearthly noises haemorrhaged from it's throat as it pulled itself after the ever slowing escape I made. I tried to throw rocks, it didn't care. I swiped my ruler at it and just got it covered in

icky goo before having to roll to dodge it. It just didn't care!

Brimstone's hoof *made* it care.

After wiping the mucus from his hoof on the now sand like dirt, he cast his head around.

“Hope you appreciate it, squirt. Just happened to be in my way.”

I nodded, before screaming as I saw a magically flung rock crack off of Brimstone's forehead. Stunned, the raider staggered before turning to the new threat as, through all the dust and swirling battle I saw the Magister advance on us, his magical energy weapon pointed directly at Brimstone.

“You two ruined everything! You desecrated our most blessed artefacts! Now you draw us early into the fire of war!”

He wasn't joking...*war*. That word felt right as I saw a griffin land on the ground from an injured wing and immediate grapple with a ghoul until, amazingly, a slave smashed it over the head with an iron pipe. I could hear Protégé nearby, the **BLAM** of his revolver distinct from every other shot. The Magister was wounded. A bullet, probably from a griffin, lodged messily in his side. All the same, his eyes were locked on Brimstone as the immediate threat. Even the big raider couldn't cross this distance and Protégé was still far off. The pistol pointed at me quickly too as I squeaked in terror.

“The zebras gave us this world! Why do you deny it!?”

Brimstone snarled and made to charge as the pistol jerked his way again, making him stall. I could see the frustration on his face.

“Now you'll die, you will never see a pure world, Murk. Not as long as you live...I offered you immortality. As for you...raider...you killed my children...you destroyed our homes in your rampage. But you consistently make one mistake...allow me to teach you a lesson...”

“What's that, rot?”

“Never bring hooves to a gunfight.”

With a smirk, the Magister aimed at his head and pulled the trigger.

Click!

The silence lasted only a second before the Magister registered the misfire. Panic set in on his face as he pulled the trigger again...and again...

Through my fading consciousness...I couldn't resist a smirk as I reached into my saddlebag and drew his spark battery between my teeth, grinning as widely as I could around it.

“And *you* should never let a thief hold your gun.”

The look of (oooh so satisfying) surprise on his face lasted only long enough before abject horror set in when Brimstone grinned and stomped the ground with both hooves, ready for a brawl. The big raider actually grinned at me.

“Nice work, kid...so, rot, what was that about a fight you wanted?”

To his credit, the Magister didn't even hesitate before fleeing immediately. Roaring and chasing him for only a few feet, Brimstone made sure he was gone. Starshine had fallen from his back, standing beside me.

“Thank you mister...”

“Think...uh...I...oh...”

My vision *swam*. In the aftermath of the confrontation I felt reality slam home. Oh boy...this...this wasn't good...

The coughing began, I felt blood curdle in my gut, lungs and throat. No...I was so close, I'd...I'd won! I couldn't...not now. But it wouldn't stop...I couldn't breathe. I tried to move, but the loose earth didn't even let

me drag my hooves correctly as my balance fell from under me. I fell to my knees, feeling Starshine shaking me with her little hooves and shouting off to the side. Through hazy vision I staggered and convulsed, only briefly seeing Brimstone running back to me.

“Murk?”

I didn't reply...I couldn't open my eyes, I could feel blood spraying from my mouth. I threw up. I couldn't take air...oh Goddesses...

I collapsed. Unable to breathe at all. Oxygen deprived, I felt myself going into shock as I spasmed with the failed effort to take in air. Only a vague muddy sense of hearing even heard Starshine scream as she shook me, or Brimstone bellowing.

“Murk!”

Something shook me before I just went numb...and let it overcome me as my lungs burned up and clogged. I finally gave up as the radiation finally won out...

“**MURK!**”

* * *

I dreamed...I think.

I could barely move...my limbs were heavy and felt restricted. Like I was locked in a cloying blanket. What could I see? Nothing...I could see nothing but a small light. Wait, that was something...nothing made sense, what way was up?

My head hurt as I felt like I was drowning...my hooves reached out but found no purchase.

But they did...I felt somepony grab hold and pull me as I saw the shape of...of somepony...pulling me along. Wait...I was going forward, was I running? I just...it was all too hazy..

Like running through liquid, I felt myself being pulled as a bright flare lit her...was it a her? Was that LittlePip? I fell, as we separated. I fell...upward through water...

Even as I broke the surface...I woke.

* * *

My *everything* ached.

“Well well, finally you're back with us.”

The raspy voice caused me to twitch and spasm, to throw myself around as the bed's blanket caught and twisted with me.

“Fucking calm it! Hold still...”

Oh...swearing. Weathervane, not Heartcare.

The ghoul was looking over me in a somewhat musty bed. I...thought...this was the hospital, but not his own little area. No...this was one of the wards I had seen. I tried to look, but the motion made my lungs twist and my stomach heave.

“Careful,” he muttered as I threw up into a convenient bucket. It was strangely orange...had I just been drowned in RadAway?

“You're lucky to be alive you crazy fuck. You'll be fine in a few hours once the medication has time to work, magic is handy like that. But you may take a little while to quite feel one hundred percent. But your temperature has gone down by about a fifth of the way to normal since that rad-fever. Yeah...lucky.”

“How...how did I get here?”

The medical ghoul looked a little surprised, before chortling.

“Didn't you realise? Brimstone brought you here.”

“*Brimstone?*”

“Oh yes, galloped the whole way with both you and that foal on his back. Broke down the doors to the hospital, gave the guard a concussion, sought me out and promptly declared that if I didn't save your life, and I quote, 'right fucking now', he would do something. That 'something' he mentioned, I can assure you as a medical expert is quite anatomically impossible. However I got the feeling he was about to try anyway...”

“...Brimstone did that? For me? But...”

“He didn't tell me what it was you did to change his view, but I did hear him saying something about what 'she' would want him to do. Oh and by the way, he told me if I informed you it was him he'd crush my skull. So don't tell him, alright? Or I'll find a way to give you every fucking injection in your rump. Besides, there's somepony else who wants to see you.”

He trotted off after tapping a RadAway to my chest.

“Wait, Weathervane! The RadPurge, did-”

Weathervane didn't answer. Instead, the newcomer did as he trotted in to my shock.

“Glimmerlight is, last I heard, recovering,” said Protégé calmly, “Brimstone apparently left for her the moment he dropped you here. Rather literally, so I am told.”

I squeaked. My master was here, I wasn't in my cell! How...I...oh no...

“Now I'm not even going to *pretend* I'm not disappointed that you felt you had to escape me, Murk. I like to think I am a kind pony. As such...I was prepared to punish you as befits how I run things. I *dislike* workers attempting to escape me...to escape their duty to Equestria...”

He trotted closer to my bed, magic fixing the blankets over me to not be as messed up. An odd move while talking of punishment...

“But it seems I am inclined to drop it and not even ask how you got out. I know my own building, so I am sure I can guess how. I trust it will not happen again. But no, my punishment is stayed only by that you have inadvertently done me a great service, Murk. We turned back the tide...but you saved one of Master Red Eye's foals. Starshine Melody has been returned to him. Master Red Eye was quite delighted, if saddened by her...condition...”

I nodded, trying not to allow a relieved smile on my face that Melody had in her own obtuse way, saved *me* from Protégé.

“Is she alright, master?”

“It is sad to say the condition is, as we know, non reversible. She will not grow properly. However Master Red Eye is kind, he has still granted her a home under him. Melody will be safe. As for the ghouls...those who did not charge out were exterminated.”

Wait...all of them?

“Master Red Eye sent his alicorns on a personal mission. The deterrent is now clear for all to see. The foals are off limits to harm and any who dare do so will not go without vengeance for their assault upon the children of the new world. They shall not be harming anypony else, Murk.”

“I...I guess that's good...”

Truly, I wasn't so sure. An innocent child was harmed...then a community slaughtered by monstrous magical creatures. It all felt like one big circle of violence to me.

“Yes, Murk. I am told you went to great risk, so I feel that I owe you a thank you. As such...so...I am very grateful to you. I...don't know what I would have done if you hadn't found her down there. While the fact that you did so goes against every rule I have...I am also grateful for you helping save Glimmerlight.

She is a good worker and my own efforts to requisition the RadPurge had failed.”

He smiled at me, leading me to feel an odd surge of pride that my master was genuinely pleased at my efforts. It made everything feel worth it and-

No...that wasn't right. I didn't do it for him. I did it for those on my side. Part of me liked Protégé's appreciation more than it should...but it still felt like a betrayal of my freedom. It would take me a while to properly kill off that part of my mind. But for now...yes...I could still do it.

“Now rest up, Murk. I will see you returned tonight. Then you must rest more...”

“Forgive me, master...why?”

Protégé turned and trotted off, turning his head.

“Your first day of work under me, of course. We have an objective. On the hills outside Fillydelphia...we found one.”

I felt my body clench up as it ached terribly. Fear made me tremble.

“You mean...a...you...you found a...”

“Yes, Murk. We found a Stable.”

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Sleight of Hoof (Rank 1) – Everypony better be careful what they have near you, for even those items they love the most may mysteriously disappear after that hoofshake they gave you! You may now attempt to steal even while detected!

Chapter 6: Lighting the Darkness

* * *

“A good friend, like a good book, is something that will last forever.”

“What is it like to have confidence in yourself?”

Wait, wait...do I really?

Well...confidence...that's where you're able to feel safe about your own decisions, isn't it? Where you can look at yourself and feel happy about who you are regardless of what others think of you. It's where you can find happiness, a sense of self worth and understand that even if everything is against you...the path you chose is still the right one.

I'm sorry, but...I don't think that's me.

Even in the wake of rescuing a foal and rooting out a powerful and dangerous force that was poised to slaughter slaves and slavers alike, I didn't feel any more courageous like I had hoped. Having saved the life of somepony precious to my companion, I had expected to feel some sense of achievement. But none came. I simply remembered all the ways that I had needed help or messed things up. How many times have tears trickled down my face in terror? How many times have I run away from doing the brave thing? How often have my ends been met or my life preserved only by the charity of others and my own cowardice to save my own skin?

I took the journey to help Brimstone save Glimmerlight and try and restore my own confidence to resist The Master's influence. Honestly, I don't know if I succeeded or not. Sure, I'd done some things, but in the end I would have died had it not been for the luck of Brimstone Blitz once again bailing me out. Alone, I would never have gotten as far as I had. That fact bit deep...if I couldn't do things all by myself, how could I ever hope to escape or help anypony else do so? What use was I to the mare or her buck if I couldn't even help my own sorry hide?

So no, I don't know if that entire little adventure helped at all. But based on other things...well...

If I were confident, perhaps I'd not hide my wings and believe all of the hate they tell about my kind. But they're right...pegasi helped ruin this world and as one of them I can't run from that fact. They have every reason to hate me and, as much as I didn't want to admit it, if I weren't one myself I might have thought the same way.

Not to mention...every time I thought of going back to the Mall, to be within reach of The Master...my Master, I felt nothing but the chilly panic. I knew that I would do anything he asked of me. Would a confident pony feel that way? I'd bet not.

There were a dozen things really. From being ashamed of my wings to my instinctual loyalty to The Master no matter how much I hated it to even the embarrassment of people seeing my more personal drawings. Really, would a confident pony feel any of that? No! I wasn't confident...I wasn't even slightly confident. Desperately, I knew that perhaps I might cling onto some shred of hope by taking refuge in that I had tried to defy him by helping Brimstone...but it just wasn't working.

Nothing, not even that, could overcome the slave in my mind that still knew its place was by The Master's side. By Protégé's side. Under the heel of Master Red Eye. To be the loyal slave of Fillydelphia that I was by right of ownership.

LittlePip...I'm so sorry. Whatever it was you showed me to help me break free...I'm losing it. What

gives you the strength to carry on? What helps you keep fighting back against an overwhelming force telling you that it's impossible? What keeps you going?

Where does *your* confidence come from?

Whatever it was...it's something I knew I needed.

* * *

Finally, mercifully, I could rest.

Protégé had given me a few hours free to recover in the hospital ward while the healing potions and RadAway worked their (rather literal) magic on my body. Apparently, being involved in rescuing one of Red Eye's foals was enough to have gotten me on the 'protected slave' list for treatment.

Yet as I stared across the bed at my fourth RadAway sachet in under an hour, I reflected this wasn't perhaps the best outcome in the world. For every three I drank, one seemed to come back up. I had complained (not whined) at length to Dr. Weathervane about my fears of my body beginning to reject RadAway. Eventually he had called me a 'little fucking earache' and hit me on the head with his clipboard till I agreed that I was talking nonsense.

Even so...looking at the sachet only reminded me of how I'd have to get used to the taste. I'd be living with it for the rest of my life now...

Curling up in the thin satin blanket, I felt myself shivering as the sounds of the hospital washed around my peripheral hearing. I had to keep myself from thinking on that. The condemnation to an incurable illness that would affect me every single day. How did you get over such a thing?

I couldn't. But to avoid myself falling into a pit of despair I pulled across my journal and started flicking through it. Carefully, I searched backwards until I found the last one I remembered. My eyes only briefly fell on the large volume of pages I had drawn upon during my early days in Fillydelphia and before. No...I didn't ever want to see them. I'd forgotten what was on them and reminding myself could never be good.

I'd thought that a chance to calm down, leaf through sketches and think for myself might help. It might settle things, allowing me to calm down and rest properly.

It didn't.

If I'd thought ahead, I'd have realised I was making a mistake. Since the Pit I'd not had a proper chance to reflect...to think and realise how much my life had changed in just a few days. From those original few hours of awakening to realise I didn't *have* to be a slave, through the desperate attempts to stay alive and escape Fillydelphia (had I really tried to escape?!), meeting The Master and the mysterious intentions of Protégé, fighting alongside a raider warlord against ghouls and breaking rules left, right and centre to do as I needed. I had been shot! My guts had been hanging out! I could still see the scar if I lifted up my blanket and-

Oh...oh Goddesses...I really was thin there. My stomach gurgled and ached in response as I realised that I was seriously low on energy from food. How had I gone this long?

So many eventful incidents...more activity in those few days than in over a decade of slavery. What was I supposed to worry about? The Master? My illness? Escaping? Protégé? Barb's demands? (Oh no...I'd used the mine I picked up for him...) Or was it even just that I hadn't seen the mare since? Did she know I was alive?

So many threads...so many things all at once with no chance to digest it. With no *hope* to digest it.

Hell, *drawing* was still new and eventful to me. I wished I had somepony I could find comfort in, but there was no-one. DJ-Pon3 couldn't hear me, the mare and LittlePip were gone and Brimstone wouldn't care. I couldn't do this by myself...but I was alone. Alone and lonely. How could I deal...deal...

I...

I couldn't.

I pulled the blanket over me, feeling the emotion all welling up, too much of it with no outlet. I couldn't draw, nothing was on the radio. Burying myself within the musty satin, I just curled up and prayed that by the time I had to come out it would all be better.

* * *

Even Dr. Weathervane's foul attitude couldn't push itself hard enough to insult me from the state he found me in. I heard him trot in and sigh as he saw me, a quivering little shape under the covers with damp stains near where my head was. He stood quietly, as though unsure how to approach this. Eventually, I heard a second, more reluctant sigh as he shook the bed with a hoof.

“We've got incoming wounded from the flamer fuel vat teams. Bloody unsafe walkways, no Luna-damned considerations at all. We'll need the bed in ten minutes. Saving lives and all that shit, you understand?”

He must have seen a section of the blanket shift as I nodded and sniffed. Silently, I thanked him for allowing the ten minutes. Right now, it felt like another eternity to pretend nothing was wrong. That when I came out I'd find a nice repaired Fillydelphia, Sundial and Skydancer waiting to be friends in the lobby, clean floors to trot on and fresh air to breath...

Screams and wails of agony came from down the hallway. I heard them. I tried to block them out. They didn't exist outside my fantasy. No...I'd wake up and everything would be fine. Under the blanket it was all safe.

Even as I heard the burn victims approaching and the shout from Weathervane for all non-critical patients to vacate, I tried to just pretend it wasn't there, another ten seconds was a long time right? But I just couldn't stop shivering, even as I felt myself compelled to obey him...to crawl out from under the blanket and begin the long trot back to the Mall. To go back out into the crimson hell I was still a part of in the bleak and harsh industry of Fillydelphia.

A hard leather armoured earth pony of dull yellow awaited me outside. As I trotted past with my head lowered, he spat out his cigarette and spoke up.

“Yo, Number Seven. The Master wants you to report to the flamer fuel factory, emergency replacement of slaves needed, sent me to catch you when you came out.”

I trembled, trying not to collapse and cry out loud on the spot. Why did I have to be the one who cried at everything? Why did The Master choose me? He wasn't being fair! Why did I have to be the target of his attentions?

“But...but I'm to go back to the Mall. Protégé said-”

“Fine, I'll go tell Shackles you refused then.”

He turned to trot off without so much as a care in the world, coughing from either his own cigarette or the smog that drifted across from the copper mine refinery nearby.

“No! Wait! I...I'll do it...”

“Good little slave, he knew he could...heh...*rely* on you.”

The slaver gave me a sick grin and trotted off toward the Mall as I turned to get right back to the daily grind of being a slave.

* * *

My back was aching.

The Master's post was not a fun one. Well...when were they ever? But this one was worse than most.

Set within the giant refinery for Master Red Eye's ambitions for flamethrower fuel, I was given the task of trudging various mixes of chemicals around slung over my back, only having just enough time to hide my PipBuck in my saddlebag. (I didn't rate the camouflage of bandages too convincing for long periods, really.) The buckets either side of my body probably each weighed as much as I did, making it a slow and back-breaking effort to lug them to each of the giant vats. On arrival, I was to tip them in and hope that there was no refined fuel to take back. If there wasn't I was given the 'merciful minute' where the buckets were empty to walk back and get more. If not...it was an immediate refill and another long trudge to the storage tanks.

But worst of all was the smell. It cloyed and thickened the air with the sheer wealth of fumes and stench to the point where it made you sick and dizzy. Some slaves claimed you could get high on it, I wouldn't be surprised...hell, I'd seen more than my fair share of minor hallucinations already in the few times I'd been sent here. The noxious fumes got into your head in a bad way and made every sense feel stuffy. It was here I'd gained my radsors, when I thought I'd saw my mother through the crowd and ran to her. Tripping, I'd realised that it had just been a fuzzy headed belief through my blurry vision. The tipping buckets had splashed me with chemicals, the burns quickly becoming irradiated and infected. They'd never truly healed since...even after Dr. Weathervane's attentions I could feel them stinging and burning away on my legs and muzzle.

I staggered up the scaffold walkway to reach the unicorns stirring the fuel vats through massive telekinetically controlled rods. Around me, earth ponies tipped the buckets in gradually and tried their best not to fall in. The fuel itself wasn't lethal...but being covered in a highly flammable (or inflammable, what was the difference anyway? Oh why couldn't I be wordy like Protégé?) substance left you a susceptible target for any spark in the area. Being Fillydelphia...there were quite a few. Frankly it was a miracle this entire place hadn't gone up at some point. Even as I poured my buckets in, I noticed the section of collapsed walkway that had caused the accident drawing me in to fill the workload. There were no barriers on it.

Just...just...WHY?

Seriously, were pre-war ponies just really dumb or utterly uncaring for simple ergo...ergono...practical ideas!? I almost wanted to stop and rant on the spot as I felt the annoyance that some idiot two hundred years ago made a stupid decision to save a little cash on not putting on a railing thus landing me a horrible job today! Only the presence of a (thoroughly high looking) slave overseer nearby kept my mouth shut and my head down. I'd already received a clip around the ear for not meeting quotas in the past three hours.

Stomping my frustration on the badly constructed walkways out (not perhaps the wisest course of action) I tried to think. Not entirely easy when the fumes were giving me a headache...but I needed something nice and right now all I could think of was the mare. I wouldn't be able to hear the radioi over the ambience in here...so I let my thoughts drift to her instead. I hadn't really had a chance to think about her properly yet. Just what was her name anyway? What was her cutie mark? Ye Goddesses...had I even missed that when I saw her?

But somehow I just couldn't quite get a grasp of her. She was lovely, kind and, well, kinda attractive too, not really *that* much bigger than me either. (However, she was still unfortunately taken...lucky buck) But it was just the way she...argh...like she understood me. Understood my problems and genuinely wanted to help me. Was she just a natural at helping others? She was the only pony I truly trusted in this entire damn city, probably more than I should given how long I had known her. There were so many questions I wanted to ask her. My mysterious mare.

The gurgling of the thick gel-like chemical as it slopped out of the bucket only reminded me of the groaning of my own stomach as the hours stretched on. Move, collect, stumble, carry, pour and repeat. I watched another slave try to make a dash for his fallen bucket before a slaver saw him and sent his whip flying with magic to catch the fleeing target. Squeals from ponies being scalded by chemicals heated for the mixture from fallen buckets mixed with the hiss of pressure cookers preparing the thick gel. I couldn't ever remember looking forward to going back to my pen, but the prospect of being near Brimstone again at least gave me some sense of time. In the past I had just wandered and done the job as I was asked...but now that I had a sense of wishing to be out of here I could swear the day lasted longer. Wait, was it day? I never could tell any more, my head was too messed up from fumes...

With a strained heave, I turned to tip the other bucket while glancing around. My mind was drifting too much in the heavy air, thinking of what had happened...what was to come. I just wanted to be below that blanket in the hospital again...not have to deal with any of this. But try as I might, I knew I would have to return. For one, Protégé or...*he*...would come looking for me, but on the other I was simply obeying, even if it meant facing my worst fear soon.

The past.

I cried at skeletons, was terrified of disturbing the eternal peace in their places of passing, froze up with terror as I thought of it and worst of all...drove myself into manic fits as my mind pieced together their last moments. It was like some spirit had always left just enough clues...or was I just observant of the past? I really *really* wished I wasn't. After all, I knew my next destination would test my courage (Hah!) to the full extent. A Stable.

Crafted in the days before the balefire, they were shelters of great depth and fortitude to keep ponies safe underground for a few generations until the world outside was safe again. That thought alone made me nearly drop my bucket, to live in a world where things were so grim. So...so dire, that ponies genuinely put thought and application into those things. What was it like for Sundial, knowing his world was approaching the end? Now I would have to visit one, what if it was the one he *should* have been at? Would I find his family skeletons? His father? Skydancer? The sealed and preserved Stable could mean anything from a dead tomb to a thriving and passionate defence by their descendants. Behind those great doors, closed and locked, lay a gateway into the past. They represented everything about the end of Equestria. Built by desperation and designed by fear, they were eternal icons of where we had come from. Often literally, a great many of the ponies I had met were descendants of Stable survivors.

They had brought horrid tales...of Stables not designed properly or the recipient of dangerous experimental concepts meant to help ponies. In reality...they had made life a nightmare or had destroyed it entirely. These days, unopened Stables were a most unusual find. But dead Stables, filled with the legacy of misguided ideas, lay open for all to see the mistakes of times long gone.

Why was I so afraid of the past anyway? It was all gone, long gone times couldn't harm me (kinda) and it couldn't affect my life other than the modern use of its secrets. But it wasn't just relics...I couldn't even face my own past, like my journal. Why did I avoid those early sketches? Well, I knew *why* but what drove that fear? Was I just afraid of looking back? Terrified that if I did...I'd fall under the weight, the realisation of what was behind me and driving me to stay and work as a slave? That must be it...I just simply couldn't bear to contemplate such a life.

The unicorn turned and directed me to the nozzle at the bottom, breaking me from my thoughts. The heavy slog back it was then, no mercy for me. As I stood beside the tap and bucked the heavy latch I glanced around me. I saw slaves on their last legs, sometimes literally, walking beside the fresh new starts with fear in their eyes. Those looks would turn to wearisome acceptance some day as I saw the more 'experienced' slaves looking like they were eager to simply keel over some day soon from the poison in their blood. They didn't worry for the past...many of them had forgotten it in order to not go insane from losing all they had.

Once, when I had first come here, the sight of them had made me cry...but it was too normal in my life now to even affect me. But, how I longed just for a random meeting, a small chance to feel I knew some of them, like if I turned my head and just saw...saw...

She was there...right across the refinery work floor, her cream and orange distinction just drifting between the slaves, exactly the way she had looked when last I saw her. Finally...something *good* from my past, even if it was just a...a day? How long had it been since I saw her? No matter, the mare was leaving! I quickly turned to the nozzle and saw my first bucket was only close to filling. Come on...they were watching me, if I just left it I'd be brought down. Come on, fill faster! She was heading for the exit already!

Watching the bucket and her as much as I could simultaneously (and wishing my eyes could look both ways) I swung around to let the other one fill. Pining over my shoulder I watched as she disappeared amongst a crowd of the new-starts. I only caught glimpses of that brilliant orange and red mane between them. I glanced at the second bucket...three quarters full, it was enough!

I bucked it closed and ran as fast as I could for her. The fuel sloshed about in the buckets as I headed right for her, she was already about to go past the side doors and leave the gateway! Ducking around other slaves and ignoring a random shout (was that a slaver?) I nearly forced the new shift out of the way to clamber through the small gaps. Splashes of fuel dripped all around my progress as I tried to follow the cream and orange sights. I screamed her name. Wait...no, I just screamed...something. *I didn't know her name!*

Eventually, it came to me.

“I'm alive! Hey! HEY! Somepony saved me! *I'm still alive!*”

Her head didn't turn, she hadn't heard. Damn, just a bit further! A bit further and-

Little weak pegasi with broken wings don't gallop too well with buckets carrying unbalanced amounts of fuel in each of them. With a slip and a horrible lurch I felt my entire balance shift right, spraying the contents everywhere as I clattered to the ground. I was stuck, suspended on one side with my hooves in the air around the weight of the large buckets. Kicking and wriggling, I fought for the latch as my radsors flared with pain from the splashes of chemical fuel on the ground. Landing on my hooves (for once...) I made to gallop after her. I ran past the side doors and directly out into the yard, she had only been a few feet away, she was...she was...

...gone.

But...but she couldn't have just disappeared! It was open ground out here and there were no crowds! I stood in the gaping maw that led into the crowded refinery, staring in all directions as the long expanse of the yard swallowed my small presence...alone outside. Even with my hearing, I felt all sound muffle down as I realised the truth and lowered my head. A few teardrops dripped onto the ground. Why...

“Hey! Who in the bloody wasteland spilled this? Was that the little one running?”

Even without looking up I could *feel* all of them who recognised me as *the pegasus* point with their hooves. When the demand for confirmation came in a raspy voice from behind a wrapped scarf against the fumes, I couldn't even help but turn and nod, while listening to the sound of a whip being magically drawn and raised.

Maybe that was why I hated the past...even the good parts of my own history were always taken from me...or never even there to begin with.

* * *

By the time I finally trudged back to the Mall I was late by an amount of hours I could only guess at. The guards obediently allowed me through the well defended entrance, chuckling as they witnessed my rather pathetic efforts to reach and push the emergency bars. They were attached to what had once acted as a turntable door before the balefire. I suspected they would have been automatic on some gears below the ground. Now, they acted as a simple barrier that took ponies a few seconds to push in and out of in clear view of the guards. Straining and pushing from my hind legs I felt my back ripple with both dull muscular pains and the harsher sharp stinging of whip scars until, somewhat unexpectedly, the gate popped open.

Caught by surprise, I squeaked and fell forward, landing on my chin on the inside with my hind legs in the air. As if being stuck in the dirt yesterday wasn't bad enough. Groaning and rubbing my chin I stood up and, rather without warning, came eye to eye (well, almost) with Protégé.

He didn't look entirely pleased.

“You know, Murk. I had begun to wonder how much I could trust you. To some extent I still do...but arriving four hours late and neglecting a direct request? You do realise any work leader less understanding than I would have you killed?”

“I...”

I was just too tired to even explain...besides, it wasn't the slave's duty to make excuses.

"I'm sorry, master...it won't happen again."

"Why were you late?"

His voice cut hard. I'd come to think of him as somepony that, even if I couldn't bring myself to like him, I could at least expect a level of care and understanding from. I felt ashamed to have let him down. But that was the hard part, he wasn't angry...just disappointed. Somehow, the slave in my mind found that all the more hurtful.

"When I came out of the hospital, I was told-"

I quickly shut up. My mind remembered The Master's warning, was this part of his 'games' with me? Would saying it result in the mare being harmed? I couldn't risk it...

"I mean, I thought I was told to go and work in the fuel refinery...I...I just misheard...it's my fault..."

Protégé merely sighed, trotting around me as the guards opened the gates for him. He moved with that certain poise and dignity I had come to expect from him.

"I am due to meet with Master Red Eye for a report on the rewards of the Stable. Please, return to the shop levels and remain there. The worker wagons will arrive within the hour to begin transport. If I am not back, as is likely, Chainlink Shackles will organise the embarkation."

Stopping, he glanced around at me as I sat down, feeling the weight of The Master's ploy hitting home. Why did I feel guilty at disappointing him?! Protégé was my slave master! Once again, I began to wonder if he truly cared or if this was all some devious ploy to build loyalty from his slaves.

"I don't want to have to consider you unreliable, Murk. Please, I ask of you, do not prove my confidence in you wrong..."

Tapping the side of his eyepiece before heading outside, the unicorn made his way into the ruined streets. Presumably leaping from the roof, I saw an ever watchful Ragini join him. For all her rudeness to me...she sure was a very good bodyguard. But, as I took a shaky breath and limped back to my cell, in my head I couldn't help but run Protégé's words through my thoughts again and again. Even as I watched him stride into the harsh landscape of Fillydelphia to receive the objectives that might just kill me soon...one question beat around my brain repeatedly.

Why had it sounded like he was afraid of me failing him?

* * *

"You took your time."

Brimstone's voice rumbled quietly from the dark corner as I flopped down onto the musty cardboard 'bed' in the shop cell. I felt a dampness from a leaky pipe above squelch beneath me as the hard ground made my back ache. How had he honestly lived with this thing for so long?

"Got called away..."

"For what? If you're on Stable duty you don't have to-"

"I know. I just...I don't know...it's just me being me..."

Brimstone didn't seem to be appreciative of being interrupted, but bided his obvious annoyance behind a snort to simply turn away and look out of the cell at the raiders. From the sounds of things, they'd found themselves a 'plaything' in one of the other slaves to shove around. I guessed the guards, despite their repulsiveness, wouldn't allow it to go too far, but the begging to be let go from their role as a stress reliever made me shiver all the same. I sent a quiet prayer to the Goddesses for that poor slave. But, right now I couldn't help them, the harsh reality of slave life in Fillydelphia when you're just a weak pony who can't help anypony...not even himself. I just wanted to lie down and rest...to forget about everything that had happened

and *try* and forget about what was coming up in my life too.

Hating the past and afraid of the future, living only for the demands of the moment...wasn't that just the perfect description of a slave?

Curling up, I tried to cry as quietly as I could. Left with little other manner to get rid of all this painful worry, it was all I could think of. I didn't have the energy left to draw and my ears hurting too much to want the radio on. (Sorry, Pon3...) I knew Brimstone would look down on me for sobbing away, but it was just too natural.

Instead, he simply spoke without looking around.

"If it helps. She'll live. We did it."

Through the dark haze of my mood, my heart ignited, the tears drying before they even got started. Of course! In all my worry about The Master, Protégé and the mare I'd forgotten what we had accomplished was still to be discovered! A new, apparently gentle and caring, pony! Glimmerlight! I couldn't hide the sudden enthusiasm from my voice, even as it broke on a fevered choke. (Perhaps Barb was right to call me 'filly', oh Goddesses...why was my voice so shrill?)

"So...she'll wake up?"

"Aye. Probably sometime soon, if not in a few minutes. Fever's gone. The rot knows his stuff, I'll give the rude bastard that."

I couldn't quite lie still. Glimmerlight was waking up! A new pony who I'd been promised was kind and didn't judge anypony! She sounded like an older version of the mare so closely that I couldn't quite suppress some genuine hype and excitement about getting to meet her. Indeed, I think I even felt a smile coming on! She'd be so nice and polite, just like me, she wouldn't be all rude or dirty like everypony else. Brimstone had said she wasn't!

I heard movements in the back. Noting my twitching ears, I saw Brimstone stand up expectantly.

"Or perhaps even sooner..."

Nerves finally kicked in. How was I to meet her? What should I say? I had a chance for somepony who wasn't nasty at last...what if I screwed up? What if Brimstone had been exaggerating and she *did* have something against pegasi?

I heard hooves approaching the door to the store front, staggering and light on the floor.

Pacing from hoof to hoof I trotted on the spot. Calm down Murky...calm down...it'll be fine. She'll come out and say hello and comment on how you're cute again! Yeah...she'll be just like the mare, nice and polite and-

Glimmerlight staggered through the doorway and almost collapsed on to the staff desk of the shop. Recovering just enough to roll her weight onto it and stay upright, the pink and white mare sighed and rolled her eyes as she cast a look around. Her face screwed up as she facehoofed and groaned.

"Celestia's great fucking name, Brim...did I sleep with a glowing ghoul or just drink way too much beer again? Damn my head hurts..."

Blinking rapidly, she seemed to finally focus her sight and spot me standing beside Brimstone. Almost slipping as her hooves skittered around, Glimmerlight beamed with a sudden and elated joy.

"Aha! So you weren't a hallucination brought on by the medicine! How you doing?"

Glimmerlight seemed not to notice a lack of reply as she immediately floundered over to a small cracked mirror before turning slightly toward Brim and myself.

"Now...anypony know any bucks or mares looking for a good time? It's been almost a week I've been cooped up sick without any 'relief', y'know? I'm itchin' for a fixin' if you get me?"

Chuckling softly to himself, Brimstone Blitz merely reached across and closed my mouth after its

jawline had hit the floor.

* * *

Glimmerlight was not how I had anticipated, that was for sure. Where I had expected a quiet, polite and kind mare, there now stood a (mostly upright) pony who seemed to be more concerned with how she had missed a 'rest day.' Her worry lay in that she had been sick through a time where alcohol had been provided from the Roamer bar outside the wall to the slaves. That, apparently, was a rare event. True, I had only seen it once in my time in Fillydelphia.

Not speaking, I just sat on the cardboard bed and watched this incredibly strange unicorn as she sorted her mane. Magically levitating the scrap comb made of bobby pins and a block of tinder, she hummed an unknown tune to herself while occasionally asking Brim for news reports on the way things had been for some others whilst she was out.

Only after a few seconds did I realise she was talking about ponies who's flanks she enjoyed watching whilst slaving away herself. Was this truly the pony who had been so soft spoken to me while sick? Truth be told, I didn't know what to think of her. Booze, casual sex and a self depreciating humour was a long way from the quiet, peaceful and kind older version of the mare I had thought of. Very quickly, I began to realise her lucid soft speech was just from her being high on medication when I had last met her...

Sitting quietly, however, I finally had a chance to properly study her. Glimmerlight was definitely a bit older than me, probably within the last few years of being a young adult. Perhaps...high twenties? Her body was just as thin and scrawny as most slaves, not to mention her sickness, but what caught my attention was her cutie mark. Three small sparkling spheres, purple, pink and light blue. Where had I seen them before? Part of my mind was sure I had...

Flicking her mane about, Glimmerlight hopped on the spot before swivelling on a seemingly random urge to face me.

“Right! Mane fixed, sexiness restored and the power of standing reacquired! Now it's time!”

Backing off, a little intimidated by the forward and supremely confident manner. If she noticed, the unicorn didn't show as she trotted a little unsteadily around the store.

“I...uh...” Why could I never just talk normally on first meetings? “I...wait, time for what?”

Glimmerlight rounded on me with a grin I was sure was about to leap off her face. Her eyes seemed to light up and almost sparkle when she lowered her eyebrows and smiled like that. I wondered how many bucks had fallen prey to that...look. Of course, she was a bit old for me, though.

“Time for me to find out just who you are, Murk!”

“I...”

“No arguments! Come on!”

Well, that was that, an order. Groaning at my still aching back, I struggled to my hooves and plodded after her own skitterishly unsteadily gait. But, as I followed her into the back of the shop I had a slight sense of worry. (Not just from Brimstone's dangerous look promising what would happen if he heard any trouble back there) Thus far she had dodged everything I had imagined about her, what on Equestria could I expect from her now when she wanted to get to know me? How could I predict how she would react? What if she just rolled her eyes? Glimmerlight had been through just as much horror as I had at the hands of raiders...possibly more. Was this how she forgave? By not caring about anything but the simple pleasures?

Glimmerlight led me to the sofa, hopping up and sitting on one side, before motioning for me to sit on the other. Clambering up with some difficulty (Why so high a seat? It's a sofa!) I sat meekly on the other side from her, naturally as far away as I could.

What a strange sight, under the dark environment, the glowing life of Glimmerlight on one side with the

lantern and the muddy coloured little buck huddled up nervously on the other, far from the light. She was beaming still, those eyes staring unblinking at me with that little grin. Perhaps...perhaps this wasn't so bad after all. Just the pair of us...alone...no danger and just being able to talk in the quiet gloom of the storage room.

The amber gem light flickered and weakened, casting an odd glow on her face. Almost gasping, I saw an immediate change. Hard, tough and weathered below the crazed exterior. For all the bluster, I had a sudden memory reminding me of what this mare had been through in her life. Suddenly I didn't feel quite so comforted...

“So, Murky...what's your story?”

“Kinda long, really...I'm not sure it-”

“Come on, we're slaves. We have the time. Now spill the beans, if you're going to be staying with us I need to know who you are, yeah? Come on...can't be any more embarrassing than the time my father caught me with a pair of bucks from Tenpony.”

Alright, imagination shutting down right now! But try as I might to avoid it all...I realised she had me trapped. If I left, the raiders would make my life very short without Brimstone's protection. Only one thing for it...

“Well...I...uh...there isn't much to my life. I was...um...I was born a slave, you see.”

Her eyes widened, quizzically, before glancing away toward the far wall at some shelves crammed with small parts. Something about that look struck a chord...she hadn't laughed or looked down on me. Lightly, a small ray of hope fed into my mind that perhaps she wasn't going to judge me for it.

But then, how would she react if she knew the truth about...about what I was...

“Geez...sucks,” she muttered, before shaking her head and looking back at me. “What is it like to be born a slave?”

Taking a stuttering breath, I began slowly, talking of how I was raised to be an obedient servant and labourer. Of how I was taken from my mother and thrown from master to master. But as I talked...I realised something was different than any other time...*any* other time in my life...

She was *listening* to me. Just sitting there, eyes wide, interested in my tale. No-pony had ever done that. I felt isolated, as though on a stage.

Something in me just...just triggered. My story changed...I began including details. Little stories within stories. I told her of how the other slaves had once held me down by a blanket and beat me with pebbles inside of socks. Of how once they had run out of enough food and sent me out in the rain to harvest more...then never gave me any. I began to snuffle as I talked of the horrid cramped cages that took us from place to place across the wastes and of my final brutal journey to Fillydelphia. My vision blurred as I dropped forward onto my front two hooves, lowering my head while I talked of drawing and hiding...of Noose and her gang picking on me. Of how I couldn't break free of the indoctrination in my mind. I showed her my cutie mark...that hated emblem that told me what to do and how I wanted to break its grasp on my life.

Her eyes looked at it, before glancing back at me, almost confused. Those sparkling azure eyes softened. Her hoof gestured for me to continue before moving forward to rest against my own hoof lightly.

That light contact between hooves, as caring as it was, did it...I spilled. I told her everything...from pain to humiliation...from LittlePip and the Pit to Brimstone Blitz saving me. I almost broke down as I told her about the mare and my illness soon after. Dripping tears struck the sofa as I quivered with fear and explained the brutal regime The Master had placed on my life. I wept openly while I told her of how much I was scared...of the fact that I was always hurt for being small and an easy target. She listened impassively, as though judging everything I said. But the mere fact somepony was willing to listen to it all...it just all came out.

All of it...

Minutes passed...I didn't even move in historical order...just remembering story after story...torture after pain after terror. I jumped from running terrified of ghouls all the way to the pre-war farmhouse skeletons. Trying to speak through great heaving sobs, I told her of how I had once almost committed suicide from the top of the airfield control tower. Of how I had laid screaming with my lifeblood pumping out through my stomach after failing to escape.

An entire life of pain with scant little inspiration and reason to keep going. Years of loneliness and neglect. I was whining, failing to remember she had lost her entire life to the wasteland as well, but I didn't care. I wasn't being selfish, I just couldn't stop the outpouring emotions! My innermost thoughts just kept flowing, one after the other in one great big expulsion of everything wrong in my life. Eventually I almost collapsed in front of her, breaking down at last and completely as the tears flooded while I talked of the disease that was slowly killing me and driving me into fear for my life. I told her *everything*...

All except one thing.

“...and...and everypony just hates me! Just because of some stupid thing I can't help! It's not fair...it's just not fair...I don't want this life! I don't want to be who I am!”

Quietly...she finally spoke.

“Who you are? Why do they hate you?”

Stopping, I drew short, hyperventilated breaths as I sought the courage to do this. But the words wouldn't come. How could I tell her? How would she react?

Eventually I didn't. I just sighed...and took my fleece off. My dead wings hung limply at my side, catching her attention immediately. With my own eyes closed, I heard her gasp suddenly and shuffle back. Finally daring my trembling body to open its eyes I found the look of shock on her face painful to see. Avoiding it, I turned sideways, grimacing and hanging my head in front of her. Already I could feel the shame building the tears...

“I'm a pegasus...they hate me because of that. Everypony seems to...they've tried to kill me just because I'm different...because I have wings. I...I just don't want that any more, I even tried to cut them off once and...and...stood ready to fall from a tower! Just I was too much of a coward to go through with it! Sometimes I...I just wish somepony would reach out, grab me by the neck and...and end it *for* me...”

I cried still...my entire life and situation laid bare. Glimmerlight didn't move, her wide eyes and open mouth just staring at the wings. Eventually...she shuffled forward.

“You...you want to die?”

Her voice was low, steady and breathless, holding so little emotion. But the words bit deep. I'd never properly thought of it as directly, but here it was. I wanted it all to end...to die. Despite my wishes to escape, despite the mare, despite everything I had done and every self preservation effort screaming otherwise, I just nodded. The thoughts had never left me...it was true.

There was a long silence with me not looking at her. The warmth of the room had my head fuzzy and set my throat to be rough on each breath. I just sniffled and shook.

Eventually...she moved. Rapidly, her hooves shot forward for my neck as I felt a great force tug at it.

...then she did it.

...something no-pony had ever done for me since I was a foal.

...she hugged me...

Her voice cracked, every ounce of that confident swagger hurled into emotion.

“No! I...I absolutely refuse to let you think that way! Don't ever think you need to do that!”

I let myself be held, falling into the embrace and feeling my own eyes cry again as she held me, her

magic levitating the ragged blanket around me.

“Never again...you'll never have to think that way again. *I* don't hate you, Murk. Oh Goddesses...a pegasus in Filly...”

Her hooves tightened as she sniffed herself.

“You poor...poor thing...”

* * *

Comfort.

For once, I felt comfort and safety in somepony else. The mare had always been in passing within dangerous areas. Brimstone Blitz was an unknown terror as much as he was a protective behemoth and Protégé...well...who on Equestria knew what he really wanted from me?

But Glimmerlight...she was different. Confident, inviting and surprisingly soft underneath her incredibly casual exterior. As she finally let go of me and tightly wrapped her blanket about me, I began to re-evaluate her once again. Yes...she had her own rather 'unique' style to life, but that didn't mean she couldn't care. Was this what really mattered in finding others? To see that everypony has their own quirks, flaws and hidden sources of varied strength? If so, what was mine?

“Now, you just sit there, Murk. Rest, for Celestia's sake! Your eyes look about ready to fall off your face with how sunken they are. Besides, I did enough resting while you were saving my rather well formed flanks, so I hear.”

Her smile turned less joking and more to a sincere expression.

“Thanks for that...I owe you a lot. I just hope Brim wasn't too...severe, with you. He is trying to be better, he really is. But it's a hard path for him. Once you get to know him he's really quite alright, wicked sense of dry humour if he's in the mood. Just you rest up from your little Glimmer-saving-adventures, okay? I'm just gonna tidy up a little.”

“I...I understand...thanks.” I muttered quietly as I replied, still unsure on how to really talk to somepony this overwhelmingly forward in her intents to make me comfortable. Should I be asking questions? What should I ask? Watching her fussing around her belongings, lots of scrap and many of those orbs from before that glittered in their boxes. How had she acquired so much junk?

Wait, a question!

“Um...Glimmerlight?”

“Please, dear, just Glimmer.” She grinned as she took some tattered red robes so faded they almost looked brown from a metal box and played around with them. “What is it?”

“How did you get so much stuff back here? I've never seen a slave with so many things that wasn't a trader.”

Oh, how pitiful I sounded in my whiny high voice compared to that strong confidence she exuded while sorting through her things. Her magic (azure coloured, like her eyes, my artistic side grinned widely) sent nuts, bolts and old spark matrix parts flitting around the room. One side of her mouth smirked as she stood and wandered back and forth without ever taking her eyes from me.

“Oh...I'm a pony of varied tastes you might say. I know a little of everything. Need somepony to work a terminal? To repair a spark generator? To work your windmill or get a good fire going from just rocks? Hell, I even know how to make brahmin moo louder.”

I just blinked. My face no doubt showing little more than a bewildered look as the cogs in my head slowly turned. Given by the look on her face, she could hear the rusty machine that was my brain failing to compute. Chuckling, Glimmerlight tossed an old rag over the room and looked over her shoulder as she

went back to her scrap.

“Don't think too hard on that one, Murky. You'll strain yourself. Suffice to say, while I've got some serious knowledge of technology, I am a bit widespread in my tastes and skills. You'd be surprised what I know and perhaps, at how handy I can be in a pinch when you really need that odd task done right. I'm the type of pony everypony should know.”

She turned, again, before pausing and lowering her eyes.

“Except lockpicks...never could work the damn things out. That and sewing.”

I couldn't withhold my sudden excitement. It wasn't often I had a chance to claim any prowess. Almost falling off the sofa as I reached into my many pocketed fleece (I really missed the safe feeling of light armour plates...) and pulled my needle and thread out with my mouth.

“I know that! I made this fleece before I tried to escape.”

Actually, that came out more as a muffled blurt as I tried not to swallow a needle while talking. But she seemed to get the idea, giggling at my frantic mouth movements.

“Well then, seems Brim and I have a reason to keep you around, Murky. I've got a job for you! My robes got a little torn when I fell into the rad-metal pit. Think you could fix them up?”

She asked.

She asked.

I had *never* been asked in my life to do something! Not out of courtesy! Demands, orders and quotas drove my life and my mind. Even as I nodded furiously...I began to wonder if I could have said no...

As I took up the dull red robes though, I had a sense that even if I hadn't wanted to please her...the answer was that I couldn't. But no, I wanted to do this for *her*. That was a step, right?

The robes were of heavy, thick and warm material. Cut near the ground to be practical and lavish enough to clearly be of pre-war design they immediately raised questions. Who wore stuff like this? It wasn't exactly wasteland proof. All the same, I took to work, patching away with needle and thread.

Glimmerlight watched for a minute or so, seemingly marvelling as I operated a tiny needle with my mouth and hooves (if only I'd chosen this talent...the skill comes easy when at threat of a barbed whip) to begin fixing her clothing. Eventually, she finally answered my question.

“So, as to the pile? I know a lot, but particularly in fixing up old things into either new concepts or just repairing them as best I can. Not many ponies can properly work those old magic matrix thingys these days unless you've been born some place to get a little training. So Protégé chucks all this stuff at me after he's done scratching his head at it so I can fix them up for his work efforts. Oh yeah, what do you make of those flanks of his? Pretty hot, right?”

I almost spat the needle. Glimmerlight burst out laughing, rolling onto her side at my reaction. Her laugh was *wonderful*, full of absolute joy like nothing on Equestria was wrong with her life. Or at least, I'd be spending time enjoying it if I hadn't almost fired a sharp needle across the room through the sheer power of a spit-take.

“Oh come *on*, Murk!” She wiped a tear from her eye, standing up. “You don't go for the bucks too?”

I blushed, what was this kind of question?

“I...uh...I'm kinda more of a...mare inclined...uh...pony...”

“Aw...missing half the fun of life. No wonder you're such a sad thing.”

She chuckled again. Personally, I was beginning to feel out of my depth. Instincts were telling me something was wrong, but my heart couldn't feel anything but relief to have finally found somepony who wasn't trying to abuse me, take advantage of me or get dragged away immediately. I tried to giggle (I failed, but I tried!) and went back to stitching quietly. What had I found here? All my life I was the outcast, the hated, the slave and the bottom of the chain. Occasionally I had met ponies who had made me believe it

didn't have to be that way. But was this finally proof that there were others out there I could...be around? That I didn't have to be alone? Glimmerlight had, within five minutes, shared jokes, hugged and cared for me, given me a job I chose for myself...

I just couldn't comprehend this. What did she want? *Everypony* always wanted something. Was sewing for her going to become my job in life? My mind raced, panicking but unable to muster the energy to do anything about it. At least she wasn't hurting me...that was a start. No, she cared...just to what end was not for me to consider right now.

Sitting back on the sofa I curled into the blanket and let out a long breath. Somehow, it felt like I had been holding it ever since I had woken up in the pig sty in the FunFarm on my first night there. For once I could let my guard down. Yes, I ached and there was still a lot of unknowing, but surely this couldn't go wrong? Just...just once, where I could relax and stitch something I wanted. Only...I couldn't. What was all of this but just a facade that I was hiding myself within until The Master came again? Until we were all forced into the Stable? I felt myself beginning to shake as the needle dropped. My chest heaved a little as I fought to hold it back. The past...I had to confront the past more than ever before and likely fight for my life...

Goddesses I was so pathetic...she was the one who had barely survived after her world was destroyed and yet Glimmer smiled and kept going...I just cried and...and...worked on this old...old pre-war clothing...

“Murky?”

The robe fell from my hooves. Falling in a heap on the floor before the sofa, my eyes rested upon the markings, machine stitched seams and properly dyed, if faded, colours. Who had worn it before? Where had they bought it? What would they think of it now in this dark place? My hooves shook, the thread falling as I pulled the blanket around me, turning my head away from it with a whimper.

“I'm sorry!” I sniffed deeply, wiping my nose with a hoof and avoiding her look. “I...pre-war stuff and...the past, it, I don't know...something about it just...just makes me well up and...and...”

“Shh...shh, it's alright...”

I felt her move over, a hoof passing around me gently and pulling my blanket wrapped self closer. The feeling was too alien, to unknown to me to take any real comfort. Touch had only ever been a bad thing for me. Thus...I simply shook and cried. I cried in the pathetic manner in which I always did, my one defence against it all becoming too much. This was getting too big for me, heading to *a Stable*, preserved past times. I just couldn't cope. If Glimmerlight hadn't been here holding on to me...if Protégé hadn't locked me away in a pit with raiders...what might I have done? Run off again?

“I don't want to go to the Stable. I don't like the past, it's too...too hurtful. Everything I look at, it's just all filled with bad memories.”

“Not all memories are bad, Murky...”

“*Well mine are!*”

I pulled away, scampering over the couch away from Glimmerlight. Trying to hop the edge and run into the darkness to hide, I felt my hooves catch in the blanket, tripping me with a high pitched yelp off of the couch to squarely land on Glimmer's possessions. Cases spilled open, sending fragments of circuitry and little orbs rolling over the floor. The shock finally brought me to my senses...somewhat. I lay on the ground surrounded by her things, shaking and apologising so fast and repeatedly it was just a constant stream even as she stared down at me with a mix of confusion and sadness.

Without a word, she got up and helped me back onto the couch, before placing the blanket over me once again.

“I...I've been through a lot, Murky.”

Her voice shook, an unusual tone.

“But trust me, there is always good. You told me about that mysterious mare you keep meeting...about LittlePip. Take strength from their examples, Murky! The mare stood up to Shackles for you! LittlePip inspired you! You saved my life...and Brimstone saved yours because he wanted to...regardless of whether he'll admit it. He does care about you, Murky. As do I.”

She squeezed my hoof as I heard voices start to shout in the rest of the Mall complex. The Master above them all...coming closer. I couldn't think, couldn't imagine LittlePip and the mare helping me break my chains, Brimstone and I's adventure that tried to boost my confidence. I wanted to! Oh Celestia and Luna, Great Goddesses above *I wanted to!* Please by all the stars, the sun and moon let me have the strength to break The Master's hold over the slave in my mind!

“Alright, all you wretches! It's Stable time! Wagons are here so get your scrawny flanks moving! First slave to bring me a nice untouched Stable dweller alive gets a hot meal! Now get moving!”

Even as Glimmer watched me, I obediently shifted off of the couch and began to trot towards the door...or more precisely...towards his voice. I could feel her saddened gaze behind me. Sorry, Glimmerlight...I know you mean well...

...but he is my Master. My memories are the ones he, Master Red Eye and all the others choose for me. How could I have memories of my own when I was a slave who didn't choose his own life? Maybe later...

Emerging past Brimstone Blitz, I saw The Master waiting for me near the door. His rotten teeth grinning at me as the raiders filed past, followed by the dejected slaves.

“First mission, Number Seven! Come back to Daddy alive now, y'hear?”

I shut my eyes as I trotted past him, before squealing and crying out in quick succession as I felt his hoof slap my flank and knock me over after I passed him. The raiders stomped their hooves and jeered at the Master's little toy lying on the ground while I was too scared to move.

Just as quickly, they shut up as I felt two figures trot up either side of me. One who's imposing presence gave them a very damned good *reason* to keep their traps shut...the other who gently knelt and helped me back to my hooves. I stared at Glimmerlight disbelievingly, before she led me out.

With one quick glance behind me, I watched as my Master seemed to snarl at all of us, glaring with interrupted fury, as I was helped by my...my...

...what were they to me?

...I didn't know...

* * *

Fillydelphia was never an environment that permitted moments of peace and happiness for long. Mere minutes after finding some strength in Glimmerlight and Brimstone Blitz the 'workers' were to march to the front of the Mall under heavy griffin guard for relocation into a series of caged wagons.

Trudging out, my back reminding me that whip injuries cared not for positive thoughts, I found the process of embarkment aggressive and intimidating. Slaves were being shoved by slavers from all sides, keeping them disoriented and stumbling as they filtered through the heavy gate of the Mall into the thick smog of the outside world in the city. Many choked immediately from the nearby copper refinery blowing its foul wastes down the streets or from the rank smells emanating from those ever-present caged pits dug down into old cellars and mines. I saw The Master's cronies hurling slaves into each of the half dozen wagons, raiders or not, with enough force to rattle them off of the far side. Those baleful gas masks gazed upon us from above on rope and scrap bridges running from the Mall to neighbouring buildings, weapons ready to mercilessly cut anypony who trotted out of line down. Some days, I could swear those masks glowed in the eyes as they stared through the smoky air. Whimpering, I stuck close to Glimmerlight as best I could while the thick mass of rank slaves and disgusting raiders crowded about us before being split toward their

transports.

Yes, I had been made happier by her presence...but nothing could change who I was. A scared little slave among ponies far greater than himself. More than Glimmerlight, I wished LittlePip were here...she'd show them a thing or two. A Wasteland Legend wouldn't let this happen!

My turn came and went about as smoothly as I could have hoped. The same slaver who had directed me to the refinery chuckled as he found me on his wagon. He tossed me to his comrade, the shoving was about as demeaning and embarrassing (my yelping may have had something to do with that) as it could be before a magical throw hurled me inside the wagon to slam on the hard straw ridden metal floor. Curling in the corner out of sheer protective habit, the only real consolation was that Glimmer and Brimstone were brought into the same wagon. The guards didn't even *try* touching him as his huge weight caused the wagon to rock on the suspension by merely stepping inside. (And making the four slaves tasked to pull it groan audibly, mostly asking why *he* wasn't pulling.)

Even as the cage door was slammed shut after a dozen more slaves were crammed in, I didn't move. Nothing could help my mind worrying on all the twisted fates I was in for. Stables were *legendary* for how messed up they could get. The chances of me coming back alive...I wanted to just run away. Hide...go back to Wicked Slit and beg to be allowed to just pull carts again...

“Just stay with us...we'll try and keep you safe...”

Glimmerlight's voice was shaky. The harsh loading sequence and imminent Stable invasion had to be affecting her as well. The mere fact she had added 'try' said it all. Zombie ponies seemed little in comparison to the past that had ended the world with its horrors.

Settling down, I tried to calm myself. Breathe...Murk...breathe...look around, don't think that you're in a cage, look around at the world. At all the ponies and buildings that you're used to in Fillydelphia...

Instead, I saw The Master moving away from the armoury wagon that carried the weapons to stand at the gateway to the Mall. Seeing me looking, *that* grin began to crawl across his face while his head followed me on our departure. His eyes were fixed on mine the entire time, before he raised a hoof to actually wave, mockingly. His voice rang out, just loud enough for only myself to hear it. *How did he know the volume to use?*

“Enjoy the history of how ponies like me came to rule your world, Number Seven! Just think of all the skeletons you'll get to meet!”

Moments later, Glimmerlight began her efforts to understand and help me after I had collapsed into a blubbering heap at her hooves. Perhaps if I had been watching, I might have felt something as we passed through the main gates and outside of the hell I had been trapped in. But I was too busy crying my eyes out and finding myself wishing that I had never even left the rock farm.

* * *

That was something about travelling with somepony who, for some reason, wanted to be nice to me. Horrible events that made me scared seemed...further away...when around her. With reassurances and a nice hug, I felt...better. That alone was something new. As was the land outside.

It had been a long time. The walls of Fillydelphia and the hellish industry were all that I had encountered for months. To witness the wastes one more time, I had expected to feel a sense of escape. Perhaps even begin to realise the concept of freedom.

Instead, I found it haunting. In all directions around Fillydelphia were either more concrete ruins, empty barren fields and low hills leading to larger mountains in the distance. The air was clearer, but not by much. Huge billows of smoke drifted over the Wall in various places, driven by the lazy wind to suffocate anything outside of the pit itself. Our column was being pulled slowly under heavy guard toward the nearest set of hills...to the west, I thought. The wagons quickly proved to be incredibly foul, packed in with slaves as filthy

as I was myself from months in Fillydelphia. Curling in the corner, with Glimmerlight and Brimstone to one side, I could only feel like I was being contained in some sort of handy portable slave pit. That...and there was an annoying squeak from the right back wheel every few seconds, never at a regular pattern either, that was slowly driving me to want to beat myself unconscious to not listen to it any more. Already, I could feel my breathing becoming heavy and rasped as their irradiated clothing that had sucked up so much of the Fillydelphian atmosphere was pushed in close contact. At least out here the ambient radiation was much lower...but I'd still need to take a RadAway the moment I got home.

My heart stopped for a minute.

I had just called Fillydelphia...home.

Oh Goddesses...I immediately looked out and around, trying to find *anything* to take my attention away from how seriously messed up my head was getting from my time in there. I had been working for days to feel free and confident in myself, *why was I still thinking things like this?* But no matter how much I raged internally...I always knew the answer. In my heart, I was still the slave, even if I wanted to be free, I still considered myself a born slave. My Master was proof of that by the way I seemed...designed...to respond and obey him, no matter how much I feared and loathed him.

Around us trotted slavers and soldiers of Red Eye. Above, griffins drifted back and forth gracefully on the hot winds to watch the horizon. If I hadn't known better, I'd have said it was a military grade convoy instead of a slave excursion. I followed one griffin as she spiralled down, whirling in the air before rounding off and gliding into the distance to perform a check on something. The others hovered in place with powerful flaps of their colossal wings.

Watching me, Glimmerlight saw my eyes following the griffins. With a soft stroke of my fleece around where my wings were, she looked a little sad.

“You want to join them?” Her voice was quiet, quickly learning she didn't need to speak up where every other filthy slave crammed in the wagon could hear.

“The sky isn't mine to have, I've never been up there.”

“Doesn't stop you wishing if it's what you want, Murky.”

I sighed, looking over at her instead of the griffins. She hadn't been around me long enough to really get that while I had wings and was a pegasus with a natural love of open spaces, my place was forever on the ground...possibly beside a slaver. But no, that wasn't why I was watching.

“No... was just wondering why they're here. It's not like we can escape from these.”

Glimmerlight's eyes moved away from me to glance at the griffins. Each carried a gigantic long rifle, undoubtedly the anti-machine rifles I had often seen. She smiled a little wistfully.

“Because they know who would kick their collective flanks if they didn't bring adequate counter-measures. The Steel Rangers operate in this area pretty heavily. If Red Eye has found a Stable, they'll know too. Stern wants to deter them with enough force that even their power armour can't handle. I'll bet they've got matrix disruption grenades too in those launchers some carry.”

Combat knowledge wasn't my area. I instead turned back to the robes she had brought along for me to finish on the journey. Just a couple of patches left to sew.

“How do you know about the Steel Rangers, Glimmer? I thought they all stayed pretty secret only to their own kind.”

Pulling the last thread tight, I smiled at my work. The big symbol on her robes was reattached proudly on her left side, bearing the icon of an apple surrounded by three gears. Azure magic coated over it as she slipped it on, lightly shoving enough room to get dressed from the slaves around us.

“Because, Murky...”

Shaking her mane out of the collar, Glimmerlight trotted side to side a couple of times to work in the red

robes.

“...you're looking at one.”

I wasn't the only slave who stared disbelievingly, some of the other dirty masses raised their heads from trying to rest. Many clearly knew already and showed no surprise, while the newer arrivals, like me, seemed to half expect her to magically summon a huge suit of armour. But the thought, Glimmerlight was a Steel Ranger? But...but they were supposed to be all stern and focussed, not whimsical and casual like her. That said...my mind remembered the occasional look of a weathered warrior in her eyes from before...

“You...you're a paladin of the Steel Rangers?!”

Glimmerlight laughed, shaking her head. “No, Murky. I wish! I was just an apprentice when I left home to get away from how stuffy things were. Not my kind of scene...staying inside, strict limitations on who you could and couldn't be. I lived in the Ranger stronghold at Bucklynn Cross. My folks still help guard there, mother's a paladin and father is a scribe. Each wanted me to go into their professions.”

One of the other slaves pipped up, his voice implying a clear call of “bullshit.”

“Hey, I heard unicorns couldn't wear the armour! Their horns don't fit in the helmet!”

Glimmer merely smiled at him, but still resumed talking to me as I kept shifting from the unsteady wagon. The speaker earned himself a harsh glance from Brimstone. Thankfully, he didn't decide to kick off.

“We can't. But if I'd travelled the path of the warrior under my mother, I'd have become a knight.

Skilled in combat magic, healing and battlefield repair of the paladin armour. We'd support their advances and if needs be provide a little magic cover for them. We only wear lighter metal plates and armour, nothing powered. Scribes, meanwhile, well, everypony knows them. Sit around, research stuff, get to build cool shit from the past. Both paths had their temptations...y'know...”

I stretched, standing up and trying to find room amongst the cramped slaves in the wagon. Most were just ignoring our conversation now, seemingly worried more about their own selves or just not wanting to attract attention from Brimstone. The massive earth pony still sat silently at the side of the wagon where he simply watched anypony for signs of trouble. The raiders, I had noticed, were being kept in a separate wagon away from him.

“So...which path did you take?”

“My own. Folks weren't too happy about me leaving, but one night I just told them to their faces that being in the Rangers wasn't allowing me to see all I wanted to see. That I could learn more and come back to them someday with what I had gathered. Caused a bit of an uproar really...”

In the past, I had been dragged from my mother against my will. Glimmerlight had chosen to leave hers for a better life. Immediately, I couldn't decide if I could have done the same if it would have let me escape. All I knew is that my mother would have wanted it. But hearing it from Glimmer, through all her smiles...I couldn't help but feel sorry for her parents. They wouldn't know what had happened to her, that their daughter was now in the thrall of Red Eye. That thought bit hard...especially if they had parted on low moods.

“Did...did they hate you for it?” My voice was shaky...trying not to step on any landmines of emotion.

“At first...yeah...but they were a little more progressive than most of the Elders. They said that if I could bring something incredible back then it could all be spun as some big quest to help the order! But the Elders...they put out motions for me to be regarded a traitor unless I returned. An ultimatum, you might say. Said to break the ways of isolation and preservation was to break the chains that bound us to the great cause.”

A little element of kinship lit in my heart for her. Glimmerlight had sought to escape a life not chosen by herself just as I had. Just instead, she had been enslaved to a set of inward thinking ideals.

“Did no-pony say otherwise? Realise it was wrong?”

Much to my surprise, Glimmerlight did not reply immediately. For once she seemed to be at a loss of words as she turned away from me and stared in the direction of Manehattan. Eventually she spoke, as though having to think long and hard to find the proper words.

“There was one. I would have followed him if I knew where to find him. Still would. To take his lead, his ideals. But the Rangers just don't think that way any more. Now they only care about technology, anything they can get to hoard away...just like they tried to hoard me, my skills and my life away as just another one of them. Knowledge...and ponies...deserve to be free. That's what he believed.”

“Who was he?”

“Somepony very special, Murky...”

She hoofed the symbol on her robes lightly and longingly. Or more particularly, the apple.

“The one Ranger I know of who hasn't forgotten what we're meant to stand for.”

My mouth opened, the question of who and why along with a dozen other thoughts prepared to come out. I felt a huge hoof nudge my side. Turning, I found Brimstone looking down at me and lightly shaking his head.

This entire business of being friendly and helping one another was entirely new to me. I did not know what it was called, or what Glimmerlight truly was. But at least for now, I understood that there were always limits. As I pulled my journal out to draw instead, I reflected that at least Brimstone had also shown he cared by just gently reminding me.

Glimmerlight didn't cease looking out into the wastes for a few minutes, before giggling to herself and sitting down. But I knew, more than any pony in the world, how to look past the smile and recognise the look of somepony realising they were trapped away from the ones they longed to be with.

* * *

Kerrunch!

“Aw...fudge...”

Muttering to myself I bent my hoof across my drawing and tried my best to smudge out the line that had gone astray when the wagon lurched on a rock. The last half hour I had spent with my head down just drawing something I wanted...because why the hell not? It's not like my life needed any more horror or emotional turmoil. So I had settled on drawing something pleasing. Glimmerlight and Brimstone Blitz had chattered quietly. Or rather, she had chattered and Brim had just given gruff answers and sardonic quips while filling her in on the details of his time with me and what had happened since her sickness. It was all pretty important events.

“He's seriously never said 'fuck' before?”

Well...mostly important.

Drawing kept my mind off of what was approaching anyway. With my back to the hills, I couldn't see the great rock face approaching that was casting a shadow over the entire convoy. I couldn't see the little glint of metal in the hillside that indicated our destination. Just draw and don't think...draw and *don't think of the past*. Glimmerlight had helped give me the courage to look on the past and not despair for everything...but a...a Stable...

No...no just keep drawing and ignore it. That's future Murky Number Seven's problem to deal with! Just concentrate on the lovely lines and charcoal and relax...yes. I felt the fear back down and reside in the back of my mind...just waiting. Sighing as I held the journal back up on my front hooves I maintained sketching away so intently I didn't even see Brimstone loom over my shoulder and cast a glance at my drawing.

“You know, Murk, you got a better look at LittlePip than I did...but I could have sworn she had more clothing than that.”

The charcoal spluttered from my mouth as I whipped the journal shut and held it against me before looking up, shaking my head. My voice rose in pitch, almost squeaking as I felt myself turn red as Brimstone Blitz himself.

“I...I just haven't added it yet!”

He let a low grin fill his face as he leaned back and stared at the hillside.

“Sure, buddy...sure.”

Glimmerlight's mad grin appeared from behind him as she raised her eyebrows.

“I guess I'll need to have a look at that journal sometime soon...”

I was already a small pony...somehow I managed to feel even smaller as I tried to turn away in embarrassment. But she only just smiled, as did Brimstone. What were they doing? They weren't insulting me or demeaning me...but still they teased me. What was this sort of thing? Tucking my journal away safely I reflected that there was a lot I didn't understand right now. Why were they even looking out for me anyway? Probably just so I could do some job for them soon...that was all anypony ever wanted from me eventually.

Despite trying hard, even my negative thoughts couldn't quite believe that about Glimmerlight. But my wandering mind wasn't given much opportunity to think longer as the wagon ground to a halt and slavers began shouting for us to dismount and stay well away from them. Squeaking in terror, I finally allowed myself to turn and witness the reality of my situation.

Uncovered from behind an old rockfall I saw the giant shape. Burnished steel made up its entire construction beside a frayed control panel. A number I couldn't read was emblazoned on the front. A huge door...gear shaped and rolled to the side already to reveal a thick blackness beyond that my eyes couldn't adjust to through the bright red haze of the valley around me.

Thrown out of the wagon while looking, I think I screamed as they hurled me on the ground, my back left knee cracking off a rock. But my gaze never once left it...that gaping hole into the past. Towering over me, I felt improbably small in its presence. Unthinkably unimportant to the passing of time and the events of the world shattering past.

“Gather round! Stable excursion starts in ten, get geared up, pumped up and lets do this!”

The raiders cheered, Glimmer and Brimstone glanced to the rest of the slaves and took deep breaths. Shouts for the armoury wagon to get its contents spilled and chants of raiding and looting began. The entire excursion, slaver and slave alike, began to thrive with excitement at another chance to earn their freedom...if only by a small amount.

But I just continued to sit alone and stare into the void that had terrified me all my life.

* * *

“Stay back! Get into your lines and wait for your kit, then stay against the walls! Step one hoof out of line and you *will* be shot down on the spot!”

The griffins were not taking any chances when it came to handing the slaves weaponry. As they explained, we would be given unloaded weaponry one by one from the armoury wagon that had been pulled up behind us under heavy guard. The slavers would then depart about half a mile to a nearby ruined farmhouse, leaving boxes of ammunition at the door to the Stable. Griffins would cover us all from above, about three dozen slaves, while we armed up and headed in. Any resistance would be met with a barrage of heavy weaponry that the rusty old things we were being given wouldn't have a hope against. The bombardment was safe in the knowledge that no other slavers were in the area.

Very quickly, I began realising how that barrage would include me regardless of my own actions...

For a brief time I stared out into the wastes. For once, there were no walls. No smog clogged my lungs and I could feel that my pulmona...ebo...lung disease thingy, was resting easier on the cleaner air. I could see further than the next industrial street. So why didn't I feel free here?

The answer came to me rather simply. Because I wasn't. No matter what I thought, I was still property of The Master, Protégé and of course...Red Eye. A quick glance at my flank revealed the gnashing shackles were still there...still signifying that even here, outside the Wall, I was just a slave on a mission.

The raiders apparently had weapons well known to them, drawn from Protégé's armoury (he had an armoury?!) that mostly made up of weapons confiscated from them after being dragged into Fillydelphia.

Apparently his theory, as Glimmerlight explained, was they would fight better and be better controlled in higher moods while in possession of their own kit. I saw brutal mouth knives, spiked hoof caps, auto axes (I hoped for door busting), rusty revolvers and pistols and even a few long rifles used by the unicorns. Much to my surprise there were even a few magical energy weapons among the handouts from the armoured wagon.

Shivering, I tried to hide behind Brimstone as I saw raiders gesture my way with the knives, mimicking a wing slice before laughing amongst themselves. My mind was beginning to work in overdrive about Barb in such a dark area...his presence removed all comfort of me finding a hidden little spot and just waiting it all out...

To distract myself, I tried to concentrate on the armoury wagon and the process involved...perhaps I'd get a battle saddle in my size?

A very odd stallion indeed was acting as the arms master. An old, dark grey earth pony with a straggly brown mane and sunken eyes was grumbling and muttering cynically as he dragged weaponry from the wagon. He sported a missing eye and seemed to scowl about as much as he took shots from an old glass of alcohol sitting on the weapon bench he had lumped all the way over here for running repairs. His accent was beyond my knowledge by at least several regions, missing words and occasionally breaking into a harsh dialect that sounded like it had been designed exclusively to swear in. That is, I could only assume the words were swears...they sounded like it.

Brimstone and Glimmerlight were clearly headed to be 'served' by the strange armoury slaver, with the big warlord moving up first to receive a chosen weapon.

“*Govno!* Brimstone Blitz! Is brave of you to request weapon from me after state you return poor gun last time!”

With just a shrug, Brimstone motioned to the raiders.

“They got rowdy, needed calming down. I'm not their leader any more...doesn't mean I have to let them get rape happy when unsupervised. Your gun was a nice beating implement, Mosin.”

Brimstone's clearly deliberate grin only made 'Mosin' bristle, idly take a swig of alcohol without ever breaking eye contact, and tap Brimstone's chest with a hoof.

“You break every gun I give! I give you pistol, you smash it over head! I give you rifle, you step on barrel!”

“Never did need a *gun* to do my work. Can't aim the things anyway...”

“*Mne pohui!* Back in Stalliongrad, would be shamed to admit such a thing! Here! I will give you *last chance only!* After that, you are on fucking own! This is southern grade assault rifle with only minimal moving parts and big thick ironwork receiver. Is unbreakable! Once, I beat hellhound over head for half hour with it. Still fired after stupid *heusos* bit my hoof!”

I could believe it, looking at that mangled appendage bound up with rough prosthetic wood on his front left leg. Brimstone took the rusty rifle in his mouth and tested the sights before muttering his own muffled curse to himself and hooking it over his side within easy reach. He grinned at me, out of sight of Mosin, as he wandered off from the armourer.

“Unbreakable? Interesting challenge. I've wanted a reliable club for a while...”

“You break gun, you worst gun handler in Equestria! Next!”

Glimmerlight was next up behind him. Seeing her, Mosin's mood did not improve.

“And you! Big red one brings guns back broken, that I can fix! You do things to them! Never come back the same way and often lose way I calibrate them. You get nothing fancy this time, old bolt action for you!”

He tossed a very long wooden rifle to Glimmer, who caught it mid throw with her telekinesis before bringing it closer and immediately examining it closely under an obvious expert scrutiny. Chuckling, the Mosin tapped the weapon and outright laughed.

“Think you steal components and I not notice? Nothing removable on gun this time! You use, you bring back.”

She seemed to ignore him, before her eyebrows narrowed at the bolt loosely flopping back and forward under her magic. Her eyes glanced up with the anger of one who respects proper design. I could relate...damn safety railings...

“This long rifle is not fit for use by anypony, not even a slave! You say I take things but you don't even keep them fresh with components you old bastard! This rifle doesn't even have a safety!”

The earth pony rounded on her, a look of confusion on his face as he looked not at the rifle...but at her, before laughing.

“*Safety?! Is not safe! Is gun!*”

Both he and the raiders bellowed with laughter as he shoved Glimmerlight aside and screamed for the next one in the queue. Recovering quickly, she huffed and stomped off towards Brimstone. Watching them, I didn't even notice I was next before I felt the slave behind me bellow in my ear and shove me forward. Stumbling, I fell right into (and bounced off of) Mosin before he eyed me up (well...down...) with a great degree of curiosity and began laughing.

“They must be desperate! Sending foal to fight in Stable! Tell me, little colt...or filly, not sure which...you handle weapons?”

What the hell, it was worth a shot. “Um...I'd like a battle saddle? I know...I know about them!”

Both Mosin and the other slaves bellowed with laughter as I felt his freaky wooden hoof slap me over the back of my head rather painfully. Whining from the strikes...it occurred to me he was just “slapping out of humour”, albeit a very strong hoofed one.

“Oh you are very ambitious buck you are! My colleague back at Mall, he would like you. Flamboyant idiot with no sense of proper practical weaponry. Always wants bigger things and enjoys kitting slaves out with perfectly fitting and fancy firearms. I keep him locked in armoury cleaning since he tried to attach sniper scope to flamethrower! No...you get this! Pistol befitting your size and age.”

He tossed me a BB pistol. That accent intimidated me, the prosthetic hoof freaked me out and the attentions of a couple dozen slaves laughing and making jokes at my expense was one thing...but come on, this was ridiculous!

“But, sir...I-”

“Mister Mosin, I am called.”

“Mister Mosin! I can't fight crazy robots or monsters with that! I...I'm not that young! I'm just small!”

“Could have fooled me. You get toy gun and you will enjoy it till you are big enough to have stallion's gun. Next!”

At least he hadn't bucked me away from him like everypony else in Fillydelphia did once they were done with me...I picked up the pitiful 'weapon' in my mouth (How unrefined! No saddles, really?) and

wandered sadly back to Brimstone and Glimmerlight, feeling my chances of survival plummeting rapidly. Perhaps I could crawl inside a ventilation duct near the entrance and...and hide. Just wait till it was all over. Stables had ducts right?

My memory quickly began to remember clambering inside the drain on my escape before being bitten and chased by radroaches. Rapidly, the idea of being stuck in a cramped little area began to fade as a very safe one.

My eyes fell upon the thick blackness behind the great circular gate.

“Cramped little area” was describing the entire place I was about to go into. Even as the wagons circled off and descended the track again to leave behind the ammunition, I just hid behind a rock until all the raiders were done picking out their required supplies. Glimmerlight kindly levitated the box of BB's across to me.

“Don't worry, Murky. Just keep your head down and we'll keep you safe, alright? Chances are there won't be anything those raiders can't handle, I'm hoping. Now, lets get you some ammo and...ah shit...”

Inside the box, there was absolutely nothing but a small note. I didn't even need to be able to read the writing as I saw the crude drawing of a fully linked chain.

Suddenly I became very glad that we had about ten minutes before we went in...I'd need it to stop shaking and recover. But amidst tears, fear and failed attempts at reassurance I could not fight the inevitability that I would have to go. The griffins had promised to shoot any slave who did not do the work.

The raiders were first. Screaming war cries they haphazardly charged into the great Stable door, disappearing into the darkness completely. Their bellowing became muffled and then strangely silent as they went further inside. Other slaves followed in small groups, nervously moving inside at a slower, more cautious pace. I saw Barb hang around, wink and smile at me and then creep inside himself. His dull colours led him to vanish from view almost immediately, leaving just the three of us...or rather...just me, as Glimmerlight and Brimstone attempted to help nudge me along by going first.

I was alone. Certain death behind me and the horrible past of Equestria before me. I was still crying as I gulped, shakily stepped forward and moved into the darkness of times long gone.

* * *

Grey.

The first few seconds inside were nothing but a sudden shock of stark terror pounding throughout my body! The stories had been right. All that was inside was a thick and horrifying darkness! It surrounded me, suffocating. If I hadn't been too scared to make a sound in the cloying dark, I would have screamed.

But quickly, my eyes began to adjust to the darkness. Feeling weak, gasping for air in the musty atmosphere of a place long sealed away, I tried to stay calm. It wasn't working. I had experienced small hidden holes all my life...crawled through ducts and even went into an underground bunker just a small portion of a day ago, but that was all temporary and I knew it was still near ground level. I had always known what lay just outside of whatever hole I'd crawled into. My place had been decided, an eternal place by my master's side.

This was different. A warm air, a polar opposite to the wasteland I had left and in some way lived in all my life, set my coat to sweat beneath my thick fleece almost immediately. Even before details began to form in my vision I could smell things...rotting and dusty, chemical and utterly alien. Any small surface I could glimpse was that same gun metal grey. Every railing, wall, control panel...just...grey. My ears found a whole new range of sounds to pick up from dull electronic humming, crackling static and sparking magical flares from control panels on each wall somewhere. If it weren't for the dead blackness, I might have mistaken it for still being fully functional. My hooves, so used to debris and unsteady surfaces, felt unsure on the smooth metal panels below me. And though I valued an ability to see well in the dark to escape bigger ponies...even my eyesight felt dulled to the point I could see very little in even this entrance hallway. Wires hung from the ceiling through vents that had corroded apart over the long years like cobwebs. Or were they

cobwebs? I couldn't tell!

A whole new level of panic overtook me. My legs froze on the spot as the feeling of wandering into the failed past hit home. To live here...for that huge door to seal shut and forever trap you in the servitude of survival in a small home like this! To never see the sky, even if covered in clouds! To have nothing to shoot for...to escape from...to forever be bound to one little place for your entire life. The thought sent shivers down every nerve I owned as for the first time I realised why LittlePip, the Stable Dweller, had fought so hard for her freedom.

She knew, better than I ever could, what it was like to be trapped. That sense of entrapment must have been what drove her to escape from being like...like a trapped bird! Very quickly, panic began to set in as I imagined the door shutting behind me. Of it rolling down from that great hinge and marking a new level of confinement for my life. That if I went any further, this Stable would just swallow me whole into an inescapable prison.

Echoes of murderous cries wobbled to and fro in the air between corridors as the raiders whooped and stormed down every one of the corridors. Three ways seemed to direct out of the entrance and its raised stair sections. The crashing and rattling of metal mixed with the sound of thick glass being pounded and beaten upon when five of them began tearing into a booth on the right hand side. The remainder began rushing, pushing other slaves out of the way as the group fought for space and purchase in this cramped entry hallway. Ponies ran every side of me, knocking me against railings I couldn't see and feeling wires brushing like scratching tentacles against my mane. There wasn't any space!

My vision finally began to adjust even as we were swept up in the madness of the Stable raid. With no chance to investigate the area properly I was knocked around, dragged with the crowd in the cramped metal rooms and pulled inexorably deeper into the past. I saw the colossal gears on the room from the interior side of the great door above me coated in rust and grease disappear as I was forced to keep up or be run down. A raider shoved me to the side into a hard metal wall, thunking my skull and dizzying me to the point I lost track of which way I was going. Harsh metal steps and walls surrounded me on all sides, solid roof and floors of the exact same panel design led my sense of direction to disappear as the great rush of slaves trying to find the best loot tossed me around. A dark metal nightmare, where I could do nothing but collapse to the ground and scream and shout and beg for them to stop and try to find somewhere to hide and...and what? Think? If I thought about all this being somepony's home in the past...

A mouth bit into my fleece and pulled me from the chaos into a side corridor. Light blue illumination led me to screw my eyes shut after becoming accustomed to the thick darkness until, mercifully, I found the source to be Glimmerlight's horn. Brimstone Blitz had pulled me from the rush of slaves moving into the main areas of the Stable. Dropping me beside Glimmer, I could have sworn he spat off to the side as though he'd tasted something bad. I wasn't *that* filthy.

Well, maybe I was...

"They're going to set off every trap and unsafe area in this entire place at that rate," muttered Glimmer as she stared down the thin side corridor that the main rush had utterly ignored, "like I said, stick with us. We'll lay low and go for the repair bays. Always some good stuff in there and *usually* much less dangerous than the primary atrium and living areas."

I shrank against the wall, seeking solace in the cold metal to remind myself I wasn't lost in the blackened past entirely. It throbbed under the surface with a subtle power that led me to stick closer to Glimmerlight instead. Was this place alive? More and more I was getting the impression that Stables were entirely aware of those ponies hidden within it...or those intruding upon the relics it had steadfastly protected for centuries.

"Murky, you alright?"

Everything just felt wrong here, something had ruined this place. All those rocks outside, why had they covered the entrance? The door had been locked open, why?

"Hey, Murky?"

I just...I didn't want to know. I'd been dragged through the Stable since I had wandered in, had I made a straight? Did they pull me around a corner? Which way was it back to the door? Oh Goddesses, if you can hear me down here please save me. I wanted to be back in Fillydelphia...wanted my pig sty...I didn't want to be here, stuck in this rotten place filled with bad memories. Forget Protégé and his mad ideals! This was too much!

“Murky!”

Just...just too much! I dropped against the floor, curling up as I numbly felt somepony, Glimmer, shaking me and calling my name. But I didn't want to face it any more...I just wanted to close my eyes and pretend none of it existed. I couldn't see, I couldn't hear over it all, every sight and smell down here was unreal and born of a past I feared. I wanted out, now.

Amongst the clacking of hooves on metal floors, screaming raiders and crashing sounds of mad looting, I just fell into my most basic reaction and cried. Even while I felt Glimmerlight's hoof stroking my mane trying to help, I just curled up tighter.

“I'm so sorry, Murky...”

I shuddered. Too much...just...too much...

* * *

It wasn't long before I finally got a look at the Stable properly. While we waited, much to Brimstone's annoyance at delays, for me to get some semblance of control together, somepony somewhere must have activated the generators. Pools of light washed through the Stable from illumination units in the ceiling. Most didn't work, some sparked and blew out and others flickered on and off rapidly. Those that did work came on dimly...but it was enough to finally waken me from my void induced terror.

Lying on the ground, fearfully peeping out between my hooves, I saw that the Stable was constructed of matching components. Every twenty feet or so the wall patterns repeated, like it had been constructed modularly. Stairs leading up and down broke away at intervals while huge metal doors filled with warning symbols stood guard over their contents. I was wrong, this wasn't a dark void of nothing. It was a preserved and quickly rotting corpse of historical fears. Foul water leaked from pipes into corners and down stairs while occasional rattles of doors trying to open on failed pistons gave an annoyingly regular metallic noise to the entire facility.

And this was just one corridor...

Under Glimmer's reassurances I pulled myself to my hooves somewhat shakily, following the pair. To say the “lights had come on” was something of an overstatement, vision went only as far as the lighting units functioned and the majority had failed. Where before there was a black void, there was now a hazy yellow buzzing glow that flickered and died more often than it was actually on. Combined with the red rust and dull grey...it provided a necrotic atmosphere to this place. What had obviously once been sterile had been worn down over time into what felt like it had been made from a scrapyard's materials.

A screeching and agonised scream cut the air. Whimpering, I fell flat on the floor, as I heard the pair tear their guns out and load. The screaming kept going, distant and horrifying. It was like the old dwellers were still screaming in the Stable that had become their tomb. Glimmerlight took a shaky breath and glanced sideways at Brimstone.

“Brim...what the hell was that?”

Without warning, it came again. This time, it sounded hurt...then louder and higher mixed with begging and pitiful wailing. A second one broke over it that went on for far longer than a scream had any right doing. Brimstone's eyes closed as he listened, before shaking his head slowly.

“Something that makes me glad we came this way. Let's just get some stuff and get the hell out. Quietly.”

Without a word we moved on, Brimstone and Glimmerlight keeping their firearms handy. For the next ten minutes we wound through corridor after corridor, trying doors that seemed inoperable. Careful trotting took us around exposed power panels in the floor while an odd little river coming from 'upstairs' let warm water wash around our hooves before it disappeared into the lower levels. Glancing down the staircase showed that the level below held no light to see the destination of the stream. Still shaking and struggling to control myself, I moved on as I spotted Glimmerlight and Brimstone pass around a corner intersected with two windows so filthy and covered in dust we couldn't see the inside of whatever room it was.

“Think that's the canteen? You've been in more Stables than me...”

The big pony narrowed his eyes and scratched his mane with a hoof.

“No...but something isn't right. I've been in four Stables when I led the clan. Every one of them had the same rough layout in some way. This one...it isn't following that. I'm not sure what this is.”

I hadn't been in *any* Stables to know. Letting my thoughts drift back to the ghoulish community in the crater, I tried to remind myself that bunker hadn't been any different...

No, it had. That was a bunker designed to shelter and continue medical work. It wasn't a home, a place of memories. But then, neither had this place been so far. Horrid rusting corridors and dirty windows? Where were the skeletons? The abandoned toys and old beds?

Leaning forward and hopping up on my hind legs, I wiped the dust from the window, peering in as I cleaned it to get a better sense of where we were. Maybe it would have some Radaway for me to ta-

With a howling scream, the blood caked face rattled against the window right in front of my nose. Screaming till my throat was hoarse, my fleeing was stopped only by running into the brick wall that was Brimstone Blitz, not again! No! I'd had enough of ghouls!

I heard the laughter a few seconds afterwards as the door from down the hallways slid open and four of the raiders tumbled out almost crying with laughter.

“Did ya see his face, mate?!”

“What a fuckin' riot! Good spot hearing them coming, Knife Edge!”

The third raider had smeared blood over his own face from a self-inflicted wound using a short axe. I lay on the ground, tears streaming down my face and hyperventilating as I saw Glimmerlight step towards them.

“Just piss off you lot! This is hard enough without you all screwing around!”

The four of them just laughed all the harder, stepping just close enough to make a point, but not so close they'd be within reach of Brimstone. The ex-warlord stood impassively with a furious look on his face, presumably waiting for Glimmer's approval to no doubt *kill* them. The bloody faced raider leaned forward. I could see scars all over him, all no doubt self-inflicted. It wasn't just his face! He had coated himself with blood, for what? To psyche himself up?

These ponies were a far cry from Moose and Lemon...

“Hey, slut! This is our turf down here to do what we want! Only chance we get to have proper fun without the *traitor* ruining it. He knows we could just kill him down here, don't you?”

Brimstone snorted. “I'd like to see you try, Edge. I still remember you whining the day I broke your knee for touching one of my mares. Get. Lost.”

I felt Glimmerlight rest down beside me. This was beyond either of us. Truth be told, hearing Brimstone refer to “his mares” brought unsettling imagery of what he had done in his life before now...

Suddenly I felt even less safe...there was one more raider than I'd counted down here with me. The four before us only laughed more as they sauntered off.

“Fine then! Just don't get in our way, the atrium is ours now. Don't come near or you'll learn like those two little slaves who tried to take some of our loot!”

The origin of the screams suddenly made a lot of sense. It became clear to me that the Stable's own environmental dangers were not the only things threatening us in the dark down here. A quick agreement was taken to rest for a minute and check out the room they had just left after the raiders departed. Glimmer helped me inside, given I was now shaking so much I could scarcely trot. The room was utterly pitch black with all the lights having failed. The dull haze outside in the corridor wouldn't be enough to light it, so Glimmerlight once again lit her horn and proved her name rung true. She smiled at me.

“Full of tricks, you'd be surprised, all the things I can do.”

Amongst the light blue aura, I took a quick glance around. No skeletons...please...

The repair bay, I guessed. I had seen enough industry in Fillydelphia to recognise workbenches and tools. Individual little stations were sectioned off from one another where I could imagine ponies. But what really caught my attention...was how nothing caught my attention at all.

Just...grey. Every bench and tool, seat and locker...that same colour. Every artistic sense I owned was screaming in violation at the dull life anypony here must have had. Without really knowing what I was doing, I moved up to one seat and sat back on my haunches before the workbench. The wall stared back. Perhaps this had once been a *clean* grey as opposed to what it was now. Covered in...actually, very little dust at all. It was *that* bland.

This wall really needed something...maybe a, hmm...perhaps a mu-

“Damn, whoever had a shop in here must have taken what they liked before whatever happened occurred to wreck the Stable. Brim, you find anything?”

“Not unless you feel like another wrench. Just stock equipment, minus the fancy stuff. Almost like no-pony ever used this place at all.”

Turning, I saw Glimmerlight holding up a pair of pliers with a rather confused look. Only after a second did it click that the pliers still had their safety pins intact. It had never been used. Hopping down from the seat, I wandered over into the now flickering light. Glimmer swore under her breath and let it die. The all encompassing dark took over the moment it had gone...

“Well...I never claimed to be an expert at long term magic. Anypony got ideas on how to solve this?”

I did, almost as quickly as I heard Brimstone about to mention it, I began feeling around in my saddlebag for one of the two prized possessions I carried. Sundial's PipBuck. One hoof of a button later and we had a dull green flicker to see by. There was something odd about drawing it here...until I noticed the PipBuck casing was that same shade of grey too...

Brimstone nodded with approval as he began bending the lockers out to check their locked away contents, but Glimmerlight stood almost in shock. She held various tools in her magic field, contrasting oddly with the green light of my PipBuck. I guessed that illumination magic took a lot more stress than a simple telekinetic hold on items.

“You...have a PipBuck?!”

Holding it protectively between my hooves, I just nodded.

“Sorry I didn't say...but it...it means a lot to me.”

The tools tumbled to the ground as she almost seemed to fly over to me, her eyes locked on the wrecked device. I could swear she was quivering on the spot like a hyperactive foal.

“You have a *PipBuck*? ” She repeated. “Ooh! Give! Can I see? I won't break it!”

Slightly taken aback, I stammered a reply, before simply giving up and gently holding it out. Given the way she had treated me thus far...a look was alright, surely? She lifted it with her magic to float before her. The loose leather whip ties dangled idly while the broken hinges squeaked in the telekinetic grip. The noise

echoed strangely in the isolated wing of the Stable. Briefly, I began to wonder where the other raiders and slaves were, I hadn't heard anything from them for a while...

“Oh my...this thing has seen better days. You poor little PipBuck. Now lets just take a look. Appropriate place this, PipBuck Technicians Bay of the Stable.”

She hoofed the switch I normally used for the radio, which brought a very quiet volume of Sapphire Shores into the room. Raising an eyebrow, Glimmerlight upped the volume until it was at a level ponies other than freaky taintborns could detect it. Eventually, she laid it on the technician's workbench and pulled a second seat over for me. Behind us came an almighty crash as Brimstone pulled the locker clean off the wall to stamp the door inwards trying to get at it.

“Been so long since I had a chance to work on one of these things. Father never did allow me near any of the ones we had in storage unless to teach me about the operations systems. Gotta say, Murky...the fact this one is working at all is nothing short of magical itself. The spark battery is actually *exposed* to the air while operating, all the hoof locks are gone, screen protector is shattered, half the buttons seem to be disconnected and of course, the entire underside has been torn off. I'll bet somepony tried to remove this in a hurry without tools, actually.”

I whimpered, Sundial's sad fate was still a hurtful thought in my mind I often preferred to try and forget. Had he died before the balefire? Just what happened to him around the time his PipBuck became such a mess?

“Aha!”

Startled, my eyes blinked and my ears perked as I leaned over before almost falling from my flattened seat with shock. There...in her hands, the screen was working! Very light green, it flickered and fizzed out a couple of times, but always came back. Arcane symbols flashed and scrolled around it as a symbol of something, probably the group who made them, faded on and off. Eventually, it settled into something resembling the idle state I had seen LittlePip's sitting in. Glimmerlight could not hold her smile in as a hoof dragged me in for a little celebratory hug. I yelped at the shock, making her let go and pat my back instead. Was she taking no chances with me or...oh I didn't understand this whole social thing at all...what *was* she being to me? The mare had cared, but Glimmerlight felt...different. I mean, yes, she cared, clearly...but with the mare something had *connected* in a way I'd never dreamed. With Glimmerlight, it felt more like an entirely new sensation...to get to know something. What was that? Why did I feel stronger around her? More confident in her presence after only knowing her for a few hours?

If she noticed my thoughtful look...she didn't react. Instead, her eyes were fixated on the PipBuck screen as the system properly booted up.

KCHUNK!

Both Glimmer and myself jumped in shock as the dull mechanical sound suddenly shot through the room. Speakers above us buzzed loudly, creepily like Parasprites before squealing loudly and failing. Squeaking in fear, I saw the door to this blacked out room jarr and jump in its half open housing before fizzing and sparking with blown magic...whatever...I didn't know doors. In the dead silence, we stared as Brimstone tapped it a few times before looking around outside.

“Guess it just jammed on an automatic shutting script from being open so long...the hell was with the speakers though?”

I found myself gripping her with all four hooves in terror, somehow. “B-but...the speakers...”

“Well...back...back in Bucklynn Cross see? Sometimes the speakers announced a door was closing. Safety, y'know? Don't worry...”

Glimmerlight sounded confident in her knowledge, if a little surprised, before she looked back at my PipBuck. Personally...I just wanted out. This place was filled with too many sudden sounds, dark corners and unknown secrets. I knew *they* would be in here somewhere. Glimmerlight seemed to find solace and comfort in going back to checking my PipBuck.

“I thought that's all it was! All that was wrong was the matrix that controls the distribution of energy wasn't detecting the screen protector, so it disabled the visuals to protect...I dunno, the warranty or something? Just a little spark in the right place and hello! Now you can properly navigate more than just the radio and audio diaries, I'll bet.”

Giggling like a filly, she squeezed me tight enough to make me squeak in surprise before bringing the screen up. Try as the fear did...somehow her laugh helped banish the dark demons I was imagining in the corners.

“Now let's see what it had to offer, I'll run a basic diagnostic and see what it still has operating.”

Controlled by magic, icons flickered and lists scrolled back and forth. I saw a little deformed picture of a pony with flashing lights and a sad face appear for just a second. Eventually, her horn's glow minimised in scale as the PipBuck lowered into my hooves. Illuminated by the glow of the active device...for the first time I began to properly feel a sense of ownership rather than just carting around an odd radio that really belonged to Sundial. It was working for me! I could use it for...for...whatever PipBucks did! I could...I could...

...I couldn't read the words on the screen.

All the excitement flowed right out of me as I slumped out of Glimmer's grasp and sighed. My eyes trained lazily on the unknown shapes and features. I tried hoofing a few dials and buttons. Sometimes a bit of light changed, but it was just all a mess of hidden secrets to my idiotic, uneducated and illiterate brain.

The radio would have to do...and all it was still playing was Sapphire Shores. (A ghoulish could sing better, I believed)

“Murky?”

I just let out a deep breath and settled down on all fours before looking up at her in the flickering light. Glimmerlight clearly hadn't forgotten what I'd told her about my reading during my big rant earlier on.

“You found it, Murky. Tech like this? It doesn't turn up every day. Don't feel that you're worthless to it. In my experience, rare artefacts choose the bearer as much as they choose it by carrying it with them. With all you've listened to stuff about the Stable Dweller, what did you call her...LittlePip? Didn't you heard about Lil' Mac?”

Lil' Who?

“LittlePip's revolver? You must have missed that broadcast or something, I have an old wireless in the cells I got working on the signal before my sickness got too bad. She found that gun, one of the best, Pon3 said. It's stuck with her through thick and thin, saving her life as many times as any companion or good luck. Yet I'll bet, from the description of that thing, she wouldn't be able to fire it from her mouth worth a damn. Does that mean she doesn't deserve it?”

Glimmer's magic picked up the PipBuck and gently attached it to my right hoof with the whipcord.

“I'm sure, where-ever he is...Sundial would be proud somepony as gentle as you found it, Murky. Now come on, I'll read it for you. Do a rundown of the systems and see what he left you.”

I didn't properly smile, just a little raising of the corners of my mouth. When had I last really smiled? When I caught out the Magister by taking his gun's battery? (That had *happened*!?) The helter-skelter? LittlePip's escape? It felt so hard...especially when the moment this PipBuck induced train of thought ended and I remembered where I was. I lifted the PipBuck to allow Glimmerlight access.

“Now, a little spark here...magical choice there...here we go! Basic runtime diagnostic.”

The screen blanked and flowed a mass of singular sentence lines in a dark green that I found hard to even see never mind read. Glimmerlight's eyes seemed to have no trouble, flitting to and fro as she muttered the results to herself.

“Basic functions not intact...visual user interface active, as we know. Magical recognition set to manual only. Location tag is active, mapping spell has degraded. It's useless...damn. Location recognition spell is working though, just no map spell to overlay on. Radiation detection spells are corrupted. Probably only a

huge level of rads would make it active...on full volume. Least it'll be a hell of a warning. Backlight on screen...oddly active even though the screen wasn't. Spell fluctuating though, it probably doesn't stay constant..."

Her voice was levelling, losing her confidence and spark as she became a fast talking monotone...following line after line of code, text and symbols.

"Medical detection spells are completely gone, stripped out, in fact. Organisation spell is gone too. Add on port seems intact, maybe not too reliable though, it's rusted through. E.F.S. is just...gone. Somepony took the gem that powers it, cheeky thieving bastard. Radio is active, as you know. Huh...S.A.T.S. has one charge left, best save it for somepony who really deserves a good bucking. Why didn't these logs list all combat or utility spells together, by the way? Wouldn't that be easier? Poor show, Stable-Tech. Just, why not?"

The last question was directed at me. I could do naught but shrug and mentally wonder if she felt the same way about it as I did about a lack of safety railings. An unbelievably petty yet all so important and easy to miss little thing that-

Alright...not getting distracted by pre-war idiotic architects again...not in here...oh Goddesses it was dark in this room. Where had the noises gone? I could hear the occasional shout now...far off and deadened by the thick walls of the Stable. They could be in the next room across and I'd not be able to hear them properly.

That thought struck hard...I was lost in a Stable...with raiders...in complete blackness, oh Goddesses...

Glimmerlight tapped my head, waking me from my stupor staring into the darkness.

"Hey, I told you! None of that 'thinking about pre-war business, alright? Keep your head. If I have to I'll start telling you raunchy stories about my first wasteland bar crawl to distract you. But here's something interesting to take your attention. You said this thing had diaries, there aren't any listed in the logs. They might be encrypted...but you accessed them. How?"

"I didn't, it just...um...beeped?"

Glimmer sat back on her haunches again, tapping a hoof on her chin in deep thought.

"Where were you? Anywhere near magic sources that might set it off by accident?"

"No...just on a control tower, a helter skelter and then in the crater in a bunker."

We sat in silence, staring at the curious device. I could only pretend I had an idea of what to ponder on. I watched Brimstone pulling old magazines on mechanics out of the lockers and stuffing them into his rather large saddlebags for looting jobs. Glimmerlight muttered as she thought, her hoof tapping on the workbench as though she'd lived here all her life. Perhaps it was familiar to her? I'd heard Steel Rangers used Stables as bases, had she once experienced life in a powered Stable? What had LittlePip done in hers? Probably a security mare, if she could fight that well! No sitting around in the dark for that action filly. That brought a smile to my face to help combat the terror that still rooted my higher brain functions in this place. To imagine her here with me...giving me a tour of her home...maybe I'd have a room to myself? With a double bed? What were rooms in Stables like?

I sighed, they were probably grey and very cramped. The thought of being sealed down here still-

No! No no...not thinking about it, no thinking about pre-war! That's a route to mental breakdowns if I let myself think on it down here...

"Aha! Location!" Glimmerlight shouted suddenly, her hoof shooting in the air as she almost seemed to shuffle on the spot in delight.

"Huh?"

"You were up high, then down low! Haha! I see it now, your Sundial is a sneaky one, he set the diary to react to the PipBuck's locator spell when height from sea level changed dramatically up or down! That way

he would know that the PipBuck could only discharge its spell if taken and moved rather than just being handled accidentally or tumbling about over the years on the ground. It's why it didn't go off in here, because we haven't gone up or down levels yet. If we go down far enough we'd probably get another one to activate. It was so he could assure somepony would have it when his messages began. Wow...I need to remember that one, clever little buck..."

My appreciation of Sundial could know no bounds as I looked at the glowing PipBuck on my leg. He had done something to ensure somepony...I...would only hear it when I had proven that I wanted to keep and travel with it? The system wasn't flawless...but it made sense.

Perhaps, in the end, the PipBuck was meant for me after all. I had carried it through misery on the control tower, false happiness upon the helter-skelter, taken it into a desperate escape and kept it safe through a horrid encounter in the crater in just a few short days. I had kept it with me...wearing it and protecting it in return for the moments of peace it allowed my fractured mind.

Sundial's messages had been meant for somepony like me.

Trapped in forced labour to go into a dead Stable, that was at least something I could hold close and take strength in. I only prayed it would be enough.

* * *

Spending time flicking through my PipBuck's various pages with the buttons, I awaited Glimmerlight and Brimstone to finish their investigation of the room. Technically, I could have helped, but frankly...they would get on better without me freaking out if I found something triggering. No...better for the useless little slave to sit in the corner and be a light source for the pair when they needed it.

Their efforts were not particularly fruitful, finding basic tools that were worth nothing alongside empty containers *meant* for PipBuck tool spares but apparently had never been filled. As much as I tried not to, I couldn't help but wonder why a Stable's PipBuck tech bay was so under supported. Didn't every Stable dweller have a PipBuck?

For that matter, where *were* the dwellers? Had they all escaped decades ago? Perhaps that was all that was wrong? The Stable had failed, so they left and lived happy lives in the wastes with no pain and yeah I wasn't fooling anypony...this place was going to be messed up. It couldn't have gotten *this* wrecked without some event.

"Yes! Knew I'd find something! No Stable ever comes without somepony wanting to talk!"

I looked up at Glimmer, delightedly holding a small device in her magic as she advanced. Brimstone had hung around the door, acting as a guard against any raiders wandering around. As far as he was concerned, the raiders were hostile, had already killed two slaves and likely would do more if they felt they could get away with it.

Glimmer's device, floating in front of my PipBuck didn't look like much. Just a little serrated circle on a small rounded casing with small prongs that would fit into something. Grinning, she lifted my PipBuck.

"Now we find out what life was like in this place. This is an audio recorder, Murky. They fit into things like PipBucks and thankfully, yours is mostly intact to do it. Last Stable? One of these and a spare one in the repair bay gave me a passcode for the weapons locker. Was in and out in five minutes with no danger from the defences further in! So what say we take a listen?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Hey, didn't Sundial help? Besides, if it helps let us know what we're facing here if anything *is* wrong, I'd like to know."

Sighing, I held out the PipBuck as she slotted the device in, hoofing one of the buttons before the audio began to kick in. I heard a young mare, bored and monotone.

“They say we’ve only got a bunch of these recorders, but frankly I got little else to do in a day but complain and keep re-recording this message so what the hell if I use one. It’s been...ergh...a month, I think, since we got the call to come in here.”

Brimstone waved from the door.

“We can't stay here, the raiders know the location and we do have a quota to fill. If you two are going to listen, do it on the move.”

Shrugging to me, Glimmerlight and I packed up what we could find and moved out after him.

Brimstone took a route further into the facility, taking us past some old dead generators. One of them still hummed on, I guessed, some sort of back up, but otherwise nothing.

“Really it's all just a battle to not think. We've got enough problems in here without languishing on what's outside. Roots said he heard somepony hammering on the Stable door after it locked, bullshit, you'd never hear that inside here. No, all sterile and safe in Stable Ninety Three. Only it's not, fucking Ministries had to come romping all over this as well, didn't they? Now we've got Arcane scientists in the lower levels continuing all that bullshit they did outside to cause this! I thought it was better getting signed through the Ministry for a Stable designed around them, but no! Now I'm just walking on metal boards not ten feet above fuck knows what messed up experiment! Oh they say it's safe, but “safe” is what they told us megaspells would be!”

“Brimstone, stop!” Glimmer shouted as loud as she dared as soon as the recording played out to this point. She rushed up, clearly trying to convince Brimstone that the better loot for meeting quotas (and apparently, gaining favour on to Protégé’s medical roster for exemplary slaves) was below us. The idea chilled my blood as I stared at the PipBuck and the floor beneath it.

“So they just expect us to hurry up and wait, to just forget that every damn pony we ever loved or cared about is dead or dying out there. We can't even leave if we want, seismic activity suggests the megaspell that hit Filly brought a rockslide down over the entrance. So yeah, this is our lives now whether we wanted any different or not. The Overmare, Windy Vane, got replaced within a day by the Ministry staff. The new Overmare, damn if I can even remember her name, she's changing things. Taken all the PipBuck tools so I've got nothing to work with! Says all the PipBucks need to go to their labs for repair now. I tell ya...the lot of us up here? If we weren't so damn lucky to be alive...we'd be rebelling against this kind of second rate treatment to those freaky sealed off areas.”

The generator room widened out into a larger hub. Brimstone had agreed to Glimmer's idea, so we scurried along walls trying to find stairs down that weren't flooded. I couldn't grasp what this mare must have felt, being trapped inside this sterile shell without any knowledge of the outside world. Even I had at least *seen* the world outside of slavery...for as much as Fillydelphia was quickly becoming my entire life.

It occurred to me that comparing my life to theirs was only a way to try and distract myself from the current situation. That wasn't a good path of thought to take...

“Well, back to sitting around, reading the same porn mag for the fourth time today and trying to work out why in the fuck the PA systems keeps shorting out. Peace out, random future listeners...oh wait, peace failed. Fuck that then. Happy Stable life.”

The PipBuck audio tape clicked to a halt. With a sad look at Glimmerlight I ejected it from my PipBuck and let it just drop into the corner. Only after glancing back up did I find the pair muttering between themselves.

“Look, I know this place is different, but every staircase to the sublevels is flooded. If we're going down, we'll have to go to an entirely different area.”

“Glim, the only way through is the atrium. We're not going by the raiders.”

“You're their warlord! Even if you don't rank it any more they fear you! Tap into that raider side of you

to get us past, surely just five minutes will-”

“**Glimmerlight!**”

I squeaked, only resuming watching after poking my head out from behind the nearby generator.

“I will not take you and Murk, two recently sick ponies through a raider base, however temporary!”

“What would you prefer? Being shot because this entire wing has been stripped by some crazy Arcane scientists two hundred years ago and we can't find anything to match quota? Brim, we *need* to get down there before them!”

Brimstone stopped and glared at her. Glimmer's back was to me, but I could only remember him saying how I had once looked like her when trying to convince him. Whatever it was she did with her expression, something must have gotten through to the big raider. With a mutter and a snort, Brimstone moved past us and began leading the way back to the main corridor the four raiders had gone down. Glimmerlight fell in step, indicating me to trot beside her. As we passed the audio recording again, I couldn't bear the silence broken only by faint whoops and cries in the distance from the dark.

“Um...Glimmer? What do you think we'll find down there? Only I heard Stables were bad and-”

“Don't think about it, dear.” She tried to smile at me, but the oppressive atmosphere and her clear concentration lost much of her calming allure. “That message would have been overwritten if this Stable had survived very long. I doubt they'll have had a chance to finish anything, okay?”

I fell slightly behind her as we squeezed past the generators into the side corridor following Brimstone. As much as she had tried to reassure me, I could only think about one thing she had forgotten. If it hadn't survived past the first generation...what was it that had killed the Stable and left this rusted and presumably empty corpse?

* * *

If the atrium was to give any indication, it wouldn't be able to any longer. The raiders had seen to that.

We had emerged on the balcony overlooking a central open plan room. I could see thick glass windows sectioning off many of the surrounding rooms to try and make it seem even bigger than it actually was. A small porthole window gazed down across it all that seemed accessible from the balcony running around all four sides with two staircases either side that led into the main...courtyard...I guessed.

But the activity within was what truly drew my attention. Among the flipped tables and chairs, all around the rusted remains of metal furniture and fallen scrap, the raiders had made their home for the next few hours during the operation. Piles of even vaguely useful items were collected in the middle, surrounded by an armed guard. Four of the toughest looking raiders there, one missing a good chunk of his face and covered in scar tissue standing atop the pile with an almost comically old shotgun. I fought to stifle a whine as I saw almost a dozen slaves held prisoner in a side room, their sacks emptied and stolen of all finds. Most of them showed fresh cuts and bruising. After a second I clicked that they were all bucks. Where were the mares? Why had they-

My hearing ranges quickly answered that from one of the rooms directly below me.

Oh...Goddesses...those poor ponies...

My appreciation of Brimstone and Glimmerlight allowing me to work with them rose high enough to almost make me forget the fact that once ponies had sat, ate and presumably laughed here together. Now? It was just a temporary hell for those slaves caught by the raider clan amongst the dark depths of the Stable. I wondered if The Master encouraged this to keep them in line. Behave and obey...and there wouldn't be any guards during these raids.

Brimstone bristled and growled, his hooves impatiently stomping on the ground as he too heard the plight of the mares. Glimmerlight just sighed and closed her eyes. I trotted away from them, but cast a

glance at Glimmerlight as she...did she just shiver? Was it a mutual feeling as a mare? Or had...when the raiders took her did they...

I shook my head. No...it wouldn't do to go thinking that. She had forgiven life, sought to stay happy and move on. Not for any riches could I have ever guessed how that was possible...how could somepony just...forgive and forget so easily? What was her secret?

“Protégé will hear of this. He won't stand for it.” Glimmerlight spoke quietly, beginning to creep around the balcony. Brimstone followed, with me bringing up the rear as quietly as I possibly could. Screams, slaps and bitter laughter mixed with disgusting grunts and threats of violence. Brimstone cast his head over the edge very briefly to gauge their positions. Moving up, I hopped onto my hind legs to peek over the balcony again.

“Hey, where'd the boss go, Edge?”

“You know Barb, he'll be right behind you when you ask that. Nah, I think he went off to explore alone. Said some shit about the darkness being his domain in the depths or something.”

The majority of the raiders were filtering in and out of the rooms, pouring old sealed food and random tools or books on to the pile. Clearly they were interested in sheer volume and letting the slavers do the sorting. I could understand the feeling...just taking things and building your inventory was oddly...satisfying. Hoofing my goggles, I felt a little happy thought at my one small victory over Wicked Slit.

“Why's he going down there, then?”

“Shit, Edge I don't know! He's the boss! Said he had to remind somepony of a deal or something.”

Oh crap.

“Look, just get this stuff done before he comes back, you *saw* what he did to those other two, right? You wanting the same?”

He pointed his hoof across. Naturally, my eyes followed long before I even thought about what I was doing.

Seconds later I swivelled back on to the balcony, desperately trying to not throw up...and failing. Nothing came out. There was nothing *to* come out. My stomach, empty and shrinking, heaved and dryly retched. Staggering to the side, tears in my eyes ruined my vision as I fought to get rid of the sight. Barb was fucked up. Truly...truly...fucked up. Even if I couldn't say the word, it felt all too appropriate in my mind.

“Taught him too well...” muttered Brimstone as he hopped down behind me. Coughing into my leg to try and dull the sound, I caught a look at Brim's eyes. When had he ever looked so old? I'd come to see him as a grown stallion, but the more I saw the weathered life of pain and sadism he'd led reflected in those looks...the more aged he seemed. How old was he anyway? Pushing over fifty? Half a century of raiding, murder and rape lay at his hooves. That he had *taught* ponies to do...to do...*that down below!*

“How could ponies do that?” I was whining, I didn't care. “He didn't have to! There's no reason!”

Glimmerlight settled a hoof around me as she began to lead me towards the nearest staircase down to sneak past the atrium ground floor and bypass the raiders entirely. Brimstone followed as gently as his colossal weight allowed.

“Because he can. The wasteland gives us freedom, Murk. Freedom to be better...or freedom to do the things no-pony would ever dream of. Just because we can. I once heard somepony say he felt the world before was becoming so fucked up that the wasteland was an improvement.”

Behind Brimstone there was a dire squeal as two raiders took offence at a mare refusing them. A strangled cry sounded before dulling as they became 'insistent.' Brimstone visibly had to control himself.

“If I met that buck now I'd kill him for being such a fucking idiot.”

“Keep those ears of yours peeled, Murky...you're a pretty handy asset down here, y'know?”

We were on the same level as the raiders now. The staircase had led to the back door of the canteen where Glimmerlight and myself were sneaking below the edge of the windows looking into the atrium. It felt wrong to go closer to the atrium, indeed the raiders were little more than ten feet away. However the door was jammed one foot from the ground on the atrium side and it held all too big a chance of containing any sealed food to fill our malnourished stomachs. Brimstone had elected to remain in the stairwell to 'ensure' no-pony got behind us while we searched for any food at all. What did Stable ponies eat anyway? I hoped it wasn't meat. Although carnivorous attitudes were common in the wasteland, I had never tried it (more out of neglect from my masters than choice...) and I doubted the capability of my stomach to hold it.

That said...I could feel my limbs shaking and my head beginning to ache from lack of food and especially a lack of water. Protégé's apple stew was so long ago, my throat convulsed dryly at the mere thought of it again. If it came down to it...I might not get much of a choice about trying meat or not if that's all we found.

“Hey! Hey lads! I got something! YEAH! WE GOT SOMETHING!”

The shout had made us freeze on the spot. Cold shivers ran down my back as I tentatively raised my head, trying to use a little awareness of hearing to detect the direction of this 'discovery.' Relatively pleased they were heading to the far side of the atrium I peeked my head up, hoping my dark coat and dull woollen fleece would be camouflage enough. Glimmerlight stayed rested below me, biting her lip with a little worry for those other mares. I couldn't even relate...

“What is it?! Ere', give it ere!”

The majority of the raiders clustered around a small side room of the atrium beside the stairs on the far side. Inside it seemed pretty office like, perhaps some sort of...office. (Once again I felt it was rather obvious I hadn't a clue about Stable life...) The raiders were throwing a couple of old bags away, knocking captured 'non-raider' slaves out of their war and intimidating anypony to lift their find out.

A PipBuck.

“Glimmer, take a look.” I whispered, lowering my head down so that only my goggles covered eyes were peeking out above the bottom of the dull window. I had donned the eye protectors a few minutes back for little reason, but somehow I felt more secure with them on, despite the lack of them really doing anything useful. Glimmerlight instead crept along to the door leading out of the canteen and stuck her head under the corner to watch them.

“One of those hoof things! Shackles gave me a pass for him turning a blind eye last time I brought one in! Yeah! I'm fuckin' ready with this!”

Very quickly, I discovered how simply brutal life even as a raider was. He had spoken too quickly, too eagerly and the reward too loudly. Almost half a dozen raiders leapt on him, tearing at each other to get it. (One mare's shriek of “MINE!” made me almost whine from the sheer pitch...) Crowding into the small room, I saw the PipBuck yanked back and forth as snarls and curses filled the air. Other raiders crowded nearby, cheering them on. Part of me recognised the chance. Noise cover! I could sneak about quicker and get food and explore and...and...and I just stayed rock still...

They terrified me. Not if I had wanted to could I move my legs as I felt myself settle higher on the window. The unrestrained brutality and complete lack of sanity when the bloodlust set in. They saw something they wanted and they took it. Alright, maybe I did that too sometimes, but they killed! Shaking, I couldn't find myself to look away as blood splattered on the dirty office window pane looking towards us into the atrium. The PipBuck was almost forgotten as it fell to the ground and activated. One raider leapt for it, the purple glow of the machine casting an odd haze across her as I saw a large stallion begin stamping on her head to get at it. Even over the din, I heard the whine of something on the PipBuck starting up, before

another, louder and shocking sudden sound screeched and tore its way into my ears.

SCHREEE-KCHUNG!

The door of the office slammed down vertically so hard on rusty and creaky gears that it severed the back leg of one pony trapped under it.

Silence reigned for as long as it took the raider inside to start howling in pain. The sound barely made it through the thick door. The raiders seemed stunned, before they beat at the doorway and glass.

“Who closed that?! Get it open! I'm Barb's next in line so I get the shiny!”

“Why won't that damn thing open! Hey, stop fucking around! Edge is bleeding out! Hurry up!”

The lights went out. All of them.

Darkness once again flooded my vision as the Stable fell into the void once again. Trapped beneath ground with no light and a horrible growing whine through every wall and ceiling. Gurgling, hissing and static flooded my ears as I desperately held them to my head and whimpered. But the volume only increased until my headache soared and thumped. Striking pains ran through my ears as warped and hideously electronic pony voices cried in shrill voices through broken speakers.

“Szzzreeee-ignal detecteEEEESSSHH...depressurisation routine...a-a-a-a-AAAAAActive.”

The slaves screamed. Raiders swore and battered on the window. I could hear the thumps of them ramming something heavy against it. Threats, curses and wails mixed with the electronic madness in the airwaves...but I understood so little. All that was left in my vision was the purple glow illuminating the silhouettes of raiders and slaves howling in agony, spasming and jerking like marionettes as they collapsed below the window's height one by one. Screaming, I turned and galloped straight into one of the metal tables, collapsing and crying out as I held my ears down. I couldn't see Glimmerlight. The mass of raiders were moving in a chaotic panic. Some galloped into the darkness, into the unknown in blind terror like I had tried. Others frothed and beat on the doors.

Even after the sound suddenly ceased, the noises kept ringing in my ears like being inside a bell as it was struck. Even as the lights came back on and I felt Brimstone Blitz dragging both me and the stunned Glimmerlight away every joint ached from the muscle stiffening fear. Even as the raiders continued to shout at one another and throw blame, the office had gone eerily silent.

Even as the door opened...no-pony dared go in to retrieve the 'cursed' PipBuck.

...even as I witnessed raiders take out their frustrations on slaves...I couldn't help but cry and suddenly start believing that perhaps the past *was* worse than the wasteland after all...

* * *

“What in the absolute *fucking hell* was that?!” Glimmerlight paced in circles around both Brimstone and myself after magically hurling her saddlebag on the ground in frustration. We had retreated back out of the kitchen, past the stairwell and onto a lower floor to avoid the rightfully pissed off raiders. Past a few doors we immediately avoided there was another long hub, like some kind of meeting room at first glance. Thick locked doors surrounded us but for one open into a side room and the way out again back to the stairwell.

Brimstone was standing impassively with that hard and practical thinking look, glancing around us, while Glimmerlight seemed somewhere between fear and bewilderment.

Me? I was huddled up and trying to fight the temptation to pull my fleece over my head and pretend I was back in my pig sty until I finally dropped dead of hunger. Fright and shock still clung to my body as I felt tense and shivery. Warped electronic droning and voices played again and again in my hearing like a spot of light that won't disappear from your eyes no matter how hard you blink. I wanted out...so...so...badly...I didn't want to die down here! Not like that!

“Stables are screwed up, but that was like the thing actively went out to kill them! What the hell *is* this place? What could do that?”

Brimstone watched her each time she moved around past him, eventually adding his own, calmer, input. I wondered what he had seen in those four other Stables. “Aye, something just doesn't feel right, even for a dead Stable. Somehow, I doubt those idiots jumping around caused it. What was it the voice said?”

I sat up, sniffing, mumbling quietly. My voice was quieter than I could ever remember it, hoarse from screaming. At least...I hoped it was from the screaming. I had only dared bring one of my RadAways with me as an emergency...

“S-signal...detec...hnrk, detected, depressur...something.”

“Signal?” Glimmerlight stopped dead, bringing a hoof to her chin. “Wait...it activated after they turned on that PipBuck. But you turned yours on and-”

Our eyes met immediately, gasping almost in tandem as simultaneous dread realisation set in. That door back in the PipBuck repair facility. The buzzing speakers before the power shorted out in that blacked out room. My PipBuck reactivating had been tracked and reacted to just as the one in the office had, only the power loss had saved us. That device on my right hoof...it had almost killed me. It could still kill me!

Scrambling, I tried to remember how to switch the power off, but what might make it do something to be 'tracked' again? Oh Goddesses, would separating it from me do that?!

“Turn it off! Glimmer, turn it off! Please!”

I thrust it at her, it could bring this Stable down on us any second! Taking a few quick breaths, Glimmer grabbed my hoof in both of hers as she sat back on her hind legs, sparking up her horn. Clattering on the floor, Brimstone galloped and laid his hoof over it before Glimmer could make any magical contact. He quickly hoofed Glimmerlight back gently, looking back and forth with an unflinchingly serious face. I could see he was beginning to sweat in the oddly hot depths down here...hell...we all were. This place just didn't feel natural.

“Control yerselves! You're both scared, timorous wee fears getting bigger because of what happened! Think about it or you're going to get us killed. The Stable detected a PipBuck turning on, what makes you think it can't detect one turning *off* as well?”

“I...I don't know...” Glimmer trotted back, running a hoof through her short mane as she tried to keep her head together. “Well...it didn't detect us using the audio recorder. It must be tied into when the PipBuck itself does it. The recorders, this type anyway...I think they only draw power, not play through the PipBuck itself. Just don't use the PipBuck...don't activate anything on it, alright?”

I was shaking so much my legs were wobbling visibly and led to me having to keep trotting to either side to stay balanced. This Stable was more than just a hole to the past now. It was *alive*, watching and waiting for a signal to pounce. But *why?* How?! Glimmerlight was clearly thinking the same thing, settling down with her head in her hooves.

“C'mon Glim...think think *think*,” she muttered, “why would it do this? Wouldn't take a magical computation core to do it, no, just...just reprogram the fire sensors maybe? To scan for a different signal? Aargghh! I can't think straight down here! It's like being drunk but without all the happy times and great sex! Brim, I don't care what you say about keeping me safe, minute we get back I am taking that nice tan buck in the far shop cell and I am going to spend the night with him. I need *something* after all this.”

She noted Brimstone's harsh glance. How restricted was he keeping her life to ensure her safety?

“He can't stop staring at my flank anyway!”

“Aye, nothing to do with you lifting your tail by 'accident' when he's around.”

“Hey, I'm trapped in fucking Fillydelphia! If I get some mare flank or buck work to help the times pass then I'm going to take it.”

“This is different from your life outside Fillydelphia...how?”

“I...well...okay, not much! Look, I'm just annoyed, alright? I tried to get *away* from underground bunkers holding back my life and now another one is trying to kill me! So I'm sorry if I seem a little *on edge* right now!”

Her words were cut short as she flinched back. White noises flooded down the hallways we had just come from. We heard distant clipped electronic voices layered with muffled screaming that almost sounded like part of the recording. Twisting and echoing around us faintly, my own whinny of fear added to the terrible chorus created by somepony else blundering into something that activated a 'signal.' Fading, the electronic white noise bounced from wall to wall lightly before being replaced by an ongoing background hum and sporadic hissing of pipes from all around.

“This place wants to kill us all...” I muttered, squeaking on 'kill' as my voice cracked. Glimmerlight turned quickly, grabbing me by the neck and looking me dead in the eyes. The mare was terrified just as I was, but she was stronger than I, more confident at keeping a level head despite her frustrations. All the same, although I heard her words...it was hard to concentrate and properly listen...

“No! It's not going to kill any of us! Just keep your head, don't touch anything and don't use your PipBuck! The only thing we know is safe are those audio recorders. So...so we'll try and find a bunch of them...and...and then just get the hell out. We'll take our chances with the slavers. You hear me, Murky?”

I didn't, I couldn't. I just kept jumping at each sudden hiss from behind a wall or above the ceiling. Lights flickered still, not allowing me to get used to anything with my night sight. It was just one ongoing claustrophobic and rusty metallic terror. No...it wasn't metal...it was organic. The pipes and pumps were its veins, carrying the pressure, magic and water to power the Stable. Somewhere the heart was deep down in the old labs and the mouth was what we had cantered right into. Now it was just...just digesting...

“Murky! Snap out of it!”

Glimmerlight shook me hard enough to get my attention through stint of my lash wounds aching at the sudden movement.

“It's just a machine! Scary, yes! But it's only doing what its been programmed to do by some idiot who didn't do things right! The past is filled with mistakes...but that's all they are. Mistakes. Errors. Wrong calls. The past isn't bad, Murky...just...unfortunate. But we need you in the present right now.”

I stared at her azure eyes, somehow still sparkling with life even down here. Why hadn't they just left me anyway? I'd been nothing but a burden thus far. What made her keep wanting to help me? Why not just go like everypony else...

For once, I was almost glad that I had a natural tendency to follow instructions. Nodding silently, I fell into trot behind her obediently with my head lowered as I would to any master. Glimmerlight seemed to hesitate, before cantering on towards Brimstone. I could hear him whisper quickly to her, presumably they hadn't accounted for how noise travelled down here to be audible to my unnatural hearing.

“Murk's not right in the head, Glim. See how he just followed because you told him to?”

“Murky,” she corrected, “is just...hurt...Brim. He needs somepony, it's like he's lost whoever led him. Was the Stable Dweller really that amazing to see and...inspire?”

“Aye...that she was. Enough to make him take a run at the wall. But he's lost that confidence, Shackles isn't going to let go of him. He's got his chains in deep...”

Glimmerlight went silent, casting only a periphery glance back to me with a sad smile (I turned away, pretending I hadn't heard...Brim had been so right...) as we trotted slowly across the open area and around old metal desks. What was this, a school? I could see small scraps of yellowed paper on some of them beside thin sticks of charcoal. Not even really thinking about it, I started dumping many of them into my saddlebag. Up at the front on the teacher's desk, I could see a huge growth of mould that only afterwards I recognised as an apple after two hundred years...

My mind ricocheted around as I tried to distract myself. Thinking of what to draw when I got home (Oh Goddesses please stop calling it that...) or what these little symbols on the blackboard meant. Why did they

repeat so many times in the same line? Sighing, I turned away from it and came face to face with a drawing.

Crayons. I'd once owned a set until another slave had made me cry and stolen them. The sense of loss hit bitterly as I stared at a picture of a few ponies. They weren't very good...foal drawings, probably.

Showing lots of multi coloured ponies all happy together. Below them everything had been coloured grey. It took a second, but eventually I realised that this was by foals who had been born after the door had sealed...who had never known for themselves that the ground had been green outside. The first generation who wouldn't know the true green of Equestria for themselves.

Sniffing, I peered closer as I heard Glimmerlight and Brimstone begin hauling open desks and searching for, presumably, recorders. Probably best I didn't help...most likely I'd only mess something up and make them angry at me...

Sitting back on my hind legs (the trembling of the floor from generators below this level making me squeak in surprise at the unexpected feeling on my backside) I leaned into the drawing, using the flickering light as best I could to view it. Part of me was tempted to use my PipBuck light, it had been safe earlier...but right now I didn't want to even touch it...

The ponies I had glimpsed were all lined up at the bottom, made of geometric shapes with scrawled colour between the shaky lines. The foal who did this must have been *very* young, but it was so filled with smiles and innocent nature. If...if only he or she had known. Sniffing again to try and hold it all in, I offered up a muttered prayer for their souls to Celestia and Luna above. Please let it have been quick...whatever happened. Please not what I'd just seen and heard...

Filling the rest of the picture were just two ponies though. One small and one larger. The smaller, the foal presumably, was hugging into the larger, who had a hoof protectively around the other...

Their mother...

But she was ruined. Water dampness has destroyed her likeness and wiped it clean of all the detail but for the general outline of a grown mare. However the foal seemed so safe with her...so happy. Just being there with the pony who brought you up, took care of you and helped you grow as best they could in a bad place like a Stable...or a slave pit.

"Murky?"

Glimmerlight had moved over to sit beside me, sharing my glance at the picture.

"Is this why you're crying?"

"Cr-crying? I'm not..."

I was. I hadn't even noticed, but amidst all the fear and danger of the Stable I had missed the tears entirely as too regular a reaction. A small damp patch before me on the floor was proof enough of that...

"I just...the picture. That foal had their mother there for them...until the end..."

"You know, Murky...you never told me about your mother other than what happened." Her voice was incredibly gentle, quiet and still as I felt her hoof rub my back lightly. "What was she like? I don't think you even said her name..."

No...please, Glimmerlight...don't ask...

"Maybe if...if you told me about her? Got it off your chest?"

Just stop, oh Goddesses I call on your for your blessing and luck make her not ask...

"So...what was her name? Was she nice?"

"Yeah...nice..." I mumbled to the floor.

"Mm...mothers often are. Y'know, mine wanted me to be called 'Glimmerknight' if I became one, my father always joked I'd be Glimmerwrite if I became a scribe like him. I told them I'd be Glimmerright-out-the-door if they tried to force me. Heh, so, what's her name? Mines was Candy Floss. Yeah...a Paladin."

I mumbled something again, too quiet to be heard.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

Again, I muttered it at the floor, creeping back and lowering my head a little before looking away. My eyes were burning...I didn't want her looking.

“Diiidn't quite catch that.”

“Nothing...” I muttered as I sat up again, wiping my eyes and gently touching the picture again.

“Murky...what's wrong? Is it embarrassing? Because I once knew a stallion called Buck Flank and well, you can't get much worse than that, right?”

I didn't answer. Please, Glimmer, stop asking...don't make me think...don't make me realise that I'd...

“Alright...”

Glimmerlight seemed about to hug me again, but apparently thought better of it and left me alone. My eyes rested on the picture of a mother and only gently cried. I'd...I'd come close to having to admit...no...

Almost without thinking, I drew my journal and tore a page from it. I bit a charcoal stick in my mouth and went to work. Lines became curves became shapes became...

...life...I wished.

Taking some of the fallen adhesive on the floor, I tacked my own picture beside the foals. Of my mother holding me and protecting me from the life I was about to inherit from my birth. Mom was...mom. That was all she had been to me in the short time I had known her.

Come to think of it, the same went for this foal. They had only known his or hers briefly before the Stable ended it all for them. Without really knowing what I was doing I placed my drawing beside the foal's on the wall. I felt...right.

Sucking up my sadness as best I could, I got to my hooves.

“Sorry...Mom...I'm so sorry that I-”

“Hey! Murky! Get your tiny hiney over here, we got another recorder!”

Biting my lip, I glanced at the picture one last time, struggling to shove back the truth in my mind, before turning and cantering away from it as fast as I could.

Behind me, the two mothers held their foals. They were always going to be their mothers. No matter what their children learned or forgot about their time with them.

* * *

Clenching myself to gallop at top speed, I reached for the recorder button and hoofed it.

Beep!

All three of us stood and held our breath...but no alarms or messed up electronic pony voices appeared. It was as silent as the Stable could get.

That alone terrified me. If there were still two dozen slaves and raiders out there...why had they made no noise?

Beep!

Brimstone had found it in the side room. Wandering inside, I'd found them on the higher section of an odd office that had a small set of stairs leading into a larger floorspace about four feet lower that contained mouldy couches and a ton of spilled filing cabinets. We stood on the higher section with a very...official...looking desk that looked out towards the classroom. There was another small door at the back

and a terminal resting just outside the door, presumably, for locking it.

With Glimmerlight pushing up beside me to hear the quiet recording (I suspected to try and comfort me over earlier by being closer too) and Brimstone peering *over* my head...I felt a little on the spot as the recorder clicked and began to play.

“What is that infernal beeping, Sandy Sculpt?”

“I'm afraid it's just this recorder, Overmare. It's one of those older types that have a weird beeping before and I think after any recordings are taken or heard. Now, I suggest we skip past this and get to business now before the storage spell fills.”

“Fine, whatever. Now look here, Mister. I don't care what the habitants of this Stable say, they are not getting any knowledge of the lab contents. They are secretive under the Act of Ministry Intelligence Safety, as passed by her majesty Princess Luna on their formation. So you cannot-”

“Damn the regulations! We're in a Stable! Have you seen any zebras?! Everypony is terrified, Overmare. They are beginning to fear you're using them somehow or creating weapons. We all saw the light as Cloudsdale went down. We don't want weapons any more. Which is why you should go public to them, allow access to tour and show them that what you have isn't insidious or warlike. Even if it's the Ministry of Arcane Science's secret hideout in a Stable for the future, we have a right to know!”

“Yes, indeed, we are in a Stable, Sculpt. A Stable that is within the lands of Equestria, broken or not. As such, we abide by the instructions provided to me by Scootaloo and-”

“The instructions provided to Beatbox, you mean.”

“The instructions provided to any Overmare, if I may correct you. My replacement of her was entirely routine based on my status within the Ministry of Arcane Science. If you wish to replace me then simply wait for the next scheduled election in eight years.”

“Bullshit, Ma'am! You know as well as I the scientists will all vote for you and they outnumber us!”

“The wonders of democracy, my dear Sculpt. Now I suggest you drop this.”

“I will not. Look, Ma'am...the people are restless. They are afraid. If you don't throw them a bone they are going to end up looking for answers themselves. Your reluctance to show them what is being done in their Stable, to take their PipBucks in for maintenance and reinstall half the electronic systems, fire detectors and PA broadcasters? That all adds up to one very dangerously speculating population Hell, some of them complain of weird feelings that your scientists are showing off behaviour which isn't...consistent. They don't like them.”

“If they threaten any of my scientists, I assure you there will be steps taken to defend ourselves. We are no threat to you. Our research is peaceful, only secret because of the regulations. Just calm down and everything will be fine. Normal residents of the Stable can go about their lives like in any other Stable. Now, I have important business to attend and you have a class to teach.”

“Fine. I will be back about this, Ma'am. In the meantime, I need permission to access the maintenance lockers for more recorders. The class are going to try them out to leave messages for the future about what it's like to grow up in a Stable.”

“Granted. The code is Twilight Sparkle.”

“Typical...”

“Watch your tone. Have them back before tomorrow.”

Glimmerlight was already scanning a wall. I quickly realised it was a map of the Stable, showing each floor in detail of layout and description. The floor two below us was completely blacked out...

“I got it! Come on, Brim! Let's see if we can get that jammed door. If you can pry it open I'll try and work it out.”

The pair of them cantered out of the office as I continued to listen.

“I don't imagine you'll have a problem of this recording being public, Overmare?”

“Not at all. I tell nothing but the truth. Tell the people they can relax. We are no threat.”

“Fine...they won't believe it, but fine. Now if you excuse me I'm going to get back to my sculpting...as per the name, har har.”

“You really aren't funny.”

Beep!

“Oh...that infernal beeping again, Sculpt?”

“It just does it as the spell is running out, that's all. If you listen back it'll beep for a bit then stop. Now goodbye, Overmare.”

The audio ceased, only the beeping continued as the storage spell continued to stay active. Lowering the PipBuck and breathing a sigh of relief, I glanced around Sandy Sculpt's workplace. There were a dozen smashed clay pots around, small statues and a little revolving table in the lower segment. I'd seen statues before, but never the process involving in making clay ones. Moving a little closer, I stepped down into the lower segment of the room.

Beep!

“Oh shut up...” I muttered, no wonder the Overmare had found this annoying. But my eyes were drawn from artpiece to artpiece. Sculpt had lived up to his name for sure. Even broken and degraded over time...these were incredible. There were ponies, dogs and even a huge dragon as tall as myself. How I wished I had a big dragon like that to look out for me!

Beep!

Beep!

Rolling my eyes, I fought the temptation to smack my PipBuck. Idly, I wondered if Protégé would like one of the statues, before picking up a more complete one of a unicorn buck and gently placing it in my bag too. Perhaps that would restore his faith in me!

Beep!

Oh come on! Stopping and snarling as best I could (not very well) I looked down at the recorder.

“When are you going to stop playing you stupid piece of...huh?”

The recorder *had* stopped. In fact. It had stopped about a half minute ago. I felt my face twist in horrific realisation...

Beep!

The Pipbuck clicked and activated its own internal power source for the speaker.

“Damn, thought this thing wasn't going to start again, Sundial here...”

SCHREEE...

My body reacted before my mind even had time to function. I galloped for the stairs back up to the door, not even hearing myself screaming for Glimmer and Brim! My hooves skittered, fell and got back up to try and dive for the-

-KCHUNG!

...door. Oh no...no NO! Please, no!

“KRREEEEE-S-S-S-Signal deeeeEEEEected!”

Static washed into the room as every light on the floor cut immediately but for the glowing green of my PipBuck. Whooshing pipes and humming generators kicked into action. Panic controlled my every emotion as I beat at the window, waving my glowing PipBuck as I saw Brimstone and Glimmerlight race toward me.

Why had it activated?! Then it struck me, through all the panic. My eyes turned back to the small four feet of stairs hidden in the darkness the lower part of the room. Glimmerlight's words echoed back to me.

“It's why it didn't go off in here, because we haven't gone up or down levels yet. If we go down far enough we'd probably get another one to activate. It was so he could assure somepony would have it when his messages began...”

I had gone down just far enough...

“Murk!” Brimstone's voice roared above the electronic filth the speakers were spraying into the room. “Get away from the window!”

“HELP ME! PLEASE! PLEASE BEFORE-”

“De-De-Deeeepressurisation...KSHHH...routiiiine active-active-active-ACTIVE!”

I screamed. No words came out other than a long terrified wail as I bucked and struck the thick glass. I felt it shudder as Brimstone Blitz slammed one desk after another into the other side...I thought, I couldn't see anything! The noise filled with a high pitched hissing as voices of dead ponies screamed clipped numbers and pressure values into the room through the PA system.

A whining burst into the room as the air became deathly thin shockingly fast. My face was soaking with tears as I tried to stay upright. Dizziness overtook me in the black void of darkness, leading me to stumble and fall. Blasts of noise sent sears of pain through me as the volume increased and static washed into the room, immobilising me as the soundwaves assaulted my sensitive ears. My head felt like it was going to explode! My...my lungs...I couldn't breathe!

A blue flare went off outside the window as Glimmerlight began tearing at the terminal and screaming something to Brimstone. What was she doing? Was...was she...

I fell. Hooves skittering my head thumped off the ground hard enough for me to almost pass out from the impact. My lungs struggled in their sickened state, before eventually falling back to small hiccups of motion.

How long I lay there waiting for the unconscious state before death. My vision blacked out as Glimmer's magic failed. Hearing nothing but a loud ringing as my hearing was overwhelmed completely, I lay still. Minutes passed...why wasn't I dead yet? Was the Stable taunting me? Giving me false hope that if I stood up the horror would continue? Oh Goddesses...just let it end now while it doesn't hurt any more...

It didn't. Instead I was left to simply lie and slowly breathe through raspy gasps. Air had fed back in

slowly...my skin felt tingly as the air pressure began to return to normal...but all too ready to pounce if I moved. I resolved to lie still, before the Stable thought I was alive to depressurise me again. Please just let me die quickly...I didn't want it to happen again! Just...just play dead until it happens...

Tnk! Tnk! Tnk!

Huh?

Tnk! Tnk!

The noise continued, a dull thumping that seemed so far away. Oh my head hurt...I had no balance as I lethargically swivelled around on the ground.

“...urk...!”

Huh? Darkness wobbled in the edges of my vision as I lolled about before finally spotting a blue star reflected through the glass...Glimmerlight's illumination spell. Brimstone was tapping the window hard enough to make any sound at all to my damaged ears.

“Murky!”

In a rush, hearing returned fully. Falling against the fence I felt every joint scream in pain from the pressure changes and my panicked spasms on the ground.

“Gli...Glimmer?” My voice barely squeaked out, sounding far away like I was underwater. A sneaking worry crept in that I had burst an ear drum from the white noise, evidenced by a constant crackling and painful thumps in my right ear. I whimpered as the thought of living with deafness began to form.

“Murky! Listen to me, quickly!”

“Glimmer...help me...”

Her face screwed up with sadness. Behind her the massive form of Brimstone loomed in the darkness, his harsh looks lit only by her magic. Glimmer's hooves were up on the window, thumping to keep my attention every time I hazed and almost passed out again.

“I blocked the signals to the room, Murky, but this door won't open because of the pressure change safety protocols. But the door at the back, that's open. You have to go quickly before the pressure sequence restarts!”

It took some time for all that to process, I was still amazed to be alive! Glimmerlight must have caught it and reversed it right on the threshold before unstoppable damage to my body had occurred. Even so...I felt as sick as I ever had as my lungs ached from over exertion in the low air environment and every inch of skin tingled from...from whatever low pressure did to a pony...oh what was wrong with me...

“Murky, please, you have to go now! I don't know how long this will hold the systems.”

Glancing back, I saw the pitch black door leading out into the unknown...an entirely dark corridor behind this one into lower levels. Trembling, I whined. Alone in the dark with little hearing, no no...I couldn't deal with that! I...I just couldn't! Not in a Stable!

“I can't! Glimmer, I just...I'm so scared...”

She was crying. Actually crying as she pressed her face close, the muffled voice through the thick glass still pounding in my ruptured ear. I just wanted to lie down and...and let it happen...rather than go into the dark on my own. Into the past by myself...

“I know, Murky. I'm sorry...I'm so sorry! We'll try and find you as fast as we can. But...but you have to be brave! I know you can do it!”

“You don't even know me!” I had to fight to not scream in hysterics, my ear was stinging on every noise. “I'm not like that! I'm just a cowardly little slave...I don't even know what I've been doing since I failed to escape! The Master has me...I only followed Brimstone because he stopped them hurting me and I...I had to

follow. Just doing...things...not really knowing where I'm going or what my end goal is any more! I don't know how to be on my own.”

Pressing my forehead against the glass, I sniffed hard. Small tears trickled from my eyes on to the surface where they trickled down like tiny drops of rain.

“I could do it once...LittlePip helped me see that. DJ-Pon3 and the mare too. But I've lost that feeling. That willpower to stand up, say 'no' and just try for the impossible. Now I look at it and step back! I...I've lost my confidence. I can't go into the dark again, I can't take that step and try...and...”

“Yes you can, Murky. You tried to escape Fillydelphia and you almost made it! Don't listen to Protégé! You can do it alone, Murky. You saved my life because you stood up to do it. You took a risk and it ended up saving Brim too.”

“I just want it to end...”

“It will, Murky. I know it's scary, hell...I'd be pissing myself if I didn't have you to look out for and try to help. I *will* try to find you down there, Murky. Trust me...”

Looking up, I saw her face, smiling near me.

“I know what it's like to have everything seem to go wrong, for your hopes and dreams to come crashing down, I'm a slave too, remember? But you have to find something to strive for, to keep going for.”

“I don't have anything...”

“No, Murky. You do...”

In that moment, as I cried freely, a flare of her magic caught my attention as I looked up and into the loving eyes of my mother, holding me as a foal and assuring me it would all be fine. Memories flooded back to me as I witnessed the picture I had drawn not ten minutes ago. The slaves had shoved me around and hurt my wings by pulling feathers. My master had whipped me for being too weak to pull the carts. But at the end of the day, there was always my mother waiting there, holding me gently and softly singing me to sleep...

Hush now...quiet now...

I exploded into tears before both Glimmerlight and Brimstone Blitz. Staggering as it all weighed down. I...I missed her...truly missed her. I wanted to go back to my mother so badly. More than anything I just wanted to see her again. Forget LittlePip and everypony else, if I could just hug my mom one more time and let her know I was alive...that her little Murky Number Seven was still fighting for that freedom she dreamed he might have.

Glimmerlight softly pressed her hoof over where mine was.

“It's going to be hard, Murky. Scary...dangerous...but never forget she is waiting for you. I've heard you talk, watched you cry and listened as Brimstone told me what you've done. About your sickness and everything else. You've been through so much, no wonder you're at wits end. It won't be easy, but you need to keep going, Murky. Never...ever forget...she's out there waiting for you.”

There was a pause as it all finally sunk in.

“...I'll try...”

“That's all slaves like us us can ever do Murky...we'll come for you. *I promise.*”

Shivering, I nodded and turned my head to look behind me at the thick black and grey beyond the back door. Terror clenched my heart, my ear was barely working and every joint ached. Trotting backwards, I finally turned fully to the door and stood before it. With one last longing glance backwards, I moved on. As I disappeared into the black, I heard Glimmerlight's parting words with my one good ear.

“I've not known you more than a few hours, but we're going to stick together, all of us. We need to in our kind of life, as slaves. Take confidence in your friends, Murky...you've got some at last. We *will* find you. Good luck...”

That was what I had been missing. The thing that gave you the confidence to carry on.

It was knowing somepony else believed in you, even if you didn't believe in yourself.

Now as I descended into the dead Stable's bowels alone, I finally realised what had driven LittlePip to fight so hard to escape.

Friends.

* * *

Footnote – Perk Attained!

Confidence Boost – When you can't go it alone any longer, take strength in those around you to help bring that hidden courage of yours out to shine! You gain +1 to Charisma.

Chapter 7: Behind Closed Doors

* * *

“Because in Stable Ninety Three, everypony entered...but no-pony would ever leave.”

“What was it like to realise you had friends?”

Nothing like I could ever have imagined and nothing like I could ever understand.

From the beginning of my life, even with the care of my mother I had never been a part of any group of friends. Sure, I'd heard of the concept here and there but generally all I saw to my eyes was a *group* telling me what to do rather than an individual. 'Friendship', to me, was not a state I had any reason being in, for my eternal born duty was to stay away from the groups and merely wait till they decided what they wanted from me.

A lifetime of being chained to a post out in the soaking wet weather at night, shivering from the cold as I watched laughing slavers share drinks around an indoors fire. Endless nights of other slaves huddled together for warmth, sharing food between themselves but roughly bucking me away from them if I tried to join their little herd. Repeated incidents featuring friends arguing over how many caps I was worth at the slave markets.

Those sorts of things eventually drove me to simply stop wondering about friendship. It all seemed to be about being equals. I wasn't an equal, I wasn't born to be one and as far as I knew I wasn't *meant* to be one.

The concept of friendship though...it soured in my mind. Became nothing more than a designation of groups that I was never meant to be a part of. I didn't believe it was a bad thing...I knew ponies could be nice to one another. I had just never expected that such a group could ever include me. Who in Equestria would want to be friends with a skinny little pegasus slave so incompetent he can't even do what his cutie mark denotes his talent as? What good pony would ever take the time to want to get to know somepony who cried at the drop of a pin and whose body was so messed up he couldn't even fly or live more than a day without RadAway? Why would any master ever want to be friends with his slave?

Even after meeting ponies like the mysterious mare in Fillydelphia, I don't think it really clicked. She was an oddity, somepony I had been blessed to meet amidst the long slow life I had been leading. But she was not a friend, not then.

So...what changed?

Why is it that I suddenly felt that...that connection? Or link or...spark or something! I couldn't tell exactly what it was, but all of a sudden something had changed. I had found two ponies who had not abandoned me, abused me or taken advantage of me over a time. Even Brimstone Blitz, the Great Raider Warlord, seemed content for me to hang around them...if under extreme warnings. But Glimmerlight...

Sorry, this is going to sound pretty terrible...but she really was a little glimmer of hope for me. From the moment I met her, she had been nothing but a positive influence and determined optimist. I had only known her for perhaps six hours and yet she treated me like a friend she'd known for years. Perhaps she was right...ponies under such extreme circumstances had to bond together to take what support they could.

Perhaps she was right. Even just knowing Glimmerlight was there, that she had reminded me of one good reason to keep trying...had promised to come and find me...it stimulated me into going just that little bit further.

That bit further into the dark...

My mother once told me that friendship was the single greatest achievement of Equestria before the war. It had bound everypony together in a unified purpose and wondrous peace. Sitting curled up beside her while listening, I had just been a skinny little colt sketching in a journal about the same size as himself. The idea had seemed nice, but at the time, all I had wondered was that if everypony worked together, who decided which ponies had to...had to be...the slaves...

...

“Do you want to stop?”

No...sorry, I...I'm fine. Just...

...

I grew up seeing slavery as the only way of life. Can you imagine how awful that feels? To look back on the first however many years of your life and realise what you spent it believing? That even after somepony escapes the Pit in front of you, that even after you *try* to escape you can't stop blindly obeying your master's every word? To be such a slave that even when you want to be free you can't quite stop wanting to just be a good little slave and do what you're told...

Well, all I know is, she was the first one to make me realise that ponies could stand as equals. The mare showed me we could care. LittlePip showed me we could be free. But it was Glimmer who showed me that helping one another and working together to benefit all your friends is the way ponies are supposed to act. Even if I didn't properly understand friendship or what it entailed, it was her that made the difference at the critical point. She showed all it could offer in one simple little moment deep within a Stable to help me push on.

I was injured, terrified and about to face all my fears alone, but she gave me hope to keep going, survive and start the path to escape once again.

* * *

A long time ago, my master in Manehattan had told me a story while drunk. A librarian by trade, he sought to bring books back to the ponies of today. It would have been idealistic, if he were not a raging paranoid alcoholic. Sipping his liquor and flamboyantly stumbling around his collection of pre-war books, he had proudly proclaimed that 'the dark of the past would only be repeated if we didn't learn from it!' I hadn't paid him much attention while attempting to clean the room up and trying to ignore that in his drunken bender he had forgotten to feed me for four days.

Screaming to the clouds above, he had erupted in a frenzied tale of Princess Luna being banished to the dark side of the moon where she could no longer see the world that she had hurt. Of being trapped in eternal darkness for a thousand years bereft of the sun or the sky. That the ordeal left her a crushed vessel of evil ready to wreck havoc upon Equestria. I still remembered how he had dropped his glass, grabbing my little face painfully tightly and speaking in hushed, psychotic and deeply disturbing whispers. He told me that the pegasi were trying to do the same to all of us on the surface. That after two hundred years the cracks were starting to show. That trapped in the darkness we would show the worst qualities we had.

The story had passed from my mind as simply a hatred of my wings. But now in the present day, I wished I had paid him more heed.

Stood within the darkest hole Equestria could ever build, I might as well have been Princess Luna on the moon. Isolated and surrounded by the unknown with only a malfunctioning and pitifully small PipBuck light to see by. Even my natural eyesight in the dark (perhaps for night flying?) failed to help me much with absolutely no ambient light to see by that wasn't emanating from me anyway. With courage as highly strung as one overstretched wire on a musical instrument, I had trotted through dead corridors and black voids. Maze like, they endlessly winded around. Every ten feet the pattern repeated in the modular design, a lazy effort by my artistic eye, but right now it only helped to give me the impression that I could be going in circles and *not even know it*.

Not that anything was helped by a dead ringing in one ear. The blast of white noise in the office had...I thought...destroyed my sensitive hearing somehow. Burst ear drum? Biological shutdown? I didn't know enough about ears or pony bodies to know. All I knew was it hurt badly and the hearing from my right ear was utterly gone.

Every single step had been an effort. Sweat was clinging to my body from the stuffy underground heat. There was no movement of air, just a humid and musty aura that stunk of chemicals and oil. (How did Stable ponies get used to this?) Sometimes, I would randomly gasp as I felt the air pressure drop significantly before screaming in terror and galloping backwards. After a few heartstopping moments of terror, I realised that this area was not reacting to me...perhaps the ventilation ducts were blocked or broken? It was better than my other theory...that the entire corridor had once initiated its deadly purging of life long ago...

Sighing, I settled down against the wall and curled up on the damp floor. Clutching my ear gently, I silently willed the sound to return. Please Goddesses...I didn't want to go deaf. Don't leave me with this now! Pressing my head against the wall and whimpering, little streaks of water from above ran down the edges through cracks and breaches and dripped over my goggles. It didn't help to keep my mind off other bodily problems I was having.

My throat was dry to the point of cracking pain. The temptation to gulp down my RadAway to quench my neglected thirst was overwhelming, held back only by the knowledge that was my only lifeline should I stumble upon a magically contaminated area. Stomach churning, I felt the bullet wound from Ragini in it suck and ache as hunger threatened to become a more immediate threat. I'd spent so long on adrenaline and fear that mere sustenance requirements were forgotten too easily. Now I was paying the price.

If it weren't for the horrific concept of being left down here...I might have just wanted to curl up and cry at the entire situation. Instead, I rather pathetically turned and attempted to lap what water I could dripping from the walls, praying with all my heart it wasn't contaminated. A sharp taste of iron entered my mouth but the liquid at least stopped the burning feeling on each breath. Now to just...

Turning, my eyes peered through the thick goggles and saw only three feet of blank corridor before everything turned into the void once more.

...get out of here...

Blank corridors...endless darkness...horrible things waiting in it...lethal ponies stalking its halls and only two friends out there looking for me. Even as I tried to grasp the horror all around me, the light on my PipBuck sparked brighter before beginning to fade away briefly between bursts. Feeling my legs tremble as the darkness seemed to creep on every flicker of my PipBuck, I tried to force them to move. To get active before the shadows crept close enough to take me forever in this metal prison of the past. I tapped my PipBuck, shaking it to try and get the light to work better. Come on! Please...

A little jostling later, Sundial's PipBuck brought light back to my world...at least, two feet of light.

Keep going...just keep moving, don't stop and think. Tramping further, I felt each step with my hoof before placing weight down. Panels shifted uneasily on rusted connections as I felt some of them bend under me. The continual water damage had, over two hundred years, given the construction of this level a noticeably fragile state. The thought of it breaking open and dropping me into an eternal darkness below was fresh in my mind as I crept further forward. It was so silent down here, insulated away from the raiders' temporary camp above.

As much as I hated to allow my mind to think on the past, the endless monotony and directionless journey was setting my mind to lazily wander against all of my best efforts. I tried to keep thinking about Glimmerlight. In six hours I'd gained a closer 'friend' than I'd had in my entire life. But something was still unnerving me about her...something I had noticed but not dwelt on.

Both Glimmer and I had been through hellish lives. However while mine was a tragic monotony and inevitability of a sad end, hers was one of depressing loss and crushing pain. She had run from her parents, lost all of her friends and presumably even a lover to rampaging raiders who in turn had abused her and then

sold her on to slavery. Having been on the receiving end of a few raiders for less than five minutes...the idea of being properly caught by them chilled me to the bone. What had they done to her...

However that was the problem. Her experiences *should* have broken her. Yet she seemed effortlessly happy and whimsically aloof about all consequence or worry. Glimmerlight smiled in Fillydelphia, joked with a raider, teased slavers and carried a positive attitude like nothing had ever gone wrong for her.

Were Brimstone's words that she was simply somepony truly special all there was to it? Really? Even by my weak standards...I couldn't imagine anypony going through all that and being so...unaffected. Even if it was sheer strength, something had to keep her going and honestly, I was pretty interested to find out how she did it. I could probably use that sort of help.

The light flickered again. Dying for a few seconds.

“Oh come on...please don't...please don't! I...I can't see anything!”

SheeeKRNK!

Screaming, I hurled myself away from the sound before crying out and clutching my ear. Pain seared across the right hand side of my head as the deaf ear still reacted sensitively to the noise. Wailing as the feeling spiked and arced back and forth, my balance disappeared, leaving me to stumble and fall until the noise, pain and disorientation disappeared. Quivering in a heap, I tried to hold the ear as closed as was possible. The...the automatic door opening beside me had almost immobilised me by sound alone never mind the sudden shock. What was *wrong* with my ear?

The horror struck me. Could it even *be* fixed if it was a tainted mutation on me?

The door (why hadn't I spotted it?) jammed, before continuing to rise. That was new, something I hadn't encountered yet. Perhaps somewhere I could simply hide under a bed and try with my better ear to listen for Brimstone's big thumping gait?

Looking up at the black void inside I-

Eyes stared back at me. A faint outline of somepony reaching forward through the door. The darkness itself was convulsing and forming into something born of the past. Almost choking on my cry, I fell backwards, hiding my face and beginning to wail as I hid my vision from the ghostly presence!

“NO! No no no! Please, DON'T! Glimmer! Moom!”

...nothing happened.

Trembling so hard I could scarcely control my own body, I risked opening my eyes again to see nothing but the dull green illumination of my PipBuck that had restarted itself. There was nothing there. What...what the fu-

Reeling from dizziness, I pulled my tired and sore body to my hooves and trotted toward the dark room, holding up my PipBuck out in front of me as though the light would ward things off. There was...nothing...

Instead, I trotted carefully inside, turning back and watching behind me as I retreated into the room. What the hell had that been? Was it just my imagination taking over? Was this Stable haunted? Were...were ghosts driving the horrors being inflicted on raider after slave after helpless pony above?

“H-hello?” I hadn't whispered fearfully for more than half a second before I facehoofed at myself. Of course no-pony was down here. What was going to happen? Were the ghosts going to leap up and respond?

Alright...no more attempts at sarcasm...because they were *clearly* helping.

Right...courage Murky...think...it was just, uh, just an odd reflection of your PipBuck's light on something in the room! No! The PipBuck hadn't been on! Maybe just...just a thick smoke in the air? Was there still any? This was too dark...where was I? The roof was the same, but the room opened up a lot. Almost squeaking in fear I saw three other points of light until realising it was the reflection of my PipBuck in three long horizontal windows around each wall looking out into the corridors. I had been right beside a

corner based room and not even noticed in the dark. Waving the PipBuck back and forth, it became more obvious as some sort of kitchen. Or...a canteen? Was that what they called it?

A boxy metallic counter ran across one third of the room, the rest being taken up with permanently positioned industrial tables and thick padded seats. Small scraps littered the floor, I saw magazines (How had they gotten them in a Stable?) still open upon the tabletops with rotten food left from spilled plates. Everything was metal, from the cutlery and plates to even the glasses and...hell...were they metal *straws*?

I glanced behind me at that door again...just to be sure. I could only imagine myself seeing that...that figure again. Oh Goddesses high above preserve my soul from the dead past...

Wait a minute...canteens had food, right? Could any have been preserved?

Faster than I thought I could confidently move, I crawled on to a table to hop on to the kitchen counter, being unable to reach up to climb up on my own. (Seriously, height considerations Stable builders, think of the little bucks and mares. How did LittlePip manage in her own Stable?) Trotting past perspex displays and more strewn plates I hopped down to the far side of the kitchen surface and began shoving the store room door. With a painfully loud (literally, on my ear) noise it squeaked and squealed open on rusty hinges to allow the most foul smell I had ever encountered. I had hidden in a pile of corpses...but it was nothing compared to the stale, rotten and contained stench of an entire stockpile of food rotting for two hundred years in a sealed compartment. Sickly and sweet, my stomach rebelled, retching and dry heaving before I could hold my breath and force myself to go in. Shelf after shelf of mangy, often furry and melted looking food broken open through degraded packaging littered the room on all sides. My hooves squelched and squished as they trod on things I didn't even want to look down at. Cramped and disorganised, the food storage was nothing more than a deadzone. Hope emerged as I spotted three fridges at the far end and with a little work to pull them open, got a look inside.

The first two were only repeats of the general storage. But finally, the mare of luck threw me a bone or, in this case, a small sealed tin of...well...I couldn't exactly read what it was. But a quick examination of the picture revealed what looked like...uh...little small things in a red or orange sauce?

Shoving the can into a pocket on my front right leg, I quickly retreated from the foul stock room before I felt the need to breathe again. A quick scouring of the cutlery drawers revealed a can opener as I sat down and tried my best to turn it in my mouth. Clearly, the chef had been a unicorn. One without any wish for earth pony staff either. Straining in my teeth, it brought back memories of my rock farm master taking my starving self and getting me to open his food...before eating it in front of me knowing full well I was malnourished. With a sudden jerk, I felt my mouth slip off the handle and jar my loose tooth against the tin. Holding a hoof over my mouth, I tried to stifle the frustrated shout in anger before thumping the cupboards with my other hoof instead at the pain and unsettling feeling of that tooth wobbling around. Partly, I wondered if it really was making itself known somehow every time I thought too hard about being a slave...

Taking up the tin, I bit the handle more carefully and managed to pry most of the lid off. The smell was like the one life line I had been waiting for...fresh tomato sauce around the...the...

...what *were* they? Beans? If they were...they were some pretty oddly shaped beans. Sighing, I still managed to smile and almost nuzzle the tin at the thought of food. While settling it upright, I spotted a host of small cupboards near the end of the kitchen counter's locked gate around a big safe. Something to investigate after I'd had my food...

Really, I don't know what drove me. But before chowing down I found myself climbing back over the counter to settle down on one of the musty old padded seats and place the food on an empty plate I wiped as clean as was possible. It felt...wrong...to just devour the scrap of food in this place. Not when ponies had once dined here properly.

An interesting sight it must have made...me sitting there chewing some sort of near tasteless beans from a plate. Alone in a dark and abandoned Stable lit only by one damaged PipBuck and surrounded by the aftermath of an event that likely killed everypony here. Like a ghost of the past, I simply sat and ate, feeling my stomach finally settle down from the small meal. Really, I couldn't help but smile. Actual sustaining

food going down was a feeling I could not understate at this time. For one brief moment of calm clarity...it let me forget about the dark. About the pain throbbing in my right ear and the dry breathing from sick lungs. To pay no heed to my terror of real ghosts appearing before me or the suspicion that my rather active imagination was just beginning to send me off the edge of sanity.

No...I just sat there and ate my beans like a good little Stable Dweller, waiting to go back to his place of work and continue the monotony of being enslaved to an underground world. Just...just for one moment I wanted to pretend this was my home. That I didn't have to go back to Fillydelphia. That I was simply having my daily meal before I went back to...to...whatever I worked as. The place would need a clean, but those...those broken plates could be undented right? That fork still embedded in its food and dropped hastily would just need a little clean.

...those balloons with some numbers on them would just need re-inflated...

Around me lay the remains of this Stable's past. A quiet and forgotten place where once ponies had...had laughed and...and eaten or drank and sung or wished well and...partied...

Feeling myself welling up, I put my head down on the table, my hooves crossed around it and simply cried.

* * *

I was not alone. Without a doubt, I could feel something around here. Even as I trotted as quietly as possible, it was becoming more apparent that there was something lurking in the darkness down here. Sitting in the canteen had only been hurting me. Something about the evidence of pony life but absolutely no remains was just downright freaky. That and I kept anticipating to look up and see faces staring in through the windows. So I'd left into the corridors once again and decided to keep exploring...the more I looked, the higher the chances of finding stairs leading to a higher level.

Up, always up...towards the surface...towards the sky.

But right now, the Stable seemed intent to reveal none of its staircases. Instead a growing fear of being locked down here forever with the drifting ghosts of the past was setting in. My mane itched and my skin crawled. Stopping in the middle of...of...*where was I?* Was the canteen back a corner and down the hall? Or...wait, was it to the left or right back there?

My heart was pumping hard enough to actually be a dull thumping to my one good ear. Every flicker of the PipBuck threatened to leave somepony's eerie form in the darkness ahead of me. I spun to look behind me on every other step, before quickly turning again to check the way I'd come from. Sometimes I did this multiple times if I heard something...a gurgle or tapping from nearby. Sometimes I turned so often and so fast I forgot which I was meant to be looking in the first place...

Oh Glimmer...please find me...

A humming picked up from above me, vibrating the entire endless corridor before wisps of white noise and static drifted down the hallways. Voices...unidentifiable and warped. Part of my mind tried to scream that it was just some poor slave activating the Stable's killswitch again above...but somehow it didn't quite stick hard enough to let the fear clenching my heart unwind. A PA system loudspeaker on the wall hissed lowly as I passed...two steps later it cut for no apparent reason, plunging me once again into complete audio blackout.

Squeaking as my hoof almost tripped over something, I cantered to the side, my PipBuck held out in one shaky hoof at the...the...

A red scooter, abandoned in the hallway, tipped on its side. As rusty as the walls, it looked to have almost fallen apart on the minor impact with my PipBuck leg. Glancing around for anything else, I found nothing but a fallen bell from the scooter. Not designed for hooves to pick up, its small size had almost fallen between two floor panels. Without really knowing why, I leant down and bit it, storing it in one small leg pocket.

Okay, perhaps I tried it once...

Bing bing!

Storing it safely, I lifted my head up again.

This corridor really did just go on forever.

Turn after turn...

Same modular ten feet every...single...time...

A glint in the darkness made me perk up. I might have been fearful, but anything in this void was a thankful respite. Breaking into what kind of a slow gallop I could, I aimed for it, seeing my PipBuck light reflected in thick murky glass. Sloshing through some low water running down the hallway and kicking aside little metal cylinders on the floor I threw myself against the glass, staring in. What was it?! ANYTHING!

It was a canteen with a freshly dirty plate from red tomato sauce sitting on the table in front of me.

Every muscle seemed to wither and die as I slumped against the glass, banging my head on it as the sheer fruitlessness of my efforts to make progress down in the dark were setting in. Cramped corridors and thick air muddled my perception. Had I really just...just spent the last...uh...hour? Was it an hour? Oh Goddesses...

Thumping my hoof on the glass, I muttered nothings to myself. I wanted a direction...I'd always had one, however vague it had become. But down here...it was just endless trotting in a state of false trust for Glimmerlight to find me.

No-pony had ever stuck to their word with me...why would this be any different? I hadn't even properly been struck with anxiety over the dead past in here other than my sadness at the canteen yet either and already I was cracking.

Guess friends weren't the big help that I'd hoped they might be...

My head bumped once again on the glass. Sighing, I opened my eyes to stare inside. Maybe I could just hide under a table...

There was a shape behind the counter.

Every muscle and litre of blood in my entire body froze on the spot. Like in some stupid reaction to freeze and hope I wasn't spotted. I didn't even blink as fearful tears burned my eyes.

Movement...not a defined form. Just occasional edges and shifting silhouettes as...as something moved around.

Sound floated through the door around the corner that led into the canteen...

...get into the lower levels, they're down there! Put anypony who can't fight in their rooms safely! Get out the canteen, everypony! Get out! GET OUT! THEY'RE TRYING TO-

It was interspersed by a hazed static and electronic screaming at a low volume behind the words. The shape flowed back and forth, before a distinctly pony shaped head finally turned toward me...and then darted the entire presence into thicker shadow before disappearing entirely. The sounds clicked and fell silent.

What...the...hell...

Eventually, my muscles stiffly regained the power of movement. I wanted to run. To hide. But *where?!* I could run for hours down here and just...well who knew what I'd find?

Turning, I quickly cantered inside the canteen again. If that...thing...left it, then at least it was the one place I knew it wasn't. But the sight of that head turning slowly towards me...featureless...just a shade in the shadows.

I couldn't help it, I dived under the tables and curled into a ball. Fear stopped me from even whimpering out of a deadly thought of it returning. My eyes wouldn't close...what if I opened them and it was right there in front of me?! Simply staring at the floor counters before me, the unceasing darkness hiding everything not two feet from my head and the utterly silent ambience other than the occasional creepy vibe was just...getting to me. The thought of the Mall was like a homecoming. I wanted my pig sty with all the stupid Pinkie music in the air to remind me that she was still watching me forever. Hell...I even wished, not for the first time, that I were back in Slit's factory. Even the toxic atmosphere in there was preferable to the suffocating lack of space down here. But no...I couldn't get back to them. I'd tried to trot off and just ended back here. I was just going to curl into a ball and be as unnoticeable as possible until somepony came around...hopefully before I died of hunger.

Dying of hunger while lying pathetically on the floor of an abandoned canteen dozens of feet underground in the pitch dark of a place meant to sustain ponies. Sometimes...there was no end to the irony of my life.

Staring for longer still, something caught my eye.

On the ground...an audio recorder. Now that *hadn't* been there before! Crawling out, I grabbed it. To hell with being afraid of the past...I needed sound. Something! *Anything!* Some source of sensory input to stop my mind becoming as enclosed as the Stable around me before it drove me insane! Who knows...perhaps...um...they would be telling where to go!

Jamming it into my PipBuck, I noticed the only remaining button was the play button. The stop button lay nearby on the ground, broken and unusable. If I started this playback...there was no stopping it.

I hesitated for a few seconds, before pushing it.

Kzzzt...SSZZZT!

Squirming and yelping out loud, I clutched my ear as the recorder's volume setting spiked. Eyes watering, I tried to hold my right ear shut and protected it as best I could until the stabbing pains went away from my head.

"...right, it's running. You ready Runner Bean? This is it."

"Sure thing Sculpy, we got the weapons from the armoury all here. They won't have anything so...hopefully this'll be pretty easy. Just gallop in, point a few guns, get them to stop all the weapon making, right?"

"Yeah...no blood. But we don't have a choice."

"..."

"The audio log can't hear you if you nod, Bean. We need this stored. We need the proof for future generations in here, to prove we did this right. That we didn't kill anypony. They have gone too far, taking all the damn Stable apart to 'fix' things that didn't need fixing. The random PA system glitches and draining inordinate amounts of power that we need for hot water and lighting! The Overmare keeps telling us not to worry, but they wouldn't keep it secret if it weren't anything big. We have a right to know...and we need to find out."

"You gonna narrate this entire thing?"

"Context, my friend. Context. People must know why we did this as much as what happened. We must survive down here and secrets do not permit that, not when it is something that could endanger our Stable...our children need this of us, their keepers, to ensure their survival. That is what the Stables were for, why we in StableTec built them. Now these Ministry of Arcane Science lot come in, usurp our authority and seek to ruin the safety we dream of with their meddling and research. This record is that future Stable

generations will understand.”

“Hey, Sculpy...the others are waiting, everypony on the top levels is heading down to their rooms below, out of the way. We need to move. Now.”

“Alright...I'll be two seconds.”

His voice became lower. Clutching the recorder closely, my ear ringing and feeling swollen inside, I glanced around me at the quiet canteen. Just what had those Ministry Scientists done to the Stable to cause all this? How messed up were those ponies to make such technology?

“One of the foals managed to creep through an air duct last week, a filly called Snowy Gust. She got into the science areas on a whim somehow. Only thing is...when they sent her back out, she couldn't remember a damn thing. Why would you need to wipe the memory of a child? That little filly would never have understood any of that stuff. They need to be stopped...I can't watch the foals I teach go through this sort of...of...horror. You don't mess with memories. It never works.”

“Hey! Sculpy, dude, come on!”

I heard a scuffling, a click of some weapons and the sound of Sandy Sculpt trotting.

“Right, thank you all for meeting here so quick. They watch the atrium, but this canteen should be pretty safe till we get close enough. We don't need them locking us out.”

Wait, the canteen!

“Well, you lead the way Sandy. You're the one recording this for whatever reasons. We'll get down there...and get back up as soon as we can to the atrium to negotiate once we've made sure it's made safe. Lead on...”

My heart leapt. If I just paid careful (and painful) attention to their sounds, perhaps I could follow the recording by listening for turns? I needed to get out of this void black area of the Stable...they could be my only hope. Overcoming my fears had to be done...I needed to do it sometime, to be able to stand up strong if I were to ever escape.

“Alright, everypony ready? No stopping now, it's make or break for us.”

“Right!”

“We're in!”

“Let's do this!”

“YEEEEAH!”

“With you!”

“Right behind you...”

* * *

“Okay, bucks and mares! We're going to head down the main hallway, see if we can get some distance covered before they spot us. Move it!”

Pushing my exhaustion to the back of my mind, I galloped toward the largest corridor again. The

sounds of hooves clattering on the ground through the audio recorder sent beats of stinging pain through my head. The darkness ahead parted at my PipBuck's light reached it, a little island of visibility around me that provided the only warning of any obstacles.

“Hey everypony, don't activate your eyes forward sparkle! They'll pick it up on their security terminals if you do. We'll just navigate manually. Left!”

The rushing sounds shifted, harder strikes as the dozen ponies rounded. Without even thinking I copied them, finding myself darting round a sharp bend of the Stable layout. This could work!

“And remember to-YARGH!”

I tripped, falling head over hooves as something collided with my front legs.

“Urgh...who the hell left a scooter here...hey, Tulip Bloom! What do you think you're doing riding around here?”

“I'm sorry sir...”

“Just...argh...go back to your room, quickly. No! Don't stop for your scooter, just leave it, go now! Keep going, everypony!”

Wanting to nurse my bruised leg, instead I fought to get back on my hooves and gallop onwards into the dark once again. Corridors passed on either side, was I hearing it properly? Had they turned?

“Right!”

But...but there was no right!

SheeeKRNK!

Almost invisible on the grey walls, the door slid open as I ran directly at the wall, before slamming shut behind me. I was definitely in new territory now. This place seemed cleaner, more preserved. Perhaps the water hadn't leaked in here?

“Come on, everypony! Keep up!”

A thick *clang* sounded in the recording. A few seconds later, my own hoof struck a loose panel that made an identical sound. I was falling behind! Praying to my hooves to move faster, I sprinted as fast as I possibly could imagine, as though I was running for freedom, to catch up!

“Sculpy! Are we doing the right thing?”

“We're not going to hurt anypony! But they won't listen to reason anymore, we have to intimidate them somehow into telling us what they're up to! Parts of the Stable are starting to act weird after they get involved! Left!”

Shit! There was a left ten feet back the way...had I overshot it?

“Right!”

No no no! They were getting ahead!

“WAIT FOR ME!” I screamed as I turned and galloped back around the corner. There were three or four right hand turns to choose from that I could run past! Was...was I lost?

“Crap, Sculpy! Gloomy's fallen behind, that battle saddle's weighing him down!”

“Oh for...we're down the second right, Gloomy! Hurry up!”

“I'm coming!”

Without hesitation I dove into the corridor and immediately fell down a short flight of steps. Shouting out in pain as my ear struck the ground, I tumbled and rolled into the next corner's wall below a window with a dull **WHUD!** Staggering and woozy, my balance was utterly shot from my head spinning after the impact. Around me the darkness seemed to blur and shift in my dizzied vision. Shapes moved and flowed back and forth like...like the group of ponies I was following. A clammy sweat broke over me as I realised I couldn't remember the way back up from here. I was entirely at the mercy and direction of the past...

“Hey, what are you lot doing?!” A new voice, educated and refined.

“Shit! Grab him!”

“Wait, what? Get off me! GET OFF!”

CRASH!

The sound of cans and tins falling around me broke even as I trotted unsteadily into the room, some sort of medical bay. Dented trays were strewn around my feet, my own hooves clattering through them even as the same sounds echoed from the recorder.

“He might warn them! Gloomy! Take out that camera before they spot us! Somepony grab him! Hold him down!”

BLAM!

Whining, I covered my ear as the sudden boost in volume and static made it ache.

“Lock him in the storage unit. We'll come and set him free later on, don't panic, but we can't risk you doing-”

“You have guns! What are you DOING!? We...we aren't dangerous!”

“That's all we want to check, sir. Now please, get in and we'll come back for you!”

A thick metal door stood locked ahead of me. Placing my hooves on it, I felt how securely it was rusted into place...

“Please! I...I don't like confined spaces! NO! Noooo!”

Clunk! The lock descended. Even as I felt the orange and browned lock...it occurred to me they never had been able to get back to him...

Whatever killed the Stable was likely on this recording...

“Let's keep going, we'll head to the Memorial Room and cut through the back passage, the cameras they installed don't cover that way until right at the end.”

There was only one way to go, I waited for the group to move off before joining them. It took me a few seconds to realise that I'd drawn my empty BB pistol in my mouth without even knowing...as though I was with them...

Running with the ghosts of the past to try and save the Stable that had already died long ago.

More voices broke into the recording...no...lots! Around me the Stable opened out into a giant room, much like the atrium. How large was this place if I hadn't even found the science levels yet?! Looming

giants towered in the dark ahead of me, massively thick and tall pillars reflecting only a vague light from their distinctly non metallic surfaces. The green of my PipBuck revealed them on all sides.

“Everypony! Stop working and get to your rooms! Just stay down and quiet until we give the all clear!”

Shouts and stamping in all directions echoed off the walls from my PipBuck, giving the sensation of the noise existing in all areas of the room. Tramping across and oddly soft floor...it finally occurred to me what the tall objects were.

Trees.

Giant indoor trees...thick with frozen sap and rotted wood from years of neglect and starvation in the dark. The ground below me was thick with dirt, loose and dry like the crater. Small round and rotten objects bumped against my hooves or squished with a thick goopy green substance if I stood on one. Apples...

This was where they had grown food. An underground...what were they called? Oar Chart? Or Chand? Sounds from the recording drifted between the trees and off walls as I heard ponies dropping the baskets that lay around me. Hard bucks to grab what they could shook the area. Without really knowing why, I gave one tree a half buck, before screaming as my hoof became trapped in the rotten wood. Pulling desperately, I fell out of it atop a basket full of rotten apples, catapulting it up to land right on top of me. Feeling runny...something...and bits of goopy apple collapse all around my head, I felt suddenly very appreciative of my goggles. Without hesitation I threw it off, almost slipping on the residue all over the loose dirt.

Shivering with the slimy rot and mould covering my body and head, I staggered back against a tree, shaking myself clean or rubbing myself against it to clean the worst of it off. Ergh...

“Alright, Sculpt! I think that's everypony out of here, why did you sent them away if we aren't going to actually shoot anyway? Hell I don't think I even grabbed ammo.”

“We don't know what those scientists have cooked up, Runner Bean. I just want everypony to be safe.”

“That StableTec mantra still going, eh?”

“Always.”

I might have felt proud of Sculpt to have such a noble intention. But really, I was spending most of my time trying not to throw up as my stomach rebelled. Now that I had something in me *to* throw up...it seemed to be relishing the opportunity after the vile apples had coated my body. Even that was just trying to distract me from the fact that these giant crooked dead husks that once were trees were scaring me. Standing in the middle of the room, the walls were too far away to see in the dark.

For all I knew...I was standing in a dark haunted forest outside. The feeling of displacement grew, an oddly open space within an enclosed area. Conflicting thoughts of being outside were mangled with the reminders that this dark place was still under...how much of a mountain now? Shaking my head and whimpering, I immediately ran forward to catch up with the recording. For a horrifying few seconds...no walls appeared. Only more trees. Was I going to be lost in an area without even walls to navigate by? How large was this room? Was I even going the right way?!

“There's the Memorial Room, the far end! Let's go, I don't think we have much time left before word gets out!”

“Wait! The living areas are just beyond it. If we rush right in we'll be trying to get to the staircases with every Stable resident in the way. Give them some time. Take out any cameras near the main exit, make them think we're going that way if they've even realised. Then get into the Memorial Room and bunker down for a few minutes.”

“You're the boss.”

“No...I'm just a concerned pony. This will turn out right, Bean, I promise. Now everypony, rest a minute or two...but don't make much noise. We don't know who may overhear. I'm gonna go check on everypony...”

The recording seemed to pause, but I could still hear ambient noises in the background of ponies settling down on the dirt of chomping on apples. My galloping ceased as a lack of direction took over. Wandering back and forth, I discovered there were actually multiple areas to this forest, divided by separate large rectangular openings. Around the edges were blank walls and the occasional jammed door. Dirtied windows looked in from side rooms while a thin balcony ran around the top of the room. It was barely visible, only if I were right under it and shining my PipBuck upwards.

Settling down next to a tree on all fours, I sighed...I'd lost my direction again. Hopefully my perception of “the far end” was the same as the recording's. I tried to imagine all the concerned ponies around me, clutching their weapons as they grabbed the occasional apple. I could hear a couple murmuring to one another nearby...the thump of some bucking apples from trees...clicks of weapons. Part of me wished I could see them...my ghostly companions on the quest to discover just what was going on in this Stable.

The thought stopped me...when had I become interested in finding out about the past? It *always* scared me. So why was there this strange feeling of-

Something cantered between the trees.

Hiding behind the tree in a heartbeat, I fought to stop myself whimpering as I poked my goggled eyes around to watch.

...it was in the trees...in the same room as me. *It was right here.*

Oh Goddesses...oh sweet Luna...oh great Celestia...save me...

Moving and grazing, the blurry shape drifted between trees and flowed round bends. All sound seemed to deaden...the recording lost volume and was replaced with a static that warped all audio. The closer it came...the greater the distortion. Like black wind it whisped around and to each tree in turn. Never a single clear shape, bouncing from the darkness and blending in as though it was a living shadow.

Then it disappeared. Wait...had it? Where was it?

Every part of my mind screamed otherwise. I moved out from the tree, glancing to either side and shining my PipBuck's light. Each one of my legs was shaking so hard I could feel my whipcord tied PipBuck sliding down to my hoof. Drips of sweat from an oddly humid atmosphere poured off of me.

Thnk!

“Aiiiee!”

Squeaking, I dove behind a tree, crouching as the sudden woody sound clopped down through the forest. Ahead of me, a tree swung light back and forth.

It was there...

Like a dark smudge on my goggles, it circled the tree. That pony shaped fuzzy head reared up, looking around.

Run, Murk. My mind was bucking my own brain to obey. Turn off your light! But I couldn't move my hoof...

The shape drifted closer to the ground, moving to another tree. I was in clear view...

Murk, *run!* But I was frozen in place.

Moving steadily closer, the head turned...watching me across the forest. There were no eyes...just the silhouette of a pony against the lesser black around it.

Gradually, almost anticlimactically...it drifted further away and disappeared through another rectangular door to the next apple tree facility. My eyes couldn't leave the doorway...if I blinked...what if it came back? What if it came up behind me when I moved on? Gradually, tree to tree, I shuffled and scooted forward, using every ounce of ability to sneak that I knew to get close to the door it had left through. I needed to see that it had properly disappeared. Peeking around the edge, there was nothing but another rotten grouping of the trees and in such pitch darkness that I could see nothing past the first few feet...just like everywhere else down here.

My world was nothing but a small radius around me...the feeling of vulnerability was really beginning to set in. The PipBuck was still flickering too...sometimes I felt like it was my only source of life to-

The PipBuck died briefly.

It *flew* past me back into my room. So close all I saw was a shifting of darkness so subtle only my fear ridden nerves spotted it.

I *screamed*. Falling back, my hooves flying up to try and ward it away. At my cry, it rounded off, a pony's vague shape appearing, eyes staring for the brief second before my own closed. The PipBuck screamed in static, sending my broken ear into new flares of thick pain. Hooves flailing to try and get a purchase, I bumped and fell for a few more feet.

Thnk!

Another tree shook...then another...and two more. Then silence.

Crying, I had to pull my goggles off to let it out. Even as the static gradually died down I just kept sobbing and shivering against the wall...even as some more sounds of faded tree hits sounded before dying off completely.

"kzzssshh...right...we ready? Far side, we're off. Let's get to the Memorial Room and move on from there."

I didn't want to move.

"Hey, Gloomy? What's wrong?"

The sound washed in faded static at the response. I didn't want to move...so scared...so scared...

"We're all scared, Gloomy...but we're all here for you. We'll find out what's down there and then we'll go back to a better life. Just stay with me, okay?"

Getting to my hooves, something about Sculpt's voice was...reassuring. A teacher by trade, his words held great poise. Almost fatherly. Something I'd never known...

"One step after another, Gloomy. That's all any of us can do."

Warily glancing around at dead trees and black mist, I began to trot towards the far end of the forest.

"That's it...now let's go."

* * *

The Memorial Room was never going to be good. The past looking upon the past? That was...well...double bad. Or did it cancel itself out? I was never very good at maths. As a colt, I'd used to say "one, two, three, lots!"

As I approached the doorway, I stopped briefly as the cantering in my recorder kept playing. What number had lots been? Four. What came after it? Ah...loads! If only cynically, it settled my nerves to concentrate on the idiotic dumbness I'd been plagued with on my youth without a proper education.

Well...that implied I wasn't still an idiot...what pony my age couldn't read anyway?

That precise lack of skill was being shown in my trust of the recording, for the room ahead of me held an elaborate sign above it. Unable to read the words...I was wandering into the unknown.

“Alright everypony, settle here a minute. I'm going to try and see if I can tap into the cameras, make sure everypony is settled before we go. If we're being forced to go into the living areas to reach the science level's doorways I do not want anypony caught in a worst case scenario crossfire. Bean, can you get that terminal going?”

“Sure thing, bo-...I mean...Sculpt.”

“Right, once you're logged in, use my clearance to synchronise all the PipBucks of the residents. Not the scientists, we don't want to warn them.”

“Um...why?”

“If we're all synched up, it means that we all have access to each other to send warnings or an all clear. But more crucially, it means that anypony can be tracked at any time on the same PipBuck transmit signal.”

“Again, why?”

“Proof, Bean! I don't want any rumours floating. The residents can watch our positions on their Eyes Forward Sparkles and know we didn't do any killing or anything, they'll have our records on their PipBucks.”

“Fine...fine...it'll be faster if I just make every PipBuck that enters signal range of the main system on all levels but the lowest do it.”

“Whatever it takes, Bean. Thank you.”

Casting my PipBuck light around, I could see the terminal he used. The room fell away but near the entrance was a terminal on a desk. A brief inspection (banging my hoof on the casing) revealed it to be long dead. I pilfered the drawers below it, finding little but a few old books and massive folders of papers. A multi-tool sat at the back end. I'd seen one before, for working with nuts, bolts and washers. Grabbing it in my mouth, I added it to my saddlebag before...without really thinking...adding the two books as well. Perhaps they might put me back in favour with Protégé?

The immediate thought of me seeking his approval was enough to make me sick to my stomach even more than the foul stench still coming off my hide and fleece.

Taking the time to hunt around, my PipBuck cast illumination over a few classroom tables. I wondered if foals came here to learn about the world they had left. Perhaps a Stable version of a field trip? Through the forest, into the past? The thought was oddly alike with how this two year job with Fillydelphia worked. Out of the slave pits and across the wastes before being thrown into a Stable. Yet somehow...I didn't feel like I had left Fillydelphia at all. The slavers were still there, always watching the only way out, to get us back in the wagons.

The ponies on my recording continued to mutter about who was where and how safe they were. Meanwhile, the light shone from the less rusty walls, bringing up something *entirely* new.

Art.

For the first time in my life...I witnessed art.

Arrayed along the walls, framed paintings...pictures...photos...sketches...

Mouth agape, everything seemed to deaden as I trotted down the wall. For every grey dull moment I

had felt in the upper levels...even in the darkness these *shone*. Colour, shape and form! Ponies, drawn beautifully in a myriad of expressions, clustered in groups of lavishly detailed singular portraits. One place of beauty within the darkness, I realised that these had been drawn by ponies before the balefire. Green fields behind them glittered in the sun as pegasi roamed freely beside earth ponies and unicorns. A small town made of thatchwork roofs and white constructs sprung up in a valley between hills. A huge circular town hall marked the centre. Without even having to think, I knew that if I were alive then...I would want to live *there*. In that place of meadows, rivers and beautiful multicoloured tents making up that...what was it? A market? I doubted I'd be very good at haggling...ponies only ever told me what I was to give them, not the other way around.

Other huge vistas of cities...one was obviously Manehattan, another Fillydelphia and the last of a giant dark forest. Trotting from each to each, it made the artist in me envious. Dragging my sketchbook from my saddlebag, I flicked through images that paled in comparison to these masterworks. I'd never encountered anypony else's proper drawings before...

Maddeningly trying to work out *how* they'd gotten the light to look like that or how they got such consistent shapes, my eyes flicked from painting to drawing to even photo. Even beside my fear of the Stable...while clutching my little scrawled journal close, I felt a little fear that I'd never be as good as all this...

Everything I drew came from the heart...but it just felt like what I imagined in my mind was never what really came out. Did they feel the same way at a higher level? Was I the only pony artist who felt that way? I wanted to meet them, ask them a thousand questions on how their art was so beautiful...so well formed so...so...

...free.

But despite my envy, I could not hide a small smile creeping across my face as I witnessed the work they had left behind for ponies like me to find. One had the Goddesses, Celestia and Luna, arcing around one another in the twilight sky. The next, multiple pegasi wearing identical blue and yellow costumes soaring in perfect formation around cloud buildings. Even through my fleece, I felt a little twitch on either side of my torso at the wondrous sensation of limitless freedom before me. So much so...that I almost tripped over a display case, the glass long dusty but utterly preserved. About half a dozen of them filled the middle of the room. Regaining my posture, I wiped the dust away with a hoof, staring inside. Lots of little cards filled with tiny writing taunted me, but there were racks of medallions and colourful ribbons like amulets. They were *perfectly* preserved, glinting in my PipBuck's light as I saw gold encrusted battleponies embedded on them. One particularly fancy one had the Sun and Moon symbol while a great many bore the symbol of a giant apple in jade crystal with red ribbon.

Standing up with my front hooves pressed against the glass, I could not deny a part of me wanted them. They were so pretty...that blue one would go really nice for Glimmer to thank her! Oh, and that one with the ruby, I was sure the mare would enjoy it. I could get little ones for all of the ponies who had helped me! These things were jewellery right?

Now if only...ergh...damn! The glass was too thick for my weedy front hooves to lift or move. Banging my BB gun against it would break my teeth long before it shattered. A small lock was at the side, but I had nothing to deal with it. Returning to the desk, I hunted around the back of its cupboard door. Eh...nothing much. Just some old stained mane gel, a bunch of bobby pins to hold up ones mane and a screwdriver for no apparent reason.

Wait...

Grinning, things finally clicked in my head, like a lock coming open. Bending forward, I picked up the screwdriver...

“Letsh she hat lock!”

Approximately forty five seconds of efforts later and I realised that banging the screwdriver's handle off the lock was not going to work. Nor was trying to lever the length behind it. Dammit! These things were

useless!

Thnk!

My voice's pitch broke as I dove behind the memorial case, whipping my head around to the doorway I saw a blackened shape standing in it, the tree behind it shaking. Whimpering, I tried to just simply hide with my back to the case, hooves pressed to either side of me to be as flat against the case as I could. It made no sound...no smell...no presence. Yet somehow I knew it was coming into the room...

My hooves skittered on my PipBuck, trying to turn off the light, but the recording turning to static was only making things worse! The closer it came, the louder the static got, oh great Celestia, send me *anywhere! To the moon, where ever you want! Anywhere but here!*

I heard the lock of the case I was hiding behind clink. As though somepony were testing it to make sure it were closed. My PipBuck light finally died, plunging me into pitch black where I couldn't even see my own body beneath me. The PipBuck's attached recorder only got louder as I tried to yank it out. Stop making noise!

A background ambience got thicker...like a sense of the atmosphere itself moving as the static got louder. It must be coming around the case! Willing my terrified and frozen limbs to function I scooted away down the other side of the case past the back door of the room and rolled into the next one, stifling my whimper as my wings ached at the ground contact. The electronic drone from my PipBuck dropped a little as I put distance between me and...and *that*. Only now did I feel the wetness from my eyes dripping all over my face. Wiping my eyes with a hoof, I curled up under the case as best I could.

It must have been only a minute...but it felt like hours as the warped sound grew and faded intermittently along with the occasional sound of something in the room moving or being adjusted. I risked a look out...

There it was...by the desk. Pony shaped...but not. Like I couldn't focus on the outline this time, it was as though my vision slid right off it.

Without so much as another sound, it simply seemed to fade. A moment later I heard the trees being struck again...then nothing. It took me a give five minutes to build the courage to even step outside from under the case again, growing as my whip bruises rubbed against the edge. Limping back across, I rubbed my tender back and looked around before one thing caught my eye. Or rather...certain things *didn't*.

Every single one of the medallions was gone.

Very easily, it struck me. It had heard me attempting to steal them...so it had taken them. To protect them from the would be thief. I had offended the past...now it was trying to stop me doing more! My mind raced, was it coming back? When it got its valuables to safety would it return to deal with me?

A whole new respect for care of the past in here overtook me. I couldn't take *anything*. Back in the canteen, I had stolen from the food locker...I'd found it looking around there. In the forest room, I'd disturbed the apples it must have believed were still in the basket...so it had begun rebucking trees and searching for me. Now it was protecting the jewellery...

Never in my life...not even in the moment of realisation that I had failed in my run for the Wall. Not even under The Master. Not even when I had been locked in the rad-chamber by the Magister. Not...ever...had my heart felt so cold and tight.

I wanted out.

Unwilling to spend my time near the door, I moved deeper into the Memorial Room. The far wall...yes...nice and safe away from where that monster had gone. Artwork softened my terror as I passed a portrait of six mares, the same six I'd seen everywhere. Wait...if they were there...that meant...

Yup. *She* was too. Grinning like a mad pony off of the portrait at me. If I ever learned to colour pictures, one thing I knew was there would *never* be any pink in them. (Sorry, Glimmer, some things are just

that important!) I watched her eyes carefully as I made my way past from the right. Good...not moving. Perhaps I could finally begin to believe she wasn't out to get me. Pinkie had her front two hooves on the front of the painting, as though she was standing up on something. In fact....she was in *front* of the painting. Staggering backwards into the case, my eyes locked as Pinkie emerged from *out* of the painting like a lifelike pony! Only after I saw she wasn't moving...did I see some joker had continued the painting of her front hooves over the frame. Well...I didn't find it funny.

Turning away from her (mostly...I checked a couple of times more...just to be sure) I continued to move toward the far end. Slowly being revealed by my PipBuck, I found the magnum opus of the room.

The Memorial Wall.

I didn't need to be a historian to know it. Long dead wreathes lay across the floor before a marble shrine. Long dead candles sat unused on tall bronze sticks while upon the shrine itself was...everything that mattered.

Old toys, pieces of jewellery, crude foal drawings and even small clocks. But more than anything...photographs. Layers and layers of them all across the wall. Each held a scrawled message on the wall or over the photo itself. I felt so small before this monumental image of what the Stable residents had lost. Beautiful mares laughing with their bucks. Little "baby's first photo" images. Military snapshots. Personal photos. Pictures that were simply awful but obviously because they were all that was left. Even pets...I saw a dog, rabbit and even a balefire phoenix that was red. Were they normally red before the war? For some...there were only written notes, many with a little cutie mark sketched on them. A photo frame, three little sparks of magic, clouds, a chocolate bar...

Ponies back then had such nice cutie marks...

I felt my hind quarters bump onto the floor. The shrine rose easily four times my height...maybe more, right to the top of the room and covering the entire end wall. Individual candles had once been lit here in little holders all across the marble steps leading up to the wall itself. Every square inch was covered in something between the embedded marble pillars upon the smooth rock wall.

Everypony upon this wall had died in the balefire.

Little tears began dripping. I tried wiping them, but it was no use. They just kept coming. Never enough to break me down, but just a slow, haunting and lingering tragedy of the event I had to live in the aftermath of. Two hundred years and we were still feeling the shockwaves.

It only felt right. Digging into a pocket...I settled the little bell from the scooter on one of the marble steps beside a pretty looking red candle. I hoped the foal would appreciate it. That...and the thing that was haunting this place on its own agenda. Part of me hoped that this one little act might relieve some of the guilt that I had tried to steal their most valued possessions.

Hearing the recorder remain silent of words and still filled only with the ambience of their break and meaningless chatter, I just sat there for a while, staring at each picture in turn trying to guess their names. Trying to not think that every single one of them had died screaming in the baleful fire that consumed their world while these lucky few were trapped down here safely.

"I'm so sorry..."

* * *

"*OH SHIT!*"

Jumping almost my entire height off the ground in shock at the recorder restarting, my legs whirled uselessly, trying to run in mid air before I collapsed to the ground in a heap.

"*Bean! Get everypony moving!*"

"*What's wr-*"

“FUCKING MOVE!”

Masses of sounds were erupting from the Memorial Room. Ponies were shouting, swearing and screaming in panic. Guns were being loaded. I heard safeties click and hooves clatter.

“They...I can't believe it!”

“What are they doing?!”

“Keep moving, get out before-”

“PipBuck signal detected. Depressurisation routine active.”

Screaming of my own right, I hurled myself towards the back door, seeing it open normally. The voice was only coming through the recorder.

“EVERYPONY RUN!”

I could only assume they had rushed for the back door by the way their hooves kept clattering on metal and not dirt. The horrifying sound of the door slamming shut behind them echoed loud enough to send me careening into a wall as the pain shot through my ear enough to upset my balance. My head slammed on a metal pillar, sending white spots all over my vision.

“Everypony got out?”

“Just! Holy Goddess' fucking backsides, Sculpt what was that?!”

“I don't know! Keep moving! I saw on the terminal, that's activated everywhere! They're trying to kill us! I...I don't know...but-”

“BUT WHAT?!”

“It's Stable wide! Everywhere but the science levels, if we use our PipBucks it locks down and kills us!”

“No...Sculpt! We sent all the residents to their rooms!”

“...oh Goddesses...what have they done...”

I pushed myself further from the door into the dark corridor as their galloping took on a pace I could never match. It wasn't needed, suddenly the floor wasn't there, I fell down the next flight of stairs roughly. My knees and head got roughed up badly, clanging off the ground as I landed. But panic drove me. I could hear it in my ghostly companions' voices. Screams for families kicked in as it became a mad rush for the living quarters. Half falling dizzily and half leaping and galloping, I descended to the next level and rushed out into a massive set of corridors. Dozens of rooms passed by me...the living areas. Each had a window and one hard closed door.

The screaming started.

I had found the residents.

“Sweet Celestia, they're trapped!”

“Get them out! GET THEM OUT!”

“The doors are jammed! Oh fuck...I'm sorry!”

“PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine...active.”

“HELP! THE...THE AIR!”

“AAARRGGHH! NOOO!”

They were in their rooms...every one of them. Frozen in time and held by motionless environments...lying upon their beds or collapsed from banging on windows. The skeletal structures still together. I galloped madly forward, tripping over masses of junk dropped and overturned in the blind panic. The armed team had run from window to window.

“MY SONS ARE IN THERE ALONE!”

“PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine...active.”

“Somepony do something! Fuck, DO SOMETHING!”

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

A windowpane before me with three bulletstrikes on it. The glass hadn't broken. Behind it lay one small skeleton near a cot with a larger nearer the window, its dented PipBuck still sparking blue light.

“No-body use your PipBucks! Take them off!”

“We can't! They took all the tools!”

“PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine...active.”

Every skeleton had a thick PipBuck around it if they were old enough. I saw a giant bench strewn across the corridor...

“Everypony, grab that bench! Ready? Three, two, one, HIT!”

THUNK!

“Again! Three, two, one, HIT!”

THUNK!

KRSH!

The window had cracked badly, but the bench had also broken at one end. Stumbling, I kept going down the long corridor, window after window bearing the horrors within. The screaming never stopped as pony after pony banged on the windows and hollered. Many of the team I was following were crying as they shouted back. Shouts of love or regret. An entire Stable dying around me, yet, here in the far flung future...I was powerless to help.

“I'm sorry!”

“PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine...active.”

Above the chorus of agony through the PipBuck, I *screamed*.

“I'M SORRY!”

Tears fell from my face as I turned entirely around, seeing nothing but unbreakable windows with the murdered ponies within. What had those idiots done? What was worth so much it was worth killing so many

innocents over? Filled with an anger I never could have imagined, I galloped onward...even as I heard Sculpt.

“Those bastards! They're going to pay! They're going to fucking pay! I'm going in there!”

My own hooves matched Sculpt's step for step as we both hurdled the same wreckage and slid under the same fallen beams. We heard the same mare on our right, that skeleton still oddly propped on the window. Both saw the buck on our left relentlessly hammering at the window with his shotgun to save his wife. His skeleton lay around the weapon on the floor. We galloped together, past and future, to discover the same truth...to discover *why*.

Within the recording I heard the end door closing as the sound droned once more.

“PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine...active.”

Sculpt's gasp of fear matched my own in shock, realisation of why the armed team were dead in the main corridor too. The recording became hazy, distorted and warped. Sculpt's breathing was all I heard as sound died out...as we both ran through the door that led to the science areas.

His ragged breath was filled with barely contained fury...before a sound of him collapsing on the floor. Of him crying. I lay down, wishing I could somehow help the poor buck having just witnessed everything he had tried to save fall out from under him.

“This won't go unpaid...to any who hear this in the future, this was our failure. The moment we became lost in the dark. My family and friends lie dead not feet away from me because of the way the world changed...even under the mountains meant to keep us safe. But know this...I will not let what they have done go without incident. Whatever they were doing...it ends now, even if it kills me. Justification be damned...secrets and lies were never what ponies were meant to have. The Ministries brought these dark days upon us even before the bombs dropped. They will pay...”

The recording clicked.

...and ended.

* * *

I lay beside the door for some time, just trying to calm down. It wasn't entirely possible, as my chest heaved and my dry breath stuttered under sniffs from tears. My chest was burning, enough that I downed my RadAway as a precaution. Mercifully...yet horribly...the burning feeling died down. How long had I been down here that my irradiated lungs were acting up again on their own with no radiation?

Now ahead of me lay more stairs...even deeper. What was this, a fifth floor? I felt a million miles from anypony else, from Fillydelphia and from the clouds. Trotting steadily and slowly, I moved into the last depths of the Stable. There was light here, but not from any panels above. Terminals littered every room that I passed by, each active with casting little islands of green light in either small rooms or the bigger widened hallway that I was entering. Smashed chalkboards and broken vats had smothered the floor in shards of ceramic or long dried (now sticky) liquids. Feeling my hooves almost stick to the floor in places, I prayed this wasn't anything lethal...

Clearly, these were the science levels. All my imaginations of some giant mad laboratory were broken as I found little more than offices and shared work tables haphazardly fitted into a Stable not originally intended to fit a science team. This might have once been extra living areas...the larger room up ahead may have been a storage area? Canterng from green light to green light, I hopped between illuminated islands as I made my way in.

I wasn't even at the main room up ahead when I began finding the corpses.

Strewn over tables or collapsed in doorways, each dusty skeleton was surrounded by clear bulletholes. Whimpering, I staggered away from them into a side room, only to find one that had hid behind her desk. An image of a foal in a picture frame lay on its side, scarred by a passing round. The terminal flickered

loyally, awaiting its input that I could never give. Trying not to cry (be strong, Murky...be strong like Glimmer said...) I cantered out into the hallway again. Little brass shells at my hooves pinged and skittered away when I moved past. Whinnying, I galloped on, closing my eyes as I saw more and more...an unending cycle of remains, all of them trying to move the same way I had done before being brought down.

Reaching the main room, I finally opened my eyes and-

My hooves thankfully got to my mouth before the scream emerged.

It was in there. Moving idly between desks in front of a series of odd machines and copper constructs. Unable to focus, I could only see the vague *presence* of the haunting spectre floating around and over the middle of the room. The 'head' cast itself around to each glow of green light before making its way toward me.

I had nowhere to go.

Crouching behind one of the desks, apologising constantly under my breath as I was forced to move a skeleton out of the place it had tried to hide in and died before, I shivered at its passing. The static had stopped once the recording ceased, mercifully giving me silence to hide in for once.

Unfortunately...it meant I had no way to track it. Unable to constrain my curiosity, my head, goggles firmly on, peeked out. Was it coming any close-YES IT WAS!

Pulling myself back, it had only been a few feet away, that head turning quickly as I'd made my move. Glazed eyes were even visible...a low dirging ambience began to soundlessly make my head stuffy and my ear ache as I *felt* it wash over the desk above me. My goggles were steaming up from crying in sheer terror. The urge to scream, to holler and beg for mercy was becoming too much...

Finally, it was over. The pressure in the air seemed to pass away. Shaking so much my loose tooth was chattering painfully, I raised my head over the desk. How had it not seen me? Did it just not care?

It was moving away. Down another passageway I saw the contrails of darkness shifting ever darker through a terminal's distant glow. But upon the desk was something new.

Another recorder.

It was different, more modern (as best as I could identify, which pretty much involved how shiny it was) and bore the same connections for my PipBuck. Ejecting the last one, I placed it within my saddlebag and clicked the next into place. I was beginning to suspect it *wanted* me to hear these. Was I the little future ghost sneaking around to its perception as much as it was to me? How did ghosts see? Was it as afraid of me as I was of it?

Click!

"Personal journal of Lead Arcane Scientist Night Breeze, starting day one. I...apologise, if this is a little breathless. We just-"

A dull *thoom* echoed in the background, ponies screamed and a great amount of commotion sounded in the recording. Wandering from my hiding spot, I entered the main room...surrounded by the clustered groups of pony remains enough to make me shiver and try to avoid looking at them. I'm so sorry...

"Well...that was Fillydelphia. It's gone now...we barely got in here on time. Technically we didn't have a pass, but we rushed up and the Overmare let us in. A kind soul if there ever was one. Now we've got to start developing ways that this Stable could support us..."

She paused. Her voice sounded authoritative, even if terrified, the air of somepony used to getting her way was obvious. If she'd told me to do something, I'd probably have leapt to it...

"Sorry...this is just...I'm trying to give myself things to do. Trying not to think about what's going on outside. The very thing we tried to prevent. I tried to get Ministry Hub Leader Aurora Star down here, but we couldn't find her! I...I think she was still in the city. But right now we need to get set up in here and get

back to work. She left very explicit instructions in the event we got separated. I am to make this Stable into a place of hope however I can. Create arcane technologies that we could reconstruct the world when we open. Aurora's theory of stored memory will be my first aim, as will the continuation of my own research into giving greater natural immunity. But we will be ready for when the time comes to confront the wastes in a hundred years. I should go."

The recording seemed to end, yet the PipBuck kept playing.

I heard something...vaguely, like a pitter patter of hooves. Squeaking, I whirled, expecting to look right into dead eyes. But all I saw was an empty science chamber around me. Perhaps...perhaps just that thing moving around again? I wasn't disturbing anything!

Cantering further in to get more cover, I moved amongst the workbenches in the high room. Little orbs rested on them, most grey and dead. A few shone dimly of all colours in the spectrum. Occasionally, some glowed as bright as my PipBuck with incandescent swirling power within. I didn't dare touch them. I didn't need any more ghostly visits...my mind *seemed* settled, but I could feel I was on a knife edge. That all it would take was one thing to push me over the edge into a blind horror of what was going on around me. Skeletons...dead places...ponies killing ponies over...over something I didn't know. I was one realisation away from breaking...that I knew for sure. Every false wall I was throwing up to stay even vaguely calm wouldn't last forever. Without the thought of Glimmer and Brim searching amongst these levels somewhere...I may have been lost to the darkness some time ago.

"Right, day seven...I think. I've had to make some adjustments in this place. For one, I'm now the Overmare. A regrettable decision, but frankly I had to. She was incompetent, allocated the wrong resources and made shifts so inefficient that the Stable would barely last twenty years never mind a century. What in the hell was Scootaloo thinking when she sent the Overmare invite to her? We held a vote, with the greater scientists and many of the more intelligent Stable residents voting for me. Some may say it was a rigged vote. I just call it a confident one. I've taken control of the Stable systems and transferred PipBuck control to the scientists. We helped invent the damn things before some of us moved to the Ministry so why not? The theories we brought are adapting well. So long as those residents don't get in our way we'll be ready to combat the wastes decades ahead of schedule, give us time to get used to using this stuff. Got to go."

The audio seemed to cut again. Presumably she kept her diaries all on one recorder.

While listening, I trotted over to the walls, looking in on experiments set up in adjoining rooms through interior windows. The overall shape of the Stable was beginning to form in my mind. Multiple levels, each with one big room and a ton of adjoined spaces surrounded by corridors and peripheral facilities. The top level had the atrium, next was the schoolhouse, then the apple trees...now this.

Where was Glimmer? She would understand what all of this was. I just wanted to find her and get out. Get back to Filly...start planning the escape. All this was just a distraction, a meaningless job that would never change my life other than to terrify me. Already I could feel my mind beginning to settle into the work instead of staying free. Would somepony who wanted freedom have done this? Would they have found a way to use all this to escape on their way out? Perhaps there was some sort of...invisibility spell? Something to sneak by the guards into the wastes with no problems!

Yet around me there was no such immediately obvious thing. The giant machine I trotted past seemed to hold little trays meant for cupcakes...like a baking tray? Was that what my old master called them? A quick size comparison saw that they were the same shape as the orbs I had just seen.

"Week three...research continues well, the memory transference process is becoming a little tough. No doubt this is the problem Aurora spoke of. Apparently Twilight Sparkle herself proclaimed it to be impossible without an external power source large enough to...well...I don't know. I'm finding the same problem. We can create loops temporarily, even residual talent...but nothing like what Aurora proposed last year. But I will make this work. Memories have power. That's what it all revolves around. The past can teach us and empower us as we remember the important times and elements of it. That's what she told us, over and over. Memories. Hold. Power. What is it that drives a pony forward? What makes you who you are? The

experiences you had. But what if we could play around with that? Ergh...I'm having to withhold the information from the residents. Simple reason, really. Chief Aurora Star told me that the Ministry had found evidence of a Zebra informer amongst the Ministry of Wartime Technology in Fillydelphia. As such, all research is now withheld only to those ponies working on it and myself. Regardless of what the residents think, I'm not going to release information. Aurora Star died trying to protect our work. I won't disobey her last request to me before we parted. But those residents are getting restless. That paranoid moron, Sculpt, he wants a recorded meeting about all this. I won't endanger our way of life to satisfy pointless curiosity. This is sensitive work, we don't need ponies without our intentions seeing it. Who knows what they might make of what we're doing here?"

Clnk!

Spinning on the spot, I whirled to look behind me. Nothing but a wheeled terminal stand softly moving. Wait...*something moved it*. I looked around...I could see nothing. No static came from the PipBuck...

Oh this wasn't good...cantering nearer to the wall, I slid behind the huge machine. A way out...I needed a way out of this room! Glancing out and around, my eyes fell on a scaffold staircase haphazardly built to the balcony, lit in the pitch black by three nearby terminals. It led to another room at the far end up one level, also only visible from the terminal inside it casting a haze through the window. If I could only get in there...less space to be surrounded by.

Lowering to the ground, there was a sensation that I was not only being watched. My head flicked around at the drifting movement I sensed.

...I was being hunted.

Calling on every ounce of stealth I had, I cancelled the recording and turned off my light before doubling back. If they had seen my light (of course they had, duh!) then they may not expect me to move backwards. Did ghosts think like that?

Heart in my mouth, I began the slow creep forward in the dark. Only little islands of light guided my way...beacons that I could not enter for fear of being noticed. I had to stay in the dark...the same dark that was slowly scaring me witless. Gently pushing a seat aside, sneaking below a desk and crawling between the struts of a scaffold construct, I gingerly made my way to the stairs. Checking every angle...I saw nothing. Damn ear...if only I could hear properly! Now...please don't be creaky...please don't be creaky...

Hoof by hoof...I began to move up the stairs. My eyes scanned the room below. Each desk lit by the active terminals revealed nothing. Was it just my imagin-

A shadow passed by the end of one desk.

Shit. Shit shit *shit!*

Something *was* down there. Quickening my pace, I cantered off the stairs, every little creak and rattle feeling like a gunshot to give me away. As soon as I was able, I quickly headed into the room. Higher level equipment surrounded me, filled with fancier materials that shone from the terminal's light. Glancing at the screen, I saw an old stain across it.

...b-blood...

Half shrieking, I back-pedalled away from it, falling over the edge of a bed and landing on my PipBuck. Hard. The recorder wailed at the disturbance, fast forwarding madly until I finally hoofed it to try and make it stop! Instead, it merely resumed. Now matter what I hit...it wouldn't stop.

"Urgh...week five. You have to wonder why the residents get so worked up and paranoid. What do they think we're working on in here? Weapons?"

Grabbing the musty blanket from the bed, I wrapped the PipBuck and my leg in a shred of it, trying to dull the sound. Right...that should work...I could hear it, but no-pony else could. Well...if it even *was* a

pony. Shivering, I pressed myself against the bed and cradled myself with my front hooves. It was all beginning to catch up...the sheer tragedy that had happened in this place. The horrid intentions of a few ponies dooming many others.

“Things are starting to heat up. Personally, I'm a little scared...the residents have gone quiet. I've ordered the others to stand watch and only go out if they need to. Some of them asked if we should take guns. I refused. No need of them, we are scientists. Our weapons are our minds. We-”

“Overmare! Overmare!”

“What is it? I'm-”

“Slinky Spot spotted the residents on the cameras! You...you need to see this!”

Shuffling and running passed through the recorder as the Overmare apparently forgot to turn it off. The same creaky stairs I had come up sounded. Sneaking forward and peering over the window lip, my eyes traced them all the way to the bank of monitors I saw on the far side still sparking away.

“What the...”

“They have guns, Overmare. They're coming this way!”

“Get ready to lock down all doors, Spot. Don't worry...I'm sure they're just trying to make a statement. Not the best way but...even Sculpt isn't that insane to actually attack us. We're all ponies.”

“Ma'am! Nutshell Cracker's still out there, he was going off shift! They're...they're going to run into him!”

“Oh no...”

I heard familiar sounds through the recording from the monitors the Overmare was watching.

“Hey, what are you lot doing?!” The same scientist they'd locked in the storage room.

“Shit! Grab him!”

“Wait, what? Get off me! GET OFF!”

CRASH!

The sound of cans and tins falling rattled across the speaker, making me wince and hold my ear.

“He might warn them! Gloomy! Take out that camera before they spot us! Somepony grab him! Hold him down!”

BLAM!

Static washed in as the screen obviously went dead.

“They...they killed him...”

No...they didn't!

“Shit...oh fuck...I...”

“Overmare? What do we do?!”

“I...I...”

“Overmare!”

“T...track their PipBucks on the security grid. If they come anywhere past the Memorial Room, set the Stable commands to lock their position in and vent the room.”

“WHAT?!”

“They're coming to kill us, Spot! It's a last resort if they don't think better or we see evidence otherwise. Just...just stay calm...oh Goddesses...”

Everything was beginning to fall into a horrible place. I was already crying.

“Overmare! They're in the Memorial Room. They've just sent out a message to get everypony into their own rooms. That...that means they're coming right here, Ma'am. Doesn't it?”

“It does, Spot. I...I can't believe this...we're not doing anything but peaceful research in here! Why couldn't they just calm the fuck down and trust us?! It's just...just procedure to keep it secret in time of war! I...I never thought...”

“Overmare, they're about to move...”

“Out of the way, I'll send the command myself. Get me the records, track only their PipBuck codes.”

There was some playing around and sounds of leafing sheets.

“I'm ready.”

“They're about to move!”

“Celestia save my soul.”

A hoof struck a button. Whining turbines sounded in the background. A science pony was crying in the background.

“PipBuck signal detected...Memorial Room. Depressurisation routine...active.”

“It's done...”

“PipBuck signal detected...Living Chamber C5. Depressurisation routine...active.”

“WHAT?!”

“It's activating on the living chambers! It just sealed Runner Bean's family!”

“What?! No!”

“PipBuck signal detected...Living Chamber G12. Depressurisation routine...active.”

“Stop it! I...what's going on?!”

“I can't! It's like they've synched up all the PipBucks in the entire Stable!”

“PipBuck signal detected...Living Chamber A4. Depressurisation routine...active.”

“PipBuck signal detected...Living Chamber E1. Depressurisation routine...active.”

“PipBuck signal detected...Living Chamber A3. Depressurisation routine...active.”

“By the Goddesses...what have we done?”

Living chamber after living chamber, it reeled through them all. The Ministry ponies sat in shocked silence. Curling up on the Overmare's bed and stuffing my face in the covers to stifle my wails, I finally broke at the weight of the entire situation coming down on my shoulders.

“We...we can repopulate or...”

“Hey! What are you doing down-”

“You killed everypony!”

BRRAK!

“He's got a gun! Sculpt! Please! Don't!”

“You! Killed! Everypony! All to safeguard your own sick designs or whatever you needed to hide from us! I won't let you do it! I WON'T LET YOU!”

Gunshot after gunshot. Screams, panic, begging and shouted rage from Sandy Sculpt echoed in one long cacophony of violence through the PipBuck. The Overmare had ran, I heard the clacking steps as she retreated up here. Gunfire below kept track of Sculpt's rampage through the science areas. The Overmare's desperate breathing was close to the recorder. Eventually, Sculpt finally must have come up here.

“And you...telling me it was all fine! But all along you had the Stable primed to kill us!”

“I didn't! It was a mistake! You were coming to kill us with guns!”

“We were doing no such thing! You liar! Your secrets and lies have killed my entire Stable! The last Overmare should never have let you in!”

“Everything we have down here is peaceful! WHY CAN'T YOU SEE THAT? Secrecy is just procedure!”

“I just witnessed my family die...all my friends and their loved ones...and you try to tell me that is procedure?! Fuck you!”

His weapon roared, Sculpt screamed, that fatherly tone lost to incoherent rage at the loss of everypony he knew. I knew without a doubt the Overmare was dead. Only Sculpt's breathing took over, eventually succumbing to tears before the entire recording cut.

I was not much different. It seemed impossible to bear, the thought.

Nothing had ever been wrong. Not once.

“Wonderfully tragic...isn't it, filly?”

Every inch of my body froze.

“That even in a place with nothing designed wrong...ponies still find a way to let the horrors take place.”

Daring to turn my face from the wet covers, I saw him.

He was sat in the Overmare's chair. Magic holding various trinkets around him as his slave knife sharpened itself on a little whetstone.

“Behind closed doors, locked in the dark, the place ponies were never meant to be in. Just as in the tale of Nightmare Moon...they succumbed to fear and hate. There never was anything wrong in this Stable. No flaw, no experiments and plenty of supplies...more than usual, in fact. Add in a full team of Arcane scientists? Well, it seemed so perfect...but ponies were not meant to live in the dark, hidden from the light of Celestia's sun or the majesty of Luna's moon.”

He advanced, flowing in the dark. Shadows twisted around his horn as the dark wreathed and became a part of him. Barb didn't so much trot as just...drift. His long dark mane idly mixed with the black aura around him...suddenly I saw why he kept it long and his clothing ragged. It meshed into his magical shadows to give the impression of an ethereal foe in dark places.

“In fact, this Stable is the perfect little analogy of the war itself, you know? Two sides...both afraid of the other, unwilling to see the other's viewpoint and terrified of what they might do. Fear driving their emotions to extremes, to do the things they would never dream of! To take steps they do not fully understand the consequences of...and then whimper and beg for salvation when it all comes crashing down around them.”

He stopped, grinning that freakishly white smile at me in the darkness.

“Trapped in the dark, we reveal the worst qualities we have, so some say. Just as Nightmare Moon became the monster she was, do ponies living without freedom eventually give way to their inner demons. In the same way the wasteland and cloud cover make sadistic bastards like me, this Stable created the paranoid division of sides you see the aftermath of here. Their own little version of the war that ended in the exact same way...”

“It's horrible...”

Barb chuckled, his form solidifying as he trotted closer to me, deactivating whatever spell had cloaked him in darkness. His hoof pulled me from the bed, almost like a friend pointing out a vista, he waved his hoof before him.

“Now we have but a lovely residence where the dark and memories come together! I would make it my home, if I could. This is a wonderful little office up here, the place where it ended.”

“But...how...how long...” My voice whimpered, breaking and becoming shrill with fear. I began backpedalling, falling off the bed to try and stay away from Barb. His magic merely pulled me back in.

“Oh, since I saw you come into this floor with your little night light on. See, being able to move stuff around with your horn to make somepony think you're behind them is a *wonderful* talent. Something you pegasi could never do in the art of stealth, for all that light hoofed nature. You enjoy the trip down here as much as I did?”

No. Without a word I turned to gallop away, before finding the door rapidly shutting ahead of me. Shadows around Barb's horn deepened...that stealthy magic aura of his affecting all it needed to in order to keep me in.

“Now don't run yet, little filly. We're still waiting for my compatriots to get back. My elite...The Shades. The betrayer had his Big Four, but I have the Shades. Always preferred to have something won before I've even started, y'see? They've been working their magic, literally, all around this place to find all its little secrets, trinkets and belongings. You may have run into them on your way? This is their training, you see. Only so much you can do in the Mall. Brimstone's more...direct methods...may have worked out in the wastes, but my plans for Fillydelphia? Well, they need a little more subtlety. Which reminds me...your role in all this...”

Still reeling from the tragedy of the Stable, I barely even noticed the change in subject until it became more obvious.

“...me?”

“Yes, you, filly. Now once they're back...then we'll see about what we're going to do with you...my little dealbreaker.”

Oh no, he stuck to his word! I hadn't brought him anything from the crater!

“L...I tried! I really did! A mine...a blue mine, I picked it up for you but-”

“Buuuut?”

“...I had to use it...”

Barb chuckled, the sound coming from all directions as he trotted to the side.

“A *mine*. Singular. Oh now aren't you proud.”

Whimpering, I tried to shove all the thoughts of the sight in the atrium from my mind. He was so calm...no direct threats, just an honest word on what he would do...and the mindset to do it. More than Brimstone's rage, more than every raider's insanity...that cold mindset to simply do bad things terrified me to the absolute core.

“I'm no help to you, please, I won't tell anypony what you're planning!”

“Frankly, filly, I don't trust you on that. Look at you, down here alone with me and you can hardly hold the piss in you. If Shackles questioned you...do you really mean to tell me that you'd stay silent?”

Barb merely laughed under his breath at my despondent expression. He had me there...

“Now come on filly...my students are returning.”

* * *

I was dragged to the main science floor again. Confused, I glanced around after being thrown in the middle of the room. What students? Where were-

Oh...

One by one, they slid from shadows. Some more effectively than others. Two of them I heard coming in while some were almost as silent as Barb. The Shades, raider stealth experts, it seemed. Among peers...I felt outclassed. Each was clad in darker clothing, with dyed manes and coats of dark blues and greens.

“What we have here, my students...is a little filly who was hired to help us. I promised him induction to our group in return for some materials acquirement.”

“I didn't-”

A raider bucked me across the side of the face. Choking on my scream, I fell, clutching my snout as I felt it begin to bleed immediately.

“Silence when the boss is talking!”

“Now, this little filly didn't come through. He knows our plans and suddenly decided not to appreciate my offer above his own ends. Deciding that apparently...his chances for escape lie better with *the traitor*.”

A chorus of seething hatred echoed from the group around me. In the darkness it was hard to count...five perhaps? Trembling, I kept my head down on the ground, trying to stifle my bleeding nose with a hoof and abasing myself before him like I would any master in a search for forgiveness.

“I'm not unwilling to permit him another chance, you see. However...like any of the Shades, he cannot go unpunished. Back in the Mall...we would be stopped. But for once, here, we have an opportunity to dispense raider code properly.”

Barb lowered himself to me, his thin eyes boring into my skull.

“You may see me do little...but that's the point, filly. I'm not like *him*. I don't need bluster, example and visual threat. Oh no...no shadow is safe for you anymore, filly. I do my work out of sight, find others to accomplish my ends or even step in myself if needs be. Oh you probably think I'm just a bully...picking on those I can't go for. Just remember...ask the traitor about the Massacre at Whitetail someday. *Fear me* filly. Better than being against me. You get punished...as you shall be by my own students. As such, I decree-”

WHOOM!

The entire Stable shook. The sound had come from levels above, a dull thud and thunderous explosion. Terminals flickered and rolling platforms rattled as every one of the raiders looked to the ceiling. Dust particles fell along with slivers of rust. Barb snarled.

“They're a bit earlier than I had predicted. Kriss! Dirk! Shiv! With me! You two, deal with the filly then join us in the atrium! Those idiots in the gang won't know what to do without guidance.”

He took off, his horn shadowing over as he seemed to blend into the pitch black after a few feet and entirely disappeared. Behind him, three of the Shades faded more naturally into the dark. What was that? What did he mean 'they'?

“Eyup, filly. Guess it's us yer left with!”

My wondering ceased as I felt powerful telekinetic magic grab me, pulling me backward into a desk. Wailing, I tried to kick and buck my way free, but a second telekinetic field sparkled and locked me down on my side atop the desk. Either side, I saw the two dark unicorns approach, one mare and the speaker, a stallion. Struggling to find the words to beg, I did little but whimper. What were they going to do to me?

“So...what do we do to him?” The mare cackled as her eyes ran over me like a predator.

Well...at least I wasn't the only one wondering.

“I dunno...Barb says kill, I kill. Barb says steal, I steal. I'm not much for lead...uh...”

“Leadership you stupid oaf. Fuck, Chib, no wonder Barb wanted you in this team. He's got *no* worries about you trying to assassinate him and take over.”

“Well...I just like doin' things...so what do we do to him? You wanna just get on top of him and-”

“Oh for fucks sake, Chib. Do you only think with your shlong? Besides, you want *me* to abuse him like *that*? Seriously? I mean, look at him!”

Feeling her magic shift, I was flipped onto my back and spread eagled. If I weren't so terrified, I might have been embarrassed as she pointed a hoof at my...uh...lower areas.

“You think he could even please a *parasprite* with that? Fuck no!”

Okay. *Ouch*.

“Besides...”

Her face turned to me. A thin and straight long mane drooped over one scarred eye. She had actually filed her teeth into *fangs* that glinted when she smiled sadistically at me. She may have sounded more intelligent than your average raider...but like Barb, it was underlaid with the same maddened mindset to hurt and abuse other ponies for the sheer hell of it.

“...I got something I been wanting to do to somepony for a while. Hold him down.”

Chib's magic strengthened before he climbed atop me and held me down by his weight alone. The mare grabbed my head in her hooves, standing up to look right down at me, saliva dripping from her fanged mouth landing on my goggles. She was *really* into this.

“Don't....please! I...I'll do anything you wa-URRGH!”

Her magic prised my mouth open. A shard of glass from the wreckage lifted in her magic field.

“Barb doesn't like ponies talking back or interrupting him. I'm gonna make sure you can't whine *ever*

again!”

What? Wait...no! My mouth?! My tongue? What?! No! No no no! I'd not be able to draw properly ever again!

“Say 'aaaah', little buck!”

“Say, 'lights on', motherfuckers!”

The pair twisted their heads around at the voice ringing out, before everything turned white. My eyes seared as I heard them scream for the same reasons. The telekinetic field broke as their concentration imploded the spells. On sheer instinct I drove one of my bottom hooves deep and hard into the buck's nethers. His scream went up to appropriately filly like levels before his entire weight fell away. Falling off the desk, my vision finally adjusted as I saw every light in the entire room had activated. Squinting, I finally saw my saviour galloping into the room directly at the pair around me.

“Murky, get down!” Glimmerlight's voice was the most beautiful thing I had *ever* heard at this moment. Diving to the floor, her long rifle cracked sharply, followed by a bellow of agony from the stallion. The mare rounded on Glimmer, charging as she saw *my friend* reloading the single shot weapon.

The raider mare was fast, very fast. Only Glimmer's speed with the reload gave her a chance for a second shot, sending the mare diving behind a desk to avoid it. Immediately after, the female raider seemed to fade into the darkness behind the desks, shadowed from the panel lighting. Glimmer took to a tabletop, seeking her out.

Seeing the stallion standing back up again, I saw the gaping wound in his side. It didn't stop him grabbing a mouth club and bucking the desk to the side to come for me. Panicking, I fled, diving and rolling under the next desk as I felt his charge slam into it behind me. Hah! Clearly he wasn't too smart to-

He had faked the crash.

The moment I stepped out of the desk, the stallion landed on me after standing atop the desk. He was slow to decide...but I had forgotten who these ponies were. Barb's students in the art of sneaky methods and misdirection.

“Kick me in the fucking plums will you? I'll rip your fucking throat out for that!”

He wasn't kidding, knowing he could ditch stealth now he was right on top of me, his teeth gnashed at me, seeking to grab my flesh in a mad blood raged frenzy. I heard Glimmer's rifle firing once more as she fought the mare. Wait...gun!

Batting his face with a front hoof, I pulled my BB pistol and aimed it at the stallion's face. Diving to the side off of me, the stallion took cover. He wasn't the only one who could trick somepony else! It gave me a chance to get up, only to feel the gun yanked from my teeth by his magic. This wasn't going well, I had nothing to actually do against him! I was a non-combatant, not a killer!

The stallion charged, the club raised high in his magic now as he came right for me. Terrified, I backed away into the darkness of a side room. Pulling my metal ruler out, I prepared to do all I could. Mustering my courage, I let out a blood curdling warcry through the ruler. Far louder than I ever knew I could that held the rage of a hundred violated ponies who's memories had been desecrated.

The stallion stopped. His eyes wide, his face drained of all colour, before he *screamed*. Turning and fleeing, my confusion barely had a chance to catch up with the reality. That hadn't been me that had roared. Just...what? He had looked just like he'd seen...

...a...a...

I turned, seeing *it* right behind me. Dead eyes, shape even more vague than Barb's and a listless presence. Every muscle of mine locked as it stood in the doorway looking at me.

...bing bing!

Even as the sound of a scooter's little bell chimed, the true shade faded into the background and disappeared amidst the darkness once again. Simply standing, eyes locked on the thick black...I didn't know what to think.

“Hey, Murky! Nothing big but *a little fucking help?!?*”

Broken from my thoughts, I turned to see Glimmer desperately dodging shards of glass bring hurled at her via telekinesis. Glimmer bore a few running scars along her neckline. These 'Shades' weren't playing around when it came to where to aim! The stallion had fled, but the mare was as lethal as they came, diving from cover to cover, using Glimmer's slow loading rifle against her. Alone, Glimmer would no doubt be overcome.

Rushing forward, I leapt atop a desk to look for something appropriate and-WOAH!

Diving back down, shards of glass whizzed over my head. Poking up, I saw Barb's student grin at me and tauntingly blow a kiss before the glass reversed and came right back at me. Screaming, I leapt over the desk again, chased by the shards as it pinged and rebounded from areas around me. Stifling a scream as I heard one piece dig into my right flank, I fell hard from the desk onto the floor, taking out a skeleton with my body weight. Horrified, even through the pain, I kicked myself away from it. Glimmer's rifle fired again, forcing the mare to cover from near the doorway. If only I had-

Sculpt's pistol sat ahead of me. Without a thought I grabbed it in my mouth. Feeling around with my tongue, at a guess it seemed the safety was still off. But not at this range..I didn't trust myself for that. Staying low, I began to creep forward, kicking a wheeled platform out to distract. With any luck, she'd-

Glass whizzed into and around the platform like a swarm of angry hornets, trying to hit a non-existent Murky Number Seven behind it. Yes! Making my move under the noise cover, I galloped low to the ground from desk to desk. Glimmer's rifle *clacked* to load once again, before she screamed and audibly dove to the side herself away from the razor tipped projectiles.

“You honestly think you can take on a member of the Shades? Chib was the rookie, but just try it you two! I'll take you both on!”

Well...try this for your sneaky business!

Hopping atop the desk, I appeared *right* behind her. No time to think about the morals of killing, I was saving a friend! My mouth pressed down on the firing as the mare slowly turned to look at me, the mad grin staring right into my eyes.

Click

Blood frozen, I pulled the trigger again and again, beginning to get a sense of how the Magister felt...

“Stupid buck. I'm a fucking *unicorn*. Just a little telekinesis and bam! Instant safety jam!”

Using the distraction, Glimmerlight hurled a chair by her own telekinesis before galloping forward, firing to give herself cover. Aiming down the sights, she took aim at the raider's head, another bullet flying into the chamber with little difficulty. Laughing hysterically, the raider turned to her.

“And the same for you! A little adjustment of your gun and...and...”

Her face drooped.

“But...where is it? Where's the safety! WHAT?”

Glimmerlight merely winked at her as she finished loading.

“Is not safe.”

Che-CHAK!

“Is gun.”

KA-POW!

Reunion.

A feeling I'd never truly felt before in my life. Not properly, anyway. But seeing Glimmerlight come to my aid not out of guilt for me but out of a conscious decision to save somepony she cared about was a defining moment for me.

The raider had fallen, her head exploded across the desk she had hid in front of. Silence reigned as I heard the brass casing of Glimmer's round clink on the floor and roll away under a workbench. Dropping Sculpt's gun, I felt my knees go weak. Hours of running through the horrid past and thick darkness finally began to catch up to me. The raiders had been the last straw before everything just finally said "Yeah...that's enough..." and I fell to the side.

"Hey, hey! Murky!"

I fell, right into her hooves as Glimmerlight leapt forward to catch me, holding me upright again for just a second before hugging me tightly. Not really knowing what else to take strength in, my own hooves grabbed hold of her as tightly as I could manage. Already I could feel myself tearing up again. She had stuck to her promise. The first one anypony had ever kept for me...

"It's all right, I found you. I'm here now."

"I...I thought they...that I..."

"I know...it's alright now. We won't let you get separated again."

"We?" Where was Brimstone anyway?

Glimmerlight let go of me, ruffling my mane a little as she helped me down off the desk. Shivering a little as my hooves landed in the raider's rapidly expanding blood puddle, we cantered away from the corpse. Nodding to the entrance, Glimmer put on as best a smile she could. From the look in her eyes, I could see she was rather drawn out herself.

"Oh? Brim? Got separated in the dark when we ran into one of Barb's scouting parties. I was going to locate him...but then I heard you down the hallway. Brim can take care of himself for a while, better than when he's watching out for me. So what's this find you got down here, Murky? I'm *liking* the look of this room! Creepy skeletons not-with-standing..."

Biting my lip, I struggled to really know where to start. Sitting upon the floor, I told her about the story of the Stable. About the peaceful situation twisted into a horrific interior war through nothing but fear and accidents. About the way they had died and what happened to the scientists afterwards. Oddly...I found myself not mentioning the shadow of the past that had been drifting around the Stable. Ponies thought I was screwed in the brain enough as it was. As the recap ended, Glimmerlight simply sighed and shook her head.

"The sad thing is...this isn't unusual. For all their strength, the ponies inside the Stables were the fragile part. Back in the Rangers, we kept records of all discovered Stables. It's unsettling to think how many failed because of internal issues with the residents. But all this..."

She cast a hoof over all the workbenches.

"...this is unusual. Most Ministries had their own internal bunkers and sublevels, so to see all this stuff in a StableTec Shelter is pretty out of place. Especially as...oh my..."

Glimmer hopped up, trotting across to the workbenches. Confused, I followed, finding her lifting tool after tool before finally raising half a dozen of the orbs and immediately scanning through the attached terminal.

"What are those things? Don't you own a bunch of them too?"

"I do indeed, Murky. Have you never heard of memory orbs?"

I shook my head, then nodded...then shook again. "Maybe...there's a lot of things I've seen or heard about then just forgotten."

"Basically, they are little orbs of magic that contain a living simulation of the past. Grab them in a magic field and *whoosh!* You're off to old Equestria. Ponies used them as diaries, means of remembering details or even as proof of past events. The spell itself can create them, if you know how. Wonderful things really...you can even extract memories permanently. So see something you wish you hadn't? Just get rid of it! You'll maybe remember some vague concepts, but the details that made you feel bad just disappear."

The very idea made me shiver. To actually *see* into the past? I wasn't sure I liked that idea. Audio diaries had taken me to wits end in this place. If I were to actually see the events? I feared they might break me. Glimmer had begun work on the adjoining terminal, casting the occasional curious glance at the memory orbs that floated in arcs around her while she worked.

"If you *really* want to get into detail, memory orbs aren't just a series of pictures. See, ponies are all magical, unicorn or not. Earth ponies have that connection to the ground and their place in life, pegasi have the sky and weather embedded in them. Every pony's magical signature is unique, like our DNA."

"Our what?"

"DNA, Murky...the stuff that make us who we are. Magical signature is a part of our body and soul. Now memory orbs contain an imprint of that signature...like a false copy of our own life and experience. That's why we see things from the creator's perspective when we watch them."

Unable to really help it, I had my front hooves up on the workbench, tapping a lime green memory orb between them. What did it contain? Was it a good memory?

"How do you use them, Glimmer?"

The white unicorn chuckled, turning her head away from the frantically clicking terminal and tapping her horn lightly. Oh...of course. I let the orb roll away from me, nothing for me here...

"Huh...now that's interesting!"

Hmm? Lifting my head, I moved to watch the terminal Glimmerlight was working on. Oh...words. Damn it...

Without skipping a beat, Glimmerlight read it.

"Paper fifty two, on the residual effects of memory orbs to their users. We have continued work upon what Chief of Staff Aurora Star theorised a long time ago for training of our military. The ability to 'pre-record' situations within orbs to create experienced veterans before even going to war. This theory was proposed within days of the memory orb spell being approved and released to the unicorn public, but the effects simply did not stick. A user's magical signature could not correctly see it as true 'experience' in the way genuine life could. Huh..."

She flicked a few more screens past. In the distance, I began to hear faded noises. Thumps and sharp cracks. What was going on above us?!

"Apparently they succeeded, listen to this," began Glimmer again, "we brought Aurora's prototype spell with us. Apparently she shared her research with the Ministry of Peace under the watch of Surgeon General Dr. Weathervane for use as spell storage orbs. In the end, this was the breakthrough. When the medical staff figured out how to store pre-made medical spells within orbs, Aurora had a theory. If we could store spells...why not store a memory orb creation spell *in* the orb itself that activates upon the user, making *them* a temporary spell storage hub by storing it into their own magical signature. Wow."

I was lost. Storing a memory orb inside an orb, to create an orb...inside a pony...using an orb to-oh Goddesses why did it have to be me to hear all this...

Giggling, Glimmerlight patted my head as I lay it on the table before I got a headache.

"Simply put, Murky. They made orbs that would cast a spell on the pony using it to imprint a spell into

their own signature for a short period of time.”

I blinked, staring blankly. Glimmerlight rolled her eyes.

“Orbs that give unicorns new spells for a limited time.”

Ooooh! Well why didn't they just say so? I was beginning to think scientists just spoke in fancy terms to hide their ideas from other ponies. Glimmerlight moved away from the terminal, dragging a few orbs into her saddlebag with her before moving onwards to the large cupcake tray machine I'd seen earlier. Now in the light, I got a better look. It had one large central chamber with the baking trays in it with a weird headset nearby. Seemingly just made of dull metal, it shone brighter from the series of gemstones embedded under the rim of all colours. Around the base, I could see a series of bones. Shivering, I turned away.

“Now if I'm right...and when it comes to memory orbs I usually am...this would be where they got unicorns to transfer a memory of using said spell into a bunch of orbs for use by others. Which means...”

She bucked a nearby cupboard, breaking the rusted lock on it. Spilling open, half a dozen small cases out. Almost squealing in delight, Glimmerlight lifted them with her magic and held them before her. Opening one, I could see a much brighter and almost unstable looking memory orb within that pulsed with a bright red light. It reminded me eerily of Red Eye.

“Aaand here's the prototypes! Let's see...we have a shield spell, handy...three healing spells, *very* handy...‘create a door’ spell? Well...not so handy. And oh! YES! YESYESYES!”

“What is it?!” Could it be something to get us out?! A teleport spell that would send us all right to Tenpony Tower?!

“Want-it-need-it spell! I've *never* been able to do this one! Oh, this is fantastic! Can you imagine how easy it'll be to get that buck or mare who never quite seems to get into the mood with this one? Never again shall it be my round at the Roamer on break days with this little baby!”

Facehoofing, I could only nod in vague agreement as disappointment washed into my head. Sometimes, Glimmerlight really confused me. All that caring bound up in one casual and self admitted shallow package...

“Oh I could spend hours down here looking at all of this! Memory orb research, memory transfer theories and spell enhancement orbs! So many to look at, to learn from...”

I left her to squee over the orbs, hearing her chattering to herself about the methods and means. How did she know so much about them anyway? Why did she own so many back at the Mall? Shrugging to myself, I decided to have a look around elsewhere. Only now was the fact that the shadow had helped me beginning to set in. Or had it simply wanted to get at the raider who had looted its place of rest? Picking the room it had appeared from, I advanced towards it.

The interior was little more than a basic office. Picking through the fallen files and folders, I wasn't really looking for anything, just wanting to avoid Glimmerlight's fascination with the past and memory. Neither of them were particularly nice topics for me.

Unfortunately, I perhaps could have chosen a better pastime. As I cast my PipBuck's light around the room, it fell upon the desk. A smashed terminal sat there, riddled with bulletholes that actually went all the way through to the metal wall behind it where they had dented the thick material. The inevitable waited for me behind it.

A mare...I thought. See enough skeletons and perhaps you might be able to not freak out at more. But finding just the one little story left was always hard hitting. She had been at her desk, simply working on helping ponies to learn through memory orbs when Sculpt had rushed in amidst his rampage. Was this why the spectre chose this room? Wait...what was that?

Shifting the Stable Dweller clothing to one side with a hoof, apologising profusely...I saw a small picture frame. Holding my spasmodic light closer, I got a good look. Suddenly...everything made a lot of sense.

A lovely older mare, ribbons in her mane and tail that now lay beneath me, stained and ripped. She was standing proudly beside a little pink filly riding her brand new red scooter.

I'd thought I was past this. That nothing could affect me after the hallway of death where an entire Stable had been choked to death. That after witnessing corpse after corpse with shattered bones from bullets I may have become accustomed to it. But little details...little memories...

“Murky?”

Glimmerlight was behind me, standing in the doorway. Not turning around, I held the picture frame in my hooves, just staring. Only peripherally did I remember that these were the same colours as the ponies in the picture upstairs. Shivering, I almost dropped it while leaning sideways onto the desk, feeling as miserable and lost as I ever had. Glimmer's hoof lay on my shoulder.

“Not everything in the past is bad, Murky. They had good times before it happened.”

“They watched their world die. She saw her daughter killed!”

“Does that invalidate everything that came before? Accept the past...remember the good and then just look to the future.”

Soaking wet around the eyes, I turned on her, standing up on all fours.

“I don't know *how* alright?! I've never had to look to the future! All I've ever done is to be reminded what I'm to do here and now, all my life! A slave! You wonder why I hate the past so much?”

Turning, I pointed a hoof at my own flank, at those horrible shackles.

“Because if I ever did properly comprehend how much of my life and potential has been *wasted* since I was born into this...I'd break. I tried to kill myself once, I don't want to...to...”

Spluttering, I shook my head and mane furiously, trying to get my train of thought out of that road. Looking at the poor mare's remains, I just kept venting.

“Seeing other ponies like this, remnants and ghosts, it makes me think about my own life. Whether I'll have anypony who'll ever look back on my skeleton and be able to find anything worth mentioning. If I'll ever be more than just another nameless figure on some history book's pages of how many slaves died!”

Her telekinesis dragged me back around to face her. Snapped from my sudden anger, I looked up to see her standing tall before me. A serious expression came over her, before eventually calming. Around her, whirling orbs of light flew in blurring circles. All colours of the rainbow.

“Listen to me, Murky.” Glimmerlight advanced. “You're afraid of the past. *That* I understand. I can be too...I was scared coming down here to find you. Hell I think even Brim was unnerved. That's normal. But do you really not know how to look back and find anything good? What about LittlePip's escape? What about the mare? Velvet's songs? DJ-Pon3 helping you? Don't tell me none of that matters!”

She was right...but somehow none of seemed to properly sunk in whenever I tried to think of it. How happy had I been when I saw LittlePip flying without wings? I'd never smiled like that since...

“So perhaps it's going to take somepony to *show* you.”

The orbs span faster, before one, a small pink one, spun off and around the room before resting between us. Glimmerlight's head lowered. My mouth falling open, I shook my head.

“No...I don't want to look...I can't even view them! How do you intend-”

“You say your mark denotes why you can't look back, Murky.” Glimmerlight turned to the side, lifting her crimson Ranger robes with a hoof to reveal her cutie mark. Three memory orbs of pink, purple and light blue. “Mine is that I can help those who cannot to see for themselves...”

“Glimmer...I...I don't like the past, please, don't-”

“Don't worry, Murky.”

Fear demanded I shrink away, but her voice kept me rooted on the orb rested against my forehead and I felt consciousness rush from my body.

“Trust that memories have the power to help us...”

oooOOOooo

I was not me.

Every instinct fought to close me eyes...but they were not mine to close. Trapped in another body, in the half a second it took for 'reality' to phase in and properly become visible to me...I had nothing but a sense of enclosure and claustrophobia.

I did *not* like this. Who was I? Why did my back feel better? My ear was fine, how? What was that on my head? Why didn't I feel...like...like a buck?

Oh...that's why.

My 'host' (wait, my what? How did I know that word?) opened *her* eyes as I gazed upon the outside world. A spreading wasteland of dull colour and an even duller sky. Hardly the paradise I'd come to picture these days as my eventual escape location. I could hardly look around however...not only because the mare I embodied wasn't, but because I couldn't quite get over the fact that *I was a mare*. Not entirely something I was comfortable with. Everything felt different. I was too tall, my head was held too high. Why did my lungs feel clear? Oh Goddesses I had forgotten how it was to properly breathe...

I couldn't be sure, was my host's head spinning or was it just...just all this? Did I still have my own feelings? Why couldn't I blink when I wanted to? I didn't want to trot through the wastes with my head held high! Everypony would look at me! I just wanted to lower myself down and not be as...as open.

A conclusion was reached very quickly...I did not like memory orbs.

In an attempt to calm my mind, I focussed on what was ahead. This...mare...was striding forward through a bleak forest of brittle wood. Mountains rested either side, was this a valley? Whatever it was, in the fuzzy daytime of an overcast Equestrian Wasteland the general difference between it all was very difficult to ascertain. The mare was tired, that much I could feel (or was that me? Oh I don't know...) and had a large weight upon her back. Wait...hadn't Glimmerlight said this was her memory? Was I Glimmerlight? The ramifications of what I might experience from things *she* had done rammed home very hard. (Hopefully not literally)

But short of any professional buck hunting, instead the idle travels seemed to bring her into a heavily clustered wood. Part of me wondered if I should feel free. Was this the freedom that Protégé spoke of? To wander the world alone? The silent world around me just felt...empty. Where were the wondrous things I had imagined and drawn passionately upon the walls? This was so lonely...

No...not alone. Not for long.

Very soon, she found a village. Small mud and reed huts reinforced with heavier wood supports, it camouflaged well in the woods. Covered fires and small patches where brahmin wandered to and fro made up the outskirts as ponies of all shapes and sizes began to stand up and watch Glimmerlight approach. Nerves demanded I run, or find the biggest one and offer my services...

“Hey folks! What's cooking for a long term traveller looking for a place to stay?”

Well...not how I'd have done it. Everypony turned to stare at me...her. Glimmer's voice rang out loud amongst the village as more and more ponies gathered. I saw foals hiding behind parents as larger bucks stood ready with clubs. Casually, Glimmerlight stood her ground as an elderly mare approached. Her cutie mark was the head of a brahmin while her sullen brown face and coat marked a life much longer than any I had known in the wastes...

“How did you find us? Creaky Hollow is unmapped, we take care of our own and live off what we

can..."

I felt Glimmer roll her eyes.

"Hey, look, I'm just wandering to find my place, wasn't working out back home. I'm pretty good with just about anything if you need an extra helping hoof. Got anything needing fixing? I do that pretty well, arcane science and all that jazz. Type of pony everypony should know. You'd be surprised at how many little bits of talent I have in this noggin of mine. Could even open a massage parlour if I wanted...honest."

To my surprise, she stared sideways at one of the big bucks approaching with a club. I felt her smile after speaking and lower her eyelids as she met his eyes...then cast a view to his...uh...rather well built...flank. Watching his face soften, Glimmer turned back to the elder. I could swear her smile was wider.

"I'm Glimmerlight. Seriously, though, needing anything fixed? I'd do it for free if it'd prove myself to you..."

The elder scrunched up her face, looking around at the other ponies before pointing to a nearby shed with a few bits of metal coming from the roof. Small wires led to a large searchlight.

"We have the odd problem with timberwolves in this dry wood...light scares them off but it broke last month. We lost three brahmin and...and two foals. That and we can't purify the water without it. None of us can fix things, I don't even know if we have the parts..."

Glimmer went to work. Respectfully canning her attitude in the wake of foal deaths (I let up a small prayer for them...even though this was probably years ago) and wandering into the shed. Inside was oily and seemed to be filled with a slight magical haze from the malfunctioning spark generator. But as I watched...uh...experienced...her work, I gained an immediate respect for her skills. Telekinesis redirected wires, plugs and jump started circuits with startling dexterity. The buck sent to guard her moved to complain as she tossed some components out. Tutting, she stopped him entirely, raising her hoof to signalled he was to shut up and let her work. (It took me some time before I realised she was deliberately angling her own flanks toward him while bobbing about working...oh discomfort and nerves...such old friends you are, a buck looking at her...my...flanks. Oh boy...)

Come six minutes later...and the generator eventually surged into life with a climactic whine before settling into a more content low hum. Glimmerlight seemed to sigh happily before turning to the buck.

"Seems somepony just didn't know how to keep one of these maintained. Really, half the stuff boded in was just unnecessary. I mean, gaffertape, really? So, can I stay?"

She highlighted the last word while wandering past him and drawing her tail across his chin. Really? Was Glimmerlight seriously *this* flirtatious around bucks? She hadn't been here an hour!

That said, I quickly realised that I knew *nothing* about how to 'appeal' to anypony anyway. So what did I have to say she was right or wrong? Even quicker I realised I was only thinking all this to keep the feeling that "I" had just felt "myself" flirt with a buck. If I could have shivered...I would have. As she watched him wink back at her slyly, I got a sense of just how...*regular* this sort of activity was to her. I had no doubts that she had not gone to bed alone this night.

Why had Glimmerlight shown me this? To make me uncomfortable? This was horrible! I was trapped in somepony else's body, unable to move for real! I...I was more trapped than before! Trapped as a slave in Fillydelphia, then into an underground Stable, then into a memory? Stuck in her past with no control at all, a slave to her life! I was...I was...

Being cheered...

The moment Glimmerlight had wandered out of the shed, it seemed like the entire village had gathered to applaud her efforts to help protect their village. Coming from shelters and huts they gathered in a crowded circle about her. Lumberjacks collecting resources returning dropped their heavy axes and sat watching intently. Families hugged close, the safety of the lights and purifier reassuring them in one swift motion. Jokingly bowing down on her front hooves, I felt Glimmer lifted by the bucks and be carried around in a small lap of the village while laughing. She was surrounded by screams of thanks and promises that she

could stay. Even the elderly mare was cracking a smile (literally, on her face) as she nodded slowly. Dropping back to the ground, she was surrounded...appreciated...

I felt...I felt...

Happy...

Something had gone right. She was being accepted and welcomed as one of them through simple means of proving her worth, not as a slave or as somepony less, but as somepony unique for what she could do!

Hadn't that been what she had done when I fixed her robes? Could...could my past actually have little moments worth remembering clearly like this? Could Glimmerlight make me a memory orb of LittlePip?!

Foals bounced happily away from a pony I presumed was their teacher as they chanted "The bad wolfies won't come back!" over and over. They circled around her as though playing a game. Glimmerlight hugged one of them, a chirpy little young colt wearing an old floppy hat clearly too big for him. He squealed happily as he buried his head into her (at this point) long pink mane and giggled before returning to his mother. For a second I thought I caught a glint of recognition...perhaps just that motherly look anypony missing their mom would feel.

Glimmerlight was shown around...given a spare hut and told she could make a workshop if she wanted to help them out. To bring her expertise to improve their way of isolated life. Safe from all raiders and gangs in such an isolated and self sustaining area. Life, it was explained, wasn't easy...but it was a hell of a lot more peaceful and joyful than any other place in the wastes they could afford.

Happiness in the wasteland. Hope and friendships forming around her, potential memories to be just as the orbs had arced back and forth around me. The vision of a past I could never have. The home I couldn't go back to. She was filling in the gaps of my life through the gift of her own.

Even as I felt it all fading, now I knew precisely why she had shown me it. The same reason I liked to hear Sundial's voice. The past could give hope as well as terrify. I knew it wouldn't change my feelings immediately, but even as my consciousness drifted out of the hugging crowds I knew something was different. I'd been pushed onto the first step to realise what it was like to be anything but a slave...

oooOOOooo

I emerged on a sofa within a medical waiting room. Like waking from a hazy dream, I stretched and groaned as my own ruined body reminded me it once more had my presence. Gazing around at the darkness of the Stable...I began to miss the feelings of seeing an open world around me all the more. But no, it hadn't been 'freedom', not like Protégé meant. I had been entrapped to one path. Even if it had helped, no 'memory' was going to free me. But it was a beginning...a start to begin to realise what Protégé had so teased me with.

Feeling movement and a warmth close by, I shifted, finding Glimmerlight having been knelt down beside me, waiting for me to properly wake before speaking in case of startling me. For all her flirty nature...she did know how to care, that was for sure. Like she knew how I would react already. What she had given me...a true gift. That even if I was scared and upset by the past...I didn't need to fear every aspect of it. She smiled, stroking my rather straggly mane with a hoof. She wasn't flirting...just being caring.

"So...you understand?"

I didn't know what else to do. Something drove me...I couldn't explain why I simply leaned forward and tightly hugged her.

"Yes...thank you...thank you so much!"

For once, my tears were not from the pain.

* * *

"Don't worry, Murky. Take a second. Your first time is always a little tiring."

Lying back on the waiting sofa, I glanced around me at the medical bay. Apparently it was just around

the corner from the science room, the same way I'd seen the spectre disappear to before I'd gone in myself. Glimmerlight had come down this way, finding her own route. According to her, the memory orb had ended about ten minutes ago. Just I'd been so exhausted that it had actually put me out. She had carried me here to rest it off until my mind recovered. Looking up at her now, I saw her holding one of the spell orb cases and wondering.

“I noticed your ear was in a bad way...well, we both are.”

“How did you know?”

Glimmerlight just grinned, looking around the orb case. “I am not a healer, but I can diagnose. I hadn't reached the *healing* part of my initiate training before I left Bucklynn Cross. But hey, I can scan somepony like most doctors to an extent. As I said, you'd be surprised at how many little talents I've picked up. Don't expect me to go identifying illness though, all we were trained to look for was internal injury and triage who got what potions first. But with this...well, here goes...”

Her horn glowed. Curling up on the couch, I watched at the orb floated out of the casing, drifting toward her horn before glowing brighter. A hazy blue aura, solidifying like the rings I'd seen around some planets in books, spinning before the entire orb dissipated. Glimmerlight sighed, staggering backwards and grabbing her head.

“How...how did that feel?”

Without a word, Glimmerlight held up her hoof and with a flash of magic, I saw a scrape simply fade and knit together once again.

“Just like a memory orb...kind of a weird sensation, really. Like I've always known how to heal with magic. Here...before it fades, lean forward.”

Obeying, I leant my head forward, feeling her horn move closer to the ruptured eardrum...if that even was the problem. I was no medic. But a cooling, tingly and itchy feeling overtook my ear and most of that side of my head. A numbness faded in...before nothing. Before long, I realised...it wasn't numb. It just wasn't hurting any more. A headache that I hadn't even known I had disappeared.

“Wow...”

Glimmerlight smiled, dealing with various scrapes, bruises and cuts. “I can feel it fading already...I don't think these prototypes were designed to be particularly long lasting. Just a proof of concept they made with limited materials in this Stable. Given my affinity with memory orbs...I can't help but feel I *should* take some of these to study. No doubt the Ministry of Arcane Magic Hub in Fillydelphia has the full records and greater forms of this...if it even still exists. But just in case, we need at least one of these now I know they work for myself! This technology shouldn't be forgotten. But Red Eye doesn't deserve it, those six were the only prototypes I could find. But I've kind of been getting the impression that this Stable doesn't really want anything taken...I hope it understands...”

Her head cast back out to the dark hallway. Her horn's light and my PipBuck mixed into a turquoise aura around us, but despite the light from the science room nearby...the corridors were still a deadzone. Glimmer's eyes tracked back and forth. A clearer head now, I could still hear ambient sounds...the Stable, residents or not, was still very much alive.

“Call me crazy, Murky...well, okay, I am...but even more so, I don't think this Stable's all that dead. I can...*feel*...memory orbs, nothing unnatural, just I can sense their magical presence, the spell that drives them. They're my *thing*. But in this Stable, I can't help but feel it moving around sometimes. Moving memories...drifting around.”

She turned back to me, biting her lip for a second.

“I can't help but wonder if perhaps their research had some...*other*...effects on the final events in here. Like some last ditch effort to tell their story. Anyway...let's just stay safe in here. Brimstone will be here soon, he knows where I went.”

Casting my memory back, both the Overmare and Sandy Sculpt had been obsessed with that. What was it the Overmare had said? Memories have power? Hadn't Glimmer said the same thing? This was getting too big, too philo...uh...fillysop...ah forget it. Too fancy. Sitting up, I shook my head and quickly regretted it as my vision spun wildly. Feeling Glimmerlight prop me up, I sat back up on the couch, my hind legs dangling off until I got my balance back. It took me a second before I saw Glimmer looking at me weirdly.

“What?”

“Uh...you sure you're comfortable sitting like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like that.”

“I dunno...just feels normal to me-”

A crash sounded down the hallway. A pattering of hooves and a frenzied shouting. I recognised Chib's voice. Apparently he'd brought friends.

“It was down here! A fucking ghost, I swears!”

“Chib, there's no such thing. Can't believe you ran from that runt...”

“Not from him! Like some...some shadow!”

“You *are* a shadow, you're a Shade student under Barb, how can you be afraid of the dark? Look, we can't delay much longer, Barb needs us in the fight up top! You want him to think we're avoiding it?”

“Isn't that what we're doing helping Chib here?”

“QUIET! You never know when he's listening! We're going back up top as soon as we get the fancy loot down here. Now, you get the medical bay, we'll get the science room.”

Oh crap...I killed the light just as quickly as Glimmer turned off her light spell. Where was her rifle? A glance to ask later and she just shrugged, mouthing the words 'no ammo' to me. Well...damn. I felt her stand beside me. There was no way out...but at least we were together.

“Hey! Look what we got here!”

Four raiders. I recognised the dark figure of Chib, still sniffing in fear as he glanced at the science room. But the other three were coated in something that looked disturbingly like the coats of other ponies. Fresh blood ran down the edges of the 'clothing.' Some poor slaves, no doubt. I wanted to retch. One mare and two stallions. Each carried some bladed implement, presumably all guns were being used in whatever battle was going on above. Against who? Slavers? Was Barb seeking to make this place his dark lair permanently? A Stable was certainly defensible...

“Now ain't this just perfect? Chib gets his revenge and we get a little mare to share. Hah! Fantastic...think we should keep her? We could put the runt on a leash! The Clan pet-OW!”

The mare had snapped with her teeth at the stallion's neck, growling and drawing blood.

“We are not a Clan! That was the *traitor's* word! We are under Barb now!”

I try to be brave...I really do. But hopping off the couch and pressing against Glimmer for any support I could get was just how I responded to these things. They had knives and...and spiked mouth clubs! Glimmerlight patted my back lightly just once, before fixing a stare at them.

“You guys really don't want to do this, y'know?”

“Oh? Why's that, bitch?”

Shocked, I saw Glimmerlight grinning at them, that wide joyous look.

“Because you're going to force me to use my special weapon.”

A different atmosphere took over the room. Backing to the side away from her, my eyes looked over her

clothing and bags. Had she found something? Some old magical energy weapon? Maybe a different spell orb!

“Hah! You're not fooling anypony! So what is your *weapon*?”

“Oh...it's a good one. I got it right here with me. It'll blow you right down, all four of you.”

“Yeah?!”

I hoped so. Perhaps it was a spell I hadn't seen? Could she shoot lasers from her horn? Or magic bullets! Maybe she could blast a huge rainbow beam! Smiling a little, the confidence in her voice reassured me as I saw her wink down at me. Oh yeah, Glimmer had something special planned!

“Yeah...you don't stand a chance. All four of you.”

“Well bring it!”

“Okay!”

“Good!”

“Fine!”

“Well do it!”

“Okay...” Glimmerlight shook out her mane, planting her four hooves solidly down, taking a slow breath.

“Go get em, Murky!”

My eyes shot as wide as they could, my jaw dropping while looking in abject shock first at the raiders, then Glimmer, then back again and back to Glimmer. Stunned for a second, the raiders burst out laughing.

“M-me?! B-but Glimmer!”

“Oh don't be so modest. You can take em!”

“Oh yeah! He's sooooo threatening with that little ruler poking out of his pocket! Hahaha!”

“Hey! Pay some respect, Murky here would tear the lot of you apart, he survived the Pit!”

“Ooooooh did he now?”

“Yeah, watch out, here he comes!”

“Uh...Glimmer...”

“Just wait till he gets his hooves on you, like a little rabid wolverine!”

“Glimmerlight...?”

“Never seen anything so deadly in my life!”

“GLIMMER!”

My shout cut everypony into silence as I hopped up to her ear.

“What...are...you...doing?!”

“Yeah, what're you saying, stupid bitch, we've seen the runt try to fight. What's your plan, get him to distract us then run for it?”

Glimmerlight just patted my head, before turning back to them, her grin turning to a laugh.

“No...actually...I was just keeping you distracted while he got behind you.”

“...he? Who?”

The raider stallion turned, bumping directly into a dark red *wall* of muscle almost twice the height of him. Very slowly, the raider's meek face looked up...and up.....and up...

“Hi,” said Brimstone Blitz.

* * *

“We can't stay here. We're leaving. Now.” Brimstone was cutting no corners as he stepped out of the (thoroughly destroyed) medical room.

“There's still a lot I can gather from these terminals, Brim.” Glimmerlight was frantically moving through the side science chambers, sifting through diary after diary and murmuring details while Brimstone had cleaned house. “You have no *idea* how amazing the technology they've been working on is! If we could get this out to the wastes and finalise it, we could get properly trained ponies building again! We could-”

“If we stay here, we're dead. Now **come on!**”

“Well then give me time! I've got the prototype orbs, but this terminal has the spell on it, I need to get rid of the files so Red Eye can't-”

Brimstone smashed the terminal clean off the desk to end the argument before it had even begun, making me squeak in shock as the impact sound assaulted my ears. His move stunned even Glimmerlight as the terminal itself broke into a thousand fragile pieces. She just sat blinking for a second, her hooves hovering in the air where the keys had been.

“...that works too...”

“**COME ON!**”

His voice brokered no argument, taking off after him, I struggled to keep up with the massive raider and his huge strides. Running down darker corridors, lit only by scant PipBuck light and an illumination spell, Brimstone led us to another set of stairs. What was going on above? Oh wait...friends now! I could ask!

“What's going on, Brimstone?”

He must not have heard me over the clattering of all our hooves on the thin metal scaffold stairs. This staircase clearly had been scratchbuilt into the Stable after it had closed. Up three floors, on each one the sounds became louder. Heavy weaponry roared, the clattering of metal and roars of...of...what were they? The floor was shaking and smoke was already drifting in though some floors we passed.

“What's going on!?”

Diving into a corridor, Brimstone finally heard me, turned and then immediately snapped around and diving across the corridor into the adjoining room. Just before I followed a projectile *whooshed* past me trailing smoke. Seconds later a concussive blast reverberated up the hallway that sent my sensitive ears into aching spasms. If I hadn't had them repaired...what the hell was that? Glimmerlight ducked back against the wall and peered around.

“Oh no...”

Poking my head out under her hooves, I witnessed a demon made real. Amongst a burning corridor it stood. Angular, wreathed in fire and ash, it came galloping down the hallway, it's hooves sparking on the metal floor. Shaped like a pony but made of dark metal, it continued its charge, a huge rotary cannon screaming as it strafed lines of devastation all over the corridor. The sight made me flinch back, whimpering in the corner as I prayed it would just pass. All I felt was Glimmerlight grabbing me.

“Move, Murky! Move or you're dead! You can't hide from them!”

Screaming at the top of my lungs in sheer terror, I followed her as we charged into the main corridor to where Brimstone was across the hallway. A haphazard glance led me to see the metal beast stopping to unleash hell into one room. I heard hoarse voiced ponies screaming and gurgling as the weaponry tore them apart so violently that I saw parts coming flying out of the doorway. Up ahead, Brimstone pounded through the chamber, bulldozing into the rusty door to collapse it out of place enough that we could force our way

into the next corridor. Behind us, the sounds of metal hooves on the floor resumed, coming closer after the demon had dealt with the raiders it spotted.

CHNK-CHNK! CHNK-CHNK!

“They're coming! Just gallop, go!”

I saw Brimstone spin and grab the old assault rifle from his back. Clenching the mouthgrip, he unloaded the entire load of rounds down the corridor. Sparks flew, walls charred and the floor plates kicked up as the sharpened armour penetrating rounds hurtled down the hall with deadly force to destroy absolutely everything *other* than the giant, almost unmissable, figure that stomped toward us. Glimmer cast Brimstone a narrowed glance.

“...you weren't kidding when you said you couldn't aim.”

“Shut up. Move!”

Following Brimstone through, we rounded into a firestorm. The entire corridor was filled with smoke flowing from broken wall panels and furiously burning pools of oil. We had went from the cold dark to the fiery light. Squealing, I hopped back as sparks landed on my woollen fleece, lighting it until my hooves desperately patted it out. My mane felt frazzled already, my eyes stinging under even my goggles. I was reminded oddly of Fillydelphia with the fire and rust, only enough to give an odd sense of familiarity before I felt Brimstone's teeth grab my fleece and hurl me through a room's window.

Crashing over somepony's old board game, the pieces digging into my body painfully, I landed in the heap upon the floor, watching Glimmer and Brimstone climb through. Behind them, masses of small explosions took out the majority of the wall panels, sending shrapnel pinging all over the corridor and into our room. I cowered, covering my face as the whizzing metal sprayed around us. I felt one bit embed itself in my journal by my side. What shape was the surrounding area like? Where did this room go? I didn't know! This was too fast...too violent, I had no idea what kind of area I was in, or where I could go!

Brimstone grunted in pain, staggering. I saw blood pooling on his side where shreds of fragmentation had penetrated his thick hide. Sobering up at the sight, I saw we were in an office, the window had led from the corridor, but the door ahead of us, the only way out, led into another corridor entirely.

“Goddesses damn it...I really hate those big guns. Keep going, it's coming!”

We ran through to door. Behind us, through the window I had been thrown through, I saw the massive steel pony glance in at us, before bracing itself and diving through the window. Turning, it aimed at us while we ran through the door.

“Eyes-Eyes-ForZZZK-Spark-kle-kle-kle signal detected...depressurisation routi-KZZZ-”

The room's door slammed shut close enough to almost take my tail off before the rocket slammed into it, denting the thick metal. Somehow, I couldn't quite feel thankful for that hideous routine even after that. Brimstone seemed to know the way he had come down, leading up around another corner.

Before I knew it, we were back in the atrium, entering via a previously closed door into the canteen. Galloping for the door I saw the huge pile of loot was completely abandoned. Scar marks of weapons fire puckered the entire floor while the bodies of raiders lay in various pieces.

“Murky! Stop! The area up ahead is sure to be covered!”

Glimmerlight's words gave me reason to stop and roll under a table on sheer habit, I watched them look back behind us through the door as it slid closed. Up ahead, I could hear furious gunfire...going two ways this time. Brimstone Blitz snarled.

“They must have brought half their fucking force to get by the small army Red Eye posted outside. Had to dodge two more on the way down, there's about four Scraps inside the Stable. Must *really* want this place.”

“Oh *course* Brim,” retorted Glimmerlight, “a Stable in their neck of the woods? Only just discovered? The Steel Rangers would move the sun and moon if they thought they could capture it from Red Eye!”

“And fuck every slave inside it, right?”

“...yeah...they think like that now. To them we're just looters and scavengers like anypony else...”

“Don't suppose your standing will help us?”

“If they knew who I was, they'd probably get even madder. What do you mean by Scraps anyway?”

“Rangers, ponies hiding under what will be scrap metal if I get my way. Rangers are Scraps, ghouls are rots...just part of the way of life to name things...”

Steel Rangers. I'd heard of them, obviously. Everypony had. But I'd never seen one. Frantic images of the steel clad pony bounding through fire, heavy weaponry spewing death ahead of it. Unstoppable machines of war by my perceptions...if they'd been designed to intimidate...the Ministry who built them had succeeded. It was hard to imagine there was somepony inside one of those things. If they'd taken out Red Eye's forces then...

Wait...

Time seemed to slow. To stop. Every sound faded. Only my heartbeat remained.

If Red Eye's forces had been taken out. That meant that...there were no slavers watching us anymore.

...we were outside the wall...

Staggering, not hearing anything properly, as though I was submerged in water, I wandered into the atrium. Around me, sparks and smoke swirled as the venting fans did their best on automatic. Above me on the balcony, shadows moved back and forth, edges of sudden light peeling off them into corridors. Were they the residents or...just ponies firing at the Rangers? I could feel wisps in the air near me...but nothing could draw my attention but for one thing.

Ahead of me, the main exit that led to the Stable door room lay open. Almost imaginary...I could feel the wind flowing in from there in my mane.

...could I? Was it *that* simple? To come out there, face my greatest fear and then just...go?

Cold fear gripped me. What if...what if Red Eye was still out there? What if I let hope get the better of me and The Master had brought reinforcements to decimate the Rangers and reclaim me? A thousand reasons to be afraid...and only one reason to try. One dream.

“Dare to dream...” the words barely a whisper from my mouth as I felt each hoof move on its own accord. A second chance to try.

A low sound, growing, made me turn. I thought it was Brimstone, a huge silhouette charging through the smoke, directly at me. The sound heightened in pitch as the keening scream of a spark engine began to pick up speed.

Glimmerlight crashed into me, hurling me to the side. A strafing burst of fire whipped past where I had stood so fast that it was little more than a single deathly wail than a series of shots. Sound returned, a sudden scene of abject carnage exploding around me as Glimmerlight and I dragged ourselves into the cover of a thick metal bench. The Ranger was being peppered from every direction, raiders on the balcony pouring fire at the thick armour. Most of the rusty weapons merely pinged and whistled off it. Bracing itself, the Ranger twisted, its *huge* body with that armour swinging around a colossal pair of weapons, one a multi-barrelled cannon and similar, but made of much larger barrels. A belt of grenades fed into it. Starting the engines of the big saddle again...it unleashed hell.

Covering my ears, feeling Glimmer pressing herself as low as possible over me, the sound felt like the world tearing apart as the Ranger dragged itself in the circle, ripping the balcony from the walls as raiders and slaves fell from above in pieces. No single sound stood out amongst the firing, impact and devastation wrought. Parts of metal fell over us, immense drowning sounds of large metal plates tumbling from the walls

and flipping over on the atrium floor. Behind us, whoops of victory from somewhere, I never found out what. Every noise echoed back and forth, slapping my senses from every direction as I desperately tried to scream into Glimmer's ear about the exit.

A shadow fell across us, Brimstone Blitz rushed forward, a huge 'L' shaped piece of wall panel balanced over his body.

“MOVE! MOVE!”

We required no telling, using him as literal moving cover, the three of us sprinted through the intense firefight into the main corridor.

“The way out!” I couldn't *not* scream it. “Red Eye's guards must be gone! We can get out! Be free!”

Up the main stairway we ran. Behind us, the battle continued. One Ranger against a dozen raiders that survived in the siderooms and balconies. The Ranger's presence was the only thing that had saved Glimmer and I from being targets from above. My mind was too focussed...I wasn't meant for battle! If only the Rangers knew that we simply wanted out the way...wouldn't they be fine with us leaving? But no...just as the residents of the Stable had become corrupted by the dark to distrust and fear their neighbours, were the ponies of the wasteland sickened by the darkness of their lands to fear the worst and never assume. Barb had been right...as had my old master. History repeated itself, again and again in different ways, but always ending the same way. In the crushing of trust and innocence.

Well I wanted no part of it. No longer. I was going to leave it all behind, pass beyond my fear and take one more chance. Facing the past had done it, I felt that burning desire in me, the willpower to willingly take a chance...

We were going out there. We were escaping. Somehow I knew they'd follow...and they did.

Together...we ran into the great Stable door room. Together...we saw the sunlight streaming in.

...together...we fell as the Steel Ranger on guard's anti-machine rifle slapped into the ground in front of us. The concussive wave behind it blew me clean off my hooves, Glimmer tripped as she fell over me. In front of us lay slaver after slave after raider who had tried the same...

Brimstone was not as simple to knock over. He whirled on the spot, diving at the Ranger and using his entire weight, bent the barrel of the long rifle before tearing it clean off the battle saddle. Rounding off, the big earth pony rolled to his hooves, dodged the return hoof swipe and faced down the Ranger.

“Stand down, raider. You are unarmed.” A harsh voice, distorted by armour and replayed through the helmet. It was almost genderless...female? Or was it lighter from the tinny replay voice?

Brimstone didn't even wait to reply. Time was against us till the other Rangers got here. Bellowing at a volume I had never believed he could, I saw the Great Warlord charge a Ranger just as big as himself in that hulking armour.

“For the Chapter and the Ministry!” The Steel Ranger nobly screamed their own warcry and thundered forward.

What ensued was...for the time...the most brutal clash I thought I would ever see. Glimmer and I could only sit as far away as possible as we witnessed metal against flesh, sheer power against hydraulic technology. Clashing hard enough to send a shockwave through the floor of the room, both rose to their back hooves, towering high enough that even griffins would have been cast in shadow, before the hooves began to swing.

Neither gave, backed by the armour, the Ranger took Brimstone's charge like a solid wall, powering her own hoof around to force Brimstone to the side. Swinging his entire body, the raider whirled and dropped every ounce of his weight to throw the Ranger above him into the wall. Like a thunderclap the power armoured pony left a dent as deep as I was wide. Undeterred, she charged back at Brimstone, sending him careening into the railings before the doorway. Crumpling under their combined weight, the two crashed down to the next level, rolling and slapping hooves hard enough to kill a normal pony into one another.

Already, Brimstone's face was filled with bloody marks and his body bruising around puckered scars. Cursing and stomping the ground, Brimstone swung up faster than a pony his size had any right moving, to buck the Ranger square in the side. With a sound like the Goddesses themselves stepping hoof upon Equestria, the armoured warrior flew over ten feet backwards with a deep indent in the side plate.

Brimstone wasn't done, not giving his opponent one inch, frothing at the mouth, his eyes bloodshot and wild, he charged over, leaping and slamming both front hooves down on the ground where the Ranger once was. Lifting herself up, the pair wrestled, wrapping front hooves around the other's to gain leverage. It suddenly appeared to me how matched they were in different ways. The Ranger had a mechanical strength that went on and off at unstoppable levels...but Brimstone's power was variable, able to twist and redirect in ways the Ranger armour never could. His savagery and experience was showing as he took advantage of the armour's joint limitations...while the Ranger used that sudden ability to surge power into movements to force back her opponent. Eventually though, beyond all thought that beggared belief...Brimstone was actually forcing back a suit of power armour by *sheer strength alone*. With a twist and a shove, he threw the Ranger to the side, hurling her through the glass of the nearby control panel room.

Somehow still moving, the dented armour plate repairing before my eyes, she held both of her front hooves together around a metal beam, using the armour's shape as rough talons like the griffins had. With a mighty swing, the beam, heavier perhaps than three bucks, set a course for Brimstone's head. Duck! Grab it!

Horribly, it connected. The warlord collapsed to the side, stunned. Without mercy, his opponent stood, pounding hoof after armoured hoof down upon my friend.

I don't know what drove me. Grabbing a pipe in my teeth, all I knew was I had to help him...however I could. There was only one place I knew of that I could hurt most ponies in! I was fairly sure it hurt females at least a bit...right?

With all my might, I swung the pipe up and under the armoured tail.

CLANG!

My teeth chattered...my entire body shook as the impact came right back down the pipe to me instead. Almost dismissively, the Ranger cast its head backward.

“You *have* to be kidding me...really?”

The back hoof shot out. About to scream, I felt my entire body dragged backwards as Glimmerlight caught me in her telekinetic net enough to at least pull my tiny weight away before it connected. I hadn't done a *thing*.

But I had. Those few seconds of distraction. With a mighty roar that echoed down every tunnel Brimstone Blitz, the Great Raider Warlord, the Scourge of Ponyville, rose up...and took the Ranger with him. Stunning my every sense, I witnessed him rear up, lifting the entire Ranger with him in his front hooves, twist and bring her down with the strength of a vengeful god.

The Ranger hit the floor so hard I felt my entire body kicked up off the ground by the shockwave, falling on my side.

And then...silence.

Brimstone staggered across. I had never seen the big pony look so worn out. Yet in his eyes I could see a strength still...that fury that could drive him to go on and on. The Ranger lay in a crumpled heap. Glimmer cast a horn across her, before sighing and muttering a few words only I would hear.

“Rest with the great heroes of the Orders, noble Ranger...”

I blinked a few times...before it struck home. On separate sides or not, all Steel Rangers still shared the same bond and hardships they'd endured to be a part of that group. Glimmerlight's reverence for one of their fallen...regardless of intent...was proof enough of that.

Brimstone merely spat blood onto the grilled floor nearby.

“Thought the ones in this area had cleared out...gone to some other Stable lately to try and take it near Ponyville. Least that's what the slavers reported.”

Glimmer shrugged.

“Perhaps these ones were still out on long patrol when the others left...perhaps they were given the mission to retrieve the technology in here first then join their comrades. The Ministries were active in here, so we likely had records of it. To be honest...I wish I could have helped them. The memory orb research is better in their hooves than Red Eye...this is all just...”

Brimstone sat, nursing his face and moving each joint to make sure it still worked properly. By the sounds of it...some didn't, not that he seemed to care. But my attention was on Glimmer. She bent over the Ranger, her magic accessing a panel until the visor slid back. Underneath was a snow white and light blue maned mare, hard looking and rough from no doubt days inside the suit. Her neck was twisted at an odd angle. Even as I watched, Glimmer closed her eyes gently, before seeming to sniff.

Friendship wasn't something I really knew...but at that moment even to me it was obvious what she needed.

Limping over, I leaned over to her, wrapping my hooves around her neck and squeezing gently.

Over her shoulder...in the dark of the corner. Something shifted...nothing anypony but me saw. A drifting darkness that flowed from vents and ducts and never once approached the light. A vague pony shaped head watched as, even today, ponies on the same side were forced to watch one another die because of the fears and dangers around them making them be this way. To see the cycle repeat again...and again...

Feeling Glimmer hold on to me back, I watched as the vague shape seemed to tremble, the lidless eyes falling on her bag that carried the research. Tensing, I expected the worst...to reclaim its property.

But hidden from my friends...I watched as it seemed to relax and slide away again. I could only hope that it had seen Glimmerlight as the correct pony at last to take their most treasured items that had caused all this in the first place. That perhaps...under her watch...the research so many died because of might still mean something someday.

...

...bing bing!

* * *

We spent a minute or two using the second healing orb to allow Glimmer to do what she could for Brimstone. The prototypes barely lasted any time...but it was enough to get him moving properly again.

“Brim? Any ideas when we're out there?”

“Grab the armoury cart, I'll pull it. Get into Filly and use the buildings as cover until night falls, then get to the hills!”

“Think we can do it?”

“If it kills me. I will get you out, Glimmer.”

We paused just short of the door. Breathless, I fell against the wall. Much to my surprise, I felt Brimstone's hoof on my shoulder...and back...and neck...all at once.

“...and you, little Murk. You've done more than you ever had to.”

Words wouldn't come to me. Looking at the big raider who had once held me against a wall for insulting him, I saw him actually grin a little.

“I...may not show it. But I try. You deserve this freedom, Murk.”

Unsure how to react, I just tried to smile as well as I could, making Glimmer ruffle my mane again. I

could sense that becoming an ongoing thing...

“You really have a beautiful big innocent silly grin, you know that, Murky? You really should smile more often.”

Chuckling, I felt giddy between them as I rounded to stare at the door. I could see nothing from outside from the contrast of light. Was...this really happening? There were likely guards outside and a whole heap of danger...plus Barb and his cronies behind us somewhere. It would not be easy...there was every chance that some or all of us would be back in Fillydelphia if caught. None of us said it...but there was every likelihood that not all of us would succeed or even survive.

“Ready?” Brimstone's voice rumbled as he rolled his neck, ready to pull a cart.

“I was born ready.” Glimmer grinned, then stopped. “Wait...no. Actually, I was born horny. I got ready around my teens. But ready now! Eh, Murky? Attempt number two...ready to dare?”

“To dream.” I replied, not paying attention to her confused look.

It was unspoken. We simply...went. Three ponies, who had found one another in the worst of pits, ready to take a chance in a bid for freedom.

We galloped toward the light...together.

* * *

Footnote – Perk Attained!

Galloping with Ghosts – Drifting from shadow to shadow, you are that thing that leaves those in the light wondering just what they are facing. Are you even real or not? Or are you simply all in their imagination? When aware of your presence, your foes now have a lower chance to detect your true position.

Chapter 8: The Virtue of Freedom

* * *

“From where you're kneeling, it must seem like an eighteen-carat string of bad luck. But the truth is... the game was rigged from the start.”

“What is it like to see your dreams within your grasp?”

A feeling like no other.

In my last attempt, born of desperation, I had launched myself into an impossible situation out of sheer determined panic and fear of what would happen had I stayed. A mad rush into the unknown, for all of my planning. It had failed because I had been too hopeful, too blinded by dreams and wishes of what I was going to do once *out* of Fillydelphia to have the presence of mind to actually do it.

I had been doomed to failure before I had even started, becoming nothing more than a game to the griffin guards wanting to check the sentries' capabilities. In the moment of believing that freedom would be mine...Ragini's bullet had torn my hopes apart just as brutally as it ripped my stomach apart. Rougher than ever, I was hurled back into the pits of Fillydelphia, my confidence shattered and spirit almost broken entirely.

For me, a slave only used to obeying others...the idea that my strength would come from others willing to follow me or lead me through choice was bewildering. Sure, I'd take inspiration from ponies such as LittlePip, DJ-Pon3, Sundial and the mare...but to have ponies willing to stay with me every step of the way? That was new.

Amidst Stable Ninety Three, I had been made to realise that the events of the past were not truly that which defined us. Memory held power...both to upset us and to help uplift ourselves. The Ministry scientists had sought to use memories to aid ponies in becoming better through skills and learning, even if it had been mired in the living memories of tragedy. Glimmerlight had shown me that the correct memory at the right time had the power to simply *inspire*. To remind us that we shouldn't frown because it was lost...but to smile because it had happened.

To show us that our dreams were still out there...waiting for us to go and reclaim them.

Protégé had once told me I didn't understand what freedom was. That I could never hope to have the strength to escape Fillydelphia until I knew what it felt like to think and make every choice for myself. From The Master through the Mall, the crater, Hearts and Hooves hospital and the nightmares of a dead Stable I had been pushing myself further and further to gain what confidence I could for the attempt I knew was about to happen. I had allies aiding me, pushing me along, sharing our dreams into one unceasing and unflinching need to escape.

A chance like no other. We were outside the walls. Steel Rangers had Red Eye's forces distracted. The cover of an entire city nearby and both the strength of Brimstone Blitz with the resourceful intelligence of Glimmerlight. I could feel it, everything I had ever truly wanted surging in my heart, telling me that we could do it.

We could.

But at that point, there was no way to know the truth.

To know that after this one chaotic rush...I would be homeward bound.

* * *

...sounds...just the noise of chaos around me, assaulting my ears...

“Shit! Down! Get down! Where did they come from?!”

“Griffins! They're hiding on the rooftops, oh Goddesses!”

“Murky, just watch the road, they've been dropping mines! They're *still* following us!”

Ping!

“What was that?!”

“I said they dropping mi-WATCH OUT!”

FWOOM!

“...urgh...Glimmer, you-”

“I'm...I think, just shrapnel...hrk...Murky...Murky you alright?”

“I...I...”

“Hold on, we'll get out of here, we'll *all* get out of here. Just a little further...”

“Where's Brimstone?!”

“I don't know! He must be up ahead at the bank...or got separated or something, we need to keep going. Find something to help you...and me...urgh...”

Klnk Klnk Klnk!

“The Rangers are still in the same street, keep going! KEEP GOING!”

“My...my leg-”

“I know, but we need to go now! Get to me, inside, Murky! We're almost there!”

Fwhoosh...THOOM!

Kreeee...

“Watch the building! It's...it's coming down!”

KERRRASH!

“Oh...no...Murky! **MURKY! No!** Get off me! **Get off!** My friend, he's still in...ARGH!”

* * *

Past the chaos of battle and danger, it slowly drifted away, being replaced by a gentle warmth. Soft and comforting, draped over me...

Before, I might not have known, but the feeling of somepony else holding me closely was unmistakable after that one lifechanging embrace Glimmerlight has given me. The first I had ever known as a grown pony. I lay amongst the quiet bliss of another, serenely and simply taking comfort in somepony else's presence. Felt my hooves against their soft, thick mane and hearing another's heartbeat.

A dream, so obviously a dream. I knew who I *wanted* it to be...but...but was it her? Was it my Saviour? My Lightbringer? Coming back to rescue me from the searing pain left in me from an hour solid of galloping under fire and taking wounds? I'd like that...to hold her close. I felt myself squeeze a little tighter

in need. Soothing delight pinging my every sense as I felt them return the favour.

My eyes wouldn't open, wouldn't see. I simply rested, hearing her voice...five words. Five words that made my spirit stir and my heart steel against all adversary, but only one of which I could identify.

“Together...”

* * *

Light stabbed into my eyes. Dizzy, tangled and weighed down, I wanted to kick and struggle...but an overwhelming tiredness overtook me. My vision was nothing but white, a bright illumination that slowly began to fade just as much as a creeping agony began to settle in on my skull. I was under something soft, rugged...a course blanket? Something was moving above me in a circle, whirling like the threshing machine, softly *wup wup wup*ing away.

Every limb felt heavy when I tried to lift them, to roll and try and stand. I could hear trotting nearby, somepony whistling and getting closer. Wanting to try to cry out for Glimmerlight, I felt my throat dry up and turn raspy. How long had it been since I'd last taken RadAway? Oh Goddesses...please not too long.

“Well how 'bout that...”

An older stallion, drawled and tinged with an accent I'd heard every so often in my life. Movement began to fade into my sight as only now my centre of balance detected I was looking upwards. The splitting headache only became worse as I shifted uncomfortably to try and see who it was. Blinking (ow...even that hurt...) I saw the silhouette gradually fade into a rust coloured pony trotting up to sit beside me. Groaning, I tried to shift, before stifling back a high pitched cry as my head flared and fired a lance of pain from left to right between the ears. Falling back, I panted on the...the...couch or something?

“Woah, woah...easy there, easy, just relax a second; get your bearings.”

I felt a hoof rest on my side, ever so gently pressing me back against the couch till I stopped wriggling. Blinking rapidly, finally things were coming into focus. A musty old room, filled with antique furniture and lit by a hazy yellow drifting through closed blinds over the windows. The old stallion was right before me. Setting my vision on him, struggling to keep my eyelids open, I saw a rust coloured earth pony sitting upon an old cushion. A calm smile rested on his face as he met my eyes.

“You've been out cold a couple a' hours now, take it slow...lets see what the damage is.”

“I...I-argh!”

Moving my head elicited another sharp pain as though somepony had just hit me over the head with a wooden stick. Something about why I knew what that precisely felt like said a lot about an old master of mine...

With slow effort, I finally got my hooves beneath me, unsteadily beginning to settle down on all fours atop the couch. With my size I could sit right across it fairly easily to face my...helper? I hoped so...

“Something, I don't quite know...”

“Let's just keep it simple, there. How 'bout your name?”

He sat back again once I had risen from my side, smoothing out the tough leather claddings he wore and adjusting the red neckerchief. I noticed he did that a lot, like it never quite sat comfortably.

“Murky Number Seven...”

“Heh...I can't say it's anything I'd have picked, but if that's your name it's your name. I'm Doc Minstrel, welcome to my quaint little home. Now...I had to do a little bit of work keeping you alive back there, you were pretty beat up when we found ya.”

Slowly, moving on seemingly creaky old limbs, Minstrel leant down and retrieved a cracked and dusty mirror between his front hooves. Blowing over it enough to raise a little cloud of stagnant dust, he set it

down before me, allowing me to gaze down. The dust remained still in the thick interior air, before dispersing and disappearing within the beams of light in through the windows.

“Now ah did the best ah could but...can't say ah could make it perfect again.”

Closing my eyes, I felt my hooves touch the mirror. The cool burnished brass around it felt all too similar to the feeling in my gut. My imagination running riot. My head was hurting so much...he said it wasn't perfect again. What...what had happened to me...

I...I didn't want to open my eyes

Dreading the moment, the dull aching in my forehead matching the weak beating of my heart, I slid my eyes open and looked down upon myself.

I screamed.

First in shock, then in pain as the sudden motion of trying to throw the mirror away set every aching wound alight. My head, shoulder, back legs and even one I hadn't felt on my front right hoof seared as I collapsed down shivering. Minstrel moved quickly, his strong, firm hooves holding me in place to prevent further motions. Already my eyes were shedding tears...I...I had seen...

...him.

Above those matching horrific eyes, I now bore the same scar running from behind my left ear to just above my eye. Red and welted against my muddy green coat, it stood out as a swollen line of both pain and unpleasant memory. The knowledge of my head being permanently marked paled in comparison to that...that I looked like *him*.

“Woah there, just stay still! You ain't ready to go all thrashin' around like that just yet, young buck. But that there wasn't just any reaction to a pretty nasty scar now, was it?”

I shook my head, wincing as that baleful line linking me to him throbbed, shaking tears across the couch beneath me.

“Well, you rest here for now, Murky Number Seven. Ah get the feeling there's issues here ah'm not seein'. But don' worry, you're safe here.”

A thousand questions were vying for attention. One after the other they wanted to explode forth, but through all the pain, through the mental scarring and above all else there was only one.

“W-where am I? Am...am I free? Did I get out?”

Doc Minstrel raised an eyebrow, letting me go.

“Hmm, I did have a thought you was a slave. You runnin' from Red Eye?”

“Am I free?! Please! It's taken all my life!”

It was a beg to more than just this stallion. It was to everypony. To my life. To the Goddesses on their stars above and to every bit of fate I had ever been through. Doc Minstrel settled forward, resting his hoof on my back once again. For a second, every worry in my mind rose up. What if...what if I had been dragged back inside Filly?! What if this was just Protégé's personal physician he mentioned?!

The answer felt like it took a thousand years to arrive. My heart in my mouth as I saw him take a breath.

“We're miles from ol'Filly here, little buck. Don't you worry...you made it just far enough.”

He paused, a smile coming across his face, slowly, as he rubbed my back and got up.

“You're free at last, little slave.”

* * *

Doc Minstrel wasn't gone long, just enough to fetch a small tray bearing a mug of water and a wet flannel. Trotting in, carefully balancing the tray on his back, he set it down in front of me.

I was quite simply too flabbergasted to even notice.

Free? I...I was free? My mind struggled to comprehend it, just the sheer scale of being told, well...that! Even as I felt him lift the wet flannel onto my head, I barely even registered the sharp pains at first. I just sat and stared without a sound.

...alright, perhaps I squeaked at the cold shock. No more than a yelp. Maybe a wince too.

“Now ah imagine you've got yourself a fine lot to think about. Lifelong slave to this? Big shift to go it into the wasteland, y'know? So tell me, how'd you even get here? Escaping Fillydelphia isn't exactly easy.”

I had been dreading this. Whilst he had fetched water and a cloth I had simply sat, stunned. Minstrel had left my saddlebag near the couch and after a few false starts I had dragged my journal across. It was safe, thank Goddesses...it was still with me. My dear journal. Although I felt violated...a huge scar in the front cover from where it had absorbed shrapnel now marred its appearance. The sight alone made me cry a little. It was dirty beyond belief, it's pages ripped and yellowed...but this felt like an *assault* upon my very memories.

Sitting sadly and quietly, flicking through the pages, I struggled to really come to terms.

Free...

Year after year in servitude. Master after Master. One torture to the next. Scars, whiplines and broken wings. Tears, blood and sweat every day unceasing.

Free.

Less than a week ago I had been shown the truth by the Stable Dweller. I had gone against my masters, launched a failed attempt to escape that almost claimed my life and been through a multitude of horrors that grew every time into that one last moment.

Free!

One last rush. Glimmerlight and Brimstone by my side only...only...

“Hey, kid?”

I blinked back to the present, seeing Minstrel's old kindly face looking at me.

“You alright there?”

“I...”

“Take it as slow as you want, that kinda injury isn't gonna leave you too capable for a while. Now just settle back, tell me what happened. How did you escape? Mighty impressive that you managed it.”

Sighing, I rubbed my sore temples and glanced at the window, into the fuzzy light that revealed nothing outside.

“I don't know if I remember too well...it's just all one big blur, like time running too fast. Sound...my...my friends...oh Goddesses! I don't know what happened to my friends!”

Panic was gripping me. I had fallen, but Glimmer and Brim, where were they? Why hadn't Minstrel mentioned them?! Had they...

“Well, when my assistant Sunny found ya, you was the only one in the area. She was out takin' a look around the Fillydelphia ruins to try and get me a new spark generator battery when she saw you poking out of the rubble. Weren't no-one else there...”

Shivering, I tried to remember. Any little detail...anything to help! Maybe I could retrace my steps, find them again! Maybe they had just gotten away, thinking I was dead...oh no...

“I don't remember very much at all, sir...”

“Now don't you go 'sir' on me, ah go by Minstrel. Look, ah wouldn't say you've quite got amnesia, you remember enough. You remember their names?”

I nodded, slowly.

“Good, ah think you've just been shaken by the whole experience, takin' time to digest it. We'll get it out of you, bit by bit. That's what the good doc does. What was the last thing you remember, little Murk?”

Drawing breath slowly, I closed my eyes...but it wouldn't appear. Just blurring...some memories were much too far back. Eventually, I began flicking through my journal, memory by memory...from LittlePip soaring above me to Brimstone standing guard over Glimmerlight. One by one, memories formed, solidified and began to return.

Picking up my charcoal stick, I knew how I would remember better. Lowering my head, I began to draw. Allowing my subconscious to take over, lines sweeping back and forth, ignoring the pains it caused my head.

Shapes formed...without even meaning to, I felt it flow from me, the emotion that no injury could ever take away erupting into my work. A great circular doorway, beaming with light before three ponies...

“We were in a Stable...the Steel Rangers had attacked Red Eye's army, so we were going to take the chance....”

The three ponies were galloping...charging into the light, toward the...

* * *

...wasteland outside. As one, Brimstone, Glimmerlight and myself hopped over the metal rung of the door and charged toward freedom.

We should have known they'd be watching the entrance.

Our gallop was brought to an almost immediate halt by the scene ahead of us. The slavers were, for the most part, utterly devastated. The ground was littered with the wreckage of exploded wagons, their steel bars bent and warped around flipped running bases. The stronger winds kicking up were sweeping loose cloth, barding edges and indeed even the bloody specks of dust into a small dust storm across the plains around Fillydelphia. Equipment was strewn around the corpses of any who had resisted...or what was left of them. Steel Ranger weaponry left little in its wake...

Worse, there were three Steel Rangers standing directly before us. Dark metal power armour towering amidst the swirling dust above every one of the prisoners they had taken. I saw a very angry looking Mosin lying against a rock, shrapnel wounds preventing him moving. Each Steel Ranger bore massive weaponry. The first with dual long rifles similar to what I had seen griffins carrying, the next a combination of gatling cannon and seemingly a box of missiles while the third had what seemed to be a deployable small piece of *artillery* across his or her back. Gender was impossible to tell, all three wore identical types of suits.

“Halt! All looters will remain where they are!”

The voice, male, held authority and force, booming from the external speakers (I guessed) into the air. I felt my hooves lock and stop on the spot, falling to the ground beside Glimmerlight. Brimstone grimly glared at them, snarling deeply as his hooves scraped the ground. I saw the two lighter armed Rangers brace themselves, their weapons swinging to face him. Behind me I could still hear their comrades inside battling with Barb's raiders, but it seemed out here the Rangers had won. Guarding the entrance...they had it completely in their favour. No-pony could come out of such a thin exit into this firepower...

“We're slaves, Paladins!” Glimmerlight's voice rung true, if tired and shaky, “We mean no harm, we own no loot! Just let us past and you'll never hear from us!”

Apparently, she did not find this a good time to mention her own past allegiances...

I began to feel my muscles clench in fear as the leader, bearing the huge cannon, looked away from her and curiously turned his head directly to me.

“Tis a lie! The little one will step forward, he must relieve himself of the PipBuck fragment! Obey, slave!”

What? Sundial's PipBuck?! I...I had just begun to finally feel like it was truly mine now...his life and the meanings he was giving, they weren't for being stored away! He wanted them told and known to somepony who found it!

“It's just a non-functioning fragment, Paladin! It's no use, I checked it myself. Just a piece of old scrap now.”

“Not for you to decide, *slave*. We have trained scribes who would restore it to glory and take its place among the records we guard. Now *pass it over immediately!*”

Glimmerlight scowled, muttering quietly out of the side of her mouth, “Fillydelphian Scribes couldn't tell a working PipBuck from the rods shoved up their asses...”

“*What was that?!*”

“Look, it's a hunk of scrap! Argh, I'm gonna regret this...I am of the Bucklynn Cross Steel Rangers! Initiate Glimmerlight, daughter of Paladin Candy Floss! You have my word that the PipBuck will be returned to our records when we get out of here, I'm repairing it myself. I can quote the regs if you *really* want me to!”

Standing beside her, I never realised how much I was shivering. Brimstone looked ready to charge them, however pointlessly, any second. Meanwhile the Rangers had every gun trained on us with an intensity I hadn't even seen in the most loyal griffins of Red Eye's army. This could go very bad...very quickly, and we didn't have much time if Barb's raiders won out inside and surged from behind us...

Much to my surprise however, the leader upped his weaponry and trotted forward, sliding the helmet from his head. A dark orange stallion of rough face and weathered eyes glared at Glimmerlight.

“I know Candy Floss. She is a strong Paladin. But the word of the Rangers matters little these days between brothers and sisters of the chapters. *Traitor* Steelhooves has declared his independence of us and taken many of the Rangers with him. The Orders are in uproar, Bucklynn Cross included. Our own Order has left for Stable Two in Sweet Apple Acres, Initiate Glimmerlight. After we have extradited all remaining technology from here worth taking we shall join them. I am afraid that I cannot trust such a...rogue element...as you to your word. However as a matter of respect for your mother, I will permit you to leave peacefully...if you hand over the PipBuck. The mission is above all, Initiate, you know this!”

“Steelhooves went rogue?”

Glimmerlight barely did more than whisper it, a look of odd longing and wishful nature in her eyes, before shaking it free. The Paladin ahead narrowed his eyes, stomping a rock so hard it cracked beneath him.

“That is our *only* offer, give up the PipBuck!”

The last command was shouted at me. Offended that I even felt my limbs twitch to obey, I just staggered backwards, holding it closely while I trotted on three legs.

“Now, slave! I will *not* ask again!” The weapons lowered, pointed directly at me.

“Please...don't...” My mouth barely staggered the words out, shaking my head and trying to work out how to run...to just run away. I didn't want to give it up...

The two Rangers flanking their leader advanced, thudding their hooves on the ground as their large weight began moving towards me. Swerving, Brimstone leapt before them, growling and scraping the ground with his front hoof. I'd seen that look before...when he had murdered an innocent slave. This was too close to kicking off. But...but Sundial...

POW!

The lead Paladin's head *exploded*. Droplets of blood sprayed in all directions, coating his armour, his comrades' armour and mixed with the spilt blood of the slavers below.

With that, hell was unleashed. Sniper shots rained down from above, high calibre rounds spanking off armour or cracking off rocks. The Steel Rangers reacted with speed that defied their weight and size, swinging their weaponry to the skies as I saw the griffins loyal to Red Eye divebomb from the clouds above. The sky in between quickly became a deathzone as the Rangers unloaded their weaponry indiscriminately. Rockets roared, cannons whirled and screamed amidst the thick booms of the huge rifles. A criss cross of heavy firepower that sent griffins whirling through the barrage on their rocketing descent. Screaming, I fell to the side, my ears assaulted and stinging under the overwhelming noise. Bullets pinged off rocks around me, kicking up plumes of the earth or loose gravel mere feet away as the rounds ricocheted off Ranger armour towards us.

“-urk! Follow me!”

Brimstone's voice! Scrambling, I scampered from rock to rock, staying as low as possible. I saw the Rangers thundering away as little blue tinged grenades tumbled from the sky above before shielding my eyes from the magical blast. A dull thump sounded, a rocket whooshed and an explosion lit the sky among the 'flying V' of griffins. Spotting Brimstone and Glimmerlight running for the flanks of the battle, I saw her look back and scream for me to get out of the area. She must have thought I was behind her! Oh come on...come on-YAAARGH!

With a wet splatter, a shredded griffin corpse collapsed ahead of me. The blood erupted from his chest on impact, spraying across the front of my body and face. Crying out loud, I turned and galloped directly away.

“Murky! This way! Follow my voice! I know you'll hear me!”

The gunfire was kicking up so much dust, either that or the madly stomping Rangers making use of their power armoured movement, that I couldn't see anything. Corpses littered around me. I passed the Paladin shot in the head. Red Eye's slavers they had taken prisoner crouched behind rocks screaming to the skies.

“Yeah! You go get em, Stern!”

“Kill those metal fuckers!”

A huge female griffin swooped low, a large anti-machine rifle in her talons, as she landed behind the rifle wielding Ranger. I had seen her before...Red Eye's second-in-command, Stern. Possibly the most lethal griffin in Fillydelphia. Whipping that rifle around with almost freakish speed, she planted it right against the Ranger and pulled the trigger.

At that range, the armour stood no chance, even on Steel Rangers. I witnessed a small hole punched in one side...and half of a pony disgustingly blown out of the other. Propelled by the blast, the Ranger collapsed. Before it had hit the ground...Stern was gone again, taking to the skies with a powerful stroke of her wings before the remaining Ranger could bring its weapons to bear. Banking into the wind, she rejoined the head of the griffin formation.

Ponies died on all sides around me...griffins too. Caught in the middle, I only now saw the truth of the wasteland.

I had once believed that slaves suffered and slavers prospered. That was how it *worked*.

But here...as I felt a wet crunch, my hoof recoiled as it landed atop the chest cavity of a dead slave...eyes lidless and staring upward. He lay torn wide open by Steel Ranger weaponry...presumably as he had tried to run from the Stable.

Slaves killed by Rangers...slavers around me falling from the skies as they were torn from the skies by even one remaining Paladin. Nearby lay one of the proud warriors, Stern's work. Behind me I knew there would be more coming after either the raiders or Rangers survived. Then it would all begin again with

whoever won out here...

No-pony on no-pony's side...just one huge circle of violence and distrust...

Staggering back, I fell against one of the large rocks dotted around. Lost in the battle amongst the dirt, I could only hear snaps, gunshots and screams. I heard more Rangers charge from the Stable, followed by the howl of raiders chasing them. This had just escalated again.

Then me...the little harmless slave in the middle of it all. I had no sense of setting, no concept of clear lines of battle or which side was winning. Just one huge mess of confused sensory overload.

I galloped for all I was worth. Crying as I felt bits of somepony sliding off my head while slavers trying to grab weapons around me were torn apart or fought back desperately. I saw raiders leaping on them...biting throats and feverishly bucking. One raider saw me, screamed and gave chase.

“Come 'ere little buck! Gonna get ya!”

Screaming, I ran, hearing his hooves clatter on the rocks behind as he grabbed a discarded dagger and gave chase. Damn this dust! I couldn't see anything!

“Murky! MURKY!”

Wait...left, or was that right?! I couldn't tell! I hadn't known battles would be this confusing! What if something just hit me?! What if-

“Got ya!”

Screaming in terror, I felt the raider leap on me from behind. His long strides had caught me far faster than I'd imagined without seeing anything in the dust. I bucked with my right hoof, catching nothing.

Briefly, I felt us struggle as I tried to get away, his mangy hide rubbing hideously against me while we fell, rolling one over the other down the shallow slope. With a wing aching thud, he landed atop me. Looking behind me, I screamed again as I saw the knife in his mouth descend...and land clean.

I had been shot before...the sheer shock had immobilised me. But this...I cried out, throwing my head backwards and howling into the air in agony when I felt the four inches of cold metal penetrate my left shoulder...

...and *twist*.

My ears picked up the sucking wet sound as the wound opened.

“Yaaargghhh! Arrgh! ARRGGHH!”

My scream didn't stop...I howled, begged and cried out as the weapon yanked out...leaving me to bleed. Thrashing on the floor, I tried to hold a hoof over the wound, crying in pain as I registered the feeling of a new, wet hole in my shoulder, even more so as I felt a bit of the bone underneath.. The raider reared up, ducked as a griffin whipped overhead and licked the knife clean with a delightful giggle as he watched me squirm and scream. Suddenly, he glanced around.

“Ah...shit. You bleed out! Blood flows in the wasteland, little pony. Blood flows. I'll be back for you!”

Without warning, he left. The reasoning only became clear as I felt the passing minor earthquake (to me) of a Steel Ranger galloping past into better cover. I simply lay there, flailing among the rocks, bleeding amidst it all, screaming for anyone, from Glimmerlight to LittlePip...even my mother. I wasn't alone. A griffin was trying to clutch her spilled innards nearby, after shrapnel had sliced across her belly. My throat was becoming hoarse from shouting, rough and sore. Already I was feeling light headed...

“Rangers! Gallop to the city! We shall bring them low in urban warfare!”

“Griffins! They're trying to retreat! Hound them!”

It occurred to me that my hypersensitive hearing was picking up *both* sides' commands. The fears of being left alone to bleed out amongst the dead and dying began to filter in. Oh Goddesses make it

quick...please...it hurt so much...I don't want it to be slow...please please...

Then I was being pulled, roughly and without care. Whimpering and clutching my shoulder, I saw the trail of blood behind me on the rocks. The sight made me want to throw up, it wasn't a shallow amount either. Ahead of me, I saw a Steel Ranger firing in indiscriminate circles as a shadow seemed to bounce around him in the billowing fog of war that had sprung up of smoke and dust. With sudden jerks, I saw the Ranger flinch as the shadow passed by him again and again...

...Barb...

Feeling myself being dumped, I saw shapes around me. Whinnying pathetically, I tried to fight them off with my good hoof...to get up. The raiders had pulled me behind the rocks to gut me with that knife or execute me with that pistol or-

“Murky! It's me! Stop it! What are you-”

Glimmer's voice stopped as I felt more than saw her pay attention to my shoulder. Blood was flowing freely. I tried to reach for her...the healing orb...

“Oh...oh fuck...BRIM! He's hurt! They got him!”

“It won't kill him immediately, get him in the wagon **now!**”

Finally, my vision focussed as I saw Glimmerlight bent over me, shielding me with herself, lifting me towards something...wait, Mosin's armoury wagon! The thick metal plated wagon lay on its side. I could see the huge figure of Brimstone, unmistakable by silhouette even through thick vision obscuring conditions, heaving and lifting the massive wagon by his own strength. Creaking, the old FunFarm circus trailer finally lurched back onto its wheels.

Behind Brimstone, a figure began running directly for him, a bayoneted rifle held in mouth.

“Brim! Behind you!”

My scream, pitching to the point my voice broke, caught even Glimmerlight off guard, twisting off me as she too saw the furious charging figure of a slaver trying to prevent our escape, his gas mask fallen to dangle from his neck. Slipping his assault rifle from his back, Brim flipped it into the air, caught the barrel in his mouth and swung it *hard*. The butt connected solidly with the slaver's own gun, knocking it clean from his filthy mouth...along with a few yellowed teeth. The return stroke snapped his head around far too quickly to be healthy...landing the slaver face down at an awkward angle...quite dead.

Brimstone looked at the now snapped in two rifle in his mouth, before spitting it away.

“Unbreakable'...aye right, ye vodka heaving old bastard...”

Crying out in pain as Glimmerlight pulled me toward and into the wagon, I flopped onto the floor, feeling her jump in behind me as Brimstone hooked himself to the front. I saw puncture marks kick into the side of the wagon...some penetrated, missing us by scant inches as Glimmerlight yanked me backwards away from it toward the back of the wagon. I tried to do it myself, but my hooves were like lead, barely able to function from the exertion. Brimstone bellowed back from the front.

“Hold on! They're going to gun for us as much as any Ranger we'll be using as armed cover!”

“Brim, the Rangers will-”

“They have bigger problems than some escaping slaves! But if we're near them then they are a bigger threat! **Hold on!**”

Stuck in the back, I screamed again as I tried and failed to hold the blood in...why couldn't I stop it? I didn't want to lose my blood...how would I get it back? Oh Goddesses...please...

“Glimmer...Glimmer...”

“Hush, Murky...lemme have a look around here.”

With a jerk, the entire wagon began moving at a rate far faster than it was ever designed for. Items fell

from shelves as Brimstone dragged it over the rough terrain. Doing her best, Glimmerlight pulled the shutters with her magic and dragged over a box bearing the same symbols as my saddlebag.

“Drink up...oh Murky...I'm so sorry...”

As I felt the purple liquid held to my mouth, the entire battle seemed to drain away into the background. Replaced only with occasional snap shots of griffins on the retreating of the Rangers. Evidently their armour let them keep pace as I felt them gallop all around us. But I couldn't concentrate on much for long...it hurt so much...please stop it hurting...

Glimmerlight simply held me as we put our trust in Brimstone Blitz's determination. Even as I felt the healing potion aid the pain and begin to stem the bleeding, I just still cried at the memory of the raider attack...

I hadn't even properly realised how afraid I was...the things that happened out here in the wastes...

In many ways, although I felt ashamed...I kept thinking how much safer I would feel simply farming rocks as a slave for the rest of my days. Sniffing, I pushed my head towards Glimmerlight's, crying...

* * *

...into her shoulder. I finished the last sketchy lines of her own front legs curled around me to keep pressure on my shoulder. Sniffing, I sat back from my sketch, seeing Doc Minstrel cast a glance down. The couch now held a few drawings that had helped me remember. Minstrel had been a good listener, sitting calmly and only asking the odd question for clarification.

“Well...that'd explain the wound you had on your shoulder there, Murk.” His voice was slow, watching me glance at the bandages on my shoulder. There were still red marks of seeping blood through them...

Remembering the feeling of the weapon puncturing my flesh, I shivered...

“That Glim-girl probably saved your life with that healing potion to stem the bleeding. Kill off infection too, them raiders have filthy weapons...as good as any poison, really, if untreated. Still...brave move you folks did to make your escape. Stealing their wagon? Hehe...reminds me of my younger days in the wastes.”

I listened to him only slightly, sighing as I glanced back at Glimmerlight and myself in my sketch. Where were my friends? I hadn't properly felt like I *missed* anypony since my mother. But now they were out there somewhere without me. Did they escape? Were they taken back? Brimstone had...had he disappeared and-urgh!

Wincing, my hoof gently went to my head. With a groan I settled back down...apparently furrowing my brow in concern was enough to hurt that...*that*...scar. Doc Minstrel patted my shoulder, getting up.

“You've had a rough time, but don't try and force it. A little memory fuzziness isn't entirely uncommon with traumatic head injuries. Really, aside from a little scarring, give yourself a bit longer for the healing potions to work and stay safe for a while...you should be right as rain.”

If only I shared that. The mirror sat across the couch now...but every glance, every half hearted look only reminded me of the horrible shared features...

...I wasn't going to be his...no...no matter what he said or what happened...

“Now look, that's only one of your problems. You're badly malnourished. How much have you had to eat in the last week?”

“Half a can of beans, a small apple stew and some bits of oatmeal...”

Minstrel seemed to stop, his mouth hanging open as if expecting me to go on. Eventually, I saw his eyes glance down to my stomach, before tutting and shaking his head.

“We better get somethin' in ya. Healing process works better on a stomach that isn't eating itself out of hunger...no wonder you're so small if you didn't get those nutrients while growing up. Lets get you up and over to the table.”

He moved alongside me, wrapping hooves across my torso and nodding ready. Taking a few breaths, I edged off the side, dropping my two left hooves to the ground and-

“Ooohhh...”

The light seemed to blur in the air, my vision becoming blurry and indistinct. The scar *ached*, feeling like my skull was shifting as my body took responsibility for my balance once again. Falling against Doc Minstrel, I let him support my weight until the moment passed. I saw him pick up my journal for me.

“That's it...won't be easy for a few minutes. Just trot it off, gently does it...”

Step after hesitant, limping step, I moved across the room. Little sound emerged from outside, just the wind and the banging of shutters on his home. Every window was covered for warmth, I could see now. The ten foot journey to a cushion on the floor felt like I had run for the Wall all over again and I gratefully sat back on my haunches to lean on the table to breathe.

“I...I don't feel well...”

“Cause you got nuthin' in you to sustain activity, lil'Murk! Your stomach's tryin' to digest stuff that ain't there. Just sit there a second.”

He left toward a musty old kitchen down the corridor of the house. Left alone, I pondered, looking around. Doc Minstrel was fairly well off, the home was cosy, seemingly secure and somewhat comfortable. Probably why I hadn't yet properly grasped my freedom was the lack of a view outside. My thoughts drifted to Glimmer and Brim again...but no answers could come of it. Maybe when I began to remember more of what happened...

I heard Minstrel approaching again. A plate of dry looking biscuits beside stale fruit was laid before me. I hadn't expected much...the wasteland was never going to be easy for food. But at least it was better than the vomit inducing and slimy oatmeal Whiplash had fed me. Sitting opposite me, Minstrel smiled gently. I sat and stared back, glancing back at the food every so often.

“Is something wrong, Murk?”

“I...” My voice faltered, I realised I'd been waiting for him to permit me to eat. Treating him as a master. Feeling the urge to cry rising, every effort of mine was made to pull it back and bite into one of the biscuits. “No...nothing's wrong...”

“Hm.” Minstrel didn't sound convinced, nodding after a few seconds. Clearly, he was rather perceptive of mental states. “You have to learn to be your own buck, Murk. Out here, no-pony's gonna tell you what you need to do to survive all the time.”

“It's hard. I don't...don't know how! Even with my friends, I just followed, usually. All my life, master and slave. Command and follow. But now I don't know what I should do...I thought it'd all come to me.”

“Don't worry for now, we'll come back to that. Just eat.”

Without much hesitation, I dug in. I felt my shrunken stomach bulge a little with the amount (still less than a normal pony would feel sated with, I imagined...) while listening to Minstrel telling me of himself. Apparently he made a living by selling things he found in the ruins of Fillydelphia, using battles between Red Eye and the Rangers as cover to sneak in and out. These days, apparently his assistant Sunny did the job far more often. Between the two of them, they could fix things up to sell for a higher price. The goal however, was to eventually sell enough to relocate off towards the central wastes more where it was much safer. Apparently, that wouldn't be too long from now, he seemed hopeful. To tell the truth though...I only barely listened. My eyes were focussed either on the food or on the windows that I kept trying to imagine the expansive wasteland behind. What would the first thing I see be? The great valleys that led towards Manehattan? An old town safe to wander around?

But really...it was fear that drove me to think and worry to distraction. The Master could be spreading out to hunt for me...those shackles and collars of his clinking at his side ready to-

...oh Goddesses...I needed to get going...

"I can't wait around here too long...Red Eye might come to look for me, or...or my Master--"

Minstrel sighed, reaching across to my shoulder again.

"You don't *have* a master now, Murk. I think you're going to have to take time to get used to that. Where do you think you'll go?"

My mouth opened...but no words came out. I didn't know...where was I supposed to go? Which direction? What was my goal? Sickeningly...I felt part of my mind wish someone would tell me what to do. Fighting the revulsion, I just screwed my eyes shut, lowering my head.

"Well, gather your thoughts. Whether it's to hunt for your friends or whatever, but you're safe here. Red Eye's cronies never come here, too off the beaten track, if you get me. Let's just take our time, get you ready to move and help you remember just what happened before good ol' Sunny found you, alright? Best wait till Sunny is back anyway, she might know something about your friends."

Briefly, my mind rebelled that I was only nodding because he had told me what to do. Sniffing, I pulled across my journal from where he had left it.

"I...hmk...I don't want to be a slave. But I can't stop thinking it..."

"Just take your time and draw, Murk. There's no rush now. I'm not going to whip you for not doing something immediately."

His voice was calming, allowing me to sniff sharply and open a new page.

"We...we were escaping in the wagon."

Thick black lines appeared, the outline of the wagon hurtling under Brimstone's power. The steely look of determination tinged with fury on his face. Moving aside, I began drawing other shapes around us...in the air, Rangers and griffins...

"The Rangers ignored us but the griffins started dropping bombs and mines."

With strong sudden draws of charcoal, the explosion filled the ground in front of the wagon, casting...

* * *

...dirt up into the air that pelted the top of Mosin's mobile armoury. Ducking at the painful sound, I peeked through my hooves to see Glimmerlight opening fire with every rifle and pistol she could find within the wagon. Either one of the slit windows or by leaning out the door, she tried to force off the griffins before they could line up their throws. She was trained, aimed properly and seemed pretty cool under fire, but the wagon was being hurled every which way under Brimstone's steam that ruined her aim. We hit a bump so large I felt all four of my hooves leave the floor before clattering down. My shoulder ached...but the wound had clotted over for now after two healing potions and a thick wad of bandage.

"Hey, Brim! Can you get off the main road? They might leave us alone if we quickly disappear now!"

There was no reply, the cacophony of sound was beginning to give me a headache. Rangers thundering down the road around us were stopping every few seconds to dissuade the griffins with their heavy weaponry. The run from the Stable had cost them one more armoured warrior, but now that we were within the ruins of Fillydelphia, the urban warfare was beginning to give them a chance. Already, the crowd of them around us had gradually passed away to take up positions inside ruined homes or warehouses.

Glimmerlight fell back suddenly with a cry of shock. Gasping, I threw myself to her, searching for the wound. What was I meant to do for gunshots?! She gently pushed me away, struggling to keep her balance in the madly bucking trailer.

“It's alright! Murk, I'm fine! Just had a round strike next to me...bit of a surprise. Got any alcohol?”

“Ah...huh?”

“None of Mosin's vodka around? Ah shit...I usually aim better with a shot or two in me. Brim! I said, could we-WOAH!”

Echoing her sentiment, I clung to the workbench as the wagon turned sharp to the right and immediately struck a wall with a metallic crash that stripped some plates of armour entirely off. Various empty firearms scattered out of the open door. The little thief inside me couldn't help but feel a wince of pain at such a waste of potential items to acquire once we got away...

Through the windows I saw nothing but brickwork and shadows. We were in an alleyway. Slipping my goggles over my eyes (I felt safer from bullets and wasn't about to argue the harsher rules of reality) I dared to poke my head up to a slit window, seeing no griffins above us. Just the two thin walls of the alleyway between a pair of huge buildings.

“I...I think they're gone.”

Popping her head out of the front window, I saw Glimmer lean down to Brimstone's torn ear.

“Next time, you gonna warn me before you decide to throw us around like that?!”

Brimstone's voice seemed all the more deadpan amidst his clear concentration and focus.

“Figured you were used to being bucked about hard.”

“I...*what?! Why...you...ARGH!*”

She slammed the slit window shut and turned back to me, fuming for just a few seconds before shaking her head and uttering the best laugh anypony could hope to under the circumstances.

“I swear, someday if I ever grow up, I'll look back and cringe. You promise to remind me to never become an old cynical bastard like him, Murky?”

At the moment, I was still shivering and holding on to the workbench leg as though it would protect me from every horrible thing in Equestria. Chuckling, she gently eased me from it. Well...perhaps she had a little difficulty. That table leg felt *safe*...

“I...I...promise? I think...” Stammering, I found myself fighting all the emotions in my head. Why couldn't I handle emotions like anypony else? Fear, of being caught or dying mixed with elation at our escape attempt and that we were outside the Wall! My eyes felt like they had run dry minutes ago while I had been lying wounded. My shoulder still gave me a sickening feeling every time I moved it. I had seen ponies receive so much worse...but one stab had broken my determination into a blubbering wreck. My pain threshold was so small.

...how would I ever manage out here?

My thoughts broke as I felt a rusty old revolver and what looked like a cut down combat rifle thrust at me.

“Here, keep yourself occupied. We'll need these before this is out. Get them loaded up for me, I'll see if we can find something for you too.”

Her voice was calmer, more stoic than before. Looking at her pulling the same bolt action she had in the Stable apart to check something, I saw every inch the grim training that Ranger Initiates must have had to go through. Every motion mechanical, like their suits...even when not in them or not intended to ever wear them. Still fighting for balance and occasionally feeling the wagon grind against a wall, I began to pick up the guns to load. (Discovering precisely why I had only ever seen unicorns carry revolvers...)

We had a straight run. This alleyway was almost fully protected from aerial strikes, once we were past the exit into the next road, we'd be gone! It was the only way out of the alley, so no ambushes!

“Here, Murk, try this out.”

Her magic floated across a small pistol (I had long since checked for battle saddles) that I bit into. The grip felt small enough for my mouth, the trigger thick and easy to find. The...uh...thing that held bullets...seemed to be full already.

“You've got seven rounds in there Murk, tongue back for safety, forward to fire. Recoil should be low...I think.”

Oh. Great. You 'think.' Only a small chance of knocking one of my teeth out then? I spat it out to hang around my neck on its cord before going back to my work on her guns.

“Personally I think I'd just prefer-”

“A battle saddle. We *know*.”

Nonplussed, I continued. “No no! I mean, like, mines. I like to...um...run away, you see. I could drop them behind me or...or put them places where I knew somepony was going to come out of!”

Glimmerlight stopped where she was, staring at me as though I had just shot her by accident.

“Somewhere you knew somepony was going to come out...*shit!*”

Dropping, the long barrelled pistol at her hooves, she leapt to the slit window at the front.

“Brim! The alleyway is mi-”

She was seconds too late. Brimstone must have leapt over it by sheer chance as I felt the armoured floor of the wagon catapult up underneath me amidst a roaring explosion that flared through every window. I lost all hearing, blasted into a ringing oblivion as, briefly, I became weightless within a wagon that had been blown vertically up and over. I felt my mouth open, screaming as I impacted from wall to wall, unknowing of which way was up or down. The workbench collided with my ribs before a final crunch hurled me away. Everything turned red. I screamed again, my face must have been destroyed! Pain flooded every joint and every muscle when I landed, rolling multiple times to a halt on...dirt?

Groaning, I opened my eyes onto a scene of devastation. The red was not my vision being lost...it was Fillydelphia in general. The wagon had been thrown so hard I had been sent flying out of the door. The armoured transport's underside was bent and shattered from an odd V-shape of design welded on. I tried to move, before finding just why that was such a mistake. Nothing seemed badly hurt...but my shoulder was bleeding again...I could feel the lifeblood trickling under the bandage.

Gradually, sound returned like the roaring of hard rain, I tried to crawl back towards the wagon. I could see Brimstone, thrown with the wagon, bucking the harness off himself. A horrid spike of metal was embedded in his side along with a few other smaller pieces spread about. Glimmerlight was flopped over the door, holding her head. Her nose was bleeding...but seemed unharmed.

“Murk! Get into cover! Quickly!”

Doing the best I could, I dragged myself toward the burning wagon. Brimstone pulled Glimmerlight down behind it while she tried to regain her senses. Around me I saw little plumes of dirt kick up.

A flutter...many flutters...

Griffins! There were half a dozen above us, circling and leaping roof to roof into firing positions. Finding strength born of lethal danger, I limped and staggered to fall into cover beside Brimstone and Glimmerlight. The big raider had grabbed a combat rifle and was letting rattling shots off from his mouth to dissuade the griffins from coming any closer. They didn't know he likely couldn't hit them even at ten feet.

I covered behind the wagon, feeling the heat of the flames on the side of my face. What was I meant to do?! I...I didn't know and-

“Get this in your mouth and keep their heads down!”

Brimstone shoved the same small pistol almost directly into my mouth from around my neck.

Shivering, I tried...I really did...but every impact on our hiding spot from the griffin snipers made me want to cry and curl up under the nearest object. I couldn't do this!

Closing my eyes, I heard Brimstone curse as he saw me fall down and cover my ears, simply crying away instead of helping like I should. I tried to blank my mind...imagine everything as nice again. Around me I saw this warehouse estate as bustling...there were ponies laughing as they worked, knowing they were safe! Yes, safe! I'd go and find the ponies I liked and be safe! Like...like that ice cream cart over there that *totally* wasn't a ruined shell now! Or that café that didn't have a pegasus sky chariot crashed through the front door! I'd take LittlePip there to thank her and...

I just wanted things to be better...not stuck in the middle of a failing escape attempt about to be shot! I didn't want to be shot again! Every part of my mind was focussed on trying to fool myself into thinking I wasn't really where I was...that I was back on the rock farm! Or...or back in even Old Equestria to just get away from it! The slave in my mind was screaming, cursing and slapping my face to get back in line, if I ran out and gave up, they'd take me back! They only shot at Brim and Glimmer because they were fighting back!

Gunfights were too much...I just wanted-

"...to be better!"

The voice louder than any sound of my messed up subconscious. The great DJ. I checked my PipBuck, but I couldn't be sure. Was I hearing his voice at the wonderful right time or just remembering?

"The obstacles in our path can be overcome if we just work together. So don't abandon those you care about y'hear?"

Beside me, I saw Glimmer reel back as a ricochet skiffed her neck, replacing the cuts she had healed from the fight in the Stable. I saw the blood running from Brimstone's shrapnel wound. I was abandoning them to fight on my behalf...

"Only by sticking together can we truly save lives and make ourselves better...no matter what horrors we all must share along the way."

That we must *share*.

Protégé had told me that I didn't have the mindset or determination to escape Fillydelphia. I'd found others to help me replace it with their own strength. But now I was taking that for granted, hiding while they risked danger. How many times had I drawn myself succeeding at escaping now? Time to make it a reality.

I picked up the pistol again...clambering up and throwing my goggles onto my head after steaming up from my tears. I was still crying...I didn't care, that wouldn't ever stop. Pulling my weight up on my good hoof, I cast a glance around at the buildings that were opening fire on us. Celestia give me the great strength to do this!

Aiming, my tongue pulled the trigger.

In the moment of one gunshot, past the screaming pain in my ears, I felt the fear fade. A strand of concrete exploded into pieces three feet to the right of the griffin, but I saw her duck because of it. I could do this! Turning my head, I aimed for where I heard the sizzle of an energy weapon and followed the contrail of red to the source. Two squeezes, two loud *bangs* that hurt my head. They both missed, but I saw Glimmerlight given a chance to think, aim and fire the long bolt action rifle accurately enough to snap the griffin back from her perch. Whether by injury or just armour impact was unknown.

"Cover me!" The voice wasn't Brimstone or Glimmerlight, it was a griffin! I screamed for them to get down before the griffins unleashed everything they had at us. My ears, through the noise, picked up a flutter of wings...they were on the move to outflank us and-YARGH!

A bullet pinged in from the side of the wagon, rebounding just in front of my eyes. Brimstone shoved

me below the wreckage, firing a burst at the griffin who had snuck around under their cover. Behind us, I could hear three more flying for the alleyway to get behind us. Soon...my help or not...we'd be overwhelmed.

“Fuckin' chickens not wanting to come down and tustle hooves with me...I *hate* griffins.” Brimstone complained as he dumped his last rounds at them and dropped the rifle with a snarl.

“To be fair, they don't have hooves, Brim.” Glimmerlight's humour was forced through clenched teeth, the last round sprung from her rifle. There were others on the ground...somewhere. But in the wreckage it was all too dirt covered and scattered to identify what rounds were for which gun in time. I had a few shots left...but my participation was hardly stellar.

“We're going to die, aren't we?” I felt myself asking through my wet eyes to Glimmer. (Apparently, whenever I thought they were dry, they always found ways to disprove me.) She sighed, looking around before grinning and pulling an apple shaped grenade from the armoury wagon. Brimstone shook his head disapprovingly.

“Grenades aren't known for taking care of flying enemies too well, Glimmer.”

Glimmerlight's grin only widened and turned almost crazed as she raised the Want-It-Need-It spell orb up alongside the grenade.

Brimstone's eyebrows raised.

“Well now...that's just playing dirty.”

The spell orb flickered-

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-toward her horn, drawn in shades by rubbing my hoof over it, creating the look of magic as best I could. She had saved us, my sketch showing her originality in putting two elements together. My charcoal curved around her almost gleeful eyes as the nearly wicked plan entered her mind. Minstrel watched from beside me, carefully listening as I recounted what I could. How we had averted our eyes and galloped onwards into the buildings to seek cover from above. Stopping, I just looked down at her face. Already, I was missing that casually crazed mindset of hers.

“She mean a lot to you, kid?”

Sniffing, I sat back and nodded. “I only met her less than a day ago. Glimmerlight was the first pony to ever hug me that wasn't my mother...she just cares so much. Even if she is quite...um...”

Blushing, I looked away, prompting Minstrel to chuckle and pick up my empty plate between his hooves and settle it on an old tray.

“Yes...I quite got the impression she isn't a mare who intends to think 'long term' very much from how you spoke. In all senses of the words. Me? I think I'm happier to settle. Or at least, I hope to soon.”

My head was lowered, as it often naturally fell too (someday I could hold it high...someday...) while turning to watch him place the tray on a nearby table out of the way.

“You're settling with Sunny?”

“Sunny? Hah! Oh no, my friend. She's my number one assistant, protector and friend. But she's also a good twenty years younger. No...I refer to my Goddess' blessed wife, Chorale Sonata.”

He smiled wistfully toward a dresser as he spoke, sighing happily. I found myself grinning slightly. Her name was *beautiful*. Following his gaze, I saw him rest it upon a picture frame. Fighting tired limbs, determined to prove that I had *some* ability to push myself, I staggered and limped over to it alongside him. An old sepia toned picture showing an older mare, standing at this very same window side dresser and nervously trying to hide her face...to little avail. The photo had caught that loving grin perfectly. Something about her reminded me about the mysterious mare if she had been a lot older, that same rounded face and

oddly fragile expression remained. Her cutie mark was hidden under the plain white dress, which even in sepia seemed to light up the room around her, reflecting the sun over the farming fields behind and-

Wait...

“Minstrel?”

“Yeah, Murk?”

“This...um...this is a pre-war picture.”

Minstrel picked up the frame between his front hooves, showing the dexterity that had clearly saved my life. Looking deep into the image, he lightly chuckled, setting it back down.

“Show me a camera that works and ah'll find one of her, Murk. Ah miss her...ah'd do anything to get Sunny and myself enough caps to relocate back to her. But this mare's eyes reminded me of mah dearest. In this world? Sometimes that's all you get when you don't know if you'll see them again.”

His eyes followed mine when I looked back at it, turning the picture to again look at her.

“It's partly why ah envy you, Murk. You can create your own memories. That's a rare talent, y'know? Many might draw but you seem to do it from the heart. Keep up with that. Memories *matter*. They have great power to affect us, y'know?”

Images of the mare and I, etched in charcoal came to mind. I flicked the journal back to her, allowing Minstrel to see. I remembered Glimmerlight's special talent to show her own past, those happy times that kept her going. Even the remnants of memory left in the dark Stable...

“Yeah...I do know.”

Gently placing my hoof upon my first ever image of the mare, I silently promised myself that the moment I was properly safe and free, my promise to her would be fulfilled. One picture to remember her, even if it wasn't perfect...it would be enough.

* * *

Gradually, my shock from waking outside of Fillydelphia was beginning to lessen. True, the element of 'freedom' in my mind wouldn't hit proper until I could look back and not see the baleful slave city in my field of view. (Using binoculars, just to be *sure*. Possibly a telescope.)

Doc Minstrel had instructed me to stay put and just rest until I felt better. In the meantime I had taken to checking over all of my belongings his assistant had brought back with her. My PipBuck, to my great pleasure, was with me still, as was my fleece and saddlebag along with, obviously, my journal. Within my saddlebag I found Slit's (Not any more!) goggles and various items taken from the Stable. My newly acquired pistol was gone. A reasonable precaution, I guessed. Unfolding it, I intended to put my fleece back on, but shuddered to a stop when I noticed the thick bloodstains coating the wool right through around the shoulder. The pain still lingered...flashing images of a frothing, raged and bloodthirsty raider holding me down and...and pushing the knife into me. During the escape I'd had too much on my mind to think about it...even while running injured or fighting for my life. But now in the downtime, it all just came back.

It wasn't my only injury, apparently. Clearly, I had been half buried in the rubble of a house, scarring my head forever. But I could feel another wad of bandage around my torso and my front right leg held a dressing where my PipBuck was normally tied around. With a glance, I saw the PipBuck bore new scars, making it even more like a hunk of scrap metal than it had been already. Yet with a tap to turn on the radio, it still worked. Stable-Tec knew how to build them...that was for sure. Nervous of offending Minstrel with noise, I immediately turned it off, cutting DJ-Pon3's broadcast short.

“...who's to say the Stable Dweller won't help all them slaves when she gets back-”

Apologising internally, I set it down, even if the words did lift my spirits. LittlePip was coming back? Perhaps I could meet her on the road and we could go find my friends together! Yes! Already my mind was trawling what I should draw in advance as a gift to her. If I could make her like me...

I had to fight the urge to bat my head to purge those distracting thoughts. (Crush later, Murky, recovery now!) Sitting back on my haunches and holding my hoof up, I tried to shift the bandages upon it a little. Before any travel on my newly decided objective, I needed to know what had happened to my leg.

“Wouldn't say that there's too advisable. Shrapnel, usually the kind you'd find from mines, got embedded there. Pretty sure ah got rid of it, but it's an open wound. Removing the dressing before it's healed would just hurt a hell of a lot and expose it to every bit of infection in the air.”

Snapping my other hoof away like a foal caught near the cookie jar (I'd tried that once at the rock farm, before being chained outside during a thunderstorm at night as punishment) and glanced over as Minstrel entered the room.

“Ah took a little look from up top of the house, looks like Sunny will be back within the hour if mah eyes work right these days.”

“Could I see?”

“No...no. Too many particles in the air, fallout and dirt on the wind, for someone injured like you are. Just you stay down here. Now, ah thought ah might get to know you a little...that slave mindset is awfully worrying to somepony about to go out into the wastes to find his friends. You picked up a gun once, yeah, but as much as ah hate to admit it...such a thing is all too common a requirement out here. There comes a time when even myself, a physician, had to fight to protect the ones he loved. Never woulda thought ah'd have to do that back in the Stable.”

Briefly, my mind stopped and focussed entirely on him.

“You came from a Stable?!”

Minstrel beckoned me to follow. Unsteadily, I trotted after him into the corridor of the house. Ahead of me I could see the front door, thick and wooden. I was led through beige carpets and exquisite woodwork furniture to a back room. There was a mirror on my left hand side, with one glance, I whimpered and moved on with my eyes firmly shut.

Within there was an odd mixture of belongings ranging from scrap items in disrepair to fully functional tools that I had seen in the Stable. In the corner sat an old instrument I'd once heard called a 'lute.' Hanging across a mannequin I saw a bright blue and yellow jumpsuit, a number I couldn't identify written on the lapels. Armoured plates were sewn into it or strapped on the torso and shoulders. Hung around the neck on a small chain lay a PipBuck that chimed in a pale orange.

“Ah'm an old stallion now, Murk. Stables ain't as common as they used to be, ah came out mine when ah was just sixteen. Only just got this little beauty.”

He tapped the PipBuck with a hoof, setting it swinging on a chain.

“Ah don't need this stuff too much any more, always figured ah'd give it to somepony who needed it. But ah see you've already got yer own. Perhaps ah'll sell it to the next trader, help pay for the supplies to take me home. Hell...ah'd sell *anythin'* to get back to her again...”

“How long will that take?”

Wandering amongst the inventory of his house, Minstrel glanced back at me, that fading mane shifting in the thick air of the home. An eyebrow raised as he leaned on the mannequin.

“Hopefully, not long at all...why'd ya ask?”

“We could travel together! More is better than one, right? And we could...oh...”

Minstrel had held up his hoof, shaking his head before just staring at me. “Don't think so, we're gonna be taking a lightweight run. Besides...you'll have other things to do...”

He was right. My friends...LittlePip...my mother even! I had so much of my own to do...

My thoughts were broken as a tickling started in my throat. Panicking, I tried to reach for the nearest piece of furniture, a chair! I almost made it...tickling became a burning as the great retching cough burst from my mouth, followed by an anguished cry as my head *seared* with pain, dizzying and knocking me over. The chair toppled, collapsing on the ground beside me as I clutched my chest, quaking and trying to hold more in. Minstrel was beside me quickly, a hoof on my breast as he lowered his ear to my neck.

“You're wheezing bad, internally...I'm pretty good at patching up folks, but I'm no proper surgeon. Asthma?”

Weeping from the pain, feeling ragged and thin breathing from hot lungs, I lay my head on a hoof and whispered instead. “Rad...rads in my lungs...please, I need RadAway soon...”

“Hmm...I'm afraid I don't have any of that. Pretty valuable stuff that most folks need. But I could mix a hot drink for that throat and-”

“*Please! I need RadAway, I-*”

Another cough interrupted me just as I had tried to rise, making me retch and stay hunched over, fighting the urge to scream as The Master's scar (No, NO! Don't think of it as that! Don't name it!) pounded and seemed to make the healed split in my skull *grind*...

“Sorry, Murk. Don't have any. Best bet is to get you on your hooves and out there soon enough. Once Sunny's back I'll see if she can't take a quick trip to the traders and round some up.”

Helping me back up, my breathing became heavy as the episode died down. Breathing became a little easier inside, with apparently less rads in the air.

“I'm...I'm sorry, Minstrel, I haven't even thanked you for what you *have* done with me yet. I'm not sure what I can offer in return to match...well...all this.”

“Think nought of it. Sometimes, a good act can return itself much better in the long term. Now, come on, time we continued helping you, keep your mind off this illness. Feeling up to it?”

Nodding, we made our way back through. As he passed by me to lead the way, I again reflected on how I had done that only because I was used to *following* rather than simply doing so. But closing the door to his storage room for him, I cast a glance back at the mannequin. So that's what Stable Dwellers wore to protect themselves...

Battle barding...she had a scoped revolver too, what had Glimmerlight called it again? My memory failed me...but remembering her form from the pit (contrary to what Glimmer might claim, I *did* remember more than just certain bits of said form) I mentally dressed her up. Finally...a little image of what my beloved legend looked like...

I'd have to draw it later. But for now, taking a new page in the main room, I sat and struggled to remember.

“We...we...”

“Don't strain yourself there, just let it flow. That's how you draw, ain't it?”

“Like it all just comes from my soul itself...”

“How very poetic, you're a little more intelligent than you look.”

Ceasing my thoughts, I glanced sideways with narrowed eyes to catch him chuckling.

“No offence meant, of course. What I mean is...you can't read or write, you've not been taught any real math or a lot of standard life skills...but you aren't stupid. You just...weren't ever told how. Free from slavery, you could be somepony better than you are, y'know?”

Somehow, some way...that reassured a large part of my ever-worrying mind to finally settle and smoothly think back...

“We were on the run, on hooves. That I remember...but they spotted us a lot of times, chasing us.”

Shaking, I lowered the charcoal, letting it almost control itself. Bold lines...crushing everything into a thin...thin...alleyway! It was an alleyway! Spurred by my subconscious drawing, I began to fill in the details. A side on shot of all three of us, galloping forward. Brimstone at the lead, grim and determined with a huge muscular stride to his gallop. Behind him, Glimmerlight with her short mane blowing in the wind-

* * *

-that tore down the thin corridor, directly into our faces. I was lagging, my shoulder flaring in pain with every step and my short gait failing to keep up with my larger friends. Above us I heard another *pop* in the air as another shining star burst into a red glare that lit the streets amongst the fading light of day. More than ever, Fillydelphia was a crimson hell, even outside the walls in the remainder of the city. Around us, I could hear teams of slavers moving in groups, trying to locate or head us off along with hunt down the remaining Steel Rangers that had gone to ground. Occasionally, a burst of intense violence broke the evening air as one was found and more often than not...slaughtered their hunters in return.

With Brimstone, I felt safe. He could take on any small group of slavers no problem, so long as his wounds didn't get too bad. In the past half hour he'd been stabbed, non-critically shot and bucked more times than I could count while defending us from the trios of slavers that infested the city on their escape prevention patrols. I'd been forced to loot through their corpses with Glimmer to try and find healing potions to keep Brimstone Blitz at his height...

My mind felt ready to snap. The tension was unbearable. Intense lengths of fear and hiding punctuated with brief moments of heartpounding terror when those klaxon calls sounded our detection. Already, I could hear griffins in the air...reinforcements from Stern to watch the rooftops and wider open streets. The efficiency of Red Eye's army was downright scary in its ability to work as one, bound by his charismatic will. Was this the Unity he often spoke of?

I was not doing well...already I was having to round corners only to see Brimstone turning the next one, Glimmerlight attempting to do her best to keep sight of both of us. I knew Brim wouldn't *leave* me but my condition was worrying me. My throat was feeling raspy again...the time we spent in these thin, contaminated urban areas that had been exposed to the balefire, the more my disease was starting to make itself known. Running was causing my breathing to spasm on burning coughs...it wasn't lethal yet, only bad due to the exertion...but I'd need RadAway within a day or so...

“Come on, Murk! Just keep...phew...going, we're all tired...” Glimmerlight was clearly digging deeply herself, but my own body just felt unable to push much further. The last time I'd actually rested that wasn't recovering from some injury or illness was long out of my memory. Many times I'd worked for days at a time, pushing or lifting heavy cargo, but out here all that obedient endurance just seemed to fade.

Could I even operate properly as a free pony?

Rounding the next corner, I found Brimstone halted at the end. (Oh thank you!) Dropping my pace, I fell on the ground beside them, trying my best to get any air possible into my clogged lungs.

“Murk?” Brimstone glanced back from the corner. “Get those lugs of yours working, listen, where are they?”

Even nodding felt like an effort. Closing my eyes, I tried to shut out everything else and just concentrate on listening. Around us I could hear crumbling...sizzling and hissing of broken industry and half faulty spark batteries. Fillydelphia, even outside the Wall, was nothing short of an industrial powerhouse of a city, ruined or not. In the distance, shouts and orders...some from down low, I could hear the echoes off charred walls and metal containers. Others didn't echo...louder sounds, probably griffins above us. We couldn't risk the main roads still. The smoke deadened sound and the concrete maze that was the industrial park in this location made it incredibly difficult to pinpoint the sounds by distance...but...

“They're that way...and that way.” I pointed with my hoof, behind us and off to the right.

“Well, we can't go left, the gates out of this park is still locked shut. Guess we just stay the course. You sure there aren't any others?”

“I...I don't know-”

“Come on, *listen!*” Brimstone was not in one of his friendlier moods. I imagined being wounded and healed so often in a short space of time would do that to a raider's attitude.

“I'm trying!” Concentrating, I blocked out everything but sounds...try tuning out the ambience, Murky...that beeping hasn't stopped, ignore it...what else?

A thick stomping underground not far away, a Ranger in a cellar? Flutters in the air ahead of us, crap...

“There are griffins up ahead...and I think there's a small trio of slavers about to move into this area and-”

A sound entered my ears that I knew all too well. It wasn't a living being...it was the sound of metal scraping and grinding along scrap-constructed gears and pivots. Fillydelphia was opening its gates. Even this far out, almost a quarter of a mile, I could hear the *clunk clunk clunk* of the massive gears sliding from tooth to tooth. Moments after, the trundle of wagons and the clatter of many hooves on the ground followed. Even Glimmer seemed to pick up the far off sounds, nodding.

“Guess Stern wasn't kidding about reinforcements...they'll be reaching us in five minutes if they stick to the main road. Remember, they *know* what section we're in.”

“Why are they trying so hard to get us? We're only three slaves! Why can't they just...let us go?”

Glimmerlight sighed, rubbing my mane lightly. “Red Eye doesn't like losing workers, hun. Especially not when it includes two of his biggest prizes, a Raider Warlord and one of the few-”

“Steel Rangers, right?”

Her face narrowed, almost looking as though she wanted to disagree like I'd been wrong, before stroking my mane again and even quickly hugging me. Tightly.

“Yes...yes, Brim and I, Murky. We're the ones he wants back.”

What had that hesitation been? No matter...we needed to get moving, any longer and they'd-
Flutter...

I *knew* that sound.

“Get down!” I screamed, throwing myself behind the nearest large bin in the alleyway. Glimmerlight and Brimstone dived to the side as rapid fire streaks of magical energy tore up the length of the alley from above. Dirt was fused to a goopy green that pulsated and stunk of fried air in little chunks, as was portions of my cover.

“**MOVE!**” Brimstone roared, grabbing and swinging me onto his back before galloping off. Gripping his mane as tightly as I could, I found that the wagon had been *nothing* in comparison to the rough ride here. We took off, galloping out of the alleyway into a storage yard, long stripped bare by Red Eye's slaves. Empty pallet trucks and deserted train carriages made it a metallic maze surrounding the central cargo-rail building. Above it I could see a cartoonish pony riding a tiny train filled with smiling workers. If only...

More griffins dove from the clouds, their scout having spotted us by sheer luck down the alleyways. Brimstone turned down between two lengths of train to avoid most of it, sticking to the right as rounds pinged and ricocheted between them. I felt my mane whip, whether from the wind or a passing bullet I didn't know. Glimmerlight followed us, breathing heavily but determination lending her strength to keep pushing. At the end of the two trains lay a third, its back carriage open to a passenger compartment. Hearing the platform creak under the weight, Brimstone launched himself into it, running between lines of seats as windows exploded or melted on either side. The train had to have been partially armoured against zebra ambushes, for few holes were made but for the small windows.

I heard the *thunk* of taloned feet landing above us, on the roof. Brimstone stopped short, knowing that to burst out between the carriages would be little more than running right into their line of fire. I could see him thinking, glancing to and fro.

Stern's griffins weren't going to give us that time to think. With a pink of glass, I saw small metal apples held down and tossed through the broken windows. Rolling to a halt before us, thin bands pinged off them...grenades!

Glimmerlight was the first to act, almost screaming as she pushed the boundaries of her stamina into her magic, she hurled them as far down the carriage as she could away from us. Unable to lift them, they just skittered along the floor while we ducked behind the seats. Shielded by Brimstone, I covered my ears.

There was little point. The noise was so intense that I felt my ears pop and replace all sound with a keening whine. I didn't even hear the sound they made, just a dull *whump*. The shockwave made my stomach churn and my head ache. Again and again, grenade after grenade, painful shots in my ears and spikes of pain through the middle of my skull. The entire train lurched and shook again and again as each explosive set itself off or detonated others early. Dizzied, I opened my eyes to find Glimmerlight almost collapsed on the floor. Worry overrode my own pains, I pulled myself over to her, trying to help her to stand. Her hoof was tapping me, her mouth moving with no sound emerging. Holding my face up, she nodded through hazed eyes.

Sound gradually returned.

“-m okay! Just tired...I...I think I've burned out. Too much in the Stable and now all this.”

Flares and dropping wreckage were sounding all around. My thoughts turned to the griffins, they had to have retreated to let their detonation go off, but did they think us dead? Brimstone made the decision for us, bellowing for us to move before they decided to come and check amidst the smoke that now shielded us.

“You two won't last in a run, move through the smoke, get inside the station and lay low!”

Glimmer shook her head, staggering to her hooves. “We need to keep moving and-”

“No arguments, Glim! **Get in the fucking station!**”

Both Glimmer and I stood in virtual shock. Brimstone had been firm, but he had *never* spoken to her in that tone. Ever. I felt Glimmer begin pulling me with a hoof. Staring into Brimstone's eyes, I saw the authority that has destroyed entire settlements for that second, reflected in the fire and smoke of battle. Even as Glimmerlight tugged me down the train, that glare bored into my eyes...not for the first time, but certainly more than ever, I was beginning to see the beast inside that began emerging in the middle of such chaos and violence. In some manner...I felt like I was running away from him. Hearing his thick stride behind us, I followed Glimmer through the train. Three carriages later, we heard the griffins landing behind us, obscured still. Screeching and shouting as they found no corpses turned to a rampaging charge across the tin floors.

“Oh shit...oh shit...oh *shit*...” Glimmerlight was muttering to herself as we limped and pulled one another as fast as two tired ponies could. I ceased to hear Brimstone behind me, had he stopped? My legs felt like dead weight, exhausted beyond compare. We were only moving one carriage, stumbling over all the wreckage, for every three the griffins were bounding through to catch up. I...I didn't want to look back! All I might see would be those razor sharp claws waiting to rip me apart! Memories of outrunning the thresher machine began to re-emerge, prompting mewling whinnying. We couldn't leave the train! If we did we'd be gunned down, it was a simple race to-

“Contacts spotted ahead! Two slaves!”

“Engage and eliminate!”

No, no! Against all my fear, my head turned. Two griffins, a male and female, black and white, were launching between chairs and leaping over wreckage through the carriage behind us. Equipped for close quarters, both had knives drawn, one with a pistol in his off hand. Where was-

Brimstone Blitz exploded from behind the door. Having purposefully stopped to wait on them, his full

titanic weight bore down on the two griffins from the side. Frenzied, I saw him actually *bite* the arm carrying the pistol, snapping and snarling enough to draw blood and make the griffin drop his firearm. Screeching at a pitch that dizzied me, the griffin spun, raking the knife at Brimstone. Normally, griffins were considered bigger and stronger than a pony, but even they seemed small compared to Brimstone in such tight quarters.

Tearing a chunk of flesh away with his *teeth*, he roared with bloodlust, one mighty hoof slapping away the knife as his forehead collided with the griffin's own. A sharp *thok* barely registered before he stamped down hard with a front hoof on his opponent's hind leg.

Legs...were not *supposed* to bend that way. The griffin squealed, falling to the ground.

Caught unaware, the female griffin whirled to face the unexpected foe only to find her companion hurled into her hard enough to drop them both into a seat. Brimstone reared up, dropping both hooves down on the pair hard enough to snap ribs on the male and wind the female beneath him. Using the time, I saw him go for the knife with his mouth, a mad glint in his eye, and-

I felt Glimmerlight pull my head away as he lunged. The screaming started.

“He's trying...Murky...he really is...”

Even holding my ears covered, I could still hear it...like ripping cloth apart, accompanied by long wailing cries that finally stopped after far too long a time. Hidden by the chairs that obscured the corpses...I could still see the draining blood and dirtied feathers dropping onto the floor and slowly spreading. With a sudden jolt, his gore smeared face turned to us.

“Why...are you still here?”

We didn't need any encouragement, turning, we galloped as fast as we could, little more than a determined canter. Hopping off the train, we found ourselves in the warehouse shop floor. Chains and hooks surrounding us from giant ceiling borne cranes. Already, I could hear griffins on the roof trying to shout to their comrades. Single shots whipped into the hard ground as skylights smashed and dropped razor edges either side of us. Glimmer galloped into a group of offices nearby to the edge of the yard, spurring herself to dive into and through the open doors even as the ground chewed up behind her. I was still twenty feet out, way to far to-

A griffin landed atop a train beside me, the short barrelled weapon pointed directly at me.

Acting before thinking, I ducked and rolled under the train, only realising why this was a horrible idea as I felt my shoulder's bandages yank and tear. A dripping under my fleece formed even as I clutched it and screamed at both the sucking wound's pain and the clatter of fully automatic fire mere feet above me.

Clawing, pulling and struggling, I pushed myself to keep crawling under the train towards the offices Glimmer had moved into. The train only moved parallel to the doorway though, I'd have to leave and make a run for it sometime...but I *couldn't* run!

I...I had to try...

Three legs only...hop it...skip it. It'd look silly, but I had to keep going. Drawing my head out from under the train, I saw the griffin stalking along it, head lowered. She hadn't spotted me yet and-

Yes she had! The eaglehead jerked around, the barrel following even as I begged her not to shoot.

“Please! I'll come back! I'll go back to my Master!”

“Too late, pipsqueak. Stern says you die, you die.”

KERRUNCH!

The entire train lurched, shaking the griffin's balance until it threw her off. Swearing colourfully, she landed on her hind legs nearby to me, one snapping down on my neck and pushing me into the concrete. My squeal of agony from my shoulder being *under* my body drowned out into a rasping sound as her weight pressed down on my weak lungs. Her weapon was pointed around, before spraying through the train itself. Why? What was she-

A train wheel hurtled in from over the carriage like a child's throwing disc, slamming directly into her chest and pinning the mercenary to the ground. A crisp *snap* told of broken ribs as Brimstone Blitz launched himself through the middle of the carriage's cargo doors. Stamping on the gun, bending the barrel, he barely even hesitated before another ferocious stamp cracked her skull off the ground. If she had remained that way...she may have lived. But groaning in pain only attracted the grim raider's attention, leading him to stamp again and again...over and over until her high pitched shrieking stopped.

Pulling myself up, I felt him bend over and pull out one of the last small healing potions we had liberated from slaver corpses before carefully dragging me towards where Glimmer hid. Already, I could hear other griffins taking to the air to close in on the screams. The moment Brimstone got us behind the doorway he closed it, throwing cabinets and desks against it like playthings until he had bought us at least a little time.

My shoulder was stinging as the healing potion took effect, the bleeding coagulating again into a thick hardened mass. The potion wouldn't get rid of it...but it would stop me bleeding out a while longer and let me walk. Skittering on the slick concrete floor, I cast a glance around. We needed a hiding spot, this was *my* area of things. Rooms...too obvious and natural. Vents...Glimmer and Brim wouldn't fit. Storage cupboards...only one way out. Damn! The entire building was big enough to survive a nearby balefire detonation, but held no safe rooms? I pathetically bucked a small sign on the wall in frustration before tripping over my own hooves. What idiot designed this place to not have any safe rooms in a major industrial city?

“Uh...Murky, what's wrong?” Glimmer glanced sideways at me.

“I'm trying to find an underground room! It'd be the best place to drop into, I used to get crammed in one, so I know they always have an exit in case the building came down. We can hide in it and escape to the outside. I used to try and do that. But no-pony left any stupid directions!”

“Um...that way?” She pointed a hoof toward some side offices. Wait...how...but...*what?! Ah wait!*

“Aah...you're a Steel Ranger, you know all about pre-war buildings!”

“Actually, I just read the sign you kicked.” Despite her exhaustion, she managed a thin smile. Turning, I saw the green and white sign filled with indecipherable words. Not for the first time in my life, I sighed and lowered my head. Illiteracy really wasn't fun...without Glimmer I'd likely be running around in circles trying to find it.

“Hey, hey, Murky! No depression slips now! Big nasty griffins about to drop in, let's go!”

I heard Brimstone batter down the door into the offices, revealing the easy access safe-room slope at the far end where a huge steel door lay open. My throat clenched as I saw multiple charred skeletons nearby to it, where they had just pulled it open before the fires had surged through the blackened building. My hooves crunched in the ash of light furniture and papers, all that seemed left was the bare structure and what bones survived. They had been so close...

Kerrash!

Behind us, I heard the surging of wings and whisps of air as griffins leapt in from the skylights. Thumping sounded as other slavers trying to batter down the door Brimstone had blocked got to work. They had us surrounded.

“Get in!” Brimstone arrived, grabbed and virtually hurled me down the stairs. Painfully bouncing and rolling, I barely managed to get back to my feet and glance back up to see Glimmer jump over the ledge and onto the dark stairwell. Brimstone glanced back, before snorting and pushing the door closed...from the outside. Her own hooves moving quickly, Glimmerlight tried to stop him, pushing futile against his strength.

“Wait, what are you *doing?! Get in here, Brim!*”

The old raider didn't even stop, sweating and scraping his hooves through ash as the great door began to slide shut. Tangentially...it occurred to me that if those ponies two hundred years ago hadn't gotten it open

for us...we'd have been caught.

“Those feathered bampots are going to surround the place! They'll be happy to wait, they *know* slaves are in here. They need a lure. Something to get them off your tails while you rest.”

Almost all sound seemed to deaden as the ramifications of his plan started to weigh upon my mind, I found myself galloping back up the stairs to beside Glimmerlight. Words just wouldn't come to me. Her mouth was just open, shaking her head.

“Look, we'll find a way, you don't need to do this!”

Brimstone Blitz looked back at us, gore dripping still from his muzzle and bloodshot eyes quivering with the adrenaline of battle. Then he smiled...

“Won't happen, griffins are patient. More than I am. Besides...I put slaves into this trade all my life...killed ponies and...just so much else.”

I was crying, this was too rushed...I didn't have time to prepare anything to say, to react! My tears were not alone, Glimmerlight pressed her hoof against his chest.

“Now you want to save at least some...”

“Aye...”

“Well...” She narrowed her eyes. “You come back. I am not accepting that the Great Warlord you've rumbled on in my ear about so much is going to be beaten by a bunch of flying chickens. On my way here, I saw an old bank outside Fillydelphia's main centres. You know it?”

Brimstone merely nodded.

“Then we'll meet there.” She stepped back. I saw Brimstone's gaze turn to me. Not expecting it, I wracked my brain for what to say, but hearing hooves and talons clattering closer, I just shook my head. Theirs was a story I shared, the raider and the runaway, but this was his moment to shine. Only two words really came from my mouth as I trotted forward to hop up and lay my head against the side of his shoulder.

“...thank you...”

I knew I was crying. For once, the pony locking me away was doing it to *save* me.

“Goddesses be with ye both...” Brimstone rumbled the words, his hoof briefly arcing around to hold me, before gently pressing me back towards Glimmerlight. “Gallop safely. We'll meet again.”

With that, the light died as Brimstone slammed the great door shut. His great stride sounded immediately, galloping away into the building. He had told me that he was always a raider, that there was no way to appear as anything else...but right now I could not help but feel inspired by his determination to protect the ponies who he felt deserved it. He may not agree...but in that moment he was as far from the raider as I could ever believe.

Glimmerlight and I stayed on the staircase for some time, listening to the gunfire, screams and blood curdling warcries mixed with dull impacts and tearing metal. Gradually they moved further and further away...before eventually ceasing completely. By then, I felt Glimmerlight holding me tightly against her with one hoof.

“He got away...they didn't get him.”

“How do you know?”

“Not anywhere near enough gunfire to bring that big lout down. Besides...he still owes me ten caps and a beer.”

Her smile in my PipBuck's pale light seemed small as she turned and led me down into the emergency lights of the safe room. Remaining for just a second with one hoof pressed against the door, I could not begin to fully grasp the emotion. What was it? Sadness? Loss? Somepony had just thrown themselves into the grinder for me...and amidst my torn mindset, I just didn't know what to feel.

The safe room had lived up to its name. Lit by amber lamps, we found multiple stale and hard beds surrounded by infuriatingly locked doors that, by Glimmer's reading, led to an armoury and a food locker. After the canteen in the Stable, I was considering it unlikely that such food would still be edible anyway.

Trotting ahead of me, Glimmerlight flopped herself down atop one of the bunks, sending a small shockwave of stored dust flapping in all directions. Finally off her hooves, I heard her sigh deeply, looking for all the world that she might fall asleep on the spot. Nervously, I trotted onward, checking the far side of the room for...yes...the exit tunnel that would lead us to the outside once things quietened down. Not to mention got our breath...

"Here...Murky, lie down, rest a minute." Glimmerlight tapped the bunk beside her, which I obediently hopped up onto and settled upon. Feeling my back muscles and whip marks ache and sting, I slid off my saddlebag and pulled the goggles from my face. Brimstone had been a topic avoided, Glimmerlight was insistent about his safety while I simply didn't know what to even say. This was all so alien to me. Ponies caring for me, fighting for me...being so far outside the Wall and hunted during an escape attempt? When I had run for the Wall, never had I imagined this sort of reality. In my mind it was me running and running forever and outstripping the chains that bound me. But the reality was...harsh, unromantic and full of twisting turns that bounced me from encounter to encounter without any downtime or chance to properly *think*. No long planning, no idea that survived the actual execution. It was just instinct and reaction mixed with cold unrelenting luck and chance. The idea that I had once sat in Whiplash's storage room planning my eventual grand escape seemed childlike and far away. This was real.

...real was more tiring than I'd ever dreamed...

Glimmerlight seemed to doze for a few minutes at a time, her breathing finally steadying. She had thrown her robes off in the heat of exhaustion once arriving, leaving them crumbled in a heap below her. I lay upon my side, gently easing my sore wing under me and just watched her. The pony who ruffled my mane, who hugged and smiled at me. Who reassured me and cared...who had *fought* to save my life. Others had done some of those, but more and more I was feeling a connection to Glimmerlight like...like a friend...

But not all my mind accepted it. Slaves didn't have friends. My very presence here was a slight against my place in life if I listened to the deeper, darker areas of my own thoughts. The Wall and my orders were my boundaries, but now I was across them. Upon my flank, I felt my cutie mark almost *tingle* in an effort to remind me. Instructing me to wander off and leave her that I might return to the safe keeping of those who would guide me and tell me what to do, rather than face the uncompromising wastes. If...if I apologised enough to Protégé, maybe he...maybe...

Shaking my head violently, almost butting my forehead against the pillows, I fought them down. That was just fear talking. The fear of being caught and killed before I could do anything I wanted with life. *My life*. The one I'd been denied for...for how long? Oh Goddesses, I wished I knew how old I actually was...I didn't even know my birthday. I'd once been ordered to clear out of the barn and sleep with the brahmin on the rock farm because they'd wanted to use it for a party in my master's honour. His birthday. I'd snuck out and crept up to one of the windows, glancing in at him and his family that owned me getting drunk and laughing a lot. Maybe...maybe when I got out and found my mother, she could tell me when mine was...

...I'd kinda like to have a birthday...

Just once, I wished I could feel the same urge for freedom that LittlePip no doubt had felt. Something to boost me along to finish this and finally, *finally*, escape the bonds that were imprinted upon my very side. My eyes turned back to Glimmerlight. She wore a small smile as she settled, not sleeping, but eyes closed all the same. What kept her so free and willing? What drove her? But Protégé had answered for me long ago. She *knew* freedom. That wasn't all though, slaves in Fillydelphia bullied me, stomped on me, stole my food and called me things like 'runt.' Mocking noises of them screaming how I would die in the Pit still disturbed my slumbers. But she had remained nice and caring. Even the best ponies had been broken by

Fillydelphia. Flippy Bit had his prejudices sent higher by the ignorance of slavery under Red Eye. Hell...even I had almost stooped to stealing from a sick mare. But not Glimmer...staring at her cutie mark, the three memory orbs, glinting even through the muck and old wounds any slave carried after time in Fillydelphia. They were her key, being able to revisit your free days, the good times...that must certainly help.

“Uh...Murky. Not to knock you down, but I *think* I'm a little old for you.”

Blinking, I snapped back to reality. Oh Goddesses...I'd done it again. Blushing, I drew my eyes away from her flank (No, cutie mark! Her cutie mark!) and bit my lip while seeing her snorting with laughter. Was...was she just winding me up?

“Oh, I...uh...your cutie mark, it...it just makes me wish I could...y'know...”

Reaching between the two bunks, she (again) ruffled my mane with a hoof and giggled.

“There are *so* many ways I could twist that sentence, but I don't think you have it in you. Well, until you get some charcoal in your mouth anyway.”

She winked. I blushed.

“Which reminds me, I've not had a chance to really get a glance at that book of yours. Mind if I take a look with you? It'll give us something to take our minds off...y'know...”

Well...she hadn't ever done anything but support me before. Groaning as stiff and painful joints cracked and ached, I pulled over my saddlebag and yanked out my treasured journal. Glimmerlight rolled off her bunk to sit beside mine as I placed it beside me and opened to some of my pictures from a few days ago. I saw her frown as she saw me lying dead in the Pit, the last image I ever drew before the mare gave me the idea to set my mind free. Flicking from page to page, Glimmerlight reminded me of that mare...the way she just accepted everything. Even down to the little snicker and sideways glance at...um...some of my pictures...

“Careful what you draw, Murky. You're making me want to grab a mare the moment we get out of here.”

Chuckling, she winked and continued. I didn't know if she was just being nice or genuinely did like them, but I felt settled enough to leave her to read through it. Shifting off my bed, I began to trot around the little saferoom. Cramped, nothing was there without an express purpose. In an appreciative nod, I rather enjoyed the concept of a bin that doubled as a chair when its lid was down. Only Glimmerlight's confused glance was enough to make me stop flipping it up and down by pressing my hoof on the pedal. (What? It's good!) Seeing her settle down and stare more longingly at the drawing I'd done of her being watched over by Brimstone, I gave her some space by moving into the bathroom.

Barely four feet by four feet, it was tiny. I didn't need to use it, really, but it was the only separate room. Nosing around, I cracked open the butterfly case within, finding little but bandages that fell apart in my hooves and a small needle. Memory flickered, I'd seen this before! What was it called...Med-Yes? I pulled it carefully into a leg pocket and turned to-

...a mirror.

Throughout my life, mirror's had been nothing but a reminder and crushing visual sight of myself. But it had always been tempered...I had always been supposed to be a dirty, weak and sick little slave. Now, when I could think clearer...

...oh Goddesses...what had my life done to me?

Before me, just above the low sink, I saw a scrawny, scarred little buck, his coat so coated in rubbish, mud, blood and rotten juices that it barely resembled any singular colour anymore. My mane and tail had...had *bits* in them. Stained in a dozen different ways just like the by now ripped and bloodstained fleece and filthy dark red bandages around my shoulder. But it was the health of my body...drawn, almost skeletal and covered in rad-sores upon my muzzle and hind legs alongside new ones on my neck. They were spreading as my disease got worse...

The eyes that stared back were not the eyes of the free pony I felt I should be. They looked terrified, out of place and showed the image of a pony about to crack and run for the nearest thing that would tell him what to do or how to live. Sunken into dark sockets and red with tiredness, I could see my own pupils shaking...see the edges tearing up as he saw his own cutie mark in the mirror that...that...

I had to look away. Quivering and sobbing, I tried the sink and got a paltry trickle of brown water. Splashing it into my face, I scrubbed as best I could. Maybe if I scrubbed hard enough I could wipe away the slave, show the real pony I was supposed to be.

Scrub, scrub, scrub...

The water was tepid, stinging my rad-sores and small cuts I hadn't even realised I had. Time lost all meaning as I just sat and kept trying. Every time I looked up, I only looked more desperate, wetter and more pathetic than before. I'd have to try *really* hard now to get it all off...all the blood...the dirt of the place that hurt me...all of it, I wanted rid of it *all*. Coughing, spluttering, I finally leaning over the bowl of the sink, not sure which was the water and which was my own tears. That's all I could do...cry. I couldn't help anypony. I wasn't a hero like LittlePip, strong like Brimstone, smart like Protégé or resourceful as Glimmerlight. Somehow, every time I did anything good it all twisted in on itself within minutes.

"I just want to do something right..."

"You have."

Glancing back up, I saw Glimmerlight in the mirror behind me at the door.

"You got out here. You saved my life, Brimstone's life many times. Heh...more than he'd admit. You *are* a pony that matters, Murky. Now c'mere."

Her horn sparked, flared and immediately failed. Straining, it popped back into life just enough to pull a small towel from the top shelf into her hoof before spluttering and imploding the spell with a brief shot of light. Dampening the towel, she sat and wiped my tears.

"You ever have any siblings, Murky?"

"I...I don't know...six of them if my name says anything, but I don't remember any of them. My mom never mentioned any, I assumed they'd been sold..."

The towel was coming off filthy on each rub. I felt her firmly wipe it around my eyes, avoiding all my sores.

"I never had any, but there was one little initiate back at Bucklynn Cross. He used to hang out with me because the others kept picking on him. They called him Safety Catch because he had a habit of leaving his on while in the range. Eventually, it got so bad he started forgetting who he was. That he could actually strip an energy weapon faster than I can strip a stallion when I'm in the mood."

I couldn't help it, I lightly chuckled. She was just so carefree, overriding my sadness with sheer audacity.

"Thought he was useless, you see? Didn't even remember that he'd scored top marks in the tests my pops set for us. But the day he actually became a scribe and got the badge? Well, he remembered, saw what he was as soon as he looked in the mirror. That he was a smart pony."

The towel dabbed under the water again, before it seemed to die entirely and spluttered out. Pulling tightly on my cheeks, she kept cleaning before almost too firmly rubbing my forehead with it, biting her own lip as she did so. I winced as I felt her pull on my mane with it, as through wringing it out.

"So...I guess what I'm saying is. We can forget ourselves as it all piles up. But if somepony can just show us what still lies beneath it...perhaps it'll help a little."

Dropping the towel, she held her hooves on either side of my face.

"He was like a little brother for a while, really. Probably the only reason I wasn't known as simply 'that mare who drinks far too much at ceremonies.'

Almost hypnotized, my head was turned as I looked back in the mirror again.

Green and blonde.

My coat's colour...or about as close as it likely could ever come anymore. A thick green, lighter than I'd ever expected it to be. My mane...I'd come to think of it as a light brown, but it actually was blonde under it all...light and fluffy. The line between the dirt and what she had cleaned was as sudden as a fence...in reality it looked a little silly, the front of my face clean for once with some strands of my mane free of debris and dirt. But it gradually spread in my imagination. The artistic side of my mind filled in the blanks, let those borders expand. To look at-

-a colt, standing with innocent little wide eyes filled with tears, my two stubby little wings flapping...

Gasping, I could see nothing but what the mirror in the FunFarm had shown me. I had almost forgotten the Mirror House and the strange sight. The little slave, yet to acquire a life's worth of dirt and grime that would mar his appearance as much as it would mar his dreams...

Not seconds later, I was wrenched out by merely blinking, breaking my daydream. Tears dripped from my face, but landed upon a small smile as I turned back to Glimmerlight.

“...Glim?”

“Yeah, Murky?”

“You...you keep helping me. Making me see the right things. I don't think I'd have made it this far without you.”

“We all help each other.”

Shaking my head, I then nodded, then shook it again.

“No...no, I mean, with me being...*me*. Trying to work out what I am...who I am. What kind of pony I am beneath the years of being nothing but a slave. You keep guiding me, always being there for me. I...I know it's only been a little while we've known each other but...but...”

Leaning down, she wiped away my wet mane from my face.

“But what?”

“Well...a mare once told me we shouldn't forget or ignore the good when it comes, no matter how short a time it takes. You...you said you saw that buck like a little brother, right? I...um...wanted to ask...”

Biting my lip, I looked away, feeling unfathomably embarrassed.

“...could...could you ever see me like that? Because I think I...uh...sort of see you like the big sister I wished I always had around...”

A brief period of silence reigned as Glimmerlight just looked down at me, before, gently, she pulled me close. Her impetuous embrace stopped only by concern for my wound. But her head leaned against mine.

“Tell the truth? I was kind of hoping you'd say that, because that's how I was beginning to think of you too. We can't take time for granted, days could be years to slaves, Murky. We take who and what we can get. So yes...”

Within the underground room, amidst an escape attempt that could or could not succeed still, there was at least one life defining moment to remember. Family need not be by blood...

“Yes...yes I will be. Your big sister best friend forever.”

“I...I'd like that.”

There was a brief moment, just allowing me to smile and hold onto the best pony I'd ever met. For about a minute, we simply sat within the saferoom, between the bathroom and main room, just permitting the moment. Eventually, she snickered, leaning back, her eyebrows narrowed and lowered.

“But...you do know what little brothers get, don't you?”

She grinned, I just raised an eyebrow. I hadn't even had a sibling nearby to know, what did little brothers ge-

“Noogies!”

“Noo-what, what are-wait, no! Haha!” Before I could react, she had me in a virtual headlock, rubbing her hoof on my mane vigorously. I squirmed as best I could while injured, laughing and squealing in equal amounts to try and get her to stop. Waving my front legs to try-

* * *

-and make her let go. The smile I drew across my face seeming almost alien as I softly added more width with the end of the charcoal stick. Then a little more...and a little more. Before I knew it, I'd drawn one of the most wide smiles I ever had. Almost as much as when I'd drawn myself on my own on that page so long ago. Now where was that one...

Flicking back, I hunted it out. The one I had drawn just after gaining the ability to think for myself...even a little. Back in the FunFarm. Ah, there it was, the one that had me on my own, grinning widely with my wings flared to either side beautifully. It still made me chuckle to think I could ever actually make a smile like that without being around LittlePip's escape. But there it was, just in the middle left of the page on my own and-

I wasn't alone anymore. There had been something else drawn on it.

At some point during the rest period, I had added somepony else. Now, Glimmerlight stood just to the right of me, about one pony's width away. Clean, as though she wasn't a slave, her initiate robes well kept and draped tidily about her. But she still had that edge...and on her face, wow. That look, the sparkling cheeky grin and alluringly casual eyebrows. One expression that comforted her friends and seduced stallions all in one fell swoop. Feeling my hooves shake, I fought to urge to try and hug the journal itself. I knew finally why I had drawn myself to one side like that.

I had been waiting for the friends I could add in later all along.

“So that's the mare herself, huh?” Minstrel smiled thinly as he watched over my shoulder. “Although ah have to question...regarding yourselves siblings within forty eight hours of meeting? That seems a little...pre-emptive, don't you think?”

“I...I thought so too. But back inside Filly, time didn't feel right. Shifts could come anytime, you could be underground in the pits working away and not knowing how long for. You lived day to day, anything that survived was a blessing. Death was so easy. I...I saw ponies burned alive, shot or simply dying of sickness. Just so random and unforgiving. I only barely survived...”

Part of me wished I'd drawn her closer on the piece of paper, nearer to me.

“But it works the other way too. If somepony feels trustworthy and close to you, then I discovered just how amazing you could feel in a few scant hours. I'm a pegasus, Doc, ponies *hate* me...”

“I don't.”

“But almost all of *them* did! Slaves are...are ignorant! They don't know how to think about situations like ponies outside do. Even I didn't realise that until they opened my eyes.”

“They?”

“All of them...LittlePip, the mare, DJ-Pon3, Brimstone...Glimmerlight, even Protégé in some weird way I...I don't understand! Some of them I only saw for less than a few seconds...but it *matters* when you're a slave like me. It's all I have! All I had...”

I sniffed, wiping my eyes with a hoof, still flinching from my forehead throbbing at the motion.

“That's why I think we...we were able to just, *know*, that we would be so close no matter what. We'd saved each others lives already. Slaves like we ar...I mean...were? That counts for everything.”

A period of silence began as Minstrel carefully mulled this over, leaning on his front hooves and staring almost unflinching at me. The only noise was the occasional snuffle from me and a wind banging upon the window shutters every few seconds. Eventually, Minstrel got to his hooves.

“Well, I suppose you need to get her back. That much is obvious, 'fraid ah can't help too much but...well, wait and have a chat with Sunny. She knows the area and the ponies you can trust. Might even give you a few tips on how to fire that pistol she carried in with you. Ah'll see what ah can cook up to maybe give you a hand when you head out the door. Just...take it easy. Ah can see in your eyes how much you wanna just gun it and find Glimmerlight. But you're badly wounded and recovering still, not to mention your memory ain't quite there yet.”

He shrugged, wandering toward the corridor and tapping the sofa on the way.

“Lie down, get some rest. Goodness knows you need it. Ah'll wake ya up when Sunny's back. Who knows, maybe you'll remember somethin' yourself.”

Nodding silently, I wandered (obediently...) toward the sofa and rolled onto it. The soft cushions allowed me to lie on my side without the worry of wing-ache (oh I had a *name* for it now?) and just flick through my journal. Perhaps if I went far enough back I could find something to-

No...no no no nooooo...I couldn't do that...not now, definitely not. If I wouldn't dare look at my slave past before, doing it now would just...it would be too much to handle. No, the years of my life would remain indistinct and behind me. I had no wish to see imagery of me being abused...

Time passed, just lying and thinking and not thinking and being confused. Freedom didn't feel quite so monumental as I thought it would at this stage. My heart didn't feel like jumping for joy. The shackles on my flank still stung every time I looked at them. I felt...out of place. Searching through my saddlebag to distract myself didn't help, I came across the elements of loot I'd taken from Stable Ninety Three. Mostly just odds and ends I'd carried for Brimstone and Glimmerlight. A spanner, small hammer, screwdriver, nuts, bolts and some little bobby pins. But striving, I pulled the largest item, a thick book, one I had liberated from the Memorial Room. Or...was it? I couldn't precisely remember, the haunting passage through the bowels of the Stable had left my memory indistinct and blurry...or maybe that was the blow to the head. Time would only tell if everything would reassemble like it should.

Weighing the book in my hooves, feeling the heavy weight, it dawned on me how long I'd been pushed by adrenaline and fear. How I'd been able to keep going even with a sick body and the injuries every slave carries. Typical...when I wanted to be heroic I was weak, but when terrified I could push myself. (If I really tried, I could sometimes be *half* as strong as a normal pony!) If only it were the other way around like proper heroes...

But this book...I'd picked it up to give to Protégé. But I was free of that conniving and 'caring' master forever. Helping and saying he wanted to be kind to me one minute then sending me into Stables the next. Holding the coverless book in my hooves, my eyes fell hopelessly on the words I could never read. I would be glad to never have to wrack my brains just talking to him ever again.

...so why did I feel like I was going to miss handing him the book?

Gritting my teeth, I dropped it back into my saddlebag. With some degree of revulsion, I set about pulling my fleece back on. As much as Minstrel seemed fine with my wings...I didn't like feeling naked and exposed like this. Whimpering as I squeezed my head through, even wool pulling across my skull feeling like industrial sandpaper, I finally flopped down, breathing hard and switched on my PipBuck's radio.

“-ck and rooooooll!”

The music ceased. Celestia damn it! I'd missed one of Velvet's songs!

Immediately, my mind realised what it had thought and sent approximately eight prayers towards the

sky in forgiveness. One for each letter of Her name. Just to be sure.

“Y’know, I really don’t think I’ll ever tire of that stuff, year after year of the same sounds wear on any good DJ’s ears. We’ve got the main daily news comin’ up in a few hours, but for now I got a little tidbit that just can’t wait. From over across the plains I’ve been getting reports of a large scale confrontation between Red Ass and the Steel Rangers. Seems even with all the problems out in the main wasteland, those two groups still want to clobber one another. But that’s not the best part, through the network it seems that the slaves of Fillydelphia took the Stable Dweller’s actions to heart. There’s a colossal search going on and it’s clearly not just for Rangers. You don’t go hunting for ponies in power armour with whips and shackles, do you?”

My heart leapt. This...this was...*ohmygosh!*

“So I say to those of you out there...good work! Now get out safe, they don’t let anypony go easy. Indeed, the Walls are only the first obstacle in their network to catch runaways. Be. Careful. Cause ain’t nuthin’ gonna hurt more than being dragged back through those gates in chains. I thought of saying what roads might be less crowded, but I’d be one pretty big idiot to think they aren’t listening in too. Now we’ve not had any reports of actual escapees yet, but by all the great goodness left in the wastelands I sure hope there is. Anypony out there gets a whiff of a slave that escapes? Let ol’Pon-3 know, will ya?”

Find my friends.

Find LittlePip.

Find my mother.

Now I had another one to add to the list.

Proudly trot into Pon3’s very studio as ‘the one who got away’.

Giggling so happily to myself at the thought that my throat threatened to spasm and cough, I squirmed and curled up on the sofa, clutching the half destroyed PipBuck tightly enough I feared it might bend. The DJ clearly knew LittlePip, maybe he could put in a good word too?

I might be weak, deathly sick, and for now without allies nearby...but at least I knew there were others out there rooting for me. Wishing my dreams to succeed as much as I did.

* * *

Hours of the day faded by...at least I thought they were day. Inside behind shut windows and the cloud cover outside there was little way to tell. I dozed while tired and ate when provided for. Minstrel checked over my wounds a few times, replacing the dressing on my shoulder as well as giving my fleece a scrub down with some old cleaning fluid. The one he didn’t touch was the bandages around my lower right leg, citing that it would be far too painful to change them for at least a few days until the anti-infection fluid soaked into it killed off the dirt in the wound.

“Sunny should be back soon, Murk, don’t you worry...”

“You’ve said that a few times, don’t you know?”

Looking up from where he was testing the joints on my legs for any concussive damage, Minstrel just faintly smiled.

“She’s got some zipline up on one of the nearby old buildings that lets her get down the hill quick to go scavenging. Problem is, getting back up is still a trot and a half. Depending on how much she fished out...could be anything from half a day to a couple hours. Apparently you weren’t much of a weight...so ah see...”

My own eyes followed his to my stomach, shrivelled and still showing ribs if I were to pull up my

fleece. Indeed, just ahead of my hind legs, I was fairly sure a griffin could fit their entire hand around my waist.

...wasn't that a wonderful thought...

“Just calm down, lil' Murk. It's big an' scary comin' out into the wastes, ah used to be in a Stable, *ah know how it feels*. You got the problem that you don't right know how to be free either. It'll come, just wait for Sunny. She'll see ya right.”

Perking up, I heard something. Hooves. Immediately I wanted to gallop, to flee. What if it were Red Eye's slavers?! Spotting my tentativeness, Minstrel listened carefully before smiling about ten seconds later as his own older ears caught up with my finer hearing.

“Well...ah reckon that's her right there...”

Scrunching gravel gave way to the front door opening and shutting quickly.

“Hey, Doc? You around?”

“Front room, mah dear. Just checking on our little newcomer.”

Sharp clip-clopping came from a confident and springy step as I saw the sandy coloured Sunny wander in. An earth pony, a little shorter than most, wearing leather fittings similar to Minstrel's (I assumed one of them stitched for both) and carrying a small bolt action in a side holster. Her mane rather than the dusty yellow was a deep brown streaked with bright red, surrounding a serious but rather bright face. Across her back were at least four saddlebags packed full of...well...junk.

I had to admit though. I *kind* of wanted that big wide brimmed hat she had on her head. Even if I knew it would just fall down over my eyes.

Something wasn't right though, before she even spoke or properly saw me. My ears twitched, somepony was sneaking behind her...I could hear padded stepping very clearly. Somepony light and soft on their feet...and...panting?

As Sunny trotted further into the room, the second presence wandered in. Dirty and dark haired, I saw something much smaller than I had been expecting. It wasn't a pony. It was a dog.

Barking loudly enough to make me wince and sweat in fear, it immediately bounded across the room, heedless of Sunny's shouted command. Shrieking, I fell backwards off the couch, scrambling backwards painfully away from it. The table overturned, knocking my journal onto the floor and making Minstrel stagger backwards. Memories flared in my head, horrible and twisted. Guard dogs growling and barking in my face or just waiting for me to try and escape to find *food* so they could bite me...again.

“Cayenne!”

Whimpering, I closed my eyes, trying to ward off the attacker with my front hooves as I felt the furry head push right past them, going right for my neck and-

...licking me?

“Cayenne, heel girl! Leave the poor buck be! Come on!”

Slowly, shivering, I opened my eyes and had to wince immediately as the dog licked right over my left cheek and seemed to almost grin at me while panting. “Gotcha”, I could see written all over 'Cayenne's' face. Behind the sofa, Sunny dumped her things, before wandering around the sofa toward the dog and I. Relieved of her cargo, I could see a bright smiley face shaped like the sun on her flanks. Despite the apparently friendly nature of this...this *mutt*, I could still feel the fear and tension ripple through me. I...I didn't like dogs...

“Come on, heel!” Sunny snapped the last word with a little more sternness, leading Cayenne to bark lightly and run back over to Sunny, padding around her hooves and under her belly before sitting obediently beside her and looking up, awaiting the next command.

“You alright, buck? Sorry, she gets a little excited around new ponies she meets. She won't bite...unless

I tell her to.” Sunny winked at me, no-where even close to the sheer casual grace of Glimmerlight, but friendly and warm...if clearly weathered.

“I...I just...”

“I imagine Murk here has encountered a few dogs before of less spicy comedic mindset than Cayenne,” spoke Minstrel, trotting back over after righting the table and setting my open journal upon it, “Murk, this is Sunny. Cayenne was the one who sniffed you out in the rubble for Sunny to rescue.”

Shakily getting to my hooves, favouring my shoulder a little (come to think of it...why *always* my shoulder?) I nodded, trying to find the words.

“Um...I...uh...thanks, I guess?”

Somehow, I had a feeling I'd never make it as a Tenpony Tower ambassador in my new life. Shaking my head, I tried again.

“I mean, sorry...just still a bit confused. Thank you...”

I leaned down, lowering my head as I would to any master. Really...it was the only way I knew to show respect and loyalty as thanks or apology. After a brief, awkward and silent moment, I heard Doc Minstrel cough into a hoof.

“So...Sunny, aside from enough junk to start our very own scrapyard, any news? Particularly...anypony else get out from that big mess earlier? Our friend here has lost his companions, his protector and his sister.”

I saw his sly wink at me. My heart warmed to him...remembering that little point so well. Sunny settled on the sofa, lying on her side and ruffling Cayenne's rapidly panting and moving head.

“Yeah, met a few ponies actually. Even got stopped by a few of Red Eye's lot. They're certainly comin' farther out than normal. Somepony with big authority drivin' em onward to reclaim somethin'.”

My entire body began shivering. I felt the scar on my skull twitch and stab pain. Oh no...please...just let me go and think I'm gone...

“Never got a look at *him*, but the cronies seemed content to leave anypony not an escaped slave or a Ranger be for now. The rest seem to still understand the agreement. They don't come out and bother us, we leave some good alcohol for them near the old school once in a while. Good to know that no amount of discipline and fear from Red Eye can beat a little beverage persuasion.” She grinned at me, no doubt having explained for my benefit. “Honestly? Red Eye's not so bad a neighbour if you know how to stay on their side. We leave a little loot for them here and there...and he's content to have the griffins not come after us. Not like we'll be around here soon enough. Soon as we got enough caps to make the journey, we're out of here, right Doc?”

Minstrel nodded, smiling thinly. I could swear I saw him glance at the picture nearby.

“But I see one pony, down near the old bank on the outskirts. Almost shot 'em on sight...big...nasty old brute. Coulda sworn I knew him from somewhere a while back. Looked way too dangerous to approach...a raider. Never any sense in tangling with those messed up folks...I tell ya. All pumped up on drugs till they don't care if you put one in their body. Not often you see them out this close to Fillydelphia.”

Straightening up fast enough to make Cayenne leap to her feet, I gasped and stammered incoherent words, trying to figure out how to put it. Eventually, I found my tongue.

“That's my friend!”

The look on Sunny's face could have been a painting for the ages. Her glance flickered from me to Minstrel and back a great many times.

“...the big red stallion?”

“Yes!”

“...huge muscles, scars, war tattoos?”

“Yes yes!”

“...covered in gore and bucking every lamppost in sight out of apparent sheer anger and uncontrollable rage?”

“That's him!”

Sunny resumed that slightly open mouthed look of bewilderment between myself and the lightly nodding Minstrel. A good ten seconds of sheer silence passed with little movement other than Sunny's face attempting to smile as it looked back and forth between us.

“...I am *very* confused right now.”

This could take some explaining.

“Woof!” agreed Cayenne.

* * *

Eventually, along with a lot of coercing from Minstrel, Sunny began to actually believe that a Grand Raider Warlord whom she had known to devastate entire areas of the wastes was actually protecting a scared little pegasus and an ex-initiate of the Steel Rangers. Not until I had explained all this did I realise how simply mad my life had been over the past...week? No, it had to have been shorter...few days?

DJ-Pon3 was right...LittlePip sure did change everything she went near.

“Right, so your friend is down there. Well, let's get moving!” Sunny seemed insistent to make tracks, Cayenne bounding around the sofa or waiting impatiently near the door as she saw her master pick up the rifle. Minstrel held his hooves up, shaking his head.

“No...no. Murk is still far too injured to make such a journey. Didn't you see the balloons go down near that place a few days ago? It's dangerous still...no place for walking wounded. Remain here, Sunny, help him, teach him. If this raider is as insistent as he sounds, he'll wait. Now, ah gotta go fetch some stuff from the stash, give em a hand. You stay with 'em, Sunny.”

Speaking even as he drew on a leather longcoat, Minstrel trotted toward the front door, shouting his goodbyes as he left. Sighing at my seemingly eternal time to “wait and see” when my entire will wanted to surge through the door, I trotted over and sat in front of my journal instead. Minstrel had explained how I was using it to help remember the events of the escape...at least I could distract myself using it. Now just to-

It felt like my mind had stopped moving. When I had knocked my journal off the table in my rush to get away from Cayenne, it had fallen open at an earlier page.

A *much* earlier page.

Sunny, hearing my audible gasp, shifted over to peer across my shoulder.

“Huh...now why'd ya go and draw one of them things, now?”

Before me, upon the page, lay a charcoal sketch of a foal's toy. A stupid little frayed and oft repaired stuffed pony with mismatching eye shaped. In my younger skills, the scaling was all messed up...but I felt myself shiver.

“Nothing...nothing big.” The memory was beginning to filter back in. I'd never *forgotten* it per se...just it had passed out of my mind down the years of being *told* to ignore everything else. Of a strange little emotion I'd briefly felt once long ago.

Struggling, putting the bits and pieces back together, I tried to remember all the details. It was *nothing*. Other than that it was from my foalhood, a time when usually, I had felt nothing but loneliness.

“I...I didn't think much of it, just once, as a foal in slavery? We were being taken down to the riverbed to scavenge, all of us in chains. But there was this wagon passing by and...I saw this stuffed toy fall off. I ran out of line to grab it...probably just me being a stupid foal. I wasn't too intelligent.”

Sunny leaned closer, looking more curious than caring.

“So this used to belong to you?”

“No! That's the thing, I *could* have done what I normally do, just take what I can. But when I picked it up in my mouth I saw this little filly on the back of the wagon crying and trying to get her parents to stop. I...I think they didn't want to stop near slavers, so they kept going. I galloped up and threw it back to her.”

“...how...generous. You could have just taken it.”

“I guess I just couldn't while I saw her looking. She caught it...I got lashed with a cane a dozen times for stepping out of line and...and that was it r-really...”

It was a real fight to not burst into tears as the memory of being forced across a nearby rock, held down by my hooves and caned flooded back. How he hadn't let up even as my shrill young voice had shrieked and echoed in the dusty valley. *This* was why I didn't look back in my journal, exactly the reason everything before I was made free in my mind was off-limits to me.

Nope...there wasn't any helping it...I could already see the drips on the paper. Sunny remained quiet, before reaching across and flicking through my journal until it was on a blank page. She didn't seem to have much soft emotion...but just enough social perception to spot the memory was a little...triggering.

“Well...uh...I'm sure she'd be pretty thankful for what you did. I'm sure? Come on, try something new, get your head out of the clouds and into escaping, eh?”

Beside me, I felt Cayenne pad across and lay her head across my hind legs where they were beneath me, whining slightly and rubbing her soft hair against me. Even my fears couldn't stop me feeling a little comforted by the animal's empathy.

Taking a deep breath, I wiped my eyes and took up the charcoal. Yes...yes, just ignoring things, that'd work. It always had. Forget it and get on with the work...

“We spent a lot of time in that safe room till things quietened down and we'd gotten our breath back. However we didn't have any medical supplies left bar one syringe. I...I think my shoulder was getting worse. But we had to move soon.”

Leaning down, a dark metal flapping door was drawn with Glimmer's head...

* * *

...pressed against it, listening to the dull sounds outside as she sighed at the distant gunshots. I sat nearby, nursing the growing agony in my shoulder and trying not to whimper. The bleeding had stopped, but the horrid motion of galloping so much on it had generated a burning pain that was affecting my ability to even trot.

“I...don't think I can move quickly. Should we wait until night?”

“No...not enough time. Eventually they'll get word of how many slaves are still out here and start searching every door they can find. You still got that Med-X?”

Nodding, I dug it out of my saddlebag, only briefly wondering why I was still carrying that book alongside my journal. All that weight in one saddlebag was unbalancing me. Glimmer closed her eyes, concentrated hard and sparked her horn to lift the syringe from my mouth. She had spent the last half hour nursing her magic back into being. Apparently, she had been lucky, it was just a lack of stamina, not a 'true' burnout as she'd called them. Those could knock a unicorn out for days, allegedly.

“Have you used any of these recently?” Her voice was stern, serious as she pulled the cap off and tested the plunger lightly.

“One, I think...maybe a few days ago? Or...a day...I don't know how long it's been, really.”

Glimmerlight's face became deadly serious for a minute, as though trying to decide on the risks herself rather than tell me. Eventually, with a light sigh, she motioned me to hold out the hoof with my shoulder on that side. The intent was obvious...we had to take the risk if I was going to go *anywhere*.

Wincing as I felt the needle puncture in, the cool rush of liquid entering my bloodstream made me shiver and nipped at the injection point terribly. Sitting back, I let out a raspy breath. The last one had taken a little while to kick in, so we wandered back down the stairs into the saferoom for a minute until it-woooooah boy!

Staggering, my hooves went dead under me and every line of definition in the room whirled and danced before me. I keeled to one side and fell face first into the spare rugs piled in one corner, lying on my chest with my hind legs and rump in the air before falling to the side...not even feeling my own body smack into the ground. Oooh...these things were comfy when I didn't feel pain...maybe sleep would be nice right about-

“Hey! Hey, Murky!”

My eyes were closed...smiling, I felt all the pain and weariness flush out of me even as feeling began to return to my limbs enough to try and snuggle up under the rugs.

“*Murky!* Come on, there, stop sleeping. No time to rest!”

Dully, I felt her hooves lifting me up onto mine. Landed on all four hooves again, I swayed from side to side and fell back on my rump. Looking up I grinned widely at her. See how happy I am, Glimmerlight? All because of you! She just had a half grin on her face as I flopped around in her hooves before finally shaking my head harshly and looking at her more directly.

“You alright there?”

“...your eyes are really sparkly...” My speech felt slurred around a mouth that was trying to grin wider than my face. Why couldn't I *always* feel like this?

“You're a regular Casanova, Murky. I *think* the Med-X dosage was a little high for somepony your size and weight...you're only getting half doses in future, mister.”

“Aww...” I giggled and tested my hooves on the ground. Gradually, after at least a few more embarrassing comments (“It's a bin *and* a seat, Glimmer! Look!”) it began to wind down and settled into a slight dulling of my sense of touch all over. Satisfied I wasn't about to start referring to gunfire as “pretty fireworks”, we began moving back to the door.

“Right, chances are we will be spotted at least once...but if we can get to the old bank, I'm fairly sure we stand a good chance if Brimstone carries you the rest of the way. We can make good tracks ahead of pursuers then. You ready for round two?”

Would I *ever* be? All the same, I nodded gently...before we both shoved the door at the same time to enter the home stretch.

Home...I was *going home*. To where-ever that ended up being, it would be mine!

* * *

Dry Fillydelphian air washed across us as we emerged into the outside world once again. Not willing to stay near to the large open doors, we both hopped out and cantered into the cover of a chainlink fence shielded with flakboard and hunkered beside a gate. Glancing through it, I saw open ground, one of the huge roads that led into the centre of Fillydelphia. I knew this one led straight back to the gates themselves. At Glimmer's prompting, I listened as best I could...

Slavers were laughing as they boasted about a Ranger they'd killed...they were up ahead from the trainyard. No going back there...the road might our only-

No! I heard a wagon approaching. We hid back behind the fence as it tore past us, pulled by muscular earth ponies and chewing up the broken ground under its metal wheels. No doubt carting supplies to a unit in

the wastes. Listening again, there were other, further off sounds and even a few shrieks of griffins in the sky above, camouflaged against the red haze.

“I...I think we have to make a break over the road. There's loads of slavers inside the trainyard. Some griffins above it too...I think...sorry...”

“No, no...you're doing fine. I certainly couldn't hear any of that. Come on, while it's quiet and before anymore supply wagons rip past.”

Breaking cover, we cantered as fast as we dared without making a sound from our hooves on the hard tarmac. I felt vulnerable, if I looked to the left I could see the expanse of the wastes...to the right I could see all the way down the road to the gates of Fillydelphia in the distance. No doubt why Red Eye had chosen such a location as to have access to a trade route directly to his fortress. The sight of that open, gaping maw back into hell almost made me trip from fear.

“Down!”

Surprised, I felt Glimmer force me to the ground, her eyes skyward. Above us, a single griffin was swooping silently in arcs...about three hundred metres or so away and fifty metres up.

“Let's get to the other side, into cover!” I made to move forward, before feeling Glimmer hold me tightly down.

“Don't move! From the sky, motion shows more than shape. Mother taught me that...stay still, it'll leave...hopefully.”

Whimpering, I remained still. We were dead in the middle of the road, ten metres from the other side. Feeling horribly exposed, I tried to think of why she was right. I was dark and dirty, wearing a black (and blood red...) fleece while Glimmer's dark crimson robes seemed to gel into the very atmosphere and smog of Fillydelphia, even this far out.

My discomfort only grew as I heard the last sound I wanted to...wagon wheels. Trundling, bobbing and sparking on the ground, my ears heard them breaking into a fast speed upon the tarmac. Slowly tilting my head, praying with all my might the griffin wouldn't see me, I looked toward the gate and had to fight the urge to scream.

Over a dozen wagons, packed full of Red Eye's army, were barreling down upon us.

“Glimmer...” I whispered back toward her ear, her eyes concrete and held skyward. The griffin was...oh Goddesses...it was even closer! We were...we were trapped or, something, I had to run-

“Don't...move...Murky...”

A squeak escaped my mouth as every muscle was willing me to run. This sort of hiding went against every instinct I had.

“There's smog and dustclouds around us...the griffin can't see us.”

“The wagons-”

“Stay...still...”

The griffin stopped, head craned toward the wagons. Hovering, I could swear his (or her...too far to tell) eyes looked directly at us, before sweeping away down behind the buildings. Immediately, we moved. I went first, crawling and staying low. Standing up would only attract the wagons by the sight of two ponies suddenly getting to their hooves. Inch by painfully slow inch we raced the speeding wagons. They were a few hundred metres away...only billowing dust must be hiding us. I dared not cry for leaving a trail of tears...however silly it seemed. Only when we reached the edge and rolled down into the lower level behind a ruined safety barrier (*Finally!*) did we get to our hooves and galloped madly into the nearest building. No sooner had I ducked into the doorway did the clattering sound of a military convoy hurtle past. Wagon after wagon...headed out to ruin somepony's day in the wastes. Silently, I prayed the Stable Dweller would be evading them.

We waited for an extra minute, breathing hard on either side of the double doors...or rather the doorway, the glass doors themselves had long shattered across the floor. Stepping aside, I flinched as I realised that through a mess of adrenaline and Med-X...I hadn't even noticed my back left fetlock had become cut on the glass.

“Promise me, Murky...we are *never* doing that again...”

“Cross my heart, hope to fly...”

She looked weirdly at me, leading me to raise one hoof and shrug.

“Pinkie Pie said it all the time over the speakers back at the FunFarm.”

“The Ministry Mare? Of course...well,” she chuckled and continued, stroking my side briefly where my wings were, “very appropriate for you.”

I wasn't so sure. Anything from that weird pony freaked me out enough without being reminded of my inabilities. But that said...it *was* right. Brimstone had told me not to deny who I was...did that mean I should have that hope? I'd never even considered it...

Following Glimmerlight further in, we found ourselves inside the normal trainstation for ponies, not the industrial one across the road. The ditch outside had been the area for wagons to pull into, apparently. Open plan interiors with empty cash desks lay barren and trashed across one wall below a giant board filled with letters and numbers. Benches and small tug-carts littered the main areas over the smooth marble floor.

Massive archways made up the support of the building. Had it not been ruined by balefire..it would have been beautiful.

Movement caught my eye. From behind a stairwell trundled a rusty old machine shaped like a pony. Each leg moved so slow that it made me impatient just to watch the bulbous and creaking machine stumble toward us. A card slot on the front bleeped and blooped lightly.

“*Tickets...please...*”

“Uh...maybe later?” Glimmer shrugged to me and resumed looking at the odd remaining robot.

“*Tickets...please...*”

Without speaking, we ignored it and cantered through it toward the main stairway. There was no sense in aggravating the machine or causing noise to take it out. We needed to get our bearings, possibly from the top floor rather than the roof. Old luggage sat unattended around us, strewn open where it had been left and thrown by the blast. Where were the remains? As much as I *hated* it...it seemed off. Even without bones, the flash burned clothing and warped utensils and tools seemed utterly bizarre. Nothing was just 'normal.' Glimmerlight wandered to the platform doors, glancing her head through where I could see a train still sitting, bucked off the rails by the force of the bomb. Even as I watched, I saw her shudder and step back. Confused, I went to poke my head around and-

“No.” Her hoof stopped me. Looking up at her face, even on her dirtied white coat...she seemed pale and drawn as she slowly shook her head. “You don't want to.”

I needed no further convincing. Stepping back, shaking at the mere *thought* of what might be found further in that way, I reflected on the obvious path anypony hearing an evacuation would take...where they might *all* be. Passing backward, we trotted up the stairs, passing the machine once again as it turned almost excruciatingly slow to face us again.

“*Tickets...please...*”

Surprisingly even myself, I scouted ahead with my lighter steps to each corner as we ascended floor after floor. There was little to see that anypony who had lived in the wastes hadn't encountered...but it was always a constant fight to keep my imagination in check. Listening for griffins was my only real distraction as I passed blocked doorways that no doubt held my greatest fears and worst images. We trotted through an

old passenger VIP lounge, the plush couches and chairs ruined and charred into blackened piles. A huge panoramic window that ran all the way to the floor and was over fifteen feet wide overlooked Fillydelphia on either side of this thinner upper floor, blown in the side facing the crater and outward on the other side.

Lowering myself to the ground, I led Glimmer around the drinks bar, avoiding shards of glass as we settled behind the cabinets to remain hidden.

I saw our freedom.

Out ahead of us, stretching as far as I could see...the wastes. Dull and barren, broken by wrecked highways and curious towers, it was at once a grand vista of splendour and scale along with the shattering tragedy of a lost world. Fillydelphia lay wrecked below us while the highways, wagon trails and outer bodies of buildings formed the skeletal structure of the greater plains beyond. A thousand places one could visit...each no doubt with its own story of how the last day played out for it and whoever was involved with it. An endless source of story and discovery...

Very quickly...I began to realise just how small I really was...

“Every pair of wings...” I muttered.

“...in the wasteland.” Glimmerlight finished. “Yeah, I've heard that one too. Good saying...but really, everypony has their own little tale. We're just one more on top of dozens...maybe hundreds, that are out there. The grand history of the wasteland goes on.”

She pointed with a hoof.

“There, the bank, down on the skirts. If we head down this row of houses...it shouldn't be too far, it's all side roads. I don't wanna say we're home free...but the chances look good. All the griffins in the sky are off to the east.”

We should have left then, but really...faced with this, under the great cloud sky and facing the expanse we were about to head to...who could simply move?

“Glimmer? Do you think this will ever...y'know...be good again?”

“The city?”

“No...Equestria. We never got to see it for real...do you think we can save it? Ponies...I mean...”

Glimmerlight watched the shifting clouds that blocked the sun for a few seconds, before hooking a leg around me and pulling me in...her little 'brother.' I took what pleasure I could in the moment.

“I honestly don't know, Murky...I think everypony out there has taken at least one moment to look to the skies above and just ask...‘Why us? Why in our time?’ What I would give to live in a world where we were truly safe again, Murky...but the truth is, history always goes on. Maybe beyond our time ponies descended from us will finally see the light of day. But there is still good to be had in Equestria...the good fight, to trust and love in one another. We're faced with a bad draw on the hand of fate...but if there's one thing ponies have learned over the years, Murky...it's that there's one thing that always stays the same, no matter what hardships come to pass.”

Even through the clouds, I saw sunlight reflect off the rocks of a hill, casting a haze upon the road away from Fillydelphia.

“One thing that keeps us all going down that path to a better life...even if it's not salvation, it just pushes us onward.”

Watching the shimmering and faded plains, I couldn't even turn to speak directly to her.

“What's that?”

I heard her hum happily, squeezing me close.

“Friendship. Friendship *never* changes.”

Gently, she led me back away from the window. I could have sat there for hours...somehow I imagined

I could see them, the only six pre-war ponies I knew, in the clouds, those ponies who had once seen Equestria as it should be. Gazing down upon us and the world that stretched out around me now with the boundless hope only the world they had known could bring.

* * *

Beep!

I almost screamed with shock, looking for the nearest door to escape through before it closed on me. Only the light pouring in through the windows kept my mind intact to remain still by reminding me I was still above ground. I should have known...coming upstairs like this would set off the PipBuck's height detection mechanism. (Hey, I could do fancy terms too!)

Beep!

“Huh, seems that thing's elevation and geographical positioning sensor is going off again.”

Oh come on...can't I be the fanciest speaker for once? Glimmer smiled, stopping us by the doorway leading back downstairs. Better to let Sundial say his piece when we were still relatively safe.

Beep!

Click.

“*Hey, this is Sundial!*”

“*And this is Skydanceeeeer!*”

My eyebrows shot up. A young mare's voice breaking through the speakers was not what I had come to expect. Wasn't this just meant to be me and Sundial's thing? All the same...she sounded nice, light spoken and joyful.

“*Heh, yeah, Skydancer's staying over tonight and...well...you just wouldn't let me be to do this on my own would you?*”

“*Not a chance. Have you told that thing about us then?*”

“*About what?*”

“*That we're a thing, silly! What kind of buck doesn't tell his diary that he got a marefriend a few days ago?*”

“*Oh...oh I did! On the last one, honest!*”

“*Suuuuuure.*”

“*I did! I'll replay it afterwards, prove it to you.*”

“*Fine, fine...I'll believe you this time. Well, you go chat to your Pippy-thingy, I'll be back once I've changed.*”

“*Thanks.*”

A brief pause sounded. I felt a little warm in the face. Their interactions and simple *fun* was heartwarming to hear after such a series of harsh events and the darker memories of the Stable.

“Well...what can I say that she doesn't portray herself? I can't believe my luck, still. Who woulda thought that one little chance meeting would lead to this in just a few weeks? My pops says to be careful, not to get too ahead of myself but he was always a bit of a cranky old stallion. Skydancer is amazing. Honestly, it almost makes it bearable, all the problems these days, knowing she's there to meet up with every few days when her job brings her back to Fillydelphia. But honestly, things are getting a bit darker. We had a drill the other day, to get to the Stable in time...everypony thought it was the real thing. Three ponies...well...the crowds were running mad and...”

I understood panic and terror better than many ponies. My heart went out to how they must have felt then.

“They've got us in some pretty secret stuff down at the Wartime Ministry. Some new armour we're designing in tandem with the Arcane lot. Only reason I tell you here is...well...not like this thing comes off very often. But it's amazing technology, really incredible to work with. It worries me though...escalation keeps happening. There are reports the Zebras are using dragons now...how long before somepony sets the bigger things in motion?”

Another silence, I could hear him shuffling about...a door clicking shut.

“I can't let her hear this...but I'm setting aside most of my income to try and get her a ticket into the Stable too...just in case, y'know? But at this rate it'll take me a year...if the prices don't go up again. Since my Dad got one for me they've doubled. I need more income...I don't know how but, I know I want to manage. For her. If anything so I feel safe with her. That drill took me away from her...I can't have that happen for real. How would it feel to have to leave somepony behind? To escape into safety and know they're still out there? I've started looking out what I can sell and enlisted in the Fillydelphia Night Watch, but it's still not enough to catch up now...I'm just your normal buck! How can I get the funds to-”

He stopped, I heard trotting in the background.

“Still talking?”

“Heh...yeah, sorry, I tend to ramble in this thing.”

“Well, don't take too long. If I wanted to hear you talking about yourself I'd listen to you in bed.”

Glimmer almost *exploded* in laughter, covering her mouth with her hooves, falling backwards. I just blushed enough that I felt my face was on *fire*.

“Ah...wha...I...”

“Oh I'm joking you silly thing, c'mere.”

There was a soft sound, like a quick short suck. Was that a kiss? Then there was another...and...uh...another...

“I...um...Sky, I need to turn off the-”

He got cut off after a short giggle. Some fumbling sounds mixed with muffled chuckles later and the sound ceased. Glimmerlight was still snorting on the floor, almost spasming. Clearly...that type of joke was right up her street. I just felt embarrassed for Sundial.

“Oooh, that's so cute.” Glimmerlight finally regained the power of speech, lying on her back. For a second, I could almost forget we were in the middle of a death defying escape from the harshest slave pit in the wastes. “But we better get going, snrk! Let...hehe...let's go.”

She stood, fighting giggles as we trotted toward the stairs. I kept glancing at my PipBuck all the way, that single piece of scrap metal containing such memories. My mind kept flicking through the happy banter,

relaxed and casual ease with which they enjoyed each other. The caring...such a level that I'd never heard before. A different sort to the friends I knew...

In fact...it seemed closest to the mare but still, different. To have a...a special somepony? I wish I knew what that felt like...

Our route took us through the staff offices to a fire escape at the back, intending to cross a fallen chimney into the next building directly. Inside the offices, I carefully listened...nothing. Silent enough to risk talking.

"Glimmer, can I ask you...um...something?"

"Sure, Murky." Her head was scanning around each corner and office in the grey corridor. Musky dust fell from the cracked ceilings as we trotted through, perpetually in motion as the building's half ruined offset balance shifted.

"How...how do you make somepony like you?" My voice felt squeaky and pathetic, but I forced the line out. "Like, I mean...like that?"

"Got somepony in mind?" She grinned down at me, clearly knowing the answer. "Perhaps you know where she, 'dwells?'"

My cheeks flushed, looking away quickly. Was I *that* obvious? Well...she *had* seen my journal. Oh dear...embarrassment time...

"Don't worry about it Murky, when it happens, it happens. Just be your charming usual self. I think you'd be surprised how many mares want a buck who isn't all...well...stallion-like."

"What if I had...well...somepony in mind that I didn't really know too well?"

Glimmerlight paused, I knew how ridiculous it was...what I was thinking. But she just reached out and ruffled my mane.

"Don't think too hard on it, hun. Nothing wrong with a sweet little crush to dream about in those lonely times. I'm sure there's a mare waiting out there for you. That is, if you still don't consider bucks a likely route."

Her sudden grin met my flustered response of incomprehensible jabbering, before I shut up entirely. My ears twitched, a stomping, metallic noise had entered the trainstation ground floor, unmistakable. Seconds later, voices, audible only to me, drifted up.

"E.F.S. spotted two signatures inside this building, up high. Likely Red Eye observers, Star Paladin."

"Engage and negate, if we clear them, we clear a route out toward the bank, hopefully, it's still a ways out."

The stomping began moving forward again, faster. They were trying to be quiet...perhaps to others they may have been. But to me it was like someone sticking my head inside a bell. Motioning to Glimmer, we quickly cantered downstairs, aiming to reach the room with the fallen chimney before they caught up. Heavy power armour likely couldn't follow over such a rickety makeshift bridge.

"Don't worry about sound, Murky, just go for it. They know where we are with those suits."

All the time, I still set us a pace that made it look like we were just 'moving fast' and not 'galloping away.' Just because they knew where we were didn't mean they knew I'd heard them. On our way, much to my amazement, the ticket robot had followed us, as though aiming to get up to the VIP lounge to ask us again.

"*Tickets...please...*"

We galloped around it, hearing the machine methodically and patiently begin turning once again to follow us once more. Potentially the most determined ticket collector in history. One floor above the Rangers heads, we quickly knocked aside the fractured wooden office door and moved inside. A blast of

wind whipped at my mane, flowing in through the colossal hole in the brickwork wall. A red brick chimney had collided through it, scattering the small red rocks everywhere and smashing the room asunder. Jammed horizontally, it acted as a small gap to the old housing next door. Only ten feet wide, it didn't seem so bad...

The moment my hoof touched it, the chimney lurched and dropped a few bricks off. Alright...bad bad bad...

“Didn't think you had a problem with heights.” Glimmer stepped up onto it, carefully shifting her way out. I followed, trying to take comfort in the nature that if the balefire hadn't brought it completely down...my own tiny weight wouldn't.

“I don't mind heights...I *do* mind feeling like I'll fall...”

Concentrating while we shifted across, carefully judging every balance, I listened behind us.

“Targets are due east, moving slowly.”

“Moving between buildings...damn, must be that chimney we spotted outside. Circle around, back downstairs.”

Breathing a sigh of relief that we had bought ourselves some time, I hopped the last few feet, taking Glimmer's hoof. In one horrifying moment, my hoof skiffed off the edge of the wall, prompting an ever increasing crumbling sound.

“Get off it! Away!”

We dove further into the strangely identical office within the opposite building (had they copied one another through the windows?) and ducked behind a desk as the crumbling turned to a cracking and grinding sound and...

...stopped.

Ten seconds or so later, popping our heads back up above the desk to look back, the chimney was still in place, albeit a few inches lower on this side. Very hesitantly, we chuckled out of sheer relief.

“Tickets...please...”

My chuckle slowly died and quietened. Twisting to look, I saw the four legged ticket robot begin trundling out onto the chimney in its endless quest to acquire non-existent tickets from the first passengers in centuries.

Then the chimney collapsed.

A sudden rush of ground stone and the roaring of a thousand bricks slamming into the ground at different times tore the creaky walls from either building completely apart. The floor beneath us dropped out, tilting and splintering toward the gap where the makeshift bridge had fallen. Screaming, I found myself sliding toward the hole and flung out into the air. The drop was only one storey, less given the falling angle of the floor, but the impact felt like it had at least chipped my ribs. Slapping down upon a thankfully flat section of wall, I rolled and yelled in pain down the rest of the pile before landing in a heap at the bottom of the buildings. Bricks rained down around me, pinging and sending small fragments everywhere.

Glimmerlight had somehow kept her feet beneath her, landing and rolling in a more controlled manner before being pitched to the side by a brick landing on her back. The dust cloud kicked up blew out of both sides of the train station.

“Murky...urgh, you there?”

“Tickets...please...”

“Not you! Murky!”

“I...yes...”

The robot was half buried beside me, damaged and sparking as it futilely tried to move. I felt Glimmer

pulling me up, immediately trying to move as we heard the remainder of the train station's wall collapse where we had lain. A machine fell from the rooms, exploding as it hit the ground and showering a chestload of old tickets across the entire area like confetti. Screeching filled the skies, Steel Rangers pounded on the ground and all a manner of shouting went up from nearby.

“Shit...Murky, run!”

Clearly, my ears had been somewhat wrong. I'd only heard the *noisy* hunters, but we were more surrounded than I'd ever thought. The griffins must have lain silent on clouds or rooftops just waiting for us...using their few patrols to trick us into thinking it was clear. Galloping as best we could, we ran out into the street, taking the quickest route toward more housing while the skies became *filled* with griffins.

Behind us, ten thousand tickets fluttered slowly to the ground before resting all over the wreckage, burying everything in a sea of white paper.

“*Thank...you...*”

* * *

A high velocity round whipped past us, tearing a six inch hole in one home's wooden pillars. Yelping, I fell back and felt Glimmer trying to yank me behind the low wall surrounding the rotten garden.

“Shit! Down! Get down! Where did they come from?!”

“Griffins! They're hiding on the rooftops, oh Goddesses!”

We had to move, half crawling, half galloping we fled along the gardens as best we could. The griffins were moving all over the place, not just after us. I could only assume it was for the Rangers behind us. They had run out of the train station, shouting to stop us before we “alerted Red Eye” to their presence. Reaching the end of the gardens, Glimmer glanced and saw the griffins either moving to cover the Rangers' approach or reloading. Spurred on, we took the chance and ran into the open to reach what looked like a subway entrance.

“Murky, just watch the road, they've been dropping mines! They're *still* following us!”

Indeed they were, even while reloading, they flapped between chimneys and over rooftop gardens.

Ping!

“What was that?!”

“I said they dropping mi-WATCH OUT!”

It leapt up from the asphalt, a curious stick of metal and plastic. Glimmer dragged me to the ground, finding time slow as the small stick spun in place...before detonating right above us.

FWOOM!

My ears were searing with audio pain, my entire body felt like I had just belly flopped into a river and my vision was hazy. Crying with a headache, sound returned only gradually. My front right hoof was bleeding badly...I could see a sharp of metal stuck...stuck...oh Celestia...it was sticking out of my hoof! Horrified, my eyes could barely leave it before clutching it close and screaming until my throat gave out. Behind me, the battle started as the Rangers engaged. Still spluttering, only now I noticed that Glimmer was struggling to even stand up about ten feet away.

Her flank and torso was covered in small wounds, her blood oddly hard to see along her red robes.

“...urgh...Glimmer, you-”

“I'm...I think, just shrapnel...hrk...Murky...Murky you alright?”

“I...I...”

“Hold on, we'll get out of here, we'll *all* get out of here. Just a little further...”

We tried to move...but avoiding other mines and our injuries replaced it to a crawl. The subway entrance was only perhaps twenty metres ahead...the bank not more than half a mile. We were *so close*...but at this rate it might as well be in Hoofington.

“Where's Brimstone?!”

“I don't know! He must be up ahead at the bank...or got separated or something, we need to keep going. Find something to help you...and me...urgh...”

Klnk Klnk Klnk!

Behind us, the battle moved closer, the priority of the Rangers being the only thing keeping us from being sniped off. I couldn't stop crying. Bullets not meant for us still whirled above us as we crawled down the street over the pavement. Missiles streaked in the air after missing griffins, exploding roofs and towers that crashed down to either side. Looking behind us, Glimmer seethed and gritted her teeth...shuffle...after shuffle...

We stayed apart, so we became less of a target, one of us roughly on either side of the street. Only as we reached an area blocked by fallen sky wagons did I realise I was on the *wrong* side. Ducking back, I retreated into the veranda of a wooden and stone home, cowering just behind the inner fence. Between me and her lay mines and a *lot* of gunfire.

“The Rangers are still in the same street, keep going! KEEP GOING!”

“My...my leg-”

“I know, but we need to go now! Get to me, inside, Murky! We're almost there!”

Please...Celestia give me the courage to cross that road. Feeling woozy, probably from blood loss, I tried to push myself to-

Fwhoosh...THOOM!

Without warning, a stray missile from the raging battle down the street rocketed past a griffin who had dodged very well. Exploding above me, I screamed as wood and chunks of stone fell on all sides. Glancing upward, I saw almost every supporting beam had been knocked out.

Kreeee...

“Watch the building! It's...it's coming down!”

I wanted to move. But my limbs had locked up in fear. Just staring upwards, unwilling to run into a mined area behind me. What...what was I meant to do!?

The last thought through my head as the entire building began to fall was a quick thought that LittlePip would have known what to do...but I didn't...just another loose story in the wasteland in her shadow...

KERRRASH!

There wasn't even any pain. Just a crushing envelopment and a dulling of all my senses while I felt my consciousness give out. Hearing as though I was below the water level and seeing through misted eyes from where the wreckage had almost entire buried me...I saw Glimmerlight trying to crawl over the street under fire.

“Oh...no...Murky! **MURKY!**”

Griffins swept in, huge brown blurs as my eyes gave out.

“**No!** Get off me! **Get off!** My friend, he's still in...ARGH!”

Finally...the darkness won out, the pain in my skull began to flare and build...leaving me dying, almost completely...

* * *

...covered by rubble, just my head and one hoof sticking out under the wood that had fallen. I had been lucky...if it had been anything heavier than the block that had struck my head...well...that would have been it. Sitting back from the frankly haunting image of my own crushed body, I simply tried to prevent myself shaking.

Sunny glanced from behind me on the sofa, where she had watched me draw the numerous pictures and listened to my scattered thoughts and memories. Over the course of the exercise, I had slowly began to feel a little less nervous about Cayenne sitting against me softly. The canine didn't *seem* to be dangerous, even if I did still shiver each time she moved. Wiping my eyes, I felt her dig into me and curl up around my back hooves where I sat.

“She's glad you're up. Really, Cayenne's the one who saved your life. You may not like dogs, but I can tell ya...she don't do that for just anypony. Most folks are too filled with harsh thoughts and anger, dogs can sense that.”

“Whereas I'm just a weak, dying and hated pegasus...”

“Alright, can that rubbish. Not *everypony* hates pegasi. Sure, vast majority of slaves might but look at how many people don't judge you for it that you've met. Besides, if a dog thinks you're great, don't ask for a second opinion, I've found. Now come on.”

“Huh?” I twisted, seeing Sunny get up and grab her rifle. Donning her hat, she shook herself.

“Well, we gotta get you ready to go find that gal, don't we? Can't have you wandering back around Filly's outskirts, raider friend or no, without you being able to shoot back. They are still out searching, so they've likely got her in a wagon or something still. That stallion leading them hasn't let anypony go back to Filly yet, so your friend must still be out there. We'll go get, what was it...Brimstone? We'll get him, then the four of us will go hunting. I'm tired of sitting around on the sidelines...”

Cayenne was with her master immediately, bounding around her hooves rapidly, impatiently. Rather to my own surprise, I felt a little hope begin to filter in. The escape was still on...we could still *all* get out! Gathering my things into my saddlebag, I adjusted my fleece and began limping after her. PipBuck and goggles went in the saddlebag, my hoof and forehead still being far too painful right now. We headed towards the door and-

Doc Minstrel arrived home. The moment we had left to go to the door, I heard it open. So much for that moment of dramatic striding onward...I hadn't even got to see the door open.

“Sunny?”

“Just heading out to get our new friend taught, Doc.”

Minstrel wandered into the room, looking at me standing ready.

“We're not going out. Sunny, put your rifle down and lock Cayenne in the kitchen.”

Her face just seemed puzzled, but Minstrel's voice was quieter, slightly pleading with her to just do as he said.

“Doc?”

“Now, Sunny! Just head into the kitchen, I've already made arrangements. We're going home soon, back to the others we know.”

“Doc what are you *talking* about?” Sunny looked about ready to burst of indignation. Cayenne stood by her side, eyes fixed before barking suddenly toward the corridor as I heard multiple heavy treads enter.

“What the good doctor means...”

My forehead *seared* in pain, making me squeal suddenly until the throbbing subsided. No...please no...don't let me open my eyes and this be true...no...no no no...

He was here, impossible as it seemed, he was standing right before me. Two cronies flanked him with weapons drawn.

“...is that he understands when property should be returned to it's *rightful*...heh...Master.”

Striding into the room, filthy hooves from hours of trekking around Fillydelphia leaving a trail behind them, rotten teeth grinning as he saw me backing into the corner. A stubby shotgun hung by his side, that hard leather whip at the other. Segmented plate armour creaked and chinked as he rounded past the sofa.

Sunny hopped to the side, between me and him, rifle drawn. Immediately, The Master's two attendants pulled their own pistols and aimed for her. Cayenne pawed at the floor, growling incessantly at The Master, baring her teeth. He just cackled, reaching a hoof to pet her and pulling it with a laugh when she snapped at it.

“Doc...what *is* this? What have you *done*?!”

Minstrel stood at the back, near the corridor, sad eyes as he shook his head.

“I've always said it...I need to get back to my love. I even told him...I'd sell *anything* to finally achieve that. Well...pegasi are a valued asset to Red Eye, I sought them out and made a deal. Seven hundred caps, he's willing to pay, along with a guarantee of safe passage out of Red Eye's territory.”

“You healed him, saved his life! How could you betray every dream of his like this?!”

“He's not worth anything dead! Come on, Sunny, you know he'd be dead in a day out there, the stupid buck doesn't even know how to think for himself! Not to mention travelling with the Warlord that killed my *hometown* back in Ponyville years ago! He's *safer* with Red Eye, where he at least gets fed and directed.”

“I spent years with you...for this?”

The Master stared into the barrel of her gun without fear, just grinning at their exchange, but his eyes never left mine. Boring silently into my mind as Minstrel and Sunny argued, I could feel the sensation of those chains that held me in slavery tightening again, concentrated on my marks tightening all over again...

“Come on home, Number Seven. You know it's where you belong. Now let's just have you trot outside, we'll even give you a lift in the wagon, won't that be nice, heh heh...”

No...

“Step forward, Number Seven.”

No...

He narrowed his eyes, stomping the floor hard enough to make Cayenne bark in offence and every ornament on every shelf clatter and shake. One hoof pulled the whip toward his mouth.

“**Step forward, Number Seven!**”

Not now...please not now, let me wake up, great Goddesses above, please tell me I'm still lying in the rubble...please please please *please*...

I *tried*. I honestly tried to force my mind so far in I might wake up or...or forget everything again. The lash struck me right on my face, on top of my newly healed skull fracture. Pain greater than any single blow before ripped through my head, drawing me right back to *his* world. Collapsing on the floor before him, staggering forward on instinct, I whimpered, lowering my head. The huge hoof of his front right flipped me over, glaring directly down at me. Spittle from his foaming rage dripped and landed around my neck. But the furious expression calmed, laughing instead. I saw his cronies back Sunny into the corner.

“Heh...you and I, Number Seven. We're *meant* to be together. Here's more proof than ever...”

The cracked and filthy hoof traced the scar. I could see his almost identical one, running from left ear to above his left eye. Leaning down, he brought his face close enough that I could feel his very *breath*.

“But don't think for one second you're not going to be punished for this, you despicable little *worm*. Trying to escape me, eh? Thought you could escape me, eh? You won't ever get away, little runt...you're *mine*. No matter how far you scamper, the chains will always pull you back. I'd hunt you to the ends of the world if I had to.”

“P-please...I...I'm...”

“**I didn't say you could speak, slave!**”

The hoof rose, aiming to slam down upon my chest. A dark brown *blur* hurled itself at his neck, growling and biting deeply. Roaring in anger, The Master backed off, shaking and tossing Cayenne as she sunk her teeth *hard* into him. Distracted, his slavers found their guns knocked aside. Sunny's small rifle *cracked*, sending one slaver reeling, screaming and holding his bleeding neck. Bucking the other aside, Sunny grabbed me, pulling me to my feet.

“Get downstairs, Murk! Go!”

Shoving me, I staggered and almost fell as The Master slammed into me. His bulk knocked me clean across the room into the kitchen while he fought with the grimly thrashing dog locked onto him. Cayenne was rotating her bite, trying to find purchase under his armour, staying away from his hooves. Turning, I saw a fallen kitchen knife, grabbing it in my mouth. He was distracted...I could just-

...I...I couldn't...he was My Master. *You didn't attack your Master*. What might he do if I didn't get away and I'd stabbed him?

I ran instead, Sunny caught up, her rifle making a sharp *crack* a second time, missing the second slaver when he ducked behind the sofa I'd woken up on. Half pulled, half galloping, I found myself directed to a small door that opened up to the cellar.

“Get down, they'll have somepony at the door, I'd bet. Cayenne, heel girl!”

Taking aim with her rifle, she made sure the other slaver kept his head down. I could see Minstrel lying on the floor, looking shocked and bewildered beyond words. Glancing across, he tried to mouth something, but just looked away. Cayenne ripped once more, sending a splurt of blood across the table and making The Master bellow in pain. His hooves lashed out, slapping the dog from him as she tried to let go. Falling on her side, she whirled her legs to get up.

One of Sunny's rifle shots smacked into The Master's side, I saw the round fall back off of one of the heavy iron plates. He didn't even look staggered...his huge form snarling and drawing the small shotgun.

“Back!”

Sunny pushed us both into the cellar staircase as the deafening brutal *boom* sent a dozen pieces of buckshot tearing into the wrinkled wallpaper beside the door, blowing it back open again.

“**You can't run, slave! You can't escape me!**”

Sunny fired blind around the corner, before swearing and trying to dig out more ammunition...realising her saddlebag was still in the sitting room.

“Cayenne, *heel!*”

She growled, I heard the dog launch herself at The Master again, that canine frenzy working up. I couldn't see into the room from the stairway, but I heard snapping and a skittering of paws.

“Pathetic animal, *down!*”

Boom!

I didn't see it...but I just heard it. The one short, sharp whine that died out as a small weight hit the ground. Freezing solid, I glanced back upward. Sunny's eyes were wet, before a blinding rage overtook her. Screaming incoherent fury, she slammed the door shut and slid a heavy metal bar across it.

“That...I...I am going to kill him...Murk...”

The Master was still stomping around, before the door bent inward with a dull thud. Again...and again...

“Go, downstairs! He isn't getting you, *he isn't.*”

We galloped down, finding a small lit living area with a single bed and a dog basket. Presumably this was Sunny's own space. There was little, a few old books and maps with a cleaning kit spread on the desk. An old spark lantern swung on each brutal impact.

“**You hear me, Number Seven?!**”

Thoom!

“**You belong to me!**”

Thoom!

Every time...my body wanted to rush to obey. Without Sunny, I might have simply stood waiting. She swept possessions into her saddlebag, before opening a drawer and grabbing more ammunition. Already I could see a stormdoor that opened upwards into the backyard of the house.

“I keep that thing covered from the outside, they shouldn't have it guarded. There's a zipline on the nearest tall building I use to move into the suburbs near the bank quicker, should support both of us. We're getting out...now or later, I don't care, but he will die.”

Testing the door, I found it easy to open, before resting against it. My heart was beating, my head throbbing on every impact of the door upstairs. I could throw it open as soon as she was ready.

“I...I'm sorry...I've ruined everything for you...”

“Shut up. The Doc ruined it for himself...stupid bastard! Argh!”

She bucked the desk's chair in sheer frustration, splintering it against the wall. Throwing her saddlebag over her back, she picked up her rifle and began reloading.

“Why...why are you helping me?”

It was a stupid question. A stupid *time* to ask it. But I needed conversation. *Anything* to keep my mind off of-

“**I am your Master, slave! Come out!**”

...that...if I listened too much...I...I might believe it.

“Few reasons, really. One, nopony deserves to be a slave, way I see it.”

Two rounds fed into her rifle.

“Two, Doc betrayed me as much as you in doing this.”

Two more...

“Three...”

She hesitated, before opening a nearby drawer and lifting something else out. I couldn't quite see...but she opened her saddlebags, stopping with it in sight just before adding it. Half gasping, I just pointed my hoof disbelievingly.

“...let's just say there's a little filly who still owes you one for this.”

In her hoof, she held a foal's stuffed toy, weathered all the more with age, before gently setting it in her travel bag.

“Y-you...”

“I heard your screaming when they punished you, Murk. Tried to tell my folks to turn back, buy ya or somethin'...but nuthin'. I guess I see this as a chance to finally do somethin' about it. *Hate* slavery...”

Part of me felt offended...how could I not have more time to talk about this? To get to know her properly before we galloped out together? Why couldn't I ever have time to properly meet anypony? This was too fast, too sudden!

“...thank you, Sunny.”

“Well...we'll talk later, on the road. But now...”

As though dropping the subject, she slid the final two rounds into her rifle.

“...gonna give that big bastard something to sting before I go at least.”

Trotting over, she took aim at the door from the bottom of the stairs. The Master was bucking it hard enough to make the entire room vibrate...wood splintered...dust fell from the ceiling. Oh Goddesses he was coming for me...

“This is for Cayenne you son of a...heh...bitch...”

Boom!

The shotgun's buckshot tore through the wood, flying downstairs and took Sunny clean off her feet. My mouth dropped, screaming her name as I saw the blood fly from her side and heard the painfully slow sound of her rifle dropping to the ground. Creaking...straining, the stairs barely supported The Master's weight as he descended, step by slow step. Even with Sunny lying groaning at the bottom, his eyes were fixed on me the entire way. My muscles felt frozen...the way out was right behind me. I could just *go*.

“Stand still, slave...”

And I did.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, his gaze averted for just enough to glance at Sunny and press a huge hoof down on her leg stretching to her rifle. Exerting his huge bulk and weight, I heard her groan in pain as her leg was held down by the joint.

“You shot at me...defied me. Yet you lived within my reach, you weren't free...you weren't ever free. Minstrel has been on our pay roll to hand over any escaping slaves for *years*. You were just his little toy...just as I've come to reclaim mine. Isn't that right, Number Seven?”

I just squeaked, trying to find the willpower to shake my head. Even ten feet away across a room...he held an air of authority. That everlasting and unbroken chain on his flanks, the chainlinks identical to my own...it felt tighter than ever, my link to him. His ownership by right of fate.

He looked down at Sunny again, relishing as she whimpered in pain under his massive hoof pressing down upon one of the buckshot wounds.

“F-fuck...you...”

“Cute. You're going to die, mare. Unless of course, the *slave* can save your life. Tell me, Number Seven,” he turned back to me, “what is one good reason to spare her?”

My mind was racing, not thinking straight. I wanted to run or cower, or beg and plead...or just...I *didn't* know *and-i*

“Too slow!”

The shotgun arced out, planting it in her mouth and holding it upright with a hoof.

“Try again!”

“I...I'll...”

“Too slow, slave! Again! You know how this works...now *do as you're instructed.*”

His game was simple...to force me to obey, the threat of that shotgun pressing painfully into Sunny's mouth was too much. He *knew* if I even did that once...I'd never be able to turn and run ever again. But I had no choice...

“I'll come back!” I screamed it, pain welling in my heart as I felt everything I had worked toward and fought for come crashing down. “I'll come with you back...back...h-h-home...you don't want our deaths. Y-you...you want our lives.”

The Master grinned. Oh...*that* grin. Those cracked and rotting teeth smiling right at me as the barrel lifted from her mouth. With a bellow, he called the slaver watching Minstrel down behind him and threw the subordinate a set of shackles.

“Put them on her, she's my stock now, not the upstart's. I'm sure she'll fit in well...”

His eyes focussed on me. A sick lick of his lips accompanied a leering small glance to the side at the shaking, but stern mare below him.

“Or be fitted *in* well, eh? Heh heh heh...”

That sneer widened, before he opened a pouch and dumped a second set of shackles and collar upon the floor, the latter linked to the leather harness on his armour by a thick chain. The slaver was already fitting the shackles to Sunny. I could see her struggling to move, to resist...but blood loss and shock was setting in fast. Her eyes were glazed over.

She couldn't do anything...Cayenne was dead. I was alone.

Under My Master's watchful gaze, I dutifully trotted forward...of course he had come for me...I had no say in anything. I was just his slave. His ever loyal-

My eyes fell upon Sunny once more. Her blood was leaking from a dozen holes...nothing fatal, but utterly crippling from pain and injury. Just like The Master to use such a weapon. She had tried to help me...to save me. I couldn't help her now as she was dragged toward the stairs to be The Master's, wholly and utterly. Condemned from her free life into a world of poisoned air, scorching industry and backbreaking abuse.

But I was stuck...helpless. I was no hero to stop them...to rescue her. I was just one little pony...

“Rules of Fillydelphia, Number Seven. You bring a slave in or recover an escaped one...you keep 'em for your stock. She's *mine* now...and so are you. Put them on.”

Against all willpower, I trotted forward. Reaching for the shackles, I lifted the collar and held it ready to slip around my head. My Master commanded...I had to obey.

Lying on the floor. My eyes spotted the stuffed toy lying from Sunny's spilled bag. The slaver had carted her away, but this was still lying here.

“*I guess I see this as a chance to finally do somethin' about it. Hate slavery...*”

She wouldn't want me to give up. She'd risked herself, *somepony she didn't even know*, just to stay true to her belief of freedom being the rightful virtue of all ponies.

I felt my hooves begin to back off.

“**Stay where you are!**”

Now...I had to go *now* before the terror clenched my heart. He had killed or enslaved those who tried to

save me, what would he do to *me*? I'm so sorry Sunny...if I find Brimstone, we'll try, I promise you...

“Stay still, SLAVE!”

I heard him canter toward me, thumping across the floor and drawing the whip. No time to think, no time to grieve or worry or plan or falter and worry...

I just had to dare.

Spinning, I galloped toward the door, hurling myself up and through it even as I heard The Master gallop after me. Hopping up, I tried to pull myself from the vertical doorway and out into the wastes. The whip lashed out, striking across my rump. Screaming, I rolled out, fighting to push myself onwards. Behind me, the doors exploded open as The Master began pulling his more considerable weight through the small space. I had time...time to run to...

No...oh no...

I was not “miles from Fillydelphia” as Minstrel had claimed. He had lied about that too.

The red haze in the clouds...surrounded by the housing areas wrecked by the balefire and crumbling around me, Minstrel's house was little more than half a mile from Fillydelphia's gates. The window covers that changed the light's colour...the insistence that I stay inside...he had me played from the very start.

Without thinking, I simply galloped forward. Around me I could hear slavers trotting to and fro. Behind me, The Master, struggling with the small opening, had retreated back inside, I could hear him screaming to his subordinates to get hunting to catch me. Hidden in swathes of smoke and smog, I could see wagons full of slavers spreading out. Shouts as some saw me grew into a mad dash of a dozen slavers from the front of the house.

I was surrounded.

No...wait...what had Sunny said? She had a zipline on the highest building that took me to the bank! Brimstone could *destroy* these ponies, then we'd get Glimmer! I glanced around, panicking, pacing from hoof to hoof on the spot, whining as I looked for the tallest nearby building.

“Get him! That little slave's life is *mine*, you hear? He's south, go!”

Storming out the front of the house, I saw The Master turn and see me as a dozen slavers began galloping directly for me. Shrieking, I fled across Minstrel's garden, full of random junk, hopping over an old bench to have enough height to jump the fence. Scampering, I headed into the thin lanes between houses as I made for what looked like an old mill that towered above every other nearby building. That *had* to be it! No zipline was visible in the hazy air of Fillydelphia, but there was no other choice. Behind me, slavers bucking and lashing at the fences to tear them apart lit a panic in my heart. Others were pulling up in towed wagons a street over...or..two streets? *I couldn't think, just run!*

Already, I couldn't stop crying, even though I strove not to, my vision was becoming blurry from the tears. The Master had killed Sunny and Cayenne. *He had killed them. Killed them. Killed them.* I couldn't get around it...find a way to make it seem happier or better...they were just gone forever...no matter if I escaped or...or...oh Goddesses...

“There he is! Come on! Shackles will have our flanks if we don't get him! Stop there you little fucker!”

Shrieking, I saw more slavers, clad in ragged cloth, come galloping down a side alley. How many were there? Why did he want me so much? I kept going, hearing them skittering around the corner behind me. Kicking dustbins and trying to weave around obstacles, I dared not even look as I heard their hooves become irregular amidst a barrage of swearing whenever they tried to catch up. They weren't even armed with guns...they didn't need to be for me. Oh, Brimstone...please be waiting. Don't go wrong...please don't go wrong...

Ducking around a corner, I stopped just long enough to get my bearings. The mill was a hundred metres away, down the street. I could see a tiny hole in the perimeter wall that I might be able to fit through...but slavers lined the roadside, searching houses and galloping to and fro.

It would all come down to how fast I could gallop with a tiny head start.

Steeling myself, I went for it. One second free...two seconds...three, four...five, I could do this if I just got a couple more without them-

“Right there! Go, go!”

“Grab that runt!”

NO! I wasn't even half way and I heard the dozens of hooves clattering behind me. They screamed, hollering, threatening me if I didn't stop. Fixing my view on the small hole, I concentrated only on that. The hole. Freedom. Escape. If I could get through that, I'd be home free in a big complex and cramped place I could sneak about, get to the roof and fly-

...a zipline. I'd *fly* away.

Spurred on, ignoring my front right hoof and my shoulder screaming in pain, I dove for the hole faster than I ever thought I could run. Crawl, push, squeeze! A tight fit, I got my head through, hind legs kicking hard as my front hooves popped through too. Scrambling, I began to panic, *why couldn't I fit?*

“He's stuck! Grab his legs!”

They galloped up, I felt hooves grasp my legs and pull. Wailing, I held myself through the hole with my front hooves, trying to push forward. I bucked madly, kicking, thrashing and scraping. With a grinding pull, I felt my saddlebag scrape all of its decoration off, stripping top layers of yellow away. It had been jamming me!

“PULL!”

Squealing, I felt myself pulled back into the hole by my hind legs. Whips lashed them, hooves stomped and tugged. Again and again, stuck in the hole I screamed and begged, desperately trying to avoid being yanked through into the rowdy gang of slavers just *waiting* to punish me. I wanted to go! To escape! To...to *fly*-

-*without wings.*

Gritting my teeth, my thoughts firmly on *her* waiting for me, she had shown me the virtue of freedom. The determination you *had* to have! I tugged my hind legs back in and bucked for all I was worth. The sickening crunch of teeth shattering mixed with a high pitched shriek as I felt my hind legs come free. Pushing through, I felt my heart sink as I saw them covered in lash marks that bled and welted. Adrenaline was all I had left...adrenaline and...well...faith.

I ran into the mill. Around me, I heard the gates being thrown or broken open. This was a one way ticket now...I either escaped or fell to them. I could already hear some inside the facility, but there was no way for them to know I was headed up there. Bucking in a back door, I made for the emergency stairs...they'd go to the top, right? Clattering on the stone steps, I climbed flight after flight...

Three floors...five...

My stamina began to flag, below me I heard some of them rush into the staircase. Whimpering, I forced my body to keep plodding...step after step...freedom racing in my mind. If I could just get on that zipline...I'd feel it, I *knew* it. To be like her and carry it as a definition of myself, to fight back against the scarred symbol on my flank!

They were on every level now, I could hear a voice of authority ordering them to head back down. I didn't pay it attention to listen too closely...it was just good for me if they thought I was lower.

Then...finally...the door. It was unlocked, oh thank you Goddesses. Throwing it open, I almost fell through it onto the vent ridden roof of the mill. Ahead of me, I could now see it...just a race to get myself tied onto it now before they got up here! Cantering, unable to even gallop, I staggered and meandered toward it. Thirty feet...twenty feet...

Hooves clattering on stairs echoed in my ears from...from somewhere...closer. Push on, push on!

A door flew open. My heart sunk as I saw it ahead of me, from the other end of the building. Wanting to scream in frustration, I was about to throw myself into a gallop until finally, my teary eyes focussed on the figure.

“Stop right there, Murk!”

The glinting eyepiece, floating revolver held solid and true before him and clad in his red and black battle barding...Protégé galloped out onto the roof, blocking my path to the zipline.

“You've got half the slavers in the southern quadrant after you, Murk. Come with me, I'll get you back safe!”

My breath as rasping, lungs burning. I coughed hard as I staggered onward...I couldn't stop, I was *too close*. Blood fell to the ground...from my cough or wounds, I didn't know.

“NO!” I shrieked it, expelling a life of frustration and hatred that drove me. “I...I can't! Please, don't do this...*just let me go!*”

“You know I can't do that, Murk...Master Red Eye demands-”

“I want to be free!”

He matched every movement I made, the revolved pointed directly at me.

“I can *make* you free, Murk! If you do this, you'll be nothing but dead meat to the wastes, look at what's happened! You aren't even out of Fillydelphia and already you're almost running dead! If you take this into the wastes, I promise you, you *will* die!”

“I don't care! She made me see it! She made me!” I was crying harder than I ever had, no pride in my voice but a horrid rasping beg. “Just step to the side, let me go, Protégé, *please!* You...you're kind! You've helped me...but just let me go!”

Around us, the wind picked up, swirling a red sooty cloud of smoke out of the way, revealing to one side of us the red hazed slave city in all it's terrible glory...on the other the dusty expanse of the wastes. Atop the building, at the border of intent and dreams, I felt my entire future hang in the balance. But he just shook his head sadly.

“Freedom isn't just not being in Fillydelphia, Murk. I have been trying to explain that to you. There's more to it than that! Let me help you *earn* it!”

“Slaving away isn't any way to be free! Not to me! Just to have *one day*, even an *hour*, where no-one is controlling me...I...I could die happily...”

“I don't want you to die, Murk...Master Red Eye and I can help you! Like he helped *me!* Murk I know how you feel! I understand-”

“You're just another master like any other! I...I was *born* a slave, you have hundreds of others in there, please, can't you let *me* go? I'm useless! I can't even slave properly! Why can't you understand that?!”

Protégé stamped the ground with his hoof, stepping forward. Below us, I could hear The Master bellowing for slavers to head back upstairs. I had to go now!

“Mas...Protégé! Just...just please...I-”

A gust of wind swept smog across the roof, choking me. Both our manes and clothes were whipping in the wind toward the wastes, away from Fillydelphia.

“Stand down, Murk. I know you feel you have to, but I refuse to let you kill yourself on the wastes! Stick with me, I can make you free and a better pony, Master Red Eye is trying to *help* the wastes and those in it! Work *with* me!”

“Are you insane?!” My voice shrieked. “Look at what he's made!”

I swept my injured hoof towards Fillydelphia, indicating the giant factories were hundred...perhaps thousands, of slaves were now toiling and dying slowly within.

“Red Eye is a monster! I'm sick, Protégé! I'm *dying* because of his city! I've been tortured, shot, beaten...The master *killed* those trying to help me! I got put in a Pit to die! You're intelligent, why can't you see this is wrong?!”

“Because it *is*! Do you think Master Red Eye likes all this?! No! How else can the wastes be saved? You think LittlePip is going to shoot every monster there is? What about Brimstone? Would she shoot him? She is not your path in life, Murk!”

“*STOP IT!* She made me free! Opened my eyes! *SHE'S EVERYTHING TO ME!*”

“Damn it, Murk, I'm trying to protect you! You're hurt! Not just physically, but inside! Bear it a while longer, I will show you what freedom means!”

“You're just lying! I can be free NOW! I...I'll manage, I have friends!”

“You know I'm right, Murk! I plead of you, stand down and come with me, I can still get you back inside safely, but we must move *now!*”

I could hear heavy tread on the staircase behind me. The Master's shouts. I turned to look back, knowing he and the slavers would be here any minute.

“Murk, please!”

Turning back, sniffing, I looked beyond Protégé...seeing the land of possibility. All the freedom and dreams I had wished for my entire life...even if I hadn't realised it. One daring rush away...

“I can't let you go, Murk! I *cannot* disobey Master Red Eye! If you run...I...I will have to stop you...don't make me do it, Murk, please!”

The world seemed to quiet down, every flap of the fabric over the building or our clothing became lethargic and dulled. Only the shining sunset through the distant clouds seemed clear.

“You don't understand at all, Protégé...somepony like you never could...”

Finally, my tears dried. But he just shook his head.

“I do...Murk. I do. Don't force it, I can help you, put the work in, I will make you a better pony by the end of it. You can help save Equestria more than going with her ever will!”

He was wrong. He had to be. A slaver could never feel what I felt. I began to gallop.

“Murk! Stop! Don't force me! Let me be the one who helps you, not the slaver who stops you! I can't disobey him and let you go! I can't!”

Gritting my teeth, I gunned for the zipline, arcing to go around him. I could see his revolver wavering as he screamed again for me to stop. Ten feet...seven...

“*MURK!*”

Five...four...

BLAM!

I felt nothing, just a rocking impact that stopped me dead in my tracks, a few feet from Protégé. He was sweating hard, looking as shocked as I felt behind the fading flare of his revolver. Slowly, hesitantly and

shaking...I looked down and saw the trickle of blood from the hole in my chest. It grew, spreading and staining my fleece, dripping to the floor in thick clods. No pain...but a fast numbness as I looked back up to Protégé and felt tears drip from my eyes.

“P-please...”

The revolver clattered to the ground, I felt him move forward, catching me as I fell to the side. Once again, the darkness began to overtake me, creeping in at the side of my vision. Ahead of me, behind Protégé, I could still the wastes beckoning to me...the open world...

“Please...I...”

His hooves held me tightly, one pressed over my chest as he screamed over the edge for somepony to bring potions immediately.

“I'm sorry, Murk...I want you to be free...”

I felt my head limply fall into his hooves. Unconsciousness finally claiming me.

“But it can't be today...I'm so sorry...”

* * *

Light...a thin ray of orange light...

Pain, wounds barely healing...my mouth tasted of the potions, how many had...urgh...the ground was moving, why was...

My eyes creaked open. Too tired to even move my head, I realised I was on a small flatbed wagon...not caged. I could see the sunset...at the end of the long highway out of Fillydelphia. My chest moved so little that I could barely believe I was breathing. Yet even so, I stretched a hoof out...I had to...to crawl, get to the sunset...see where it escaped to so easily...every night...

“Stay still, Murk, you'll be alright, I promise.” Protégé's voice sounded from beside me, strained and weak, a far cry from his usual self. I could hear other ponies around me, trotting quietly.

“Hehe...homeward bound, little Number Seven...”

“Be silent, Shackles. I'm not in the mood.”

Straining my head, I turned and felt the urge that I could not feasibly do...to scream. The gates of Fillydelphia, open and waiting as I was carted through them. The pits...the sounds...smells and heat...no...no not again...I'd been outside! Turning back to the sunset, I felt a strained whimper arise from my throat, trying to claw my way back. I could...could still make...it...

The wagon stopped, I groaned as I felt somepony touch me, checking me. Magic flared, a raspy, ghoulish deep voice speaking.

“Pretty fucking good aim if you wanted to keep the poor bastard alive, kid.”

“Will he survive?”

“Yeah...shit, not without a lot of rest, but yeah he will.”

Behind me, ponies finished coming back into Fillydelphia. Slaves wandered past. I saw The Master stomp in, eyes locked on me, looking ferociously annoyed when he saw Protégé standing almost like a guard beside me. Finally...I saw one little figure standing in the doorway.

“I believe that will be seven hundred caps, then?”

Protégé turned, glancing back at Minstrel. Slowly, he trotted toward him.

“You were the one who healed him?”

“Yes...not to mention had your ruffians kill my *friend*.”

Protégé's head tilted down, eyeing Minstrel very carefully. His voice turned stern, a tone I had never heard from him before. He didn't *need* to shout.

“You killed Sunny Days and her pet, Doctor Minstrel. You and your selfish mentality.”

“Then I guess that's where we differ, I'll take my caps and go if it's all the same to you. I've lost enough.”

Protégé hesitated for a second, before reaching toward his side and igniting his magic. He did not throw caps...he drew his revolver.

“There are few things that will drive me to anger, Doctor.”

Minstrel was already backing up, looking around for help which was never going to come.

“But I hold myself to a certain set of values, highest among them is that of *loyalty*. That if you aim to help ponies...you *do*. Not fix them up...only to dissuade them...to lead them astray with their trust in you! You have corrupted the idea of loyalty at the very highest!”

He wasn't shouting, but Protégé's voice did rise in strength, a small tinge of carefully controlled rage.

“That buck there wanted more than anything to be free...and you gave him that belief, only to take it *all* away! I may have stopped him...I bear that guilt. But you didn't just hurt his life, you crushed his dreams by making him believe! You are *scum*, not befitting of the title 'Doctor.' Nor did you deserve Sunny's friendship. You betrayed her as much as you betrayed Murk! You cost her life! To show such a staggering lack of loyalty to somepony who trusted you...you bring a wisp of fury to my heart, Minstrel.”

I heard a rasping, colourful agreement nearby to me.

“Look...I think...perhaps I should just leave and-”

“Yes. You will.”

BLAM!

The single shot echoed off the giant gates...the soft, slowly fading shapes to my vision saw one of them slowly pitch over. I didn't feel any justice...even as I saw the vague black shape of Protégé turn and slowly trot back to me.

Behind him, the colossal gates slowly closed...yet no matter how hard I wished for it...they would not stop. For one horrible moment...I had felt all my dreams within my grasp. But the great sunset was separated from me as the giant gates finally closed shut...just as I passed once more into a painful, tearful, sleep.

* * *

“Hello wastelanders, this is your true, unknown if actually blue and spellbindingly true of his word DJ! Well folks, it seems that amidst all of the chaos around Fillydelphia we reported yesterday, there is actually a little ray of hope! It seems that one slave got out! Actually escaped! The word got passed down the line by a merchant who met one on the highway out of Fillydelphia. Apparently the slave took on a Hellhound attacking his caravan, filled with all sorts of murderous rage and tore the thing apart with his bare hooves!

Unfortunately though, turns out said slave is one mean raider...I'm afraid so, my little ponies...the big nasty warlord is back on the maps. Red Eye did us all a service taking him in five years ago, but I'm afraid that big guy is out once again. Already I'm hearing of a bounty going out before he can get a band together. Only weird thing is though...the merchant said, after riding away very fast, that Warlord Brimstone wasn't interested in him. Just kept hammering on the hellhound corpse before, and I choose this word carefully,'screaming in anger.' Not a warcry, apparently.

Well...ah dunno what to make of it. But just to be on the safe side, keep an eye out, ponies. Although the merchant did say one curious thing...that he started heading back to Fillydelphia..."

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Skittish at the Bit – It may not be the fabled Pinkie Sense, but if you really concentrate, you have your own ways of identifying where others might be around you, whether through paranoia or a greater sensory ability. Add +2 to your perception while still and in no immediate danger.

Chapter 9: Following in Her Hoofsteps

* * *

“Kinda used to being a beast of burden to other folk's needs. Very sad life. Probably have very sad death. But at least there is symmetry...”

“...so that's why you didn't get away. What was it like to fail?”

Guilt.

“Huh?”

I felt guilty! How could I not? In my quest for freedom, I hadn't just put myself in danger; I'd brought it upon innocents too. These stupid wings...they were what made Minstrel consider me valuable. He hadn't cared about me, only for the wealth that selling *the pegasus* would bring him. Now he's dead...because of me. Cayenne had been shot, defending me from the life that was going to try and drag me back in any way it could. While Sunny...brave Sunny Days, she fell and was pulled right into the same life I had been attempting to get away from. If I *had* escaped, how could I have ever lived with myself knowing what cost it was at?

Only now it was worse. At least while free I might have been able to eventually pretend that she gave herself up to save me or something. A sacrifice. But now we were now both inside Fillydelphia, having gained *nothing*. My stupid wishes had ruined the freedom of somepony else and killed everypony that she had in her life. We weren't even together to take comfort in one another...she was The Master's. Not under the protection I was from somepony else...just his and his alone. Kept so far away from me, with no way to ever know what was happening other than the occasional winking sick glance from The Master, that she might as well have been in another city altogether.

Perhaps...perhaps it would have all been better if I hadn't tried at all...

At least then, no-pony else would have been hurt because of my stupid impossible dreams. But I had been so close! So hair-raisingly within reach of the one clear border that would have saw me free for the first time. It hurts. Right in my heart, it hurts, because I know that as much as I want it, if the deaths of innocent ponies and the enslavement of others who help me is the price they must suffer, then I can't ever have it. The Master would follow me to the ends of Equestria and beyond if he wanted to get me back. How many ponies would he hurt in his crusade to bring me 'home?' How many sleepless nights knowing that out there, somepony else is being abused, hurt or taken after they failed to give him proper direction? How many must become slaves to buy my freedom?

But on the other hoof...I had an unceasing drive within me. Being out there, seeing the wastes from building tops and feeling the true wind on my face, unspoiled by rads and disease from smog that lurked in the air of Fillydelphia. It gave me a target, a fresh ideal that I could not deny. A tempting, big and lovingly warm meal laid bare before me with a price on it that was just too high...but I wanted it anyway. I'm just a stupid, uneducated and naïve young buck...I don't have the life experience and growth to deal with decisions of morals and what's right to go for! At what point do dreams cease to become a goal and enter the realms of impossible madness? At what point are you asking too much? I didn't...I don't know!

All the same, those little voices in my mind, reminding me that I couldn't have both. One telling me that I was *so close* to being free. The other telling me that I was *so close* to making the biggest mistake of my life. One saying rebel, the other saying obey. Fantasy or reality.

Dare...or simply dream.

I couldn't do it alone. Making sense of all this wasn't something I could manage while by myself under slavers. No matter what I wanted, for the foreseeable future I was now condemned to the work once again, separated from my friends. If I wanted them back I would have to work for it, prove I could be a part of their 'workforce' once again.

I had failed...now it was simply back to the grind.

* * *

This was a familiar place.

Rusty dark metal surrounded me in the small cell, vents upon the floor allowing red tinged fumes to filter through before being sucked out by more chopping fans behind the vents on the ceiling. The locked door ahead of me almost invisible against the wall, told only by the small closed slit they used to occasionally check I wasn't dead yet.

Roughly healed, as best as Dr. Weathervane could manage in the short time before the enforcers of Master Red Eye's will arrived and took me, I was left to sweat in the stuffy heat of the enclosed space. Bandages still around my chest, shoulder and right hoof told of still healing injuries. The fumes were making me choke, my lungs stinging and heaving as my sickness grew. No RadAway for the one who had defied them, not at all. Instead, my thick coughing only echoed and rang back off of the walls to cause thumping headaches. I would have retreated to the corner, further from it all, had I not been chained to the floor in the middle.

Abandoned without clothing or possessions and left with a fuzzy head and a raging fever, my mind only raced from thought to dream to wish to fears. The Master had visited many times, sometimes entering to sit and talk of my place in life...others to just...stare. Those were the worst, looking up and knowing those light green eyes would be peering in through the slit, silent and telling.

But by far the cruellest moment was his talks on the fate of Sunny.

...she wasn't dead...

No, The Master had taken her, hidden her from Protégé and Minstrel to the point that they believed as I had, that she had been taken simply to be killed. No...now she was the personal property of The Master, his to do with as he wanted. The same thing he had once wanted LittlePip for...had wanted me for...now he had her. Horrible visions of what sick things he might do to her played in my head in the times that he would grab my face, stare directly at me and hint at how she was 'his forever', as I would soon be.

His last words were to rest his own forehead against mine, eye to eye...and whisper that she was his little secret with me only knowing that I might realise what I had done. That the consequences for telling anypony would be more than I could take. Sunny, like my abuse at his hooves before...would remain hidden behind closed doors from the only ponies who might want to help her. I couldn't dare go to anypony, lest he make good on his promise.

A part of me wished I could help her, like I helped Glimmerlight and Starshine Melody...but with The Master standing in the way, claiming her as much as he claimed me, I could not muster the courage to do anything but nod and agree to his terms. He had left, leaving only the echo of sick laughter as I was shut in alone once more.

I felt another thick coughing fit build and erupt forth. Held down by chains, I had no way to properly move to brace myself, simply closing my wet eyes and trying not to cry out too loudly as my rough throat flared on every one of the hacking expulsions. A wet splatter accompanied it; I didn't even need to look at the floor to know there was a new bloodstain across it. My wounds may have closed...but all the signs of rad-poisoning entering lethal levels were starting to show. Behind the echoes of my own death rattle, I didn't even hear any hooves approaching.

“Sir, you know you're not meant to be down here. The prisoner is under orders to not receive any-”

“On whose authority?”

“Standard rule for all prisoners by order of Stern, sir.”

“Yet I happen to know for a fact that Chainlink Shackles, has been down here every hour, on the dot. Can you explain that?”

The voices made me perk up as the guard paused. Through the thick doors, I couldn't recognise anyone in particular, just the dulled muffling of speech, barely discernible.

“...I...”

“How much did he pay you each time? Or promise you? Tell you what, I'll keep this rampant abuse of authority to myself and save you from being thrown into the taint moat as an example, if you go for a ten minute break.”

“...sir.”

Trotting grew to a canter as I heard the fearful guard make himself scarce as fast as was possible. Half choking, I tried to push myself back from the door, feeling my head swim and throat swell as I pushed motion through my sick body. A thin copper taste in my mouth only made me shiver...the next coughing fit would come soon, I could feel it...

The door's locks were thrown aside, clanking metal and squealing joints sounded and gave me reason to cover my ears as the huge door was pushed inward. A rush of cleaner air only made me splutter when I turned my head to look.

The red eye stared back at me, glowing through the smog as I saw him trot toward me. Only this time, I recognised him for who he was. Protégé quickly approached me, wearing a dark brown weather cloak against, presumably, some rain outside. Pulling a half empty orange sachet from his saddlebag, he quickly dropped it near my mouth. Without waiting, I grabbed it, sucking down the foul liquid fast enough that I nearly choked. Wincing as the taste hit me, it became a fight to not throw it right back up.

“I...I need more...this won't do it...”

“I'm sorry, this was all that was left, Murk. Barb's lot were quite thorough as soon as they saw you weren't around to reclaim it all. If I can, I'll see what I can do, but even we only get access to so much at a time and Weathervane is being monitored closely.”

“Why...do you care?”

I saw him step back, eyes narrowing as I glanced up with my question. This pony had stood in front of my freedom and shot me down to keep me inside. Bringing half a sachet of RadAway wasn't going to do anything like apologise for it.

“Why couldn't you have just let me go?”

Protégé sighed, shoulders slumping. Rubbing a hoof through his red mane, he looked at me through the one visible eye.

“I have a lot of explaining to do, not just to you. I have other work-leaders inquiring why I kept you alive. Why I killed one of the ponies who was paid to help Master Red Eye. I tell you this, because I want you to know how much risk I am involving myself in to ensure you are not simply killed outright. Like it or not, you were the last worker to be found out there. All others caught, including Barb's raiders and Glimmerlight, were brought home long before you were. This makes you significant, Murk. It makes you a target for punishment from everypony seeking to see it happen.”

Just shaking my head, I couldn't help but just repeat myself.

“Why couldn't you just have let me go? Please, master...I just want to be free...”

Tears already started rolling down my cheeks, leaving thin lines against the muck and soot. Glimmer's cleaning of my face hadn't last long in Fillydelphia. Even seeing him here was still reminding me of that horrible moment atop the mill. When I was within sight of escape with only him standing in my way.

Somehow able to appear at the last second to drag me back.

“How did you even find me? Everypony else didn't know where I was.”

Finally, that small smirk of his returned, raising a hoof, he tapped his eyepiece. To be honest, I had begun wondering what it was for.

“An Eyes-Forward-Sparkle, Murk. A gift from Master Red Eye. It can follow PipBuck locator signals if within a certain range. I've had it set to yours for some time now, tracking your position while I was on my way to reclaim you from Minstrel's home, but-”

“But *he* got there first...”

“Yes...Shackles was the direct link to Minstrel and was far ahead of me by the time word got back about the escape. Look, Murk, you have to listen, we don't have a large amount of time. The call for your sentencing is going out as we speak. I don't know who is going to decide it, but chances are they are on their way right now. I had to speak to you ahead of time, get you to understand something.”

Screwing up my face, I didn't even want to think on the ramifications of that eyepiece and how Protégé would always know precisely where I was. Had he just been testing me before when I had snuck out of the Mall?

“All I understand is I failed...now I'm going to die...”

“No, Murk. What I need you to understand is you can still do this. Show forgiveness, prove to them you are a worthy worker who is seeking to help Equestria. You're a good pony, Murk, I can see you want to help others and live a good life and that's just what I'm offering! Two years, Murk, two years of hard effort and you can do whatever you want! A small portion of your life with a ration of hard work and you can earn your freedom for yourself. Rightful, guarded and without danger of falling into it ever again. No slaver in the wasteland would dare take in a pony carrying the pardon of Master Red Eye. Give me your trust, Murk, I will keep you from the dangers as much as I can, help you become somepony better. Perhaps you will see the value you can be as a worker to me, or perhaps something mo-”

“SHUT UP!”

It wasn't the most elegant response, but the more he talked, the more I felt the rage and bile growing in my throat. Screaming led me to stagger even as I forced myself to my hooves, feeling my shoulder, chest and every leg ache. Leaning against a wall to even stay upright, I had to bite back an angry snarl.

“*Stop calling me a worker!* I'm not! I'm a slave! Whipped, hurt, kept locked up and ruining every day of my life it can! I'm dying of sickness because of this place! Red Eye isn't anything but a monster forcing ponies to work and die for him!”

“Master Red Eye is a visionary, Murk. I have told you that I accept that this isn't the best way forward, but it is the *only* way and it is working!”

“All it's doing is killing us!”

“Have you got any idea what Fillydelphia was like *before* Master Red Eye came along? This place was a blight upon Equestria, a horror filled city of pain and darkness where raiders and warring gangs were only the tip of the iceberg. There were...*things*...stalking the streets, things no-pony has even yet identified or discovered the source of. They still exist, but beneath us in the old city tunnels and subways, only because Master Red Eye brought with him the leadership and charisma to turn Fillydelphia around. He took a place where wastelanders were lucky to survive a day...and turned it into the greatest industrial powerhouse in the wastes. We are producing books, cloth, resources and tools for a protected generation of educated foals. He has done good.”

“At what cost...I don't want to be a part of this anymore! I never asked to be a slave...”

Sighing, he shook his head, glancing back out of the door quickly.

“I respect that, Murk, you do not have to be a slave all your life. Believe it or not, I don't want you to

be...if I could make you free, right now, I *would*. You don't...you don't deserve to have been caught up in all this. No-pony should be born without choice but...this is how it is in our time.”

My anger simmered down, bubbling beneath the surface as I watched Protégé remove his eyepiece with his magic and store it on a clip of his clothing. Those deep red eyes were earnest...convincing.

“I do...care for you. But this is the hand we have been dealt. Master and...slave. I cannot release you short of Master Red Eye himself permitting it. All I can offer is whatever small measure of protection I can bring as you push on. These two years will make you a better pony, Murk, I am sure of it.”

“But...I barely survived one day...how can I do two years? I can't survive a day without RadAway!”

Protégé simply looked away, sighing.

“You know it! You know it's going to kill me! It's impossible! No-pony has ever done it!”

“No...it's not impossible, Murk. Allow me to help, work to get back to me and-”

Stopped short, he began paying attention to a sound that I had missed on account of how worked up I was. Multiple sets of hooves approaching.

“They're early...I had hoped to have longer to convince you, Murk. Please, trust me on this, your best bet for survival is to get back to me. Let me do the talking, say that you want to work to return to me. *Please*, Murk. Can you accept this at least? It will get you back to Glimmerlight.”

Staring across at him from where I leant against the warm metal wall, the thought finally began to reoccur. Of course...she'd be back with him. But any train of thought was lost as the approaching party arrived. I heard a *lot* of ponies and griffins out there beyond the half open cell door. Protégé was signalling for me to move back to the middle of the room, to stop straining my chains. Feeling the fear begin to build, I did so. There was a look on Protégé's face I did not like. What was going on?

Lying down on all fours, I felt my neck shrink back and my hooves tuck in, as though trying to make myself as small as was possible. The cell door creaked open to reveal a huge earth pony in battle barding that looked thicker than my limbs. Stomping forward, he moved to my right and took up position facing toward me. Behind him came another, almost identical guard...followed by four griffins who took the corners. All carried shock magic rods or had hoof shackles at the ready. Finally...I saw the large earth ponies draw weapons and keep them pointed at me. Even Protégé seemed to have to move aside, his assertion to 'do the talking' blunted by the heavy guards. Trembling at the centre, they didn't seem to take notice of my whimpering, keeping their eyes fixed firmly for any movement. Why all the security? Was this a rank higher than Protégé? What was he...a tier four? Or was it three? *Was this Stern?!* Panic to make a bolt for the door was held in check only by the thick chains. Oh no...she would kill me for sure, she did that sort of thing...or put me back in the Pit. Please no...please please please...

A gentle tip-tap of hooves proceeded toward the door down the corridor. Pleadingly, I cast a glance at Protégé, who had been politely moved to the side of the cell, into a corner behind a griffin. Having slipped his eyepiece back on...I only once more saw the slavemaster who was holding me against my will. Instead, I screwed my eyes shut, prepared for whatever pony general or slave overlord this was I was about to meet.

The hooves stopped just in front of me. By some insane stroke of madness...I allowed one eye to open.

The chains that held me to the floor were not what kept me from immediately running terrified beyond all conscious control. No, the dulled section of my brain that still desired obedience and control over my life became fully active on mere sight to stay my efforts. Locked in my own unresponsive body, my every free will screaming for me to *get out of here* could only now stare upward. It wasn't Stern. It wasn't one of Red Eye's generals or overlords.

It was him.

My Master above all. The pony who had bought me. Who *owned* me.

Red Eye himself.

With a start, I realised my error. Before any detail or close observation of his appearance could even register, I flung myself to the floor, abasing myself with my head lowered in abject submission. My entire body trembled hard enough that coughs built and were forced down by the willpower to not make a sound in the presence of my master. The highest of masters. Maybe not the most personal...but by every law and rule of slavery...he owned my life completely. I could only await his instruction, be it to die or to live.

What I did not expect was the same kind, fatherly and genial voice that I had heard on his broadcasts.

“My dear Murky...you need not hide your eyes from me. Come, stand before me and show the same spirit you held to attempt the impossible.”

He knew my name. Past the shock, it was an instruction. I obeyed. Avoiding as much whining as I could, I shakily pushed my battered body to my hooves and looked up. Red Eye was smiling warmly, his one proper eye showing not the hard glare that I had long associated from afar...but a gentle concern. Across his body he bore the garb of a Stable, similar to Minstrel's, while on his right hoof, just like her...just like me...he possessed a PipBuck. But that crimson cybereye was all that drew my attention. Feeling unable to look away, it almost seemed to hypnotize me as Red Eye began to speak again.

“Much better, Murky. I must admit, to attempt one escape and survive only by the thinnest of threads is impressive. But to attempt a second one less than a couple days afterwards? Perhaps there is more to you than we first thought. Not just mentally...”

Through the slight filter of smoke I could see a light beam near his eye projecting outward. Trotting forward, he moved alongside me, gazing at my broken wings.

“If things lately had been different...a pegasus like you would have been very valuable to me, Murky. You could have done great things for the restoration of Equestria to order and aided Unity in its pursuit of peace. Well...depending on the situation, who really knows in these turbulent times? I somewhat wish I had known of these wings all those weeks ago when I bought you. Such a pity that you hid them so diligently upon your arrival here. Tell me, do you feel ashamed of your birth?”

“Yes, Master...”

My eyes didn't leave the doorway ahead as I answered, almost mechanically.

“Such a tragedy. It is good you found us, Murky Number Seven; the wasteland would have stricken you. It disappoints me that you saw fit to try and escape your destiny here in Fillydelphia to help Equestria. The mind is more powerful than the body, Murky, did I not rebuild this city with words and leadership? I could find many uses for a pegasus willing to become better and stronger of mind from the shackles of the slave. As I hear, you were doing rather well too in helping to discover the secrets of a Stable. Why did you try to run, Murky? What drove you to such extremes?”

Gulping, fighting the itchiness in my throat and attempting to wet my dry lips, my mind raced for an answer. His words were filled to the brim with a thousand different intents and purposes, like an unbreachable safe door that I could never break to understand the true meaning or aim within.

“I...”

My voice died, every idea faltering, like his very presence drove every element of free thought from my brain. Not in the invasive, overwhelming method of The Master...but via an almost tangible aura of calm understanding. Red Eye *controlled* the space he occupied, I was merely one little pawn within his great game.

“I wanted...to be free...master.”

“To be free? Is that not what all ponies wish for, Murky? To be free of pain, suffering and free of guilt. The guilt that sits in all our hearts, that we *could* be doing more for Equestria. I understand...you may see me as a monster, as the dictator forcing your life into harms way. But, I offer freedom, true freedom. To face the world and be able to say in your heart...‘I helped.’ Is that what you seek? To go out, to be a better pony out there? Little Murky...do you know what freedom truly is?”

Red Eye had spoken as he circled me, eventually coming back around to face me head on. Without knowing why, I felt like I could look him in the eye and not feel in danger of insubordination. He seemed to invite a charismatic ability to see him as a simple pony, bereft of all the mythical legend. But his question was deceptively well chosen, unable to think, unable to consider, reason or piece together any coherent thought process, I could only lower my head again, sniffing.

“No, master...I don't...”

“Yet you have now made two runs for something you do not understand. I would ask why that is, but I believe I may already know the answer. A certain little Stable Dweller.”

My head shot up, prompting Red Eye's brow to raise with a small grin.

“That would be my confirmation, then.”

It took a few seconds, but eventually it clicked...Red Eye hadn't known for sure, but by playing my bluff...he'd just fooled me into revealing it for certain.

“What is she to you, Murky?”

“Everything, master. I...I believe she's going to save everypony, somehow.”

Red Eye's grin became an amused smirk, before, catching me completely off guard by nodding.

“I agree. LittlePip will be a great asset in the restoration of Equestria. Her and I are not too different, you know? We are both seeking the same goal in the end, whether you believe that or not. Her role in this will be significant yet, more than unloading rounds into random raiders and creatures. But the mirror image is there...her and I. Both fighting for Equestria's future and both having to bear the burdens of our path. You may be interested to know that you this very moment lie in the same cell she once occupied for the same crime. Perhaps you and her are not too different, either.”

If it weren't for all the security and my master's presence, I might have moved out of abject shock. She had been here? Prior to the Pit, she had been in these same chains? Or was this just a way for Red Eye to mess with my head?

“I...I want to try and be like her, master.” It felt like the only honest answer I could to deflect the greater depths of traps his words were leaving for me.

“Admirable, if somewhat naïve. No, I believe you are better off here, with us, creating the New Equestria, Murky.”

“But...why all this, master? Why do I have to be whipped and driven to death?”

Biting my lip, I expected the lash any second, I had slipped up, letting too much out, *you don't question your master.*

“An excellent question, one that, in a differing way, she asked as well. Our world is imperfect, sadly brutal and lacking in the Unity that will save it. Perhaps when all is said and done, I may face judgement for what I am doing to save it. But for now, this is merely my side of the same coin, the unfortunate inevitability that ponies, like you I'm afraid, may be caught up in. I have never attempted to hide the truth, Murky. I do not deny the darker side to my work...but on the other side of that coin lies the identical grey morality that is your beloved Stable legend.”

“But, master, she saves ponies!”

Somehow...I felt like I was being toyed with. That I was nothing more than an idiotic child to a grandmaster's artform of conversation.

“Does she now?” His head tilted, intrigued by my more convicted words. “She didn't save you.”

Four simple words that wormed their way into my head. I knew they would not disappear easily...

“I...but...she couldn't! No-pony can save everypony, master! To...to get there, I guess some ponies will have to go into danger or...or wait their turn?”

“Then what is so different with Fillydelphia, may I ask?”

My mouth opened, then closed...then gaped and finally shuddered shut again. He had expertly weaved me into a logical trap. Resigning myself, I simply bowed my head.

“My Master,” I heard Protégé’s voice approach as he carefully trotted toward Red Eye, “Murk is rather idealistic, from what I have seen. Admirable in some ways, if tragically naïve and sometimes void of cold facts.”

Daring to open my eyes a notch, I saw the black unicorn stand to the side of his Master. Only now did the similarities begin to tell. The way Protégé wore his mane...his tail...even down to some stylistic patterns of design on his eyepiece compared to Red Eye’s...well...eye.

Red Eye smiled as he saw Protégé move over, turning as though to politely allow him into the 'conversation.' Very quickly I was beginning to worry if I were being judged without even knowing it. By supporting LittlePip, had I just ruined my chances? Oh no...

“Ah, my faithful student. I was under the impression that Stern didn't allow past masters to visit their recovered workers.”

His voice held a slight tinge of challenge to it. As though he was testing his 'student' to find the proper reply to work his way around the situation.

“An unfortunate necessity, Master. Murk was dying of an irradiated disease. He required RadAway immediately. I felt, after consideration, that you would prefer not to have a pony die pointlessly.”

Red Eye's smile grew as he nodded, almost lightly chuckling.

“Very good, just what I might have done...or have done in the past. Now...time is shorter in these days closer to Unity than ever. I felt that it be only right for me to finally meet the little oddity of a pegasus in Fillydelphia myself before deciding on his future...”

Protégé didn't seem to hesitate, crossing a hoof across his chest and lowering his head.

“I am sure he will have been glad to meet you.”

Speak for yourself, Protégé...

“Before you arrived, Murk was willing to offer his continued services under me, if primarily to be reunited with his friend, Glimmerlight the unicorn. The Steel-”

“Steel Ranger Initiate...yes, I remember her, from the same influx as the Great Warlord, I believe.”

Red Eye seemed to catch a surprised glance on my face, turning back toward me with that ever-fatherly smile. I could feel myself wanting to please him, serve him...the loyalty he inspired in those working with him was easy to understand.

“You are surprised that I remember another worker, Murky? Within the rebuilding of Fillydelphia, I ask a great amount of you all. Is it so much that I be required to remember those whom I can, to honour your sacrifices and hard work?”

“No, master...sorry, master...”

“Now, do you truly seek to return to Protégé, to continue your progress toward true freedom and choice? To help Equestria by the methods we have here? I do not require you to turn against the Stable Dweller in your heart...only that your mind sets itself to the task you *can* do. She is beyond your reach now, into the furthest reaches of Equestria. Her tale is not yours to share anymore, past the crossroads of history that saw you so briefly within her influence. So, Murky, you wish to retake your place as a worker under me? To follow my students path that may see you do better things for all ponies? Truly and honestly?”

A sudden dark tinge overtook those last words...a narrowing of his good eye...the loss of the tinged grin. Very quickly, I began to sense what would happen if I were to do anything but agree. My master was leaving me no choice. Despite what he said...this was no question.

“Yes, master. I...I am sorry for trying to escape you...”

His gaze fell upon me, witheringly intense and full of all sorts of indiscernible intents.

“...I deserve to be here.”

Saying those words were like ripping my own newly found spirit clean out.

“The punishment for at least one escaping worker is simple, but you have complicated things by being a consistent troublemaker, Murky. Not to mention...chaos almost seems to follow in your wake, a dead slaver in the threshing mill, perhaps? Or the Terminal slave riot? Normally, I would offer a choice between summary execution, for I cannot have other workers believing your freedom of choice to be attainable, or to join the next rounds of the Pit Arena.”

I couldn't help the squeak escaping my lips, tears began to fall as history seemed to be repeating itself. Lowering my head, I didn't even dare defy or beg...my master had the final say. Do I take the quicker certain death or...or try the Pit...oh Goddesses above in your mighty skies please help me...

Protégé trotted forward.

“Master Red Eye, I-”

He was silenced by a raised hoof from Red Eye.

“However, Murky...you have done me a great service. One few ponies have. You showed kindness and a braver heart than you may feel you own, by helping to rescue one of my dear children of Unity and Equestria. Starshine Melody asked of me yesterday, 'Where is the little pony? Is he okay?' This is partly why I am here, to meet the pony who brought one of those I am doing all of this for back to me. I would like to believe I have a generous soul, Murky. However I cannot allow you to go without punishment for fear of repeat occurrences both from you or other rebellious workers. Thus, I am left with a clash of ideals.”

Shivering, my fate hanging in the balance, I raised my head once again to look at him. The smile was, amazingly, still present. Still reassuring, like I could half expect him to genuinely care for me.

“Within my messages of Unity, I speak of hard work being the proof of the willing. That those ponies willing to take a stand and say 'I shall do my part' are the true bearers of Equestria's future. Therefore, it seems appropriate that you should be set to prove this. Murky Number Seven, you shall reaffirm your worth to my student, to be accepted once more into the two years of salvage missions by working a full shift within the Parasprite Pits. Show the courage, resolve and determination required of the ponies who would bring about our salvation...and you shall be forgiven for your blind and unfortunate mistakes. Do you feel this is fair?”

The question was not directed at me, but at Protégé. I saw the younger unicorn cast a look toward me, away from his Master. His one uncovered eye hidden from Red Eye as I saw the immediate concern. Terror was gripping me, the Parasprite Pits were, without a doubt, the single most dangerous job in Fillydelphia...reserved only for troublemakers and rulebreakers because no-pony else would ever actually volunteer. To find, collect and destroy the masses of flesh eating, flying and lethal Parasprites that swarmed to and fro down there. Horrible memories of hearing the agonised squeals and long, bloody death as a pony was caught and devoured by them as I passed by the pits were too fresh...too real...that might be me now...

“This is fair, Master. If I may, I feel that Murk will show a good effort.”

“I truly hope so, my student. If the future for him you discussed with me is something you still believe he can achieve...”

“It is, Master.”

Red Eye paused, watching his student, before smiling and resting a hoof on his shoulder.

“Tell me, my most loyal student, is there anything you have learned from all this?”

“Yes, Master.” Protégé nodded diligently. “I have learned that even those we believe in may falter sometimes...but we should not casually dismiss one failure as a complete loss. That we can do better for

Equestria, to put them on a better path for themselves and for the world as a whole. Be it a raider being repurposed and kept away from others to help rebuild homes...or a hurt little soul who has lost his way from the path of his life..."

His Master seemed to agree with this, smiling a little greater and patting the shoulder once before standing tall and proud once again.

"I always did appreciate your rather poetic tone," he said with a grin, "from the first day you conversed with me directly. When you initially spoke to me of Murky, the notion of history repeating itself did stand out from your words. I ask you to stay by him, if that plan is still your choice, but this task he must do on his own. Murky will be taken to the pits by his old overseer, Whiplash. You understand?"

"I do, Master."

"Good...good. My time will become more precious with each passing day in the hours to come, my student. Unity approaches. Continue to write to me with your findings in your studies, if and when you have something to report. Until then, I wish you good fortune. To you too, Murky, I would not begrudge you giving your prayers to LittlePip's safety, I assure you I am just as concerned about her as you are."

He turned, nodding to the guards and trotted from the room. As though on cue, the security began to march past me, each thump of their hooves making me shiver all the more. No matter his friendliness, the sentencing left me in abject terror. Dread images of carnivorous little beasts tearing at my skin...pushing their way inside to the muscle and organs and multiplying all the time. A horrible, slow and painful death...no...I didn't want to die like that...

If Red Eye's influence hadn't kept me where I was...I might have simply thrown myself on their guns. That thought alone chilled me. I saw him depart, a last glance back to me with that glowing eye being the final image left with me. My meeting with the great slave master of the wastes...the legend that had brought even Brimstone Blitz's clan low. For all his calm and polite nature, all his fatherly speeches...he terrified me. Only now did it even filter in, he'd called me *Murky*. Like he was a friend. The way only Glimmerlight did...other ponies rarely said it...only ever to degrade me like Sooty had. But Red Eye used it genially and respectfully...

Somehow, that scared me all the more.

Protégé stood in the doorway, watching as the procession headed away, before slowly turning his head to me, glancing back over his shoulder almost sadly.

"I'm sorry it had to go this way, Murk."

"Pro...Protégé?"

He turned almost suddenly, as though surprised I hadn't called him 'master.' In the wake of Red Eye...Protégé seemed almost trustworthy.

"I...I don't think I can do this, I-"

"You can and you must. Your friend is waiting, Murk. For now, you simply must endure."

Collapsing to the floor, spluttering and coughing between sobs, little brightly coloured sprites bringing an unthinkable end wouldn't stop buzzing around my mind.

"Simply endure...I wish you all the luck I can, Murk. Master Red Eye would not have given you this chance had he not believed you could survive."

There were no more words I could say. Protégé simply stood in the sole light of the doorway, looking half way between me and the corridor. Long seconds passed, before, with a sighing resignation, he trotted out of the cell.

"You endured for your whole life...just a little more, Murk...a little more. Good luck."

Even as he closed the cell door over. I could still hear a violent crash.

The sound of somepony outside bucking a metal wall. Hard.

Being marched toward the wagon waiting outside was like the Pit all over again. My legs were shackled and tied to another three ponies taken from the cells. Each looked rough, liable to hit back against a careless slaver. No doubt they were in here for just that, sentenced to the same punishment. Between two large unicorn bucks, I trotted with my head low through the steel corridors and hissing pipes that made up the industrial plant converted into a prison; the rattle of reactivated machinery doing little to let me try and relax. To fight the urge to scream, cry or beg.

But it had been Red Eye who commanded I was to go. Thus, I couldn't disobey.

Only now was my mind beginning to drift and fret over other issues. My possessions were likely all gone. Sundial's PipBuck, my beloved journal and all my clothing or loot from the Stable. Barb apparently had stolen all my RadAway left behind at the Mall too, given Brimstone wasn't there to be a deterrent. Feeling the brief respite of the small amount Protégé had saved already beginning to fail in its resistance, the shiver of cold fear passed over me. The Parasprite Pits were heavily irradiated from the trapped smog underground...it was all a matter of what would kill me first.

Either I would be torn muscle from muscle and devoured alive by small creatures over the course of one long agonising minute...or I would choke and drown in my own blood as my lungs ruptured and filled from my disease worsening. No matter how hard I tried, my mind kept going over and over each fate, filling my imagination with what it might feel like. Every time was the same, surrounded by uncaring slavers who would simply laugh or turn their back.

Sniffing, wishing I could dry my eyes with a hoof away from the shackles, my mind only wished it could deny the reality that was my life. Even as we were led through the cavernous doors into the red mist outside, the sight still shocked me. Fillydelphia was a hell, truly and utterly.

Stood on the ashy gravel next to the broken tarmac road, waiting for the wagons to roll around, we were simply ordered not to move by one of the multiple gas masked guards. You never, ever, got used to a view of Fillydelphia. Of trodding lines of sick and broken slaves moving ahead of you, the whips and shock rods dragging screams from their parched throats or blood from their broken bodies. Back and forth, ever moving, like a great machine that moved unceasing, the cycle of slavery and labour only kept going. When one slave expired, another was found to take his or her place like a replacement part in the engine of industry. Even as I watched, one marching buck on the road simply keeled over, spasming and finally lying still. Masked slavers simply threw the body on a passing corpse wagon headed toward the mass graves and incinerators, ignoring the wailing mare being pressed back into line.

All just one big, utterly efficient and unthinkably brutal machine...

“Stay in line ya wretches...wagon's coming. Make a move, we'll slot the lot of you.” The stallion's voice was muffled behind the mask as he jabbed one unicorn slave's side with a riot shotgun. My legs felt locked in place (well, technically they *were*), not daring to move one inch.

To the right of us, around the corner of a ruined employee building, a scrap-built wooden wagon rattled and began its lurching gait down the road. Slaves scampered from its clearly uncaring path, avoiding the big hooves of two big earth ponies dragging it. Each bore fresh whip marks on their back and hoods over their heads. They were nothing but a source of movement, not even allowed to see where they went...

Upon the back of the wagon, my old overseer, Whiplash, glared at the four slaves waiting. Standing up, his front hooves on the front of the wagon, he cast an imposing figure against the crimson smoke and tall funnel chimneys behind him on the Fillydelphia horizon. Turning between the chainlink fences surrounding the entrance to the prison, I could see his eyes focussed only on me as it pulled up.

“Well...well....well...”

Hopping down, Whiplash trotted around the wagon, standing before me. Without a word, I saw him reaching for his whip, slowly and carefully. Taking his time, he let it unfurl and got a good bite on the leather grip; the whipcord itself dropping to the ground right in front of me. Whimpering, I felt myself stagger back from it. I knew it was coming...he was just drawing it out.

Wringing his neck side to side and almost chewing the grip a little, Whiplash finally swung the whip...and pulled back. My squeak of shock and wince as it came near my head only betrayed my fear of it. Finally, after making 'test' shots another two times, he finally did it. Shackled to the spot, I couldn't even dodge.

CRACK!

Squealing, I tripped when my hooves tried to cover the impact point on my forehead. He wasn't nearly as strong as The Master, but my skull felt like it had *shifted* as he hit my still vulnerable head wound.

Balance waving and vision swimming, I shivered on the ground, pleading my apologies to him in between cries of pain. Eyes clenched shut, I could still hear him shouting above me.

“That's for taking my whip, for stealing from your overseer! If you weren't going into the Sprite Pits anyway I'd probably put you in for twenty lashes for theft!”

“I'm sorry! Please, I'm-”

“Shut up! Just shut up! I had to put up with Slit bitching for an hour after I went looking for my whip, Betsy! You can take your hit and you can like it! Get on the fucking cart, all of you!”

My shackles were already being pulled. With me staggering along with the chains and bumping into the rump of the stallion in front of me a few times, I was half pulled and half pushed up and into the wooden cart. Forced into a small section near the head of the open top wagon, I tried to curl up as best I could and cradle my skull. In the dry Fillydelphia air, my throat was already beginning to burn on each whimper, leading to me dry heaving a few times when it spasmed and fell just short of a coughing fit. Rumbling off, the wagon departed toward one of the great pillars of smoke from a parasprite incinerator. Around me, the other slaves just tried to stay as far from me as possible, muttering that I was 'bad luck.' Whether due to that demonstration or my wings...I didn't know...

“To think, you were a pegasus all that time under me, Murk. Disgusting. Should just have you shot in the back of the head, I think. Right?”

The last word wasn't directed at me, but to the driver of the wagon beside him. I kept my head down, feverishly trying to get rid of the horrible feeling of a gun being placed to my skull and fired. But then, wouldn't that be nicer than what was about to happen?

“Aye, Lash, any thievin' little welp takin' any of my stock isn't lookin' to get much favour from me now, is he?”

Wait...that accent...I hadn't even looked at the driver with my attention on Whiplash entirely. Glancing up, he turned back to face me. Another face from before my first escape attempt...one I had last seen tauntingly laughing at me when The Master had paraded me through the streets.

Sooty Morass. That grey braided mane drooping down over the back of the driver's seat even as his head turned to wink at me.

“But...but you're a slave!”

My jawline whipped to the side, my head following, as Whiplash's hoof slapped across my face. Yelping and falling to the floor of the wagon, shivering and trying to find the best works to appease my overseer...I felt that tooth loosen again. Just as the chains pulled tighter...one swift slap across the face to remind me of my place. No talking without permission...

“Aye, laddie, that I am. But life ain't so bad if you know who to let a few caps pass to now and again. 'Wagon driver' is pretty cushy...handy too, to meet all the contacts. Lash here just knows a good business stallion when he meets one. So how's that RadAway hunt goin' for ye laddie? Still ready for the off?”

I didn't have much choice with him. No doubt Sooty Morass could read me like a book. With Protégé, Red Eye and now him...I was quickly beginning to remember how pathetically small I was in Fillydelphia. As such, I could only sniff and sadly nod, before coughing almost on cue. Throat rattling, I had to take gulping breaths just to get my lungs functioning again properly. Pulling a hoof back over the wagon back, I

felt him roughly tussle my mane as though he actually cared.

“Well there's me answer...shoulda' stuck with me, lad. You know who has the RadAway you need, me business door is always open, if you're willing to pay the price, o'course.”

Undoubtedly something absurdly high and bonding me into future 'favours' that would ruin every ounce of freedom I had scraped together in my mind. All the same, he had the things I needed, while I had no leeway right now to try and steal anything.

“After all...can't be nice to be sitting back there, knowing that radiation is eating away at you inside...slowly...never going back down on its own. I hear it's quite the long process when it finally all adds up. Tell ye what, if you get out of the pits here, come see me at the ol'Terminal. Got some new directions of trade I could use you for. I'm sure me new business venture's customers would appreciate having somepony as, well...exotic, as a pegasus.”

The degrading cackle as he rubbed my mane once again before returning to driving took all the effort I had to not make me burst into tears.

“One RadAway per day, laddie, for each job done, after ye work off what you stole from me. Come see me in the ol'terminal if ye want. Ye'll find I'm quite open.”

Staying silent under Whiplash's harsh gaze, I wasn't sure what sickened me more.

The fact that once again I was so far into servitude that even other slaves had leeway over my future options.

Or the fact that part of me felt so hopelessly indentured and desperate to survive that I actually considered his offer...

* * *

“All off! Five seconds, move it!”

The back of the wagon was lowered down, masked slavers crowding around to yank at the chains that bound every slave on board. We weren't even given the option to move, simply dragged as one conjoined line off the wagon. Having been sitting with my head down, my world turned upside down as I was pulled from the wagon, dropped and shoved across the ground. Yelping as pain flared across my forehead and body from injuries, I was dragged across the gravel with the others by half a dozen slaves battering us onward so hard that I couldn't make head nor tail of my surroundings. Just red sky then grey dirt, crimson clouds then ash covered road...again and again as they kept pushing me and the others over and over, rolling us sometimes and clipping us around the ears to keep us docile and disoriented. Panicking, I tried to keep going, to do what they wanted...but shouting painfully in my ears, they just kept knocking me about.

Finally, mercifully, it stopped with a last hoof standing on my back and forcing me onto all fours upon the ground. Glancing back, I saw it was Whiplash himself taking responsibility for me, while the Pit Slavers held the other prisoners down. Behind me, Sooth Morass almost gleefully leaned back on the wagon.

Coughing hard enough to spray up dirt before me, my eyes finally focussed on a hoof right in front of me. Covered in a dull yellow containment suit, I glanced up to find a scraggly older earth pony mare, perhaps over fifty, with a patchy mane staring at all of us. The suit's headpiece was hanging at her neck, that dark purple mane stringy and filthy against her deep blue coat. She was utterly hideous. Covered in sores, old bite scars and with a smell that stood out beyond even the pungent reek that resided on most slaves, myself among them.

“That's it? Four slaves for me today? I lost ten yesterday, what the hell makes you think this is going to help?”

Raspy and uncultured in the extremes, she simply scratched herself as much as she talked. I could see her head twitching on every other word. Her eyes were lifeless around a drooped face. I felt Whiplash shrug.

“Rest of em got claimed already, Hive, you know the rules. Go check with Grindstone if you want more, I hear he's got ponies to spare right now.”

“Yeah, well...Grindstone is a cranky old bastard to get anypony off of. Just see what you can do about it if any slave gives you lip you want rid of, Lash. The sprites are playing up lately, warm season for them, more aggressive. Can't seem to keep the slaves alive too long...”

Her eyes travelled downwards, looking me up and down with distaste before almost deadpanning with a lazy glance at the slaver above me..

“...you having a fucking laugh, Lash?”

“Come on, Hive, you're used to working with small creatures. Just give him a good clip around the oversized ear, he'll do what you tell him.”

“Eh...more that he won't fit in any of the suits properly. Oh well...doesn't look too useful anyway. We'll just tie him in and if the sprites get into the loose parts, I guess they'll get some wings for dinner. Hah! What? Don't like the sound of that, little chicken?”

She had heard my whimper of fear as she reminded me of the sprites. Already in the edges of my hearing I could detect the sound of buzzing and flitting tiny wings in their masses. Behind Hive I could see the pits, stretched out over the open field with cage wiring fitted over the top. The elevator down was kept in the middle, with some pits giving out a thick pillar of sickly smelling smoke. Beyond that lay the outer housings and above them...the great Wall. We were close to the edge, far away from anything 'important' should a parasprite containment breach occur.

“Hah...oh, chicken wings...I kill myself.”

Please, do.

Hive turned and wandered off, her containment suit proving to be just as spotted, matted and filthy as she was as the helmet and tailguard flopped around behind her. Feeling Whiplash's hoof lift, the chains were unlocked by the pit guards. Whiplash wandered around to me, raising my head on his hoof.

“It's been brief, but I spent too long with you since you were dropped on me out of no-where with no proper procedure to not feel like I'll be embarrassed if you screw up again. *Don't*. Or I'll come hunting for you myself. Twenty lashes, Murk. You know the punishment.”

“Yes master...”

“Good, now get going. Hell, if I could ever find who it was that gave you to my stock...I'd lynch him myself.”

Wrapping a hoof around my head, Whiplash almost threw me forward. Not expecting it, I staggered across the mud, before my injured right hoof gave out in a sharp stab of pain. Before I could even yelp in pain for that, I was tripped to fall flat on my face by the thick muck that surrounded each caged pit. With a sharp springing sound, I landed face down on the cage itself, mercifully painlessly as it flexed beneath me. Holding my right hoof to my underbody protectively, my eyes finally focussed and-

...oh Goddesses...

Below me through the cage, the parasprite pits were in full swing.

A red hot workhouse made up of pony-powered cranking conveyor belts; small carts, filled with rank honeycomb like nests of all putrid colours shifting to and fro and dozens of of the weakest and most horrifically pitiful looking slaves I had ever laid eyes on. Even including the crater.

Each one of them I knew had tried to escape or cause Red Eye problems. Their rations were lower, their sleeping conditions often simply their workplaces and their sicknesses untreated. They huddled scraps and small pieces of cloth and clothing over themselves in a vain attempt to hide any exposed flesh from the parasprites.

Oh...the parasprites...

Buzzing everywhere, not in huge swarms but in a consistent thickness that flitted all over the pits as each nest was fed down the conveyor into an incinerator. One or two flew from the fire each time, causing at least a few slaves to scream and hide under the conveyor or carts while guards equipped with flamethrowers sent searing blasts toward them. I saw them drop from the air, little more than drifting ash...while the higher or more agile ones rammed against the cages or swooped toward the screaming slaves. Many tried to swat with large metal fans or sticks...others simply ran before being turned back at gunpoint from fully suited slavers.

It just went on and on...terror after terror following hard work that was never allowed to cease. Seeing my dripping tears evaporate in the thick warm air before even hitting the ground...the reason why pit workers were so strung out, paranoid and weak became perfectly clear. How would i-ARRGH!

A parasprite hurtled right at my face, leading me to throw my body back from the cage. Innocently cute, I saw it gnaw on the bars with tiny fangs in an effort to get at me, just a small light blue ball of carnivorous intent. Shaking, I quickly retreated over the mud, even as I saw a pillar of flame rocket out of the cage and burn it to cinders.

“Come on, you four, get inside!”

Hive's slavers were already moving to herd us to the elevator, a shock rod giving me plenty of incentive to not dither around. Half cantering, half limping, I moved onto the sheet metal floor of the lift with Hive, two armed guards and the other three prisoners.

“Right, now get this straight, it's simple. There's four stages to Parasprite work.” Hive spoke almost to the wall as the lift juddered and began descending. “Import, chop up, move, burn.”

Already, I found myself backing into the corner and curling up as the lift, through its caged open front became a target for many little stray creatures bashing into it repeatedly. Behind them I could see the work pits stretching between tunnels and hollowed out basements. The heat was already unbearable, choking all the air from my lungs.

“Import. You get on the carts and pull the nests in from where-ever they're found. Chop up. Use auto axes to carve the nests into pieces. Move. Get them on the conveyors and fan away any strays trying to get out. Burn. Throw them in the fire. You'll each get a job.”

Straightening on her helmet and tailguard of the rotting contamination suit, Hive kept the lift going onto a level apparently below the work floor. Dull grey overtook deep red as we descended into the underground rooms where I saw slaves trying to vainly sleep and guard their meagre armour from the intentions of their co-workers at the same time.

“You, the big earth pony, auto axe, chop up. Tiny horn, you're on conveyor. Other unicorn? Yeah you, you're on burning. Chicken?”

Sighing at the acquirement of yet one more name to add to the list, I looked across at her.

“You're on import duty. Lash tells me you've done carting before. Probably all you're good for.”

Sighing, I rubbed my shoulder...this was going to *hurt*.

Finally arriving at a level one below the lowest work pits, the elevator opened with a clattering racket that pounded through my head like a machine gun next to my ear. Beyond was a small ready room with a sealed cage door leading into a mesh walkway beyond. I could only imagine it led back up to the main chamber and was designed purely to keep sprites from this safezone. Around me were rusty benches and old abandoned lockers. A couple of slaves cowered in corners, small bite marks bleeding while they shivered and pathetically licked empty bowls. Beside me, I noticed even my three rough prisoner companions beginning to cast unsure glances between themselves.

“Here's your suits. Grab one that fits and follow me, ten seconds.”

She pointed to a pile in the corner. Filthy leather, metal plates, rotted fur and old cloth were patched and sometimes nailed together into the most mishmash clothing I had ever seen. On top seemed to lie a smaller

one...ooh, that'd be a lot better if I could-

The other three shoved me to the floor, rushing by me and clammering across the ten or so empty suits. The one I had seen was stripped apart, used to quickly cover the exposed sections on others.

“Wait, wait! That's the only one that might fit me!”

Heedless, I was roughly bucked back away from them and left to clutch my chest, wailing in pain as the freshly healed wound threatened to reopen. By the time I could pull myself to my hooves, they had torn it apart to cover their own flanks. (Literally) Hive glanced back at me, rolling her eyes behind the visor of her containment suit.

“Whiplash was right about you, chicken. Absolutely useless...might as well write that letter to Protégé already, telling him I'm not releasing you from my service.”

Wait...*WHAT?!*

Seeing my look of shock, she raised an eyebrow, she seemed to be a little shaky and short fused right now, biting back an annoyed scowl.

“Didn't you know? That's how things work around here to prove yourself back onto normal work. Red Eye did you a good turn by putting you on my shift instead of having you hung for our entertainment, something he should have done to a *pegasus* I might add. But rules go, to 'prove yourself', you need to first prove yourself to *me*. I can find plenty of suicide jobs for a pathetic pegasus who can't even fly, but I'm not going against the rules just to satisfy your wordy little master's whims. No...you don't impress me today, you get to stay here until either you do...or you die. That fucking clear enough for you?”

Without waiting for an answer, she lifted one random protective suit on her hoof and hurled it toward me.

“So get your flank in gear, pick that up and follow me.”

The rotten, half ripped and often repaired clothing slapped heavily at my hooves from bent metal trays that had been nailed onto the sides as what protection could be managed. Even crumpled up...it was clearly for a pony far bigger than myself. But that wasn't my most horrid thought as I watched the prisoners follow Hive out, her dangerous glance making my hobble and drag the large suit after her. No...it was realising that Protégé's one comfort, that I need only endure till the end, was now gone. I had to *excel*.

Unfortunately, that was something I never had done at any slave work in my life. The pony born a slave and destined to be one via his cutie mark wasn't even able to do what his own mark said he should. Probably the biggest failure of a pony in Equestrian history...

Hoofing it into the mesh corridor after them, I felt it shake and judder from the scaffolding holding it above the carved rock corridor. Every so often, a single parasprite flitted around outside it or rammed against the cage in an effort to reach us. Winding through a few corners, we came to another scrap metal room construct. Behind it I could see the work pits as the cave opened up into the lower levels that then went further up to the cages on the surface. Clearly, this was a chamber to get ready, enter and exit without the parasprites having a chance to get into the mesh corridor.

Checking inside the murky window, Hive opened the main door and with a nod of her head, indicated we were to enter. Trying to keep my whining to a minimum as the shouts, screams and fierce surges of the incinerators sounded through the last door ahead of us, I trotted in, almost falling against a bench at the weight of the suit. My entire body was already feeling weak...I...I needed RadAway *now*. An entire shift wasn't survivable, even if I did excel at the job...

“Get dressed! That door opens for a shift change in three minutes, if you aren't ready...tough.”

The three prisoners began throwing on their suits. Around us were the benches I had spotted, along with racks of various equipment. Behind a locked cage door I could see crates of weapons and flamer fuel tanks mixed in with more valuable looking devices I couldn't even identify. Near the door was a large bin that Hive tapped.

“You have any bits not attaching properly, have a check in here, sometimes you'll get scraps if you're lucky to tie them up or patch them.”

Checking my suit, pulling it up, I found it to be a mostly heavy leather construction. The two dinner trays were nailed to leather strips with cloth covers on the joiners. Around the face was an old flat welding mask with clear plastic soldered in instead. It *looked* tough at least...

It wasn't.

Even as I tried to fit my hooves in, the cloth began to rip. The headpiece of leather and wool felt flimsy and ready to tear. All along my underside the entire suit had a great opening where the ties had been stripped off. It was entirely too big by at least a good few inches and I didn't even want to think why that ripped section near my flank still felt wet.

“Aaah...old Ladybug's suit. Yeah, we stripped the lace off that.” Hive chuckled, leaning against the door and preparing what looked like a tiny flamethrower to sit around her mask, connected to a small battle saddle style wire inside, only her hooves kept dropping it from an odd shake she had going. “Good old worker...till she sat on a nest. Tore right through the material at the back and...well...kept going.”

Trying my hardest to not let my imagination take flight, I slipped the suit on as best I could. The leggings were loose, the bottom hanging open with a huge gap to my exposed flesh and at least three holes ripped as I tried to force my way through the huge size compared to my small frame.

Hive simply snorted at my effort to ignore, slipping her own hood off for a second to slip a small white tablet into her mouth. Her hoof seemed to be shaking even more as it fought to keep the tablet from dropping until it was in. A few seconds later, she inhaled deeply, shuddering, before breathing out and relaxing.

“Fuck...needed that”

The words were just muttered under her breath as she strapped her suit back on and slipped the little rusty box back into her suit. Drugs, likely. Many of the slavers in Fillydelphia used them. I'd seen Whiplash go through a few inhaler like things before. But watching Hive, she just seemed to jitter on the spot, her pupils widening and seeming to cease blinking for a while. Looking back at me, that hazy darkness in her face faded away to be replaced with a bright fury.

“Hey, Toolset?”

One of the masked slavers turned his enclosed head.

“Know if that rat bastard Sooty's got any more mint-als? I'm out.”

Without a word, the guard just shrugged. Hive swore under her breath, before turning to see me looking.

“You waiting for a fucking invitation? Get in the barding!”

Immediately turning back to my suit, I fought with my own hood. Settling my face into the headpiece, I had to fight the urge to throw up when I wiped the visor to find those bloodstains were on the *inside*. She said there were spares in that bin right?

Trotting unsteadily forward in the ill-fitting gear, I hopped up to put my front hooves on the lip of the bin, stretching on my rear ones to peer in. There were a few things, perhaps there might be a wire for me!

“Oi! Get out the way!” A heavy force knocked me clean off my hooves onto the floor after tripping on my own clothing. The big earth pony prisoner, a stallion, was looking in himself, one of the unicorn bucks doing so too. They pulled out numerous rags, small plates and scraps of leather. Moving away, I saw the unicorn use his magic to lift two threads out and weave one around a hole to close it up. I only needed one! There was enough for both of us...phew...

Trotting up, I waited beside him till he was done, holding my hoof out for the second one. His suit was enclosed now, he wouldn't need it. Finishing up, he turned back to me.

“Nope, I need it.”

Feeling my own face droop, I stepped forward.

“But...but you don't have any holes!”

“Want a spare.”

“My belly is open!”

“So? Get your own.”

“There isn't any...can't we share?”

“I'm sorry, isn't selfishness what you pegasi do? Go ask your rich parents on the clouds for one.”

He wandered off toward the door, leaving me muttering 'I can't fly...' behind him. Storing the thread loosely on his side, he hooked it through a small pouch that dangled and nodded to Hive. They showed little obvious fear...probably because of my presence. I could see it in their eyes, all this bluster and acting tough was just trying to hide the truth.

In the presence of working with the parasprites...they were just as terrified as myself.

Hive nodded back, glaring at me as I tried to hold my suit together beneath me, looking for all the world like I was hankering for the toilet urgently as I crossed my hooves in an attempt to hold the suit shut.

“Please...Hive, I need something to close this!”

“Don't use my name again or I'll throw you out there naked. Your fault for not getting in faster.”

“I'm going to die without something to close this! I'm-”

My sentence was cut by having to let out a shrill, high pitched squeal. Growling and storming forward, Hive lifted me, carrying me while wailing toward a bench. Her shakes were gone, replaced by a calm and horribly efficient displeasure toward me. Was she going to hold to her threat? Planting me down, she stamped on the side of my face, holding it to the bench. Her voice was dangerously low, possessing a sudden intelligent and lethal tone missing all of the aloof shakiness of before...

“I am through fucking playing with you. You think *any* slaver in Fillydelphia wants you? No, you're bad fucking luck. We *all* know you. From your first, Grindstone, all the way to Whiplash, Slit and Shackles. The insufferable whiner, Murky Number Seven. Not so lucky as his name implies, eh?”

Squirming under her hoof holding my head tightly on the metal bench, I heard the door beginning to hiss ready to open. My apologies were cut off immediately.

“I don't want you here...but I hardly relish handing you over to that upstart in the Mall either. So if I see you've got an untied belly strap...don't expect me to do anything but look the other way. I could not be happier if I get to hear you squeal as they eat their way into that stomach of yours.”

Her other hoof prodded my belly.

“You've been getting too soft under Protégé, Murk. Forgetting your place in Fillydelphia. You're not special, not anypony destined to escape. All you are is another number to me...more than most. Time to remind you what proper slave work is...”

I clung to the bench, it was a *death sentence* if I were to go in there! But she was pulling me, wrapping her hooves around my stomach and roughly hauling me free. The gates behind us slid open, racking upward to reveal the red hot heat of the incineration rooms and the pit itself.

“You'll kill me! Please, don't! I'll...I'll...”

I had nothing. No bargaining chip. Just a slave.

She hurled me backward with a deceptive strength to her old limbs. Tumbling, I flew through the door and collided with the unicorn who had taken the threads. Collapsing together outside, I felt him swear and stamp harshly on me twice, eliciting cries of pain; even if it wasn't particularly damaging. Cowering and trying to pull myself out from under him, he gave me one last small kick on the knee before cantering off.

Behind me, Hive snorted and closed the door behind us, before using her small flamer to take out any parasprites that had gone inside of the shift change chamber. Lying on the bare red rock ground, I found myself in a mass of activity. Flamers belched from on suspension platforms and bridges, carts were drawn up and down ramps to higher levels that arced around the edges of the pit while dozens of slaves rushed to and fro on weak legs. The great conveyor trundled across the floor, from one carved room to the next with an incinerator below each of the cage meshes in the roof. From the surface it had looked like a small circular pit, but down here it was more clearly a series of pits, all interlocked with ramps or conveyors running through the mined out earth. Within seconds, a parasprite fluttered in front of my visor, prompting me to lash out with one hoof, the other trying to keep my clothing together. It eluded me and buzzed off to pester a slave working a cart to the end of the conveyor.

“Hey you! The idiot in the bad suit! Get over here and get to work!”

Pulling myself behind a rock, I hoped only to buy myself some time. My collision with the unicorn hadn't come off entirely without reward. Held tightly to my chest...the spare thread dangled from the little pouch the bigger pony had possessed.

“Oi! Stop hiding, get over here now!”

Quickly, tie it shut, tie it shut...

Desperate, my hooves dropped it multiple times as I heard the slaver approaching with his heavy tread. Come on...I can sew, this should be easy! But with the fuzzy visor and ill-fitting materials it was like trying to thread a needle while blind with a numb body. Right, one hole...now just a dozen more...

“I can see you hiding, dumbfuck! No-pony gets breaks here!”

The slaver rounded the rock, maintaining my look on the belly, I kept trying to tie it shut, four down...eight to go.

I only managed one more before a sharp click sounded and my neck clamped shut. My scream couldn't even emerge as anything other than a wheezing cough as something closed around my throat. Feeling myself pulled from the rock, trailing the thread behind me from the still open hole, I saw the slaver's magic held a sort of extendible lasso that could grab hold of slaves' necks. The wire bit deep, even through my thick clothing, making my legs kick and flail when no air would come in. Gurgling and choking, I was pulled before the slaver.

“Tryin' to take a break, eh? We'll see about that. You're on carts, so grab that one and get moving!”

Finally, the noose came, well, loose. Dropping my head to the floor, I struggled to take breaths through the enclosed headpiece. Seemingly, the only air that came into it was through the small holes that were hopefully too small for a parasprite. Rolling to the side to avoid a fully laden cart topped high with a huge nest, I felt the slaver shove me in the direction of the still empty ones coming off the end of the conveyor. Afraid of the noose, I cantered as best as my sore little body could take me

“Hook yourself to the one on the end and get up that ramp into the storage! Just don't drop the damn cart off the edge and I'll not have to beat you for it!”

The buzzing was everywhere. Holding my clothing closed with one hoof, I tripodded my way toward the carts and tried to ignore the occasional bumps on my body from a parasprite getting too close of landing for a little ride. Every so often, I could feel one gnaw on the tough leather until I shook it loose. A few landed near holes, sending me into a frenzy of panic until they were swatted away. Seemingly, I wasn't the only one with such troubles. Around me I could see blood leaking from small bites they tried to cover on exposed holes in the failing suits. Only slavers seemed to have properly enclosed barding and masks or containment suits like Hive's. I could see her, having re-entered the pits, cantering around spurting fire from her mini-flamer and bellowing at slaves who were struggling to lift the cracked and crumbly nests onto the conveyors. It was hard to see exactly at this distance...everything kept clogging up over this visor, already it was beginning to mist up.

Even with the flimsy visor...I really missed my goggles right about now...and my journal...and Sundial...

Part of me wished that Protégé still had them again, a slim hope that stopped me from falling into the abyss of loss that I had felt after the gang took my journal.

Even traversing twenty feet down here was an obstacle course. Twice a cart thundered past, sprays of shredded hive belched from auto-axe zones, slaves crashed into one another as they felt a parasprite's teeth gain purchase, begging for somepony else to knock it off. Much to my surprise...most slaves *did* help each other. The notion that if they all watched one another, somepony would come to their aid if it were them.

Any lift in my heart at this sight was quickly drowned out by the knowledge that they likely wouldn't help *me*. No. Pegasi didn't get preferred treatment in the pits.

There were about six carts yet to be pulled off, the remaining five I presumed belonged to now dead slaves I was replacing. Carting being the most dangerous was of no surprise to me, travelling along with a huge hive at your back while locked onto the cart itself and unable to run was a horrifying thought. Glancing behind me at the auto axes spinning and whining alongside the conveyor (with half a dozen ponies galloping on a treadmill to power it) I saw the slavers were a little distracted for a second with controlling two poor ponies who were getting swarmed. The masses of sprites that had flew from the incinerator seeking to get through the tough suits for anything more than a small bite through softer material.

The thought of what would happen if I let this huge open gap in my stomach get noticed gave me the courage to crawl under the cart and try to do it up again. The movements had unthreaded it again...oh no...oh no...

Fluttering sounded around me on all sides...I couldn't tell if one was nearby or not. Sweating, my hooves fumbled and struggled with it. Looking down at my own stomach for every time I got it through one hole, it fell out of another...oh come on...come on *please!*

I felt something land on my back...my heart almost stopped as I whipped the gap shut with my hooves, crying and silently praying it would leave. Mercifully...after a few seconds it did. After another three whizzed by the front of the cart I kept trying again, just to get it-NO NO NO!

Fluttering at speed right under the cart, a bright red parasprite made a beeline for the gap the moment I had opened it again to try and tie it up.

“Help! Somepony, anypony! HELP! HELP ME!”

Fighting me, the sprite kept trying to dig away, pulling at the material with its tiny jaws and evading my hooves as I tried to knock it away while holding myself shut. It got inside for a brief second, before I pushed it back. Undeterred, it kept shoving forward, three of its friends beginning to lazily float over while taking notice. Two others seemed to cluster around my back, niggling away at the leather as they hunted for weak points. Panic was giving me volume, even on a hoarse throat, to scream for aid. Many looked...none helped.

Only after three of them made a concerted effort to push their way inside the gap did it hit me. They could smell the blood of my wounds through the gap...that's why they knew! Backing out from under the cart, my one hoof batting away as the agile sprites, I felt their powerful little mouths beginning to pull away at the gap.

“Haha...stupid fuckin' pegasus. Doesn't even know you roll to get them off you...”

The line was muttered in passing to another slave, clearly not intended for me to hear it or be helped by it. But my hearing picked it up all the same and I didn't waste any time. Rolling frantically on the ground, I felt little crunches below me or heard the sound of them flying away to avoid being crushed by holding onto me. My wings ached from hitting the ground, I could feel the broken bone structures in them grinding and shifting away while my shoulder felt dangerously close to reopening the stab wound. Weathervane was right...I needed rest, lots of it. But Fillydelphia was not giving it to me. Amidst my mad thrashing to ward off the sprites, I could feel my body itself begin to wear and tire much faster. Pain built in the joints, the effort making my head spin and the air intake needed cause my lungs to burn. Finally lying still, feeling each breath in like swallowing shattered glass, I simply held myself shut and recovered. Gradually, slowly, I began to carefully tie myself up again, finally getting it far enough to pull tightly shut.

Finally...I could breathe a sigh of relief..

Until the hoof caught me around the head.

“Whiplash wasn't kidding, you are fucking useless! Get up, chicken! Get on the cart! Go! Go! Go!”

Each 'Go!' was accompanied by another skull wrenching blow to the head as Hive clipped me around the ear so hard it was almost like a straight out kick. Cantering in pain ahead of her, I strapped myself in even as she berated me. Crying the entire time, shouting I was sorry and promising to be better didn't help her mood.

“Get. Moving!”

With a final slap across the flank, I took off with the cart, wishing I could wipe my tears under the hood and visor as my aching hooves pulled me onto the big earth ramp that circled around the pit into a higher level for the nest importing.

Nothing she hit me with was particularly damaging in the long term, indeed after so long in Fillydelphia regular beatings were almost expected. But as I whipped myself into shape and made a pull of the empty cart for the ramp, it wasn't the pain that made me cry. It was that every strike was a stinging reminder of my place in the world. The place I so wanted to change...but just seemed incapable of doing so. Every effort had only landed me lower...first into harsh work in Stables and now into a literal pit where I would likely die soon.

Even as the bumping parasprites followed and toyed with me. Even as my throat itched from the growing ambient radiation down here. Even as my mind fought over which death would be worse...that one line of Red Eye's kept banging around in my head. It was stupid, illogical to think it should have happened...but I couldn't deny its significance and how upset it made me feel.

“She didn't save *you*.”

* * *

Working down in the pits, it turned out, *sucked*.

It had everything a 'normal' job in Fillydelphia might entail. I was tied to a cart and given a simple route that, bizarrely, seemed to be uphill in *both* directions. Slavers watched us like hawks...or eagles, in the case of griffin sentries. Any sign of slacking resulted in a sharp beat across the back or head, given whips couldn't penetrate the thick clothing to allow proper incentive.

But the similarities ended there. Trudging on the hard hewn rock was hell on my hooves for a start, but the sheer heat of incineration chambers all held underground in small areas led for a sweltering atmosphere. Adding in the thick clothing and unceasing hours of hard manual labour and it was a recipe for heat exhaustion that exceeded even that of Slit's forge. Around me, slaves sometimes dropped where they stood. A swift strike would either force them to their hooves again...or they would simply be dragged off. A single gunshot was usually heard following them...

The parasprites were a lethal nuisance. Small bites before a location was sealed or covered led to almost incessant yells of pain, creating an almost hell-like atmosphere amongst the flames and red rock. The punished were sent here to work off their sin in the eyes of their masters up above...almost appropriate to the old tales of Tartarus one master had scared me with as a colt. He'd told me that disobedient slaves were sent there if they caused any mischief.

...guess he was right...

Most of the parasprite injuries came from the auto axe wielders, who regularly got swarmed when slicing open nests to fit on the conveyor belts. Those of us on the carts, while noticed by less of the loose sprites, had a harder time dealing with them. Stop, drop and roll didn't work when you were padlocked to the cart itself.

But the worst...above all, were the masks we wore. They were not filtered gas masks like the slavers or powered containment suits like Hive. The only area to breathe through was a thin layer of cloth near the mouth that if you sucked enough breath in, you might get half a lung's worth. With the dry air and stifling temperature, that made things very difficult before my lack of air intake in general was factored in. The result was that while trudging up sharp earth and rock ramps and straining my back to pull carts laden down with nests, it felt like I was trying to breath through a wet and sweaty towel being held across my mouth.

Numerous times I crashed out, collapsing, believing I was dying while coughing up inside the sealed mask until a slaver would start kicking me to get up. Half blind and unable to focus as my vision whirled and became little more than a red blur, I had struggled to keep putting one hoof in front of the other...to drag myself that one step further.

This couldn't last. I wasn't even one third finished with the shift and already my body was failing. The radiation wasn't even having a chance to build, I would suffocate in this long before the end!

Finally arriving once again at the import area, I dropped while they loaded me up. Loading took twenty seconds on average, the only minor rest I got each time. Unable to lie down from the wagon straps, I ended up just hanging in my loose suit. The loaders were heaving the great nests from covered wagons that had transported them from where-ever in Fillydelphia they had been located. Covered in horrible juices and sticky fluid, they stank even above the smell of smoke. The route back was up a ramp, through a mesh corridor into the main incineration chambers again and then down another ramp that ran in a circle around the conveyors to the ground floor. Once there...dump the stuff...and back up the opposite ramp to arc back into the higher import room again.

It felt about as inefficient as it was.

Hive had continually ignored me all through the shift. How was I meant to prove myself down here? What was the goal? All I was doing was dragging carts, things that I didn't have the strength for in this heat. Maybe if she'd let me sew up the suits to protect slaves or...or...well, that was all I really could do for her. The unfortunate fact that she likely didn't care for the slaves didn't particularly compare to the fact she had no interest in being impressed by me or even caring about my survival.

“Laden up, get going!”

With a groan, my aching back muscles stretched once again as I set about tugging the heavy cart. Buzzing in my ears from the masses of parasprites still inside the nests once again became an irritation as much as a danger. They were strange creatures, irradiated to the point of carnivorous intent according to the other slaves, yet oddly playful. They allegedly had moods. Often, a little 'love bite' was their standard fare with ponies that were mostly covered. But if they sensed a hole big enough to swarm in...they could strip a pony to the bones in less than a couple of minutes. The swarming mood was rarer, apparently, only created if they hit a certain critical mass, which was why the guards had so many flamethrowers spurting through the nests and in the air. Sometimes they sprayed my cart, sucking all the oxygen from my air in an effort to keep the bugs down.

Slowly tugging the cart one step at a time up the earthen ramp that led back into the main chamber, I groaned as I felt my shoulder wound suck and stretch under the harness. Whether it had opened I didn't know...my entire body was so coated in sweat that I could be covered in blood and not know.

Ahead of me the incineration chamber appeared through the carved rock passageway. A frantic rush was being beaten back into work from near the fires by slavers while the conveyor sat still. Hive strode among it, bashing heads and shoving ponies back to their workstations even as a two guards magically carted off a limp looking pony. Blood streamed from the neck area enough to make my stomach turn. Closing my eyes...I pushed on. The parasprites in the cart behind me stayed in their nest, but their increased buzzing at the scent of blood was enough to make them itchy. Just...just don't move...I'm sealed up, don't try...please.

All the same, I felt one of them land on my head and simply sit there for a ride. These creatures were *weird*.

“Get a replacement from Grindstone! I hear he's been taking in a lot lately. You lot on the axes, back to work! I didn't say you could stop!”

Hive's voice rang out around the pit, echoing off walls while she strode back and forth among all the workers. Even a few lazy looking slavers got a clip around the ear or flank from her.

“Carts! What's the hold up?! Just because one idiot ripped their suit and got their jugular eaten doesn't mean you get to hold up, get moving!”

She confused me, just when coming in I had seen a jittery and aloof overseer. Where had this sharp and perceptive personality come from? Unless...had that thing she had taken been some sort of chem? I'd heard that ponies addicted to such things could have almost two personalities...

Spears of flame shot across the conveyor enough to make ponies duck under it, the parasprites that had killed a worker being turned to black dust in the air itself. Wandering on in our convoy, I passed a mare crying to herself behind the visor. She was carrying an auto axe out for repair, bawling as she trotted.

Another buck nearby was controlling another axe with magic, balancing on three legs. A small patch over where his suit's front left leg might have been telling the horrible tale all too clearly.

I remembered the slave in the thresher mill who had been shot for losing a leg, clearly rules differed from slaver to slaver.

No-pony walked strongly. Heads were low, running on what energy they could muster in the tiny breaks inside a rusty saferoom. If only I could breathe properly...I might be able to work harder, show my worth to Hive...to Red Eye...to Equestria...

Pushing harder, whinnying softly and snorting hot air into my own face off the visor, I set out with the cart again. The parasprite on my head gave a small hop and squeak (Oh, great, even the *parasprites* had deeper voices than me) as the speed increased downhill into the room itself and curving around the edge of the wall the corridor hugged. With wheels squeaking (and carts...) I kept up the pull until I was behind the one in front of me again.

Below me off the rather unnervingly close edge, I could see the giant pile of nests ready to be cut up. Shifting surfaces as sprites rustled around on the larger pockets of activity. Flamethrowers were pushed into said holes and flushed them out from heavily armoured slavers tramping across the nest pile. Even through the suit, I could smell the rotten mint and milk aroma of their disgusting homes.

“Get back! Everypony get back!”

Huh?

“BACK! SHIT!”

The screaming was coming from the incinerator again. I could see half a nest sticking out of it, bulging and stretching at one end.

Oh no...

It burst.

“SWAAAARM!”

Pandemonium broke out. From within the far too large to fit nest fragment, an undealt with pocket of dozens...maybe hundreds, of sprites belched forth with a slopping rip and buzzing drone. Slaves scattered as they surged over and around them like a wave, some fell or hid beneath the conveyor. Auto axes shrieked as they were dropped while still running on the floor, flamers roared toward the great mass as the swarm instinct took over and every loose sprite in the room joined the horde. A bell was ringing an alarm to workers further away, slaver after slaver rushed in through the gates, but the sprites just kept coming. How could they multiply like that? Move so fast?

...move so fast this way...

Shrieking, I tried to gallop. The wagon lurched as I jammed back on the locks. Straining, even if I could pull the weight again, the wagons in front were unable to move from one that had overturned in the panic. My hooves paced on the ground faster and faster, head whipping from side to side before it finally settled, wide eyed, on the gigantic swarm. Tightly closing them seconds before they hit.

My ears vibrated, their sensitive...whatevers...that actually heard things aching and pinging in pain while the pressure of so many wings on all sides felt utterly unreal. Screams from around me only joined with my own as I felt the cart behind pushing and knocking me toward the edge. Blind in the swarming bugs as they pushed and bit at the armour I wore, the edge was invisible.

“Stop pushing!”

The pressure increased, my cart tipped as one wheel fell.

“PLEASE! Whoever you are, stop it! STOP!”

With a great dropping of weight, the sensation of it slipping removed all pressure from me only momentarily before the harness locked, grabbed me by the waist and dragged me over so hard and hard that my ribs seemed to bend to one side.

Pulled from the swarm, behind me I saw the wagon explode into fragments and planks as it landed in the nest pile and punched right through to the concrete floor. Pulled at an angle, I dropped over the top of it and squelched into the rest. Punching through the weak material, it only marginally supported my landing before the hard rock knocked the wind out of me and sent lances of pain shooting from every wound I owned. Crying out, even within the nests, I simply curled up, clenching my teeth and seething in pain.

Hooves shaking, I knew I had to move, now! The nests were waking up, dully popping out one or two sprites at a time each. I could see the slavers herding the sprites up into the cages with fire, where higher level slavers sprayed them with more flames from the surface. Mists of black ash fell like dark snow into a pit still gripped by panic and chaos. Individual small swarms that had branched off were chasing ponies, pulling at clothing and fighting with hooves to get into gaps the slaves and slavers desperately attempted to hold shut. I saw some groups pressing their gaps against one another in an effort to help out. Some lay shrieking in agony on the ground, holding shut gaps where a parasprite had devoured a piece of their leg, an ear or a tail.

Pulling myself with my good hooves, keeping my bandaged (hopefully) and injured right hoof held close to my underbelly, I made my way through the soggy, rotten nests toward the conveyor. I...I could hide under it!

One hoof plunged into a pus filled crevice of a nest, bubbling up and sucking as it finally came loose and bogged me down. The reek that wafted up and through my nostrils was sweet and sickly, like the bodies I'd sometimes woken up screaming beside in the FunFarm from dead slaves. My visor was dripping with the stuff, the moisture getting through gaps to stain my hooves and clog up the inside of the loose suit. Every extra fold seemed wet and sticky on the interior. My own sweat, blood and whatever else had accumulated through gaps sending the stink nowhere but to me.

Enough to make me want to-

-to...oh no...

My throat seemed to spasm, tripping forward, I dry heaved from a lack of food in almost a day once more. Trapped inside my suit, for once I was glad to not vomit properly, but it kept going. Finally falling free of the nests and falling on my side, the retching turned worse...my throat seared in pain as the copper taste entered my mouth. No, please no, just a while longer...I'll...I'll get RadAway soon!

It didn't cease. Staggering, trying to keep my balance, my hooves were forced under me again. The right hoof's injury stung and burned in infected pain as I used it after the fall. The shrapnel injury from the mines having only gotten worse, apparently. Eyes watering, I slipped or fell every few steps before finally rolling under the conveyor and pressing against a buck that was calling for his big brother to come help him. I could appreciate the feeling...but my words were naught but to send prayer after prayer that I be spared

from the hell that was my new workplace.

Sprites sometimes flew down to us, making the buck and myself scream. Along with the (I think) mare on my other side, our warding hooves sent them flying off again for easier prey...or simply getting bored taunting us. Ahead of us, I saw one slave, trapped in the open, swinging an auto axe at them in a blind rage and panic. Swearing, cursing them with all the names in the world, his front hooves lifted and threw the massive whirling axe in all directions. His momentum was over-balancing him, before finally tripping. The auto axe went low, swinging out and slicing across the side of another buck who looked no older than Protégé. By some minor miracle, it only cut the suit and not him. Stopped on the spot from attempting to gallop toward us and relative safety...he started laughing.

“I...hahaha! Thank you, Goddesses! What are the chances, eh?”

We waved him towards us, there was still room. He looked at the gap and dodged away from the frantic axe swinger again before cantering over carefully. Big dopey blue eyes showed a slave not long in here.

“Hurry!” I screamed. “Get in! There's room!”

“I'm coming! I'm-AAAIIEEE!”

With horror, I saw a sprite fly right into the gap in his suit, immediately forcing its way into the side of his torso. He fell, scrambling with his hooves as I saw the little bump in his tighter suit shift around and vibrate. A trio, then half a dozen more, followed. Unable to stop them all, his hooves began simply flailing as one bit home. An anguished squeal came from him, followed by begging to us to help him. The bumps under the suit kept moving, some going right for the flesh at the gap. His front hoof kept trying to crush one, he tried to roll. But in one sickening moment, one of the little bumps rolled up his neck. Moments later, a parasprite was flying around *inside* his visor before diving toward his face. Already screaming as the dozen others bit and devoured their way into his body, the sound wailed higher as it went for its prize, becoming a shrill shriek of terror and agony.

“Get it out! *Somepony get it out!* MY EYE! *MY EYE!*”

Spreading, multiplying in seconds and growing, the suit was little more than a raging mass of parasprites stripping him to the bone, his screams becoming sick muffles and panicked mumbles, mercifully, I saw one slaver turn his flamer on the poor buck. The sounds lasted ten more seconds before finally dying, leaving little more than a few scraps of metal and a set of bones within a minute.

Amongst it all, away from the screams, the blood and gunshots of panicked slavers not used to dealing with this, I retreated as far as I could into the mass of hiding slaves. There, I simply curled up between a few of them and began crying as hard as I possibly could while trying to think of better times than this place.

There were precious few.

“She didn't save *you*.”

I know...

* * *

The aftermath was as short as it was quickly forgotten. To me, the swarm had been a mind numbingly hellish event. To the slavers in the pits...it was routine. The dead were collected, the critically wounded brutally executed before my very eyes and the rest thrown into the rest room for recovery. Everypony else...it was back to work.

Left without a cart, I was suddenly jobless. The other spares from earlier had disappeared as more shifts came on and there didn't seem to be any other job that I knew how or could physically do. As such, it was a rather depressing knowledge that I would need to locate Hive and...oh boy...ask.

There was a rule as a slave. One I had learned long ago. *Never* ask. Never say that you have nothing to do. No slave master was ever around that did not possess the mythical skill to locate work for anypony. But

to be found trying to 'slack off' carried greater punishment in Fillydelphia, one often resolved with violence. My body was already aching enough without another beating to push me into critical territories again...the illness was still building and doing that just fine on its own. Each breath was wheezing and the metallic tinge in my mouth wasn't going away. That wasn't a good sign. Any more stressful activity might bring about a set of spasms or...well, worse...

Left alone in the pit, I felt surrounded by a whirlwind of activity, shaped by the rising shape of the tunnels all the way to the surface. From the floor beside me in lines around conveyors to the curved roads running around the edges with carts, it all moved and twirled in ceaseless brutal activity with me in the eye of the storm. The brief calm before the inevitable plunge right back in. Much to my dismay...I felt myself moving to create that myself out of inevitable born loyalty to the entire system.

"I don't care if there's ten or ten thousand, we need to get that place cleared! Red Eye will have my neck if they destroy anything in there after last time!"

Hive wasn't too hard to find. Shouting amongst a congregate of slavers, she was waving a hoof in every which direction...but mostly at other ponies. Approaching meekly from across the room, I worried about how was best to approach while trying to avoid thinking about whether this was me acting to try and win my way out of here...or just acting to look for my next task. I really wanted my journal...to just sit and draw, let it all out and create to help me sort things out and know what I really was...

"And *you!*"

Stopping dead in my tracks, her head whipped around. At least twelve different forms of apology were on the tip of my tongue for not abasing myself first, as every good slave should, but her eyes were elsewhere. Nearby to the slavers, a slave worker was being held down on all fours by two heavily barded guards.

"Isn't it a bit damned obvious that thing wasn't going to fit in the fire? I've lost workers 'cause of you! Now you're going to have to clean up. See that gap up there?"

I glanced up at the same time as the blamed slave. Above us, I could see the red tinged cloud layer through a cage. Guards were still fighting to reattach a segment of mesh over a six inch hole.

"One of those idiots hit the cage when firing about like a bloody loony! Apparently, ten parasprites got out. The surface guards kept them from getting near the slave dens, but they've fluttered over and gone right into the fucking Ministry of Image building! *We only cleared that fucking place out a few days ago already!*"

Her voice rose until both slaves and slavers were glancing over at the outburst. Remarkably, the slave before her just sat quietly.

"Ah'm not goin' in..."

"I do believe you are. This is your mess and that little unicorn isn't around to wave her magic horn and do the job now, is she?"

My eyes visibly perked up. My ears would have too, had the suit not crushed them down.

"Mister Shiny did ask for her again, sure, but that little bitch isn't around anymore since the pitfight is she? So I need you to go in."

"Dun care...ah'm not goin' in to die huntin' parasprites. Shoot me if you want...ah dun care anymore..."

The earth pony looked in his early thirties, his coat and mane hidden in his suit...but his posture showed all will completely lost to even live. Was...was that how I looked sometimes? From afar, the stance was a stark reminder of the dangers of being in slavery too long. You eventually just stopped caring entirely...

After all, I knew I had once stepped on the edge of the control tower too.

"Oh you do tempt me, slave. You really do, but I need every worker at their post. Get back on carts. Least you can't fuck up there. Perhaps handing you over to Shackles or Grindstone might change your tune, they've been looking for more lately. Hey! Misty Sheen! Yeah, you!"

A young mare looked up from the conveyor's, the bright orange leather around her suit almost

camouflaging against the red haze.

“You're going topside, we need the Ministry cleared, sprite hunting. Get on it!”

She visibly recoiled. A buck beside her stepped closer. Hive marched right over to them, voice dropping.

“Did I *say* you had an opinion?”

“She's never fired a gun! Don't take her, she'll just die! Please!”

“Oh break my fucking heart, get out the way, loverboy. Unless you want to do it yourself?”

“I...”

The mare tugged at him, imploring eyes that he don't send himself in for the dangerous mission either.

“For crying out...ONE of you is gonna go! Choose!”

Holding the mare, sadly, the buck turned to nod before being pulled back by clearly the slave who was his marefriend.

“Don't!”

“Sheeny...I have to, I can't let you go in there.”

Already she began to wail, simply holding onto him as more and more slavers began to grab hold of him to begin tugging. Eventually dragging both across the ground, I saw the mare struck with a steel capped hoof and held back, crying at the top of her voice.

“Don't take him! PLEASE! I'll do it!”

“Sheeny! No! Don't!”

“I won't watch you go off to die! You...just...”

Rolling her eyes, Hive turned..

“I'm had just about enough of slaves whining in my ears today, one of you is going and that's it! Guards, just pick one of them.

“NO!”

“I'll do it!”

The third voice rang across the pit in a raspy and tired tone. Mine.

Silence overcame Hive and the pair as they all turned toward the sick little pony in ill-fitted protection gear.

“I'll...do it. I'll go.”

The words felt impossible to speak. To choose. To overcome the obedient nature to be told what my next job would be. But this pit was killing me slowly and invisibly from radiation and heat...at the very least this would get me out for a while. The danger of the task hadn't quite entered my mind yet, but some part of me knew this might help convince her...somehow.

Hive slowly trotted toward me, leaving the pair in the back to clutch one another and quickly retreat to the conveyor again. Hive's eyes were lethal, thin and serious.

“You think doing this is going to make me suddenly like you, chicken?”

“I...”

“Don't even answer. You've volunteered. Get topside, find Mister Shiny and make sure those parasprites are gone. I expect either the building clear or you dead trying to *make* it clear. Understood?”

I nodded meekly, stepping back and lowering my head.

“You dare set foot outside and it isn't, you can rest assured you'll be eating a parasprite before the night is out. I've done it to one mare for failing me before. Don't think I won't happily watch it happen to you.”

The imagery haunting my thoughts, I quickly nodded again.

“...you're still here, chicken.”

Shit! The word ran through my mind, only stopping just short on habit of actually *saying* it as I realised I'd missed my cue to leave. I'd gotten sloppy as a slave lately...that was going to cost me before long.

But even as I retreated into the elevator and began ascending to the surface again I realised the truth of the matter. I hadn't chosen this because it was a job to obey. No, my place here was assured with Hive's mentality. This was a test for me so kindly given by the Great Goddesses.

They had placed before me the same challenge that my beloved legend, the Stable Dweller, LittlePip, had once faced. An opportunity to live the legend. This may have been something LittlePip had done with both hooves tied and one eye closed in her sleep...but to me it was one small chance to prove Red Eye wrong.

Her story wasn't gone from my life yet. Time to follow in her wake, if for a little.

* * *

Limping, struggling and fighting with the headpiece as I went, my last legs out of the elevator to the surface once again were filled with frantic zeal to taste the sickly air once again. Virtually throwing the visor off, I braced my lungs and took a deep gulp of the dry air. Compared to the pit...this was the purest and cleanest air I had ever tasted. Despite the rattle of my throat and several stifled coughs...it brought a little light of escape to my mind. At least from the trial by fire down below.

Spending about a minute, I simply sat and retched while I tried to get as much air as I could. Making ridiculous sucking sounds and throwing my head back as much as it rocketed forward. Dry, hot air was all that seemed to go in or out, unable to breathe with much more.

“Well, well, laddie. Don't I recognise this little sight before me, eh?”

Oh please, not now...

Turning on the spot, my eyes widened in surprise to see a set of large tables laid out in some of the drier earth. Wares, scraps of metal, threads and leather lengths rested beside old oatmeal and a few odd pieces of clothing. Slaves clampered around it, shouting and haggling with shouted voices while the tender, Sooty Morass, completely ignored them. The earth pony had locked eyes on me coughing near the lift exit, waving me toward his stand.

My eyes didn't lock on him back...they spotted the bright orange sachets on his table. RadAway!

Heaving myself up, I made a sorry little limp across. All the wear and tear of injuries and work was just one dull ache all across my back and shoulders now, even as Sooty turned back to his clientèle I just sat on my rump in the mud to wait. Slaves bought strips of metal, leather and thread to maintain their suits. Pulling the bigger slave's pouch out, I took a look inside before having to hide my glee. Twenty five caps! They weren't worth too much in here among slaves, but ponies like Sooty and guards would still use them!

Ahead of me, a mare dropped what looked like a book on the table, receiving a few strands of thread in return. Behind her, a buck wandered up. Only half wearing his containment suit, I could see the telltale signs of radsore across his cheeks. I recognised that weak gait...he was dying just as much as I from the radiation in the pits and air of Fillydelphia.

“H-how much is the RadAway?”

“Heh, had a little run in, lad?”

“The pits...I...I keep throwing up blood, please...”

“Twenty five caps or trade, lad.”

“But that's all I have!”

“Not my problem, laddie. Buy it or die quietly, you'll put off my regulars.”

Biting into the sachet after dumping twenty five caps on the desk, the buck galloped off. Idiotically, he sat near the other slaves, something even I knew would be a bad idea. The brawl from the other irradiated slaves behind me and the buck's pitiful whines as they tore the vaunted RadAway from his hooves almost made me miss that it was my turn while trying to tune it out..

“Aah! Hello little Murk, lad. Now can't I guess what you're after, eh?”

He was entirely ignoring the buck being horribly beaten behind me. Straining to keep my attention focussed on the canny trader, I almost felt guilty for trying to tune him out too. These things just...happened...in Fillydelphia.

“Please...I need RadAway, please!”

“Coulda' called it. That'll be fifty caps or equivalent trade, laddie.”

About to dump out my caps, I just felt my ears wilt, mouth tremble and eyes tear up. He was *extorting* me!

“But...but that buck-”

“Wasn't immediately dying of radiation in his insides, lad. He's got a few days left in 'em if I've seen me sick ponies right. But you, ye little winged thief, you've only got a few wee hours left, right? We've been over this back in the Terminal, remember? Not to mention you owe me for stolen stock, I'd beat ye but yer too good a potential customer. Of course...could always put ye down for me other work, got a few clients been askin' for somethin' with wings...”

“Sooty, please, I-”

In an almost identical repeat of history, my lungs seemed to swell and remind me that they were the exact reason for this sales bias. Staggering in front of his stall, I had to place my injured hoof on it to keep myself up. Sooty's eyes glanced to it even as I pulled it back in pain.

“An injured hoof too, now? Oh, come now, lad. You're just making this too easy for ponies like me to take advantage of ye. Why, I almost feel a little bit sorry for you. Oh wait...you're a thief. Well...there goes any niceness I might've had. So, shall we talk employment? Or do ye have anything else hidden inside that suit?”

So it had really come to this...I was being asked to literally sell my own...my own body...to give up the one thing that in some way belonged to me. No...there *had* to be a way, think, Murky, *think!*

Looking along his bench at the plates of metal and leather...one idea gradually and horribly began to slip into my mind.

I didn't like it. Oh no...I didn't like it *one little bit*.

“My suit.”

“Oh?”

“I'll sell my suit...”

Welling up, the risk factor seemed certain of choosing parasprite death over sickness. But Sooty was the only merchant who could solve at least one of my problems. Grinning suddenly, he leaned forward.

“Now, yer talkin', laddie! Now let us get to haggling. So...ye say you'll be giving me the one suit, eh? Two metal plates, cloth, two ties and some leather it looks like...hm...throw in the twenty five caps.”

“One suit for one RadAway! They each save a life!”

Sooty just laughed, then laughed some more and eventually broke into a cackling roar of comedic screaming as he slapped my back hard enough to make me yelp in pain.

“Oh this is just cute, lad. You're trying to *barter*? What makes you think you have anything to stand on in this? When I said haggle...what I really meant was, I'll tell ye what I want for one RadAway satchet.”

I really wanted to argue, but he was right. My throat was tingling and my spit was no longer clear. In maybe less than a couple hours, it would start to build into the dangerzone. I couldn't risk not getting some sort of medication to hold it back.

“Now, I'll be taking yer suit and the twenty five caps. Come on, laddie. Undress like a good partner in trade.”

Choking back both a cough and a sad little whinny, I began untying and pulling myself from the horridly sweaty and ill fitting suit. My coat was drenched under it, coated in dark red blood...whether mine or somepony else's I did know. Thick goops of nest slime still crusted around the bottoms of my hooves.

“Oh, well now, bandages! Now that's a surprise.”

My body still had some around my chest and shoulder as well as the yellowed and pussy ones on my front right hoof. My head hung sadly, until his next words bit ever deeper.

“I'll be takin' those cleaner ones too.”

“What?!”

“Truth of the matter is, little Murk. I can ask what I want. Name any price. You *have* to take it to live. The very definition of 'over a barrel', me friend.”

You are *not* my friend. But for all my defiant looks...Sooty just motioned with his hoof to the bandages.

“Strip em off, lad. I gots customers that might want them.”

It felt terribly slow. Not entirely painful but making me feel horribly vulnerable. The bright pink and red welt on my chest from Protégé's bullet seemed to throb and sting in the air, while my shoulder revealed that it had slightly opened. Even looking at it made me wince. The memory of a foul, frothing raider holding me down and plunging that wicked knife into my shoulder still haunted my thoughts. It was all proving too much, my eyes were already dripping as I handed over the thin strips of bandage. The only one he didn't want was the infected one on my right hoof.

“Hmm...and I think I'll take a few feathers too, there. A bit of décor for me braids, y'see?”

His hoof toyed with that grey mane, the beads in the braiding clicking as they struck one another. It began to break over, proper tears as I felt all slave eyes on me. The little pegasus being stripped of everything he could be by one trader in exchange for one tiny satchet worth less than thirty caps.

Whimpering, I reached back with my teeth to my right side. At least after the raider's pulling my wings yesterday (Had it really been only one day ago? It was hard to tell...) my wings would be symmetrical.

That was no comfort. Yelping on each pull, I yanked four feathers free to hand over the table. Sucking in air, despite my hatred of those dead wings by my side bringing so much hurt and no benefit...I couldn't help but feel an intense sense of loss to willingly pull even small parts of them away. I didn't know if feathers even regrew or not...

Almost chuckling with delight at his large haul, Sooty set about placing my feathers into his mane immediately and laid everything else out on his table alongside pocketing the caps. Standing before him, shivering and crying, I just waited for him to finally hand it over.

“Hehe...finally ye learn, lad. Well, here's your side. Enjoy!”

The RadAway was finally handed over to me. Leaping forward, I almost hugged it to my chest to prove that it was really in my hooves. Without another word to the gloating trader, I glumly trotted off to the side with the RadAway in my mouth. The pits cast more smoke around the muddy field and broken concrete that I hoped to find somewhere secluded to drink my RadAway...cry a little...and...and then...

...something...I'd do *something*. I had to. Every advantage I had was gone. The pits would tear me apart, they almost already had. Now...to see about making sure I never had to go back. One visit had been

brutal enough.

Guided by the gruff nods of Hive's guards on the surface, I made my way to the 'Ministry of Image.' Apparently one of the buildings near the edge of the pit fields. As I slipped and slopped my way through the muddy fields surrounding the pits, avoiding trampling ponies, my mind briefly wandered. Brimstone Blitz had said something about the Ministries...as had Weathervane. Many ponies across my life had mentioned them, talking of how they 'ran Equestria' or in more strong opinions like Brim's, 'destroyed' Equestria.

Sundial, it seemed, had worked in the Wartime Ministry himself. But in all my life...I'd never seen one for sure. Mostly due to a lack of being able to read signs. Having Brimstone or Glimmerlight around had made things so easy...

“Hey, you! Pegasus!”

Stopping dead at the sharp words, I almost felt confused when they were interrupted afterwards by a hacking cough. Turning on the spot, the RadAway hanging in my mouth, I saw a bruised and bleeding figure limping his way toward me. It was the buck who'd had his own sachet stolen...

“Lucky you...RadAway...”

His eyes were full of almost lust and mad determination. I recognised them...I'd once seen them in my own eyes in the desperate struggle to stay alive day to day in this wretched city.

“I think I'll be taking that...”

“NO!”

Without even waiting, I just turned and tried to run in a blind panic. The buck's hooves kicked up earth as he hurled himself to land atop me even as I curled around the sachet. He wasn't getting my RadAway! No-pony was! It was mine! After all that it was *mine!*

“Give! Me! It!”

“GO AWAY!”

The sick buck seemed to turn aggressive, trying to shove me away and tear it from my hooves in selfish greed more than nasty thoughts to harm me. I could smell the result of a long life in Fillydelphia off of him, no doubt similar to myself, but tinged with an infected reek from the mass of radsorens across his face and hooves.

“I need it more! I'm in the pits every day!”

“I won't live a day!”

Keeping it held tight, his greater earth pony strength was prising me away, gripping it between his hooves. Why didn't I drink it right away? Why did I always have to try and run and hide?! We pulled on it, my mouth and good hoof against his two stronger front hooves. Muffled by the sachet, I tried to plead to him.

“Rease! Ust et o efore it-

Pop.

Splash.

The orange liquid splattered, the majority falling down to soak into the earth. Huffing, the buck stamped his hoof on my chest and cantered off immediately without so much as a glance at me, muttering about 'what I made him do.' Clutching my ribs in pain, I simply stared in abject shock...the orange lifesaver was draining into the earth quickly. I...I had to...

Bending down, I crammed as much of the earth inside my mouth as I could, using my tongue to hold it around my teeth and sucking hard. Grainy RadAway slid down my sore throat. Clod after clod of

earth...choking and fighting the urge to throw up...I collapsed to the ground. A lot had gone down...maybe half of the packet. I had given everything...and even then I hadn't got all I was supposed to. Teary eyes looking to the clouds above, I begged of the Goddesses;

“Is...is this some kind of cruel joke?”

For a few seconds, I did little but lie there, holding my bandaged hoof closely. The illness had died back a tad from what RadAway I had gotten...enough to last perhaps till tomorrow if I didn't go back in the pits again. Part of me was wishing for somepony to appear...to help me up again. Like Glimmer had in the Mall. Please...somepony...

After twenty long and silent seconds of lying in the mud, the thought was beginning to solidly drift home.

I really missed my friends...

I missed my things...right now DJ-Pon3 might have said something to inspire me or hear one of Sundial's reassuring messages of happiness while I was down lower in the pits. I missed my journal and the self confidence and comfort the freedom of art gave to escape the harsh reality surrounding me. That was I trapped in Fillydelphia, likely, for a very long time, under the shadow of a terminal illness that made my life worse just in an effort to stay alive. That I had masters who hated me, other slaves who loathed me and a dream that was being crushed *daily*.

Why couldn't I just be like everypony else out there...?

Not wanting to move, my body curled up in the mud, sucking in air enough to properly cry. To weep in a way I hadn't since that last night cowering in my pigsty back at the FunFarm. It had been a wild ride since that one beautiful moment when I had learned to...to choose. Unceasing danger, galloping around and enduring pain. I'd tried to escape twice. I had almost died, well...who's counting by now? But it all just kept coming back to this. Ponies came and went. Some stayed, some left. The mare had been in my life only to disappear. Brimstone had escaped, likely never to be seen again in my lifetime. Sunny was with The Master. Even Sundial had been taken from me.

Glimmer was with Protégé still, at least. But my path back to her was being stopped. I wanted her around. To hear her cheeky jokes, for her to tease me or ruffle my mane. I wanted my Big Sister Best Friend Forever back.

Even through the depression, part of me was trying to kick my rump and say that this job could bring her back, that if I impressed Shiny enough he might talk to Hive! Be like LittlePip, Murky! Do what she did! Prove you *can!* But they were the voices of hope, dreams and daring bravery. Each of which had been gradually stripped from me in failure after failure.

Better to just lie here and wait for some slaver to shout at you, to order me that I could just fall back in line again and not think about anything. That way it wouldn't hurt so much.

“Hey! You! You the one Hive sent up to clear the Ministry?”

Opening my eyes, my head lifted with a soft sucking sound from the mud and spotted a slave master wandering over the muck toward me. His face betrayed more curiosity than rage.

“What you doing lying in the muck you daft thing? Come on, get on over, work to be done.”

The voice wasn't harsh or angry, unlike most slavers. It seemed oddly kind...almost reminiscent of Protégé if you took out the wordiness and replaced it with a strange earnest nature that seemed to 'ask without asking' rather than demand. Sighing, I lazily stood and trotted after him.

“Yes, master...”

“Eh, can the master talk, I'm Mister. Mister Shiny. Well, let's see about getting you set up to work then, shall we? Here's the Ministry.”

Almost to my surprise, it was a fairly nondescript building alongside several others like anything else in

Fillydelphia. I'd been lying almost right beside it. Weren't Ministries big and fancy? They sounded it...

“Ever worked with parasprites before?”

Without even answering, I just gave a slight shrug and nodded toward the pits I had come from.

“Right, stupid question. Now we got to wait for the spark batteries to charge for the rifle. Only problem is...how to fire it, it doesn't have a mouth sight. I *was* expecting a unicorn like last time. Was sort of hoping they'd send that little one with the PipBuck again, was pretty good.”

That grabbed my attention.

“You *met* her?!”

“Who? The mare with the PipBuck?”

“Yes!” The sudden exclamation made me double over with a heaving cough. Small spots of blood fell to the ground. Mister Shiny grabbed my torso, pulling me back up. Apparently the meagre amounts of RadAway were still working their magic before it would die down properly. No excited shouting...got it.

“Woah, there. Seems Fillydelphia has gotten to you a little, might want to ask your master about getting into Hearts and Hooves Slave Hospital sometime soon. But yes...I met the little mare, why? Relative? Marefriend?”

Stupidly, through my recovery from the cough, I hoped he couldn't see my sudden blush. I wished...

“No...no...just, uh...I only saw her a little then...um...lost her. Sorry, mas-I mean, Mister Mast, uh, Mister Mosi-, um, Mech- or...Smiley?”

“Shiny.”

Trotting back, I abased myself quickly.

“Sorry, sorry! Mister Shiny!”

Mister Shiny seemed to just shrug and trot over to the building. There was a small table near to it that was being hastily set up by a few slavers. A rather makeshift magical energy rifle sat on it beside a few spark batteries hooked up to an odd contraption involving a lot of gemstones.

“Whatever, let's just get you readied up. Um...didn't they give you a suit?”

I nodded lightly, trotting over and sitting obediently nearby.

“Right...and it's not on you, because? I used to have one here, but we didn't exactly expect to have to clear this building again.”

“I...kinda lost mine.”

Mister Shiny stared at me for the longest time before sighing, clearly already checking me off in his head.

“Now, we've got at least ten parasprites in there. The last mare took on fifty or so and managed it, so hopefully this shouldn't be a problem for one slave to do, suit or not. Just stop drop and roll if they get too close. Ten shouldn't be able to swarm you.”

Mister Shiny was surprisingly friendly sounding...although it was clear that he was still a slaver and expected the work done as much as any other. Looking sideways at me as I tried to figure out how to hold the rifle, he even smiled. The grin seemed dead inside, despite the pleasantries.

“Often wondered what became of that little mare, so busy getting things done with Hive and the like breathing down my neck I tend to miss things. Eager little thing, though, about the same size...perhaps age as you?”

Again, I lightly nodded. Right...she'd done fifty, I could do ten, right? Just point and shoot.

“Had that look in her eyes, determination and spirit...hah, what am I saying. Probably just trying to get

on our good sides here in Fillydelphia. Wouldn't be the first to try and join the ranks from slave to slaver. Damn few that ever make it though, there's only one in recent memory, I think.”

My thoughts drifted to Sooty Morass. That slimy trader likely had his eyes on that goal too as soon as he had enough dirt on somepony with authority.

“Now, the rifle doesn't have any real kick so somepony your size should be able to mouthfire without any trouble.. Low power energy, so two spark batteries. Twenty shots should be enough.”

“What...what if I miss?”

“Find something to blat them with! The mare used a bag, I think, to capture them. You'll figure something out, I hope.”

“Are...are you sure I can't get another suit?”

That mirthless smile turned to me, before Shiny shrugged and began strapping a small saddlebag to my side, probably to sweep up the ash into. “Sorry, kid. I don't make the rules. You lose the one you were given, you don't get another. Hive would know, she always does. On those damn mint-als you can't slip anything past her. Look, do it quick enough and I'll see about getting you something for the trouble, off the record. It's a lot off my back if this place is cleared before Red Eye finds out his presses are infested again, so you could do me a real favour.”

'Something for my trouble', huh? Perhaps a letter of commendation? Did the chain of command work like that? Urgh...for a scrap of paper and some charcoal so I could organise this. I had to figure out how to get on Hive's good side and then survive the remainder of my shift still.

The problem, of course, was that if I spent too long in here, my only support from Mister Smi-I mean...Shiny would be lost. Whereas if I tried to finish quickly and please him...the pits would likely be my return destination. Being down there any longer was a death sentence in and of itself without a suit.

Why was nothing ever easy?

* * *

Argh! Why was nothing *ever* easy?!

Crying, sweating and bleeding, I galloped down the metallic hall, screaming at the top of my lungs in sheer panic. The almost empty energy rifle swung madly where I had pushed it through my saddlebag straps. Behind me the small swarm of parasprites surged toward me at a frightening pace. Rounding another corner of another infuriatingly identical (to illiterates) junction, I gave it my all. All I needed was an open door!

My shots had been pathetic. Missing almost every shot I had been given in my first charge pack and all but a few in my second. One parasprite had been hit. The rest had converged and flown after me for daring disturb their rest in the rafters of a storage chamber. Since then it had been a dangerously tiring game of tag around the Ministry building. I'd galloped through offices, collided with heavy terminals and knocked over shelves containing enough books to keep Protégé grinning like a kid until the second apocalypse. Tragically...obstacles on the ground, I had discovered, had little effect on flying creatures.

The low buzz became louder as they rounded the same corner, twenty feet behind me. Pushing my skinny little legs as hard I could, I made for the closest doorway I could see (what sadistic idiot would lock them all just before a balefire war?!) and prayed it was open. Pulling with all my might on the mouthgrip handle...it didn't budge. No!

The parasprites whizzed toward me, little mouths chomping open and closed. Already one had nipped me on the neck when it had ambushed me through a ventilation duct in the chase...the pain had been sharp and brief, but a horrible reminder of the reality should they catch me. Come on, door!

It wasn't shifting. In sheer frustration, I bucked it...only for it to swing open.

Oh. Right. A *push* door. Well excuse me for not being able to read you *arrogant pre-war aristo-*

whatsits!

Hopping through, I swivelled and pushed it back shut again. Really...I should have known. Every door in here had been a push door thus far. Dull thumps sounded on the far side...before the buzzing ceased. I'd bought myself a little time...they would find another way, I was sure of it. Spilled among dirt or not...that RadAway had likely saved my life for me to be able to keep up that gallop as long as I had on a wheezy throat and swollen lungs.

Catching my breath a second, I slowed down, turning to the area I had entered. A security corridor of some sort, but it was wrecked. An upturned desk warped from some sort of heat or energy lay on the floor next to a wrecked terminal lying on its side. The drawers lay open, three bottlecaps spilled on the floor. Beyond it I could see a smashed turret still sparking on the roof. A few dots of ash were spotted around amongst a mass of energy rifle scars on the walls and ceiling.

Eventually it began to all stick together. This had been *her* work. It was all so obvious! She'd come in, used the desk as a shield from the turret, likely hacked it from the terminal using her awesome PipBuck and turned it against the parasprites! That'd explain the marks on the walls from magic energy shots. As if *LittlePip* would have ever missed or had to resort to brute strength, hah! A hero such as herself probably didn't even break a sweat.

But oh the feeling...to wander amongst her handiwork. A small surge of pride and satisfaction to see the results of her passing once again. Hee! She'd been here! She'd been here! She'd been here!

After a few seconds, I figured that prancing around the room on an injured hoof *probably* wasn't the best way to let it heal. Apparently LittlePip ranked higher than self preservation on my mental priorities. At least I could-

Sudden shock overtook me as I sensed motion in the air behind me. Spinning, reaching for the energy rifle in vain hope...I didn't see any parasprites. Not any organic ones anyway.

It was a Spritebot.

Metallic, rounded and floating silently, a big screen on the front of it lay dormant as it seemed to just stare at me. After a second or two when my smile had faded, it gradually floated off in a rather wobbly fashion down the corridor. I *really* hated those things. Creeping up on you...acting randomly and then just buzzing off...

Scooping up the three bottlecaps she had left behind (So charitable!) into my saddlebag, I cast my eyes around. Right...where would she have gone next? I should follow her methods...do what she did to the letter as much as I could! That'd help me survive. Learn from the legend. There were a few exits, one a corridor leading back toward the staircases, another the way through the security gate and the last a small maintenance room off to the side. Well...a great hero would be resourceful, right? She probably went in the maintenance room.

Trotting over, I cast my head in around the door.

The small room caught my attention immediately. It was *covered* in pegasus memorabilia. Finding myself wandering in, my head spun in a slow circle along the walls. Posters lined the walls, the most prominent making me almost blush in embarrassment at my pathetic comparison to them...

Blue and yellow clad pegasi. Pictured rocketing in formation. The artwork was *fantastic*. If I could only have reached high enough, I'd have taken it for myself. They looked incredible...coloured manes and whipping smoke trails, what pegasi should be like.

What they should be like...

My eyes tried to avoid glancing sadly back at my rather threadbare and non-functional wings.

Pulling my eyes from the poster, I let them settle lower. Huh...more blue and yellow pegasus 'team awesome' stuff, all clustered around that skele...skel...skeleeeeeARRRGHHH!

Backpedalling intensely, I fell into the shelves of the maintenance room. Tools and boxes showered down around me as the buck's skeleton stared, lidless, from the floor up at me. His limbs were splayed out, unnaturally posed and clearly the result of some sort of spasm attack. I'd had enough by now to recognise it...

No! Little...LittlePip had been here! She hadn't been scared by skeletons, had she? Of course not! She had...had taken the things she needed and calmly left...so could I. Just...just stop thinking it was going to suddenly get up...

It lay beside a workbench. From the dust, I could tell somepony had worked here recently. Rotten food lay across the floor and bench, tipped out of something. Wow...she had built a weapon or something from the scraps she had found. Probably some sort of really advanced perfect tool that saw her through the escape. That's how it had always happened in my mother's stories.

Even through my slightly immature love of anything related to that wonderful mare who had shown me the way, I recognised that it was simply a reminder. She hadn't just been some once off wonder. LittlePip, the Stable Dweller, really had been there in the Pit with me. She had existed, had worked in Fillydelphia, was still out there. Seeing more evidence of it...well, it sounded stupid but...even this sort of aftermath helped remind me of how her heroic escape had inspired me right in the beginning of my new life.

My eyes crossed to the side. A whole pile of magazines sat there. Oooh...perhaps she had learned things from them? I dragged one across, opening it quickly before shutting it even faster...blushing madly.

I hadn't ever seen a pegasus mare before. Certainly not *those* parts. The magazine sat under my hoof, the rather sultry cover now more obvious. A logo of a pair of erect wings emblazoned the top of it. My hoof was sort of tempted to open it and take another look...for...for research, y'know? Wings were tough to draw...yeah, that's all it was!

No! No what was I doing? I was trying to follow in the hoofsteps of my idol! She wouldn't have stopped to take time reading...reading smut! Neither would I!

Turning, I huffed and swung my head high before marching across the room to the door.

I got a very impressive three feet before turning back to shove a small amount of the huge collection into my saddlebag and then gallop from the room.

* * *

It's just...just reference material! Pre-war ponies were healthier, I had to learn to draw them! That's all! I wasn't...wasn't taking it because of those athletic pegasus mares...with their well rounded curves and...and...it was just to help my art! Some of those poses looked...good to draw...an artist had to be varied, right?

Shaking the justifications to my own nerves aside, I looked ahead of me. The corridor opened up into an office. Probably management, I guessed, behind a turret and a severely smashed assistant's desk.

Thankfully, there was nothing destroyed in here past the usual shaky floor panels and exploded circuits on the roof. Standard fare in most buildings amongst this scarred and lost world.

Briefly, my mind drifted onto just how strange it was that even after two hundred years and my entire life living in it...it still felt like a fresh and horrifying scar. Equestria's real form was still ingrained in us as ponies, the macabre ruination that surrounded us was just a daily reminder.

Besides me, large glass panels, thick and misty, overlooked the huge printing presses that Mister Shiny had talked of. Not for the first time, the ambition of Red Eye's task in Fillydelphia for us impressed me. Books and folders could be made again for those foals he was protecting. Either that, or they could be used to mass produce artwork once more! The thought of one of my sketches (well...one I'd feel fine showing others anyway...heh...) being on ponies' walls across Fillydelphia or the wasteland was a wonderful one. Could Protégé be right? Could us ponies in here as slaves be doing the right thing in the end? Trapped behind the great Wall, we were hungry, dying and enslaved to a life of labour, but if this was the sort of thing

it might produce in the end...

Sighing, I turned away from the presses. It was easy to think that while alone in a somewhat secure room. But outside, in the irradiated air or struggling to survive in the hellish nightmare of slave life under Red Eye, reality slammed home very quickly. Fillydelphia was an abomination, one we were all tragically still a part of. Really, my wish to be free was as much to not be beaten, lashed, ill or starved any more as much as it was a sense of longing to see the world through free eyes. I dreamed of the day when Fillydelphia's industry might be taken by somepony kinder. Too many ponies died every day in here in this iron rule. In their sleep, shot by guards or killed by the work like that poor buck in the pit. It had to end. This...this wasn't right, no matter what rhetoric Protégé gave for it.

Turning back into the office, there was one more desk with an active terminal rested, its surface bearing a few folders and books. The walls were lined with more posters. A lavender pony was pictured with a sparkling book, another showing war technology. Amongst them all, I saw those same six mares. I wished I could keep remembering their names...Rainbow something...what was it? The only one I invariably remembered (and likely would for at least another six rebirths) was, of course, Pinkie Pie. Her toothy grin stared at me from across the room. Around her were a number of happy looking spritebots. No doubt it was to try and sell the idea to a populace. To reassure that they were always watching you.

Well...they certainly had managed it. As if those creepy eyes looking at me down the left hand side of the poster weren't bad enough, thanks to that spritebot earlier (hadn't I saw one before that close in the FunFarm too?) I certainly *did* feel like I was being...well...

...watched.

Sighing, I made my way to the desk, passing by the Pinkie poster and hopping up to stare at the terminal. As if I could ever do anything to these...LittlePip had probably activated something really cool or solved some mystery from it, best not to touch. Not like it could actually help me anyway. What was a *terminal* going to do to kill parasprites? No...I instead glanced at the book beside it.

It was a scrapbook of sorts. No pages seemed even vaguely identical, being crammed with a ton of clippings, pictures, photos and so much else besides. Really, it was more of an album. One page had a small image of that yellow and pink medical mare, the one of the Ministries. I wished I could draw her...she seemed really sweet. Brimstone's assertions that these ponies had somehow destroyed Equestria seemed almost stupid when I looked at those caring eyes.

Flicking through more, there was little to be discovered without the ability to read. The most I got was a really cool picture of the rainbow mare standing victorious atop a *dragon!* Woah! Was that what pegasi could really do?! The huge beast looked dead, its hide the same colour as Brimstone's coat.

I placed the book back down carefully. Clearly, LittlePip hadn't spent a huge amount of time here. Really, there was little but odd memories of the past. Funny really, that after the Stable, at least for the now, outside of skeleton shock, I felt a...a little better. I guess comparison could really help overcome lesser instances. All the same...too long in here and I figured it might become unnerving. After all...I was alone in this big...empty...dead...Ministry. All by myself other than sprites of all kinds creeping around...

Shaking my head, I set out to continue. No...I couldn't get bogged down, a Stable-style freakout was not what I needed. Just keep to LittlePip's trail. Advancing, the last door on my right caught my eye, a simply bathroom...but it held within it an unopened medical case! The sing-song of "Potential RadAway!" lit in my head as I rushed in.

Someday, I would probably stop running into skeletons. As fast as I had galloped in...I shrieked and backtracked in a blur of activity. Half hidden beneath a collapsed piece of ceiling, the crushed mare's skeleton betrayed her no doubt painful last moments. From where I had fallen against the desk, my eyes remained locked on the empty sockets, struggling to stop my mind imagining being trapped under a chunk of rock while my world died.

No...wait, my world *had* died. The only difference was she had known what it looked like.

Sucking in breath and steeling myself, I trotted back in. There was precious little, but one thing caught

my eye.

A set of shackles on the floor...fallen in the exact same shape as my own cutie mark.

...they had been hers.

Alone in this place, she had found a way to break her chains. To leave them behind her in light of her coming great escape from slave life. How long had LittlePip worn these? Not too long, I guessed, judging by DJ Pon3's reports. But all the same, these had been the chains that bound the Stable Dweller into the life of servitude...and she had simply removed them.

I wanted to take them...they were something that had, in some way, belonged to her. Something I could have as a reminder of her, to feel connected to my great inspiring hero. But it wasn't right...these shackles had bound her, the same way they bound me. As a symbol of freedom and escape, they were entirely unsuitable. A reminder of a dark part of her life that she had willingly broken away from. LittlePip had left these here. For me to take them seemed to go against what she had sought to achieve.

Elsewhere, around the bathroom were only the partial rags of the poor mare's clothing and a couple of small tools. There was a half squeezed tube of wonderglue (Yoink!) and much to my delight, a medical box on the wall! Those wonderful butterflies, the same as my old saddlebag, promised so many things! The Stable Dweller clearly would never have needed these, she was too good to be hurt!

It was locked. Even my patented pathetic whine of 'want' couldn't convince it to give up the healing items trapped within. Instead, I took the wrench from the mare's toolkit and jammed the clamp into the rusty edge of the medical box. It wasn't going to be exactly dignified or clean, but these cases hardly looked tough. A few seconds of pulling at the wedged wrench with my teeth would do it!

Fifteen minutes and an awful lot of swinging and pulling later, I finally fell back on my rump as the now somewhat destroyed box popped open and its contents fell nicely into my hooves. Hah! Little Murky isn't as weak as they think! My grin turned to a moan as my loose tooth made its presence known from all that pulling before I looked down at the one item the case had contained.

A...packet of sweeties? In my hooves was a little tin box marked in bright colours. I could hear small mints or something tumbling around inside it. I couldn't lie...it was somewhat anticlimactic. No wonder LittlePip hadn't bothered with this here, what would she ever want with a few little sugar sweeties in the middle of her busy life being a hero and all? I popped the lid open. Hey, perhaps a little sugar energy would keep me going! The little white tablets certainly looked tasty.

Upping the tin, I raised it to my mouth, ready to down every single one of them.

Krrsh!

Stopping as my ears picked up the odd sound, I poked my head out of the bathroom instead. I could have sworn that sounded like...like...

An airvent grate falling to the floor...

Down the hallway, I could hear the fluttering and whimsical whisps that betrayed the location of parasprites. Oh...oh *shit*. This was a dead end! Throwing the mints in my small saddlebag, I grabbed the energy rifle off its strap across my back and got to my hooves once more. Did they know I was here? The sound wasn't getting any closer...

Carefully, I trotted out of the bathroom. Glancing back, I almost jumped as I saw myself in the mirror, before controlling my movements. Once again, my eyes passed to my cutie mark...then to the exact same symbol from LittlePip's chains on the ground. If only mine could just be removed like that...

"I'll do it, LittlePip...please, I haven't given up yet. I...I just don't know how...if you could only show me something to give me a little hope again...something to prove to me I can do this."

A small *thump* from a parasprite knocking something over sounded a lot closer. I had to get moving. My eyes still rested on the chains though...before finally ripping away to look for a way out.

As before, there was none. The parasprites could be heard approaching down the security corridor. Unaware of my presence as least, they seemed to be moving slowly, if I closed my eyes and concentrated on hearing. But a door out was needed, I'd never get past them! Oh, what to do, what to do...I only had three or four shots left! I couldn't hit anything short of a huge wall with this thi-

...aaah.

I pulled the magic rifle into my mouth again. I'd have to move fast. Terror made my heart beat faster as I tried to steady my grip and move my tongue into position. The barrel pointed directly across from me...right at the windows that led to the walkway above those huge printing presses.

I only had one shot at this. Well, I had three. But *figuratively*.

Zap! Zap! Zap! Thk!

Energy flared from the barrel the first three times, blinding my eyes and streaking across the room. I heard them splat against the window, saw the shattered glass melting or evaporating from the area where all three shots had hit. The window remained unbroken...but hopefully it was weakened enough for me to-

Kree-ee!

Parasprites! Gazing sideways, I saw them swarm in the door. Even only nine of them seemed enough as they hurtled toward me. Galloping, I leapt at the window with all my might and screamed as my injured shoulder and chest impacted against it. The weakened panel of glass sheared right off the greater area of the window, punching a hole through onto the walkway. Sliding across its smooth surface, I barely grabbed the edges of the walkway itself to stop my falling into the presses below. Even turned off...there were enough sharp edges to tear me apart. The energy rifle though, dropped between a great pair of rollers. Urgh...*this* is why you need safety railings, pre-war ponies! Is it *really* too much to ask for somepony to have a lick of sense in this world?!

Straining and grunting in pain, I rolled back onto the balcony and immediately had to dive to avoid the parasprites rushing through. Swishing my tail at them, I galloped off before they decided my tail trying to ward them off was a meal in itself.

Of course...a big disadvantage of me being a ground pounder meant I had to use the walkway...they simply cut across the corners after me. Yelling in stark fear, sweating and trying to avoid looking back, I simply ran around the edge of the room, slapping each doorway in an effort to find one that was open! The noise increased behind me, the deceptively quiet buzzing from those little wings ringing in my ears like the sound of my oncoming death. A sharp nip on my rump led me to scream and ramp my own backside into a wall hard enough to knock it off. Tears flew from my eyes. The walkway only had stairs to go down to the printing presses in each corner, but I'd be caught if I slowed down to go on them!

Please, somepony have left your door open. Pleeeeease somepony be generous enough to have left it unlocked!

One last door remained before I was back where I had started...and the hole was too high to climb back through fast enough with my height. Okay...the doors in this place were...um...pull, right? That last one I had pulled to open!

Springing up, I clasped my mouth to the door and tugged hard enough that the resulting lack of opening almost pulled a tooth right out. Squealing as I felt my gums bleed, my eyes widened as the parasprites closed in. I simply screamed 'NO' as loud as I could, I didn't want to be chewed and eaten to death...please no....no no NO!

Trying to ward them away, I fell backwards into the door...falling through as the push door opened behind me. Not stopping to even curse anypony, I crawled and kicked out. The door slammed shut...and bounced inward again.

“NO!”

Struggling to my hooves, I galloped forward into it. A small red sprite poked its face through the door even as I slammed it shut with a great cry. I didn't even see if it had dodged back or been crushed as my hooves pounded on the door as though it might close *more*. Eventually...tired, sweating and bleeding lightly again from my neck and rump, I slumped against it with my head in my hooves. My matted mane drooped, my teeth hurt and my entire body was shivering in adrenaline and fear.

I'd...I'd just stay here a while...

At least...at least until the tears stopped...

* * *

My crying, as always, tended to last a good few minutes. Scared, confused and alone without my journal...it was all I had to fall back on. A good, long and hard cry to let all the emotion drain out of me.

Finally, I let my wet eyes look up to gauge my latest environment. I expected some other random office...but what I got was anything but.

Around me lay the single most lavish office I had ever seen. A thick carpet, dusty and grey but obviously once pure white lay below me. Decorative furniture, a rather lavish set of teacups and teapot atop a polished wood table in the corner. Dead plants betrayed the presence of greenery that must have once offered a lovely green, while a pretty faded cat basket in front of a large airvent sat next to an incredibly elegant and undeniably *beautiful* desk.

Trotting carefully, I felt almost terrified to break anything. As though I half expected somepony to come charging in and scold me for always messing things up again. Around the back of the desk, I found its layout almost anally neat. The feather quills were stacked in size order, for crying out loud. Either somepony had one heck of a thing about cleanliness or it just hadn't ever been used.

Investigating the boxes behind it revealed little but old documents beyond my skill to read or a few pieces of fabric. Instead, I carefully began to peak through the drawers. Smooth and quiet, they slid out like they ran on silk. Even the minor noise of the first drawer felt like an offence to how well ordered the entire room was. Truth be told, in my filthy and sweaty state...I felt rather undressed for this area. My hooves were leaving little ashy and dirty hoofprints all over the pristine (if dusty) white carpet.

Within the drawer there was little worth. A few quills, notepads, crayons and some long out of date cat food. But at the back, I found a small row of recorders like the ones in Stable Ninety Three. Tugging with my hooves, I drew the pack of four out.

Only one seemed still operational, either that or the other three just hadn't ever been used. Wondering why it seemed active without being attached to a PipBuck, it finally occurred to me that the small stand the four were attached to was like a hub to allow them to play. Lacking anything better to do while I searched the room, I set it playing.

Ksssh...

“Right...ah, yes! There we go.”

A mare's voice. Even from those few words, her diction and eloquence was obvious, like every word was being deliberately crafted into a feminine and well mannered tone.

“Due to a rather ruthlessly busy schedule, I have elected to record myself with the day's events. I simply cannot believe the distractions and problems even one day away from Canterlot can create, as such...for my own sanity, I must do this instead to remember. Oh, for the days of my simple Boutique and only having one product line to follow...”

Moving from drawer to drawer, found little on the left hand side of the desk other than the bare essentials of an office. Clearly, whoever worked here was rather picky about keeping the things *they* knew

with them if they travelled away.

“The investigation in Fillydelphia turned up almost nothing. Clearly, the intelligence handed to me was not accurate as this has been a fine way to waste three days searching. The head of the Arcane Ministry here, Aurora Star, did offer her rather elaborate and generous levels of aid. But even with their support, the missing papers on...”

She seemed to hesitate. My ears had perked at the mention of Aurora Star. The Overmare in the Stable had said she was into the memory research, hadn't she?

“The missing papers haven't turned up. It is something of a travesty that they even got out of Canterlot...less than a dozen ponies even knew of their existence. I swear to Luna...if I ever find whoever let those things slip-”

With my head buried in the drawer to see into the back (Damn unicorns and their magic...) I slipped and whacked my head as I heard the door suddenly open. My heart must have skipped a beat. Bad, bad, ba-

The door was still closed...I finally let out my breath as I realised it was in the recording.

“Oh! Oh my! Fluttershy, my dear, I didn't expect to see you!”

“Oh...I'm sorry, I could go back and make an appointment if-”

“No, no, darling, of course not! Do come in, it was just a surprise, is all! I do apologise, Fluttershy, if I had known you were in Fillydelphia as well...”

The second voice almost stopped me in my tracks. It barely transmitted from the recorder at all with how quiet it had sounded. Indeed, without my hypersensitivity, it may not have been audible.

“It's alright...I've been too busy. I...I just wanted to see you before I had to go.”

“...darling, what's wrong? You look most upset. Please, do take a seat, sorry, I am being most ungracious, would you like something to drink? We could go to the café near Pinkie's rather garish FunFarm if you'd like.”

A sound of the recorder being placed on the desk sent the quality into static for a second, before I heard two ponies trotting further away from it. Rustling my hooves around, I found a small selection of coat and mane dye. Pink, light blue, red and a few other colours too! My spirit did a little dance, I could use them as paints! Dye worked like that, right?

“No, really, Rarity, I'm...fine.”

“Forgive me, Fluttershy, but I've been your friend too long to not see when something is troubling you. Well...more than this whole thing troubles us all. Oh, please. You can tell me anything, you know that.”

“Yes, I do. Well, you see...I was checking in on the refugees.”

“Mm, yes. The Ministry of Peace Refugee and Aid Initiative, I must say you most impressed me. I toured the facilities and camps yesterday and you're saving so many ponies who have lost their loved ones or homes. Granted, I may have cheekily given them a few pointers on getting blankets warmer. It felt good to get back into the old needle and thread again. But whatever about them could be upsetting you? You are doing a wonderful job...”

“That's just it...I'm not.”

“Oh, Fluttershy. We talked about this, remember? You are doing everything in your power to-”

“No, I mean, the refugee camps and houses, there's something wrong.”

Sitting back while I stuffed the dyes into my saddlebag, I listened for a few seconds. The talk of Ministries between this Fluttershy and...what was it? Rarity? The talk was helping me attach names and voices to faces. This Fluttershy was clearly the one I had seen on all the medical posters. Her voice made me wish I could go to her Ministry for help with my illnesses...I'd want somepony with that kind and gentle voice to take care of me...

The other, Rarity...probably either the lavender or white one. I couldn't quite remember them enough to tell which was which. It occurred to me that I must be in the office of a *Ministry Mare*. The voices I were hearing were likely things very few ponies back then would have gotten to hear. With the parasprites infecting this place before LittlePip came along, no-pony must have been able to explore it. Sitting more attentively, I listened further.

“Wrong?”

“Yes, the poor things...there are refugees going missing, Rarity. Often the poorer ones, oh my...I just worry for them. I was trying to find out where but no-pony knows. They just get up and go somewhere...but never came back.”

“Hmm, I can see why that would concern you. How many?”

“Dozens...but at this rate, it could be over a hundred. The camps are so crowded since the villages in the Vale were hit, it's hard to keep track of everypony. Oh I'm so worried...this is my responsibility, but with things back at Canterlot, I can't spend any more time here to look for them. I...I don't know what to do, Rarity.”

“Fluttershy, darling. You have an entire Ministry behind you, searching for every single lost pony isn't something you need to do yourself. I know you feel like you want to, but go to your hub in Fillydelphia, I'm sure Dr. Flowerpot will be willing to look into the matter.”

Wait...Flowerpot? That was the ghoul that Weathervane had locked up under Hearts and Hooves Hospital.

“I suppose...I just see the mothers and fathers missing foals or children missing their parents and I just wish I could comfort them all. Rarity, when can all this just end?”

“It will sometime, Fluttershy. It will. We've all got our problems to work through.”

“Oh? Applejack said she was coming to Fillydelphia in a week's time to investigate where three of her Ministry's workers from the refugee camp went. Why? Did you lose something too, Rarity?”

“Oh...me? No, no, no, nothing at all, darling. Why would you think that?”

There was an odd silence for a few seconds where even I felt awkward. Eventually, I heard Fluttershy sigh lightly.

“I think I need to go...Aurora Star needs to see me before I leave Fillydelphia for Ponyville.”

“You too? My...that mare has been busy, hasn't she? Probably to give you one of those new memory diaries she's been working on. We're all getting one as a gift, all six of us. She's looking for funding to make more of them, you see. Some sort of design that records you as well as your voice...showing you when it plays back. Rather impressive, I simply must say...but there is no way I am committing myself to history until I get some proper mane attention from all this heat. Fillydelphia is far too hot this time of year. Tell you

what, Fluttershy, if you're still in Ponyville when I arrive there to get the train back into Canterlot, we should meet at the spa. Perhaps that will help you settle down...just like old times, yes?"

"That would be...nice. I'd like that."

"I shall see you then, dear."

I could hear hooves getting up. Curious myself as to this old tale of ponies going missing and Rarity hiding something from another Ministry mare, who apparently was her friend, I began digging through the drawers on the other side. Nothing...just things that likely held the answers that I couldn't decipher.

"Oh my...Rarity, is that a gun on your desk?"

"Oh...haha! That old thing? Applejack sent it a year ago, protection against infiltrators she said. She called it 'Rarity's Grace' as though it ever matched the real thing. I tend to just leave it in my desk out of the way...she did her best and meant well, but it is still a rather repulsive thing."

Almost on cue, my hooves slid open the last drawer to reveal the very item. Tiny, slim and given a white ceramic finish with a single blue gem near the very short barrel, it almost looked delicate. The sort of weapon a noble or, well, 'proper lady' might carry. The mouth grip was rather incredibly designed from thin polished silver. Guns weren't really my thing...but even I had to admit this was one beautiful looking piece.

I heard the pair say their goodbyes with Fluttershy leaving the room, before Rarity's hoofsteps tapped back along to her desk. The sound of something being flung in a drawer (likely *Rarity's Grace*) and her sitting down with a sigh sounded through the recorder.

"I really hate to lie to you, darling...but that book has to remain a secret. I need to get those papers back, however possible. Even if they don't contain the things that matter...it's best to be clean and careful, as always, Rarity! Oh well, back to the hu-" Click!

The recorder ceased. Clearly, in her negligence to remember it when Fluttershy entered, its memory had filled. Likely the caretaker for the room had replaced it in the drawer after she had left.

That had been a strange experience, these had been two of the highest ranked mares in Equestrian, well...history. Even from a brief listen, I had a much greater sense of the sheer scale of the Ministry operations that they were being kept apart and rushed around so much. Missing refugees? Secret books? Was Flowerpot being regarded a prophet by those crazy zebra worshippers something to do with the refugees? Perhaps Weathervane would know...

Tnk!

Startled, I felt my voice squeak and swivel my head to the door.

Tnk! Tnk!

Above it, the small vent to allow airflow into here was being nudged. The rusty nails were shuddering. Through one of the small windows looking out, I saw multicoloured little balls flying upward. My heart clenched. This time there really wasn't a way out...

Having to fight to stop my own hoof hitting my face, I shook my head. Of course there was! Galloping over, I threw the cat basket out of the way and tugged at it. Surely, I was stronger than sprites to get rid of a vent cover before they did!

The small lock on the top of the vent was proving me wrong. It wasn't rusted at all in this carefully preserved office. *Oh come on!* Tugging, biting, bucking...nothing would break it. Behind me, I heard a tinkle as one nail fell from the door's vent. I could see little coloured bodies struggling around the edges. Any second they might burst through! Running back to the desk, I grabbed *Rarity's Grace* from the drawer

and aimed it directly at the vent lock. Closing my eyes and clenching my teeth around the comfortable mouthpiece, I gently pushed my tongue down on the trigger...bracing for the loud gunshot sound on my ears.

Instead, I got what had to be quite simply the most...polite...gunshot I had ever heard.

Somewhere between a small cough and a curt rap on a door, the sound even kicked up at the end, like a highly spoken word of great eloquence. It wasn't a silent weapon, I'd heard them used before. It was simply...elegant. The vent lock popped off, betraying the pistol's somewhat deceptive level of power despite the lack of sound, significant recoil or having a tiny bullet. A quick check revealed it only had space for perhaps two or three rounds at a time loaded, no doubt simply a self defence weapon. But right now the fact it had given me a way out was all that mattered!

Clambering inside as fast as I could, I heard the other vent pop off, followed by the deathly fluttering of the sprites. No time to close it behind me, I simply climbed into the dull grey maze as fast as I could.

Oh...this was a baaad idea...

Now I was simply going to be trapped as they flew in and devoured me from the hind upwards.

Panicking, I forced myself in deeper. Pushing around a corner, I had to blink a few times until my eyes adjusted to the darkness before forcing myself onward. The noise on the thin metal sheets that made up the vent echoed back and forward, hurting my ears, but all I cared about was trying to lose them in the metal maze. Behind me the fluttering changed tone as they entered at a shocking speed. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw them round the corner.

“Go away! Don't!”

Screaming more out of habit and fear than choice, knowing they wouldn't stop, I kept pushing onward. Up ahead there was a t-junction. Dammit! I needed a way out!

I couldn't look back anymore with how low the roof was. On my belly, I scooted or crawled forward, hearing the fluttering closing closer and closer behind me. For one horrifying moment, I felt my saddlebag get jammed. My hooves skittered on the floor as I kept pulling, unable to take it off in these cramped conditions. The thought of being devoured and *not even being able to move or thrash* was drawing tears of abject nightmarish terror.

“COME ON!” Hollering loud enough that I gave myself a headache in the echoing vents, I tugged and strained until I felt fabric tear and myself fall forward again. The parasprites were a mere ten feet away...toying with me, playing and staying as one small swarm. Soon I'd be exhausted...and unable to evade them any longer. Everything was misty through my eyes, they were wet enough that I could barely see, only hear and feel as I pulled myself to the t-junction. Yanking around to the right, I saw only a large fan at the other end...with a dead end on the way I had chosen.

I was trapped. In a small metal box, I was trapped with parasprites.

I didn't want to die...not like this...please no...please no...*please no!*

Screaming, I kept pushing myself into the dead end, thumping the edges, maybe one was weak! They weren't. Maybe there was a hidden hatch! There wasn't. This was it...I was backed into the corner, such a small area I couldn't even sit up. Claustrophobic feelings began to set in again. Turning and facing them, I saw the eight parasprites buzzing toward me.

Rarity's Grace fired twice more before the weapon ran dry. I didn't hit a thing. The second shot even led to me dropping the weapon in fear...I couldn't even properly hold a gun, let alone shoot something with one, even if it were of high manufacturing.

I could swear the lead one grinned before they swarmed me.

Amongst it, I couldn't even say where was being bitten or chewed on. I could only scream again and again in pain as I felt bits of me get grabbed and bitten. My hooves waved, warded them off, but they kept dodging and biting again. One of my ears was tugged, my legs, my lip. That dreadful fluttering almost

becoming a sharp buzz as they kept flying around, always biting. Crying, begging, wailing like a newborn foal I slammed myself back and forward against walls. I felt my hoof hit something sharp edged that shocked me with an energy discharge. Shivering and trying not to open my mouth anymore to scream in fear of letting them *in* I bit my teeth together so hard the shaking one aches and shifted. Three of them landed on my stomach, starting to try and dig in as I fought to push them away, feeling the broken flesh beneath then and screaming through clenched lips as I fought to stop then pushing the wound wider to fit in. Small little streams of blood began to drip off me from the bites...with my desperate attempts only just keeping them from properly eating. But I could feel myself tiring...I didn't want to die! Please, oh great Goddesses help me!

This...this was it. Alone in a vent, devoured slowly and painfully by parasprites to be nothing more than another skeleton for somepony to be scared by someday...

A gust of air brushed across me...was it from their wings? No...it grew and grew. The biting began to cease as I felt air begin to rush from small grates in the vent walls. The parasprites were slowly moving away from me...but still struggling to fly toward me. One of them bit painfully into my back leg until I knocked it off. I was bleeding in a dozen places onto the floor...but the wind kept growing.

Down the vent, I saw the fan chopping away. *Whup. Whup. Whup.* The wind grew stronger, nothing enough to move me...but the tiny parasprites were being sucked at an ever increasing rate. Beside me, sparking, I saw the control panel I'd hit with my now burned right hoof. The bandage was blackened.

Even as I saw the parasprites sucked in and sheared apart, I couldn't stop trembling on the spot. The feeling of them flying over me...eating me...it wasn't disappearing quickly. Trying to stem a dozen wounds and feeling my ears and limbs stinging from shallow bites...my head felt dizzy already.

It took me a good while to finally crawl back to Rarity's office and use what bandages I could spare from the thick wad around my right hoof to tie up the bites. Blood loss and exhaustion were quickly mounting...I needed...needed to rest. Just a while...

Staggering, I managed to limp over and lie in the cat basket (I was small enough...it was fair game...) before falling into a restless doze when my heart finally slowed down.

* * *

I wandered the Ministry after that.

I didn't really know why...only that I didn't feel ready to go back outside. Blood dripped around me, but an examination in a mirror within Rarity's desk had shown that each injury, while painful and bleeding, was not serious. I wasn't tough...but most of my days had been spent under the pain of some cut or bruise, for now I could afford to just stagger about and try to think.

I'd completed the job...but somehow I didn't feel heroic like I should. Like LittlePip. I'd 'won' out of sheer luck and chance alone. Survival though drawing the right card rather than by skill or wit. That seemed to be a running theme of my life...

However, I had done it. One way or the other, I had faced something she had come up against and stayed alive at the end of it. Sure...I had faced a lot less than her, but it still kept me going to know that I'd walked the same path as her. The same challenge. Perhaps...perhaps some day I might be able to do as she did. To always keep thinking and staying determined. Where she remained steadfast in my mind, I faltered and tripped on my own lack of confidence and fears. Did...did she ever get scared? Were there times that my hero might cry alone, afraid that she may fail? How had she felt being brought into Fillydelphia?

Wandering back into the office that held the bathroom and her discarded chains, I simply stood and looked at them. The same...but so different.

Someday...perhaps. But I had endured. That was enough for now.

But there was one last objective to today...I still needed to convince Hive that I was worthwhile,

somehow. I'd taken far too long in here for Mister Shiny to likely get me anything of reward. In desperation, I emptied my saddlebag on the steel floor and began rooting through. Hive likely wouldn't care for dyes...three caps wouldn't win me through either. *Rarity's Grace* would likely get me in more trouble to produce than to keep. At most, the best idea I could do was wait until I could hand it over to Protégé...he wouldn't punish me for finding something, would he?

Then again...he had been the one to shoot me down. It confused me...why did I still feel a certain trust that he would be nicer to me after that? He just confused me. My last memory of that confrontation was of him holding me in his hooves, trying to save my life. He hadn't *wanted* to shoot. Why not? It couldn't simply be that he liked me...all his talk about plans for me was infuriatingly vague and contradictory. He literally made *no sense*. Why was he acting like this?

Shaking my head, I returned to the immediate problem. What had LittlePip left behind that I might use? Tools? Wonderglue to repair her suit? Nothing Hive likely couldn't get on her own with but a word...

My eyes fell to the small tin of mints. My memory began to pick up. Mister Shiny had called her drugs 'Mint-als.' Mints. Like...like...

Suddenly...I was very glad I hadn't downed them all as sweetsies.

But this was only one small tin. Likely something she would just grab from me and then not care. I needed leverage...I needed more drugs. But who did I know that had...

...oh!

Stuffing everything back into my saddlebag, I made a run for the maintenance room. I had a few...items, to collect before I went outside again.

* * *

"Well little laddie...nice to see you've come back alive. Would hate to lose me most *generous* customer."

Sooty Morass had been making a killing. His RadAway was all gone (Damn!) but his drugs container was still somewhat bulging with Artery's stocks. I staggered up to him...both half bleeding and half under the weight of my saddlebag putting me off balance. He grinned down at me, flicking my feathers in his braids.

"I...I want all your mint-als."

Sooty seemed genuinely surprised. The look of unexpected shock with the direction in this trade was worth every pain I had been through.

"Now just when I thought ye couldn't get sillier. What makes ye think that you can-"

I slammed forty copies of *Wingboner* Magazine down on the table.

"...ten tins. All yours."

* * *

One hour later, I was waiting outside the pits beside Hive. She had been a lot tougher, being genuinely surprised I was back and willing to give me a few bruises for losing my suit. Even as she had thrown me against one locker in her ready room, the savage slaver mare had caught attention to the one tin of mint-als I'd thrown down. The rest I'd buried in the mud near a pit...bargaining that I'd give her the location when Protégé arrived to take me back. Hive hadn't been too happy with it...but had finally reasoned that at least she 'wouldn't have to put up with me whining anymore.'

The drawn chariot clattered across the road. Almost regally, I saw Protégé step down and trot across to us. His face betrayed nothing as he glanced at me and then to Hive.

“I've come to retake my lost worker.”

“Oh fuck off, upstart. Don't give me that 'worker' shit, you're a slaver. Get over it and don't lose your slaves ever again. Take the little rat.”

She turned and half bucked me toward him. Yelping, I landed in the mud beside Protégé. He didn't break eye contact with her.

“Get into the chariot, Murk. Glimmerlight's waiting for you.”

I didn't need any further telling, scampering up into the wooden transport and turning to watch Protégé again.

“I hear he did a good service for you, Hive?”

“Get fucked, hornjob. He's useless, unless you're trying to groom the little chicken for some sort of bed buddy I can't imagine what *you* want from him.”

Protégé didn't react in the slightest. Indeed, he if anything simply trotted toward the side of the chariot without even maintaining eye contact anymore.

“A containment breach, so I hear. Infesting one of the Ministry Hubs. Mister Shiny was so good as to inform me of the details.”

“Did you hear what I said? Murk. Is. Useless.”

I saw Protégé grin toward me, a surprisingly cheeky smile he had only once used when he had called me out on my drawings of mares.

“So why did you write to me informing that he had proved himself?”

That shut her up. I had to fight to not snort in laughter as I saw her fall for his verbal trap. To explain why would be to admit to Protégé that I had held her addiction to ransom. My master clambered up beside me.

“To the Mall, riders. Take your time, if you please.”

Smoothly, the chariot rumbled off. Hive watched me intently as we rode past and back along the road. She continued to watch until we were twenty feet away...before the cap finally dropped. I saw her rush forward in sudden panic...unable to catch the chariot.

“Oi! Wait! You didn't say where the fucking mint-als were yet! You little chicken *BASTARD!*”

In the aftermath of her hellish pits and the parasprites...the elation of escape too strong to not do it. I couldn't help myself.

I waved.

* * *

“It is good to see you remain alive, Murk,” Protégé looked back from directing the two stallions leading our chariot through the slaveworks of Fillydelphia, “I must admit I was worried that you might not return...”

We'd been sitting in silence since he had relieved me of my saddlebag's contents. Most of it he'd given back (I had blushed as he handed a couple magazines he'd saved) but *Rarity's Grace* now sat in his own pocket. Only now, as we were far away from the pits did he speak. I remembered the harsh buck to the wall after the sentencing...he was being honest. But it wasn't going to cover him.

“You shot me...you stopped me escaping. Why?”

“I had to. Master Red Eye does not permit workers to leave until their due is-”

“You don't want me to suffer! You've been giving me second, third and more chances every time I've met you. You give me medicine...return my things to me and...and even seem to care for me. You...you've

shown you aren't like the others...so why do you keep torturing me by keeping me in here?"

My eyes were probably going to tear up soon...the thought of *how close* I'd been stung deep in the wound across my chest. Taking a few seconds to simply watch and presumably judge me, he eventually sat in the moving chariot and looked across at me.

"Would you believe me if I said I had been nothing but truthful with you, Murk?"

As ever, I felt like it was a loaded question. He kept staring with that indefatigable look, one eye hidden behind the symbol of his studentship to Red Eye.

"Yes..."

Finally, almost with relief, I saw him remove the eyepiece and sigh.

"Murk...I am glad to have met you. Fillydelphia is not an easy place to live in...for any of us. Now, I know that is not much comfort, coming from a...well...a slaver. But I try. I try to care for those ponies who I know are being hurt in this place. I *believe* in Master Red Eye's vision, with all my heart, Murk. We are making Equestria better. You would have seen the printing presses in there, those will be used to print school books. In time, ponies like you, unable to read...that will cease to happen."

He looked away, as we passed by a group of slaves weighed down by scrap. Boils and wounds slowed them while they trampled through dry earth with dour faces and weak bodies.

"I've never said I *liked* it here. Ponies are ponies...I do not see slaves. My job entails problems, like the raiders...like Shackles. The other slavers dislike me, as you've seen. But it's all necessary, we all do our part. I *chose* to be here. You didn't...and I wish that hadn't happened. But it has, and you must now play your part to earn your freedom."

"But master...I don't want to be here..."

The chariot drew up in front of the Mall. I could see some slaves returning from shifts on tired and shaking legs. Protégé stepped off, with me following at his heels.

"I know, Murk. But you are. I'll do what I can, but unfortunately, I *cannot* defy Master Red Eye. He orders that no...slave...escapes. That we all *must* do our part. I am his student, his faithful follower. His methods are my life and his decisions my code. You heard me talk of loyalty to Minstrel...well I am loyal to Master Red Eye's flag to my core."

He trotted toward the door. I simply stood before the great Mall...my home for the next two years in his service. My thoughts drifted...scenes of Protégé holding me desperately in his hooves...clamping on my wounds...he had been *crying*.

"Master..."

"Yes, Murk?"

I saw him begging again, pleading me to just come with him, trying to avoid me defying him...he wanted me to *follow* him. To show that same loyalty. Not to Red Eye. To *him*. Because he wanted the best for me that he could, short of what he couldn't allow...

"...you...you were tempted, weren't you?"

Protégé continued to stare back, a blank look on his face as his eyepiece hung in his magic field nearby.

"To let me go."

Time stood still. Protégé and his home ahead of me and the slaves returning behind me. All filthy, surrounding me with as much blood, sweat and tears as I had myself. The full might of Fillydelphia's labour in vista all around me. Eventually, I saw his mouth seem to twitch...before finally replying.

"Yes, Murk...yes I was."

Firmly placing the eyepiece back on. The student of Red Eye and my master turned once more to return to his place of work.

* * *

Passing the cage door, filled with conflict over my master, I found the survivors of the Stable excursion lying on mattresses that had been dragged out.

My heart almost broke as I saw the heavily bandaged form of Glimmerlight being seen to on the far side. The slavers hadn't been kind to her on recapturing. A bloodied bandage smeared her forehead while her two front legs bore thick padding. A nurse was tying more across a thick welted wound on her side.

That didn't stop her pulling herself up and launching toward me...as we simply held one another amongst the city of slaves we had failed to escape.

“D-don't worry, Murky...we know it's possible...s-someday...someday, I promise...”

* * *

Footnote: Quest Perk Attained!

Path of the Lightbringer – Hers is a story to not cross paths again...but the legend of the Stable Dweller and her unceasing determination to save Equestria will inspire ponies for years to come. Once per encounter, if reduced to less than 10% of your health, you will immediately gain a small health boost to keep you in the fight that little bit longer.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Organiser – Some ponies stay neat and tidy to keep efficient belongings...others just learn how to cram things in really hard! One way or the other, it helps you carry those little extra things. All items with a weight of two or less weigh half as much in your inventory now.

Chapter 10: A Long Way From Equestria

* * *

“All the other ponies in the world told her she was wrong...for believing in something we're all dreaming of.”

“What is it like to not know your place in life?”

It's...like being caught between worlds; unable to fall to either side for fear of the consequence. Before she made me realise I had a life of my own, every day was just the same monotony. To simply wake up, sigh and go about your business. Never thinking, complaining or questioning. But with open eyes...it becomes harder. You *see* what slavery is doing to your life. How it's...*ruined*...mine. Ruined it in a way I could never heal or change, even if I were free someday.

Every day the thought niggles in my head, to fall back into the knowing place in life. Understanding the mentality of the slave is tough for anypony who's known freedom. It's like a safety blanket, one that teases you not with comfort but with the knowledge that you can just switch off and go back to sleep again. To not deal with the issues of what slavery has *done* to your life!

But on the other hoof...to want to be free and not even know what it feels like or what I should aim to be? That's almost worse...if I lost myself to that drive I'd be throwing myself on their guns or execution blocks in a insane explosion of emotion and heedless screaming to not have to work another day in Fillydelphia. That and...well, what I just said a minute ago about whether escape would bring more harm than good to others...like if The Master followed me to make my life worse as I was dragged back. That's too much pressure and thought for me. I can never get away from him...*never*. That thought hurts, it really does...

If...if I sat and thought about it, I'm fairly sure I'd actually buckle under it all...if I ever fully comprehended the permanent damage done to me. Just as the temptation to go back into the unconscious acceptance that I will never amount to anything would trap me forever. The dreams that I held so dear could drive me to seek *any* escape I could.

I'd almost lost control of that desire once already...upon the precipice of the control tower.

Protégé understood this. He saw that I needed to taste freedom to truly understand what I wanted and where I belonged in life. Other ponies may have their cutie marks, but I didn't even have that to help me. All I had left was Glimmerlight to prop me up and Protégé offering his twisted logic and beliefs upon me behind a veil of apparent kindness and loyalty. How could I trust him? The pony who gifts me things or keeps my possessions safe alongside promises to make me better and eventually free...but shoots me to keep me under his iron hoof in a slave city! Every...every thought in my head just keeps hating him for that moment. Even with Weathervane's healing I...I can still feel the scar on my chest from the moment he crushed my one hope of freedom.

But despite all that, against all logic and sense and...and whatever else smart ponies use to say something is explainable...I still don't feel threatened by him. Every time I tell him he doesn't know where I'm coming from...he says he does. Every time I cry...he knows why. Every single facet of my life he just somehow *gets*.

...and that's why I...I think I forgave him for stopping me...even if I hate him.

Because he is the only pony in the whole of Fillydelphia that didn't just tell me things could be better or simply comforted me.

He actually took steps to try and *make* things better. Whether I agreed with his 'way' or not...

What is it like to not know my place in life? It's awful, stuck between two worlds, being on the brink

between slavery and freedom. Like being lost in a world of pain that ponies shouldn't know as opposed to the world we *should* have, that great civilization that was now lost. Yet all the while. unknown emotions and thoughts between beliefs, dreams, reality and terror that destroy any coherent path or plan run through your mind.

But even before it got a chance to make me lost once more, *he* was already trying to light my way....

* * *

I was galloping. Corridor to corridor, scampering around corners. Terror gripping my every vein and muscle so hard that my very skin crawled with stings and aches. He was out here somewhere, oh Goddesses why didn't I just stay with Protégé? He was hunting me, stalking me and...and I couldn't hear properly to spot him!

Rounding a corner, I glanced ahead, wasn't this the way back to the cage into the shops? I could run out the back door and...and get away! But before I could even move, that cackling voice drifted through the thick air and darkness...

"Murky is my bestest slave...woohoo....whoopee..."

Shrieking, I kept galloping, he was following me, following from no-where and never leaving. The sound of the chains being pulled across the ground following my every move. I screamed for Glimmerlight, for Protégé, for *anypony*. Even as I ran, I tripped...and fell again...and again, my hooves just wouldn't stay under me, like they were being weighted down and trapped, unable to move. Please...please!

"He's the smallest, sickest, all around weakest pony...pony..."

I...I couldn't stand. My legs just kept stopping working. The gunshot on my chest sucked and bled, my knife wound on my shoulder was cold and numb. Tears ran down my face, why couldn't I stand? I had to go, he was coming, *he was coming for me!* Why couldn't I gallop anymore?! Desperately, I crawled, pulling my heavy body a long behind me on tired limbs, my eyes unable to focus, turning the dark corridor of the Mall into a misty and indistinct environment to try and navigate. Again, that voice, *his* voice, drifted through, closer. I could hear his hot breath and heaving mass as he closed in on me. Almost laughing, playfully muttering the haunting tune.

"I bet if I chain him all nice and tough into slavery...slavery..."

Screaming, pulling, I felt his hooves wrap around me and drag me back before the thick collar snapped into place around my neck. I screamed, feeling my own mind pull me into his sway.

"He'll give the whole rest of his life to ME!"

Flipped around, thrashing as the length of chain yanked my neck and head up, my eyes were forced open to see that leering face. Sickly breath through rotted teeth below light green eyes promising the depths of sheer sadism and control...and that welted scar sealing the deal.

Even as he laughed, lifting a white hot brand in the shape of an eternal chain, I kept screaming and pulling from his grip. Even if I got away, that chain kept pulling me back, again and again...closer and closer to the huge figure of The Master and that burning iron that stabbed downward onto my cutie mark. My mouth opened and *howled* as-

* * *

-I fell and landed in a crying heap. Curled up, bawling and shivering, I kept pulling my hind legs in, expecting to feel the scald of the iron. Hooves were trying to hold me down. Fighting from under the blanket, I weakly kicked out and tried to scramble away until finally I heard her voice.

"Murky! Murky, it's okay! It's me...it's me..."

The blanket was pulled from my head, where azure eyes sparkled in the darkness before me. Behind me lay the sofa of the shop cell's back stockroom where we had been sleeping. Breathing hard, my face so wet with

tears that it had dampened the woollen blanket, I felt my heart rate slowly begin to move down a few notches as Glimmerlight hugged me and stroked my back.

“I...I...”

“It's alright...you're not the only slave who gets nightmares, I'll bet.”

Clinging tightly to her, I tried to reassure myself...just a bad dream. But looking around and seeing the dark misty interior alongside hearing the eternal industry outside...the reality of Fillydelphia was little comfort.

The Master had been strangely absent since I had returned, which had in turn only allowed my fears and memories of him to become bigger...more intense and mythical without a real presence to hide from. But I could never hide from myself...every time I looked in a mirror or felt my own forehead it brought more hurt and connotations than any taunt or crack of a whip could ever do.

Somehow...I had a horrible feeling he knew that his disappearance was having that precise effect and was doing it for *just* that reason.

Sighing and sitting back from me, Glimmerlight glanced across to the doorway and saw the ambience was still fairly dark. Likely, it was still night time...or a cloud of smog was just passing over. The past few days had become nothing but a whirlwind of activity to the point I didn't even know anymore. All we knew was what Protégé told us, that we had a few hours to bunker down and rest before work started again.

Glimmerlight and I had curled up on opposite ends of the sofa with her insisting that I have the one blanket. Now, she began picking it up and placing it back on the sofa before returning to me. Still sitting on the floor, I was glancing from side to side, watching the darker corners of the room. Through teary eyes...it all seemed too familiar to my dream...like someone was watching from the shadows.

Of course...knowing certain ponies in here, there might well be...

“Don't worry about it, I don't think less of you for it, okay?”

Still sniffing, feeling my breathing returning to normal, I nodded shakily.

“I...I know...”

“Want to talk about it? I'm all ears to any dreams, raunchy ones with Pip or not.”

Despite myself, I couldn't help but snort with laughter and blush with embarrassment while wiping my eyes. But I still shook my head.

“I don't really want to think about it...sorry, you can go back to sleep. I'll...I'll just...sit around and draw or something. I don't really want to sleep anymore...”

“Murky, you're tired. Come on, I'll sleep beside you, so you know your big sis' won't be far away, alright?”

Smiling warmly as she reminded me of our 'bond' of sorts, I was tempted, even if it was a little foolish sounding given my age. (Or as close as I could guess to it.) But friend or not...the drifting thoughts of sleep were too...too subconscious. Even a vague glance into the darkness of the stockroom felt too close for comfort. I could feel my body gently jittering with nerves and fear. No way could I relax into another sleep. I needed to think and clear my head a little.

Watching me carefully through her clearly still very tired eyes, Glimmerlight pulled my saddlebag over with her magic, opened it and placed my journal before me. Apparently, Protégé had dropped off my things, much to my delight...and further confusion as to his intentions.

“Well...alright, Murky. Hey listen, why don't you go up to the roof? The back door Brim and you got open should have a fire escape nearby. Get a little fresh air, or as best as Filly ever has, and try to calm down a little, alright? I'll be just down here if you need me. Don't think twice about waking me up, alright?”

Picking up my journal with my mouth, I adjusted my reacquired fleece after messing it up in my post-nightmare thrashing and nodded to her. Past a muffled thanks and promise to see her in a little bit, I trotted

off sullenly to make the long climb upwards.

Pulling the door shut behind me, I couldn't help but see her still lying awake and glancing across at me, looking rather concerned. Waving gently, I heaved the door shut and moved off toward the rickety old fire escape.

* * *

“Hey there, wastelanders! How you all doing on this cold wasteland night? The answer should be 'We're doing great, DJ! Because you're still on the air!' Hahaaa! Far be it from me to be egotistical to all of ya, but it sure will be what you're saying with our late night line up!”

Carefully, almost lovingly, I put charcoal to parchment and drew a line.

The singular motion seemed to finally allow my heart to settle and my frayed nerves to gradually begin to ease. Despite the wonders of having a friend and the relief that my success in the pits had brought me, that one moment of just me and my artwork was never going to lose its calming impact.

I sat atop the roof of the Mall, alone, simply drawing and listening to DJ-Pon3's show. Nestled in a hidey hole between a few vents and metal...boxy...things, I was hidden from pretty much every angle while still being able to pop my head up for a look if I wanted. The air was thick and warm with that ever-present iron tinge to it. If anything, it was just irritating my throat and burning my eyes, but the lazy wind on my sweaty and shivering coat and mane was at least some comfort after the claustrophobic and dominating nightmare. My eyes were still heavy with sleep, but the idea simply seemed too terrifying. No...better to stay awake up here and let others dream. I wouldn't be alone for I had my oldest companion to spend the night with. DJ-Pon3.

“First up we've got a great little newsflash for you all. Turns out, the recent troubles over at Sweet Apple Acres have mostly calmed down. That mysterious Stable up there seems to have been saved from the Steel Rangers by...yup, you guessed it, the Stable Dweller!”

Ee! I had to stop drawing for a second to hug myself and remember that she was still a force for good. Red Eye and Protégé claiming or hinting that she had left me behind and wasn't all that heroic was not going to last long in my mind. To even hear one tale of her exploits was enough to refresh my mind and immediately my charcoal raced to yet again illustrate that brave mare.

A flutter in the air made my skin crawl. Dropping the charcoal down I ducked under the vent and watched the shadow of the passing griffin team flash past along the rooftop. They would have needed to be directly above and looking directly down anyway...but there was no sense in advertising. That and random little flutters still made me nervous and started my stomach aching. That moment still stung.

Raising my head up to make sure they were away, I got a good look at the surrounding area from the roof's height. It provided a commanding view of Fillydelphia, just high enough to see across the city, but too low to see over the huge wall. When I had been climbing up the creaky fire escape, I had tried to distract myself by imagining Fillydelphia as it once was before all this. But the effort was just too great in the light of being dragged back here. The chains had tightened all the more, locking and pulling me in. Now I could not see it for anything but the horror it was. Processions of slaves marched under guard away from the colossal crater, others could be seen hefting the heavy auto axes in earth pits while guards trotted back and forth on suspended platforms. All were just tiny figures from up here. Through a set of tall, smoke belching chimneys, I could spot the rickety roller coaster of the FunFarm above the petting zoo and helter skelter. The sight was oddly nostalgic, even for less than a week since I had cowered my way through every day in there.

Now, however, things felt hardly different. We had failed in our escape, losing our most reliable friend in the process. Now...we were simply back in the machine. Unable to take on any more salvage missions due to such losses until Protégé's stock was back up to strength, we were all being relegated back to standard work shifts in the factories. So much was different...but nothing changed in Fillydelphia.

“Now I'll bet many of you are saying 'Hey, wait, you told us that earlier!' Well of course ah did, but now

we've got the happier ending to the story. The survivors are comin' out! Pave way, my little ponies, there's soon to be a new settlement in the wastes near Shattered Hoof! Get your trades all ready, folks, cause things are taking a turn for the better today. As for all you less than steller raiding bastards listening in to try and spot a weak target? Forget it! You had enough trouble with one Stable Dweller, well here's a bunch of 'em! That, and they are under the protection of the Talons so I hear...so don't even think about it. Now...just to mark this occasion, why not a little bit of music created by a pony from that very Stable? Yes folks...we all gotta have our rock and roll, take it away Velvet!"

Glancing and smiling at my PipBuck as the catchy fast beat kicked up (rear hoof tapping away without even intending it too), it occurred to me that Protégé would know I was outside due to taking my PipBuck...but I frankly didn't care. The link to the voice of truth and hope was too much to give up. No, what I needed wasn't worrying...it was time to just think. Which meant time to draw.

Charcoal slid, stopped and changed direction. It hesitated and then struck out boldly, waving to and fro before arcing around. I never checked drawings midway through, it just felt...natural, to let my imagination work and flow until it was done. Eventually, pulling back, I saw my creation.

A rearing earth pony mare. Sunny. Below her, the rough coated form of Cayenne bounded around her master. That wide brimmed hat atop Sunny's head flew back as she shouted something unknown to me. Fighting back guilt, I allowed my eyes to drift upwards from the drawing to see the vista of Fillydelphia once again.

Oh...Sunny...I'm so sorry I brought this upon you...

Part of me wanted to make her my next, well...mission? But I was just one little pony, hurt and weak right now and unable to make a difference inside the city of slaves. Wherever she was, Sunny was out of my reach. The thought of what she was no doubt going through was likely going to haunt me for some time. The same fate I had taken a suicidal run at the Wall to avoid.

Shivering, I had to fight to resist my mind telling me that the *real* reason I couldn't help her was because she was *his* and that I couldn't defy him enough to want to try. My dream had been proof enough of that, his shackles were still firmly entrenched in my...soul? I had run from him outside the walls, but that was slightly different. Trying to rescue Sunny would be going up against him...not just running away from him.

Sniffing, I turned the page, a new blank canvas of the yellowed parchment sitting and waiting. These last few days, I had been driven through my own worst fears of the times long gone. I had been working in a Ministry, moving through long abandoned houses and even lost in the depths of a dead Stable. Memories long gone terrified and upset me in a way I couldn't describe, particularly those related to the 'last day.' But Glimmerlight had shown me something else, how to look for the memories that could do things other than simply hurt. Without even realising it...I had done it in the Ministry of Image by listening to that audio recorder.

I had been learning a little, instead of burying it all under a mountain of sadness and loss.

Without really knowing it, I felt my head descend to start drawing again.

Aurora Star. That name had turned up a couple of times, hadn't it? The leader of this city's Arcane Magic Hub who had visited Rarity and Fluttershy to hand over some sort of special memory orb. Then there was the scientists in the Stable, they had worked under her, bringing some of that memory research in with them.

Below me, small sketches formed, little wisps of creativity to show my mind's version of Rarity, Fluttershy and the Overmare. All had known Aurora Star to some extent. It was nothing drastic, she had been a leader in Fillydelphia, so it only made sense they would know of her. Between some sketches, I drew light lines.

From Fluttershy to Rarity, two friends, the Ministry Mares. From both of them to a new sketch, Doctor Flowerpot, the pony Rarity had mentioned that I now knew that Weathervane had also worked with. I added him, then drew a line to Flowerpot. Lastly, I added an older mare with a star on her flank, my version of what Aurora looked like, given I had no idea what 'Aurora' even meant...

To her I drew lines from the Overmare, Fluttershy and Rarity.

Wait... Weathervane had been involved in spell storage, right? His name had turned up from the Stable details Glimmer had found. Leaning down, I drew a line from him to Aurora Star.

Others might organise their thoughts by writing it all out, but to me, this was worth so much more. In front of me lay my understanding of the past related to a few little dots of history I had stumbled across. It was meaningless, a few bits of dead research that someday might prove useful to somepony else. Incredibly basic, perhaps...but it was the train of thought that it permitted. Each dot was a separate piece of the past unto itself with the connections being the 'links' between them all. Like a...a...what had my old master called them? Star shapes? Consta...con...

Shaking my head, I looked back down again. There *were* linked. Frozen moments of Old Equestria, joined by connections that created an overall picture. It was like drawing the very fabric of the past itself...rebuilding the shape and form that was their lives.

What would it be like to find more? To complete the puzzle and find out...well, everything. What had happened, why the world ended this way and who was responsible. Perhaps there were hidden secrets only permitted to those who found enough of it, who might complete this tapestry of memories. What might such a pony who delved into the past enough discover out there in the wastes?

Sighing and sitting back, I could only look at my half finished collection of sketches, occasionally joined by some lines. Strangely, seeing the past like this, in my own drawn style...it made it easier to contemplate. It got it out of my mind and down on paper, like any emotions I had expelled into art to escape the pain or sadness.

Beep!

That...and there was this too. The music was interrupted as the beeping started. In truth, I had expected it by climbing up here, almost hoping for another message from Sundial to help me relax. But after drawing out what I had, I looked on it as another opportunity to see the past with new eyes. Or ears...

Beep!

Click.

“Uh...hi there.”

“Hi...”

“Well, uh...I'm not sure what to say here. But well...I need to get this out somewhere. Oh Celestia what is going on in my world...”

A shot of cold fear passed through me, Sundial's voice was breathless and scared. Like he'd just galloped for a long distance.

“Look, I...I've may have to do something bad, to do something good. This world is coming crashing down, there's been reports of crazy huge spell testing going on and the shifts just keep going up. This entire thing is escalating again. My father's been recalled out to Hoofington to help cope with all the casualties there. Already, these Stables aren't seeming quite so stupid. I need to get the money to afford Skydancer a ticket, only I just can't afford it! But I...I may have found a way...”

My drawing forgotten, I now held the PipBuck in my hooves, feeling myself sweating as I just stared at it. Sundial's life, to me, was a perfect image of a buck earning real pay in a job he wanted with a lovely special somepony by his side. What had *happened*?

“When I came off shift today I was just crying, I couldn't stop. I've worked the maximum sixty hours this week and I'm still not earning enough! I'm just...sorry, that drill I mentioned? We had another one yesterday, but they don't tell us it's a drill till they lock the door shut! Every time my nerves fray and I feel so guilty. It's driving me to the edge of sanity having to abandon her...again and again. Each time it could be

the real thing. But, even when I sat in the alleyway behind the factory this...this figure approached me. He just appeared from no-where! I never saw his face, all cloaked up, but the accent was pretty exotic. I'm not an idiot...it was a zebra. He dropped this huge bag of bits at my hooves and said that...that I could have it if I brought him some plans of what it was we were working on. Celestia help me, I'm tempted...I just want to protect the one I love! I've got no-one to turn to about this, the Ministry of Morale is everywhere. Every sprite-bot I see I'm afraid is watching me now, like they're just waiting to spring if I dare do anything."

Even today, in Sundial's far flung unfortunate future, I could relate to that feeling. When Pinkie Pie had set out to watch everypony forever...she had meant it.

It was silly, really, me worrying for what would happen here. Sundial had been dead for hundreds of years, I'd *seen* his skeleton. Had he given his ticket to Skydancer in the end? Was that even allowed? Or had he just been unable to get there in time? It only now began to occur to me that given enough time...this PipBuck would likely lead me to his death on the day the balefire was set loose upon Equestria.

Yet...something compelled me to keep listening, recording after recording. Sundial's messages were meant to be heard, he wouldn't have programmed them to play otherwise. He had made an effort to ensure the truth of the average pony's life was known to those of us in the wasteland.

"I just wish I knew what to do...I even considered going to the guards about it, hoping for a reward, but there's no proof and the city's coffers are running dry on sheer industry these days. No...I have to decide myself. They must have been watching me, knew I was one they could exploit."

Sundial's voice was cracking, tinged with frustration, anger, guilt and fear.

"I hate this...I just hate all this! I shouldn't have to make these decisions! Why me...?"

Feeling tears drip from my own eyes for him, I could only relate in that I had asked that question of myself a thousand times in the last few days since the Pit. The most I could truly do was curl up around the PipBuck in my hidey hole and try to pretend it would *somehow* make a two hundred year dead pony feel better.

"I can't lose her...she's all I have these days."

Nodding, I agreed, not just for him.

"Is it really worth it? To work with evil to find freedom from pain?"

I don't know, Sundial...

"...I should go, don't want anypony else hearing this so...well, bye for now."

"Bye..."

The PipBuck clicked and hummed for a second, before fizzing through its half ruined speaker and locking back into music from DJ Pon3's station. Seething frustration began to build. Why did that war have to hurt him!? Sundial was...was a nice pony, choosing the lovely and happy ways, not wearing any cynicism or warlike attitude. Why did it have to drag him in too? Oh please, Sundial...come through this okay...

But I *knew* the ending already...a skeleton abandoned in a refuse pit, alone and forgotten until I had found him.

That...that did it...

The old feelings dredged up too heavily as I felt myself curl up ever tighter and clutch the PipBuck to my chest. The past could hold good, but right now...the all too familiar haunting feelings returning of what was lost.

"Well, I'm gonna be signing off in a bit, wasteland. Even your good ol' DJ needs his shut eye now and again. But for those of you like me, up late at night and worrying for others out there in the dark...here's a

little something to match the quiet night air. Something to help calm those nerves...goodnight, wasteland..."

Sweetie Belle's soothing sweet voice seemed to whisper in my ears, gentle and caressing. A lullaby for all time to settle upset ponies and clear their minds. Still sobbing, I picked up my charcoal stick and cast the lattice of the past away to a new page. I could draw the past, I had learned. Time to make worth of it. The touch of my stick on the parchment stopped my trembling enough as I put all the heart I could into this one drawing.

I didn't know what he looked like...but it didn't matter.

"Hush now...quiet now...it's time to lay your sleepy head..."

Lines becoming curves, seeking to return a pony's memories to life. Just as DJ-Pon3 and Sweetie Belle had helped stop me being lost to the horrid past, I would do the same for him.

"Hush now...quiet now...it's time to go to bed..."

Curves became shapes, restoring his presence in the physical sight of those he sought to deliver his tale to. He would be seen once more, if only to my eyes. A fate better than forgotten bones for the buck who had helped me from so long ago.

"Drifting, off to sleep...leave your exciting life behind you..."

Shapes...became life, gentle twists of the charcoal and jerks of my head to add in everything I could. The shape and flow of his mane. The thick and bulky PipBuck that I now possessed on his right hoof. But not alone...I had drawn the shape of another with him, my mind's eye of Skydancer, radiant and bright to be with him forever, if only in my artwork. Lying curled up together, her wing over his back and her head nestled into his shoulder.

"Drifting, off to sleep...let the joy of another land find you..."

Fighting my own tired eyes, I added the last details before finally dropping the charcoal stick and fighting a squeaky little yawn. There...now they could be together no matter what happened in their lives.

Hopefully...the same way they were together in the embrace of the Goddesses now, at peace after the horrors they endured.

Glancing upwards at the cloud ceiling over Fillydelphia, my eyes blinked open only once as a small break in the thick red clouds drifted over...tiny and quickly fading.

But through it...a star shape, little dotted memories, drifting far from home in another world, a long way from the Equestria they knew.

Even as the hole closed up quickly, I simply lay on my back and watched it as I felt my eyes slowly begin to close again. This time...my dreams were filled with nothing but the sweet thought of somepony I might care about in the same way they had each other until the bitter end...

* * *

"Roll-call! Everypony get your skinny slave flanks out here on the double!"

I was already half way down the fire escape by the time the shout came, mixed bellows to wake up had gone out a few minutes ago. Given just enough time to gather my things, I raced to join the muster. Being late for roll-call was and always had been a quick ticket to a hoof across the face or a whip across the back.

Waking up had not been pleasant. For once, I had slept even vaguely soundly, but the ashy air and sickly tasting fumes had gathered throughout the night to lead me into a coughing fit upon waking. Foul black muck tinged with dark red had splattered on the ground, ejected from a throat that seemed to be filled with glass shards. That probably wasn't a good sign...hopefully Weathervane was still around...

Glimmerlight was already pulling her crimson initiate robes on, staggering with heavy eyes toward the stockroom door. She turned back for just a second as I strained to close the heavy rear door.

"Come on!"

“I'm coming! Sorry...sorry...” I looked up, seeing her robes. “Glimmer, why are you putting them on if you're getting the bandages changed this morning?”

She rolled her eyes. “So that nurse buck gets to watch me take them *off*, duh!”

With a giggle, she cantered on out. Dropping my saddlebag inside the stockroom, I hurried out after her to find everypony not still recovering had gathered on the bottom floor of the plaza. Across the centre, around the fountain, lay dozens of mattresses or rolls of filthy blankets where the wounded lay in pain. A few remaining doctors from Hearts and Hooves Hospital were wandering around, slowly checking bandages and ignoring the moans from those left without any painkillers. Most had shrapnel wounds, often multiple on one pony, from the Rangers' large and indiscriminate weaponry. Others bore burns or were choking up from smoke inhalation in the fires that no doubt had gutted the inside of the Stable by now. A few nurses or basic healers also remained, including the blonde buck Glimmerlight seemed rather intent on meeting. She immediately cantered toward him, grinning over her shoulder at me. Most non-raider slaves made way for her...I could only imagine why.

Making a beeline to stay behind her, I found myself having to hop, skip and jump over a few 'misplaced' hooves thrown in my way to try and trip me. Both raiders and normal slaves taking what chances they could to garner some mild amusement at my expense. One harshly flung leg from a mangy raider mare caught my injured right hoof, making me yelp and limp away. A series of snorts and high pitched laughter chorused through their ranks, often mimicking my voice. I dearly wanted to buck backwards and catch them between their legs as frustration and hurt built up inside me. But seeing all their 'friends' clustered around and aching for somepony to start something, I just put my head down and limped over to catch up with Glimmerlight.

Barb's raiders were spread everywhere alongside The Master's cronies and bitter slaves nursing wounds. Many mattresses were strewn across the ground; bearing bloodied and resting injured slaves. Most had dirty bandages...but few seemed to have gotten full medical attention. Weathervane's magic only had so much stamina for the dozens upon dozens of casualties. Already, I could see many of the mattresses were covered in blankets where once had been a still living pony before. The night had not been kind. Having seen the trip, Glimmerlight brought me round to stand on the opposite side of her, away from them.

“Don't worry about it...just stick near me, Murky. We'll find a way to make it through without Brimstone...”

Immediately, despite nodding my head, the thought that we no longer had his protection was beginning to set in. What would happen the moment the raiders got in a mood to come for us in revenge? The amount of guards around the healers were providing security right now. But once they left...

“Leader's here! Stand still you wrecks!”

The shout came from above, one of the leatherclad slavers making use of the balcony platform above the door to announce. Below him, the (newly repaired) cage door squeaked open, the large form of Ragini leading the way. I breathed a sigh of relief...Protégé was taking this roll-call. My master himself strode in behind his ever-loyal griffin guard with a scroll and quill held within his telekinesis, followed by a small team of slavers carrying the day's oatmeal.

Apparently, not even Protégé's intent to do his best for the slaves under his command could locate better food than the ubiquitous slime in a bowl.

The actual roll-call was somewhat underwhelming. No called names and no shouting your 'number.' Protégé simply looked around us, sometimes checking with an attendant slaver for confirmations on fatalities during the night and ticking things off on his scroll. Somehow, given Red Eye's insistence to remember slaves, I figured it only right his student would attempt to do the same for his own stock. Eventually, returning to near the door, he spoke, raising his voice just enough to be heard.

“Today's work schedule, listen closely! We've been pulled from scavenge duty.”

There was an uproar of indignation from the raiders. It occurred to me that they were in the majority of survivors, wasteland weathered and tough, they had shrugged off many of the injuries I had seen claim normal slaves' lives. Protégé raised his hoof, awaiting a moment of calm.

“We don't have the ponypower left, so until new volunteers are in, we're back on standard work fares, as previously mentioned. Half of you will report in one hour to the scrapheaps outside Slit's factory for auto axe reclamation duty. I offer the choice that for those of you unable to use an auto axe may also move to the fuel refinery two blocks over. The following ponies are to report to me for specific work allotment in my office within the next half hour.”

Already, I was half expecting my own name to be on that list somewhere. My abject objective was simply to avoid wherever Barb and his lot ended up and if possible, the same place as Glimmerlight. I cast a glance over to her, but she wasn't looking back. No, what was she looking at...

I followed her eyes and found it led rather unerringly to the nurses' flanks. Well...she wasn't wasting time getting into her promise made inside the Stable. Blushing, I looked away before anypony accused *me* of looking at him too.

“Thunder Racer! Kriss! Barb! Lemon Mint!”

As each name was called, I saw the individual ponies perk up. Barb and Kriss (likely one of his 'Shades') shared a glance and a strangely knowing grin.

“Rocksplitter! Murky Number Seven! Wool Stitch!”

Well...there it was. Immediately I quivered and felt a cold sweat break out as I saw Barb and his student leer at me. Oh no...Protégé what are you doing? Not them! Glimmerlight's eyes shot right back to me, a cold fear clearly visible on her face as I felt her wrap one hoof around my neck.

“That's it. You've all got half an hour to get some food in you and have Doctor Weathervane check you if you're still injured, he'll be here in ten minutes. I expect you all to work your best on these tasks; they are all important for the restoration of Fillydelphia and Equestria as a whole. For achieving our Master's dream of Unity. That is all.”

The surrounding slave base murmured in displeasure. I could see why...most of them had joined the salvage missions in a bid for freedom or less mundane work. But now they were being cast right back into it. 'Unfair' would have been the word...had slaves any rights at all...

Protégé ignored the protests, turning on his rear hooves to march out again. He hadn't even glanced at me...something I was a little glad for, given how slaves that received special treatment publicly became nothing but targets for night assaults to 'bring them down a notch.' But as he reached the cage door, I saw another figure push past him. A foul, rotten reek came in his wake. The tall, half bearded, and glasses wearing ghoul doctor stomped his way back into the slave pen. Apparently, his estimate of ten minutes was to be cut down severely. Feeling my lungs sear on each breath...I dearly hoped those saddlebags of his contained RadAway...

“Right, you lot! Chows in, get it now or lose it! Half an hour! Move it!”

Amidst the stampede of hungry slaves, I just stood still. Long ago I might have run as well, but arriving at the front of the queue only meant more ponies to hit me on my eventual beating to the back. By the time I had arrived at the rickety table used to hold the huge pot, my bowl received only a small drizzle of mostly leftover cold water. Slimy wads of thin oatmeal floated in the milky liquid. Sighing, I took the bowl in my mouth and left without complaint. Slaves were gulping what they could down, most of them long adjusted to the tasteless and thick gruel of a meal day in and day out. Surrounded by his students, Barb lurked in a shadowy corner, mostly blending with the darkness around him. Trotting by, I received another knowing gaze from the raider's leader...following me with an eye while taking wads of his followers' own meals for himself.

“Oi! You! Pegasus!”

Almost spilling my bowl as the sound seared through my sensitive ears, the shouting slaver shoved me to make his presence known. Haphazardly dropping the bowl before I lost my meal, the push send a whip of pain across my shoulder.

“You been seen by the doc?”

“N-no...”

“Get on that mattress then. No time to eat and get checked. Fuck knows why he wants to waste time with you, gonna be dead in a couple days anyway...”

Whimpering as I was reminded, I morosely took direction and dragged my bowl to the mattress indicated near the fountain. Allegedly not fast enough, I found the slave guard pushing and knocking me toward the mattresses. Obediently, my rump thudded down behind me on the rotted mattress to wait for a doctor I frankly didn't want to see right now. After Minstrel...I wasn't sure I could ever trust one again. Now I had the scar to remind me of his 'attentions' for the rest of my life. Stopping short of touching my forehead with a hoof, I stifled the shake and tried to distract myself by glancing around, searching for my 'together by life' sister.

Glimmerlight was nearer the shop cell we inhabited on another mattress, the blonde buck nurse already sitting beside her and checking the bandage around her forehead. Despite too much ambient noise to hear specific words, I could see she was happily chatting away to him. At least there was enough security around right now that I didn't mind being separate from her for a few moments...that and I figured she was a little busy talking anyway. No need for a socially awkward little buck to get in her way...

Across the hallway, I saw a nurse alongside Bloodbank trying to hold down a thrashing slave after informing her that she was going to lose a leg below the knee. The mare had been crying in pain all night, languishing as infection had eaten away with no potions or drugs to stifle it available for a mere slave, with or without Protégé's authorisation. Beside them, two healers were having an argument.

“Shady Sands is dead to us now, look, we *can* wake him up, sure-”

“So why not?! We're healers!”

“For what reason? This is just going to cause him to be too slow and sick all the time from now on until some slaver kills him for failing! It's more a mercy to let him pass now in peace under the boss' anaesthetic spell.”

“You're going to just watch a pony die. I can't believe this...”

“It's less painful for him in the long run, Tulip...”

Tuning them out, my eyes fell upon this 'Shady Sands.' He looked fine...but I of all ponies knew that the deadliest things lurked beneath the surface. I clutched my sore chest, almost in relation to the quiet form of Shady. Had he just taken in too much smoke?

Perhaps the worst realisation was...this wasn't the first time I'd heard this same argument. Ponies in pens all across Fillydelphia had argued the point about their comrades dying in their sleep from the poisoned air and radiation within their bodies. Many had debated with themselves, was one quick impact from a great height better than a lifetime of this? Amongst all of it...I only felt oddly at home. Ponies hurt and dying all around me, surviving only to face more...and worse. The fact I was even still trotting was a miracle unto itself. It was just the horrible cycle of slavery and unforgiving industry. All these slaves with healing knowledge could do was try their best...or attempt to ease somepony's passing, knowing that they were in some way simply prolonging the pain.

But for all their efforts...it was nonetheless a rather grim sight on either side of me. Occasionally, I would see a slave lying too still to be alive. A mare in a jumpsuit with a hastily stitched butterfly peace symbol morosely draped a cloth over one such poor soul. Even those still awake were not through their horror yet; lack of medical supplies, particularly the valued healing potions, were giving rise to sharp screams as invasive telekinesis attempted to pull shrapnel out or clamp shut wounds. Feeling my right hoof throb, part of me began to worry what I might have to go through when they examined it...oh please no don't make it hurt...

I wanted to run and hide in the back room, but the watchful eyes of a guard instructed to make sure we all got checked over kept my rump firmly attached to the ground.

“What in the grand fucking hell are you doing to that stallion?! Get out my bloody way, you

incompetent bumblefuck!”

The rasping tone soared above the others, attracting eyes and ears as Doctor Weathervane strode toward a mattress and almost threw a young healer out of the way. Landing on his rump, the buck let his primitive medical tools fall from his magic and watched as the ghoul began work on the burn victim that lay screaming below them.

“I...I...trying to put the healing bandages-”

“Shit...I'm two hundred and seventy Goddess-damned years old and you're saying you somehow have *worse* eyesight than me? Don't you see that there? The clothing has stuck to his skin and you're trying to bandage it down? Celestia save me from the shit sundae you were trying to create with that. Ever hear of infection? Get out of my sight you *absolute fucking moron!*”

“I...but-”

His protests fell on deaf ears. In a flare of magic, Weathervane began his work on the burn victim, putting him to sleep with a spell and stripping the clothing from the torso. The wet tearing sound and patched and blackened material only looked like a second skin being drawn from the stallion to my eyes, making me wince and look away. The sickening smell of burnt flesh, all too well known to *anypony* in Fillydelphia reeked through my nostrils and seemed to burn my throat.

Whether or not it was my imagination, the gagging reflex led me to spasm and splutter on a thick cough. My sickness had only been staved off by two half shots of RadAway (one mixed with a thorough helping of soil, a cocktail I was sure that the Roamer wouldn't be too interested in) but I could already feel it returning.

Lying on my side upon the mattress only made me wince further as a popped spring prodded my left wing. I rolled to the right instead where the freshly plucked feathers still ached as well. Sighing, I let my head sink. *Everything* was sore somehow. Perhaps if I-woah!

Squeaking in shock, I found my entire body moving of its own right to sit up properly. A magic field surrounded me as I saw the ghoulish figure of Weathervane stomp on over.

“Just what I need. I so much as magically touch you and you whine. Sweet fucking Celestia, I'm going to have a damned migraine by the end of this aren't I? Now sit still, you're still healing and I can't say I'm over the fucking moon that you won't get proper bedrest.”

His horn waved over me, before immediately scowling and dropping his telekinetic field.

“If I had a bit for every stupid pony that doesn't follow prescription I'd be richer than Red Eye by now. What the bugging hell do you think you're doing, Murk? I told you, one RadAway every single day! Your lungs are too susceptible to radiation, they'll be lighting up again by the end of today after that little stint in the pits I hear you got. What happened to the five sachets I gave you?”

The harsh tone bit deep, I felt myself wanting to shrink back and cry at the mere thought.

“I'm sorry...they got stolen...I...I only got enough to stop it a few hours a-ago...”

Weathervane simply groaned and facehoofed. “Well, I don't have anymore with me. We're not here to treat radiation. As for the rest, you're healing, slowly. I can treat the parasprite bites now that they've closed with magic, but you are weak Murk. Your gunshot and stab wounds are both closed over, but the areas are very sensitive. Any other hits in those areas and you could be looking at permanent problems. Fuck knows...you've got enough of them already.”

As he worked his healing spell, I glanced over behind the ghoul, spotting Glimmerlight pulling herself out of her robes in front of the nurse for a bandage change. It took some degree of effort to not blush and giggle at once as I saw that she was rather deliberately angling herself while bending down to slip it off her, wiggling her rear around. Sometimes...I really could not believe that attitude of hers...even after only a few days of knowing her. The nurse was rather openly blushing and fighting to stop a grin on his face. Hearing him laugh almost politely, I saw her tail whip up and stroke under his chain 'accidentally.' Oh great Goddesses grace, she was *good* at this...

Pulling my eyes away, I stared at my left hoof to check on the progress of the bites.

Weathervane's magic was indeed closing the small parasprite wounds that had stung incessantly since the Ministry of Image Hub. During the night, I had sometimes tossed and turned trying to sleep on the sofa, feeling like they were eating me again.

Under his magical care, I was beginning to feel the lack of sleep as a warm and fuzzy tingling passed from area to area like a soft massage. But his forward speaking manner was landing hard. Pressing my front hooves to my chest, I just wished I could...could...well, do whatever it would take to cure my tainted lungs...

I didn't want to go away...not like this in a slave pit...

Weathervane ceased his work for a second, glancing down at me. His voice was harsh, but professional.

“More tears? What's it now, kid?”

Spluttering on my own ragged breathing amidst tears, I looked up at him, the rest of me shrinking back onto the mattress. My voice felt unbearably weak.

“D-doctor...am I going to die?”

His beady eyes focussed briefly on me, before returning to his work. Through the harsh rasping tone quality that emerged from his ruined throat, I could have sworn there was a very tired mood.

“Two hundred and seventy years, Murk. Performances going wrong, a great war, the balefire...the wasteland. I've heard those words more times than it really matters anymore, kid. Shit...it's not easy to keep hearing them. You'd think I'd get used to it. But no, something in me just keeps. Fucking. Caring. She may have helped ruin my world with her place in creating the Ministries, but Fluttershy had ideals. We all swore them. To bring peace, harmony and comfort to all ponies. I quote, 'No matter how bad this becomes.' Well, this is still Equestria and we're still caring. Just sometimes I feel like I'm the only fucking one left...”

Blinking, I sat still and attentive. His eyes had left me, staring into space or around him at, I guessed, Fillydelphia in general rather than just this scene of pain and suffering.

“Even so...feels a long damn way from the home I knew, if you get me.”

I didn't. 'Home' was an alien concept to me, muddled only by the occasional niggling feeling that it might end up being here in Fillydelphia. Doctor Weathervane grumbled and reached out with his magic again to apparently scan across my chest.

“Without more RadAway in the next eighteen hours, I'd not rate your chances too high. I can see you've taken some, but those pits have high ambient levels that have aggravated your bronchial tubes. You won't feel it more than an itchy cough right now, but that'll start growing in the next four hours into the symptoms you'll recognise. This tainted shit...it turns quickly, hits a certain critical mass and then you'll feel it.”

Even Weathervane managed to contain his impatience as I fell to the mattress, covering my eyes with my hooves, sobbing away. This just wasn't fair...I wanted out...not to just linger and die. My...my mother wouldn't ever know...

After a few seconds, I heard Weathervane stomp his hoof lightly to get my attention.

“Hm...we've got none with us, that's all locked away in Hearts and Hooves Hospital. But...see if you can't let Protégé allow you to swing by later tonight. Come into the basement and I'll see if I can't dig some out of the stockrooms. You're the only pegasus I know of in this region of the world...it'd be a crime to let you simply expire. There's worse bastards out there and, Fluttershy forgive me for saying this, plenty of ponies who deserve life a lot less than a well meaning...if whiny, little slave buck.”

My heart lifted, he *would* help me! I almost wanted to hug the squishy old ghoulish for offering. He was rude, abrasive and clearly somber regarding the world he had lost...but how could I not respect a pony who still followed the oath he had sworn even through the apocalypse?

“Thank you! Tha-”

“Quiet down you stupid arse! *You* know about my basement, but I'd rather most ponies still think it to

be an irradiated area of nothing. Now sit still, I'll keep helping you because it's what I do, but if you keep up these insane escape attempts there won't be a body left for me to heal.”

Almost angrily, I felt my head yanked up as he began to examine my new scar. Even feeling it being watched by him, I felt oddly ashamed.

“Ergh...that simpleton had no fucking clue.”

“Who?”

“That shit eating donkey rapist calling himself a 'doctor' that treated this wound. I talk about oaths? Well he broke every single one in the entire damned book in what he did to you. I swear...if this were Old Equestria and he'd done this to somepony even Fluttershy might have raised her voice. Believe me...it wasn't fun whenever she did. Leaving a scar like this...fucking amateur.”

Letting my head drop again, I just curled up on the mattress as Weathervane backed off.

“Now, you're checked over, so try and get some rest, Murk. Oh...and to repeat one more thing?”

Looking up, I remained still and small upon the ground. His healing had worked, the bites were gone...but the ache on my chest, shoulder, right hoof and forehead remained. Clearly, it'd require more than he could spare right now to solve them. Even my wings still stung from pulling feathers.

“No more escape attempts.”

His raised hoof caught my attention before I could even open my mouth to protest.

“Bu-”

“No butts! No fucking butts! *Always* with the fucking 'butts!' You are too weak and too hurt to do anything more. Put your head down, stay out of trouble and get on with the work in Fillydelphia. That's the best thing for you right now.”

“No...please, I can't go back to that...”

“Stick with those who'll help you, that mare from earlier, pink mane? Just you and her help one another and you'll perhaps find some way to be more content. But escape isn't possible in Fillydelphia. Not from inside the Walls. I don't want you losing your life chasing some stupid dream, not one of the last living non-Enclave pegasi. Take it from me, patience and keeping your head down is the way. I lasted two centuries through harsher days than this. The first days after the balefire...no settlements, trade or currency. Just brutal aggression, anger and bitter loss turning Equestria into a living fucking hell. Chances come, history changes, life goes on. I'm not asking you to start agreeing and enjoy it...just don't rush headlong in. Equestria doesn't need another young corpse...”

The wave of hurt was coming crashing down. My forehead ached, the scar thumping and flaring in sharp pains as the 'advice' was given to me. But I nodded. Strangely, not even knowing what I was doing, I found myself feeling more sorry for him than I. He'd lived with the world he hated for generations already.

“Did...did you lose anypony, when it happened?”

His eyes flared, as though about to launch into another curse filled tirade. But restraining himself, Weathervane merely nodded, speaking quieter than I had ever heard him do so.

“You know...in this arse-backwards fucking city, that's the first time I've even been asked that. Hmph. Come along tonight, Murk. We'll see about your lungs with some RadAway...perhaps something else too...if I can remember the spell. Now, stick with that mare...stay safe, because you will not hear the fucking end of it if I have to put up with anymore filly-like whining from you than I already do. Caduceus should be done changing her bandages now over there.”

He nodded his head to 'there' behind him. Glancing over, I could only see an empty mattress. Noting my confused look, Weathervane turned and sighed.

“Oh, pissballs...where have they got to?”

* * *

Approaching the shop cell to collect my saddlebag, I couldn't help but ponder on just what kind of 'special' job Protégé needed both myself and two lethal raiders to report to his office for. I only had a few minutes before I needed to head up, but I was intent on going up early. No way was I going to wander the corridors with Barb when he made his move.

Pushing the stockroom door aside, I blinked to adjust to the gloom, turning to wander past the corner toward the larger part of the room itse-

“Heh...oh you cheeky mare, you...”

I stopped *dead*. Oh...oh dear...

Sounds, like that I had heard from Sundial's message with Skydancer, were drifting around the corner that separated the doorway and stockroom. Muffled giggling mixed with the sound of a little movement under a blanket. Poking my head around the corner just fast enough to bite my saddlebag and pull it out from where I'd left it at the edge of the stockroom, I only saw a rather...actively moving...blanket upon the sofa, before I whipped back around the pressed myself against the wall to slide out. A buck's sudden intake of breath and soft tease was followed by another of her soft and low laughs.

“Whaaat? Can't a mare in this crappy city take what opportunity she can to have a little fun?”

Sometimes, hypersensitive hearing really was a liability. Feeling my face burn brighter than my lungs ever had, I couldn't exactly tune out the little gasps and soft moans that drifted out of the blanket amidst

Truth be told...I *probably* should have known Glimmerlight well enough by this point to have expected this. Per...perhaps I would just come back and see her later.

“Oooh! Well...you certainly *do* know your anatomy, Mr. Healer...”

...much later.

* * *

Protégé's office was in as much a state as it normally was. Strewn with books of all shapes and colours around that thick desk, if it weren't for the cleanliness of it (comparatively, anyway) I might have thought it just another wrecked room of the wasteland. My master sat behind his desk, a quill fluttering to and fro while his eyes darted from the scroll before him to a large tome held on a bookstand to the side of the desk.

“Master, you asked me-”

“Hold one second, Murk.”

Fighting back a squeaked apology for interrupting, I stepped back and averted my eyes from his writing. Instead, I took notice of one new addition to the room. On the far edge of his desk sat a memory orb container, laying open. Inside lay the three remaining spell orbs the slavers had confiscated from Glimmerlight. It didn't surprise me she hadn't been allowed to keep it, given their apparent rarity.

After a second or two, I felt my ears twitch and perk up...Protégé was muttering under his breath as he wrote. So low...I imagined even he thought that my hearing couldn't spot it. Lying down on all fours and closing my eyes as though resting (Well...I kinda was...) I concentrated on listening, fighting the nagging feelings that I shouldn't be eavesdropping on my master.

“...that everypony has some role they can play in the recovery of our world, regardless of their flaws or fears. Your faithful student...Protégé.”

I heard the scroll wrap up before I opened my eyes. Another letter to his teacher, clearly. Unfortunately, this indication of any weak ponies still having things they could do hardly reassured me about this 'special job.' Across my life, 'special' jobs tended to simply mean 'more dangerous' or 'liable to be disgusting.' Back on the rock farm, I had always been the one chosen to muck out the brahmin or stand watch for raiders during thunderstorms on account of no-pony being around to stand by my side. Apparently...even having a few who would didn't make any difference in here.

How could things change so much but still feel utterly the same? The ache in my tooth, almost on cue, made its presence known. Just another job for just another day, with the chains pulling me ever closer and tighter. I wasn't any closer to escape than I had been sitting in my pig sty. The Master likely was right.

The imagery of my nightmare flicked in my mind once again, that mocking laughter...

“Thank you for waiting patiently, Murk.”

Popping back to my surroundings from the daydream, I refocused my eyes and lowered my head.

“I can only wait to serve, master...”

His head inclined to one side, leaning on the desk. “...you're sounding a little more autonomous today, is something wrong?”

“S-sorry...I...I'm...” There was no sense in lying to him, he'd spot it a mile away. “I'm just afraid this is all I'll ever be, a slave in Fillydelphia till the day it finally kills me.”

“So you're afraid of being a slave forever...so you fall into being one even more? A curious mindset...but tragically pessimistic. We shall make more of you, Murk. I believe you have earned at least an explanation by now. Are you ready to go?”

Huh? I couldn't deny an interest in knowing just what it was he had in mind for me, but right now? Just out of no-where?

“But...but master, what about my shift? What about the other ponies like Barb coming up soon?”

Protégé was already trotting to his stand and pulling on the holster for his revolver, before moving past me to the door.

“This *is* your shift, Murk. The others will be seen to by Ragini, she has all the information to direct them to whoever it was that required their services. But you have something else to do. Follow, Murk, we're going out.”

Half cantering to catch up with my master into the corridor, we passed Ragini, standing guard in a small room near to his office. A knowing nod from Protégé sent her to await the others in his absence. Briefly...I wondered about her. She had protected me from The Master, then shot me and finally spent time insulting me on every meeting...yet I barely knew anything about her. Any questions likely wouldn't have a chance as I found Protégé slowing down to allow me to trot alongside him...rather than behind him where I felt my place truly was as the slave.

We passed down the stairs, clearly headed for the main entrance. Slave guards stood more at attention as he passed, sinking back into lazed slumps in their posts once he was gone if I looked behind us.

“Master, where are we going?”

“Not far, Murk. There is a view I would like you to see before I explain anything in a building nearby. Suffice to say, a little context is very important.”

Passing through the entrance, we were met by buffeting winds that stirred the factory fumes and sent whirling dervishes of black dust arcing down the roads. Passing by a group of carts pulled by thin slaves devoid of all emotion by the exhaustion of the day, I found Protégé leading me not on the main streets that would take you to the factories or mills...but into a small courtyard off to the side. High rise buildings rose from the ground near the Mall, their top halves having collapsed off as though sheared by a massive axe. Judging from the heights...the sturdier Mall had shielded the bottom half while the tops had simply been blown away to collapse all over the dead park on the opposite side. Huge chunks had also torn part of the elevated monorail that passed between the high rise buildings clean off, making a ramp up to it from the ground into the courtyard.

After a few more minutes, it became clear that the entrance to one of these buildings was Protégé's intent. What was left seemed almost like a jagged castle of thick concrete supporting pillars and bent iron rods. Burnt curtains flapped through shattered windows on some floors in the wind.

"I...I don't think this is a good place..."

"Calm yourself, Murk. They supported the weight of two centuries of wear. Two small ponies won't cause them to collapse."

"N-not that...ponies died here. This was their home."

Reaching the low and wide steps that would take us to the shattered glass of the front doors, Protégé stopped and looked up at the missing top floors. After a second, it almost seemed like he was trying to imagine it whole and rebuilt. Glancing over my shoulder at the small mountain of destruction the top half had created behind us, burying the park, I found it all too easy to wish it hadn't. A park would have been nice...

"Yes, it was. As was everything the unfortunate souls of old possessed in this city. We won't be going too high. Now...let's get going, we shouldn't take too long."

* * *

The interior was as desolate as the Stable. Spilled bags filled musty corridors lined in rubble. The whine of auto axes and screams of slavers were heavily dulled in here, punctuated only by the roar of factory shift horns or gunshots. Protégé trotted ahead, seeking another staircase after the main one had proven to have collapsed. Taking my small nervous steps...I occasionally had to canter forward to catch up.

"Master Red Eye's workforce hasn't gotten around to this tenement yet with so many factories left to reactivate. Truth be told, I've been tempted to get a few volunteers to scout it out soon."

"Isn't that what we're-*yargh!*"

I cried out, backing off as I glanced into a room and witnessed a small pile of bones facing away from a window that overlooked the direction of the crater. Pressing myself back against the opposite wall, I gently shuffled away from the apartment's doorway. Having turned in concern, Protégé trotted across and glanced in himself before sighing.

"It's likely that won't be the only one, these flats I believe were still being lived in when the missile struck. Not all ponies could afford Stable tickets."

I nodded, shakily. Sundial had the same problem. Almost to my surprise, I felt Protégé's hoof touch my shoulder in apparently concern.

"Are you alright? You can keep going?"

Shivering...I didn't know if it was from the bones or from his suddenly caring tone fighting with my hatred of the pony who had stopped me. I wanted to throw myself at his hooves and beg to be helped as much as I wanted to buck his face for what he'd done to me and others.

"I...yes...t-the Stable was worse..."

"I know, Murk. They often are. Come on, trot beside me, we're almost there."

"Almost where, master?"

"You'll see."

He brokered little questioning as his hoof gave me a little nudge to match his pace, dropping down to trot properly after a few seconds. Ducking below a sparking gem encrusted conduit that had fallen from the ceiling, I saw Protégé point wordlessly to a signed door at the back. Almost to my glee, I saw it had a little picture of stairs beside it. Some ponies *were* considerate!

Moving on upwards revealed only more dead corridors filled with enough luggage to make an assumption that the ponies in here had received just enough warning to make one last dash for safety. Likely the haunting sirens had been the only warning these ponies got. Whimpering, sticking close to Protégé, I tried not to look at my hooves as we picked our way around the still clothed skeletons that lay beneath the luggage.

...bee...bee...bee...bee...bee...

Whining loud enough and stopping dead, the sound of some sort of alarm began to pick up in my ears. I would have thought it to be Sundial, had we been any higher...no, this was muffled...further away.

“P-Protégé...what's that?”

“What's what, Murk?”

Of course...he couldn't hear like I could.

“Something up ahead of us...l-like a beeping...an alarm...”

...bee...bee...bee...bee...bee...

Shaking his head, my master continued trotting along, staying silent until he knew what it was. Sticking close behind him, it occurred to me that beneath that student barding I still didn't know what his cutie mark was. Probably just a book or something...maybe a padlock to stick with the theme as one of the ponies keeping me in here.

Continuing along the corridor, I could see the Mall through some of the blasted walls of wrecked rooms. From these few flights up, likely just short of Sundial's message limit, I could still see the main entranceway. No slaves were travelling, probably not yet the time for them to head out.

...bee...bee...bee...bee...bee...

Further along, Protégé stopped, more intently listening, before, almost to my shock, I saw him draw his revolver with a small magic burst.

“Master, what-”

“Got something on E.F.S.”

He was looking apparently at the wall.

...bee...bee...bee...bee...bee...

...kssh...kssh...

“Oh no...please no more...I've had enough of scary things from the past...I can hear something moving!”

Lowering myself to the ground, I just shivered as the second noise, accompanied Protégé glancing around in a full circle to check the area.

“Don't worry...it's not hostile. Well...yet. But I don't see any movement, it's just standing still about twenty metres to our left. Come on...”

“O-ok...”

Creeping forward, I stuck nearby to him. This was a little surreal...this pony had shot and recaptured me! Yet here I was, less than a day or so later following him on some special mission or job. Even if I knew why...it still confused me why I did not feel anything but pain and hate for him like I did The Master.

Rounding the corner, I saw Protégé glance down the hallway and jerk back.

...bee...bee...bee...bee...bee...

...kssh...kssh...

Gradually, after glancing at me Protégé reaimed his revolver and advanced once again. Moments later...he lowered it.

“Well...would you look at that.”

Nervously trotting out, I saw the source of at least one of the noises. Ahead of us, a strange multi-limbed

machine was sweeping the floor, hovering about a foot from the ground. Only it wasn't sweeping everywhere...just one small patch that had almost been rubbed clean to the concrete. Many of its limbs hung uselessly while the magical energy keeping it afloat (similar to the sprite-bots, I presumed) seemed to flicker and make it stutter in the air every few seconds.

Apparently seeing us advancing, an eye stalk whirred round to face us.

“Brrrrrk-ello, sirs! Brrrrk-brrrrrk-rry about the mess!”

The eye turned back to its work, leaving us to simply stare at this strange, forgotten robot.

“An old Clean-n'-Handy, hmm? I should see about getting your friend Glimmerlight to take a look at it. Might still be recoverable.”

“I...I'm sure she'd enjoy it...but...but the beeping?”

I could still hear it. Above the soft sound of the old robot sweeping one square foot of floor, it was still going off around us. Protégé had holstered his weapon, apparently seeing nothing else on E.F.S.

“Well...I'd thought it was this old robot, but it's on our way. No doubt we'll see...”

Gently pushing our way past the cleaning robot (*“Brrrk-so sorry sirs!”*) Protégé began leading me toward a side of the building not facing the Mall. The hallways were more deserted here, hiding larger rooms that were oddly empty. Were they vacant or just ponies who could afford a Stable as well as bigger lodgings? Not that I was complaining...the fewer skeletons, the better. Already, I was surprised I wasn't crying. Had the Stable desensitised me that much?

The beeping became louder, more directly audible. A room up ahead...

Protégé pushed himself past a fallen wall that led into a rather vertigo inducing drop where a portion of the building had ripped apart in the collapse. Edging carefully, I tried not to look down...what kind of pathetic pegasus was I? Afraid of falling...

But my fears quickly relocated...the sound was coming from the next doorway. To my surprise, I saw Protégé seem to relax as he got close enough to hear it properly.

“I think I may know what it is...”

Without waiting, he bucked open the jammed door, causing a great mass of dust and fragments of rubble to drop from the weak doorframe. Walking calmly inside, I couldn't find the same ease of mind. If it wasn't dangerous...that didn't mean it wouldn't...wouldn't be...

It was...

The moment I trotted in behind Protégé it was revealed to be something as simple and depressing as it sounded. Before me in the apartment lay an open door to the bedroom, its alarm clock insistently sounding a two hundred year old wakeup call to the couple that were still on the bed. Their blackened bones curled around one another in a final embrace.

They must have realised there was no way to get to the ground floor or basement in time...and just lain and waited...

No...no the Stable hadn't desensitised me...not at all...

Feeling my hooves go weak, I turned and backed out on shaky legs until I could fall against the side of the rotted couch and cry. With as much coughing and sucking of air between sobs, it still didn't stop my oldest and most common flaw and reaction coming to the fore. Each shrill beep of the alarm clock serving only to send further stings of hate for this world into my mind. Eventually, it ceased, a small click as Protégé's hoof finally ended the little machine's wailing.

I heard him trot out behind me. It hurt...to be so upset and sick in the presence of my master, but even as I felt him wander over beside me I expected to feel the curt order and insistent pull to keep going.

I didn't expect to feel his hoof rest over my shoulders to try and comfort me.

With all my life, I hated him. The one pony more than even The Master who had turned me back at the last possible obstacle; the one who had put a bullet in me. But right now...he...he was the only one caring for me...

Before I even realised what I was doing, I had flung myself against him, taking refuge in the small measure of kindness he offered, crying my heart out into the shoulder of somepony I could not recognise as either a master or an ally.

* * *

We sat apart, afterwards. Protégé had quietly asserted that this room would do...for what reason I didn't really know. I simply sat against a side cabinet, meek and trying to not feel embarrassed about what I'd just done. My eyes still felt red and sore, hopefully hiding the minor blush as I tried to work out why I'd done that...why I'd sought shelter in him as much as I would in Glimmerlight.

Protégé had remained unflappable, simply keeping that one hoof gently held on the back of my neck as I had let the sadness all out. Afterwards, he seemingly showed no real reaction...almost a little withdrawn. Only now, he sat and stared from the window. I had to hide my eyes as he turned toward me.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Mhm...”

“Don't be ashamed, Murk. You aren't the only pony who feels sadness of what has been lost in this world. By all rights...none of this should have happened. I think no less of you for showing it. If anything...it has provided the context I spoke of without me really even having to say it myself, although that is getting a little ahead of what I brought you here for...”

“You...you promised that you would begin to show me what it is you want with me...”

He seemed to slightly wince, as though not liking my wording of that particular point.

“To show you how I intend to help you, is the better way I think of it. Master Red Eye helps ponies, if they allow themselves to become helped. I want you to be the next one. You might do Equestria proud, aiding us. However I cannot order this of you, thus it is that I must give you your first step along the path to freedom as I see it. To make a choice to help Equestria by your own decision...or to willingly say no. It is in this sense that I can now, away from unfriendly ears, tell you that I require your help with something. Something that, for all my authority, I cannot ask of you in my stead as a work leader under Master Red Eye.”

My mind reeled. *Protégé* had a job for me that needed done off the record?! Something that he could not risk others hearing to the point that he had separated me from everypony else and other duties simply to find space to ask it? I didn't know how to reply...what to think...how to look. The idea that a master was giving me a choice was...unfathomable. I had chosen before, but only for myself or those who were also slaves...

“I...I...uh...”

“Come here, Murk.”

Moving toward where the window had once stood, Protégé beckoned me with a hoof. On cue, I lightly trotted over, glancing through.

The view from this side of the building gazed toward the Wall. Behind it, the southern hills of Fillydelphia's region rose up...the same ones the Stable had been buried beneath. But the view was dominated by one building. Sheer faced with dark marble and laced with balconies and turrets, it held a grandeur not often seen in Fillydelphia. Around it lay a thick pre-war security wall topped with razorwire. Slaver guards could be seen permitting processions of limping slaves in through a mesh gate.

“Somepony else's slave pen?”

My master merely nodded, before pointing out a giant brass symbol of a six pointed star.

“That, my dear Murk, is the Ministry of Arcane Science Hub in Fillydelphia. Or what once was the hub

anyway...it has since fallen into a multi-purpose use. Both as a worker's accommodation on the lower floors and specialist repair on the upper areas using the tools they have in there. What I need from you, is for you to steal a piece of technology for me.”

Staggering back, my mouth gaped open. Suddenly...the reason for such secrecy had become apparent.

“B-but...”

“I understand this is asking a lot of you, Murk. But this piece of technology would permit workers like yourself under my care to eat and drink with less fear of contamination. It's called a Sparkle Sanitiser, developed near the end of the war by the Ministry Mare herself while experimenting with ways to counter balefire radiation. Eventually, other projects far larger, ones never committed to any record I know of, took her attention and it was sent here to be finished. One prototype made it to completion before the missiles fell...and it lies in there.”

Pointing with a hoof, he indicated the Ministry Hub itself. From up here I could effectively see a layout of the entire courtyard surrounding the area. Mostly worn away, I could see piles of wreckage had been thrown in corners by the slaves. Even as I watched, one slave was being bucked repeatedly by a guard for dropping something. Whoever ran that slave pen was clearly not like Protégé...

Pulling a small folder from his saddlebag, Protégé dropped it before me. From within slid carefully drawn maps matched to the layout of, I guessed, the Ministry.

“I can provide blueprints, directions and descriptions, Murk. But do not think of this as me seeing you only as my personal thief. No...I only ask because you will be bringing hoarded technology to the good of others, not just yourself. This is your challenge to accept or deny...not my order to give. Should you be successful, however, I feel it would do you some good in beginning to realise the reality of choice and risk. That...and I may be able to redirect some resources this technology would save me to try and help you survive, Murk. Weathervane told me about your sickness...”

My hooves crossed over my chest, almost embarrassed. That caring look in his eyes simply made me want to look away. The feeling of throwing my hooves around my *master* to cry and let it all out was still jarring and uncomfortable. You *didn't do that*.

“I won't hold it against you should the decision be to simply return home, Murk. This is your choice.”

“Master...why are you doing this for me in particular? Why not Glimmer or...or some other pony? They want to be good too...”

There was a small silence. I wondered if he hadn't expected that question, leading to this quiet thought.

Eventually, he let the eyepiece drop into his hooves, turning it over a few times, staring deeply at it. Finally, he slotted it back behind his ear and stood to leave.

“I want you by my side, Murk...you and I are more alike than I think you know. In the end, I believe you want more than simply to be away from slavery. I think you want the same as I; to be free of this *world*. To find some place that might be...better. You understand the hurt of this world more than most, you were born into slavery and misery. That is why I picked you to offer these opportunities to in lieu of the freedom I cannot give you. Good day...”

Trotting away, I could not quite believe what I'd just heard. Protégé had always stood as a sort of beacon of conviction toward Red Eye's work. Only now was I beginning to see the true emotion that lay behind that unwavering obedience and loyalty he showed to his own master. It was nothing more than a desperate wish to escape the reality of the wasteland...

Sitting against the cabinet, watching him leave, my own feeble mind couldn't ever hope to dredge up an appropriate response. Only one thing came to mind. Protégé had helped me from the moment he had met me. Our confrontation in my escape attempt was a solid brick wall that prevented a true trust in him...but he hadn't turned away from trying to aid me in what ways he could. He had even comforted me in my moment of weakness earlier...a caring master.

There was but one thing I could give that I knew I possessed.

“M-master...wait.” He turned. “Please, I...I took this from the Stable for...for you.”

Digging into my saddlebag, I bit and drew out the hardback book.

“A book? Why, thank you, let's see...”

Seeing Protégé's magic draw it across to his face, flicking open to look at the inside cover, I found myself biting my lip. I didn't even know what it was. His eyes drew back and forth for a few lines.

...he smirked.

“Daring Do...and the Quest for the Sapphire Stone. A tale of a broken and hurt pegasus...unable to fly, as she faces an almost impossible task...”

His eyes looked up as the book slid into his own saddlebag.

“Appropriate...no?”

Turning with a curt and grateful nod, I heard him trot away down the corridor as I listened to his hooves gradually fade away in the abandoned building, leaving me alone in the room to make my decision.

For the longest time, I simply sat and stared upon the Ministry of Arcane Science. Not at the slaves...or the horrid scrap constructions that repaired its marred walls that must have once gleamed, but at the symbol of the six pointed star.

From last night, I had realised that the stars were the holders of memories. They symbolised the past. I had seen the shapes that made up a long forgotten world, told only in patchwork across the canvas of time.

Now before me lay the largest icon to support this. An entire Ministry who's work had been the preservation of memory...they had sought to help future generations, wasteland or not, to understand the past. They were...in some way, the true visionaries (how did I know *that* word?) of helping to create the better world that Protégé so dreamed of...

...that I dreamed of...

Pulling my saddlebag over, I slipped the maps inside, before strapping my PipBuck to the left hoof out of the way of injury. Slipping my goggles on and adjusting my fleece...I took one last look at the Ministry from above, noting the only way in I could make out across the old monorail track.

Stars were memories...Aurora *Star* had led this place...Sundial and Skydancer were with the stars in the past now...

It all came together in one great dream that this building had been a part of.

That some day the stars might aid in our escape from the wasteland itself...

* * *

Finding my way up onto the monorail was not especially difficult. On the way in I had seen the broken shaft that could act as a means with which to access the elevated platforms. Old trains lay dormant on the tracks while others had simply been blasted off and cannibalised by Red Eye's workforce. Presumably, the ones up here were too difficult to work on right now.

Picking my way through the buckled interiors for cover or hopping over thick singular tracks, I slowly crept toward the Ministry hub itself. The monorail passed close to the edge of that barbed wall, my hope was that there was something I could land on safely to jump off. Those piles of scrap had looked promising, piled against the walls to offer a somewhat rough ramp to break my fall.

Slavers wandered the courtyard surrounding the crenelated walls. Most were directing slaves to carry boxes on their backs, carts or with magic inside. Large piles had been set on pallets, ready for transportation while newer outhouses and slaver accommodation had been built from rotten wood. They would all provide pretty good cover until I could blend in with the other slaves.

Approaching the wall, scooting along below the small juttied side of the monorail tracks, I poked my head up to get a glance beneath me.

...oh...oh that *was* high. Gulping hard, I cast my eyes across the intended landing area.

It seemed to stretch out for a long fall. The scrap pile, covered by sheet corrugated metal and a few thick slabs of steel, bottomed out with old cardboard boxes only provided a small comfort against the drop. The metal could be slid on sure...and wet cardboard would slow me down...right?

My eyes glanced around, I had to time this right...slavers were looking rather attentive with so many slaves out and about. None would be watching up here, they weren't anticipating anypony trying to break *in*. It took an achingly long time for them to seem to all be glancing the other way.

Controlling my breathing...I leaned out-

-from the top of the control tower-

NO! Whimpering, I fell back again, trying to fight the imagery from my head. Things...things were bad, but that wasn't the way out...not yet...not yet...

Sucking in breath, trying to force my aching lungs to operate properly, I let myself relax as best I could for a few seconds. On a tangent...I really hoped they had some RadAway to steal in there. I could feel my throat clamping up under all the smog in the air out here...

Not giving myself anymore time to think bad thoughts, I turned, braced my hooves against the monorail side and hurled myself over toward the scrap. The wind of the fall rushed in my ears as I tried to roll and land on my side instead of my *face*. A shock of motion kicked up my rump as I felt my tail catch the barbed wire and slice a small chunk of hair out completely. The motion upturned me, leading me to land right on my back upon the sloped surface. Feeling the wind knocked clean out of me amongst a pained cough, I slid faster and faster across the sheet metal surfaces and bumped over thick rivets or girders. With one last stinging smack on my rump from the edge of the large corrugated piece I was thrown into the wet and soggy boxes that collapsed surprisingly quietly around me.

“Oi! Who dropped somethin'? I'll 'ave yer knackers if you broke another box!”

...not quietly enough...

Burrowing deeper, I covered myself in the boxes as I heard slaves scamper and avoid the stomping hooves of an overseer. I could hear him myself...his hooves had to be within ten feet...

“I...I think something dropped off the monorail! Like a...a piece of metal breaking off?”

The hooves stamped closer, making wet splashes in the turned earth. Through the small gap below my hiding spot, I could see his shadow...oh please don't look in the boxes...please please...

For twenty agonising seconds, I could hear a small stick being prodded into the scrap pile. Each time closer...then only a foot away.

“Eh! Come on, Fruit Punch. It'll just be another piece a' scrap. That monorail's ready to go soon anyway.”

The stick retracted, but only after a few more seconds did I hear the slaver leave. Oh good...just silent and safe for now. Waiting for as long as I dared, I poked my head out through a hole in the boxes, seeing a dull grey earth pony trotting away toward the slaves. They seemed to be packing up, ready to carry their last shipment in. Slowly, I began pulling myself free and creeping low to the ground away from the box pile. I felt horribly vulnerable, relying on 'Fruit Punch' not turning around. The moment I was close enough, I ducked behind the thin metal wall of a slaver's home to plan my next move.

The slaves were taking boxes from just in front of this house toward a huge double door in the back of the Ministry. On the other side, I could see a series of large doors opening to allow fully laden carts to exit toward the main gates, some sort of old loading area. Under the noise cover, I slipped forward again, making a quick darting gallop to dive behind a pallet of square metal cases. (Oh, hello old friends...) But where now? If I could catch up to the full procession I could blend in with them like I had done at the Mill long ago (granted, that hadn't *worked*, but still...) but there were too many slavers and bits of open ground between

us...damn.

With my back pressed against the boxes, I heard the command shouted to fetch the next pallet. The slavers were making their way back. Poking my head out only led me to yank it back right away, oh *crap* they were coming this way...this wasn't a good plan, no not at all...

“Grab a box each, lift 'em in ya' pansies. Fruit Punch and I could take three each and you lot are stumbling and groaning over *one*?”

I overheard a slave mutter something quietly about them trying it while malnourished and sick. I could appreciate the thought. I'd never been able to lift these boxes even whilst empty. They were just far too large for me, hell, I could probably fit in-

...aha!

As swift as I thought possible to stay silent, I turned and bit the lock, swinging it open and trying to prise up the lid with my hooves. Come on...come on! Straining, I risked a little more noise to push harder.

Already one slave had reached the opposite side of the pallet to watch over them. Faster slaves were beginning to drag the other boxes off the front of the pile.

Almost tripping as it popped open, I set about swiftly dumping the various wires out behind me and covering them with earth before hopping up and falling head first into the box after wiggling my rear hooves in the air to give me enough momentum to get my back half up and in as well.. The lid snapped shut above me to leave me in complete darkness eerily similar to that of the Stable...only with my full body curled and crushed into a tiny space. This time...I couldn't even dare turn on my PipBuck light, I simply had to sit quietly, still and try not to let the claustrophobic feelings sink in.

Even a few seconds in...it was proving difficult. The air was low in here, the smallest of gaps between lid and box providing just enough to survive by on my weakened lungs...but I couldn't keep this up long. My throat was getting hot from the effort as I had to fight to breathe properly.

“And the last one! Grab that too!”

A lurch and loss of balance signalled the lifting of 'my' box, followed by the strain and cry of the poor slave who would have my weight to pull this one journey as well as the box itself. With a dull thud and a shoot of pain through my spine at the impact, I felt myself dumped onto the cart before I was pulled slowly toward the Ministry itself...

In here, I had plenty of time to think. It was all I had to try and distract myself from the cramped conditions. Chief among them was, *why* was I doing this? Was it because I did want to help? Because I somehow found myself interested in the great stars of memories?

...or was it simply because *he* had asked me?

Even now...I still wasn't sure if I was choosing...or simply obeying.

* * *

The journey was, mercifully, not too long. Five or so minutes filled with ringing shouts and wails of the slaves who took too long receiving canes or whips to their rumps and backs. I wished I knew how to activate voice recording on my PipBuck...the ponies outside the Walls needed to hear this. If they could be made to realise the true horror of Fillydelphia...perhaps something might be done about it? Trapped in this box, I had the most true to life audio filtering I had ever known as I simply...*heard*...Fillydelphia.

Before long, the trundling of the cart ceased and I felt my box being lifted with a smooth grace...likely a strong telekinetic. Swinging across, the odd loss of gravity felt incredibly bizarre before I was harshly dropped the last two feet. The impact sent a jarring pain through my entire body, making my lungs spasm and my throat explode into a harsh coughing fit. The noise wasn't an issue, in here amongst the work outside...but I had no room to properly move. Each cough was like an inverse crush on my body as the small box kept it contained. I felt a trace amount of blood splatter on my own stomach before all balance and sense of direction fell out from under me due to the contained sound reverberating in my ears. Sniffing, whinnying

softly in pain, I clutched my chest and shivered...praying that I could get out of this box soon. There was even a foul stench of mud, dirt and unwashed...hair in...here...

...oh...that was me. Right...

A small clunk sounded through the box. Wait...what was that?

“That it all off? Good, get back to the main chamber you lot, master's gonna have a new job soon. Come on, stop limping back there!”

The sound of a few dozen ponies all leaving began to filter through the box, backed up by the heavier trot of the slavers as they followed and herded their stock. I spent a few minutes just listening, but all I heard were a few distant sounds of shouting and screaming. It was time to go.

Pushing myself upwards, I exerted myself to press the lid open. To my horror...it didn't move.

Oh no...no, no, *not now*. Do not do this!

Pressing harder, thumping the back of my neck upwards or pressing with my head, I strained and strived. It moved...but it felt heavier than I had ever remembered. Suddenly, the realisation began to filter through as to what that clunk from earlier was. Somepony had...had put another one on top.

Fear began to filter in, I was trapped in a tiny box, alone with no-pony knowing I was here, with a gradually failing air supply. Eyes watering, I pushed again and again to no avail. Hyperventilating, my lungs burning and hooves shaking madly, I pushed with every ounce of strength my sick little body could spare.

It was hopeless...I was trapped. Only fear of a worse fate kept me from screaming for help. Twisting, I turned on my PipBuck's light to gain any sort of vision, but all it did was heighten the pressing lack of space when I saw just how my body was twisted and contorted to fit in here.

I panicked. Being trapped in here was not a fate I wanted, but stuck I began thrashing in sheer terror, driven to a maddened state as my eyes watered more and more.

“I...I don't want to die in here! Somepony help me!”

Forget other fates...I needed *help!*

“HELP!” The shouting only echoed right back into my sore ears. “I...I don't want to suffocate, I-”

Spasming again, my screams only led me to cough and hack painfully. But amidst it, I felt something rock the box from side to side. Sucking air as best I could, I tried to rock it again...and again. Building momentum, I realised the box above me was heavier than I was...if I could just make it rock from side to side...

It took every bit of small courage I could to calm myself and keep rocking as I felt my mind begin to wander and darken...the lack of air was getting to me, I knew it. I...I couldn't pass out, if I did I might never wake up before my sickness got worse! Crying a shrill whine as loud as I could, I threw my body one way and then the other, feeling the thump as the boxes swayed and clumped down on their edges. Finally...beautifully, I felt it overbalance and keel over both boxes, ejecting me onto a concrete floor in a dark room. Breathing in the musty air was like a dream, filling my lungs as I pushed my chest out and in a good few times. I simply lay on my side for a full minute, trying to stop my shivering and stretching my dead legs to regain the feeling in them.

Eventually, my front legs fell back to cross over my chest.

I hated this illness...why...why couldn't somepony fix it? I just felt so weak and helpless amongst other ponies who were stronger, faster or tougher than myself. All I had were my dreams and the small measure of faith from the mare who had shown me that anypony, no matter how small, could take back their life.

Yes...yes, Murky...think of her...think of LittlePip, your Stable Dweller. I tried to remember everything about her as I pushed my hooves beneath me. I had to cling onto those memories, those little stars of hope like her when she had risen to the skies above in the Pit. Right...right...let's go...

Opening my eyes, I found that the room was a large chamber next to the multitude of doors I had seen opening to let other ponies out with carts. Piles of boxes, crates and shelving units covered this side, while rows of carts were littered against the other. Three exits left this room, one big and gaping toward a brightly illuminated area...the other two only dimly lit through small single doors. Staggering across, I tried to hear down each of them, but only the large entrance held any noise at all, that of many ponies laughing and screaming in dual succession.

No...not that door.

The other two were silent, so picking one, I crept forward and tried to open it under the dim light.

Darn...locked. Shrugging, I made my way to the other one, finding the door already open anyway.

Switching off my PipBuck light as the flickering white gemlights gave enough ambient light that my eyes could adjust normally in here, I trotted carefully inside. It led to a locker room, with three rows of the small metal cupboards cutting down the centre of the room. Small benches were dotted here and there, mostly snapped and made of peeling paint by now. Glancing around to make sure no-pony else was there, I pulled out Protégé's maps.

It didn't take long to locate the huge warehouse on one floor. He had drawn a small purple circle on a higher floor and pointed to it with a few arrows. So that was likely where the Sparkle Spoofitiser was...right. It looked like if I were to go through the back of this locker room and across the top of a big main room (I hoped I read it as gantries right) I would find the research areas. From there is was a simple run through into what looked like a lab judging by all the tables.

Okay...simple. Stay to the shadows and creep...I could do that, right? It was easy to remember the directions, compared to the Stable, I could trot this place no problem after a quick look at the maps.

Right away it began to go wrong. Perking up, I felt my ears twitch as the sound of two ponies pushing and laughing came to light nearby. There was a door at the back of the locker room...they must have been coming in through there!

Stuffing the maps back in, I rushed across to hide at the ends of one of the locker rows, glancing down the line at the door. Please just go past...

They didn't, staggering about, almost drunken looking, I saw a buck and a mare holding one another up almost fall through the door. The mare, a unicorn, still had a glass bottle held in her magic that they were both taking swigs from. I whipped my head back to hide. Maybe I could use the lockers to go around?

"Hey...hey...wanna use the showers? Could...hic...clean ya, if y'know what ah mean..."

The mare snorted before I heard the sound of hoof impacting with head. Well...that's what you get if you aren't Glimmerlight, I guessed.

"Hah! Yer a good drinker but...screw you..."

"Why not-argh fuck!"

A second, harder, sound had impacted...but the pair only laughed more. Clearly, this was some sort of running joke to the two slavers. A gurgle sounded another swig from the bottle, before I heard it clatter on the floor, empty.

"Aww..."

"Hey hey...you don' do that...hic...y'throw em! Watch..."

The sound of somepony grabbing and grunting with effort was followed only by the blur of the bottle as it flew past my head and impacted on the wall, showering me with thick fragments of glass. I yelped in shock, before clamping a hoof over my mouth.

"...whut was that?"

"Yer mo-ARGH FUCK!"

The hardest hit yet denoted a return to thinking for the buck.

“I heard somepony! Hey! Hey come out...we can have, snrk...a threesome or something!”

I wasn't sure what horrified me more. The thought that I had been heard...or the direction my traitorous imagination took. But I quickly had to pull myself to my senses and gently trot away down the other side of the lockers...if I could just reach the door...

Already I heard them staggering down the other side, not a couple of feet away through the lockers. I almost leapt right off my hooves as I heard the mare scream.

“PEEKABOO!”

She had reached the end, oh crap...oh crap I needed to *move*. I upped my gait to a quiet canter, the door was still open...

“I'll...I'll go look this side, see if it was somepony in the corridor fuckin' with us...”

I stopped dead. The mare was where I had just been and would no doubt look up here soon, but the buck was now looking back the way they had come toward the door. He'd see me if I ran out...only one place to go.

Hopping to the side, I reached the end and the tantalisingly close door and instead moved another row of lockers down and away from it to hide from both of them. Ducking behind the lockers, I cast a glance back toward the door as, true to my guess, I saw the buck wander up to it and glance out into the corridor.

“No-pony here...”

“And no-pony down here either,” replied the mare, “think we're hearin' them ghosts they say are in here? Woooo!”

“Pfft...that was just once in the main office...said he saw a fuckin' purple pony appear right before 'em. No-pony listens to Theory Shaker anyway...nah I think we're...we're just too fuckin' drunk, Flank.”

“Dun call me that...me brother's the one with the shitty name. Ah'm...ah'm Firm Blade now, got it? Now git over here...”

The buck, reading into that or not, didn't waste any time in staggering away. I concentrated on not letting the building cough sound out, swallowing it down and whimpering as quietly as I could when I felt all the colours around me seem to fade and sear across my hazy vision. This...oh dear...this was getting worse. I needed to get this all done quickly before I was too sick to continue. Protégé likely didn't know how fast it could come on me...

Pulling out to glance back down the middle row I had come up, I had to snap back as I saw the mare pass across it. I'd have to time this right, the moment she went by the last row I was *now* behind...I'd have to move back to the middle one...then again to the one with the door before the buck saw me.

On an unrelated point...I now had a headache.

Watching the mare from the smallest amount I could expose, the moment she shifted past the opposite end of the row I moved...then immediately dived and rolled toward the door as I saw the buck appear earlier than I'd thought behind her.

“Ah'm back!”

A sound of a hoof slapping something decidedly *not* a face echoed through the room, accompanied by a shocked, almost cute, squeak...then an impact that *was* upon a face hard enough to make the lockers shake as the buck no doubt fell against them, laughing himself silly.

Much to my confusion...so was the mare. What an odd couple of slavers...

Outside I found the corridor to be much better constructed than most, somewhat on the level of the Ministry of Image yesterday. It only made sense, I guessed. But here, multiple rows of coloured stripes ran along the walls. Some turned down one corridor while others kept going past. Symbols were embossed at various intervals. Were they...directions to things? One, the purple one, held the six pointed star, while a red one bore the symbol of a small flame and a pony running away from it.

But my attention was taken by the yellow one, bearing the butterfly symbol of healing. It pointed down the

opposite way to my objective...but there was no *way* I was overlooking this opportunity. Already, my vision was swimming and my head fuzzing up as the ambient radiation built and made my chest feel thick...

The corridors seemed oddly deserted. Weren't there dozens of slavers and almost a hundred slaves in here? Where were they? Not that I was complaining, my weakening legs gave way to me slipping and falling back and forth just like the drunken ponies had. Per...perhaps I could blend in as a drunk?

Squinting to get my vision to reassert from the blurring lights, I saw my destination up ahead, an open glass room bearing the symbol of Fluttershy. Almost collapsing in, I began scouring drawers and cabinets frantically, feeling my breath taking on a ragged tinge. The medical room was little more than a single raised bed surrounded by walls of cupboards and glass lined cabinets. A couple of thin metal trays on wheels had been tipped over, spilling scalpels and empty syringes everywhere.

Oh Goddesses please, there has to be *some*. I threw aside small tubs of pills and bandages in my search, anything I didn't know got thrown on the floor as I went from cupboard to cupboard. Nothing. I searched the floor for any spilled sachets. Nothing. The drawers. Nothing. The bed, the bins and the cabinets above. Nothing nothing nothing!

Collapsing against the bed, sucking air through clenched teeth as my chest ached and swelled in pain, I could feel the gurgle of blood in them. Was...was this wing of the Ministry irradiated? It shouldn't have advanced this fast...

Striving forward, I tugged at cabinets, climbing up onto the work surfaces to search them. It felt like somepony had lifted everything valuable from here already, all that was left was worthless junk! That wasn't fair! Everything tumbled out, from clipboards to even a recorder. My hoof hit it as I stood on my hind legs to see into the top shelves.

Click...

"...oh...my, is it working? Oh! Sorry! Did I just ruin the beginning? I'm so sorry, whoever's hearing this..."

Aha! My hooves found one cabinet locked shut. Through it, hidden to one side I could see an orange haze through the tilted glass. Unfortunately, no matter how hard I pulled, the lock wouldn't give.

"Don't worry, Miss Fluttershy, I'm sure they won't mind. Now, your train leaves in one hour, I suspect they'll wait for a Ministry Mare...but we should get going. You really don't have to set up each one of these yourself, the staff who'll operate it are very capable..."

"Sorry, Cherry, but I just can't bear to think I haven't helped out somehow. I don't really like just expecting somepony else to do the job I want, I'll leave after I get this medicine cabinet all locked in."

Argh! Come on! Coughing so hard I fell upon the worktop, I cried aloud in pain as I fell into the sink, my side bashing off the tap on the way down. Wheezing, I looked around, there had to be something to prise the lock off with...they'd left me a message but I'd rather they left me the *key*!

"Of course, Miss Fluttershy. Now, the recording you wanted?"

"Oh yes! My, I had almost forgotten, to whoever's listening, I'm so sorry-"

I heard Cherry cough into her hoof. I responded with a cough of my own before standing up on my hind legs to be in front of the glass again. Be strong, Murky...like Brim...oh Goddesses Brim...

I missed him...what I'd give for him to just throw me out of the way and...and headbutt this stupid glass or something!

"Right, well, I'm recording this for whoever comes along from the Ministry of Wartime Technology."

Applejack very kindly sent me a gift, a bodyguard...but...I'm so very sorry, I can't take him with me. He's just too...um...loud...and um...he likes the idea of war a little much...so sorry, I mean it's nice and all just, he makes me so nervous. I'm leaving this for the engineer who's coming to set up the light, could you return this to the Wartime Hub, pretty please? I'm sure they'd like to have him back...tell Applejack I'm sorry."

The beaker smashed off the cabinet, as did the metal tray. Snorting (or at least, what passed for a snort from me) I grabbed a scalpel in my mouth and climbed back up.

"Miss Fluttershy, we really need to make tracks."

"There, now any of the little ponies who come to learn in the student wing won't get any nasty medicine they shouldn't have."

Almost growling as I twisted and jammed the scalpel in the lock from between my teeth, I rattled it around. Yeah...little ponies...here's one little pony who *really* needed it, pretty please!

"That's wonderful, Miss Fluttershy" The voice held a small tinge of deadpan exasperation. *"Now let's get you to your train, I'll call a trotters cab for us."*

Nothing else for it...this would hurt. A lot. I pulled back my hoof, ready to swing and smash it. But even more cuts were better than...than my lungs acting up. I almost fell as my head swam and my hooves felt weak again, I coughed a small metallic taste into my mouth. Spitting it out, a sickly coloured blood fell from my mouth...no good, I had to try...

Swinging forward, I smashed my left hoof as hard as I could into the glass and rebounded hard enough to catapult me completely off the worktop. Landing on the bed, it fell off its wheels to clatter onto the floor, dumping me against the cabinet. Moaning as the landing jarred my already sore torso from the convulsions, I looked up to see the glass defiantly intact.

It was no good...

Holding my head in my hooves, I struggled to think of some other way...some manner in which I might get the one thing that would let me live another few hours.

"Thank you, Cherry."

The sound of hooves trotting about played through the recorder. I heard the aid wandering away while Fluttershy seemed to stop and make a few scuffling noises.

"Oh, um, before I end this? Please, could you tell the scientists the key to the cabinet is under the welcome mat until they get a proper box? Thank you ever so much."

Click.

Slowly, bringing my crying face back out, I stared at the recorder a few seconds...before launching myself to the long faded mat. Pulling it up, I expected everything bad...

But there it was...waiting to be discovered by anypony willing to actually *listen* to the past.

"T-thank you...Flutters-s-shy...argh!"

Rolling over as another convulsion hit, I could feel my mouth aching and filling with splatters of my own fluids and blood. Driving myself forward that one more step, I pulled my sore body up to prise open the cabinet with the key, grab the sachet and nearly bite the end off in my rush to let that foul orange liquid save my life.

Even now...she was still caring for ponies. Weathervane wasn't as alone as he thought.

* * *

Allowing myself a few minutes, I soon retraced my steps to continue on my route. The RadAway had

soothed my throat, my lungs felt like they were slowly decreasing in pressure while my head was a little clearer. That wasn't the closest run I'd had, but somewhere, I had run into radiation without knowing it in here to set it off that badly. Moving on seemed like the best idea.

Warily passing by the locker room door, hearing the two drunkards still shouting from within the cargo room, I advanced onwards, following the map. Very quickly, I envied the unicorn ability to hold something like a map up while trotting. Me? I had to stop and hide every corner or two to check I was headed in the right direction. Offices and fairly nondescript filing rooms lined this area, possibly the lesser workers who dealt with import and export through the cargo areas? It certainly wasn't showing anything of the splendour I expected from a Ministry Hub...

A hubbub of noise began to filter in through my ears...I was clearly drawing near to somewhere with a lot of ponies all talking and shouting. Music was playing too, some sort of slaver lounge? But there were too many voices, dozens upon dozens.

Following my map, I cantered up some stairs, again wondering just why this portion was so deserted. I could see blankets and saddlebags left in these rooms, clearly accommodation for slavers or overseers...but no-pony was home at all. Another flight led me to a set of workshops. Benches with clamps across each side either lined the walls or were nailed to the floor in the middle...again, nothing even vaguely magical here other than the lights.

Wait...no!

I dived below one of the benches, pulling a few toolkits in front of me. Seconds later, a galloping pony went by at a thundering pace, heading from up ahead to the stairs I had just come up. Slave or slaver I did not know...but only once they had passed did I pull myself out and continue. My heart was beating fast, despite how quiet this area was, background noise not considered, I was still deep in a forbidden place...I could *never* forget that.

If I were caught...if they discovered what I was, likely I wouldn't even get taken as a new slave...I'd seen trespassers brutally mocked, humiliated and exhibited to other slaves in the past. Often much to the amusement of the *slaves themselves*. Not for the first time, the sheer circle of brutality in Fillydelphia never ceased to amaze me in rather morbid ways.

The workshops held five or six doors to the right, all of them seemed to lead into the big room...where all the noise was coming from. Tentatively, I snuck forward to push one open, before hopping back as my hooves almost walked clean off the edge of a sudden drop.

A *big* drop...

Creeping forward, tentatively poking my head out, I saw a colossal room, three floors deep back to the ground floor. Ornate murals furnished every wall down to the ground where I saw a large space in front of a low wooden stage. Covering the back wall lay a simple curtain of half moth-eaten fabric. Arcing my head around I could see side rooms on the bottom floor, each containing small tables. Dotted here and there at various levels I saw other balconies or open corridors that allowed onlookers to gaze into this central hub of the, well, hub and watch whatever was taking place. In its hey-day, this must have been *beautiful*.

But now, slavers had stripped out every seat that must have lain before the stage, turning it into a solid floor; while the stage was lined with chickenwire mesh into large cages for slaves. Lines of foul banners and cloth were hung from balcony to balcony. The side rooms had been hollowed out into further containment for their workforce, sealing them in with nailed wooden barriers. Opposite the stage the slavers had set up a few wooden tables where some of them now all sat and bustled around, drinking heavily and laughing as they either played cards or whooped at the stage. I could see a scrawny, underfed and crying mare being forced into a humiliating routine as the slavers thumped their tables and screamed for more. Other slaves were lethargically dragging their hooves around to see to the needs of their masters between their work shifts. In the side rooms, I could see the vast majority of the bony slaves, trying to get what rest they could or glaring with no hope left in their eyes at the slavers that either sat at the tables or bustled around. In others, slavers sat with watchful eyes.

There were a great many slaves simply left on the floor of the room, huddled in groups where they couldn't fit in the side rooms, as though the slave den was overpopulated. The majority of slavers not sat at the small tables were sitting against the walls or in side rooms, watching their stocks...whips hanging ready. Many ponies came and went from side rooms, likely to their own accommodations. In all...the entire room seemed to bustle with activity and acted like a hub of, well, the hub.

But worst...the gantries were gone. Before me I could see where they had been torn away, leaving my route inaccessible.

I...I'd have to go down into that...try to blend in as I passed by. I didn't want to...I *really* didn't want to. But something drove me to step back and trot back to the stairs after checking my map.

I hoped with all my heart it was a will to do and not simply a mindset to obey that forced me to go about the steps required to pass through such a place.

* * *

“If I tell you to go and fetch my fucking saddlebag then you fetch my fucking saddlebag whether it's your shift or not!”

The slave was slapped heavily across the face by the burly earth pony; rushing back out of the entrance on three legs, clutching their bloodied nose in the other while I meekly trotted in past them. It was, unfortunately, the best way. There was no chance to sneak...I simply had to play the slave and stagger on through. Not that such a thing would be entirely impossible given I *had* at least gotten plenty of practice across my life.

To that end, the moment I passed into the massive stage room I fell in alongside a group of weary slaves returning from a shift. I had hidden my PipBuck and goggles in my saddlebag to avoid drawing attention. Itching and sighing, the group around me made their slow path toward a spot on the floor where they collapsed. Unwilling to appear differently, I dropped with them onto my side upon the laminated wood. Truth be told...it wasn't entirely all acting that I was exhausted...thirst was clawing at my throat. RadAway wasn't particularly known as a thirst quencher.

Above us, the poor mare was being jeered to 'turn around and wiggle some more.' I could see the roughly forced on makeup staining from her tears. Often, the females really had it worst in these places, being such a subject to the often unrestricted lusts of the male slavers...this was only more proof as I saw the half dozen or so slavers with their table whoop drunkenly. The slave beside me was softly crying herself, clearly worrying for her own safety, had she been told she was next? If she hadn't been so deprived of cleanliness or food, she might have been fairly attractive. Fillydelphia ruined all ponies it seemed. As one dirty mass, we all simply lay together in a heap, with me praying that no-pony recognised me as the pegasus who had been dragged through the streets just a few days ago.

If I could just slowly move from grouping to grouping...I could make my way to the far doors into the research areas. I began crawling as though hurt and tired, reaching for a fellow slave in the next cluster. A few other slaves were moving too, just stay average and forgettable-

The whip cracked upon the ground. As one, all of us moving froze at the sound and turned to see the wiry unicorn stallion snarling.

“Get in your groups and stop moving, all of you! You think this is a social gathering? Unless yer told, don't move!”

Squeaking in terror as I saw his eyes focus on me, I hopped quickly into the next group and cowered there...trying to pretend I'd always been from this one. The slaves roughly pushed me to the outskirts of the cluster, complaining and seeking more space for themselves. Eventually...I simply lay on the ground and shivered, hoping that no-pony would really pay me any heed as just a small bundle on the floor. Already, the sheer noise and chatter of the slavers and the moaning of abused slaves was playing on my ears. A mare shrieked and begged as I saw a couple of slavers tug her off toward a curtained side room. Another buck wailed as he was whipped again and again for bumping into a slaver. Behind the mare on the stage, I could see similarly dressed mares and even a couple bucks cowering in the chicken wire cages.

This entire place was a misery...I could see why Protégé hated it. A room that almost seemed to personify the day to day suffering of slaves. No extravagant tortures or cunning deceptions. Just deprivation and control. The reality of life for so many ponies in the wastes, I had seen the thousands of them across my life that had fallen out of control of their own lives. What would Sundial have thought of this? But against all wishes, I simply had to be a part of it.

For now. I reminded myself. For now...

Occasionally I would spot a few slavers less interested in the brutal side of their work, preferring to simply rest on the outskirts of the room between shifts. It wasn't unusual, some slavers were just taking it for the work, after all. If I could maybe go by them instead...

Waiting for a procession of slaves to limp past, I gently slipped in among them, trotting with my head down toward the edges where less attention was focussed. Up ahead I could see the thick door that led into the research areas swing open and closed as slavers barged in. At least it was open...now I only had to-

I was interrupted as I heard the rhythmic stomp and hiss of machinery actually moving *toward* the room...and emerge into the light. My mouth gaped as I saw what had to be the master of this area. I almost had to doubletake as I rubbed my eyes and began looking higher and higher as I fought the urge to shriek on the spot. This...this was no pony!

Standing on...on hind legs? A thick, dark brown haired and muscular body drew up above them to a bovine head bearing two sharpened horns. At first I thought the behemoth was wearing armour, but very quickly, to my horror, I saw it was all *implanted*. Robotic looking arms and embedded machined in its chest whirred away while one arm ended in a cybernetic hand. But the other...it bore a brutally large tri-fingered claw, giving the entire beast a lopsided gait from the immense weight.

As it loomed above me, gazing into those rotating and red blinking eyes, I fought the urge to void myself in sheer terror. Below it walked an old donkey, limping on a stiff hind leg. Wait...the huge thing was *following* it? Was...that some sort of insane half robot bodyguard?

Any thought further was killed immediately as I heard the voice of the pony the donkey was moving to meet. The bionic monster and the oddly authoritative donkey were bad enough to have to worry for, but that one voice overrode every thought had on the spot.

“Get out my way you worms! Move! Shift's coming in and you're lazing about. Not over there you wretch! Come here!”

His voice.

The din died out as he rose above it all, my head slowly turning to see the sight I dreaded. Behind me, across the hall, strode The Master. A thick crack sounded as I saw a bony buck being lashed by that heavy whip. Again and again for simply getting in the way, crying out in agony before being bucked away entirely.

“Know your place! Get inside you lot, think Grindstone's just going to want to wait?!”

Around me, every slave present seemed to shift backward...I joined them. He...why was here here now?! Hide, I needed to hide! I wanted to scream in pain as I felt my head sear and throb around the scar, I simply fell amongst a group of complaining slaves who seemed too tired to properly shove me away.

Behind him trooped a line of blackened and burned slaves carting crates and storage boxes. Most of them had dried blood covering their torsos, flanks and faces. They had been put through absolute hell...as soon as many were inside they seemed to pass out on the spot. I couldn't even tell which were mares and which were bucks under it all...even by my standards, these ponies were on the edge of life and ability.

Crushing myself amongst a group of slaves, I didn't dare try to move for the nearby door now. He was too sharp...he would *know*. If he already didn't...Celestia, Luna, please lift me away from his wretched embrace...

“Chainlink Shackles...if my old eyes don't deceive me. You're bringing me gifts, so I see? Your excursion went well? I see your personal stocks have grown as of late...”

The donkey's voice was very low, rich and surprisingly smooth. The Master snorted, idly kicking a slave beneath him until he stood up again.

“You know the rules, Grindstone, you get what you catch. That breakout stunt you had your informant arrange by contacting the last Rangers proved a lovely little way to get some of that upstart's little ponies into *my* hooves. In return...the remnants from the Stable for your...heh...collection. But most of these slaves are just, well, appropriated from other slavers who don't want to dare say no to me. Give a little time...I'll have a full stock of my own to play with...hehe.”

The Master glanced at the small donkey before him, then at the giant beast marching along behind its charge.

“A minotaur from Red Eye's technicians? Heh...you must have done something to please the big guy...”

Grindstone was already wandering amongst the crates, ignoring the chitchat. He lifted horribly burned pieces of terminals and wires out before dropping them and nodding.

“Yes, this is good...Aurora Star's scientists went in there, did you locate the information I asked for?”

“Hmph...nothing after the fire. If anything's there, it'll be on the terminals. It's all yours, Grindstone.”

“Very well. *Slaves!* Take these to the storage room, *now!* Half of you get it!”

His own band of slavers got to kicking and prodding the tired workforce lying on the floor into activity, swapping over from the horribly maimed and hurt ponies that had come in with The Master. I felt myself being pushed toward him, before fighting back to try and hide while moving *away* from him. I had to! He...he would recognise me instantly, oh this isn't good, not at all! If he saw me out here I'd be his forever! Spurred by sheer fear, all too similar to when I had run from the FunFarm, I more actively threw myself against the slaves moving the other way and galloped toward the next group to-

The moment his gaze was averted, I made my moving, trying to simply gallop as fast as I could to the next group while all the slavers were busy with the changeover or watching The Master. A couple more slow slides into each group and I was at the door, the slavers seemed distracted that one pony slipping out amongst the mass would go unnoti-

“**YOU!**”

Every hoof ceased moving, locking me in place. Facing away, I felt my chest rapidly accelerate my breathing in short and sharp gasps. Sweat and tears dripped off of my face in equal measure. My head stung. I didn't want to turn...but I had to. My Master was calling. Every old instinct that seemed to re-emerge in his presence more than anypony save perhaps Red Eye himself. Slowly, my hooves twisted, turning me to face him.

My heart felt a spike of hope as I saw it wasn't me he was looking at.

But it broke the moment I saw who it *was*.

Lying to the side, nursing a series of barely healed buckshot wounds on her side, covered in filth already with her brilliantly coloured mane stained from smoke...Sunny Days. The Master strode over, pulling her up with a cry of pain, before immediately slapping her across the mouth with one of those massive bony hooves of his. I could see the fear in her eyes...the broken pride as I could see her mouth gently begging him. I felt the tears in my own eyes as I witnessed hers drip slowly, leaving clean lines through her sooty face. She had been so strong and...and weathered, when I met her. He had broken her so fast...

“**You rest when I tell you! Not when you want! You *earn* sleep, not choose it! You've got plenty to go yet before I let you!**”

Falling from my own hooves to hide, my jaw simply hanging open as my eyes simply kept streaming, I watched as she was hurled toward the door, thrown away from me and back into the mass of unlucky ponies whom had fallen into his will. She curled back, pulling herself away as I saw The Master greedily licked his lips and chuckled. The donkey, Grindstone, simply stood and watched the show, thankfully being the one to

gain The Master's attention next.

“Sometimes, Shackles...you even scare an old vet like me.”

“Good.” The Master snorted, tapping his cutie (urk...) mark. “It's my place in life to have ponies beneath me, at my every whim and command.”

“Ever the born slaver you are. Well, you'll have enough to your 'whims' soon enough. Come, follow, a room in private would be better to discuss certain matters of importance.”

Backpedalling, I almost screamed in intense terror. *They were coming this way!* Toward the door I wanted to go through with me between it and them! No, no, no! Turning, pushing myself to the floor, I crawled among slaves, disturbing those trying to sleep and inviting a few lightly bucked hooves into my side for the effort. I had to get there before them...I *had* to!

“Hm, Shackles, I see you don't have a, heh, pet with you. You always did used to have one...”

Looking back briefly, I saw The Master raising a hoof, pulling up the empty collar attached via a chain to his armoured barding. The smile became a fully fledged grin of sheer sadistic will.

“Oh...believe me, my good Grindstone...I have somepony in mind. Soon...very soon...”

Shivering, I fought the urge to wail and just gallop. The nightmare was here, the chains waiting to clamp home the moment he spotted me just...just hanging! It didn't take a genius to figure out who he wanted as his *personal* slave. The swinging collar was almost hypnotic before he dropped it again. A slaver lashed out as I hopped to another group. I had to bear the whip and stifle the cry of pain as I felt it open a welt on my neck. Shaking my hooves in apology, I heard him snort and leave. But the delay had cost me dearly, they were less than twenty feet behind me...

A quick glance saw The Master stopping to reach out and grab a young mare with a hoof. Clearly, he knew her from someplace beforehand, as I heard him taunting her on whether she was 'behaving.' Grindstone and The Master clearly had a long history. Right now, however, the unfortunate target of his attention gave me another window to push forward to the last slave group ahead of the doorway. There were no guards, presumably it being an entrance that slaves used just fine then if heading between work areas inside the hub itself. Reaching forward with a hoof to push through, I looked once again over the back of my body to see The Master looking up. Squeaking in terror, I was forced to drop to the side of the door again. Don't see me, don't see me, don't see me...I'm so close..*don't see me...*

A few slaves around me were staring at me strangely as I ducked back from the door. The horrible thought of even one recognising me and shouting out was enough to make me avoid any and all glances. Pretending they didn't exist wouldn't help, but it at least cleared my head a little to push my back against the door while staying low. The moment he even looked away again to view Grindstone's slaves...

Now!

Grunting with the effort it took to power my wasted little legs into sudden motion, I slipped through the door in a single shove, kicking it closed with a back hoof as fast as I could. Line of sight broken, I clambered up and galloped for all I was worth down the straight corridor. Long rusted shut doors lined the walls, but I knew this led to some sort of large research room, hopefully with some sort of place to hide in until they passed by.

Reaching a corner, I dived behind it just as The Master and Grindstone (with minotaur in tag) passed into the corridor.

“You should know, I'm moving forward with plans to increase my stock soon. You'll have an ally nearer by amongst the slave masters, Grindstone. My own informant is taking care of preparations as we speak.”

“You think you'll be promoted from overseer? I know your eventual ambitions, Shackles.”

“Oh yes...I think you could say that...heh...the thought of all those ponies, all *mine*. Brings a little joy to my heart.”

“If throwing them in a burning Stable underground and locking the door till they're done is how you treat your stock...someone better help your new pet when you get him.”

“Oh...don't you worry, my old friend...no-pony will be able to. That's the point. He's not like the others, once I've got my chains around him, he'll be begging me to control his life.”

Crouched behind the corner up ahead, it took me a monumental effort to stifle tears of abject horror at knowing he was *right* and instead get moving again. The double doors up ahead to the search floors were hanging open as I scampered through and shut them behind me. Even a few seconds had proven the difference in the past, no reason to think it wouldn't happen again. Briefly, I considered shoving something against them, but that would only alert the couple. Instead, I turned to view the research floor.

It was a very wide and low room, punctuated by steel tables, terminals and lots of measuring equipment. One entire wall was covered in musty books; while I saw larger machines made to obviously sit ponies in, helmets ready to accept horns ready, all against the back wall. Much of it I recognised from the Stable, so much so that a familiar sense began overcoming me as I trotted quickly away from the door. So much so part of me almost wished I had another recorder to play and hear about what they had been doing here.

I was not, however, alone. Almost startling me into shouting, I hear a long and drawn out snort from somepony's nose. Only after glancing to the left and right did I spot the one snoozing guard near a set of stairs on the far left of the wide lab. He had literally fallen forward on a desk, drooling across a faded folder in his sleep. Breathing out slowly, I kept myself facing away from him anyway behind the workbenches and desks scattered around in thick clusters for, presumably, differing projects.

Each piece of equipment I passed had a small note stuck to it as well, perhaps telling somepony what they were? It seemed strange this was so empty of activity, likely Grindstone simply didn't like ponies hanging around in an area where they were probably still organising a lot of unknown equipment, lacking the scientists to understand it all. Was that why he wanted the information from the Stable? The contrast between this silently preserved area stood out from the bustle of the main slave floor so hard that it almost felt like a different building.

Like a different world...

How might the scientists have toiled here, trying to better their understanding of preserving memory in these familiar machines? Everything they sought was to avoid the present day nightmare I had just come from.

Absent mindedly, I found myself dropping a few of the more valuable looking items such as little spark batteries and fancy wired things into my saddlebag. Protégé had wanted me to steal the soffimizer...I wasn't sure this was what he had in mind, but it didn't stop me anyway.

While scouring the tabletops, I found a recorder. Well...in the Stable they had recorded their daily lives and I knew that if I had to remember all the sciency stuff my little head would probably swell. I threw it in my saddlebag too, unwilling to make a noise by playing it in this dark and silent manufacturing place of the past with a sleeping guard present. Instead, I cantered onwards, I could see the door that would lead me to the storeroom at the far side, if my memory served me right for directions. Lined with brass on the doorframe, it certainly *looked* important.

It was locked. As was every other door to either side that exited the lab into the more specific research rooms.

...shit.

The Master and the minotaur's hooves were very easy to discern, even at this distance through a door. I literally had only a few seconds to think, but everything in here was so...so practically designed or impossibly over ornate in its design. There were no random storage containers or cupboards to simply hop inside, only open backed desks and worktrays amongst the machines. I began pacing on the spot, twisting to the right and left as my eyes scanned around. There were *some* spots, but it all held too much risk if they even went vaguely near it. The dim purple and blue gemlights didn't exactly help matters to blend somepony as neutrally coloured as me in either.

Glancing to the side, one more set of stairs led upwards in an almost grand fashion. The one the sleeping

slaver was (rather badly) guarding. Covered by a sheet of thin fabric that had been crudely nailed up to denote a no entry, it seemed to be the only way for me. The purple line on the walls that only now I realised I had been following this entire time led upwards from both sides of the room to there...the symbol of the six pointed star hinting about where it led...

I had no time to think or decide if this might end up just being *worse*. There were no other ways out of here. Silently, keeping my hooves light on the floor, I eased my way past the guard and slipped under the barrier to climb the stairs. Behind me, the lab door was thrown open rather too strongly with a sharp clang as it hit the wall on the other side. I was already long past his field of view, but by some oddity of life...the slaver did *not* wake up from it.

Only after a few seconds I realised I felt sorry for him and what he was about to receive. Gently, I pulled myself past the doorway at the top of the stairs, pushing the heavy oak with both front hooves to move it.

Ducking inside, I softly clicked it closed and waited on the spot with my head pressed against the door, not even daring to move to turn around and see where I even was.

The bellowing and harsh words from The Master at the guard were only matched by the roars and snarls of Grindstone's immense bodyguard. The guard was thoroughly grilled, possibly even beaten, judging by some hard sounds of impact. Every hate filled word directed at the slaver made me quiver as The Master took care of discipline duties for Grindstone. Even slavers weren't safe from him...no-pony could trust anypony in this city, even Brimstone and Glimmer I had been unsure of at first.

What kind of world was this...

Shivering behind the door, even as I heard them leave the sniffing guard behind, I could only maintain quietly wishing to myself. I didn't want to be a slave...I didn't want to be in this city...in this *world*. It was just too brutal, too uncaring and...and harsh. The thought of a peaceful world of bright colour and smiling faces was like a tease, given I knew it had *once* existed.

I...I *really* wanted to go there...

Finally turning, wiping my eyes, I looked upon the room I had entered. I was stuck here for now after all...might as well see what was in it until I knew The Master and Grindstone were far enough away.

If the Ministry was the body, and the workrooms its heart, this was its soul.

Stretching high above me, a vertical office panned out to a colossal window that looked over what once had been the old park the high rises had collapsed on. High library shelves lined the walls, almost seeming to angle inwards as they went up to the point that I felt somewhat meek in the presence of such unreadable words bearing down upon me when I trotted in atop the soft purple carpet. Occasionally, shelves of defunct or dim memory orbs in holders interrupted the tomes, each with small notes tapes onto them. On the floor before me lay that same symbol of the star, dyed into the fabric in a giant piece of wonderful art that I simply had to wander around rather than over, for fear of offending it.

Slowly wandering forward, I couldn't help but feel small in the presence of the entire history of Equestria.

Across the ceiling was a mural depicting the great Goddesses themselves in half arcs around one another. Framed pictures between racks of books depicted a grand castle upon a cliff, the six Ministry Mares and a set of jewels with a crown in the middle. This entire room was like a nexus for all memory. The Goddesses who remembered it, the Mares who defined the past and the orbs and stars to preserve it. But sitting at the back, near the window, were two more immediate things to draw my attention. A desk and a large machine in the corner.

The desk was light, thin and smooth with a terminal sitting inactive at it. Strewn across the tabletop were scrawled notes and diagrams of complex machinery. One looked like the monstrosity that lay to my right...

Thick, clunky and clearly patchworked out of a thousand little parts on top of one another, even I could tell it wasn't mass produced from the ties and thick tape that bound much of it together. No...this was hoof made, piece by piece. In a strange way, it seemed to remind me of the machine I'd seen in the Stable, given it was linked to a rather familiar looking comfortable cushion chair with a headpiece hung over the back. Upon the seat was a small recorder. Around the bottom of the entire thing lay a whole host of memory orbs of both

light green and shimmering cream. They were oddly bright compared to the dusty ones all over the shelves. This had to be the office of Aurora Star. I really wished Glimmerlight were with me, she would know what to make sense of from here, not to mention freak out at it all. Memory was *her* thing. But all the same, I couldn't deny my *own* curiosity here. Glancing toward the door, I reached out and plucked the recorder to insert into my PipBuck. Half muffling the speaker before hitting buttons, I finally found the one to play it. After a second, I instead slumped down into the machine's chair.

Click.

"This is Aurora Star. Operating instructions for the Memory Projection and Extractor unit will follow."

Her voice was surprisingly young, somewhat nasal and with a habit of sniffing between sentences. I felt myself gasp at the mere idea though...this was the mare I'd heard so many mention, if only in passing. Another piece of the puzzle...

"It's really quite simple, I did design it as such. Well, apart from setting which memories to extract, leave that to the unicorns trained in the memory spells. Place the headset upon the brow of the user, whether for projection or extraction. Then, pull the red lever all the way down for projection or the blue lever half way up for extraction. Just make sure you do it right...there's nothing worse than doing it wrong...then forgetting that you did it wrong because you did it wrong and forgot what you did wrong."

As a note...my headache was not exactly improving.

"Dull orbs are to be copied onto, lit ones are to project from, again make sure of that. Please, every time you are done place the light blue one back in? It's the original test orb with one of my own memories. I prefer them not to go missing to the press, Featherweight is rather good at tracking this sort of stuff down. Thanks."

Click.

Well that was a grand whole two minutes spent waiting for a chance to move out of here...

So began a period of waiting. I sat and watched out the window at slaves moving around below me or staring wistfully at the Wall in the distance. I flicked open a few books, looking for the ones with pictures in them. They were all boring. I tried listening to see if the guard started snoring again...nothing. I sat in her well greased chair that could spin in circles. (Whee!) But eventually I could not keep my eyes from drifting back to that memory projection machine.

I wanted out of this horrible world...I wanted a better Equestria.

...I also knew how to operate it now...the light blue memory was still embedded in a little holder, one of Aurora Star's.

A little shining star of memories from a better world, just waiting for me to see the *real* Equestria.

After my drawings and thoughts recently, after Protégé's talks, after the Stable and the Ministry of Image...I couldn't *not* do it. Yes, it was foolish, orbs made you unaware...but I just needed it. One little escape for a while, a brief trip to someplace that wouldn't hurt me. Pulling off the headset from the chair, I lowered it atop my brow and pulled the red lever before wandering over to sit at the desk...because why not? It was comfier than the machine's one. And span.

As I heard the low throb and tingle of spark magic inside the machine...I had a distinctly unsettling feeling in my stomach. What...what if I woke up to see The Master or a guard? They were right out there! This was a horrible idea...but handed the opportunity to leave my world behind for a few minutes or so...I could not turn it down...

My perception of the world swam as I heard the machine gurgle and spark with magical energy...then everything faded away...

I was Aurora Star.

She was trotting through the Ministry in the early hours of morning, judging by the still slumped faces of those around her in the brightly lit corridors. She had a spring in her step, a saddlebag over her back by the feeling of it bouncing off my...um...her, sides. Upon my brow, a feeling of light pressure told of a thin set of glasses. They were way more comfortable than my goggles. I could swear it was easier to tell details...

“Good morning, Miss Star!” A pony waved as she passed. I felt my hoof lift to wave back, revealing Aurora's main coat to be a lavish ornate blue.

“Good morning, Wheatsheaf!”

The unicorn named Wheatsheaf trotted on past with a smile upon his face. Again and again there was that happy little polite mannerisms. I...I could get used to this!

“Miss Star! Miss Star!”

A young buck, likely an apprentice, ran up to me...I mean, her, well, me-her.

There was a term I never wanted to use again. I really hoped that being a mare in a few memory orbs wasn't going to affect me in real life...Barb already called me a filly. No...no...forget my world, all Equestria now!

I felt Aurora raise her head proud and reach to shake his hoof. Ponies were so polite! The young buck welcomed the gesture.

“Sparkler, what can I do for you?”

“Nothing, Ma'am! I...I just thought you might like to know, you have a visitor. Um...a pretty important one. She's in your office. Also, your morning coffee should be waiting, I...uh...figured I'd pick you one up while I was out anyway. My treat.”

I felt my eyebrows rise in interest, before she (urgh, he, she, me, I, whatever, I'll leave orbs to smart unicorns...) nod a thanks.

“Oh, thank you, Sparkle! How very kind of you. Now...I have a feeling I know who it is...”

Bowing their heads in goodbye, she wandered past him toward the office. Passing an inside balcony, she glanced down to see numerous ponies cheering together as one presented something on stage. I could not *hope* to understand the diagram projected onto the wall, but I felt Aurora smile warmly as the young mare was treated with respect and admiration by those trotting up to shake her hoof after the presentation.

Compared to that same stage in my world...

Finally trotting around and through another locked (in my version anyway) door, she came to the research lab, bustling with activity as ponies cast spells or recorded spells being cast. With a magical throw of her horn, the heavy door to her own room was gently pressed open.

I wanted to shield my eyes as the light struck them. The office *shone*. Daylight, *actual daylight* blazed through the windows, reflecting off the glass to cast a shimmering glint into the room. Only now did it hit me that I had *never* seen the past as it should have been. Even Glimmerlight's memory had still been the wasteland, but now...

Equestria...was beautiful...

The colours, the way all the little details that time had long scoured away now showed on the wood of the desk. The small gems that had once been in the Goddess' eyes upon the mural were no longer stolen. The sounds of gentle wind and polite discussion from the labs behind Aurora while she wandered across a soft floor of thick carpet...

That was before I even saw past the figure sitting at the desk to witness the outside. I wanted to take control, steer Aurora Star toward the window to gaze upon the vista that I only saw hints of behind the lavender pony that she was so intent on.

“Miss Twilight Sparkle, an honour to know you visit us so...unexpectedly.” Aurora's voice managed to rid itself of most of that nasal tone as she bowed her head slightly in greeting.

The older unicorn looked up, tired eyes across a weary but strong face. Wait...I had seen her on the banners in the Mall! She was a Ministry Mare!

“Sorry for taking your office, Aurora. I guess I just don't think too well without some books around me. I won't be here long, really, I just wanted to talk to you about a little something.”

I felt Aurora shake her head, revealing to me that she had a rather long mane by the way I felt a ponytail jiggle from side to side.

“No, no! Please, Ma'am, it is alright. I'm just the same, really!”

Was she nervous? I could feel sweat running down my face, not just from the more natural heat that drifted throughout the room from the windows. Twilight smiled thinly at the mare. Clearly younger than her, standing up and beckoning her over to the machine I had just used.

“I wanted to talk to you about your projection machine, now, I know it's been your own little pursuit for the past year but...I'm afraid it's no longer necessary to provide funding for mass production.”

I felt Aurora step back in shock, moving over to place a hoof upon the machine protectively.

“But...but Ma'am! This is my biggest project! To allow non-unicorns to see and store memories! I thought the Ministries were all on board!”

“I'm sorry, Aurora. But we've had a breakthrough...something called a recollector that works with a separate concept called the black opal. Essentially, it does the same thing your machine does, by letting anypony access or withdraw memories but in a much more portable form. I'm so sorry...but in these days we need to prioritise the ones that will have a greater overall effort to the war.”

She did sound genuinely upset to have to break this news, moving over to lay a hoof on Aurora's shoulder.

“You've been an incredible leader of the Fillydelphia hub, Aurora. You will continue to be. The papers you wrote, about using memories to educate ponies? That could be a wonderful tool to let all sorts of ponies learn about things they normally wouldn't. After all...we both know how few ponies actually know about Starswirl the Bearded, right?”

The older mare's smile was met by a little chuckle from Aurora Star, clearly a little in joke between the two of them. But I could feel her shoulders slump as Twilight led her to the window overlooking the park. I would have felt finally elated...had it not felt disrespectful to Aurora having one of her projects canned after, presumably, a long period of work and effort.

All the same...Fillydelphia was not the city I recognised...

The park was...was green! Gently flowing trees surrounded a bright blue pond at its middle where little winged creatures were being fed by ponies. The high rise building was intact beside it, annoyingly blocking the view to the Mall. But just to see the streets clear and home to so many ponies, the skies filled with pegasi that twirled to and fro. Never...never in my wildest imaginations could it have looked so amazing.

“Ma'am...do...do you mind if I ask you something a little personal? I'm sorry, just, it's hard to speak to the staff about this and you've been such a wonderful mentor for me.”

“Of course, Aurora. Believe me...I know what it's like to need one.”

“Do you ever think that it's wrong to be making all this technology to go into a *war* effort? I...I didn't imagine this when I was small and wanted to be a scientist. I wanted to help everyone, not just everypony.”

“So did I at that age. The world is changing, all we can do is hope we invent the right things to stop that change from going too far. I'm never sure how Applejack and Rainbow Dash manage it, developing or doing the things they do. Some days I fear I may have to start doing something similar if things get bad enough. But don't worry for the future, Aurora...you're a pony of the past, despite your age. Look at where we've

come from, the world you wanted when you were a foal and just do all you can to preserve and maintain that, alright?"

"Yes, Ma'am..."

"Please, Aurora. We're friends. It's Twilight."

My head turned to see Twilight offering a rather adorable little smile, even for her more advanced age. My own mouth's corners twisted upward too.

"Yes, Twilight. Thank you. I...I won't disappoint you. But, I do have something!"

"Oh yes," Twilight chuckled as she spoke, "I think I know what...all the other Ministry leaders have been mentioning you've been getting in touch with them. Very canny business thinking. Come on, show me."

Aurora was clearly blushing at her superior knowing ahead of time, but she turned to pull a lavender orb toward her, the same colour as Twilight. In fact, I could swear the darker purple sparkles within it seemed to match her mane colour too. It was slightly bigger than a normal memory orb and glowed when Twilight herself plucked it from the air with her own telekinesis with an ease not even Protégé had. Against the direct sunlight, the orb almost seemed to absorb some of the light in its strange glass-like surface.

"It's got my magical signature..."

"Yes, Ma...Twilight. They have to be created using a memory orb from the pony intending to use it, which is why I asked for one from each of you last year. It's not a very efficient process...but it's just a proof of concept. This orb will actually display as an image to whoever activates it once you record something on it. It lets you basically make a message that includes you and your expression too. To play them back, you just place them on the holder they come with, so anypony can view it."

"Aurora...this is wonderful, I wish we had things like this back when I was just a student sending messages every week."

"Well, it's yours. The messages can be so personal with this sort of thing, but they are one use only so...if you want to record something, make sure it's important, I can't create them easily. Also, um...you have to leave this one with me afterwards, I promise I won't look but I need to have a model with me to help in creating more. I'll mail it back to you the moment I've worked out how, though. I promise I won't look at the contents, it's your message from the heart to the ponies of the future..."

Twilight seemed transfixed by the message, only nodding vaguely in response while rubbing a hoof along it before pulling the orb close. I saw a little glint in her eyes...not happiness, at odds with everything else.

"I...I think I know precisely what to say in it. Recorders just don't feel right to me and memory orbs...well, it feels strange to talk to a mirror. But this...yes, there are a few things I wanted to say. I'll have it back to you before the end of the day, Aurora."

"Thank you..."

They hugged briefly, with me rather enjoying the small measure of physical comfort even for just a memory. Twilight gave her polite goodbyes and departed, leaving Aurora to look over the vista of Fillydelphia once again from her chair. Kites were flying in the park, while even the factories in the distance seemed cleaner and part of the scenery. A wonderfully serene image of the world before it all.

Gradually, I felt the corners of my perception darkening...the memory was ending. No! Not yet! This world was...was happy! I wanted to go to the park! To trot the streets! I wanted to see the *sun!* I didn't want to leave Equestria!

Despite all internal pleading, everything began to slide away.

I wanted to stay so badly...

oooOOOooo

Slowly...that world faded, falling apart through the blur and haze of the orb's memory ending to reveal the desecrated corpse of a city that had been risen from its death by Red Eye. Colours withdrew to thick black

and scalding red and the park was once again buried beneath a mountain of rubble, the kites fading into nothing. Factory smoke became like volcano ash, belching forth into the sky that was hidden by the clouds once again...

The return to reality was as harsh as I might have imagined.

Sitting in Aurora's chair, I simply hung limply for a while, not even crying. I just stared. I wanted to go back...wanted every dream to be filled with that place. Slowly, I gradually pulled the headset off and let it drop by my side. Turning my head, I saw the purple orb still sitting there beside its holder.

I couldn't live in that world. But I could let their wish of the message coming to those of us in the future they dreaded come true. Slipping off the chair I picked it up in my hooves, seeing the magic within surge and twist in arcane shapes. This was no normal memory orb. The radiance from it recoloured my own coat when held near me, while the sheen on it had gathered no dust at all to the point I could see my gaunt face in it. Without much ceremony, I placed it upon the holder.

A sharp but soft magical crack snapped through the air and my ears as it made contact. Sparkles whizzed free from the orb, orbiting it at high speed. Stepping back quickly, I could only gaze with an open mouth as I saw the stars flow faster and faster in all directions around the central orb as it's light grew and grew.

Sucking air, the sparkles flew inwards as the entire orb gleamed. Colours danced around it...before they began to form and flow together. I saw lines...

Lines became curves...

Curves became shapes...

Shapes...

The Ministry Mare, Twilight Sparkle, came to *life* before my eyes. Standing in front of the desk, she faced toward me. Her body was somewhat translucent, twinkling from little stars that drifted lazily from side to side in place as they helped make up the shape of this legendary pony. A star-shape like a skeleton projecting the body around each dot of light. She was taller than me, properly fed and healthy, if tired looking. In her eyes hung a weariness that she had either not had or kept hidden from Aurora.

"I don't know who you are or where you found this, nor how long has passed since I recorded it. Aurora Star has promised that they do not break easily...so this could be as far as I might imagine into the future. So please, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Twilight Sparkle. I am one of the six Ministry Mares under Princess Luna of Equestria. A land of peace, optimism and hope. Or at least...it used to be..."

She glanced to the side, away from 'my' perspective had I been directly before her. I began to worry about the volume for the guard...but if he hadn't been attracted by the first spark, likely the door was blocking the sound. I shifted forward, standing right in front of the Twilight illusion.

"We have entered into a war. A horrible war against the zebras that is consuming our entire civilization. I am not here to tell of the reasons or the morality...because I do not want to attempt to rationalise or justify what should not be happening. We of the Ministries are sworn to find a way to preserve and protect Equestria, to end the war however we might in order to help bring peace again. But I take to this orb not to tell of how we are succeeding...but of how I fear we may have already failed."

A part of me went out to the poor mare, I could see the hurt on her face as she spoke the last line.

"A Ministry Mare should never say these things...we are to 'remain steadfast' and 'promote victory' without thought of failure. But I cannot permit this time to pass without *some* record of my true thoughts and feelings. I am a pony first, a leader second. This...sorry..."

Twilight looked away, raising a hoof to her eyes. This was hard for her...it seemed only natural to me to talk about the world. But this was a mare who had grown up with a peaceful realm to love and enjoy...

"I...I come to this orb to get this out. I *need* to. Equestria is not what it once was. We are not only losing countless lives against the zebras, we are losing who we are. When did we become about aggressive victory? I had seen great darkness and chaos overcome with friendship. Savage greed and hateful intent

beaten by love. But now victory and defeat comes only at the end of a weapon. This...this isn't the Equestria I grew up with..."

My heart broke. She was...she was crying. My hooves felt itchy on the ground, unable to do anything but simply listen. Twilight looked back toward me (or slightly above me, anyway) with tearful eyes. There was nothing...nothing but me and her in the room. The broken past speaking to the ruined future.

"When I was a student in Ponyville, all I had were my friends and the love of my world. We could leave our doors unlocked, trust one another to help out and gladly offer up our time to aid a pony in need. We played, learned and loved in the light of a brilliant sun, sleeping soundly and safely beneath the beautiful moon. The worst I had to worry about day to day was getting a report done on time...such innocent days. That world is gone. So far that I...I'm not even sure this is Equestria anymore that I'm trying to save."

Breathing sharply, she seemed to scuff her hooves on the ground, looking away again until she could compose herself. I dearly wished I could hug her. But my hooves I knew would only pass through. Her voice grew and grew, pain and hurt expanding upon every sentence.

"Today on...hgn...sorry. Today on the train...I heard a group of young colts swearing and insulting others. I passed ponies drunk and screaming, war veterans staggering and horribly maimed and others suffering from the stress of war. We own weapons in our homes that can kill in seconds while our own Ministries are spying upon each other! One of my *best friends* is a drug addict! What *happened* to my world?! I...oh Celestia...I'm sorry..."

She had slumped, falling to all her knees and hiding her face as I saw little sparks of magic simulate even the tears dropping to shimmer and disappear on the ground. I was shivering myself...real tears forming in my eyes for her. I had lived in this world my entire life...she had to watch the one she loved *become* the hell I knew.

"In history...other civilizations were born in the fires of war, in pain and in turmoil. We were born through understanding, love and friendship. We strayed from the path we had set for ourselves not by hate or choice, but through the ignorance of our own innocence. We were foals playing with the tools of our parents, the parents who had not taught us the responsibility we needed to know why we should never play with them at all."

Another sad pause...Twilight looked up again, twinkling eyes staring right at mine from her lower height while kneeling.

"I'm so far from the Equestria I knew...I just want to wake up tomorrow and be in my bed in the library. To nag Spike for oversleeping and see my friends outside in the sun. To visit Sugarcube Corner for a snack or...or go to meet Fluttershy for lunch. Why can't we just go back to what we once had? If this doesn't end well...I'm so sorry to whoever is listening to this. With things escalating and megaspells coming into being, I don't even know what's going to happen. The thought that someday all the good might have been squeezed out of Equestria scares me, that there might not be any good ponies left. Just corrupted elements as I see around me now. All I know is I have to find a way to stop or at best *repair* my world and hope somepony might be willing to do it."

"We're trying..." I barely breathed the words.

She had stood again, pacing in place. But Twilight stopped, looking directly ahead.

"I know whoever you are, this must feel like you're the unluckiest pony in the world right now, should this war pan out the way I fear it could. Ponies aren't meant to live in horror and pain. Please...don't forget where we came from. That's what matters, because there is always a way back. I'm going to find it. All I can say is we're so sorry..."

She stretched her hoof forward, almost looking confused why she did. Raising my own, I pressed it toward hers until the light sparkled around the end of my own leg from touching the ambient magic. Her sparkling lavender clean hoof of the beautiful past passing into the bandage bound, blood stained hoof of my future.

"Stay true to the elements that made us what we were. Never surrender to the hate, I know your world may

not be perfect...but Equestria is only what we create. Make friends, take time to make amends, do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world. This message is to let you see from me the thoughts and fears of everypony now. We're all dreaming of the same peace, even if we don't know it. Good luck..."

With that, the little stars shimmered and whirled as the entire image collapsed into a shining mass that flooded into the orb, leaving me alone in the dark. Alone in a silent new world...a million miles from the true Equestria she had known.

Somehow...I felt both more convicted to escape than ever...and further from freedom than I had known my entire life...

* * *

I had sat staring at the orb some time, listening as I heard the guard grumbling to himself downstairs about being tired. It felt odd, knowing he was so close to me still after all I had seen and done inside the very room he was trying to keep others *out* of.

Twilight's memory had hit me hard. They were hoping in the past that their world wouldn't fall into the abyss they saw coming. Their hopes had been almost entirely dashed. Now it was up to ponies like LittlePip and...and all those others Pon3 talked about on the radio. All separate across every area of Equestria, all striving for the same thing. I really wished I could ever be like them...travelling the wastes and trying to make things better.

But I wasn't.

Eventually, I slipped the orb into my bag. It was surprisingly light for its larger size but my bag was beginning to get a little full. Pulling the straps across, I placed it back atop my torso and snuck back over to the doorway. The past had opened its wonders to my eyes, literally this time, but I could not linger anymore. I needed to get out, get that sardonitor and get back to Protégé and Glimmerlight where I could...could draw and just make sense of all this. I had to push my wishes to be someplace else away, lest they overload my mind with rampant emotions or feelings of isolation of being born two hundred years too late to be a nice pony.

Pressing my ear against the door revealed the guard was trotting around, likely to keep himself awake. That was good, I could use that gap to get out the door. Gently pressing it aside, I only cast one last look back at the office. This place was important in ways I could not fathom...if only I could come back and remember more sometime...

The guard was at the far side of the lab, far enough away that I managed to creep down and slip behind the workbenches and stay low to the ground. Listening to his direction, I crept around the tables, hopping from one to one only as the guard wandered past my position. Although he was a good fifteen feet away in the wide room, there was no sense in taking chances now.

"Fuckin' Shackles...thought we were rid of him..." The guard was muttering to himself. Had The Master worked as an overseer here too? It did make sense to think about...

Waiting at the next corner until the guard wandered back towards his chair, I poked my head out to check on where his head was looking, pulling back immediate once I saw his neck twitch to look over the top of everything. Shivering from even that simple close call...I waited till I heard trotting again before moving on. Approaching the door, I lightly tested it with a hoof first, finding it swinging easily. Good...that wouldn't be a problem to jump through.

Wow...I really *could* do this whole sneak thing...

Well, sort of. I still was only going *in*. Traditionally, it was while getting *out* of places I tended to slip up. Watching the guard's hooves beneath the benches and desks, I slipped through the doors the moment I saw him turn away.

Beyond was a thin corridor that split into a two sided junction at the end. Trotting forward, I found that each direction curved away around a smooth corner. Doors lined the outside wall while the inside one had various windows. Creeping up to one, I saw that the curves must have met at the other side. This was a single large

test chamber surrounded by one circular corridor. It was well lit and contained a very valuable looking piece of machinery at the centre, like a large bowl connected to the ceiling with pipes and wires. It was very shiny...and *very* complex.. As such...I ignored it. With only one way in and no hiding places, even some shiny things had to get overlooked from my rather grab happy mindset in a place where I felt the slavers deserved nothing. No...my objective was the room on the far side. Trotting around, I saw that it held no door. Within was exactly the place I had wanted, a large storage chamber used for old machines and prototypes.

Piled scrap lay on either side of the entranceway, while a rack of shelves around a wall-table bore a whole ton of weird and wacky designs. Most were rusted or cracked. In the far corner, I saw a few old robots lying dead against the wall. They were big and boxy with large screens where I might have imagined their chests were. It all tapered down past two weapon mounts and two arms to end in a single wheel at the bottom. No wonder they were junked, how could *that* ever work?

But the storage chamber was *dominated* by a colossal machine. What was worse...I recognised some elements of it. Pods, just like the zebra-pony-ghoul cult had been using to...to zombify ponies...they were arranged out here as well! In a spaced ring around a central tower of humming magic and blinking lights.

...there was somepony inside one.

Checking behind me, I trotted forward into the oddly sparse room, concentrated only around this. I could see out of the corner of my eye a table that held the shape of the sananaitser...but this felt more important. A young buck, an earth pony with a soft red mane light grey coat and perhaps only a few years older than I, was...sleeping? He was unclothed, just lying with a slightly open mouth while breathing gently. The pod had closed around him, bathing him in a bright white light. His pod hummed louder than the others while I could see a cluster of memory orbs atop the machine that pulsed and glowed. What *was* this?

A control panel flickered between two pods. I cast a gaze at it, seeing one pod on the diagram lit in a flickering yellow while the others were an almost invisible blue against the background. Text continually scrolled...paused...then repeated the same shapes again. My eyes kept flicking back to the buck serenely lying there. Was this a slave forced in? A slaver volunteer?

No...this was *waaaay* beyond my capability. Just...just get the sanitisoor and go. Yes. Turning, I grabbed a strap hooked around the single box marked with a six pointed star in my mouth and lifted it from the table. Now just to-

The sound of moving scrap entered my mind from behind. Something was powering up...something *big*. Oh no...

Dreading to turn, I found myself rushed by one of the machines. It had powered on, two weapon limbs and two clawed arms firing from that boxy torso while the screen flickered on to show an angered pony in gilded armour. Above it, those two flashing lights on the top of the carapace flared in red circles. The wheel spat and span as it tried to gain purchase to stand and *why wasn't I running for my life yet?!*

Good advice! I turned and galloped for the door.

“YOU WILL HALT AND STAND, COWARDLY THIEF!”

A whirring was my only warning before I screamed and felt claws clamp around my torso. It could extend it's arms?! Yes! Struggling, dropping the salinattoofer, I saw that one of those long tubular arms had shot out to grab and lift me up. The voice was loud, booming and shook through all the corridors and halls around me. My ears seared with pain as my headache thudded on every syllable of the robot's voice.

“I wasn't stealing!”

“A LIE MOST FOUL! YOU WILL KINDLY ACCEPT BEING HURLED ACROSS THE ROOM IN PUNISHMENT!”

...what.

It wasn't kidding, the sheer confusion was all that gave me reason to not panic before gravity inverted for me and I slammed against one of the shelving units. *Now* I panicked, already howling in pain as my right hoof slapped against the wall and my battered torso flared in pain down both sides. Scrambling on three hooves away from the machine, I waved my one good hoof toward it, begging profusely.

“D-don't! I'll give it back, I'm sorry!”

“TO REMOVE WAR PROPERTY IS OF THE HIGHEST TREASON! YOU SHALL SUFFER THE MESSY REMOVAL OF YOUR HEAD! FOLLOWED SHORTLY BY A BRIEF PRISON SENTENCE!”

“NO!”

“OH YES!”

Standing atop it's one wheel, the colossal machine aimed it's short barrelled gatling cannon toward my face, along with the quad-barrelled energy cannon on the other side. Both arms clacked their claws together menacingly as it began to wheel forward. Retreating further, I found myself cornered.

“I'm sorry! I'M SORRY! Please, just don't kill me! Don't!”

There was no way out...I saw the gatling cannon spin up as one arm raised to crush down. Terror bled through every fibre of my being, I simply screamed and hid my eyes. My throat catching, I simply couldn't even scream louder...it just devolved into the longest and most pathetic whimpering squeak I had ever made in my entire life. I heard the weapon cease moving...

“Wait!”

Standing back up fully, the robot held itself still, the face changing to that of a puzzled unicorn. I heard a warbling of something being rewound, before I heard all sorts of moans, groans and shouts. Eventually, I heard my own squeak played back (Was I really that whiny sounding?) and then shortly, an eerily similar one.

“There is only one squeak I know of so pathetic! SALUTATIONS AND GREAT JOY TO MY WARMONGERING HEART! MISS FLUTTERSHY! IT IS GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN!”

Before I could even respond...I felt myself being picked up again and flung over one hard metal shoulder and then the other. The screen had changed to a delighted foal.

“I...um...huh?”

“AS I PROMISED, I HAVE AWAITED YOUR RETURN WITH BAITED BREATH AND SAFETIES ALL OFF! IS IT TIME FOR US TO GO TO WAR, MISS FLUTTERSHY? I DO SO LOOK FORWARD TO GIVING THE STRIPED MENACE A SOUND GOOD THRASHING!”

It...thought I was a Ministry Mare?

Wait...it thought I was a *mare*?! Oh come on...

“But...but I'm no-”

I mentally bucked myself as I realised I was currently being held by a giant robot with at least four methods to kill me who's only reason not to was mistaking me for a two hundred year dead mare because I squeaked when scared. This was *not* the time to correct him!

“Um...no, I...I was just coming to collect something. You're doing...uh...a very good job though. A very...um..loud job.”

“THIS IS MY PRODUCT LINE'S FACTORY SETTINGS FOR THE BATTLEFIELD, MISS FLUTTERSHY. TO OFFER A FIRM TONE TO LET THEM KNOW WE ARE NOT SIMPLY HERE FOR CRUMPETS AND TEA!”

“We...we aren't on a battlefield...”

The screen changed back to the puzzled unicorn again.

“Oh. Is...this a more sufficient volume for thine ears, Miss Fluttershy? Please forgive me, I simply wished to express my unbridled joy at your return after all this time! I was most upset when told I could not accompany you as your bodyguard, but I have instead taken the time to guard the room you asked me to.”

Rubbing my ears, this *was* slightly better...but every word was like a clip across my skull. This was one weird machine, guarding one room for two hundred years? Somehow, despite it trying to kill me, I couldn't help but find that such an unbearably lonely thought. Had Fluttershy ordered it to guard a pointless room just to get away from him and these warlike tendencies?

“Hey! What the fuck is all the noise in here, you stupid machine?”

The guard from the labs had galloped in, baton hanging ready around his neck to grab in his mouth. Entering the door, he found me much closer...and simply stared for a second before scowling and advancing.

“And *you!* What the hell do you think you're doing in here, stealing?”

“L...L...”

“We got a good punishment in these here den for thieves. Can't proper sneak if you're missing a hoof now, can you? *C'mere!*”

I yelped as the larger pony dived forward, grabbing and pulling me to the ground. The baton swung, cracking off my skull with enough force to knock me back into the ground and hit it again. The double impact reverberated in my skull, painful and making my still healing forehead welt and throb in abject agony. I didn't even know if I screamed or not, but I felt him pulling my hoof out, reaching into his bag for...oh goddesses a knife.

The memory of a knife stabbing into my shoulder was all too fresh, too horrible to think about. The penetrating cold metal rending my flesh...

“COME HERE, YOU WRETCHED RAPSCALION! YOU WILL UN-HOOF MISS FLUTTERSHEY IMMEDIATELY!”

Suddenly, the weight of the slaver disappeared, forcing open an eye, I saw him being lifted, snarling and swinging his baton at the robot's arm...to no effect.

“Let go of me you old scrap pile! He isn't-”

“SILENCE! THE PENALTY FOR ASSAULTING A MINISTRY MARE IS A TEMPORARY BAN FROM OXYGEN FOR ONE YEAR!”

The robot shut him up rather forcibly. I saw the claws clamp closed hard enough to crush his neck...only a disgusting gurgle emerged from his mouth...while the eyes went wide. The robot's screen displayed an angered armoured guard, the lights flaring red.

“BUT BECAUSE IT WAS MISS FLUTTERSHEY, I SHALL ADD AN ENERGY SPANKING TOO!”

With a twist and a whine of pistons, the slaver was sent flying into the wall. Whirring, the quad-energy cannon powered up and blasted him into nothing but dust with a lingering pained gurgle being the only remainder...

I stared at the pile of ash, finding it drifting all through the still air. Some...some of it landed on me!

Scrambling, even past pain, I fought to clean myself of...of him! I was covered in *pony!* Further into the facility, I heard the shouts of dozens of slavers...gunfire wasn't going to go unnoticed. Hearing commands shouted, I broke myself from the horror, turning to the robot.

“What did you have to shoot him like that for?!”

“My sincere apologies, Miss Fluttershy. If I'd known you'd have preferred the rockets...weeeell I still could if you really want me to.”

It's shoulder popped open, revealing a dozen miniature warheads, I sat back, waving my front hooves before holding my head again in pain.

“No, no! No missiles! Please...I need to get out of here...um...zebra infiltrators are disguised in here and might try to kill me!”

“Then I shall protect you! THAT IS MY GRAND MISSION!”

Wincing, I cowered below him until my ears stopped ringing. Already, I could hear hooves running all over the nearby rooms and floors. We didn't have much time. The Master was still in the building, I just *knew* it...he'd be coming. Coming to take me back again...

“T-thank you...I think...but please, I...I don't want to kill ponies...I mean, zebras.”

“This long and you don't change one bit, Ma'am. Enough to make a warmongering robot like me blow a circuit in confusion. What *isn't* there to love about the grand art of war?”

“Right...right...um, what is your desig...designa...name?”

“Mister Peace.”

...go figure. Hopping up on it's one wheel, the multi-limbed machine raised the quad-cannon to scratch its head.

“Forgive me, Miss Fluttershy, but did I not make such an impression on your before to remember my illustrious name? I did think we got on charmingly. But I am most capable of continuing to defend this machine should you require me to stay behind once again...”

Well...perhaps he could be just what I needed to save my life and get out of here! We needed to go now, but perhaps it was the immensely armed killing machine that regarded itself my sworn protector...I simply had to ask. Turning to the massive device with the buck in it, I pointed with a hoof before scooping up the Sparkle Satingaling.

“Mister Peace...what *is* this machine?”

He (it?) turned back to the pods with the memory orbs at the centre. He seemed to stare at the buck inside.

“This is something that Miss Star was putting together. I'm a warbot, not a scientist, so I couldn't tell you exactly what it does. All I know is that buck has been in there as long as I have stood guard and that the new mule in the Ministry keeps saying that it doesn't work anymore. Truthfully, Miss Fluttershy...if you had any questions about war machines or the best way to extract a zebra's diaphragm I could help, but this is rather out of my specialist area, I'm afraid.”

He had been in there since...before the war? Pressing close to the glass, I watched his blank sleep. Just...just dreaming. My own body lit from the white light flushed across his thin body, I couldn't help but wonder who was really more trapped between him and I...

“Miss Fluttershy, if we are to get you out, we should go. Hostile intent signals are approaching. Or should I go and cheerfully say hello?”

He hefted the gatling cannon while I turned back and threw on my saddlebag.

“Al...alright.” Yes, it was time to go and get back to Protégé...there were too many secrets and mysteries in the depths of this Ministry's past. “But, you need to be quieter...please...”

“Oh...but I *like* being loud, Miss Fluttershy! It strikes terror into the hearts of the most impolite enemy. But if I must...”

Oooh...so much better on my ears. But the slump of his bulky shoulders and the disappointed earth pony on his screen almost made me feel guilty. Galloping across, I listened from the doorway. Hooves were

thumping all over the research labs...likely organising a team to rush in and check.

“Do you know a way back to the big cargo place in here, Mister Peace?”

“Oh of course, Ma'am. This way!”

He rolled past me, weapons pointed, heading for a side door away from the circular corridor. This whole 'Ma'am' thing was beginning to irk me...honestly, I was a *buck!* I liked mares and everything! What did I have to do to get a bit of masculine approval in my life?

There was a sudden ripping crack of wood. I leapt a good foot from the floor, shrieking at a filly-like high pitch. Mister Peace stood before me with the door entirely separated from the frame. The perplexed unicorn on the screen looked at it the ruined door in his hand.

“Hmm...I should see the engineers about this. I believe it needs some oil.”

Galloping past him, I ran into the corridor beyond, hearing Mister Peace rolling after me. This was leading us through many documentation offices. Even I could tell that, *no* pony would ever work with that many filing cabinets and stay sane in anything else. Mister Peace directed me, shouting directions as we dropped flight after flight. Eventually, the activity lessened out as we passed into a more deserted area of the hub. I hoped it wasn't due to more radiation...

We slowed, no sense in galloping about madly when I could sneak. Mister Peace was fairly quiet when he wasn't talking, just a low hum and the soft trundle of his singular wheel. Despite the attitude, he certainly did obey instruction. But away from the immediate rush (well...I hoped) I stopped to get my breath and hold my aching shoulder and chest. The robot remained protective, watching corridors above me.

“Mister Peace, what's the last thing you remember about me?”

“Some time ago, Ma'am. To be precise, five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred-”

“Just...just what it is, I mean...”

“Oh, well, I was seeing you and your friend away from the Ministry after visiting Miss Star's office, of course. Why, is there something in particular?”

Really, I hadn't known why I asked...but the poor robot being abandoned just struck a nerve, I hoped she'd at least said goodbye...

“Alert! Hostile targets detected within Flutter-Guard Range!”

I heard them too, a group of hooves coming from roughly the same direction we had. In the long corridors around thick murky internal windows to research rooms, the sound echoed everywhere. I struggled to my hooves...

“Here, Miss Fluttershy, you are injured! Allow me!”

One of those giant arms swept down, arcing around me and lifting my entire weight as though it were nothing but a foal's toy. He carried me underarm. If I hadn't been happy to get off my sore little hooves...I might have found it demeaning. But he trundled on much faster than I could gallop, zipping around corners so fast I squealed, thinking I was going to slam into them.

As we passed a cross junction of corridors (how many corridors were in this damn hub?!) a shot pinged off of his casing, zipping by my face. Stopping, he spun and placed me down behind the corner. I heard the gatling cannon whirr and roar down the corridor. Shouts to get into cover came from the far end.

“It seems they have spotted us. **Good!**”

I simply hid by the corner. Slavers fired around the corners as I felt Mister Peace grab me again and quickly pull me across the junction behind him, out of the line of fire as bullets whipped off his thick armour. The gatling cannon belched fire again, making every bit of incoming fire from the end of the hallway cease.

“**Cowering fools! A real stallion should stand and take the bullet in his teeth! Have at you!**”

Popping open his shoulder, I couldn't shout in time to ask him to stop before he unleashed a rocket. The back

blast exploded from the back of his casing as it streaked away, erupting in a harsh fireball around the slavers' position. I heard screams, calls that somepony was on fire and the sound of dropping debris. The concussive wave made my head spin, throwing my balance as it hit my poor suffering eardrums.

“L...L...”

“**Come on, Ma'am! Let's get you out of here!**”

Picking me up, he roared onward, sometimes stopping to unload fire down a corridor. Slavers were beginning to close on our position, attracted by the loud gunfire. Mister Peace was powerful...but he was a very easy to track presence by the sound. Through labs and weird machine filled research chambers we soared. Even stairs he simply hopped down. One particularly large flight he just kept gunning for.

“Um...Mister Peace?”

“Hold on, Miss Fluttershy! **TALLY HO!**”

He ramped directly off them, clearing the *entire* stairway, accompanied by my shrieking the entire way. Reaching the bottom beside a doorway, he placed me on the ground...where I struggled to regain the ability to move my hooves, simply shivering and staring blankly after the soaring leap.

The machine tore a bar from the door before punching it open (and clean off the frame, apparently I couldn't make allies who treated any door well) before trundling through. Somewhat unsteadily, I staggered after him, adrenaline thumping painfully all through my body.

We were back in the storage loading area! This had been the locked door from earlier. It was not empty. As we entered, I saw groups of slavers returning in through one of the open dock doors. A good dozen in total. Shocked, they simply stood for a few seconds staring at us. They were heavily armed with battle saddles, shotguns, long rifles and heavy pistols. The sheer hurry of our movement in the room held little vagueness as to our intent. They advanced, spreading out and drawing weapons.

“Stop right there robot!”

“This the one they say is running about?”

“Yup! Crazy machine gone haywire, didn't say he had a slave with him though...must have rewired it to try and escape!”

I heard safeties click off, they weren't going to let us go. I felt Mister Peace's arm push me toward a large wooden box.

“Miss Fluttershy...kindly hide behind that crate there. Mister Peace has a little **war** to fight. Oh most glorious of days...”

I didn't need told twice, ducking behind it, I poked my head out to see the slavers regarding him warily.

“You got AP, mate?”

“Think so...hit it anyway!”

The sound made me fall to the ground, clutching my odd ears to the sides of my head, crying aloud as the echoing of gunfire battered my senses. Booms, cracks and chattering belts followed by a storm of impacts and pinging. Mister Peace was rocked back on his wheel by the barrage, almost turned around by the impact of one of the shotguns on his shoulder. The robot's screen flickered from the friendly pony to the angry guard.

“**You stand in the path of Miss Fluttershy! PREPARE TO BE MOVED ASIDE! IN MULTIPLE DIRECTIONS!**”

With no effort against the incoming fire, he whirred around, the gatling cannon and quad-barrel unloading with devastating effect. Three of the slavers were blown into ash or pulped upon his fire barrage. The others dove for cover. A long rifle shot chipped off his screen, leading the machine to unleash a rocket that drove through a crate to explode directly onto the shooter. Powering forward on his wheel, Mister Peace careened into one large storage box and hurled it toward another two slavers. Crying out, they dived away from the

immense projectile.

“ZEBRA LOVING IS THE VERY DEFINITION OF FAILURE, YOU WHELPS!”

His wrists popped open, revealing a whole bank of extra barrels. They fired rapid streams of red magic energy that ripped one slaver limb from limb.

“EMBRACE FLUTTERSHY AS AN APOLOGY OR YOU WILL BE ERADICATED!”

One slaver had actually run up behind him, pushing a shotgun's barrel into a more vulnerable looking point. Before he could even fire, one of those tubular arms grabbed and twisted his head so hard it separated completely. I felt my stomach turn. The half dozen or so slavers that hadn't been killed or fled grouped together in a firing position, one metre apart from one another on the loading bay's cargo step. Their weapons unloaded completely, blasting a volley into Mister Peace so hard I saw the robot stagger and raise an arm to protect his screen. For a horrible second, he fell backward and only just caught himself. The fire kept coming, leaving black marks on his carapace or denting his structure. I felt guilty...somehow. This machine was fighting for me, killing other ponies in 'my' name and putting itself in harms way...all over a mistaken squeak.

But it was saving me...and the threat of The Master bringing me back from in here was too great...I simply hid, cried and watched as the machine was blasted and torn. Eventually, the firing ceased and I heard multiple weapons click empty. Mister Peace stood rock still....before simply standing up. The slavers looked about in a panic, before one of them finally saw me.

“There! The slave must be controlling it, kill him!”

Argh! I hid back as I saw one slaver begin reloading and aiming.

“COMMENCING TACTICAL ASSESSMENT: ANTI-FLUTTERSHY THOUGHTS DETECTED WITHIN MISS FLUTTERSHY'S VICINITY.”

The gatling spun up. The quad-cannons began humming. Both shoulders opened to reveal racks of missiles. His wrists popped open to reveal those mini-lasers again. The slavers began glancing at one another in worry. Three threw down their guns.

“BETTER WIPED THAN STRIPED YOU IGNORANT LOOTS!”

The barrage was so loud, so violent, so utterly decimating that I didn't even see or hear much.

My ears gave out, I closed my eyes and turned away as he simply continued to fire.

* * *

Only after the horrific thumping and rocking of the entire floor had ended did I dare open my eyes to see the giant silhouette of Mister Peace glaring down at me from the smoke. His screen bore the happiest looking pony I had ever seen.

“Salutations, Miss Fluttershy! How good it feels to operate under my prime directive! But there are many more on approach, the battle has dissuaded them to find heavier weaponry...we must get you away now.”

Gradually, I stood and found the entire right hand side of the loading bay in tatters. Concrete pillars were shattered, wagons torn asunder while there was no sign at all of the slavers. In the distance, through the constant ringing, I could hear roars of slavers while outside there were the murmurings of slaves in the courtyard, abandoned with their carts as the slavers were called to tool up and go robot hunting.

There was a way out, yes...but it wasn't through force. Shaking, still breathing far too fast to be healthy, I turned back to Mister Peace.

“Y-yes...yes I need to get out of here, b-but...I'm sorry...I don't think you can come...”

I had known since he started following. He wouldn't be able to accompany me. Such a machine just wouldn't work...he'd be shot down by the slavers outside and then me with him. Seeing the screen change to

a rather blank looking pony was enough to wrench my heart. I tried telling myself...this was a machine! But no matter what, he had...had protected me. Only a few ponies ever had...

“...I understand, Miss Fluttershy...your role is not mine.”

“I'm so sorry...”

Crying, I didn't even know what to say. How did a machine feel? It was just obeying orders. Sniffling and sobbing, I just averted my eyes.

“Thank you...I know sh...I know *I'm* proud of what you've done. Is...is there any way you can stay safe?”

Mister Peace's screen flickered a few times, switching from pony to pony before settling on a unicorn with a bright idea. Trundling over, he pulled open a side hatch to one of the storage rooms attached to the loading bay. I could hear hooves coming...we didn't have time...

But inside lay a whole heap of machines almost identical to Mister Peace. Immediately, he began removing his bloodstained arms, unclicking them to replace them with new models. The old ones he tossed into the middle of the floor, along with various chassis segments from himself (again, replaced soon after). I could see his plan...those coming would think he had been destroyed by the team if he then left or hid in the crate...

“Now for you, Miss Fluttershy. I can detect many ponies, non-hostile, just outside with carts. Allow me to load one for you that you may blend in. Suffice to say, pony society confuses me greatly these days...things were so much simpler when we just shot at stripes.”

“I'm sorry...you weren't meant to be left alone...”

Pulling a cart over, he dumped some scrap in it before offering the harness to me. I morosely wandered forward, letting him strap me in.

“Miss Fluttershy, you are my reason for being. Knowing that you are safe is all I require to be sated. No matter how far you are from me. To see you again **warms my battle loving heart!** If it so works best for you that I once again must wait...so be it. But know, I will always be loyal to you! If in need near here...simply call for me and I shall **SALLY FORTH!**”

Wincing, I tried to stop my eyes from watering. Testing the weight on the cart, I found it fairly easy to pull, despite the massive load. All the metals must have been light. But I felt wrong...to just simply go and leave this robot with his misconception. That his charge had been killed two hundred years ago...

If I had learned one thing from all this...it was that the past and present were still connected in ways I couldn't imagine. From every skeleton telling a horrible story to the remnants and memories that littered this wasteland...Equestria had not been forgotten if we simply chose to believe and to look for it.

We were a long way from it...but it wasn't impossible. Twilight Sparkle clearly thought so, Aurora Star wanted to...LittlePip I was sure believed in it. Protégé...in his own weird way, perhaps too.

I wanted to as well.

“You must go, Ma'am, the enemy nears and I must annoyingly deactivate, I would not wish to waste myself when not protecting your oddly peaceful self! Till next we meet, Miss Fluttershy!”

“T-thank you, Mister Peace...”

Mister Peace circled on the spot, saluting sharply as I trotted off. He remained dead still in respect and vigilance until I had departed. Only after I moved out of the loading bay did I hear him move away and dig himself into the piles of boxes. Outside, I joined the mass of slaves without much effort, they were all too distracted and worried to care about one more little pony joining them. Shuffling into them, shivering and squeaking in pain as tired muscles strained and pulled, I awaited for order to ring out with our instruction.

“Get these slaves moving! That mad robot's in the cargo dock, you want to lose the workforce?”

“Right, right! Move it slaves! Out to the factory, now!”

We began moving, trundling forward. Casting my eyes up, wiping my matted and patchwork mane from my eyes, I saw myself walking out beneath the six pointed star. Yes...I really had found what I had wanted in there...the truth that there was a better world. Now all I had to do was believe in LittlePip to someday bring it back...I just *knew* she was the one.

And so, I wheeled on, leaving the past behind me. The memories, the pictures, the voices and the survivors. Under the six-pointed star they once again rested, awaiting the attention of those they desired to hear.

* * *

He was waiting for me nearer to the Mall. Slipping out from the factory hadn't been difficult in the mass of slaves. I heard him nearby, that damn eyepiece telling him exactly when I was returning and where he could intercept me before I even knew he'd seen me. I heard Protégé's terse trotting before he emerged from the smog across the street.

He smiled. I didn't feel like returning it.

"I must admit, Murk. I'm impressed, if a little surprised, I don't want to imagine what caused an entire wing of anti-machine equipped griffin mercenaries to take off for the Ministry of Arcane Science. Judging by the noise, you stirred something up in there."

For this task at least...I had no master to report to. This had been my choice to see the past. I dumped the Sparkle Sanitiser at his hooves.

"Yeah...the past..." Wandering past him, I just wanted nothing more than to get a drink from the fountain and pass out on the sofa in Glimmer's cell. But I felt him lightly stop me with a hoof.

"You did as I asked, I won't go back on my offer, Murk. I believe Weathervane is waiting to see you, he said you'd know where. Glimmerlight headed over earlier with him to wait for you when I told them you'd be back."

Blinking, I turned, somewhat shocked.

"How did you know I'd succeed then to send her on ahead?"

That all knowing grin emerged on Protégé's face as he picked up the sanitiser-thingy in his magic field and slipped it into his own bag.

"A little trust goes a long way, Murk. Thank you for proving my thoughts correct. Did you learn something from all this?"

Scuffing my hoof against the tarmac, I avoided his eyes, before nodding.

"Not what you wanted...I think...but yes. I did."

"Good. You saw something for yourself, Murk. That's all I can ever ask of you, look at the world and see what you believe for it, like I believe in Master Red Eye's vision to bring that world back. That Ministry holds many records and secrets...more ponies would do well to remember them."

I thought back, the Stable had protected me while trying to tell its story...Fluttershy had helped me to survive my illness like she had promised Equestria she would...Mister Peace was still guarding that which he felt was important. Protégé had seen things like this, took faith in their existence to justify his actions.

"Master, do you really think things can go back to how they were before? With ponies like...like the slavers in there? Like..."

I wanted to say The Master...but I couldn't even dare say a word to him. The Master was planning something, but while Sunny and the mare were under his threat I...I just couldn't say a word. Protégé turned, pointing a hoof back toward the FunFarm.

"You have not seen the foals, Murk. I see them every few days...sometimes to help teach them history or philosophy. They are being brought up right, cultured and intelligent. They offer one another gifts on birthdays or share their belongings. Things ponies from two hundred years ago might have done."

Turning back to me, that eyepiece glowed dully, almost making me squint from the light.

“Yes, Murk. I do believe it is possible. Perhaps someday I shall take you to meet them. You have proven yourself a valuable pony to me, one I hope might stand by my side for the two years to come as we continue to rebuild this world. We strive to be better...I hope you choose to see it this way too. Now...your friend and doctor are waiting, good day, Murk.”

With that, he simply nodded his head, leaving me standing alone for a few seconds in thought before I turned and silently galloped off.

'By his side'...just why was such a thing so important to him?

* * *

Weathervane's basement had a sachet of RadAway hidden just beside the outdoor entrance. Having trotted up, I drank it as I cantered in. Protégé had been right...there was something to learn about freedom in there. But it wasn't about choice, it was about what freedom from hardship truly was. I could be free from Fillydelphia someday, yes...but what I might find out there had to be what I made of it. What I made of my *own* life...something I could start with in here.

For now, that simply meant staying by those I cared for and trusted. Freedom was a long way in all forms of thought, but I didn't have to walk that path alone. Protégé had offered his aid on it and there was no reason to turn him down, ponies may have different ideals...but helping one another is always something that matters.

My reverie was somewhat broken by harsh and frenzied screams and slamming ahead of me. The thick gate containing Doctor Flowerpot rocked and bucked on its welded hinges. Raspy roars erupted from within, making me trot back in fear and stay away from the door...

“Quiet down you crazy fucknut!”

As expected, Doctor Weathervane got out to the door long before I could even approach his own room. His front hoof slammed and slapped against the wood.

Thoom! Thoom! Thoom!

“Raaauggghh!”

“I said *silence* you Fillydelphian thundercunt! SHUT UP!”

Numerous curses enough to make me feel decidedly less innocent and much slamming on the door later, the maddened ghoul behind it seemed to draw away. Only then did Weathervane turn and beckon me in.

“Took your sweet fucking time, judging by the reports you woke something up for sure. Now get in here, got something for you.”

Entering behind him, I saw Glimmerlight awaiting at the far end of the medical lab. Galloping forward, she swept me up, hugging me tightly.

“Oh good...you're alright. Protégé told me not to worry but really, in this city...”

“I know...I know, I'm just glad to be back...that wasn't fun.”

Letting me down, I found Weathervane standing and staring, tapping his hoof impatiently before nodding to the stretcher.

“Hop up and get your fleece off. I've got three RadAways I can spare, but we'll get this done first.”

With a small glance at Glimmer, I found her smiling...what was that about? Almost afraid, I struggled and pulled to get onto the high bed before tugging off my fleece, my wings stinging and aching from lost feathers and bad bones. Weathervane trotted around me, horn glowing in a dank yellow as he observed me.

“Hmm...little bit more radiation than I'd like, you must have wandered into a patch, but that RadAway will do the job. Now hold still...”

Sitting still...I felt my wings began to tingle...what was he *doing*? The magical glow increased, reflecting off the steel sinks and every basin and beaker in the entire room. Shivering, I felt a pressure grow in either side of my body...then suddenly pop with a sharp pain. Yelping aloud, I fell to my side as Weathervane's magic ceased.

“What did you do? That *hurt!*”

“Oh quit your whining, take a look.”

Turning my head, I almost dropped right off the bed in shock.

...my...my feathers. They were back! Glimmerlight grinned madly from the side where she sat. Weathervane just looked proud.

“Feather-fix spell, been far too fucking long since I did it. Glimmerlight here told me you'd been losing some lately. Now sit still, I've got a little more work to do to strengthen them. I think I can help you with your wings, Murk.”

I took a sharp breath, could he make me-

“However, you will never be able to fly properly, let me get rid of any false hope now. But...with enough work, picky and fucking tedious as wings are, I could be able to repair the damage and perhaps get them moving again. I wouldn't be a very good pegasus doctor if I didn't damn well try to fix this. No, I'd just be some incompetent arse.”

“T-thank you! Thank you so much! I...I...”

I didn't even know how to put it in words, I just kept looking at my wings, with all their feathers restored. Maybe they could move again! Maybe I could once again feel the wind flow through them when held out, even if I couldn't fly that would...it'd be something! I felt Weathervane's hooves pressing me down again as he began work to strengthen them, making my wings feel warm. Glimmerlight nuzzled me slightly, simply glad to see me happier.

“You know I've heard what pegasi can do with wings that move other than flying, who knows, could be a whole new world for you and that journal.” She winked...I simply blushed.

“What's up with the journal?” Weathervane was distracted, but clearly still perceptive. I saw Glimmer laugh. Oh no, please no, don't say a word, not a word!

“Oh, you could just say Murky here takes his interests with a *lot* of detail in them for future 'reference', doesn't he?” That grin widened...as I felt embarrassed enough that I just dug my head into my hooves.

Giggling, she trotted off to sit by Weathervane's desk and spin in his chair. (See? It was fun!)

“Oh...Glimmer, look in my saddlebag, I, um...got some orbs and...stuff...”

Almost squeaking in joy, I saw her drag the weighed down bag across and dive face first into it. Orbs floated out around her invading head before she eventually emerged with a mass of papers in her mouth. The sight drew a small giggle from me, especially when she wagged her eyebrows in a silly motion. It was almost enough to keep my mind off the stinging going on around my wings. Weathervane didn't comment on Glimmer, but rather nodded his head with a gruff noise to attract my attention. His eyes were briefly focussed across the lab to a silver sphere sitting on a small tripod.

“Never did remember to say thanks for fetching that for me. Spell orb that powerful shouldn't ever end up in Red Eye's hands. I just trust you won't say a thing about down here, alright?”

“Yes, sir...” Not like I had a choice, Weathervane had saved me too many times to risk making an enemy of him. Besides, he swore at me often enough for whining...who knew what he'd do if he *hated* me.

“Useless to me really, takes four unicorns to operate the bloody thing, but prevention is better than watching Red Eye tear apart that research to heal those that would hurt others. Madam Star really had been proud of it. Shit...pity the poor mare never got to do much with all that research before those fucking bombs fell...”

There went those links again...I wasn't sure whether to say anything or not in relation to it. Thankfully, Glimmerlight quickly gasping and stifling her own cry of surprise drew all attention away from me. Both of us looking over, we saw her glancing at a leaflet of paper.

“Murky...oh Murky...this could be something here.”

“Could be what? Some new technology?”

“No!” She swiveled on the padded chair with her magic propelling it and looked directly at us. “More than that...if the rest of these orbs maybe contain little bits of information that I *hope* they do...this may be a way out.”

I almost leapt from the table, prompting Weathervane to roughly force me back down again. Glimmer spun in the chair as she spoke.

“It's a message from an apprentice to Aurora Star. It's simply saying that their application to purchase an abandoned metro station for underground testing has been denied...because the walls need to be upgraded to stop, quoting here, 'the idea of some zebra being able to mine their way through the metro tunnel walls right into the Ministry itself.' This message is dated some time before the megaspells were unleashed but...who knows? What if they never got around to it?”

Weathervane snorted.

“Forgive me if I withhold my boundless fucking enthusiasm. You don't think Red Eye's reinforced all that shit? The metro stations were blocked off years ago to prevent slaves escaping.”

“Even Red Eye can't reinforce the walls of an entire metro system!”

“Doesn't matter, unless you know precisely *where* to dig for the weak points then you don't have a hope in hell.”

Glimmerlight paused, looking at the rest of the papers before speaking again, her eyes not coming away as she floated the orbs up.

“Maybe you're right...but if Aurora was as organised as she sounds-”

“She was.”

“-then maybe the rest of this stuff might tell us where? The Ministry had to have been concerned. Look, I'm gonna take a look anyway, even knowing which metro station it was they were interested in could give us a clue. This could be it, Murky...”

Spinning again, she glanced at me on each revolution.

“...a way out! Just like I said, we *know* it's possible now after getting so close. This...this could be nothing, but it's worth checking out, even if there's a few problems in the way for us to figure o-whoa!”

The chair spun out under her, dumping Glimmerlight onto her rump against the desk. Weathervane's belongings rattled onto it, a gasp from the ghoulish doctor proceeding a photoframe falling...until Glimmer's magic quickly caught it. Biting her lip, she shrugged, rubbing her flank with a hoof and wincing.

“Uh...sorry?”

“Hmph...kids...”

The ghoulish doctor made a tug on one feather to test the strength, drawing a small yelp from me. But we had a chance! Twice now I had failed...but with a little hope more there might still be a method if Glimmerlight's theory meant anything. I trusted her with my life...she would do the right thing...I knew it!

We could do this...

Right now, however, Glimmerlight was still staring at the photo frame.

“Hey, Weathervane?”

“Hmph?”

“Is this...you?”

He looked up from my left wing, eyes narrowing as he struggled to see. I didn't imagine his vision was doing very well after all this time. Eventually, the squint on his face lessened and his cheeks rather visibly sunk. Sighing, he nodded.

“Yes...that's me and my son.”

There was a rather sudden emptiness in the air. Glimmerlight glanced back to it with a more serious look as the obvious was thought by everypony present. I glanced across and saw the bearded doctor, rather old already with a stern face, standing proudly beside a little blonde and orange buck over Fillydelphia's skyline. Weathervane sighed.

“Most ghouls like me lost somepony in the balefire...we all had to come to terms with shit like that. I'm one of the lucky ones...he didn't die in the flames, no. He died peacefully, I got him a Stable ticket.”

No.

“You might say, knowing he wasn't caught in it is what kept me going this long. I save ponies, I'm a healer. He was one I truly managed to spare all this...”

No...no...no...sweet Celestia no. I could feel my eyes tearing up, a weight pressing upon my emotions.

Glimmerlight looked at the picture more closely, before setting it back up. Her face was uncharacteristically morose and sad.

“What was his name?” Her voice was quiet, respectful. Weathervane just sighed again.

“Sundial. My little Sundial. Knowing he was safe it's...well I guess it's what allowed me to not go feral long ago...”

Sobbing loudly, I dropped my head into my hooves. I heard Glimmerlight quietly gasp, but move toward me. She knew I had his messages...she didn't know I'd found his corpse. Outside...far from any Stable.

“Murky?”

I couldn't stop crying, even Weathervane stopped to look confused and sad. Her hoof lay on my back.

“Murky, what's wrong?”

Nothing...nothing could bring me to say it. I just kept crying...on and on...as the past brought another little line from one dot to another and created just one more great tragedy to work into the fabric of time itself.

* * *

“Hey there, it's Sundial! Well, who else would it be? I figured I better record a second thing today after that...well, that thing earlier. Something happier, I need to stay positive, that's what Ministry Mare Applejack told me when she visited recently to check some things.”

“So...uh...I guess I should do something I haven't properly done yet. I wanted to say thank you, to say it to history on this recording that you might all know I mean it. Thank you...to my old stallion. My dad. He paid for this thing to help me survive and I don't think I've really shown the right gratitude for it yet. He wasn't ever like that...but it's all that's kept me going amongst all this.”

“Ponies care for one another, my dad saved me...I want to save Sky. All from one to the next. I hope whoever listens to this will still be doing the same. Anyway...I should go and get things ready, I've been told that I need to go to a meeting at the factory about this new armour. Maybe a promotion? Wish me luck!

Oh and...dad? If you ever hear this...you're the greatest. I know we don't always show it too much and we live apart but...you brought me up good, da. I wouldn't be who I am with the mare I love without your guidance to show me the way. Hopefully, someday I can do the same for somepony else as they learn to go out into the world for themselves too...”

“So, uh...bye for now!”

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Shadow Canter (Rank 2!) – Thievery and infiltration are fancier words that you might begin to use to describe your role in life these days. No longer just a basic beginner, those who want to keep their valuables safe might just begin to sweat a little if you're in the area. You gain a further +10 to sneak and may move 10% faster while sneaking.

Chapter 11: The Morality of Escape

* * *

“You don't leave town, you end up under it. You got me? 'Tis better to be alone, than of bad company.”

“How far would you go to be free?”

After the Pit, I might have said 'any distance I could.' But then, I'm a pretty naïve pony like that. It's all too easy to say you'll 'do anything' without ever really thinking about the situations or problems such a mentality might cause.

Back on the rock farm I had almost starved to death. My master hadn't fed me for days in punishment. I don't think he realised how little time it would take for me to die, so I had broken the rules and tried to steal some back. It was the first time I'd ever done something 'bad' that the Goddesses frowned upon. At the time, I had prayed and justified that I needed it to survive just a little longer until my master remembered to leave some food for me or for the other slaves to stop taking mine. How...how easy it is, to just come up with reasons why you do something...to justify it and pretend it was all for the right reasons.

But in the wake of seeing Sunny Days taken by the very pony that had been hunting *me*, I wasn't too sure anymore that I had as clear cut a reason as I thought I did.

Now, I was less convinced I was right. More than anything in the world I wanted my freedom, but some paths just kept raising grey morals in my face. Helping Red Eye and being a good little worker would, with luck, eventually permit me to be free if I could work with those I trusted and overcome the impossible task...rather than the impossible escape. But wouldn't that be betraying the very inspiration from LittlePip that set my mind free in the first place? Could I really look her or anypony else that had inspired me in the eye and say 'I got out!' after aiding their enemy?

It is easy to look at that Wall and believe it being morally right to simply escape over it without involving anypony else than myself and Glimmer. To find a way past that iconic barrier and find my...or our...way home to the wastes. But the approach to that was not easy. We had only come close to succeeding because of sheer luck. Being already outside and aided by a large force of the Steel Rangers was not something we could count on to happen again. No. Now we had to look internally and find a new way to escape from within the belly of Fillydelphia itself. That is where problems began to show up...despite Glimmer's theories and ideas...we couldn't do it alone.

Plans, resources, allies and courage were simple to list, but finding them is hard when almost every single pony in Fillydelphia is a potential betrayer behind the mask of friendship, lost to despair or just plain twisted. Who might we have to work with or endure the presence of to find our freedom? Would we be forced to aid those who would only use their freedom to hurt ponies? If we let gangs or raiders out to help ourselves, we would be doing the wasteland a crime and hurting the few good efforts Fillydelphia had made to imprison them.

But the more I sat and stared at that Wall, feeling my life ticking away on the radioactive deadline of my disease...the more I began to realise that to find the light at the end of the tunnel we might have to walk in shadows to be able to reach the end at all.

Even if...even if we had to step into the harsh 'in betweens' of...of...

It's...it's not easy, okay? When everypony feels like your enemy or at best some sort of unknowing grey area, you don't have a choice sometimes! I wish it were easier for me...Glimmerlight is...is somepony I really trust and love being around, but she can't bring about a flawless escape for us both on her own! We needed

help! As soon as the medical security left us to the mercy of the raiders in our sleep we'd...we'd be...

Escape means so much to me...I...sorry, I guess I'm lying through my teeth...

I wouldn't do 'anything', but what I would do goes a lot further than I'd ever like to think about...or who I might help to try and get us any help we could muster in an escape attempt. It's all like some huge game that everypony is playing, we all want the same thing in the end but everypony is playing by their own sets of rules. You can choose who to play with...but they all have their own horrible consequences if you make the wrong choice. One choice that seemed right might end up hurting another innocent slave pony down the line somewhere if you worked with the wrong pony. But what if they forced those choices on you? Or what if your hoof was forced?

However...the worst part is realising that some of those decisions you may have made already without even realising there was a choice or risk in the first place...

* * *

Pistons heaved, belts spun and presses hissed all around me. One great machine of Fillydelphia's industry, interconnected and reliant to each part's own operation. Amongst the great forge crawled and strived the little living cogs of slaves on all levels. Some clattered on shaky walkways that stretched across the top of the work floor to permit access to machinery that could no longer function on its own. Others dodged sparks and splashes of molten metal upon the scarred concrete floor.

Days ago, I had seen such similar things within Wicked Slit's factory, but hers was only one of many that Red Eye had reactivated and set to work. Within here, in the old Ironshod Firearms manufactory we were to build ammunition that would supply the vast army of Fillydelphia that stretched all the way to the Everfree Forest. If rumours were to be believed, some elements had even gone all the way to Hoofington as well. Judging from the belts and crates of bullets, apple grenades and replacement parts rolling off the assembly lines...I could believe it.

Within this mess of hot metal and fiery air I was set to my new role. Protégé had offered the rather obvious choice between here or helping sort the radioactive materials from junk drawn out of the crater by salvage teams. That one bore less immediate danger, but any sort of radiation was something for me to avoid. Thus, here I was, left to be tied to a giant crucible of molten brass alongside another dozen ponies. We were tasked to pull and tip the pot into the moulding chambers for the long flat sheets that would be stamped and cut for bullet casings.

“Pull teams, stand ready!”

The stallions and mares either side of me groaned, pulling themselves to their hooves and trying to stretch out sore necks. Doing the same, I felt the muscles along my back and neck strain and ache from the irregular periods of high stress and sudden unexpected rest.

“Pull! Pull!”

Over the noise of the presses, the others couldn't hear the command too well. Noticing I could pick up the sound through the ambience, the overseer had put me on the pulling team to act as a signaller to the rest. Hobbling forward, I pushed my head downward before feeling the others spot me and join the effort. With a dull and deep creak, the massive crucible began to tilt on its suspended wires and poured white hot metal into the machine below. Sparks and splashes flew upward, scattering slaves on the walkways to dodge the lethal liquid while a thick steam blew out that scorched and stung my body, along with the others. Very quickly, I had become glad of my goggles protecting my eyes from the hissing vapour.

It had been hard, trotting from Hearts and Hooves Hospital to once again enter all this. I hadn't said a thing to Doctor Weathervane about Sundial, pretending I had simply been crying over him losing his son at all, rather than the truth that I knew. Glimmerlight had thankfully stayed silent, correctly assuming that something else was amiss. I had filled her in back at the Mall, rather tearfully. Part of me wished I had told the truth...but Weathervane was quickly becoming my only true lifeline. If the real death of his son had become known to him...

I...I couldn't risk saying anything. Not even to say that I had Sundial's PipBuck. It gave me a hollow and wretched feeling to know I was hiding his son's last messages from him, but I doubted it would be doing him any good to reveal it all so suddenly after two hundred years.

“Ease off! Back up!”

Releasing the tension, I tried not to let the weight drag me backwards when we carefully trotted in reverse to make the crucible upright again. Squealing hisses of shaped metal erupted from the sheet press, dizzying me further in the thick and hot air of the ammunition forge. Feeling the immense weight of the pot pulling all backwards, my hooves began to skitter and slide on the smooth surface, held forward only by the efforts of those around me with *proper* strength. The moment it was back to the normal position...I fell to the ground, breathing hard from the effort.

Sundial was Weathervane's son. The same sentence just kept rolling around in my head, forcing any other questions I had aside, like why The Master was planning to acquire many new slaves of his own or what things Grindstone had really been searching for in Aurora Star's work. I had left all the memory orbs and odd little trinkets with Glimmerlight, trusting in her to observe them with a greater clarity than I ever could in the search for anything that might offer an escape route. She'd had little time, the call for our slave den to go out to work had come within the hour of our return. I wasn't sure where she was, likely in the arcane technology labs being forced to help repair more advanced items and tools.

Little weaklings like me didn't get anything so fancy...no, it was simply a return to the back breaking labour I had always known.

'Not for long...' I promised myself. I was unsure, afraid and lacking in true faith...but that fiery spirit to be rid of this place still burned as brightly as the forge around me.

But taking what relief I could in the musty air, feeling the poisonous tang in my throat, I began to wonder just how long I could survive in this place even without my illness claiming me. The air itself was filled with all sorts of problems. Infections, choking and other diseases of similar symptoms to mine were all too common amongst slaves. Even for myself, in my haste to worry about a taint related ebo...whatsit, I had even overlooked the various shivers and aches related to an ongoing fever and the itch from a minor eye infection. Likely, I assumed, Weathervane had considered them too low priority to waste his valued magic healing on. I couldn't hold it against him, even the mere thought that my wings had their feathers back made me want to give him a big squishy hug if I'd ever thought he'd appreciate it. The news that I would *never* fly was not a huge surprise, one I had long since let fall into a dull ache in my heart. But to be able to move them again...to be able to balance properly and stretch those aching things out...I wanted it. I simply wanted that to happen.

I *really* hoped he could do what he promised...

Ahead of me on the work floor, through one eye as I pushed up my goggles to rub the itchy one with a hoof, there was a little commotion amongst the slavers. I couldn't make it out, but the overseer, a scrawny earth pony with an oddly lanky neck was waving a hoof in frustration and berating two slavers before him. Waving them away, he thumped a hoof off his forehead in frustration and turned to wave it towards us...towards me.

Oh why did it *always* have to be me? Hopefully it wasn't anything too bad...

Unclipping myself from the crucible, I hobbled on over upon my still bandaged right front hoof. The injury hadn't seemed to be healing well, simply staying as a stinging mess of blood through the fabric and seeping yellow pus as the infections weeped. The overseer glared down at me, before leaning down rather too close to shout in my larger ear.

“Some idiot's broken the only spark battery charger we've got in here! I need you to run an errand to the quartermaster's storage hall to get another! You'll remember what you've to ask for?”

“Yes...yes, master!”

“Good, now get going! If one of those batteries on the stamper runs dry we'll be sitting pretty with nothing to

do until we get one!”

Nodding, I briefly abased myself (it never hurt to be careful with slavers) and scampered off toward the exit. Truth be told...I was feeling rather lucky. An errand outside the factory was almost like a break. Dodging around rows of slaves lifting metal scrap into the smelting pots and waiting for a large cart of ammunition crates to pass by, I eventually reached the colossal doors and found the cooler air rush over me.

Well...cool by comparison. Even Fillydelphia's warm musk was nothing compared to the searing heat of a forge.

Cantering out onto the main roads, I set toward the storage halls. I'd visited them multiple times in my stay within Fillydelphia, often finding myself being sent as it was one of the few things I was apparently good for with my lack of stamina or strength. I was simply the loyal little slave who you knew would come back from a message run.

The problem began to emerge in my mind though...this was *exactly* what I'd spent my time doing. I was simply going back to the grind again...working myself silly while waiting for Protégé's stock to build its numbers once again. A part of me was furious, telling me that this errand gave me ample opportunity to do what I'd done before, collect information and items to help build toward an escape...that I could be collecting things...

The truth was, we had no plan. There was no simple way over the walls. We had spent last night doing something to try and think of ideas to pass the time should the papers reveal nothing. What had she called it? Mindthundering? Whatever it was called (thoughtlightning?) it hadn't ended well. I'd wondered if we could perhaps use her talents to build some sort of grapple gun and sneak onto the battlements before firing it at the buildings outside and zip-lining down. Of course...that was shot down quickly. (Likewise rather literally, had we tried it) There was no real way onto the wall's battlements without being noticed, it had taken every effort I had mustered and a near suicidal mindset to even get next to the wall. Getting inside it and then zipping over it without being spotted? Not a chance...not to mention we would end up in the same place as last time trying to get through the ruins only this time we didn't have Brimstone...

After another ten minutes of thought and Glimmerlight had began wondering if she could somehow get in bed with Red Eye and 'convince' him. The night's plans had somewhat broken down after that point. I rather hoped she was joking.

She had went back into one of those memory orbs again afterwards...I had sat alone and prayed to the great Goddesses that we might find *anything* to give us a vague hint at using the metro lines to escape. The words kept ringing in my mind. 'We had a way!' The metro's lines seemed like a high potential avenue for escape, one we could use over time if we could figure out any method related to it. If so...we could build towards it!

Please...please...let her have something for me when I got back. I *needed* something to grab hold of and power towards...something to give my life *meaning* again. Not just this daily grind.

The journey to the stores wasn't particularly far, but my hope for a long queue broke down upon seeing only a few ponies passing in and out carrying saddlebags of specifically required supplies. Located along one of the old junctions amidst Fillydelphia's main industry district, it had taken over what used to be an old chariot landing strip directly used by the nearby factories. The storage itself was simply a group of large cargo containers stacked together with scrap constructed ramps leading to the higher ones. A loose canvas roof flapped in the dull wind above it all to shield from Fillydelphia's irregular rainfall. Trotting up, I cast my eyes around to try and spot the quartermaster himself and found him near the entrance with little effort. The rather rotund black earth pony swivelled from his thick rolls of checklists to spot me moving up and snorted.

“Thought they'd killed you off days ago, runt. Didn't Shackles get hold of ya?” His tone was not as insulting as it was simply disinterested.

“Yes, s-sir.” He was bigger than me, thus I offered what politeness I could, I knew this stallion preferred 'sir', having recently come out of service from Red Eye's army in the same role. I could see his one front hoof held in a permanent limp off the ground from a horrible wound half way up it that would make him limp. It was the reason he could no longer travel the distances required for active frontline service.

“Well that's me lost a bet then, I figured you'd last less than a day under him after seeing you traipsed through those streets. What do you want anyway?”

“A spark b-battery charger, sir. For the Ironshod-”

“Yes, yes, another one for the old Ironshod Firearms building. Why am I so surprised? Container six, you'll find them at the back.”

There was a brief moment of silence, with me simply biting my lip and trying to find the words to say it.

“Sir, I...I don't know how to read six...”

His two front hooves slapped down on his desk, followed closely by his head in sheer frustration. Clearly, he simply did not care for this. Spinning, I felt him shove me with a hoof hard, knocking me toward the containers and following.

“*Fine!* This way, runt.” Continually giving me a helping front kick or nudge every time his long limping stride caught up with me, I was herded around the massive red and blue containers to find one with both doors wide open and a smaller canvas cover sheltering it.

“You don't need to damn well read when you can just count up! Now get in, get your damn charger and get the hell out!”

Before I could even move, his teeth gnashed down, gripping my fleece, picking me up and *hurling* me inside the container. Crashing over a series of boxes, I curled up on the floor in my only form of defence, hearing him snort and move away. Shivering, waiting till I could hear him further away, I unsteadily got up, holding my shoulder and chest until the dull aching of those wounds passed. Yeah...this really was just like old times in Fillydelphia, the same ones I had half heartedly wished for while terrified inside the Stable.

Glancing around, the chargers weren't particularly difficult to find. A moderately heavy hub that a few small batteries could slot into and stamped with the image of both the six-pointed star and an apple. Tucking it into my saddlebag (putting me somewhat off balance to one side with the weight) I aimed to simply get out the container, leave the storage facility and get on my way. Although I did cast my eyes around in annoyance for anything worth taking, better to serve that nasty pony right! Amongst the junk I did find one little thing...a small piece of metal polished to a mirror finish that had been used in some sort of complex device. Now, it just lay amongst a heap of wires loosely. Carefully looking into it, I glanced at my own face to make sure that my somewhat threadbare mane still covered the scar. I'd spent some time trying to make sure it stayed there...I didn't want anypony to see it and link us together. *I* didn't want to see it...

Hesitantly picking it up, I kept glancing to ensure I wasn't spotted. I had a little idea for the shard. Besides, it was pretty.

Checking my infected eye within it, seeing the red hazing around the edges, it almost took me a second before I saw the pink face staring at me from behind in the mirror. Slowly, hesitantly, I turned to see Pinkie Pie standing *right there*.

“Hello!”

My scream echoed around the walled container at least a dozen times. Falling backward into the rest of the chargers, I sent them scattering in all directions. The pink pony's head jerked from side to side, a buoyant smile on her face. Those eyes stared into my *soul*. Without warning, she began sparking from her joints before the entire thing shuddered and creaked upon movement.

A...a robot? No...just some machine that could detect movement...a creaky and rusting hoof rose to wave at me from the old pile it had been dumped in, likely from the FunFarm.

“How ya bzzzzztch-doin'? Enj-j-joy the riiiide?”

I...I really wanted, no, *needed* a bag to breath in...

Trotting back outside fairly quickly, I made my way away from the crazed pony's construct as fast as I could, fighting to get my panicked breathing under control.

Rather creepily, the head followed me the entire way, one hoof jerked around while sparking, turning in ways no *organic* pony ever could until it tried to point to the side.

“The way out is-tzzzzch-just downstairs-just downstairs-just downstairs!”

The faulty servo motors tried to bring it back down, but just shot it vertically instead like a mangled corpse, before the entire leg fell off and dropped to the floor, connected only by a glowing wire. High pitched snorts of laughed interrupted by static followed.

Freaky. Biting my lip and shivering, I headed for the entranceway to depart before my current overseer got a little impatient. I really didn't like robots...it was either tickets, cleaning or war or...something. The way they were just slaves to one purpose or simple didn't sit well with me.

But Mister Peace had...urgh...just a machine, Murky. Yet I still felt sad for the poor machine, long abandoned from his charge and not truly knowing what he was doing anymore.

Right, no more wondering...I had to push on. No matter how exhausted you were on getting back...if anything had happened that meant they needed it sooner, the tradition was to blame the messenger in Fillydelphia. But the thought of galloping only made my muscles quiver in protest and my injured hoof throb as a reminder. My energy had been sapped by the day, giving me the same limping daze as most slaves eventually gained in this city, but I might just have to push a little to avoid another punishment...I wasn't sure if I could take one and not snap under the crippling unfairness of slavery through dreaming eyes right now.

“What do you *mean* you don't have any more standard size gear washers?!”

The shrieking mare's voice made me perk up as I rounded the corner of the last container. Oh no...I knew that tone. No *other* slave overseer had the same banshee like frustration and pent up anger...

“What I mean is just what I say, Slit, ain't got none. They're weak and not as common as their name entails to-”

The unicorn slammed both her front hooves on the quartermaster's desk, grinding her teeth. I could see that curving knife jittering perpetually in the air behind her. Her entire body seemed to be quivering in abject rage.

“Then *who* last took them? Was it Rusty again? That little bitch always takes too many! Have you any *idea* what lacking them is doing to my production rates? Screw you...I'm going to look myself, if I need to cut something to get the right size, I'm doing it!”

She swivelled off the desk, growling at the rather nonplussed quartermaster and turned right towards me, eyes widening as she saw me.

“You...”

What anger she had on her face dissolved, as though replaced with sudden confusion at seeing me here.

Then it twisted, building and building into a look of absolute *fury* I had only very rarely seen in the rather wound up mare's eyes. Her broken horn sparked and flared.

What was her *problem*? What on Equestria did she have against me now?! I wasn't in her workforce to cause problems anymore, what was making her...

“Oh...*you*...”

Her eyes were not quite locked on mine...rather about a few inches above them. Reaching up with a hoof, I found it tapping against the shape of my goggles.

...oh.

Her goggles.

“You little runt! I fucking knew it was you!”

“I...I...” I honestly didn't even have a single thing to say that would even vaguely help me here.

So I simply turned and galloped, screaming out loud as the chase commenced. Or rather...ended the

moment it began.

Her magic grabbed me. Normally unicorns had trouble controlling an entire pony outside of pulling them quickly away, but with my weight and Slit's obvious anger driving her, I felt my entire hind section being dragged toward her across the floor, even while my front hooves dug in and tried to gallop away. Whinnying in fear, I was flipped over onto my back, her front hooves landing on my chest and pushing me onto the floor, leaning over me. The weight upon my wound brought a gasping rush of cold pain from me through a sharp gasp beyond all ability to scream.

“You have any idea how long it took to find goggles that *fitted* me, Murk?! Oh you're going to pay for this one! No more little excuses to weasel your way out! Oh yes...you're going to be my little toy for a while for taking *my* fucking goggles...”

Off to the side, I heard the quartermaster snort in laughter and turn back to his paperwork, intently oblivious. I was much too terrified to get any idea of the joke...

Casting naught but an annoyed glance to the side, her eyes returned to me. Sweet Goddesses...she was so angry I could see one of her eyes actually turning *bloodshot* with the strain.

“M-Ma'am...I...I got them f-”

“Don't lie, Murk! You think I haven't had to endure your wasted little flanks around my factory long enough to tell when you're lying, you little shit-worm?”

Her knife floated up, dropping to ping against the ground beside my face and leaning sideways to press the blade against my muzzle. I stopped even breathing as I felt the pressure. She was breathing hard, bared teeth showing between sentences, the sides of her mouth twitching upwards in maddened glee at finding the criminal in her eyes. I felt her lower body sit over my own, pressing me to the ground. The personal imagery it created from the outside would have been intensely embarrassing, if either she cared or I hadn't been in abject terror and danger.

“If there's one thing I cannot stand, it's little thieves thinking they can take **my things!** I...oh Murk...I don't even know what to do to you first...you see how angry I am for this? **You see?!**”

“Yes, Ma'am!”

“Shackles got you...but now I'm going to get you too. You know what they say...an eye for an eye...”

The knife flitted up and descended, stopping nothing more than an inch from my eyeball. Caught in terror, seeing that madly grinning face out of focus behind the knife tip, I simply held still.

“You sorry, Murk? You admit taking it?”

“I...I...”

The knife descended, filling my vision as her magic adjusted and pulled my eyelids open.

“Please...I...I didn-”

It kept coming, pressing down...I felt the horrible sensation of touch.

“I TOOK IT!”

Stopping, the blade remained where it was, before slowly drawing back, being replaced with that shivering expression of Slit's.

“Good...now we're going to go back to my factory...little runt. You're going to get tied to the bottom of my bed for this. My little personal stress reliever whenever I feel the need to just buck something from the absolute *incompetence* I am surrounded by!”

I wasn't sure what scared me more. The thought of being taken as hers...or the fact that I didn't quite know which means of stress relief and 'buck' she meant. Wicked Slit had a reputation for *both*...not necessarily upon separate ponies.

I...I couldn't go back to being hers. It'd be literal torture as a reason for being...with Shackles only coming to

take me back at the end of it. I...I couldn't...I'd never see Glimmerlight...

I was not the same pony she had held a sway over a few days ago...I wasn't going back! Not *ever*!

The moment I felt her lift her hind weight off my lower body...I lashed out, bucking her square between the legs. (In the more 'attack' oriented sense, just to be clear.) She clearly hadn't anticipated me to be capable of anything but blind obedience as I once had been, when fear would have struck me down. But feeling a solid impact under my little hoof, her face contorted into the most angry expression of pain I'd ever seen...not that I hung around long enough to look.

Instead, I just simply turned, pulling myself out from under her and galloped for all my life, trying not to think too hard about where my hoof had just been.

“Oh...eeerggghh! Fuck! You...are...**dead!**”

The furious wail sounded behind me as I heard her launch into chase, biting down her own pain in a rather shockingly quick time. Magically enhanced voice booming and echoing off the thick containers that I dodged between, she galloped with a frenzied determination.

Turning down the masses of small gaps between containers to try and break line of sight, I found that having a sadistically inclined Wicked Slit chasing me was a just *perfect* incentive to ignore the complaints of my body against galloping as fast as I could! Behind me, I heard her magic sparkling or fizzing, giving me just enough time to dive to the left between two huge red containers and fight my way across stacked boxes before she could grab me.

Kicking the boxes down behind me to block her, I ran directly forward toward the back fence of the storage facility and began running down its length, looking for any sort of gap to squeeze under. Stopping on the spot and glancing left and right, breathing too fast for my weak lungs to really keep up and sweating profusely, I spotted one small gap...just where the edge of the pegasus landing strip's concrete met the dead dirt and earth by its side...good enough!

“**You get back here, Murk! I am going to destroy you, you little stealing...groin kicking runt!**”

Her hooves were erratic...she must have not realised which way I had run at the end of the two containers where I'd knocked over boxes! Pressing down to the gap, I tried to squeeze under it...too small!

“**Oh I know you're here somewhere! I'm going to find you! Come out you little shit!**”

Pulling back, I began pulling at the loose dirt with my front hooves, yelping as my injured right one flared and spiked in pain. Pulling it back, I dug with one hoof, pulling dirt and rocks out from under the wire fence surrounding the containers. Just a bit more...hooves were awful at digging!

“**There you are!**” The shriek and immediate clatter of hooves made me look up to see her galloping toward me, knife held straight in the air.

Shrieking in a voice that if anything was *higher* than hers, I threw myself into the enlarged gap, tugging and pulling myself through and galloping away. Her magic clawed at me, I could feel the force and pull of it...before hurling myself down the embankment of the runway to escape her. Rolling and falling to the bottom, a quick glance back up gave reason to know I wasn't free yet. Knife slicing through the air, I saw it part the rusted wire fence with no effort. How sharp *was* that thing?!

I took off again after rolling to my hooves, aiming for the bays where chariots were once clearly kept for loading. A clatter of fence and muffled screaming as she tumbled down the sharp embankment later and I could hear her hooves thundering after me. Moving from the dirt back onto concrete again as I reached the bays, I ran inside between a pair of giant chariots for bulk carrying, hoping to find something to hide in. Toolboxes...too small! A cupboard...locked!

I wanted to hurl the goggles away, throw them at her and pray she would just take them or throw myself crying at her hooves and beg...but I was way too far past that point now. She only wanted to kill me...

“**Going to mail you back to Shackles in pieces for bucking me!**”

No...she was in the middle of one of her simple murderous rages now. There was no negotiation. I'd once seen Slit almost skin a mare for *accidentally* striking her with a dropped tool. My rather deliberate hoof-to-groin was unlikely to result in much better.

Bucking open a very rotten door, I hopped inside an old repair room for individual components in the chariot designs. There had to be something to hide in here! Oh Goddesses I could hear her coming...

There was nothing. The room was well lit and filled with nothing but open benches and lockers with broken doors. I tried pulling at the floor panel, but a thick padlock with half a snapped screwdriver stuck in it barred any way through. Where else? Where else?! My head throbbed as my fever began to pitch up and sap all the ability to think clearly. Every limb shivered on the spot, a dread cold flowing over me.

The back door was loose and half broken, allowing me to hop up and pull myself through, I'd need to hide somewhere else. Splinters dug into my underbelly while I wiggled and leaned forward to fall through the broken gap. Landing amidst the thick mud on the other side, I slipped and staggered forward, feeling my stamina waning...

“Stay right there!”

Her face stared right through the broken door at me, before turning and bucking it once...twice...three times. I could see the rusty hinges breaking and snapping off. More staggering than running, sucking for breath, I pulled myself down the side of the factory itself. Stopping to lean just within a dark alley and get my breath, I prayed that while she was turning to buck the door, she hadn't seen me. I heard the wood splinter and break behind me, Slit freeing herself...just as the hoof clamped across my mouth and around my neck. Struggling, I was pulled deeper inside the shadows where a voice whispered 'Sssh...' into my ear...a male voice.

Quivering in their firm grip, I watched as Wicked Slit raced by the end of the alleyway, screaming and hollering my name in decreasing volume as she continued to chase me down on a path I was no longer on.

The hoof relaxed, allowing me to drop to the ground and collapse, utterly out of breath and feeling each overworked muscle ache terribly after both the shift and the chase.

“Thank...thank you...” Words barely gasped from my mouth, turning to face my saviour.

Then I screamed.

“You're welcome,” spoke Barb, sharp eyes and bright grin glinting from the shadows that seemed to mix with that dark blue long mane, “wasn't particularly hard to miss you, filly, all that screaming you were doing.”

Backing off, cold fear shooting down my spine, I turned to run again, finding the way out blocked by two of his Shades melting out from the shadows of the alleyway.

“What...what do you want from me? Y-you attacked us! We were just-”

“Defending yourself?” His interruption shut me up, while nodding to the Shades. Magic grabbed me, tugging me from the alleyway with little resistance. “Filly...I'm a raider, *everyone* defends themselves from me. Toss him in that ditch, we'll conduct business there before somepony comes through the alley.”

The magic strengthened, despite my struggles I felt a rush of force hurl me over the lip of the ditch into a muddy crater like shape amongst the field. The ruins of a pegasus sky chariot that had tumbled from the sky lay among it. A good six feet down into the wide hole...no-pony from the outside would see in. Another two of Barb's raiders followed him out, maddened eyes glaring at me like some kind of toy. Quaking on the ground, I cast my eyes to each one, trying to keep track of all the stealthy raiders when they surrounded me.

“I like to think, for a 'bloodthirsty crazed raider' I'm pretty patient, filly. More than the old traitor ever was. I know when to wait and hang back or when to keep quiet and move on...I don't look a potential in the mouth when I see it. You...well, perhaps once I might have wanted to offer you shelter and teachings...coulda' brought you in as one of us. No-pony would beat on you then...not if you were one of my warband.”

He moved in circles around me, silently trotting with those eyes fixed on mine as I kept track of him, twisting on the ground to never let him fall out of my vision.

“Please, I just want to be left alone, Glimmer and I...”

One of the Shades snarled, a unicorn of dark coat and mane bearing a missing eye. “That bitch killed my sister in that Stable! When Barb says I get to, I'm going to string her up and hurt her like she's never been-”

He shut up on the spot as Barb raised a hoof. Eventually, he turned back to me.

“Well, as you can see, the only thing stopping you and your...heh...'sister', from simply dying in your sleep is me. Now you know I'm an informant for big Shackles...but I also know you've got the ear of the little student yourself. That makes you suddenly important to me, filly. Now you may not want to join us and frankly after the things you've done and who you hang around with, I don't *want* you to. But I know what you still want...”

Passing by me, he whispered inches from my ear.

“...something I can provide...a way out.”

My ears perked up, turning to stare back at Barb. The warband leader grinned, his eyebrows lowering.

“You don't think I could have escaped from the Stable? Filly, I killed a Steel Ranger with a *knife!* Don't think any two bit slaver is going to haul me in. I could have gone to ground in the city with my group here and simply left when night fell...it's no real problem and certainly beats having slavers chasing you all the time.”

“You...you could have...then why come back?”

“Simple! Power, filly! Power! Shackles and I got a good deal running here, I help him out with the things only us Shades can do, he provides me with caps and weapons only Red Eye could put together for when I eventually just slip out on the next outside excursion. Not like a bunch of tough bastards like us can't survive Filly for a few more weeks, right? I think long game, filly.”

Sitting still, I could hear some slavers nearby wandering through the alleyway. Thick treads told of big ones too...the rattle of metal on metal...weapons? I had to delay Barb...try to keep him talking till they were in *their* hearing range...

“What could I b-be to you?”

He simply laughed.

“Nothing! At least...not for why I'm here now. Shackles knows you've got a few little bits of information in your head that he thinks you might blabber on about if you and Protégé get any closer than you already are. Master's seen the way he looks at you, filly...like you're some sort of protected slave.”

He stepped closer, his voice turning quieter.

“Now...follow what I say and perhaps there might still be a use I can find for you. I can appreciate a little pony who doesn't rely on anything but guile and stealth to get what he wants. I've got a little job for you soon, something that might earn you a favour from us, filly. Something that might help you in your little quest...hmm? You like that?”

My breathing low, I didn't dare react to him, just staring with terrified eyes. I didn't believe a single word of it...he had tried to kill us...he had tried to have me tortured and had watched as his followers had once tried to pull off my wings...

Barb only let that fiendish and strangely clean grin spread and become a sneer. He ran a hoof along my cheek, before clenching his lower leg around my head and pulling it sharply forward.

“But that's all later...for now, my job's to give you a little incentive to *not* say a single word...not about what Shackles did to you...not about Sunny Days...not about that little mare he knows you've got your mind on from a few days ago. I'm here to *deliver* that incentive.”

Oh no...I could hear the other Shades gearing up and chuckling in anticipation. I wasn't truly valuable to him...only a potential trip for whatever The Master had planned to usurp power. The slavers were right nearby...if...if I screamed...oh please let this work!

“HELP ME! SOME PONY! DOWN HERE!”

They stopped, I felt one of the Shades grab and almost choke me as his hooves wrapped around my neck and blocked my mouth. I struggled, lashing out and trying to bite his leg, but his grip was like iron. Above the lip I saw two slavers rush over. Thank the Goddesses! One of them had a *quad* shotgun battle saddle! The other held a thick wrench in her mouth and had a combat rifle slung over her back.

“Oi, what's goin' on down there? Stop that! Every slave's needed, let go or we'll have you in the Pit!”

The Shade only twisted to throw me between them, I heard the battle saddle's ammunition canister activate. The unicorn beside him drew the rifle, pointing it down at them.

“Don't you get tough at me! Waste 'em Garrot!”

But by then Barb was already behind them.

I hadn't even *seen* the raider leader move, he had just melted from my peripheral vision, emerging from the smoke behind them and landed upon the slaver mare. Spinning off her, I saw the slaver's throat erupt with blood as his throat parted from a curved knife held around it and drawn as he twisted off. Grabbing the corpse with his magic, it was flung between him and the shotguns, tearing the body apart and stopping the shots. Barb and the slaver were left staring at one another...his glowing horn and raised knife against the brutal power of those cannons.

“Get on the floor slave...I got my eyes on you now.”

The Shades around me seemed oddly relaxed...I'd have thought they would have leapt for the slaver themselves...but they simply watched, grinning. What did they know that I didn't?

“I said get on the fucking flo...oh fuck it!”

The shotguns roared again, bucking the user back a foot with the recoil. Before him, the impacts slapped into Barb...blasting him into nothing but a black mist that drifted away in a sparkle of black magic. What kind of spell was *that*? I wanted to shout a warning to the slaver...but the hoof clamped down over me so hard that I merely choked on the words when I saw Barb's knife shear through the slaver's throat from behind and pierce out the front. Gurgling, eyes wide...he collapsed on the spot, twitching as he bled out...his spine cut.

Barb simply stared down at the corpses, before magically shunting them into the ditch...and trotting toward me. I fought in his subordinates grasp, feeling all too exposed and vulnerable after trying something I shouldn't have!

“Not...a good idea...filly...” His voice had dropped, losing the arrogant streak of playful craziness. His lethal gaze bored into my wide fearful eyes. The sheathed knife didn't make me feel any safer. Baring teeth, he reached forward with both hooves and grabbed my face.

“You listen here, little filly...I gave you chances...I offered you opportunity but now I've just about had it with you, got it? Shackles wanting you alive is the only reason I don't gut you from neck to crotch on the spot and leave you to die hugging your own organs. But you never...*ever*...do something like that again...”

I whined, nodding as best I could, feeling my eyes becoming wet with fear.

“You probably think I'm all talk, don't you, filly?”

I shook my head, trying to mumble that I *really* didn't think that!

“I was one of Brimstone's Big Four, just you remember that. The others got by on size, strength and power...but I got to be the best of them by simply being the most dangerous motherfucker in the entire place. Do *not* fuck with me. Now...to make sure you never do...tell me, filly...”

His voice had dropped again, regaining a little of that almost joyful cockiness.

“...how long has it been since you were so beaten up you couldn't even beg?”

I flailed, throwing my hooves and body weight to try and break free while cold terror flowed through every vein. Mumbling, begging through the hoof blocking my mouth, I struggled in vain until the leg around my

throat clutched tighter. Barb stepped backwards, magically raising a little lock of pink hair before him.

“Oh and if you want to know a reason not to go running to that egghead in the Mall? Consider that this is from when you and the whore were last sleeping. You're *never* safe.”

The pink hair dropped to the ground, while Barb cast his eyes elsewhere, before nodding at his Shades.

“Make sure he can still walk to get back, make it look like he just got in trouble with the slavers. Elsewise...just do what you want for ten minutes.”

I struggled, fighting the legs holding me in place...seeing the others closing in with those hideous smiles.

But there was nothing...*nothing*...I could do to stop them...

* * *

Nothing was clear...

Everything around me...just...just hazy and...and hurt...

It hurt so bad...

The trek home to the Mall was long and painful. The overseer, after taking the charger, had simply sent me back, seeing no more use for me in my state after I had collapsed before him. I had been told to return in an hour once I'd had time to rest or find a slave healer if I could. If not? Well...'thems the breaks' as he'd said...

My front right hoof was a mess...they had torn the bandages from it that held the perpetual shrapnel wound closed. I had to stagger my way on three legs, holding the bad one close under me while struggling to see through swollen and blackened eyes. Fillydelphia was just a crimson blur. It hurt to even cry...it hurt to even breathe through a chest that had been stamped on and battered. My ribs were likely bruised.

They hadn't...they hadn't cared at all...just unfeeling raiders seeing me as a toy.

They'd...they'd *laughed* when I had screamed...

Limping through the gates of the Mall, wiping blood from my split lips...the pang of pain told me that the end of my muzzle around my nose was likely broken while my mouth tasted of blood from the stumps around two missing teeth. All of this on top of the days aches and pains from slave work and the thin cut on my muzzle from Slit.

I just wanted to hide...hide and cry and draw and pretend nothing was real.

Caduceus, the unicorn buck and nurse that Glimmerlight had spent time with was waiting in the shop cell.

Sitting on the sofa, he looked up with surprise as he saw me, not her, return. Through my eyes, he was little more than a light brown shape with a blonde streaked mane.

“Oh. Murk, was it? I didn't expect you so...oh my...what's happened?!”

I barely knew him, but Glimmer had told me he cared for ponies and saw Weathervane as a somewhat good example for medical ponies. Hopping from the sofa, he immediately galloped over and supported me until I could lie on the rug. Crying out as my ribs hit the ground first, I almost pulled away from him, not enjoying the sensation of somepony else I didn't know too close to me. But his hooves gently held me in place, one arcing around my muzzle to lower it down without harming my broken nose.

“Hey...hey...I'm a healer, take it easy.” He drew over a saddlebag, pulling only slightly dirty rags out and dampening them with a small bottle of cloudy water to help wipe the blood away from my hoof, the worst injury. “Bloody hell...what happened to you?”

“S-slavers...” My voice was little but a whisper, blown through sore lips. I felt his hooves holding my injured one carefully while a little hoof and mouth work tied the rags over the hideous shrapnel wound. I heard my own voice making a rather pathetic whinny as the rough bandage was pulled tight to stop the bleeding.

“Look...I'm not technically meant to be here, but I don't have any shifts and I wanted to...well...see her again, not often you find somepony nice like her. She talks highly of you, so don't worry, I'll do what I can for you too. Here...”

From the saddlebag he pulled a sparkling purple glass beaker, a healing potion. Over the next few minutes I sat as silently as I could while he dabbed rags soaked in the potion's contents over my wounds or made me sip it. The potion's magic sealed anything still getting worse and dulled some of the more intense pain, but I knew the aches and stings wouldn't pass for a while. My nose swelled and stung as the healing took effect on the sensitive area, making me cling to Caduceus' hoof between mine until the sensation passed. At least I could see better again as the swelling dropped around my black eyes. I'd been so scared when they had started pulling my hooves away to hit my eyes...I'd thought they were going to blind me. They had just been sadistic savages once they realised I wouldn't fight back...

“Just lie still, you can get up to rest in a minute. Fluttershy's memory...they really did a number on you.”

Now, the rag gently brushed against the bleeding arcs around my body as Caduceus worked to help the worst damage their hooves had done. The earth pony sighed, seeing that he didn't have enough resources to help every part of me. He was kind, yes...but right now I just didn't feel very well at all, one potion wouldn't heal the worst part. My terror stricken heart and vulnerable feelings. I needed space...time away from everypony...go into hiding...

Away from this entire city...

The moment he was done, I thanked him meekly and simply slunk away to the back door to go to the rooftop. My body hurt terribly, but he'd at least got me away from a dangerzone of simply bleeding out and expiring as a little heap in the corner. I could sense his wish to keep an eye on the little slave before him, but with only a quiet promise to let Glimmerlight know where I'd gone when she returned, he kept his distance as I wandered away with a hung head.

* * *

The sun was low in the sky above Fillydelphia, a vague hazed shape through the clouds to give the roughest showing of light. Whether sunset or sunrise I did not know, direction and time was quickly becoming without meaning after the irregular schedules of normal work had kicked in. But it was my focus, the one thing I could look to and...and just wish to follow over the horizon.

This time, I didn't even care about griffins. Shuffling on three legs to an open spot I sat down to let the potion do its work and watch the great Walls in every direction around me. Today had already been nothing but an example of the ruining of my life in this city, enough that I already felt despondent to the point of losing hope. I wanted to cry, but it just wasn't coming...

Testing my hoof on the ground, I found the wound had sealed under the soaked rags. Nothing was critical, but it all simply...hurt. My nose still felt stuffy, my lips swollen and if I checked my new little mirror piece I could see my eyes surrounded by purple puffs of darker blackened rings. One side of my face alone was discoloured even through my coat while one eye looked almost like Brimstone's bloodshot one.

I had been brutalised by the raiders. Flickers of being held on the ground and stamped down upon. The others had howled in laughter at the sight...

“Again! Do it again!”

The feeling of a hideous crack when a tooth had broken loose still flew around my mind. My groin still ached from the 'revenge' kick the female raider's brother had given me. They had locked me still while he had taken a run up...

“Haha! That made him fuckin' squeal!”

A few days ago Noose had beaten me hard in the airport terminal...but she had only knocked me around. Most of the horror and blood had been from my illness then or being unused to true attacks. But this by Barb's lot...this had been sheer physical punishment and trauma...

I couldn't take this much longer...I was being dragged back to moderate health by luck, scavenging and the

care of the few willing to look after me. But every time I felt better this city found a new way to damage me all over again till I was once again like any other of the weakened and limping slaves.

Standing to get my numb hoof working again, I began trotting in circles, my mind whirling and thinking over every aspect of my life as though trying to make me cry again...just let it out...please let me honestly cry and drain it all from my mind...

They would do it again...and again...they'd promised to do it whenever I didn't do everything they wanted...no matter how many times I was healed. Just because they *could*.

I wanted away from them...I *needed* to be away from them!

My head shook, shivering and gritting my sore teeth in frustration. Somehow, my eyes remained dry...the emotion was not sadness or being upset. Like a building force in my breast it just whirled and grew and grew...

The only escape from the attention of other slaves *was* to do the work! Harsh, unforgiving and pointless work, in ceaseless industry that sapped my will and spirit the more I went through it. Every shift eroded my determination that little more to falling back in line. My only place of safety from the slave raiders was the *acceptance* of slavery!

My trotting became almost careful stamping, pacing back and forth in ever increasing speeds and aggressive panic. This...this feeling continued to work up, making my body shiver and cause me to seethe and suck air through clenched teeth. My body stung with pains and hurt on every assaulted part but I just kept trotting backwards and forwards, tossing my head, muttering under my breath or wiping my brow at random periods and for the simple sake of trying to expel the sheer...the sheer...it couldn't come in *tears*, no...

What was worse...I knew this healing, kind as it was of Caduceus, was only ensuring me a return to work the moment the next shift came up...it just never ended!

Rearing up, I slammed my hoof against the nearest vent. The frustration and...that was it, *anger* building in me just wouldn't stop. This wasn't fair! *Why* did I have to be trapped in slavery? *Why* did I have to be in Fillydelphia? *Why* did it have to be ME?!

Why?

Why?!

WHY?!

The slaves wanted to kill me! The slavers wanted to abuse me! Everypony I knew was being hurt or taken from me! I'd been...been scared, tortured, shot, stopped at the very last moments and irreparably hurt and scarred for life. Muttering to myself in a soft voice, meant only for me...

"I...I don't want to be here...please just...just..."

It all began to come to a head.

"...just..."

Staggering in circles, out of breath, I felt my breathing quicken, stomping on the spot and ignoring the spikes of pain as it all just finally expelled in one echoing scream toward the sun and the great Walls. Leaning forward, holding and drawing out the scream on the final word until my breath gave out completely.

"...LET ME OUT!"

Every feeling and emotion that had gathered in me since arriving in this city, toward the wastes and free ponies I loved that were being denied from me. The cry echoed off the metal sheet tool sheds and vents atop the roof, holding the great cry long after I had fallen to my knees. The dull warmth of Fillydelphia stifled the air around me, as pressing and cloying as the will that kept me inside. Hearing the shout bound back and

forth between the thick concrete buildings across the road before dying off under the ambience of industry...I felt only reminded of how small I really was...

Shaking, I dropped onto my side, feeling my wing ache and at the pressure alongside a dozen other injuries that threatened to make me lose my life through sheer weakness and bodily failings. What had The Master said? That...that ponies often threw themselves from the roof to escape the hardships?

Just a few feet before me lay the lip...had they been victims too? Perhaps I-

“Murky...?”

Taking a sudden breath again, I turned my head to see Glimmerlight hobbling her way up the staircase to find me. She was healing better now, just a few safety bandages left on her head and back left hoof remaining even after one night since the treatment. But she had been weakened, only now did I begin to see the effects of her life in here too. Her body clearly had once held more of a shape and form while her white coat had been marred and dirtied. But her eyes still sparkled with that life as she let a relieved smile come to her face on seeing me. It quickly turned to concern as she saw my condition...cantering over to lean down. Her hooves stretched to hold me...but held back, as though afraid to hurt me.

“Caduceus told me but, oh...Murky...I'm so sorry...”

“I'm...I'm still here, I'll be...fine.” I didn't like seeing her worried, I hurt and felt terrified for my own health, but I couldn't bring myself to look for any sympathy from somepony else in the same hell as I was. “I just wish we *weren't* here.”

“Me too...me too. I don't think anypony bar Brimstone ever truly wanted anything but their freedom back.”

Judging by her face, she clearly didn't believe a word that I was 'fine.' Hell, she could tell that by just looking at my battered and hastily healed body. Glimmer sat beside me, close enough that I could feel her side pressed against mine, a gentle comfort when hugs would be considered too risky for pain right now. We sat and stared at the horizon for some time, like we had while outside the Wall. Idly, I began playing my tongue over the sore stumps of two knocked out teeth on the left hand side of my mouth. Annoyingly...the loose one hadn't been one of the losses.

At least...at least with her here I felt reminded that were was that one chance still waiting...one more last route to success...

“G-Glimmer...did y-you find any-”

Beep!

I blinked, pulling my saddlebag over with my uninjured hoof, I let Glimmerlight pull the PipBuck out.

Beep!

“Well now...maybe this will help cheer you up, eh? Nothing heals faster than a smile, I say, why do you think I always try to do it?”

Why indeed...as ever I remained perplexed over her ability to simply forget and move on when I got bogged down in all the emotions I wasn't used to. How did she manage it? What let her just ignore it all? To think it was just a few days since the Pit. Wait...how many times had I thought that? Urgh...having an open mind was hard...

Click.

“Hey...it's Sundial.”

“Hi.”

Glimmerlight cast a sudden glance as I responded to him, chuckling slightly at the oddity, but just gently ruffling my mane and not saying a word. Truth be told, I was simply trying to hold back my feelings now

that I knew the truth about who his father had been...

...oh Weathervane...I'm so sorry...

"I'm not going to talk about what...uh...what I said last time. But he's still been asking me, day after day...no, sorry...not saying a word. Maybe...maybe tomorrow. Today was happier, let's just stick to that, it's what any of us can do. The Ministry of Peace counsellor told me that's what I had to do...I hope I don't get diagnosed with Wartime Stress Disorder and lose my job. But I went out to meet Skydancer's folks today. Yeah...nerves and all."

"I once met some mare's parents at a trading post..." Glimmerlight grinned at me, "pity they met me by walking in on us."

I allowed a tired grin to crawl out from my swollen lips, never would I want to be away from her even after an escape. Even if I would have to put up with trotting in on her like earlier now and again by accident...she really was crazy.

"But, turns out they were really cool! Her father's involved in a lot of the mining going on up in the hills to build Stables, so me and him got on really well chatting about engineering and stuff. I think he kinda approves of me too! I overheard him saying to Sky that he rather likes an armour engineer being the one to go out with and protect his daughter. Truth be told? I think she'd be the one protecting me. Sky's stronger than she looks with all that mail flying she does."

The thought struck a harsh chord with me. If...if I ever found the Stable Dweller out there, would I need to meet her parents? Oh they'd never approve of me...not at all...

"Lovely dinner and all, they've invited me back next week again after my shift finishes. I'm working day and night shifts if I can now to help raise money for Sky's ticket but...well, no. I promised not to go on that topic this time, I won't! All I'll say is, so long as I can keep this up, all I need is two years of hard work and I'll be free to buy her ticket too at this rate. If I can go and spend time with her and her folks in between well...maybe it'll help me do it. I never much see my pops anymore what with him having to follow the Shadowbolts as their medic. It's kinda cool meeting Sky's mother. She's really nice...like, welcoming and warm, just wants to nurture everypony. Kinda reminds me of my mom..."

There was a rather odd pause after he stopped that sentence. My neck went a little rigid and my jawline tightened, trying to just stay focussed.

"...been so long...dad doesn't talk about her much still. I was a bit young but I still remember a few things. Little sights and senses...her face, the taste of her cooking. I...I kinda wish I could see her again...or remember her voice. I was just a kid."

My hooves tightened around the PipBuck a little, keeping my eyes fixed on the device. I could hear Glimmer turn to look at me, but remaining silent.

"Right, well, night shift time. We're getting a little visitor to fit the suits so I better be there early. Goodnight, anypony listening."

"Goodnight..."

"...and uh...g'night...mom. Wherever you are..."

Click.

I didn't move, just sat and...and stared at the PipBuck. At most I think I let out a few forced breaths. He...he hadn't really known his mother either...

Glimmerlight nudged me with her shoulder. Shaken from my sudden thoughts, I turned to her. My thoughts were a little confused, but I shook my head, winced from the movement and looked up to her.

“I..ah...huh?”

“You alright? That seemed like it was a little triggering for you. Just made you sit and stare there. You mentioned your mother to me before, y’know? In your big rant when we met and in the Stable? You kind of avoided the topic there, is...is there something about your mother?”

Her hoof lay across my shoulderblades gently, caring and willing to talk, but I just shook my head.

“No...no...I’m fine. It’s not a problem.” I turned away.

“Murky-”

“It’s fine!”

Standing up with grunts and groans, I began packing everything into my saddlebag.

“I’ve been on my own long enough, it’s...it’s okay.”

Clipping down the saddlebag, it took me four tries to get my shaking hooves to actually do it, before standing up and trying to smile at her.

“I mean, I’m hurt and...and scared but that’s fine! She...she was nice and I remember that and...and...yeah, she was nice! But I’m...I’m fine! Yeah...fine! Just dandy!”

Still sitting, Glimmerlight’s face gradually lost a lot of it’s spark to be replaced with a clearly more worried and serious expression. Slowly, she pushed herself up, watching me carefully before just standing there a few feet away.

“Look...I’m sorry you were taken from her, Murky. You don’t need to hide it, I miss mine too, so if there’s something bothering-”

“No, no! Really, it’s fine!” Hooking my saddlebag up, I gently eased it onto my back, pacing about as I did.

“I...I mean yeah it’s bad and...but I’ve got friends now, right! I’ve got you and...and Brimstone’s gonna be waiting for us when *we* get out, right?”

She nodded, but her face remained serious. “Yeah, yeah, we’ll stick together and-”

“Exactly! You guys helped me not be alone so...so I don’t need to miss anypony! I mean, it’s been over a decade since I saw her to...to get over it, y’know? I don’t need to feel bad about it because I’ve got friends now, right?”

“Murky, it’s *alright* to be upset...” She stepped forward, face deathly serious, eyes caring and pleading.

“Upset? I’m...I’m not upset! See how not-upset I am? I...I can smile now with you so I don’t need to be upset about the fact my mother and I were split apart before I was really grown up! She was good to me then and...and what else do I need to remember, huh? I mean...maybe I can’t remember some things like...like the words of the song she sung to help me sleep. Or...or the ending to the stories she told me about the Goddesses stopping chaos!”

Breathing hard and fast, I forced my smile wider and wider. I just kept speaking, trying to hold myself higher, not even feeling where my mouth was running to.

“Who needs to remember their mom or...or what she really looked like or...what her voice sounded like or...or her n-name...” I hiccuped on a breath, forcing myself to keep going and be happier. “But I’ve got friends now and that’s better right? Because you’re here and I can smile and laugh! I can laugh! See, Glimmer?! Haha! Hahaha!”

I just laughed, forcing it out, laughing to the Fillydelphian skyline and wondering why she just kept looking at me sadly. Why was she not laughing with me too? I...I was laughing! Not crying!

Slowly, it dawned on me that the tears were already dripping off my face even while I was thinking and laughing. The laughter continued for another few seconds, slowing...dying...before everything just inverted and my heart simply broke. My face twisted, my smile falling down into wretched sadness.

“I miss her so much, Glimmer! I...I really miss her! I want to see her again!”

She rushed forward, pulling me quickly in with her hooves, feeling them wrap around me as I began bawling and crying out. She pulled tighter, almost crushing me against her. It hurt...but I just grabbed her back and felt the out pour coming...years upon years of pushing all but the most basic feelings down. Ones I had revived in a pigsty with a simple drawing...

“I don't remember her, Glimmer! They...” I choked on a sob. “They told me to forget her because I had a new master and...and *I did!* I didn't know how to think for myself! I just...just obeyed and it's been so long without remembering! *I don't remember her name!*”

I could feel drips on my back, falling from her own eyes as she rubbed the back of my neck and swayed gently. I knew I would never have made it to where I was without her...my big sister best friend forever. Especially now that I was beginning to remember the pain, the sick guilt and loathing. Those feelings from knowing I had been so indoctrinated...that I still *was* so indoctrinated...to have forgotten my own mother, simply because I was ordered to.

But I wasn't alone...I dreaded to think what I might have done by now if I had been. She whispered quietly just for my ears, there was no reason to be so quiet...but it was all the more personal knowing it was just for me.

“We'll get you back to her, Murky...she'll recognise you, parents *always* will.”

Alone on the rooftop above all the chains and slavery, we simply held one another. I knew she missed hers fiercely too...I could feel it in how she seemed to take as much comfort from me as I did from her. Two lost ponies in a city they never wanted or asked for that wanted nothing more than to return to the ones they loved.

“We'll get you back...and I might know how...”

My battered face, soaked with tears, drew back, looking at her own puffed and red eyes as she forced a small smile.

“After you left for the work detail, I did a little more digging in those memory orbs you brought back...I might have found something to help us, Murky. Come on...lets get you inside and resting. I'll explain everything...”

* * *

Caduceus maintained a watch over my injuries, retying my hoof bandage to check the mess that lay underneath it. I averted my eyes...I could feel the wound's savage damage without having to see it.

Glimmerlight had insisted that I be on the sofa and draped in the stitched blanket before she began to say even a word. Bringing me a small bowl of water from the fountain. Allegedly it was about as clean as water in Fillydelphia really got, so presumably the saniwhatsit was still being set up. I gently sipped it, still huddled up and feeling rather fragile.

My journal sat open beside me, the first drawing of my real life stared back...my mother. It had only been the vaguest of feelings, running of the choice and flow of my emotions...I didn't know if that was truly what she looked like or not...

...oh mom, I'm so sorry...

Sitting beside Caduceus, grinning a couple times to the buck like a surprise she hadn't entirely expected to see again, Glimmer cleared her throat and turned to look at both of us, making sure to give me my own time to nod that I was...was alright. Yes...I could force myself on, I'd see her again once we were out and...and correct all this!

“I may have found a lead on a way out of Fillydelphia.”

“Impossible.” Caduceus shook his head. “Come on, Glimmer...that Wall isn't passable in any way, shape or even vague form. You can't get over it!”

“Oh, bucks...always thinking about being on top of things, right Murky?”

The sudden wink at me almost made me drop my bowl, spilling only a little over my blanket and muzzle. Come on...not when I'm emotionally shattered and in the middle of a drink...

“No, I'm talking about not using the Wall at all. In fact we're doing rather the opposite. I had a chance to look through some of Aurora Star's memory orbs and files that Murky brought back from the Ministry, as he well knows. The metro stations were regarded weak in their walls for anypony...or any zebra...simply being able to tunnel through.”

Her magic lifted a mess of papers filled with spidery scrawled writing and a few dull orbs that seemed at their life's end of power. The orbs hung in the air (a star shape...) while she let the papers drift to show diagrams of...um...lots of words and lines. Aurora was not a particularly good artist if these were meant to look nice...

Caduceus slid one over to himself with a hoof and glanced down at them.

“A funding request for mining equipment?” He looked up with a little confusion. “You're not seriously hoping that you're going to somehow start a mining operation to tunnel out of Fillydelphia are you?”

Glimmer rolled her eyes, I hoped that my own bewildered and confused silence wasn't included within the gesture. “I know a lot of things, sweetie. Jack of all trades and all that, but low level mining and construction isn't one of my strong points. But we shouldn't need to.”

A memory orb floated up from the half a dozen or so. It glittered with a pale blue light in the dark of the storeroom.

“This one was possibly the most boring orb I have ever seen, Aurora no doubt had a somewhat ironically bad memory if she had to extract and record her tax return forms. But about midway through, this rather polite little apprentice called Sparkler who *completely* had the hots for her, believe me I can tell, ran in to give her a bit of news. Simply put? He told her that the mining was finished and that they had been granted full access to the underground station.”

Lightly biting a swollen lip, I put a hoof to my chin, trying to figure out precisely what that had to really do with getting out. Only after a few seconds did I spot Glimmerlight watching me with a growing smirk.

“I can almost hear the little gears grinding in there, hun. Don't worry, I'm not done. Now that didn't mean much to me yet either, but look at this.”

Another of the reports I had swiped flitted up, with Caduceus and myself craning forward to both read it. Or at least...Caduceus did anyway, I just pretended to try and not look quite so stupid.

“A warning from Fillydelphia's mayor to the Ministry of Arcane Science, regarding the mining in the disused metro station coming too close to the outer circle's tunnels due to the thin walls...” Caduceus skimmed the large bodies of words, his eyes flickering rather dubiously at the concept. “Just like you mentioned, so I see. So the Ministry wanted to put something underground, interesting enough, something I'm sure Red Eye's lot have already checked out, but what's it to us?”

He had a point, but instead of explaining, I saw Glimmerlight simply raise an eyebrow.

“Us, eh? One roll in the hay and you wanna join us to get out of here?”

The nurse blushed widely, eyes glancing at me as though embarrassed that she had spoken so openly of their activities around somepony else. Truth be told it wasn't a major issue to me, slaves had often done such thing in clear view around me to try and make the best of their lives. By now it was nothing incredibly special.

Well...not to know about anyway, it wasn't like anypony had ever shown interest in the little pegasus holding his ears shut to try and sleep...

“Well...I guess? Really part of me isn't sure, I'm learning so much from Doctor Weathervane's experience and I can't help but think Doctor Helpinghoof would approve of me trying to help these slaves as best I can...Red Eye allows it so...”

He shrugged as Glimmerlight just patted his shoulder, indicating him to not worry the point right now,

before turning to me.

“Caduceus here was one of the trainees at Tenpony Tower before he got snatched. Originally wanted to be a trader of commerce in the tower but...parents shoved him toward medicine. You're good though!

Helpinghoof Clinic's healers are pretty well known among the wastelanders. Good reputation for getting a job done quick...even if that applies to other walks of life too...”

“*H-hey!*”

“Quality before quantity, sweetie!” She lightly pecked him on the cheek before giggling at his blush and going back to the matter at hand. “Look, the outer circle is this huge deeper line that goes all through Fillydelphia...including the suburbs outside the wall. Red Eye's got all the inner circle stations locked off with enough guards to make a Ranger outpost think twice so the outer circle is otherwise inaccessible. Now here's what I'm thinking...”

Throwing a hoof over my back (I appreciated the caring gentleness away from my pained body) and drawing me in closer to the pair of them, she lowered her voice.

“We put together enough supplies and weapons to survive down there, locate the disused station the Ministry had and go to ground. It's near to the outer circle right? All we need to do is slowly chip away at the walls in the right direction and we'll eventually break through to the outer circle. That lets us go *under* the walls to emerge outside without anypony even knowing there's a breakout going on! We wait in the tunnels till night falls then slip out under cover of darkness.”

I had to admit, I was rather impressed. All this time I had thought of escape as a daring rush for freedom...but this was quiet, sneaky and sounded *much* safer than frenzied leaps off a giant Wall. In other words...my kind of plan. Hopping onto the sofa, I swivelled and lounged back, dropping my legs off the edge to rest my body. (What was Caduceus looking so weird about? It was comfy...)

“So...um...what do we need to do?”

The brightness of her smile almost managed to make me return one as she saw me being a little optimistic about something. Truth be told...I didn't feel a huge amount of faith in it, escape attempts only reminded me of bitter feelings, but there was no way I was going to stop now.

Glimmerlight seemed more intent than I ever could be, slapping her hooves together and rubbing them with a gleeful look of conspiracy.

“Grab your charcoal, Murky. We're making a list!”

That infectious cheer managed to gain a bigger smile straight from my heart. SO much was hurting me, physically and emotionally...but so long as I could ride the wave of escape planning...I'd make it yet. Pulling out my journal, I flicked to a new page and sat ready. She giggled, softly rubbing her hurt forehead before shaking her mane out.

“You really are *too* cute sitting there like that with that stick in your mouth to draw. Now, we need to start building our supplies and hiding them, probably just outside the back door you bucks opened. Food, as much as we can gather. It's a long trip till we find anypony we can trust out there and we'll need to be able to survive the trip. That's our number one priority, doesn't matter what we fight if we've died of hunger. On that note, containers for water, the fountain should make that easy enough. Murky, think you could sew together some waterskins if you stole some leather or heavy fabric?”

I had no idea what a 'waterskin' was, but I knew I could sew pretty well, so I nodded. Already I'd drawn a few cans of food, ready to cross off as we found enough to support two or three ponies. Beside it I just drew a beaker of water. I could even fill it up by shading in as we found more!

“Caduceus, I know this is a lot to ask but if there's any medical supplies you could get us, it would be great.”

“Well...I don't have the key to the storage, but I'll see what I can do. All just for you, Glimmer.”

“Aren't you a gentlecolt? In Fillydelphia too...my my, that's rare!”

“Well...” Caduceus looked away, a little awkward at the praise. “Tenpony sort of pushes it into you. In here it...it's one of the only things I've got to hold onto, to keep me feeling like I'm more than just a...a...”

“A slave?” I spoke quietly.

“Yeah...so, I'll do it for you, somepony nice.”

Glimmerlight more genuinely smiled at him. “Well if you can't, point me at somepony who does and I'll see what I can do to persuade them instead, eh?”

She grinned madly, I honestly couldn't tell if she was joking or not before I leaned down to add some rolls of bandage onto the paper. On a whim, I threw in some RadAway sachets too...we'd need them. Well...*I'd* need them...

Caduceus actually smiled back from Glimmer's comment, seemingly proud to announce his response. “Sorry Glim, the others are either taken or not after your type, guess you're stuck with me!”

“Oh, what a shame...now, weapons...that's the hard one. But for now let's just wait and observe where we go, see if we can't steal away little parts now and again to build out own. Anything that looks valuable, bring it back and we can hide it inside my little scrap pile Protégé trusts me with. I've got a few spark batteries and magic circuits so I may be able to whip something up if you can get some old parts. Murky, if either of us gets put on anything involving tools, try and swipe some to help the digging, a gas mask or two if you see them discarded wouldn't hurt either. Don't take a risk if it's not worth it though, one slip up could cost our whole stockpile...”

Small guns, knives and a few bullets to represent ammo went down, a growing road to preparedness laying before me. My charcoal began to twist and score in more confident strokes, each curve and shape lifting my hope that little more...I couldn't *wait* to start checking this off! Picks and auto axes were drawn in more lavish detail. My swollen lips stung from the charcoal and my bleeding gums around the missing teeth felt horrible...but this was too big...too important. Finally, a gas mask was added, the eyes seemed to curve in a happier expression than the terrifying ones the slavers wore.

Finishing, I dropped the charcoal and looked upward to see the other two. I may not have known Caduceus other than Glimmer's apparent ease with him, but I was beginning to sense that I...I could get to know him? We needed every ally we could get now. He...he had helped me too...

“Cadueus...um...thanks for helping, sorry I kinda...um...ignored you...”

He waved a hoof. “Hey, it's what I do. Glimmer's been telling me about what you go through, I'm happy to stick around with you two if it'll gain anything or keep you alive. Helpinghoof told me I was to help those in need...well here you are. I'm with you.”

I almost wanted to cry...he was polite and...and kind. I had been missing Brimstone so much that it...it was just nice to have somepony else around Glimmerlight and I. Another male. Perhaps I could even ask him a few things if I ever got to really trust him...buck to buck...

“Hey!” A slaver's voice echoed into the plaza, probably from up on the balcony above the cage door. “Murky Number Seven! You're wanted over at the forge, what are you waiting for?”

And there went my happy mood...

Until Glimmerlight leaned forward, pressing my new checklist into my hooves with a smile.

“You can pull through...I absolutely believe you can. We've still got a plan, now let's make it a reality, bit by bit, okay?”

I couldn't do anything but nod, carefully hug her and receive a quick smile from Caduceus for good luck, before limping away.

Let's do this...

* * *

“Murk! Where the blithering hell are you? *Murk!*”

The cry came across the factory floor, stifled in the heavy air and thick ambience of shouting, clanging metal and hissing steam. Looking up from my work, to scrub clean the pistons of a stamp press for future reactivation, I saw the gangly overseer stomping around the slaves. Truth be told...I was glad for any excuse to take a minute off. My hooves were stinging from the cleaning fluid soaked into the cloth while the stench was making my head spin. Limping down from the machine, I waved a hoof to get his attention and began moving over.

“Ah, there you are. Tend to miss you in here...that damn small. But I need that quality, follow me.”

I just nodded. Really, for all the hope and optimism of knowing we were putting together a plan in secret, doing any work for Fillydelphia just drained you bit by bit. All the same, I'd have to try...just keep the goal in mind, keep thinking about it! I tried to keep my head high as I followed, but quickly lowered it out of worry anypony was looking at me. Eventually, we approached a huge piece of machinery, one I recognised as producing the massive rounds for the big rifles many of the griffins carried. Urgh...this was going to be annoying, wasn't it?

I'd rather keep thinking about secret plans...they were exciting! We were...were like some sort of secret society to do all this!

“The shell injector's bugged up. Big complex thing, really, so I'd rather get it fixed *before* Stern finds out that we can't make any more anti-machine rounds without it. Whenever we try to move it, the servos jam and grind so much I'm afraid they'll break, Cogwork thinks it's a shell got stuck in the workings.”

We'd just work away without being seen, come up with plans and...and have *meetings* and maybe a smart pony like Glimmer or Caduceus could make a motto! Ooh...I had to think of a name...

“Now, we've deactivated it for now, I want you to crawl inside and see what's up. You can fit with that scrawny body of yours so I'm going to send you in the conveyor end where it's jamming.”

Let's see...Escapetastic Fantastic? I wasn't even sure if that was a word. The Freedom Threesome? No...Glimmer might get ideas. The Ex-Slaves? Did that really count before we escaped?

“Just look for anything in the gears, it might even be a forge glove that's been dropped in or something...”

Wasteland Crusaders? Ooh...maybe that could-YOW!

A stinging pain slapped itself through my still very vulnerable skull when I felt the overseer whap me across the face with his hoof.

“Are you even listening to a *word* I've said?!”

“Y-yes, master! Sorry, master! Go in, get the stuff jamming!”

“Good, now get to it!”

Staggering about until the pain settled down, I was left to get the job done. I glanced to the thin opening into the darkness of the machine. On the outside it just seemed to be a series of large metal boxes with small pistons above it driving something else within. Shells went in one end and came out the other with their innards all ready for the actual bullet to go on top. Well...might as well get it over with...

Crawling up onto the conveyor (*Please* don't turn it on...) I pushed myself into the dark interior by lying low to the ground and crawling. Blinking, I got a sense of the shape once within it, trying to fight the claustrophobic feelings that resulted from not being able to stand. Much of the noise from the forge dulled out...but the heat was stifling. Around me were loads of gears, small injector arms hanging loose and dead with so many discarded shells rolling around either side of the conveyor, likely knocked off the line during the balefire and never recovered...

I grabbed a few of them, maybe Glimmer could use them for something? Thinking of stripping off some of the more complex looking wires for her too, I eventually concluded that I'd most likely break it even more.

The overseer would be more than happy to blame me if it failed again as well. Casting my head around, I crawled in further, pushing a few arms to the side that rested above the conveyor section. Really...past the

low entranceway, there was quite a bit of space in here...if dark.

So...jamming...jamming...look for gears...

There were gears on *everything*.

Well...crap.

I began running my hoof over a few of them, feeling more than looking for items by trying to make them turn. Some gears made an arm swing back and forth when I turned them...ooh...that was pretty cool. My hoof pushed one gear to the left...the arm copied it above the conveyor behind me. Hehe! I tried another one, a second arm moved downward. Wow! This was *really* well made, pre-war ponies sure lacked any sense about railings but they knew their stuff!

The third gear refused to move at all. Gotcha!

Feeling around, my hoof touched something softer further in. Above me I could see a small slit in the machine through which the orange hazed light shone, likely where this blockage had fallen in...c'mere...

Tugging hard enough that my hind hooves were pressed onto the outer wall, I turned nearly horizontal with the strain of yanking the offending item.

Likely...I should have thought better of how gravity worked for when it sprung free. I *was* a pegasus, flying or not, I should *know* these things. As such, with a sharp spring and whirr of gears, I collapsed backward to land on the conveyor itself. A sharp whirring from the gear sprung up as it whirled with the released tension. Screaming, I rolled to the side as an arm slammed down from above me and snapped against the conveyor where I had just lain, the gear controlling it. Dropping from the conveyor onto the innards of the machine itself, I just lay still to get my breath back...oh Celestia my body *hurt*...even that one dive had drawn a fiery throbbing on my ribs where that raider had stamped on them...

In my hooves was the object itself that had jammed it all up, a simple forge sock, designed to slip over a hoof to protect against hot surfaces. Made of thick leather, they were fairly popular amongst slaves.

I had different ideas for it...a water carrier! Throwing it into my belly pouch of the multi-pocketed fleece, I grunted and groaned till I had climbed back onto the conveyor and made my way toward the far end.

Well...that was fairly easy as far as slave work in Fillydelphia went, maybe I could just hang around in here for a bit? Get my breath back and pretend I was still hunting? It's not like they could *tell*...

“Hey, boss! That red light's green again!”

...as if my life were ever that kind...

“Guess it fixed itself then, tell the overseer he don't need to get that little runt no more. I'll start her up.”

No, no, no, NO! They thought I wasn't in yet!

“HEY! I'M IN HE-”

The whine of the motor and sparking of arcane boards drowned me out. Pacing on the spot, I panicked...I had to move! But the conveyor was beginning to trundle its way forward! Thinking faster than I felt I normally could, I galloped and hopped onto it, trying to run for the far end before the arms started up.

No such luck, the arms swivelled back and forth, while not sharp, the ends were pointed enough to deal some bad harm if they slapped down on me. Dodging left and right on the conveyor, I hopped and dove around them. Landing on my stomach, my efforts were shot by the flare of pain in my chest, resulting in a thick, sticky cough. A sharp pain on my flank made me scream as an arm fired down, drawing blood in a small hole. The sudden pain gave me the strength to keep pushing, trying my best to dodge them. Another arm scythed past my tail, a third almost catching my outstretched hoof. This was a nightmare...trapped in a dark and small area with a dozen little mechanical arms trying to stab me...

The exit was a thin shaft of orange at the far end, with the conveyor moving...at least I could concentrate on dodging and still move on. The moment I was in range, I dove for it and began pulling myself through the horribly small gap. My saddlebag came off, being shoved through first before I squeezed my aching body

under the gap, with the conveyor scratching and burning against my knees from the friction of me not moving with it fast enough....ow ow ow...

Mercifully...finally...I popped back out into the warm glare of the forge...making one hazy slave mare faint as she saw her work machine apparently give birth to a pony. Dropping off the conveyor, I concentrated mainly on trying to get my heart rate and breathing cycle down to normal levels again...oh Luna thank you for saving me in the dark...

The sullen face of the overseer glared down at me with almost surprise, before looking back at the machine.

“...and they said you were useless, pfft...any slave's got a use. Good work. Now get up.”

The adrenaline was passing...replaced entirely by a shaking and re-emergent agony in my body that required three attempts to stand upright and lift my head to look at the tall overseer.

“That would have cost me if Stern's griffins couldn't get the shipments to help fight any Rangers, Murk.”

Turning, he placed his head into a saddlebag and drew out four more of the forge socks.

“Maybe give you an incentive to stick around here, I could use a little scrawny pony with all this machinery, take 'em.”

Bowing first, I bit the four socks and tossed them in my saddlebag, likely I'd find another use than he thought of...but I wasn't complaining. A small surge of pride swelled in my chest at the praise, I could really do this stuff! Maybe I wasn't that bad a slave after all! I was a good little...

...slave...

Turning to trot away as my shift ended...I could almost hear the mocking rattle of my cutie mark through the factory air...

* * *

Well...at least I had something to add to the pile for my part when I got back to the shop cell. I had returned to the Mall rather quickly, moving as fast as my tired legs would carry me through the streets of Fillydelphia...sticking to the well guarded areas where masked guards strode on walkways above the streets. I didn't trust any areas on my own anymore...every shadow could hold another raider, just waiting to hurt me again. The thought alone would make me sniff and sob, remembering how it felt to be utterly helpless and alone with them...

If The Master didn't want me...I dreaded to think about it.

Now, I wandered the hallways of the Mall on my way to the cage door that would return me to my friends. I hoped Caduceus had brought something, I needed it...my eyes were still blackened and swollen, despite his earlier work. The potion seemed to have helped my broken nose...but I could swear I felt something still shifting in there while trotting on three legs down the darkened...corridor...

I stopped, casting my head back and forth. I could feel my heart beginning to beat faster. Ears perked, I shuffled against one of the walls as I could have sworn I heard a heavier tread from nearby. The sound of a door opening ahead of me gave reason to dive into the nearest shadows behind an abandoned cleaning cart.

“You can tell Barb that he'll have his reward soon enough for delivering the message.”

The Master.

His heavy stomping was coming this way. Just like my nightmare...I needed to move, now! But where to? The route to the cage door would have gone right by where I could hear him!

“What are you even planning, Master? The fuck matters if the runt squeals to somepony? Not like anypony'd actually believe that little shit. You said yourself, he's got no proof of anything you've done to him and it's not like he knows anything important.”

“Never you mind, raider. You've all got your promises, you do **not** factor in any more than that, understand? He's too close to that upstart coltcuddler to risk him even telling about abuse. I don't need anypony messing around with me. He won't talk now that your leader's had him negated, I *know* he won't, not while he feels that mare he likes is in danger.”

“Is she?”

“Explicitly.” He almost caressed the word, breathing it with a deep chuckle that I heard the raider nervously echo. “Now get back to your cell, slave. I give you these chances, but I can take them away if you cause trouble...understand?”

“Y-yes, master...”

The sounds of hooves charging in the opposite direction kicked up, I *prayed* he would go the other way...but even amidst the hollow terror for the mare or Glimmer, it only got worse as he continued coming this way. Sweating, with no other option, I simply turned and galloped as fast as I could in the opposite direction. At...at least he'd just hear it as somepony else-

“I can hear your pitter patter, Number Seven!”

I audibly shrieked, even down the corridor, that voice echoed up it...lidless and almost omnipresent...before the stomping increased. Oh Celestia save me, *he was coming! How did he even know my sound so well?*

HOW?!

The cackle drifted up behind me, I pushed on, shoving all the pain down and using all four hooves to speed up the nearest stairwell. Behind me, I saw him round the corner I'd been looking at and grin.

“There you are...”

I didn't stop, the moment he commanded, I knew I *would*. I had to get as much distance and a hiding place as fast as I could. Exiting on one floor up, feeling a pang of horror on every thump of a cracking stairwell as he moved up after me. I ran to a door, it was locked, *why were they always locked?* I...I didn't have time to try many more doors, it was just management corridors with nowhere to hide!

Wait...I recognised this place...I knew *one* door I could go into!

The sound of chains dropping to the ground and being dragged up the stairs sent shivers beyond compare down my spine and around my cutie mark...the rattling sound of certain enslavement followed me. Crying, I galloped on, please be in, *please be in...*

The heavy oak door was at the bottom here, I began hammering my hoof upon it.

“Master! *Master!*”

Shackles emerged from the stairwell, his head slowly turning with the rotten grin before he began trotting down...taking his time...inevitably approaching. He spoke lowly...the volume that only Glimmer knew would be only for my ears, *how did he know these things?*

“What's the matter, slave? No-pony home?”

He was only fifteen or so feet away. The collar clanged to the floor...oh Goddesses no...if...if I was put in that again...

I tried the door, it was locked. He always normally had it open! That meant...that meant...

Backing up against the door, my head turned sideways to watch him trotting closer, ten feet away.

“Now...your Master commands, stay there like a good little slave.”

My Master commanded. I obeyed as I felt my limbs deaden.

“Heh...heh...good...”

His eyes met mine, like strong to weak...like master to slave...like father to...

As a great surprise, I heard a click before the door fell open and dumped me upon the softer surface of the office floor. Line of sight broken, I wailed and rushed further in, colliding with somepony. Without even thinking, I just bucked out and ran further in. A grunt of sudden pain followed, quickly asserted with something falling to the floor.

Falling against one of the low benches that sat for readers next to the great wall of books, I turned, breathless and panting. I saw Protégé standing on three legs while the fourth, his back right, lifted in pain from the ground where I had struck his flank.

“Murk, what is the meaning of this?!” His eye sternly focussed on mine, before softening upon seeing the state I was in. “What's going on?”

“Ou...outs-side! I...I...” Words wouldn't come. *Just tell him.*

Hoofing closed the book he had dropped when we collided, Protégé walked to his door and stepped into the corridor. Yes! Yes yes!

“There's no-one here, Murk.”

What.

Shivering more than I could ever remember, I pulled my sore body to poke my own head out. The corridor was completely empty. Protégé even trotted down to check the nearby junction before turning to face me again.

“I believe you have some explaining to do...”

“But...but master I-”

“Inside. Now.”

And that was that. My master commanded. I obeyed.

* * *

I was sat before his desk, hooves rooted to the floor even though I wanted to hold or cradle a dozen different places. Even that short run had woken much of the pain that had been dying down. Caduceus had advised me to not stress much...but really I doubted I'd *ever* be able to follow a healer's orders well. Shaking, I ran over the thoughts in my head. The excuses. I...I was running from a loose raider. No, he'd *know*. I'd thought I heard a ghoul? There...there was one in here I knew, but it was locked in...

Of course, a portion of me had the simple answer.

Tell him. Come clean...tell him about the abuse...about the plans. He could *help*. Just tell him and all this would stop and I could go back to just being a meek slave and not an abused runt.

But every time I thought that...I thought of Sunny and the horrible conditions that had ruined all of her pride and dignity...and my mind cast either Glimmerlight or the mare into the same situation...

I couldn't...

“Pray tell, Murk. What gave you such a panic as to rush toward my office and scream like murder at the door before rushing in so quick and in such a panic that you were shocked even by the pony you wanted to meet? So shocked, I might add...that it led you to kick your master in blind fear.”

He sat at his desk, the height of the cushion chair elevating him far above me from my hunched own sitting position.

“I...I...”

“But I am willing to look by that now that I see the...the horrible condition you are in. Something has happened to you and I believe I know who it was. Murk, ponies hurt like you are not uncommon in Fillydelphia, especially among those who are smaller. But I know an unconditional assault and beating when

I see one after being in this job for some time. I know the signs, the look in your eyes and the despondent jittery fear. You've been abused by others, more than you are used to. I want to know who."

Stumbling over failed sentences a dozen times, I failed to say anything. Nothing but an occasional stammered 'I...I...' or 'It...it was...' left my mouth. I felt trapped, unable to choose a direction. I felt hurt, as vulnerable as ever from the pain and rotten exhaustion and now under absolute scrutiny for something that would hurt those I cared for...

Protégé's eyebrows narrowed, before he sighed and began to trot around the desk.

"I'm going to ask you one question, Murk. You don't need to say anything, just nod or shake. I won't tell anypony it was you who came to me...but I've had my suspicions ever since I first met you after your recovery from the Wall. I need to know..."

No, please...don't ask...

"Is this Chainlink Shackles?"

My heart skipped a beat. My neck felt frozen, unable to move.

Tell him.

"He has a history of it, every slaver in Fillydelphia knows, Murk. But he is also very good at not leaving traces and few ponies care to actually bother stopping him. *I do*. It was a mistake to leave him alone with you before...one that, had I known you as I do now, I would not have made. I may be ranked higher than him, but I cannot move against a veteran overseer and take this to Master Red Eye without proof. Let me help you, Murk, I *know* it's him, but I need you to confirm as a witness to let proceedings start. So please...was it him?"

Tell. Him.

"It...it..."

"Don't worry...just nod or shake."

Dammit, Murky! Tell him! Tell him and this is all over! He can protect them!

The sight of Sunny...ravaged and bereft of all hope...of Glimmerlight under the wicked knife of Barb as he drew the life from her...of the mare being dragged into places no-pony could see...

"All you need to do is just move your head, no-pony will hear or know it's you..."

He isn't your Master, Murky! You are your own pony, LittlePip would know to do the brave thing! Shackles is planning something as well. Open up and tell him everything, do what you want, cry into his shoulder if you need to...he cares! Let it out! Tell him the truth, no matter how bad it hurts!

He was going to hurt or have killed everypony who actually liked me...I'd be alone again...Protégé cared but...but he was still a slave master, I...I couldn't value him over my friends...

Amongst the voices careening in my head, back and forth, arguing and whirling around one another...one broke through with an unstoppable will that I could not resist.

Your Master commanded you to stay silent.

...I shook my head.

Sighing, his shoulders slumping, Protégé just looked away, seemingly stopping short of cursing under his breath.

"Some time ago, a zebra in here, the one you saw rescued...she was the victim of a horrible attack of which I shan't describe. No-pony came to her aid or looked to deal with those who committed the crime, even if our leader would handle it. Most slavers don't care...but Murk, I have the ear of Master Red Eye himself and I know he will not stand for such wanton abuse if given proof of a specific slaver. He knows it happens, but

his concerns are not with the day to day individuals...but if I brought it to him...Murk he could help..."

"It...it was just because I got in t-the way..."

"You're lying, Murk."

I just looked away, hiding my eyes from that harsh glare of his. Sniffing, I could only shake my head a second time. A long silence ensued as he simply stared at me while I shivered and held my eyes to the carpet beneath us. Eventually, a sparkle of magic picked up, followed by a series of books floating by me off the small bench I had collided with.

"You can stay here for a time till you feel better, Murk." His voice was empty, oddly helpless.

At the unspoken command, straining and feeling the tingling ache in my nethers from the vicious kick, I hobbled over to lie across the bench, curling up tightly. (They all still deserved it when I did it, as far as I was concerned) Protégé moved back to his desk and took up a scroll. More silence in which I simply tried to calm down...I had gotten through that without endangering my friends. He meant well but...but I just *couldn't*. This had to remain silent...at least until we could escape, get to the metro and tunnel out.

"I have received a message from the overseer of the forge requesting your presence there for future shifts. Would you prefer working there?"

The topic change was sullen, heavy with forced conversation. Lying my head on the cushioned bench, I took a few seconds to get my response out.

"Y-yes...master...he's not so b-bad..."

"...indeed, he is a rather fair overseer. However, I suspect in a few days we will receive a new shipment of volunteers for the salvage detail, I do hope you'll have recovered by then. As such, I'm sending you to Weathervane's care overnight. You're on the list for medical support now that you've proven yourself to various slavers...be a little more proud of yourself."

I hardly felt proud. This wasn't something I wanted to *be* proud of. All the same, I nodded, if anything just to please him and sat up a little.

"I'm...I'm sorry, master...for running in and...and being scared..."

"Don't let it worry you, Murk. I know how it feels. Now, just take your time, I did say that you were welcome to come here should you ever wish to talk.

Still casting his eyes over my vaguely healed injuries, Protégé eventually sighed and sat back, trying to place a smile into the moment. His efforts to maintain 'cheer' were hardly successful given it was coming from the pony who owned my *life*.

"I owe you this much. I am rather thankful for your efforts and, if I may say, rather proud of them myself. That was no easy infiltration at the Ministry. Grindstone is a particularly stringent taskmaster, one I am increasingly wary over. I had actually petitioned to take leadership of the Ministry worker den, but he has friends in high places among the ranks of Master Red Eye's leadership base."

I wasn't sure what I felt more, the odd surge of satisfaction at pleasing him...or the crippling fear of letting on that I knew anything about Grindstone and The Master working together on...something, whatever it was. Oh how I wanted to just even hint to make him wary...

No, I couldn't...Barb could be watching, he always seemed to be. Just...just stick to what you know. I took a short breath, rubbing a hoof on my neck to massage the sore muscles.

"The machine thing will help us I guess...I'm scared for Glimmer and the others..."

"It will help a lot, Murk, as soon as we get it charged up. I have Mosin and his assistant working on that right now. Now...is there anything you would like to talk about? You do normally have something on your mind..."

Casting my eyes around at the wealth of books in messy piles or disorganised heaps upon shelves. (Why in Equestria did he have a book on top of a lampshade?) I wondered if he had any information on what lurked in

the metro...he had mentioned that things had gone down there before after Red Eye took over, didn't he? Well...might as well do some digging...

“If you don't mind, I...I think I want to learn more about Re-I mean...Master Red Eye coming to Fillydelphia. To...maybe try to understand all this? Like...you mentioned things that he cleared out?”

Much of the sullen tone was banished as I saw his one eye light up, the quill immediately dropping into the ink well once again. His voice was somewhat happier, joyous that I was asking on a subject he clearly held dear to his heart. Good...good, just...anything but trying to get the truth out of *me*.

“Of course, Murk! I am glad you're taking an interest in this, perhaps you'll begin to see in which ways we can all help one another, for Equestria.”

Protégé stood and began to pace around, presumably organising in some sort of method I would never hope to understand. I guessed he didn't like just sitting doing nothing but talking for a time...but then he was a slave master...they didn't often get time off.

“Fillydelphia was uninhabitable, Murk. We're not sure what caused it, other than perhaps such intense radiation over so long, but there were horrors here that simply were unlike anything else we had seen. Of course...there aren't any real records kept in the wasteland, so this is all based on talk and second hand perspective, it may just have been very odd ghouls. Master Red Eye rarely speaks of it, motioning that we should look to the future and simply learn from the past rather than fear it. But I must admit I did have a curiosity as to what had really gone on back then...so I did a little light research. It turned out that as well as ghouls and the swarms of parasprites there were at least a couple of creatures that ponies feared above *everything* in this part of the world.”

Groaning slightly as I felt my eyes sting and complain around their edges, I gently rubbed them and tried to pay further attention. Despite the lack of a slave industry, Fillydelphia hardly sounded any better back then before Red Eye. The idea of using the metro was quickly becoming rather scary if it was still like the old Fillydelphia pre-Red Eye.

“You remember when we were in the building, Murk? The alarm?”

Oh, don't remind me...I averted my eyes, fighting as hard as I could to avoid any crying. I'd been embarrassed enough by throwing myself into his hooves while upset...

“Y-yes...”

“Well, there was a reason I was wary, Murk. Some of the sources I spoke to who claimed to have known others around that time reported that many of these creatures gave off an unusual shrill alarm sound when they were in the vicinity. Not all, but just some. No-pony really knew why, as far as I could find out.

There's all sorts of myths but very little facts...not even what they are or what they look like. Only one thing remained steadfast and repeated...”

“W-what was t-that?” These things were beginning to terrify me already...the thought of being underground where these things apparently still lurked and hearing that alarm slowly approaching in the dark...oh Goddesses protect me if we had to go down there...

“One simple survival instinct. If you smell rotten mint...gallop away as fast as you can and do not look back. Do not stop and do not try to hide.”

A cold shiver fired down my spine. I wasn't very good at running...

“They *all* said that, every one of the older veterans. Some had even done so while sealing off the tunnels, never even seeing what it was...we lost a lot of ponies sealing off the outer circle metro lines, apparently...”

“You sealed off everything?”

“Everything inside the walls, certainly. Those incidents were relatively rare, but the fear was so great that every outer line metro station inside Red Eye's domain was collapsed in on itself. It only made security sense as well, the tunnels were dangerous, but it also represented a breach in the defences were they not closed off.

No, now the metro is simply used for underground shelter on the inner circle, while the outer is a forgotten abyss. They're still down there...we're sure of it, just with no way to get back up that we know of."

Wait...that they knew of? Could there be other entrances or ways down to the outer circle that they hadn't yet found? I wasn't sure if that was a blessing for an escape or a horrifying thought of one of those...*things*...coming above ground. Well...that was interesting to know.

"Do you still have records of it all? Like...maps or something?"

"Yes...yes I do, why?"

"I...uh...um..." *Crap.* Way too obvious there, Murky! "Just...just for..."

The sound of a bellowed warcry out of the window took both our attentions from the awkward mistake. Many shouts, swears and crashes exploded into being with a violence that visibly shocked even the usually unflappable Protégé. Almost stumbling across his office, he cast a glance from the window.

"By the Goddesses..."

A scream, followed by a shattering of wood and metal. Was...was it one of those things? Oh it was, wasn't it?!

"Come on!"

His revolver flew from the holster to his side as he galloped for the door. Pushing myself up as best I could, I cantered after him, the thought of being left behind alone in the corridors being all that gave me the strength to stay within sight. He made for the stairwell, pausing only to ensure I caught up before we descended.

"W-what is it master?!"

He didn't reply. We passed a group of slavers rushing toward the entrance with all sorts of armaments. Ragini was with them, striding alongside Protégé.

"Kysa reported from the air, the moment the cage was opened inside the gates-"

"Coming here, I could only guess. Let me do the talking!"

"You should just shoot-"

"Ragini."

"...yes, master. Hey, flightless." She glanced back at me with a crude grin and a flap of her wings.

I was rather too concerned, what had they brought here? A long wail sounded, an electric sparking crackling after it. Quickly everypony (and token griffin) rushed out of the front of the Mall. Why had he insisted I come along? What use was I in a fight?

It all became very quickly relevant.

Before the Mall lay a scene of devastation. Two carts were destroyed, bodies lying amongst the wreckage where they had been thrown or smashed through. All lay groaning, some still. But before me the brawl still continued, with one slaver hurling over my head to shatter through one of the doors to the Mall.

...it was him.

Brimstone Blitz swayed to the side, avoiding the whirl of a cane, before striking the offending slaver so hard his gas mask flew from his face. Bucking backwards, he caught the griffin that had attempted to land and restrain him a wicked blow that hurled him into the side of a ruined wall on the far side of the road. Up the street leading to the Mall I could see slavers lying in heaps the entire way...while one overhead walkway had collapsed from a shattered pillar beneath it. The slavers who otherwise would have shot him were slowly shifting on the concrete, holding their limbs or torsos in wracking pain.

Another slaver leapt toward him, hurling a magical shock stick forward that stung his side. Roaring with fury, Brimstone hoofed and threw a rock to force him back. A slaver beside me raised a gun, only for Protégé's magic to sweep the barrel away. My master cantered forward.

“Warlord Brimstone Blitz!”

He apparently did not hear, slapping two slavers' heads together with enough force to make a sound like rocks colliding. He yelled again as the sneaky slaver with the shock stick scored another strike on his chest and dived back behind the wagon again. A full group of five slavers finally got their act together and rushed him. With ponies hanging off of his limbs and neck, the huge raider was visibly slowed...I saw the others rushing to pick up the rifles dropped from the walkways...

“Stop!” I shouted, running alongside Protégé. “Brim! Stop!”

His head shot around so hard at the sound of my voice that a mare was thrown from his neck. He might have stopped...but that shock stick stuck and held against his back leg hard enough that I saw the bloodlust rise in his eyes.

“Protégé, call them off! He's going to kill them!” I begged him, pleading to let this not become a massacre for either side.

“Slavers! Fall back! Let me handle this!” His voice needed no magical enhancement, simply carrying with a practised ease across the street. “Leave the raider be!”

Some of them dropped, one was thrown for not moving fast enough. The shock stick buzzed once more before Protégé yanked it from his grasp with a telekinetic tug. Within the slowly expanding circle of slavers...Brimstone stood, dripping blood from wounds, eyes filled with a fury directed *entirely* at Protégé. He breathed heavily, hooves scraping on the ground.

“**Where is she?!**”

Glimmer...he'd come back for *Glimmer*...

“She is safe, inside with a healer. Those who brought her back were not kind but I assure she is-”

“She **better** be, *boy*.” Advancing that he was alongside many of the slavers who stood rooted to the spot (particularly the shock stick slaver) Brimstone looked down on Protégé. Despite my master's authority...it was clear that Brimstone held the real weight here. He had led *hundreds* of ponies for most of his life...one slave master was nothing to him.

“I don't care for your rules...I'll play your game only if I'm with her. Some fool thought he could 'claim' me...well he won't be doing that from now on. So...are we going to have a problem?”

There was something ever more frightening about him when he *didn't* swear...he didn't need to pose and sound off to intimidate, you just *knew* he had the power to do so. Protégé held up well, not backing off, waving his hoof to tell the slavers to not worry.

“Technically, given I stopped you during your...hm...rampage, through the streets to get here, I suppose that would count as me being the one to bring you back to being a worker. I would be glad to have your skills with us once ag-”

“Leave your drivel for somepony who cares, boy.”

Protégé only nodded, clearing his throat.

“Then I assume that your little war to get inside again then fight your way here is over?”

Brimstone narrowed his eyes, snorting air through his nostrils...his gaze remained fixed on Protégé even while his left hoof whipped out horizontally and smacked the shock stick slaver hard enough to knock him completely away from the edge of my vision with nought but a blur.

“*Now*...I'm done.”

* * *

“You stupid, stupid, fucking *stupid* stallion!”

Glimmerlight was letting her less than polite mouth flow freely, beating her front hooves against Brim's rather unmoving chest. He merely stood in the gateway to the shop cell as she continued her rant.

“You were out! *You were out!* Why did you just...just hand yourself in!?”

Personally, I had stepped back, sitting in the corner with my needle and thread, piecing together the leather socks with some old bits of a hose to create a watertight container. I wanted to scream at him myself...but the moment we had trotted back in here, I had felt too tired to even try.

Besides...Glimmerlight had certainly done the work for me.

“You're like...like one of those idiots who doesn't get that it was just a one night thing and just always *comes back!* You were free, Brim!”

“I can't be free.”

It was the first thing he had said all conversation. Glimmerlight, exhausted, fell against him, butting her head on his chest a few times in sheer exasperation and anger...but simply too tired to keep it up.

“I'm a raider, Glim. On my own out there...I'd likely just fall back into the way I was before. Almost did...angry enough that I held up a trader to get what I'd need to get back here for sure. No...I'm meant to be here, but you...both of you, aren't.”

Sighing, closing his eyes, he began trotting past her toward the layers of cardboard he used as a bed.

“That's why I'm here, I'm helping *you* escape...not me. Chances are, once you're safe I'll come back here again. That's just the morality of the whole thing, Glim, raiders like me don't *deserve* the freedom to do the things we did again.”

“But you aren't-”

“Don't.”

His eyes met hers briefly, fiercely, ending that line of speech immediately.

“Just...don't. I'm not the all good guardian you think I am. Now...are you alright?”

Sighing, Glimmerlight stomped her hoof on the spot in frustration, looking unable to decide if she should nod or shake her head.

“We...we got by. It hurt but...we got by. Murky got beat up bad but...we held it together. There's a plan coming together, we could use your help...”

My head perked up at the mention of my name. Truth be told, I'd long considered myself a side matter to these two, the one that just tagged along or helped out with some things. Glimmerlight was the real leadership here, with Brimstone as the one to point the best way or get stuff done. To hear her talk about me as though I mattered just as much as her to all this was...strange, if reassuring. I caught a quick glance of her looking at me, a small smile forming to remind me she was still there. Her rage settled...apparently being able to begin to look by her anger and reassert the Glimmerlight I knew.

“In fact...no, you don't have a choice. You act like some big idiot lump and trot back into a slavery hell then you are *going* to help us...here's what we need...”

* * *

The plan was explained as we waited for the next food delivery to arrive. In that time, I created three waterskins and filled them from the fountain. That we could get away with and even use for now, it wasn't uncommon. Glimmerlight took my bullet casings and hid them amongst the scrap pile, pulling out a few little robot eyepieces she had found (apparently for trap sensors) at her workplace and even a discarded bolt from a rifle. It was a start...

Brimstone asserted that he could make some tools very easily, promising to try and bring some back from the type of work he got given and drop it nearby. At night, I could sneak out the back and retrieve it. It felt so strange...just being expected to go back to normal with Brimstone around again. Caduceus even got the fright of his life when he returned with a few sealed bags of purified water he'd gotten from the surplus bins in the hospital and immediately kissed Glimmerlight...much to Brimstone's chagrin. The big raider had almost been ready to hurl him out until Glimmerlight explained.

Today had simply been...weird. Awful...enlightening...inspiring and confusing with a series of random events one after the other. From Slit and Barb to Glimmerlight and my mother...from desperation inside a machine to Brimstone returning and...and The Master...

Nothing made any sense, it was just all these emotions and other ponies with influence over my life, pulling me this way and that...I...I needed to find something, a track to follow that was my own. Like some sort of virtue to stick to and trust in. Everypony else had one, Glimmer's optimism and forgiveness...Brimstone's protectiveness and even Protégé's loyalty to an ideal.

Maybe that was why things were so choppy and horrible right now...I'd lost the momentum I had been gathering through my escape attempt or the rush outside with Glimmer and Brimstone. But we had one again...I just needed to be patient and endure until we were ready.

“Soup's on, everypony! Get your pasty flanks out here!”

Well...there was something we could do. We needed more food to store away, here was one more opportunity to stay on track. As a group, we trotted out, thankfully receiving much less crowding now that Brimstone was here again...which also permitted us to join the queue properly without worry of my presence sending us to the back. I glanced at Brimstone and Glimmerlight, Caduceus having decided to wait behind in the shop cell away from the crush. Technically, he shouldn't even be here to be allowed the Mall's food anyway.

The shop cells were under a lot less security now that the healers had departed, though many of the mattresses lay unclaimed and stained with the blood of those who had been treated. A sudden flap of fabric caught my attention to look up and see Pinkie's flag whipping around, seemingly nodding toward me.

It had to be a draft from a hole somewhere...you didn't get wind *inside*. I quickly averted my eyes from those wide and overjoyed ovals of creepy fun that always had seemed to glance down at me in particular. Remembering the container, I shivered, turning away from it. Always watching...forever watching...

“So..um...any ideas on gathering food?”

Glimmerlight simply smiled and rustled my mane. What had happened to that mood? How could she just...switch back over to happy like that?

“Don't you worry, Murky. I'm sure we've all got our own ideas. I mean...you're gonna slip some extra, right?”

“Well, sure-”

“Just leave us to do as we do, trust me, eh?” She winked and grinned. I could only dread what she had planned.

I approached first, holding up my bowl. They had a large urn for the gruel (at least it wasn't oatmeal again...) and several pieces of stale bread in some wicker baskets. The young slaver assistant, a few years older than myself, poured some in for me. He had a pretty lifeless expression, yawning a lot or glancing off to chat to his colleague who was handing out the bowls beside him. It wasn't exactly a difficult task for me to swipe a few extra pieces of bread when he wasn't looking. Then a few more...after a few seconds, I began to worry I didn't have that many pockets left that could fit slices of the hard bread...so I hastily moved along before somepony in the crowd saw...me...

Barb was sitting by the side of the plaza...just watching as he waited for his raiders to bring his food. *He* saw me...and just grinned.

I shivered, sticking close to Brimstone. He was up next, carrying the largest bowl possible that he had simply grabbed from another raider with a growl and a warning 'tap' on the head. The young slaver simply looked up at him as he spooned in the normal amount.

Brimstone didn't move.

“Oh! Um...sorry!” In went another spoonful. Then another...and a third.

Eventually, he'd gotten almost twice the ration...by stint of *simply standing there*. The moment he moved away I already heard the complaints from behind in the queue, matched by the insults from those raiders brave enough to shout out. Finally, Glimmerlight trotted up with a little wink to me, somehow saying "Okay, let me show you how it's done."

Her bowl popped down from her magic onto the pasting table they set up for the food, where she leaned beside it with her front hooves on the tabletop. A spoonful was thrown in, as normal. I could see the buck was clearly keeping his eyes on her, he was a little more like her age than I was so...I guess I couldn't have blamed him.

"Aww...so little? How's a mare meant to get her energy?"

"That's...that's all we're told to give..."

She leaned forward again, her hooves resting on her chin, tail swishing to and fro behind her. Her lips pouted a little, leading the slaver to begin to sweat a little and glance back and forth to the others, who simply shrugged and continued giving out gruel from their urns across the bench. Clearly, they were of a rank to simply not care.

"Hey...I'll give you a kiss if you give me another spoonful..." Her eyebrows raised, before going ahead anyway. With almost shock in my face, I watched as she dragged him across the table with her front hooves and slapped a kiss onto his mouth with enough passion and energy that I saw many of the bucks in the queue suddenly begin to blush. Somepony cheered.

Oh and...also...his hoof with the ladle kept adding more each time she kept the motion up or stroked him firmly with a hoof along his neck or chest. Oh my...

Almost by surprise, Brimstone was suddenly beside me, I only realised after he prodded me with a hoof.

"Murk?"

"...uh?"

"Your mouth's open."

Blushing fiercely myself, I snapped it shut and gulped. "I...I was just...um...really good...food gathering tactic..."

The big raider warlord chuckled lowly, regaining a little of that softer dry humour I'd known him for.

"Sure, kid...nothin' to do with some wee unicorn on your imagination..."

I simply whimpered and stayed silent, fighting to let my frantically red face from growing any hotter. Glimmerlight eventually pulled back with a wet smack of sound from their separating mouths. Breathing deeply, she readjusted her mane and smiled to him before picking up her bowl.

"Dinner at my place, sometime?"

"Uh...I...durgh..."

"It's a date!"

With a cheerful wave, she trotted off with a swaying rump, her bowl actually overflowing while held in her magic field. She grinned at us widely.

"And that, my buck friends, is how you get extra food."

Almost skipping off into the shop cell, she hummed happily to herself before disappearing through the door.

* * *

It wasn't long before the next shift calls went out. To no-one's surprise, Brimstone Blitz was called almost immediately. Leaving us to work, he stomped out, mentioning he'd bring what he could back from the scrapyards to make tools. Glimmer had sighed as he left, turning her eyes to me.

“I really wish he'd stayed out there...I feel a little guilty, y'know? Like me failing was what dragged him back into slavery. Sure I can throw on the happy Glimmer gets by everything style look but...I just want to see him find some peace. Big stallion wouldn't be doing this if *some* part of him didn't want to turn away from that life...”

I honestly couldn't reply other than to nod and nuzzle up to her briefly. She had smiled and wrapped a leg around me, whispering a thanks.

We began spending the time cramming what we could into tins and tying it down with thick cloth. The bread we stored in one of the leather socks to keep it dry. We ate what we could, leaving the remainder in a dark corner of the scrap pile. The gruel simply tasted like what I imagined rancid vomit might...how I longed for some proper food someday. That apple stew Protégé had given me felt so very long ago...

Sitting in the back, I was, at Glimmer's insistence, clad in the blanket. My injuries still hurt and my face was still swollen and discoloured...so that apparently gave me the rights to a little bit of comfort. Caduceus had checked me over once, but now he simply sat with Glimmer, giggling as she regaled her tale for food. While sewing, I wondered if he were just being polite to not be offended...weren't they, y'know...together?

“So, Murky, now you know how to be not malnourished! Try it next time!”

...what. “But...but he wath uh buck...” My voice warped as I held onto the needle in my teeth.

“So? Seriously, try it sometime, bucks are good firm kissers if you take the initiative, see?”

She rather proved her point, again, with Caduceus. The look in his eyes said nothing but 'I am so lucky' as he returned the gesture. It began to linger...then grow a little more. I rolled my eyes while they just giggled, hooves beginning to hunt for ways past her crimson initiate robes or his stained white jacket.. Oh for Celestia's sake, was I going to have to leave the room again?

“Mhm...yeah I think you can stick around when we get out of here...I could get used to a buck who isn't afraid to take the initiative a little.”

Sighing, I put aside the last leather sock I'd been working on and spat out the needle. *Anything* to get those two back on track...

“How are we going to know our way in those tunnels?”

“Red Eye had a big operation going to take out every entrance, right? Well, he needs to organise that on a map...you think hot flanks up in his office might have one?”

“That's it! Sick leave's over, get in there!”

The main cage door to the shop cells creaked open outside, perking my ears up at the grating sound. It wasn't The Master...but I didn't want any authoritative slavers in my life right now. I pulled myself under the blanket, shivering violently and praying he wasn't here to announce anything for me. Like I would *ever* have that luck. For once, I was proven wrong. I heard the slaver slam the door shut and begin trotting away. The departure (thank you Luna...) was followed by a mature female voice, bitter and low spoken.

“Better recovering than being dead from radiation, you lout...”

Glimmer's hoof that had been stroking Caduceus' head stopped. I heard her get up quickly, trotting for the doorway. Pushing my head out from under the blanket, I called out after her, but she didn't stop. From the brief glimpse I got of her face when she turned to head through the doorway...I saw a mask of surprise and near shock.

“Glimmer? What's wrong?” Caduceus glanced over at me for any idea. But she was already gone. Unable to leave her to go alone and filled with my own curiosity...I hopped out from the blanket and hobbled my way over to the doorway after her. Behind me, Caduceus simply looked perplexed, but didn't move for the moment. Given he technically shouldn't be here...it was likely the best plan.

Various slaves were poking their heads out to see a small group of new arrivals, three mares and two bucks. All were rather weary looking and had clearly been in Fillydelphia for some time. One of the bucks looked

almost dead on his hooves...only just managing to stagger to a mattress to collapse.

The others simply trotted in, most of them heading for a shop cell further back, but one of the mares, a unicorn, hung back and glanced around her. I paused in thought...something about her seemed familiar. Pale grey coat...a dark blue and shot with white and black highlights mane was braided into two stands either side of her face and the remainder tied into a ponytail at the back...it all sparked a few thoughts of recognition.

“CORAL!”

Beside me, Glimmerlight raced forward, galloping across the mattresses and concrete floor towards the mare. The other unicorn turned, surprised at the madly dashing form of Glimmer for her.

Then she scowled.

Her horn lit, a dark blue like deep water that sparked and stuttered around her horn like a faulty light before it exploded into being. Even before I could shout out, I a dull thump of overpressure blew across the plaza floor, kicking up water from the fountain and blasting a few mattresses aside in an arc before her.

Glimmerlight was knocked clean from her hooves with a yell of more surprise than pain. Landing on her side, she could only glance up in apparent confusion and sheer shock.

The new unicorn's horn fizzed and sparked in the aftermath of her spell, causing her to wince and reach a hoof to her head until it all died down. But quickly, she regained her composure, trotting over with slow and deliberate steps. She was much older than Glimmer, far more mature and likely in her early forties. Only now on her flank could I see the image of a reared wave of frothing water.

“Glimmerlight...you...you *dare* to think you can just run up to me and shout happily?”

My best friend lay on the ground, nursing one side that had impacted upon the concrete. I hobbled over towards her, laying down over her.

“Leave her alone! She's hurt!”

Pained eyes switched to me for a second, before widening.

“You...you're that little buck from the hospital...”

Finally, it all clicked into place...I remembered her. This was the mare that I had almost stolen RadPurge from! Guilt began to trickle into my mind, she had every right to hate me, which made her sudden relaxation seem all the odder.

“The nurse told me what you did...how you realised what you were doing and decided not to. Not many ponies would do that in this city...not like *her*. I should have known it was you and your allergy that RadPurge was for. What are you doing with *her*, kid?”

“Coral, what's wrong?” Glimmerlight breathed out the words, getting the air back in her lungs as she sat up. “What do you *mean* about me?”

Coral stood up straighter, scowling, before trotting and again lowering her head.

“Are you being serious? Are you honestly saying you think you can just waltz back over to me, throw a hug around me and consider everything fine? Oh...but that's right, you don't do remembering the bad times, do you?”

This was becoming seriously confusing, there was bad blood here...but only in one direction. I stepped forward. Love for my chosen sister lended me an assertiveness I never knew I even had.

“Stop it! She's saved my life and helped me! I'm Murky, Murky Number Seven, who are you to her?”

“I'm Coral Eve, old...heh...'friend' of Glimmerlight from the village we inhabited. Or at least I was until we ended up in here because of her!” The voice was cold, long withheld fury seething into every word. “I'll bet she didn't tell you that bit, huh? Of how she *betrayed* us, led our village to be burned down and get most of us sold into slavery? I had my *son* taken from me, just a little colt! Now he's been dragged in to learn from Red Eye and you think you can just act like nothing's happened?!”

She...she was from the village? Immediately, I almost felt a painful spark in my mind as memories flickered and emerged. The memory she had shown me in the Stable...of her own life in the village...

Foals bounced happily away from a pony I presumed was their teacher as they chanted "The bad wolfies won't come back!" over and over. They circled around her as though playing a game. Glimmerlight hugged one of them, a chirpy little young colt wearing an old floppy hat clearly too big for him. He squealed happily as he buried his head into her (at this point) long pink mane and giggled before returning to his mother. For a second I thought I caught a glint of recognition...perhaps just that motherly look anypony missing their mom would feel.

It was her...

She *was* from the village, I had seen her, that's why I'd recognised her in the Stable! I'd already met her in the hospital!

Suddenly, the harsh reality of truth in her words began to slip into my mind...

Shoving her head forward, she almost seemed to spit on her words, inches from Glimmerlight's face. My friend recoiled, looking shocked beyond proper thought processes. All around us, slaves were coming out to view the confrontation by the fountain. I saw Barb leaning against the edge of a shop cell with a wicked grin...clearly enjoying the drama.

"But...but I...no! That isn't what happened!"

"Oh, Glimmerlight...the mare who can forgive anypony else or anything...except that it's all a lie..." Coral Eve turned back to me, those two braids swinging loosely. "Has she told you the truth yet, of how she manages to forgive and forget?"

Speechless, I just cast my head between them...what could I say? No...no Glimmerlight was good!

"She...she cares..."

"She *forgets!* A pony with a speciality in memory orbs, you seen her collection yet? All those orbs of hers rolling around in her bags or boxes? What do you think they are? Oh how easy it is to forgive somepony when you can simply wave your horn and just get rid of all the bad stuff. Hey Glimmer...tell me, how'd that back leg get injured?"

Throwing a quick glance backward, Glimmerlight immediately snorted at the accusation.

"Slavers, when they brought me back in they weren't too kind."

"I didn't ask who, I asked *how*."

"They...they hit me or...or beat me up and..." Glimmerlight faltered, that ease of words failing. I could see it in her eyes...defeat.

My heart felt like it was being torn...the sudden doubt and grasping for straws in her expression told it all. Coral only stomped a hoof and tossed her head. I felt useless...way out of my depth in their history.

"Thought so...probably wiped it the moment you got back. So you're still doing that, huh? Funny how that works to lead as guilt free a life as you do...no wonder you don't even remember what you did to us. What you did to *me*. You know it...those orbs you'll never touch, the ones you know are memories you want to keep away and never have to deal with the way the rest of us do. I'll bet you don't even remember what happened to the village in the end. You're just running away, Glimmer...escaping having to deal with the morality of your life and the horrors you brought on yourself and those around you. You are no friend of mine..."

Tossing a braid over her neck, Coral stomped past us, wincing as her horn sparked and flared again.

Glimmerlight fell back to sitting down as her back leg gave out again, her mouth gaping, her eyes wide and sad. With a clatter of hooves, Caduceus emerged from the shop cell, sliding to a halt as he found himself almost face to face with Coral.

“Hey, what's going o-Glimmer!” He saw Glimmerlight half standing from a limp near me and threw a stare at Coral, but found her only glancing back briefly as well, before giving a tired laugh.

“Another buck? You don't change one bit. Glimmerlight, the ride of the village...barely a stallion or so-inclined mare you *hadn't* gotten with. Hey, buck, how's it feel to know you're just another number for her? You see any looks of surprise when you showed up afterwards? She's only after you for one thing, another notch on her bed.”

The pale grey unicorn rounded on us all. I moved to Glimmer's side, standing slightly in front of her, even as I saw her head droop, letting the short mane hang over it.

“Murky...I don't advise you hang around with her much longer, that mare is trouble. She'll betray you in the end...I promise you that. Even if she doesn't realise it.”

Taking a strong stance, she screwed up her face once more.

“Funny how memory works, isn't it? Now stay out of my life!” Baring her teeth, she turned away, the show of strength broken only for a single hiccup of emotion. “You've ruined enough of it already...”

She cantered off down the plaza to the bottom, before turning a corner into one of the stairwells and disappearing. Locked in place, stunned beyond words, I could only really move toward Glimmerlight.

“I...Glimmer...I...”

Without a word, she ran toward the shop cell, head low. I could hear a sniffing and sudden breathing, leading me to push as fast as I could after her. Inside, catching up, I found her on the sofa, head buried into one of the side cushions...crying her eyes out completely. Her body was quaking.

I...I didn't know what to do in this situation...

Caduceus moved past me, sitting and hugging her across the sofa. Lost, I could only trot nearby and offer what kind of caring look I could muster. Over Caduceus' shoulder, her tear filled eyes looked down to me.

“S-she was my friend...one of my best friends. I...I thought we still were! I didn't know!”

Around my feet, all around the sofa, the memory orbs lay. Crushed in her sadness, I saw her eyes glancing from orb to orb...before her magic threw them all into one bag in one swarm of hated memories.

“Coral's right, I...I'm sorry, that's how I did it. It was so easy to start with! A few crap days or things but it just got too simple to get rid of the bad and...and just live with only the good out in the wastes! B-but I didn't know I'd gotten rid of that kind of...of thing...now I've lost one of my best friends, she and her son were like...hrk...like a family to me after I'd left mine. I knew I had forgotten some real bad things, but...”

The bag of orbs was thrown behind the sofa. Caduceus held her tighter, nuzzling the side of her head. Closing her eyes, cheeks wet with tears, she gripped him back, stretching out a hoof to draw me in as well.

“I can forgive anypony, *anything*...all except the one pony I really know did the wrong thing...”

Sniffing, she fought to not break down again. Held close, I just tried to wrap my short legs around as best I could.

“...myself.”

* * *

She was not perfect.

I had always known it. She was flirtatious, overly spontaneous and while I hadn't seen it, had admitted to a history of rather severe drinking. But I had accepted it, because I had seen how loyal and caring she was as a dear friend. A sister, even, one I never had but had always needed.

But now, as it transpired, Glimmer had one large flaw, one I had pondered on for some time now that I thought on it. The reason she could be so happy...even after being assaulted by, likely abused by and humiliated by raiders...even after being sold into Fillydelphia...was because she had sliced the worst horrors from her memory.

Coral Eve has returned to her life now, bringing the truth with her...and it hurt. Even while she had ranted and screamed, I had seen the pain in Coral's eyes. There was no good and bad here.

Now, she simply sat against the sofa, wrapped in the blanket and staring at a group of memory orbs that hung in the air before her as though considering something. Her tears had dried with a significant effort to try and smile through it all. Somehow that had hurt me even more, reminding me of my own forced laughter. I'd lost my mother...she'd lost those she had considered family too. Only now that smile had faded to a blank stare on a face lit only by the dark red illumination of the orbs.

"I...I wouldn't hurt anypony, Murky...I'd never hurt you, I promise. I...I don't know what happened, it's in here somewhere but...but it's all buried under orb after orb of horrible things..."

Sitting nearby to her, I had toyed in my journal, finding my charcoal sketching out Coral Eve with her son in that floppy hat I remembered. Now I looked up, but didn't say a word.

"Raiders took me, they...they did things to me, Murky..."

Already, I could feel myself tearing up for her. I moved closer and sat alongside Glimmer.

"If I go hunting for the village I...I don't know what I'll find before I come to the right orb. I can sense the order they go in but I don't know where to start or...or what. Coral wouldn't make things up, but...but she may not know all the details or...or something."

Nuzzling closer, I felt her lean against me. It wasn't often that I was the one supporting anypony with my presence. Caduceus was here too, but Glimmer had responded better to me than him, understandable given our shared experiences...but harsh on the poor buck in light of Coral's words.

Not that there was anything I could do to change that now.

"We need to get out, Murky...if...if I've done anything to put her and her beautiful little son in here...we need to get them out with us. I...I think I know what drives Brim now. Even if she hates me...I want her out."

I nodded, turning just that she could see me in the darkness. With a shuffle of movement, Caduceus stood and trotted toward us.

"I know I'm fairly new to you guys...but Glimmer, in a city of pain and labour I've smiled more around you in the past day than I have in months. I don't care if Coral's right, if that was just a once off 'thing'...I'm thankful for spending the time. I want to help you, to get out myself. I've made my decision to return to Helpinghoof, maybe try and take the things Weathervane invented like RadPurge to a place it can do better good too."

Glimmerlight began to smile again, kissing me gently on the cheek and hugging me tightly.

"Thank you...thank you both. I...I don't know if I'm ever going to look or know, but getting out...that's the main priority. It has to be. I'm not going to wallow in my depression for too long, promise. Just give me some time, please? This is...this is hard stuff..."

We both agreed quickly, as far as I was concerned, she could have all the time she needed. I trusted her, I couldn't *not* after so much, but I knew what it was like to have your world shaken.

"So...let's see, we've got good stuff from one day...how's the checklist doing, Murky?"

Her voice built on each word, growing in strength. Still, that hollow pain sounded in her tone, but she had something to move on with...to concentrate on. Flipping my journal back a few pages, I found the checklist.

"We've got...um...five waterskins, a couple days spare food and six packs of proper water with three RadAways for my illness. Oh and...and parts, but I don't know what you do with them..."

"Not bad for a day..."

"Oh...and...I talked to Protégé..."

Their glares even overrode the lingering pain and emotion from Glimmerlight, who stared at me like I'd gone insane.

"Wait! I mean, I got some information!" I covered for myself hastily, waving my hooves rather too

enthusiastically to the point of having to grab my shoulder in pain. While catching my breath, I explained Protégé's tale of the outer line circle and all the things that dwelt down there. But more specifically, the fact that he might have a map or information on what Red Eye's workers found...

“Well...beasties can't be any more dangerous than trying to simply run at the Wall,” Glimmer spoke in deep thought, still clearly working to keep her mind focussed on planning rather than drifting, “but you're right about that map...”

Thinking for a few seconds, Glimmer eventually seemed to get frustrated at a loss for ideas. She sat back, placing her head in her hooves, taking a few deep breathes.

“Sorry...just...”

“We know.” Caduceus lay a hoof on her shoulders, at least getting a thin smile from her. “Just take your time. Don't feel you need to be all positive okay?”

I chimed forward, the only words I knew being the ones she had told me...

“It's...it's alright to be upset...”

Glancing down to me, her 'little brother', her thin smile grew a little before hugging me tightly. I could feel a tear or two drip on my back.

“I know...thank you, both of you. I...hm, a map won't be easy. Protégé tends to either keep his office locked while he's asleep or guarded when he's away, judging from when I've been pulled up there to check some tech or fix his terminal when it shorts out. If he's still in the building, you can bet it's Ragini on guard...and he *always* locks it upon leaving. I doubt it'll be a cheap rusty one that I could fiddle through either...”

“Brimstone can pick locks...” I saw their glance at me. “Well...he gets by them.”

“I doubt he'd go unnoticed, sweetie...”

“What you need is a distraction.”

Both Glimmer and I turned to Caduceus, but he simply shrugged, looking around himself. Oh no...I knew that voice...

Emerging from the shadows of the room, from an *impossible* angle to have reached without going through any light of our lamp...Barb flowed into being...trotting toward us. I squeaked in terror, pushing back and behind the sofa. Caduceus simply backed off to be beside Glimmer...who at least stood her ground. Even if it was Barb...I imagined he ranked pretty low on her concerns in life right *now*.

“What do *you* want?”

His eyes were staring at me...winking, before finally swivelling to Glimmerlight. If he had any disappointment that she hadn't reacted like I had...he didn't show it. Oh please don't hurt me again...

“I want a lot of things, mare. Some of them beyond my current reach...some of them rather within it...”

Those bright eyes of his foretold all sorts of potential outcomes. His smile would almost have been friendly had it not been for those snakelike eyes that simply promised all sorts of harsher meanings to his words.

“But at this moment, the choice is on you. You need a map for another ill fated escape attempt? Well...I honestly couldn't care if you got out, even if you are working with the traitor...though some of my Shades might not think that way. You're a popular mare with them after a display like that at the food table...I hasten to even imply some of them wouldn't want to ask...”

My stomach turned, threatening to make me vomit at the mere thought. I *hated* raiders...

Glimmerlight may have grinned it off before, but in her more vulnerable state, I could see the pain and fear in her eyes. No doubt Barb saw it too, for he laughed and lounged against the sofa, lifting a hoof as though inspecting it for imperfections.

“But you need a map from Protégé's office...for that you need him out of it in a rush, something to take his attention that he wouldn't bother locking it. Now I happen to want to start something soon myself, get a little

revenge on some of the slavers who killed our own up on the hill.”

Any sense of friendly nature on his face dropped and disappeared on the spot.

“We don't take *kindly* to being resisted. Your time will come, mare, oh yes...but for now...you have an option with us to use our distraction as we...hmm...'end' a few slavers as payback in here to get your precious map. The filly can get you out with his little clearances after he's done the job I want..”

Glimmerlight took a deep breath, trying to stop herself shivering, I betted. The sofa felt all too small to hide behind...I wanted to move for the door, but the shadows promised any number of Shades...

“You want a riot.” Glimmerlight was unusually terse. “You're looking to kick up a proper riot just for petty revenge.”

“Petty to you. We aren't *like* you.” Barb countered harshly. “But we need something the filly can provide, for him to steal the key from outside the door, somewhere we aren't allowed to go. Raiders get watched or chained...the filly doesn't. He helps us get the keys to assure they can't simply lock us up...you get a distraction to sneak up for a map of your precious escape route. Deal's a deal, right?”

Caduceus half snorted nearby. “Why should we work with *raiders*?”

“Because without us, you think you'll be content to wander the metro unguided? Or to try some other method and risk him discovering you? Or perhaps I might just go ahead and *tell* him if you don't agree, you seem to have mistaken me for somepony with honour here, blondey.”

Between Caduceus' offence and myself cowering, Glimmerlight merely maintained a stare at Barb as though afraid to lose track of him. I couldn't blame her.

“Tit for tat, huh? We scratch your back, you stab ours? What kind of guarantee can you give?”

Barb simply laughed, a horrible dry sound like his throat were made of dust.

“None, but we're not the ones wanting out now, are we? Your choice, 'escapees', your choice...you wanna risk it with us? Or you wanna go it alone and die in some stinking hole?”

The three of us cast glances to one another.

“All you're after is a few slavers?”

“Enough to sate my lads for those we lost, half a dozen...we'll drag them in here and do it raider style.”

“Spare me the details...”

Again, those half glances and unspoken arguments flickered between us. Caduceus shrugged...Glimmer was clearly tempted...I wanted nothing to do with this...not with him. Even now I could see him half smiling at me. Eventually, Glimmerlight sighed, turning back to him.

“Give us an hour till Brimstone gets back...we need to talk on this.”

* * *

“Absolutely **not**.”

“Brim, this could be the only way we have! Who else has a full room of encyclopedias and old elements of the past in this damn city that isn't in a damned Ministry? The metro is a *maze* without a map, if we want to stand a chance, we need it!”

The big raider swung around, stomping a hoof so hard I felt the floor vibrate beneath me. I'd stayed back, hiding under the blanket at the confrontation. Brimstone had changed again...like he'd slipped, fallen back into what he once had been while outside. Perhaps it was just his mood after the shift...he'd at least got us some iron bars. I presumed no-pony had even wanted to risk asking why he was taking them...

“Barb is not somepony to do deals with, Glimmer! He is below even the twisted sense of right and wrong raiders normally go by, the moment you've done what he wants...that's it! Deals off, why do you think he put your work to be done first?”

“But we've got *you!* They won't get to us if you're coming with us! You think I don't expect him to try and slip a knife in our back the moment the riot starts? Look...we can pull this off and avoid him at the same time if we just move fast enough and make our own way up to the office. The moment we're through that cage, you just charge in and break a path...even the raiders won't stand in your way, Brim!”

The cargo trolley clattered, panels destroyed as Brimstone's hoof *crushed* it. I just squeaked, backing off and finding myself oddly pushing close to Caduceus. The buck was far too afraid of Brimstone to even stand near the mare he had apparently fallen for.

“We are not going to aid them or become a part of their mad plans! Barb can rot in here for all I care!”

“It's for a better cause in the end, Brim, if we can get *out!* Just get over how you feel about them!”

“They are murderers, Glimmer! Rapists, torturers and looters! You want out, *I* want you out, but not like this! We are not going to help them to sate their insane fucking minds!”

“We don't have any fucking CHOICE, Brim! He's going to do something to us ANYWAY and we might as well take the one that actually helps us!”

I'd not often seen the more fiery side of Glimmerlight that was confined behind her casual flirty humour. But here...I saw her stressed out, ready to snap at somepony.

“I know...they aren't like you. Hell, you saved me from *them*, just like how you saved Murky. But what I mean is that there's no black and white in here anymore, Brim...we don't have the luxury of picking and choosing. Murky's at death's door...the raiders made it clear they want me and they want me *soon*...we have to get out...”

I sat and cradled a sachet of RadAway, sipping away at it for today's relief. But my eyes couldn't leave the pair. Brimstone turned, glaring at me drinking the life-saving liquid.

“What do you think, kid?”

Huh? Me? Why...why did my opinion matter here? Almost spluttering on the RadAway, I glanced at Caduceus to see if Brimstone had meant him. No luck...the attention was square on myself.

Barb terrified me. He and his raiders had already horribly beaten, scared or humiliated me multiple times. I feared them as much as most slavers, if not more so. Brimstone was right...Barb would not hold on to the deal, it'd be up to us to make use of what his raiders were doing. On the other hoof...staring down at the orange sachet in my hooves...I didn't have a huge amount of time remaining...I *needed* out of here. In my heart, mind, soul and body...I had to leave, to feel the joy of escape.

“We need the map...”

Those four words were like falling from a rooftop, feeling your own body casting your life in a direction you don't *want* it to go in, but cannot now stop. Brimstone sighed, snorting to himself and stomping away to the darker parts of the room. Glimmerlight didn't exactly look pleased, just tired.

“I can't let anypony I've hurt with my life stay in here, Brim...if I need to trot in the shadow of those who might hurt me to help save them in the end...” Her voice was quiet, unusually emotional. “Coral Eve doesn't deserve this, as much as anypony doesn't, but to me even moreso. Some...*something* I did helped put her here and I don't know what, Brim. You understand redemption-”

“All I understand is that this will hurt somepony before the end. Barb doesn't throw these things for pointless fun, he's got a plan in mind. The moment I know what it is, regardless of where we are or what we're doing, I'm going to drag you away from it. Map or not. Got it?”

Hesitantly, Glimmer nodded...before turning to speak to no-pony in particular.

“We'll do it...”

The voice only echoed from the shadows...

“Good...”

Whimpering, I just pulled myself back underneath the blanket to pray for our deliverance. I hoped the Goddesses would understand that I just had no choice...no choice at all...

* * *

Planning was awkward, we had been invited to sit among the Shades, where Barb had explained all. Brimstone had sat at the doorway, eyes fixed on anypony who so much as *looked* in our direction.

It quickly became clear that Barb was using this to help solidify his position as leader. Even I could see that if he didn't permit some of these raiders their revenge upon the slavers who had killed their comrades...his popularity would begin to fade. Some raiders lurked at the edges of their own shop cell, a large restaurant outlet stripped of most furniture, sharpening hunks of metal they had magically carved into knives. Others let their horns warm up, sparking and testing throwing pebbles. I saw a dozen hideous rituals of battle...self cutting, blood marking, head-butting and even a quiet warchant in a foreign language I couldn't ever hope to understand.

My role was pivotal, the element that permitted them to not simply be locked in and left to calm down. I was to head out to 'visit Protégé', but steal the key on the way out they would use to lock the cage door. Once it was done, I'd signal to Barb and his raiders who would...well...'do their thing.' Often, I wondered why Barb couldn't use his freaky abilities to get that key. *Surely* he could lockpick, or pickpocket the guard on his way out? I guessed that he didn't like risking himself at the very well lit door...it didn't feel sadistic enough like getting a sick runt to do it for him. Either that or he was still taking an interest in 'developing' my abilities? I dreaded to think what he had in mind for me...I was too sick to resist anyway. Already, my fever was making my head pound. Either that or it was the stress...likely both.

The moment we knew that the guards were distracted, the three of us would move on up into the management corridors, hiding in one room that Brimstone would get open under cover of the riot noise. From there, we'd wait until Protégé passed us and then move on to the office. Hopefully...he wouldn't have locked it, or we'd have to risk Brimstone's method of entry again. Already, I felt a little oddly guilty...stealing from Protégé. I owed him, yet didn't...my thoughts on where he sat as ally or foe were still incredibly conflicted. He'd calm the riot and we'd...well, we'd try and slip back in or simply claim that we ran from it to stay safe. He'd believe me, right?

That was all...get the map, get out...get planning. One step closer to being away from confusing smart ponies, sadistic Masters and frightening raiders...

I'm coming home, mom...I'm sorry for what I need to do to find you but...but I'm coming...

I hope you're as nice as I think you are...

* * *

Glimmerlight, Brimstone and Caduceus waited amongst the shadows of the closest shop cell to the door. The other slaves, sensing a preparation of activity, had began to slowly move to the back, not wanting to risk alerting the guards for fear of raider reprisal. I had seen Coral Eve on the balcony above, glancing down. Most slaves gave her a wide berth, seeming to look up in fear if her horn sparked. The faulty magic clearly caused her pain...but judging by their reactions, she must have been capable of some truly powerful magic on those who angered the bitter mare.

“She never was too good with precise telekinesis. Had to learn how to work as an earth pony for most of her life.” Glimmerlight trotted up behind me, sitting and glancing upward at the pale blue unicorn. “But on the other end of the spectrum, there aren't many ponies who can match the raw power she can throw out, unrefined as it is.”

Somehow, I could relate, I'd had to accept life as a ground pounder without the use of my wings...but the thoughts of what Coral could do if she unleashed that magic already made me shiver. I'd seen LittlePip demonstrate amazing precision *and* power in the Pit...would Coral compare to that?

“I...I hope she'll forgive you...” I wasn't sure why I said it, it's all I could think of. Seeing the sad eyes Glimmerlight stared at her old friend with, I couldn't help but wish they would find a way to become friends

again, only recently had I realised how important that was.

“Me too, Murky...me too. Maybe once we're out of here I'll...I'll find a way to understand what happened...what I did. You, uh...don't think less of me, do you?”

“No! I...I mean, it's sad, upsetting...but you've done too much for me to turn away.”

Her hoof ruffled my mane, letting a smile creep onto her face. “Thanks, Murky...I guess I kinda need to know someony's there for me too sometimes these days...”

Her eyes twitched to the side, away from me to see Coral Eve leave the balcony. She had been staring down at us...

“Right, filly...”

My nerves shuddered even as I watched the mare disappear.

“Time for you to go.” He was behind us...somewhere. I could hear Brimstone watching for him. “We're all waiting, don't mess this up or I won't give them a time limit next time.”

I nodded, meekly, what else could I do? Glimmerlight gave me one more quick hug, Caduceus whispered a 'good luck' and Brimstone simply nodded. Pulling myself up, favouring my injured hoof, I trotted to the cage door.

“You wanting out, runt?” The guard behind it was one of The Master's lot. “Going to see the boss?”

“Y-yes...just going to his o-office...”

“Fine, stand back.”

It was almost routine now, I'd spent a lot of time going to his office lately. Stepping back, the cage door shook while the guard fought with the rusty key in his mouth. Creaking open, the large gateway swung upon its hinges into the plaza. Behind it lay the guardroom, filled with slavers resting, eating or gambling. It must have been an old employee lounge for those on breaks from working the plaza, with a small canteen and numerous tables. Four doors led away from it, one to the main entrance, one to the management offices and the others to goodness knew where in this sprawling complex. I hesitated, deliberately stalling in the gateway as though confused about something. The guard frowned, clipping me over the ear.

“What's the hold up, runt? Get moving!”

The stinging pain shot through me, giving me an excuse to stagger (Well...I didn't have to act too much, that *hurt!*) and fall into him. My hooves fumbled, feeling the key briefly till I could bite it and slip it into a front leg pocket in the tussle. With an offended snarl, the slaver smacked me across the head and lightly bucked me further into the guardroom. My forehead flared with pain, making my eyes water as the scar ached from the impact. The hot pain in my ribs from my illness wasn't helping either...to the point that I let out a horrible cough that echoed from the walls.

I had the key...that cough was the signal...

“Watch where you're stepping! Get out of-”

All hell broke loose.

His voice was cut short by a bloodthirsty roar from within the plaza. Every raider had joined the chorus, singing their lust for violence loud and clear. I knew I was 'on their side', but my blood still turned to ice under the horrible sound. They erupted from the shadows, charging the doorway. The lead raiders frothed, biting their own lips in sheer madness as they outstripped the others. They carried makeshift knives, club-like rocks in magic fields or simply gnashed teeth.

The guard swore colourfully, rushing forward to pull the door closed. The hinges squealed and the metal clanged loudly as it slammed shut. He began fumbling for the key, searching all over himself to get it...but it was too late.

The tidal wave of raiders collided with the doorway. It fired backward, knocking the guard flat to be

trampled over by the rioting ponies. I didn't even hear him scream as I dove aside into the corner to avoid them myself! Guards were perking up, grabbing weapons and calling for aid. Panic spread, leading many to freeze under the savage charge or fumble with the safeties of their weapons.

“Don't let them take the guardroom! Open fire! Fire you bastards, FIRE!”

Finally, shotguns roared, taking the front row of raiders clean off their hooves while two slavers upturned a table and began throwing pistol fire from behind it. Several other raiders pushing through the doorway were twisted around by the heavy shots, collapsing over the corpses of their allies to fall on the concrete. One was killed by his own side when I saw a sharp hoof stomp snap his head. But the raiders had the momentum, charging like ponies possessed into gunfire that would have stayed any other group. The first slaver was leapt on, taking the head off a mare with his rifle even as two others fell upon him. Knives flashed...ponies screamed...blood spilled.

“Get 'em alive! Grab them! Get their guns!”

“Been waiting months for this!”

Cowering in the corner, I could only stick to the shadows and fight the guilt...I'd had a hand in this...been a cause for the bloodshed that was now being unleashed. I owed slavers nothing, I doubted I'd particularly mourn them but...still, I could not help but feel a little wrong about this.

Any conflicting feelings were thrown aside as two rounds whipped into the wall above my head, a slaver was targeting me! Why?! He got little extra chance, a shadow detaching itself from the wall fell upon him, tearing the machine gun away and snapping his neck like a twig. Barb grinned, melting back into the shadows. He was mad...utterly mad...

The raider rush had been aided by his intervention, however. Even as the pony assaulting me had been put down, I saw Barb launch himself among the rest. Distracted, dying to his flickering blades and desperately trying to find the real one as he shifted and created illusions of himself with magic, the slavers could not stop the second wave of raiders as they piled through. Overrun, I saw the slaver guards being knocked out or dragged screaming back into the plaza. Other raiders grabbed their weapons, opening fire down any corridor that offered resistance or became a route of guard reinforcements.

With the second wave ran Brimstone, hurling raiders aside as much as any slaver to clear a path for Glimmerlight and Caduceus. Only now did I leave my hiding spot to dash up to them, my heart was pumping as gunfire and warcries echoed around in the guardroom. I had to dive to the side and dodge around the raiders who ran rampant in all directions. The guardroom was still a centre of violence...but the raiders had taken it. Brimstone grabbed me in his teeth, hurling me onto his back. Barging through a group of three raiders, knocking them into various tables, he set a running pace for the closest doorway that led to Protégé's office. Soon, we had left the bloodbath behind us, replacing it with nothing but howls and shouts that reverberated down corridors and haunted the atmosphere of the Mall. Barb's lot were savage beyond compare, I had only seen them amidst a proper battle with Rangers and griffins, but here, in this cramped environment, they ruled supreme.

Having been dropped from Brimstone's back, I led the way as much by habit of knowing the directions to Protégé's office better. We crossed junctions and galloped upstairs, hearing the commotion picking up all across the Mall. Eventually, we came to the a large room of desks and filing cabinets...not far now...

Without warning, my ears perked up before I could even acknowledge the sound.

“Slavers!”

They charged into the room from the opposite end, missing us only by my audio warning that led us all to duck into cover, Brimstone was back out the door, keeping his sheer size away from sight. There were a good half dozen of them, heavily armed and moving cautiously.

“Everypony spread out, look for *any* slaves that got free! Shoot on sight!”

Squeaking in fear, I looked from side to side, there were a few other doors we could use to make it there, but while I might have been able to sneak my way up, four ponies (including Brimstone) would never manage

it...

Caduceus glanced up at them, then back at Glimmer and I. The nurse took a few breaths, clearly gauging the distance in his mind.

“Can you two find a way to get there yourselves?” He whispered at what felt deafening to me, of course...he didn't know my hearing. Glimmerlight thought for a second, before nodding.

“Be careful, Caddy...”

The nurse breathed out, gathering his energy, but grinned at the sudden nickname.

“Mom always did say I'd do something stupid for a mare someday...”

He launched himself up and away toward the next door, attracting their attention immediately, casting us a quick glance telling us to *get moving*.

“STOP THERE!”

A shot flew past him before Caduceus galloped through a doorway. Glimmerlight turned back to Brimstone.

“Go with him, keep him safe!”

“No, you are-”

“Not the time, Brim! You can't sneak like Murky and I can, go help Caduceus! He matters to *me*, alright?”

Snarling, but obeying, the huge raider nodded and stormed off, bucking a chair so hard at the slavers I saw it knock one off his hooves to almost do a backflip before landing on his head. The warlord disappeared through the door, bellowing for Caduceus to keep up or get strung up. Glimmerlight and I hunkered down, letting the slavers rush past our hiding place beneath the desks before glancing to one another. I was breathing hard, scared and out of my depth. The Mall felt much more dangerous now, filled with trigger happy slavers and bloodlusting raiders that could come from any one of its maze-like corridors. I hadn't realised how...how oddly safe I'd felt there compared to the outdoor areas.

“You and me, Murky, classic duo, eh?”

How could she grin at a time like this?!

“Yeah...yeah...”

“Come on, hun, lets get this over with.”

We took our time, sneaking around to the far door that I knew led to Protégé's office. The stairs behind it took us up the final level into the management areas of the Mall. The moment we arrived, I could hear shouting, demands, orders and the clatter of hooves and talons. Protégé's fluid and commanding tone was unmistakable amongst it. Glancing around, I spotted a cleaning cupboard, which Glimmerlight and I hurried into. Leaving the door just ajar as it had been before, I saw my master charging down the corridor, pursued by Ragini and at least five bodyguard ponies. Oddly, Mosin was with them as well.

“How the hell did this happen? The doorway can close over before anypony gets close!”

“I don't know, sir! No-pony in the guardroom is around, they've taken it!”

“Well don't wonder for now, just get every guard on duty to cover the corridors and *contain* this riot, then we'll see what to do once we've killed their momentum. Get somepony over to Stern to request griffins if things go south, but get it sorted *before* they arrive! I don't want a griffin raid killing all the slaves who aren't rioting! Mosin, make sure your armoury is secure, if they get there we're done for! Move it!”

Protégé was direct and confident, even if his voice had betrayed a slight lack of calm. This was his pet project, an attempt to give slaves a chance under Red Eye's missions...I could only imagine how it felt to see it in jeopardy again so soon after the Stable. We waited till they had passed, before Glimmerlight poked her

head out.

“It's clear...”

Following her now, we crept into the corridor once again. He had sure seemed in a rush...I hoped that included the potentially unlocked door.

Unfortunately, over the clatter of their procession...even I didn't hear the two slavers that came up the corridor behind and spotted us trotting about...

“STOP, SLAVES!”

“Run, Murky!” Glimmerlight took off, half pulling me as I fought with my instincts to obey the harsh command and root to the spot. Half dragged and eventually properly galloping, we tore off. The two mares behind us shouted, drew guns and gave chase. Turning a corner to avoid the incoming fire we knew was about to start, I quickly realised our mistake. We couldn't run...not in our condition. Glimmerlight was limping, but I was effectively hobbling still after my beating earlier, moving at little more than a canter. I could see Protégé's office up ahead...we needed to distract them! But I couldn't find the information without Glimmer, so she couldn't draw them away and I couldn't outrun them like Caduceus or Brimstone could...

There were a few doors before the one into Protégé's office...we couldn't simply hide, they'd search! The only other route was downstairs, right back into the maelstrom that was erupting below us.

Wait...

I hopped up, bucking the door to the stairway as hard as I could, before directing Glimmer and myself to hide in one of the old office rooms. The stairway door I had kicked swung wide open...banging against the wall and swinging on loose hinges just as the slavers came around the corner.

“There! See the door? They went downstairs!”

“I see it!”

Hoofing it past our hiding spot, I heard them speed off down the stairwell...before I finally started breathing again. Glimmer's hoof stroked my back.

“Quick thinking, Murky...all I had idea wise was to confuse them with interpretive dance, but I wasn't sure if you knew how to foxtrot...”

Indeed, I had no idea how foxes even trotted, I'd *never* seen one. For now though, I just rolled my head and peered back outside. The corridor was empty now, Protégé's door sitting slight ajar...yes!

Without waiting, I cantered out, half tripping in my rush over my injured hoof. Staggering, I felt Glimmerlight help me up and push me onwards, we had to get in and out quickly! His office was as messy as ever, a minefield of books. I didn't worry about avoiding them, he'd *know* if we took anything, so we had to mess this place up, make it look like some mad raiders tore through it!

The thought made me a little guilty...destroying Protégé's room...

“Plush living for those with the power, eh, Murky? Fancy seat and a terminal with picture capability? Not often you find these ones.” Glimmerlight trotted around the huge desk, marvelling at the cushy chair and various parts of pre-war furniture while casually knocking over a couple benches and a small table with a pile of old picture books. Sitting in his chair, she lounged back and glanced at his terminal. “Wonder if there's anything worthwhile on this...maybe the patrol schedules outside the Wall and anypony we should know not to trust...hey, you think he has any good porn on this thing?”

My jaw *dropped*, just staring at her. She was insane! How...how could she...

“Aww...you're blushing! What, you looking for any more 'reference material' like those hot magazines you brought back?”

I felt my entire face burn red. She...she'd found them?! Oh dear...

“I...uh...j-just for...pegasus anatomy...”

“Certainly your kind of anatomy, Murky.” She just winked, turning back to the terminal while I tried to avoid the temptation to simply go and find a raider to end my embarrassment.

She went to work, tapping away madly with both magic and hooves, biting her lip in concentration.

“Besides...one of those poses you drew certainly helped get Caduceus to pay attention...”

Oh come on...have mercy! I hid my face under my hooves.

“Hah! Oh you really are too easy to make blush. Anyway...you take a look around for any brochures of city maps or something, they might have the metro layout on them. Don't worry about being messy, the madder the better to cover our tracks.”

Nodding, feeling myself sweating with the mixture of fear and sheer embarrassment, I moved across and started tearing open a filing cabinet, letting the drawers just fall to the floor where I could scavenge through them. I didn't know the words of the maps, but I could look for anything like a map and check it with Glimmerlight should I need to. Pictures of the FunFarm, skyport and Mall were strewn on various old pieces of faded cardboard, all too specific...

“Got it! Haha! Password, 'Unity', of course! You really are too easy, Protégé...now let's take a look.” She pumped a hoof in celebration, before diving back in. “Find anything?”

“Just tourist leaflets...” I muttered quietly, pulling myself up and near enough lifting my rear hooves off the ground to pull myself in to look at the higher drawers. “I think...I think maybe in-”

The entire filing cabinet fell. Squealing in shock, I rolled away before it crushed me. Papers flew out of it, exploding into the air and dropping all over and around me. My head was buried beneath a small pile in itself, that fell off my head when I stood up and shook my head. Oh...Protégé wasn't going to like this...

Nerves were beginning to make me shake...I could hear hooves stamping all around the Mall, gunshots were still roaring down below alongside rolling battles that seemed to change location. Protégé's guards clearly were struggling to contain the raiders...

Just keep pushing, Murky...it's gotten you this far. Upping to my hooves, I began pulling scrapbook after tome off the shelves, casting a quick look before letting them fall below me.

“Right! I think I've gotten into the admin files, geez, this is as disorganised as his office...the patrol schedule seems to update every month so I'll download this one to your PipBuck and hope we get to use it before they change the schedule again. Now what's this....oh!”

Pawing through an old scrapbook containing tickets and vouchers from Old Equestria, I looked up.

“I've found his journal...”

My mouth seemed to wordlessly move...what *could* I say? Protégé's journal? I wondered if I could get some answers from it...but we *really* didn't have the time!

“The most recent one...journal entry of the third year of my service, day seventy...”

Glimmer clearly thought differently.

“...today marked another 'success' on the road to the restoration of Fillydelphia, we located and searched another of the vaunted Stables. However it is my abject displeasure to say that we lost far too many ponies in the process. Master Red Eye's plans are coming to fruition, I understand the need for this hard sacrifice...I only wish I could make it an easier process for the ones who are willing. To this end...I continue to petition for a reward scheme to be initiated for the workers that prove themselves.”

It was everything he had told me before...but this was not from his mouth, this was his personal records. It meant he likely was telling the truth! Glimmerlight continued...

“However, with regards to my search for another who understands, I am becoming increasingly convinced that I may have found the correct pony at last. Master Red Eye permitted me to speak directly of my ideas and intentions and he was supportive of the plans. His will is that I need only keep him alive, should his own grand intentions of Unity not provide the pegasus he wishes. Personally...I hope this does not come to pass,

Unity bonds us all, but I would rather see Murk be handed the freedom he wants, not the freedom that we might provide. I see too much of myself in him, too much of the past's reflection before the freedoms of today. I feel...indentured, as though it is my right to help him as I might. He doesn't have to do it alone."

Glimmer read it in a slightly monotone voice, concentrating on it herself. She glanced up at me sitting nearby, as though she was my master. Her mouth opened and shut as a gunshot roared with a heavy calibre below us, before finally gathering her words again.

"A plan involving pegasi for Unity? What the hell is this? At least Protégé seems to want to protect you. He really seems to like you, Murky. You're a wonderful little buck, but I can't say I can understand what caused it from a slave master..."

Why indeed. Protégé always seemed to just 'get' me...to know what I needed to hear or how to influence me into doing things. Why? Why all the attention? Did he just feel sorry for me?

"Maybe he's got a crush on you?"

The paper I'd picked up in my mouth to investigate sprayed from my mouth in sheer shock. I turned my head toward her, simply agape at the suggestion. She was just grinning at the terminal.

"Aww...dammit, I was hoping I'd get another blush from you, find out for sure if you're just being shy and hiding in the barn or not."

She...she thought...oh boy...

I glanced away from her, quickly trotting to work on the next set of drawers, concentrating on the work. I heard her giggle and go back to her work on the terminal, looking for anything of use, lifting my PipBuck from my saddlebag with her magic to load the schedule onto. Protégé had plans for me that weren't for Red Eye? He had said by his side before...did he want a personal slave or something that wouldn't cause problems? Pulling the full drawer out and shifting papers aside, I finally spotted a small group of booklets bearing images of an underground train system. Aha! This would distract her from her crazy theories about me...

I trotted up, pushing them up beside her, where she merely grinned and nodded.

"This is it! Inner and outer circle sub-station maps! Now...I've been trying to get the underground plans here that we can overlay over the official map...that'll let us see where the tunnels are."

"H-how long? We kinda need to go soon...I don't like stealing from Protégé..."

"We're only borrowing...you can bring them back or something...but *these* I am stealing back."

She nodded at the three orbs sitting on their holder. Protégé still had the spell orbs resting on his desk from where they had been recovered on Glimmer's retrieval. My friend shoved them in her own robe pockets before glancing back at the terminal

"Here's an odd entry...he's talking about the time he first met you..."

W-what?

"It goes...I had that same dream last night, that of Equestria. Of green fields and intelligent ponies who share fun and peace...yet every day I wake to the horrors that my generation must inflict to bring it about. I question, I worry...but Master Red Eye calms me, assuring me and helping me still. He changed my life...gave me purpose and a reason to live for the future...to restore the past. Every day, past the guilt and pain of directing these missions I see some good emerge...hear the children at the hotel laugh and play...we can do it. We must, I *will* see Equestria for real...to see the sun and the sky with my own eyes..."

This was his dreams and wishes...all laid bare. Somehow...I began to see him more as a pony, less of a simple figure of authority...

"GO GO!"

We dived behind the desk as the voice bellowed down the hallway.

“They've broken in! Get them!”

Shit! Glimmerlight exchanged a worried glance with me, quickly clutching a heavy book to propel with her telekinesis.

“What?! How did they get by the barrier? We trained for that!”

“That lot are fucking intense! Every time we hold them off they just sneak around and ambush us! Now get moving or they'll outflank the main armoury!”

“Oh fuck...they got Hollowpoint didn't they? Please tell me they didn't get him!”

“I don't know! Just move! GO! They're behind us!”

Gunfire thudded into the door, splintering the oak and sending books through the thin wall flying across the room. We crouched to the floor, hearing them panic and run. One yelp of pain and a soft thump was all it took to signal that one pony had been struck and collapsed outside the door. I could hear that much. The running gunfight spread down the hallway before fading away. Somepony was *really* determined to get them to ignore the office...or they just didn't know. I doubted raiders were brought here much.

We finally breathed out as they passed...but it didn't speak well for the ongoing riot outside. Glimmerlight and I exchanged glances, before she took a breath, looked up and began to continue the diary entry.

“Right...last entry then we go, where was I...ah, here we are.”

She coughed into her hoof, before continuing, this was wasting time...we were risking being discovered, but this had hooked my interests now.

“But to see the sky, to green fields and wondrous world, I must first begin to find those who would share in the same dream that Master Red Eye gave to me. To be able to give all of myself, just as Master Red Eye has, to be prepared to do if it rescues but one pony who I believe holds my dreams of a better world for himself as well. The pegasus...he attempted an escape last night. An impossible task in his condition, but that is what stands out to me. As such, it has put a large drain on my resources to have been able to claim him, post-escape attempt. This poor pegasus has cost me dear...more than I could have perhaps afforded in these trying times of inner conflict, but the others are sure to notice the opportunity to gain such a prize themselves. One of the few remaining pegasi.”

If Grindstone or Shackles had gotten me...oh Celestia save me...

“I had to pull a great many strings and even call in a few back door favours...if word of this ever got out it would be very troublesome, but I cannot permit him to be taken and killed...I simply can't. If Grindstone were to get a hold of him, I could not forgive myself, he has already placed a rather large bid to swing the odds for reclamation in his favour, to attain a pegasus. That cannot happen, it would be a crime against Master Red Eye's ideals if I were to turn my back on his plight. I am the student of his ideology, it is my duty to Equestria that I might save at least one pony...even if it is to cast him into two years of the hell I know all too well. He thought to escape...he can do it, I know he can.

No matter the cost, I need to bring him to the Mall.”

We sat in silence for a few seconds as Glimmerlight read through the list that came after. Weapons, chems, straight up bits in huge amounts and even some high end pre-war technologies. All of it he had expended as trade to get ponies to look the other way and avoid me an execution...

...he had given up so much for me before I'd even known his name...

“Woah...” Glimmerlight breathed the words lightly, “that's, uh...pretty intense stuff. He really believe he's doing well for everypony. But if he cares so much...why turn you away on the rooftops? Why shoot you down?”

“He said he couldn't...that he couldn't permit me to break Red Eye's rules.”

Glimmerlight simply sat and stared at me, then the computer, before sighing.

“The answers are probably here...but we just don't have the time, we've got what we came for and none of

this will matter once we're gone. He's a kind pony in a bad place...twisted as he is to believe Red Eye...but we don't owe him. We'll make our own way in life. So...ready to head out, Murky?"

I didn't reply, instead I was simply wondering about him. That eyepiece glowed in my mind...the student of Red Eye himself, his protégé who bore all the authority and willpower to dominate the wastes. But take it away and I couldn't help but just see a lonely pony searching for those he felt would wish to understand him in response...

But then he would send me to a Stable...or into a Ministry...something I'd done simply because he asked me to. Had I done that for the protégé or the pony? He had shot me. Somehow, I could only see pain in my future with him if I were to launch myself into his great game.

She glanced at me, before letting that grin fade and patting my shoulder.

"Hey, Equestria to Murky...we gotta go! I know it's all confusing for you about him, but we'll keep you safe, alright? I doubt he wants to harm you, he's always done well by ponies even before you came along. Don't worry about any plans, we'll be gone long before they occur, okay?"

"Okay..."

How could she be so supportive and calm, so jokey and carefree even amidst the chaos? Even after her world had been shattered and drawn bare by Coral? Could she have used her memory orb since? I couldn't tell anymore...I simply wished I could be as decisive. But then, she'd had a life of free will to choose and think. I was left with but a week or so to learn to think for myself.

"Come on, Murky...let's stop minds wandering and just head on." She wandered toward the door, checking out carefully as we heard the sounds of ponies down the corridor, but they were moving away.

Unfortunately they were also in the direction we needed to go...instead we trotted alongside the windowed corridor in the opposite direction. We needed another route back, but with so much stuff happening all over the Mall how could we know the right direction?

The corridors were not empty, we hid, dove into rooms and ducked as rounds were fired off both above and below us. The Shades had lived up to their name!

We passed an observation station, bearing two raiders wrestling with a single stallion. Sacred Celestia! The riot had spread up here! Growls and grunts of pain and exertion sounded from the room when we passed, as gunfire on *this level* sounded out behind us. What was Barb doing? He said it was only to get a few of them! I hadn't even thought of what he intended to do with the consequences...likely he didn't care so long as he had somepony to take the fall...

I shrieked as a thick glass window looking inwards to the building pinged from bullets attempting to fire at us. It stared down into the plaza from an odd angle. The shots had been strays, fired by raiders and slavers fighting in wickedly brutal close quarters atop the balcony above the cage door. Stopping only briefly, we glanced in to see a few slaves running about on the plaza floor, some helping others or hiding away. They must have been terrified to have been stuck within all this...

Never again...I would never work with raiders again, it was too horrible and guilt filled...

The corridor led to a larger room with multiple steel doors taller than three ponies and often double sided. Already we could hear significant sounds of conflict behind us, prompting the escape to simply find someplace to hide and let it quieten down...Protégé would understand...

"Storage, this place should be-"

Very quickly, two familiar voices shouted down an adjoining corridor.

"Keep up!"

"I'm trying!"

Both of us twisted as we heard the sound of our friends. Storming out of another doorway into the storage area, Brimstone Blitz hammered his way in, closely followed by Caduceus. The latter looked absolutely

exhausted. Seeing us, Brimstone rounded off, nodding a greeting. Hooves were smeared in blood...

“Did you get what we need?”

Glimmerlight tapped her saddlebag and motioned toward my own bag containing the PipBuck.

“Yeah! All there, patrols as well, if we take less than a month it'll be all we need!”

Caduceus leaned against the wall, breathing hard.

“Sounds...good...phew, less running though? Geez...”

Glimmerlight grinned at him, before turning back to the steel doors.

“There'll be a lot of running to do before the end, no doubt. But we need to survive this first! Damn it, Barb's taking this a few steps too far, isn't he? The entire place is in chaos! We'll hide in here, it's the storage area, right? Well, might as well use the opportunity! We can take stuff from storage and sneak it back in through the madness! I don't think I wanna go through that yet anyway...”

Brimstone nodded, but grumbled as he cast his eyes back to the corridors we could hear screaming from down. Somepony was wailing in pain...crying for their mother...

Oh sweet Luna...

“I did tell you...but he'd have tried this on his own somehow even without you. I'd be surprised if it weren't the things I taught him. We're not going near it, we're no doubt acceptable targets now. The main store room is in here...I've worked it a few times, get what you need and let's go to ground inside it before anypony comes back here. No arguments, we're heading to the old offices to lurk in rather than here, they *will* come here soon.”

He gruffly stomped over to the largest of the entrances and shoved open the heavy double door. He had to lift himself up for the leverage and strained against the heavy doors. Grinding on the floor with an intensely deafening sound...they finally slid open enough to see beyond...

Woah...behind it lay much more than I had ever thought could be inside this building! A colossal room, piled high with boxes, moveable cages and thick pillars that stretched out and out. It must have been at least the size of the plaza, length and width ways anyway. Made with heavy bricks and a stone floor, it was clearly not meant for much but simple storage, but amidst the old crates lay piles and bags of newer wasteland items that had been dumped here. To one side lay an office, presumably to act as a kind of quartermaster in the old days which judging by the items strewn around still had the same purpose. It had a large cage built around the walls to keep it safer, although the door was open anyway...possibly the lock was even broken from the way it simply hung there. But I could see masses of huge lockboxes inside it...a safe room for the slavers' personal effects? No-pony was present to ask.

“Now this is what I'm talkin' about...think we might get weapons in here?”

Brimstone wandered in, flanked by Caduceus who seemed rather in awe of the sheer scale.

“Perhaps...sometimes they throw items in here Mosin doesn't want by his 'standards.' But this is lucky...I've brought crates in here for them before, follow me, I know the way to some better stuff.”

As a full group, we galloped on into the massive stock room. We passed pillars piled high with shelves, bins filled with thousands of plastic straps and large cardboard cut out advertisements. Rotten food leaked from the occasional crate while the random piles of possessions taken from slaves were haphazardly piled. I could still hear the battle going on below, an odd sense of separation coming over me as I realised how little we'd been involved in it. Who was winning? Who had died?

I caught myself hoping that Protégé was alright...

It took us a good five minutes of wandering in the wide room to find the boxes Brimstone seemed most interested in. He dragged one off before nodding.

“Right, here we are, get digging whilst I get these open.”

Brimstone began searching in a very specific pile, while we spread out. Five minutes of hectic scavenging passed, punctuated only as we heard further passings of ponies outside that whooped or cried out orders. No...this was no battle, it was just illogical madness and violence with neither side willing to back down and say 'that's it! Enough!'

I found plenty of cloth and fabric in black bags, likely stripped from slaves as they were brought in. Taking out that which I couldn't use, I tied the back to the opposite side of my torso from my saddlebag. I could sew up wasteland clothes for everypony! Glimmerlight sorted out containers and canteens from a chest full of them while I saw Caduceus rather unwillingly picking his way through the dismal comments of somepony's bloodied saddlebag.

Tossing everything we found into the middle of the floor, we soon had a pile of random bits and bobs. I found some new red thread which went into my fleece pockets. Digging a little further netted me a lantern and some bandages. Behind me, the pile was growing larger as clothing, tools and even a couple old watches were tossed on it. No doubt Glimmer wanted to repair them. Brimstone was still ripping open boxes with increasing fervour whilst Caduceus was being a little *too* picky...that'd be a Tenpony born pony for you...

“Oooh! Now...this I could get on board with...”

It was Glimmerlight, Caduceus and I both looked up to find her *strutting* nearby to us...wearing striped pink and light blue socks on all four hooves. Leaning over to us, she batted her eyelashes and wiggled a little, posing over a box with her torso bent inwards.

“What'ya think, boys?”

Caduceus blushed fiercely, eyes going wide at the alluring pose. I saw him shift a little uncomfortably, mouth trembling a bit. His eyes were flickering back and forth across her...somehow the clothing seemed to...*emphasise* the rest of her...

“Wow...um...uh...”

“L...L...”

My own stammering had joined him. I wasn't attracted to Glimmerlight due to her age over me. That and I saw her more like a sister...but I couldn't deny that...that...um..

I *really* wanted her to pose in them that I could draw her....

...oh *my*...

Spotting Caduceus' blushing, she only grinned madly and wiggled her flanks before hopping off the box and wandering past him back to the pile, drifting her tail across his chin.

“If you kids are *done*, you can either fuck on the floor and get it over with or get back to working before some fucking raider does it *for* you!”

Brimstone was terse, reprimanding us harshly with a ferocious glance up from his own work. Caduceus sobered up, shaking his head and diving back into the piles of old bags. Glimmerlight just huffed and blew her straggled mane from her face. Even with all the dirt and grime that matted her...she could still somehow look as good as she did through those eyes alone...

“Fine, fine, *granddad*, but I think we've got about as much as we can carry...no real weapons-”

The weapons crashed onto the floor. Brimstone had dragged them clear at last. A set of brass hooves, sharpened on the edges and almost six inches thick off the ground, they weighed enough that I saw them chip the floor. One of them was wrapped in chain, holding a wicked hook ready to throw. A shoulder brace with serrated edges clattered down whilst a mouth knife with two blades on either side thumped and span.

They were bloodstained so deeply I almost mistook them as simply red coloured...

Caduceus looked at them intently, almost in horror.

“These are sick...just brutal...there are-”

“Mine.” Brimstone spoke softly, glancing at them. “Not the type of thing Mosin takes...nor this...”

Reaching in, a colossal suit of leather and metal armour was drawn out. Asymmetrical, patched and bulletholed, it looked heavy and unmistakably adorned in the same marks that Brimstone wore upon his coat. Only these were painted across the dull metal in red...I dreaded to think how...

“Woah...” Glimmerlight struggled, failing entirely to lift one of the brass hooves in her magic, “weighty kit...”

“Decades of slaughter were all this suit of equipment permitted, Glim...all spearheaded by one symbol.”

His hooves reached into the crate, slowly drawing out one more item. I trotted around for a better look, before whimpering in fear.

A dragonhead looked back at me, crafted of scrap brass and iron into a fearsome mix of mask and helmet. Horns were welded upon its brow from some great wasteland creature, while chainmail fell across the back of the skull plate like a crest to lie across the back. It looked mean...lethal and filled with the promise of one thing.

Carnage.

“The great dragon Brimstone...it terrorised Hoofington during the war, brought the name into infamy across the wasteland. I brought it back to haunt ponies once again through my actions. To spread the word...‘Brimstone terrorises the lands once again.’ Oh it worked...it worked well, makes you wonder if the name will ever mean anything else...”

Brimstone...Blitz, sat holding the helmet, staring into its eyes like it were an old enemy...a long defeated foe. His own brow narrowed, nearly scowling at it like some savage intimidation contest. The dragonhead merely glowered back through that metallic visage. Eventually he spoke again, not taking his eyes away from it.

“Take the stuff to the front and check the lockboxes...I’ll join you in a minute...”

“O-okay...” I backed away from the colossal pony, only noticing after a second I was trying to remain stealthy through sheer force of habit when scared. But...but it was Brim...why was I scared?

It had almost become a joke. ‘It’s Brim.’ Very quickly I began to remember *why* I should be scared of this pony...

The other three of us lifted what we could (or rather, they lifted most of it and I dragged a bag along the floor with my teeth), leaving him to his thoughts and old elements. Glimmerlight had lain a hoof on his shoulder and patted it gently before moving...he hadn’t reacted. The five minute walk back to the entrance was quiet...oddly quiet even, like the battle had ended around here. Far away I could hear the occasional pot shots. Had the riot been contained?

“Is...can we trust him?” Caduceus rounded on Glimmerlight, speaking quietly. She only nodded grimly.

“He’s saved me and Murky more times than I can count. He’s trying, Caddy...he’s trying. But it’s not easy...giving up something that controlled your thoughts and directions for an entire lifespan...”

Yeah...it really wasn’t...

“I dunno, Glimmer...I know of the things he did. One of the students under Helpinghoof before me went out to help Ponyville. I can trust you if you say so...but I don’t think I’ll ever feel right around that stallion.”

“That’s alright, hun...truth be told I think something’d be wrong if you did. Once we get out of here...I’ll try and convince him not to come back. A new life, to create somewhere...that’d be better than any penance in here to redeem himself. Now...let’s just get into this office and get what we need. I don’t like how quiet it’s got...”

It was a locker room, filled with various lockboxes bearing written words with green paint. Many of the larger lockers at the back were controlled by terminals resting beside them, or at least, I assumed that was what they were for. I trotted in between the two larger ponies either side of me...feeling distinctly out of

place in all this. I could help, but as usual, I just felt more like a tag-along than an actual 'very important pony' to all this.

“Huh, now *this* is interesting...” Glimmerlight wandered further in, staring at the lock boxes.

“Turnlock...Baton Mane...these are the names of slavers, it must be a saferoom for their belongings.”

There were dozens of them, all secured with padlocks. Testing them with a hoof I found them strong and well made, likely new from Fillydelphia's industry. Well...we couldn't get into them but...the terminals for the higher ranks, perhaps? Glimmerlight certainly seemed to think so, for she was perusing along them.

“Silent Cord...Ragini...all the more important ponies and slavers in here...oh...”

She stopped, staring at one in particular, rusted and dented, it seemed stronger than any.

“...Shackles...”

I stepped back, whimpering...no...no we shouldn't be here...why was she looking at it like that? No good could come of this...he'd know...he'd know somehow...I was the thief and *I* didn't like this...

“Glimmer...I don't think we should...”

“No...we need what we can get and that bastard deserves it to have something stolen, he'll think it's any of the raiders or something. Let's take a look...”

“Yeah,” agreed Caduceus, “strip it out, I've dealt with too many of his 'victims' to care about any rights he once possessed.”

Her magic grabbed the terminal, lowering the keyboard to begin work upon it. Chewing her lip, she focussed all her attention upon the terminal while I lay against another lockbox watching my friend work. Password after password, try after try. It beeped and blooped as she came closer or failed. I could hear some ponies begin to run by outside, calling out for their friends beside the shouts of somepony determined to get everypony out of hiding and on the hunt for 'rogue slaves'. Raiders were loose in the building freely? Oh no...we couldn't stay too long.

“Long damn password...come on...”

Caduceus began using the sink to clean some of the bandages he'd found, apparently favouring a little irradiation over infected dirt. I rooted around in the other lockers, opening any loose cupboards to find little but some floor cleaner and buckets. Maybe I could make a helmet...

“Aha! Getting there! Three words...three words...”

Her voice died away, glancing across at me before narrowing her eyes at me when I turned, wearing a bucket on my head. Blinking, I just looked back at her and tried to smile. Helmet! Right? Stop my head getting hurt more!

“Um...to stay safe?” I tried grinning wider. I saw Caduceus slap a hoof to his face, that blonde mane flopping over it.

Glimmerlight just laughed, shaking her head.

“Sorry, Murky...I doubt that's going to work.”

Aww...but the handle even fitted under my chin...

She paused...staring at me for a few seconds, before returning to typing with a suddenly sullen face. Why the emotion change? Slipping the bucket from my head (it smelled anyway...) I trotted closer.

“Glimmer...?”

Tap tap tap beep!

“Got it...” She simply muttered, sighing.

“What was the password? Three words, right?”

I pressed closer, as though I could actually read it, she began flicking through screens quickly, almost robotically.

“You...you don't wanna know...let's just get this open.”

With a hiss the door slid open on the thick locker, Glimmerlight stepping back and suddenly giving me a tight hug. What was that for? I knew I was still a little upset or she maybe still needed comforting over Coral beyond the bluster and humour but...

Inside there was a good few items of his possession. Multiple healing potions immediately caught my eye sitting beside a thick folder. There were spare clothes (ew...) and numerous sizes of shackles at the bottom and a couple of apple shaped grenades. Glimmer's magic drew the healing potions from the locker, immediately pushing them to me.

“Drink, come on, you need them. He's hurt you enough, let's steal some life back.”

I couldn't touch them...they were *his*...

“Murky, come on! Rebel a little!”

My hoof reached out, before hesitating and stuttering on the spot before flying back.

“I'm...I'm sorry...I can't do things against him, y-you don't steal from your M-Mas-”

“LittlePip would...”

She would...

That did it, reaching forward, I downed one potion, then the other, offering the remaining half to Glimmerlight, she needed some too after all. A tingling surged through my body, tightening the loose wounds and clearing my skull of a headache I'd forgotten I had. Breathing out slowly, tasting the odd berry flavour of the healing potions, I felt the pain gradually fade from my body...oh that felt goood...

My shoulder...my chest...they felt more *whole*, finally a full and proper healing potion to bring me back to capability. My right hoof even dulled from pain a little...even if I knew it wouldn't particularly heal. That needed time and more attention from Caduceus. He was checking me over, nodding with approval as he sensed most of my wounds beginning to soften or fade.

Chugging her own one quickly, (Did she drink alcohol like that? Geez!) Glimmerlight glanced into his locker again, floating out the grenades to me.

“Throw them in your saddlebag, you never know, might give you something to placate Barb. I'm gonna take a look at this...”

The folder floated up to her face, opening the musty pages as she began reading through. Stuffing the explosives into my bag, I twitched my ears, hearing another group rush by the doorway. We really needed to get in and get it dealt with now before it calmed down...

But Glimmerlight's face had gone pale.

“...it's a list, all ponies he's had and the way they died in Fillydelphia. He *records* this shit...sick *bastard!* Lead Head...death from exhaustion. Fluffymane...whipped until she bled out. Jelly Bean...left in stocks for trying to escape.”

Caduceus swore, the first time I had ever heard the healer earth pony do so with such crude conviction, his normally gentlecolt tone of Tenpony was so prevailing. I could agree though...this was *beyond* wrong.

“There's *so many*, he's been doing this for years, just taking ponies and breaking them, destroying them until there's nothing left or they snap. He doesn't *care* about what they do! Wait...”

She flipped a few more pages, I began to see one column of the tables cease to be filled in.

“The ones still listed...Clockwork...Heather Hay...”

She paused.

“...Sunny Days...”

I felt my bottom lip tremble...please...please please be okay till....till we could, I don't know...

“Hey, Murk? You alright, buddy?” Caduceus held me still with a hoof, noticing that my hooves had been quaking at the knees. That could be me sometime....oh so easily me...just another name...another *number* on a list...

Please...please Goddesses if you *ever* have listened to my pleas for salvation and deliverance listen to me now...

Glimmerlight continued flicking through, her face twisted in disgust. Eventually, snapping it shut, her magic hurled it roughly back into the locker and slammed the entire thing shut again.

“*Bastard*. Born slaver...just wants control, ownership...like it's his only fucking purpose. I'll bet he only gets kept around because he can keep the raiders in line.”

Or work with them...it still confused me why Barb was doing this and threatening his position with The Master. Oh well...his mistake. Let The Master take him.

Caduceus prodded Glimmerlight with a hoof, nodding his head toward the door. “Come on, let's just get all this stuff out and into one of the less obvious doorways in the corridors. Packing time before anypony comes along. Nodding as well, I trotted out with him, Glimmerlight pausing only to buck The Master's locker harshly, breaking the lock and jamming it shut. It wasn't often I had seen her angry...but the thought of so many ponies not living the free will she loved so much...

We spoke little, gathering the biggest bags and stuffing clothing and tools into them. It felt oddly good...taking so much stuff. Like a huge rush of fear and satisfaction that pleased the little thieving mindset I'd come to listen to lately. Listening out, I heard little more than those sporadic gunshots from the same direction. Even I could theorise that it was a point of proper defence finally set up...likely that was Protégé's influence at work...

“Hand me that bag!”

“Okay, okay, can I get those screwdrivers? Keep them with these hammers...”

“Fine, you got any old wires?”

“Nah...”

I stopped as they worked. I had put some clothes together...but my intellect didn't extent to wasteland preparation...instead I simply sat and concentrated on listening. At least I could be an early warning pony...

I heard trotting from far off...the same gunshots...a brief three round burst...a cry of pain...

...trotting nearby...

“Quiet!” I hissed, reaching out to stop Glimmerlight's hoof from moving any further. We froze...

The trotting came closer...multiple ponies...

“Hey...hey how many's the boss after?”

“Many as we fuckin' want...”

...*raiders*...

They were in the same outside area beyond the massive doors that led in here. We couldn't move...any slight sound could make them spot us if they were Shades and not just the normal variety...

“Hey, storage!”

“Aw yeah! Boss'll pay us big if we get some good shit! Come on!”

Oh no...oh no...oh no...I could see the look on my friends' faces, the same fear. Oh where was Brimstone...

The door rattled, shifting and sticking.

“Fuckin' door's heavy! Can't shift it!”

It rattled more, jamming backward and forward. We had to do it...we had to try moving...

I began to creep toward the lock box room, praying that the others would match my pace. To my ears, they sounded embarrassingly loud when they began shifting toward the door too.

We couldn't rush...but we needed to hurry!

Rattle! The door shifted, scraping a few inches. Light from the corridor was beginning to shine in.

“Together! Push the damn thing!”

I had heard *seven* voices now, one line each and all of them different...all male. There was tons of them! I wiped my eyes hard to stop the dripping tears from making a trail into the room. We were only a few feet away now...a little more...a little more and-

Kreeeeeeee! The door slid open, shoved by all seven raiders in one massive push. We were still short! I dived into cover, but Glimmer and Caduceus were still in the open!

“Ohoho! What have we got here? Get 'em, lads!”

They barrelled forward, I recognised them mostly as the same raiders who had beaten me earlier in the day. Glimmerlight turned, surprising one with her will to actually fight back and bucked him hard in the face. But the next two dove for her. While I knew she wasn't exactly an unarmed fighter, she was no wimp. Glimmerlight thrashed, kicked out and swung with a determination that was driven from the fear in her eyes. Caduceus was charged by another buck, tussling together on the ground, rolling end over end.

I saw him slammed to the ground, his head raised to slam against the floor. No!

Galloping out, I hopped up and slid on my back toward the raider, bucking him *hard* between the legs. The howl of pain echoed madly amongst the huge room, before he fell to the side. Caduceus clambered free, before trying to shout a warning. Too late...I felt another of the mass of raiders grab me from behind, a hoof going around my throat and tugging tightly to the point I couldn't even squeal for help. Being pulled away, I saw Caduceus throw himself at another of the wiry but surprisingly strong raiders to try and reach me or Glimmerlight. The Tenpony healer was determined and brave in the defence of us, wrestling hoof to hoof with a wasteland raider...but thrown to the ground and surrounded by three raiders as they stamped and pinned him.

The brawl had lasted at most twenty seconds...but he was pinned...I was being held and nearly choked.

Glimmerlight slapped another one across the face with her front hooves, but the three assaulting her were on all sides. One simply hurled himself onto her, weighing her down before, with horror to me, I saw one slam a hoof clean across her jawline. The mare fell, the raider atop her collapsing on her back.

We were beaten...

“Well...” the lead raider, a burly earth pony, spat blood from where Glimmerlight had bucked him on the mouth, “got a little *fight* you three, eh? But now it's time for us to have *our* fun...”

Caduceus tried in vain to rise, but received only a half buck to the chest, making him cry out in pain and collapse, holding his midsection with two front hooves. My throat was burning from the steely grip, before I felt myself thrown to the floor, head down. Scrambling, I only was pinned once more as he *sat* on me...

“Get the *fuck* off me!” Glimmerlight scowled, whipping a hoof against her captor's back leg. He winced, before simply throwing her against a crate.

“Bitch! Oh I've waited to deal with you...you made a deal with *raiders* mare...you think we got honour to give a shit? You're ours now! Hold her down boys...”

What? No! *NO!* I cried out, trying to shift and move, but my head rattled off the floor, dizzying my vision. Caduceus tried, but I saw the three above him only trod down more, knocking the wind from him

every time before slipping a long blade free and pressing it against his neck. He only watched with bared teeth as I saw two raiders lift the struggling Glimmerlight and hurl her atop a small crate, face down. One lay atop her midsection, the other holding her front hooves to bare her over the crate. She thrashed, crying out for them to *get off* as I saw the burly raider move up to her, kicking her hind legs to either side...

...*Goddesses no...*

“What's wrong, mare? Thought you *loved* getting the stallions? Shoulda' listened to your old friend back in the plaza...being a little whore only gets you *fucked*.”

The scream of humiliation and genuine terror she gave out as she felt him begin to move closer crushed my heart and set me to simply scream for her.

“**Get. Off. Her.**”

The raiders stopped, the burly one ceasing his movements to look up at the voice, stepping back from his approach on Glimmer.

He must have galloped all the way from the moment he heard the door explode open...we'd left our friend a five minute trot away.

What stood here was not our friend.

Clad in the armour, decorated in blood and symbols of a lifetime spent destroying pony's lives...the Great Warlord of the Raider Clans loomed between the crates. The dragon's head peered at us, beady eyes flickering with sheer, undiluted and uncontrolled *hate*. Upon each leg were the thick brass hooves. The shoulder blades were mounted...the dual sided knife hanging below his mouth.

Standing taller...wider...every ounce of his body *oozed* power.

The raiders holding Caduceus backed away, glancing to their leader. Bent over Glimmer, he snarled toward Brimstone Blitz before hopping backward and off.

“Thought you said you'd stopped all that, eh? What's this but an old stallion trying to pretend he's still the big boss of the wastes? That armour don't scare me...”

His gang warily glanced between them. Those holding Glimmerlight remained there, holding the mare down. She glanced over her shoulder still...eyes simply gazing at Brimstone herself. Caduceus seemed unwilling to move in the standoff.

“**I said...GET OFF HER!**”

His voice *alone* hurt my ears, slapping my senses like a brick to the face. The stallion moved over, stroking Glimmer's mane.

“Little mare just wants a good fucking! That's all I'm giving he-ARGH!”

She bit him. Furious, he reared up, slamming a hoof down upon her head and knocking her clean off the crate, along with his two lackies.

That did it. Ooooh boy...*that did it*.

The floor *shook* as Brimstone charged, bellowing a warcry the likes of which I had heard the other raiders attempt but *never* even come close to. The armour must have doubled his weight with those massive plates and weighty hooves. He was among them before any could even properly draw their weapons.

The first raider found himself simply gored upon the horns of the dragonhelm, lifted screaming into the air, his chest impaled by a good twelve inches. Brimstone didn't even stop, crashing forward to throw his entire weight into a second. The twist *threw* the first from his horns to land atop a third. Their leader attempted to blindside him, but lasted an almost anticlimactically short time, Brimstone's rage simply swatted his hooves away and ripped that mouth knife into his side. A brass hoof collided with his head, forcing the stallion to the ground before...*oh Luna...*

I almost vomited on the spot...the moment the stallion was down, Brimstone ripped the mouth knife

downwards, drawing it along the side of the leader, ripping organs free and slitting his *entire body* open from neck to flank. Blood *sprayed* and flowed across the floor, landing atop my head. Screaming, trying not to throw up, I threw myself towards Glimmerlight, catching up with Caduceus as we both held the quaking mare. She was in shock...

Behind us, I heard one raider yell a surrender and simply *run*. A chain shot out, wrapping with that hook around his neck and piercing into his side before dragging him, drawing blood the entire time, back toward Brimstone. It had come from one of those hooves, which forced him down and stamped *hard* on the stallion's back. A single great snap cracked into the room's ambience, followed by the raider wailing in pain.

“MY BACK! I CAN'T MOVE! *I CAN'T MOVE!*”

Two double teamed Brimstone, leaping on his back and trying to shove knives around his throat. They caught on the chainmail, permitting them no time before Brimstone simply rolled. Trapped beneath him, I heard ribs snap and the raider's scream as those shoulder blades dug into them. Under his thrashing and attacks, they were torn and pounded to a messy end. Brimstone was still roaring in feral *rage*, his frenzy carrying him to repeatedly beat the other raider's head off the floor between two brass hooves until his face resembled nothing but a battered pulp, dropping teeth and spittle across the floor.

Those who had been thrown or knocked aside before raised, only to have their ally hurled at them again. Charging after the thrown pony, Brimstone stamped his hoof so hard on a back leg I saw the joint not so much snap as *disintegrate* under his weight. The leg flopped uselessly, the raider falling back screaming. His friend was hurled across the room so hard that he crashed *through* the chainlink fence *and* the window of the office to slap against a lockbox, covered in a thousand glass cuts.

The remaining buck was trapped...a younger raider, fresh coat markings still without scars. He backed away, waving his hooves as he fell into the corner. Brimstone stopped, raising his head to glance across at him. I saw the hot air hiss from the nostrils of the dragon as he snorted, before stomping toward the remaining one.

Only them...*only then*...did I realise the most horrid and terrifying fact of his rampage...

None of the raiders were dead.

They lay screaming, wailing or crying in pain. Even I couldn't bring myself to feel sympathy for them after their attempted rape of Glimmerlight...but it was the callous and sadistic brutality of Brimstone's methods that shocked me to my core. Stomach turning, I could only watch as I saw the leader desperately trying to hold his own organs inside...as one crippled raider could move only his head. The others spluttered or shook in their death throes...knowing they were in pain but lacking the ability to shout out. One was still spitting up teeth through the ruined mess of his muzzle that had been almost entirely *removed*. Everything I had been told about raiders come to life, unrestricted, before my terrified eyes.

Every one of them dying...every one of them *slowly*.

“BRIM!”

Glimmerlight tried to raise, tears coating her eyes as she raised a hoof and attempted to shout to him when she saw him approaching the remaining raider.

“DON'T! THIS ISN'T WHO YOU WANT TO BE! STOP!”

The brass hooves stomped on the ground, making the remaining raider cry for mercy. They dragged across the floor, grinding and drawing a line in the blood that seeped from his last victim. He charged...

“STOP! STOP!”

He didn't. Meeting the raider, for all of Glimmerlight's trying he fell upon the young recruit. Brass hoof after brass hoof fell, stomping, crushing, breaking and slamming into the buck. I saw limbs broken, a chest deflate entirely, a jaw *torn* from the muzzle. His agonised wails gave way to a liquid like blubbering and eventual muffled hisses of pain. His head was grabbed, slammed against the walls, the ground and everywhere in between, a whole lifetime of rage and hatred pouring forth from one pony. This had been him at the height of his terror...bringing nothing but a painful and unstoppable cascade of hell upon those he fell on. No quick

escape...no way to end it with dignity...

Glimmerlight finally got to her hooves, galloping forward, bucking Caduceus in sheer panic as he tried to restrain her. She screamed to Brimstone, not daring to get so close against his whirling bulk and blades.

“BRIM! THE DRAGON IS DEAD!”

Only now, hearing her did the huge armoured figure whirl, leaving his victim behind. He *towered* above her.

“**They hurt you, I *destroy* them! Pain and death, all for them! They will NOT hurt you!**”

He was drenched in blood, I could see it dripping from the knife, his hooves...his entire body. Glimmerlight was shaking, barely able to stand as her voice turned raw and raspy from screaming.

“You aren't them! You're just like you always were! You don't need to protect me like *this!* I don't *want* protected like this!”

“**They're raiders! Nothing but scum and missed chances to be good in the eyes of the Goddesses!**”

“*They* think like that! But it's *you* that's got to be different to-”

“**NO-PONY who does what they do deserves mercy from it! They caused pain amongst all the wasteland! They don't deserve a second chance or sympathy! No escape! I will not watch them violate you and grant them anything but a death as humiliating as they would have given you!**”

He surged forward, looming over Glimmerlight, casting the malnourished mare to become one tiny form before his immense blood speckled bulk.

“**You even know what they'd have done to you? You think they'd have just fucked you? I taught them different! They'd have *ruined* you!**”

His words echoed and slammed into my ears, his shouting blowing Glimmerlight's straggled mane with the force of his speech. But she stood strong, stomping her hooves and gritting her teeth against the Warlord before her.

“You're trying to become a protector! You can fight to DEFEND us, but you're losing sight of who you are! Who you're trying to be! You need to be BETTER!”

“**THEY DO NOT DESERVE ANYTHING BUT NO MERCY AND NO FORGIVENESS!**”

“NEITHER DID YOU!”

The raiders had died...bleeding out...choking on their blood...so that in the aftermath of those three words there was no sound. No ambience...just the simple stare of the Great Warlord into one little pony who had changed his life and offered him the second chance that even *he* didn't believe in...

“Because...because I'm not seeing my friend in front of me right now!”

Caduceus and I found ourselves very close, completely forgotten in the wake of Glimmerlight and Brimstone Blitz's relationship of ideals and wills clashing. Of their unique link that was driven by so much fate as sheer random chance being strained and tested at the harshest end.

“I...I've been hurt! Okay? I admit it, I'm *hurt!* I've lost my old friends to something I don't even remember...but...but I can't let that control my life! If I just fell into it all again and stripped myself of memory to forget I even knew Coral I'd...I'd be betraying why she mattered to me in the first place! Don't do the same...don't forget everything you've been trying and striving for to become the Warlord again...be Brim...our guardian...not the raider...”

He simply stood there, gazing at her. Blood dripped, seeming to never end from the helmet. The dragonhead longed for more...that shape and design channelling incarnate rage through it to long for more battle.

Breathing heavy, snorting on each exhale...it eventually slowed the more he looked at the slender mare before him.

Raising one hoof...almost tenderly, he let it slip from his head. Beneath it...oily from the armour...blooded from the battle...lay Brimstone Blitz.

“I...I will never understand ponies like you...Glim...like any of you...”

“Someday you can-”

“**No!** No...I cannot. Change can happen but...but never can so much be forgotten. I am not becoming a better pony...not yet. Those days of redemption are far away. Out there in the wastes, given one chance of freedom I just felt myself falling into the same **anger**. The same way of thinking without anything to guide me.”

His eyes turned intense, glancing to the carnage he had wrought.

“I tried to get you out and in the end...only I did. Everything...**everything** that had begun to properly matter to me I had left behind, all morality gone to just become another raider cast adrift in the wastes. No...there are more ponies than you who would need to forgive me for the things I've done to ever truly matter outside you. I was **like** these bastards...destroying them was like...destroying a part of myself, righting a wrong I created.”

“But not if you just turn your rage around and do the same to them...you can kill every raider in the wastes, but that won't ever get rid of the raider in you.”

“Mm...maybe...but the dragon is in here.” He tapped his chestplate. “He can never disappear. You should not be so forgiving of me...I am not somepony who will ever become what you are. But I will abide by your wishes...as your guardian, that's all I have left to hold onto. All my freedom proved was I'm still the pony the wasteland fears.”

He moved to the side, knocking the door clean open with a hoof that struck the metal *far* harder than was needed. So much rage still flowed in him...just being held back...barely kept in check.

“For good reason too...”

He stomped off into the corridors with a large sack of our provisions. The anger so evident in each stomp of those dinnerplate sized hooves. But it was an internal anger...a frustrated one, unable to grasp the way to the pony he wanted to be...

Glimmerlight stared after him, crying deeply, even as Caduceus lay a hoof over her shoulder and held her close.

“I won't give up on you, Brim...it doesn't matter if I'm the only one...”

He didn't reply...simply moving on.

We followed quickly...leaving the bloodbath behind us. Whimpering, last out, I looked back upon the devastation he had wrecked and felt only sick.

The Dragon was still there inside him...

But even I caught myself hoping through all the terror...all the fear of him snapping and destroying *everything* in his single-minded protectiveness of the one good pony he knew he had left...that he might someday realise that it was possible.

I *knew* it was possible to let go of the chains that bound your heart through the inspiration of another...

* * *

The riot had gone well for Barb.

Ahead of us, below us, through the interior windows, I could hear slavers as they were tortured, put through the hell that would have been unleashed on us had Brimstone not saved us. But the horror had expanded, gone beyond all that we expected. As we had galloped down the hallway, we came to the interior windows that gazed upon the plaza.

Brimstone swore loudly, almost smashing the glass with one brass hoof in sheer resurgent anger.

Glimmerlight stared on with wide eyes and a hoof to her mouth. Caduceus seemed to shake in offence.

...I simply cried as I saw the reality of the situation...

Below us...in the plaza, the slavers were not the only casualties.

Raider corpses were strewn across the fountain area, shot down. But we witnessed ponies being dragged into cells protected by raiders on the top floor. The...the raiders had *won*. They controlled the *entire plaza*.

Barb himself wandered across the balcony...a loudspeaker floating before him.

“Slavers of Fillydelphia! This is for your benefit! Know that the plaza and guardroom are *ours* now. You sought to bind the Bloodletters...now you shall see the bloody mistake you have created!”

The wails of torturous agony flowed even through the glass...I saw skins being tossed out of a cell...heard both male and female slaves as *well* as the slavers being dragged by those who willed them for entertainment. A few raiders traded shots inside the guardroom, noticeable only by their sound, defending the area.

“Be ready...slavers...you shall see what you have unleashed by keeping us here. This is our fortress of delight, our place of reminding you why you should *fear* raiders, not keep them as pets! The slaves will suffer...they are in here with us, our *playthings*. This is *your* fault, 'masters'. Now...you will have to watch and deal with the consequences.”

The loudspeaker clattered to the ground. Barb had turned on the slaves...he was bringing them into his hell as much as the slavers.

“He didn't betray *us*...he just hid what he really wanted...” Caduceus breathed gently, shivering and turning away as he saw a slave try to run and get roughly thrown into the fountain and nearly drowned. He was then pulled toward the stairs...being dragged up and into the higher levels of the plaza for whatever purposes...

But the *screams*...there were so many...a full raider camp of sorts inside the plaza that was now letting flow all the built up tendencies raiders were known for...

Brimstone seemed to quiver as he looked through the glass...but Glimmerlight placed a hoof on his shoulder.

“This...this is what you can be free of...this is what you aren't...”

“I am...but this will not go on...”

Glimmer narrowed her eyes, but shifted her back legs, still obviously feeling vulnerable. Another cry of pain shot up from below, making her wince again...and again...

“No...it *won't*.”

She trotted off...clearly with a purpose in mind. Brimstone glanced around and followed, as did Caduceus. I galloped up beside her.

“Glimmer...what are you doing? Where are you-”

“We had a hand in this...Barb tricked us around, used our fear of him to get us to aid in this *atrocious*. Brim? You want a good cause? Here's one.”

I could hear voices ahead...I recognised one of them intently. Glimmerlight continued.

“If you need the proof, Brim? Well...I'm going to help put a stop to this. Coral is in there...a pony who doesn't deserve any of it. If you seek redemption, follow me...because I'm on a quest of it myself. Murky? Caduceus? You don't need to come.”

I found myself slack jawed. Brimstone and Glimmerlight stomped off ahead of us toward the voices...glancing at each other, Caduceus and I simply followed in shock.

* * *

How...how could they stop it? Who could-

After a few minutes of following the pair, we emerged into another room, following the voices I knew I felt we should be avoiding...

Protégé and his slavers were within the next large room...clustered around a table filled with the blueprints of the Mall. Protégé was wearing his battle barding, the revolver strapped to his hoof. Ragini was here too...as was Mister Mosin. I saw The Master glance up at me harshly...making me fall closer to Caduceus. Slavers whirled their guns onto Brimstone...but Protégé raised a hoof.

“What are you doing here? I advise you to go to the back and stay out of harms way until we contain and solve this-”

“No.” Brimstone brokered no argument, stopping Protégé dead. “*You* don't know Barb like, I do.”

Glimmerlight nodded.

“We're not going to sit idle and watch those we care about get hurt.”

She trotted forward, lifting one hoof to slam it on the table, putting a stern look into her hurt eyes and obviously fighting to control the trembling from the whole experience.

“We're going to help bring that bastard's raiding days down once and for all.”

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

A (Very) Little Dash – While wearing light armour or no armour, you run 10% faster. Such a pity that hoof's still aching...

Chapter 12: Sixty Minutes in Hell

* * *

“Look buddy, my job here is to keep the peace, and if I have to break a few heads to do it, then a few ponies are going to be hurting.”

“What is it like to fight the good fight?”

Utterly, utterly new.

I'd fought before, yes. I'd lost, but I had at least tried. I'd even shot a gun at a few things recently, griffins and parasprites. I'd not hit a single griffin and perhaps only one parasprite while panicked and just pulling the trigger out of sheer terror. I'd lashed out, bucked a few groins, helped take down a sneaky raider...

But to actually move forward, armed and ready...with the express purpose to move in and eliminate something or somepony to help bring peace? To take a stand, make the decision to commit and then push yourself into the firing line to save others?

...could I do that?

Ponies needed help. Brimstone and Glimmerlight had stepped up to the challenge already...but the weight of the decision weighed heavy on me still. If...if I were to go in, wouldn't I just freeze or run away? It's what I always did...I...I'm no fighter...

Even one raider would kill me...

That image in my mind, it's seared in, of one plunging a knife into my shoulder and twisting the cold metal against the bone. Even seeing a raider, I can't get rid of it. The thought makes my muscles twist and stiffen up, makes me stop in my tracks...what possible help could I be to anypony?

But not an hour ago...Glimmer had almost been...been...

...that couldn't happen to the others...all the innocents that were trapped just like me. Even if they hated me, even if they would spit and curse at my very name...I didn't hate them back. From the pigsty to the Ministries...I had been somehow growing. Every hardship, struggle, scream and tear had been pushing me further and further from the slave that I was. Yes...chains remained...chains *still* remain around my heart, but that doesn't mean I can't pull in other directions to do what I was quickly beginning to feel I *had* to. DJ-Pon3 and LittlePip had given me the inspiration...but it had to be *me* that made the decision. I had proved to myself by now that I could survive, endure and find a way to keep living, even if it wasn't perfect and often went wrong. But that had all been of necessity.

Protégé had offered me one chance to make a decision for myself. To gauge risk against reward. I had taken it without realising whether I was truly doing it as a pony or a slave. Whether I was choosing or obeying.

Now I see that this is the sort of situation he was trying to prepare me for, when I had to *choose* to face great danger to help do some good for other ponies...to choose to take risks that it might pay off better in the end.

Of course...wasn't that what he had been doing with Red Eye all along? Was I only falling further into the subtle hooks of Red Eye's ideology?

Or was I finally beginning to not just listen and wish...but *decide* to follow the things told to me by a voice across the wastes on the air? To fight the good fight, any way we could.

...either way...ponies needed help and, for once, both slaves and slavers had the same goals.

To end Barb's sick rampage, forever.

* * *

“Working with the slaves? With the *raider*? Hell, no!”

“They'll just turn on us the moment we go in!”

I cowered behind Caduceus, watching while the slavers as a whole lambasted Glimmerlight and Brimstone's assertion to offer aid. It hadn't gone down well, with the vast majority of those slavers assembled rising up in opposition to the entire idea. Mosin had sworn colourfully. I hadn't understood what he'd said...but *anything* said with that much malice had to have been a curse.

The planning had been taking place above the plaza in an old security room. Tough inner windows of thick glass looked down upon the shop cells. Only occasional raiders could be seen running along the balconies. Mostly, they were hiding in the shop cells...keeping their strength and stolen armaments a secret from all prying eyes. I could still hear the screams...

My imagination had been running rampant with what each one could mean. The long ones were the worst...drawn out and filled with as much shock as pain. Oh Goddesses protect the ponies within there...

For their part, Glimmerlight and Brimstone had simply stood with stern eyes and waited the criticism out, ignoring the slavers entirely in favour of appealing to Protégé instead. The slave master had simply stood and watched them back, apparently gauging their readiness to help.

Really, I couldn't blame them for accepting the help. Only out in the corridor I could hear the frantic calls for ammunition. The raiders were only *barely* being kept at bay...less than twenty feet away through a couple of walls there were slavers holding the line behind upturned tables and opened doors, trading shots that rung and echoed all the way to sting my ears with raiders who occasionally tried to sneak around their defences or make a concerted push. Every slaver present was on edge...the word had already gone out that the entire Mall was on lockdown. No-pony was to move more than a few dozen feet from the perimeter until this was done. I'd heard as much from the planning when we had entered the room.

We were as trapped as the rioting raiders...

“Somehow I don't get the feeling this was one of their brightest ideas, Murk...” Caduceus muttered back to me. The nurse was trying to brush some of the dirt from his white clothing. It was already stained beyond recovery from just living in Fillydelphia, but he persisted as though from some nervous tick or motion.

“Just throw them in chains and wait till it's over before he rejoins them!”

“You think they can do what we can't?”

I cast my eyes around them. Earth ponies and unicorns, stallions and mares, all types of ponies from the slaver team in the Mall were consistent in their belief. But there was one voice I expected to hear...but didn't.

My eyes found The Master. He was standing on the opposite side of the table from Glimmerlight, looking smug as ever. Spotting my own eyes lingering on him...he twisted his head to grin at me. I retreated behind Caduceus again, pressing close to his side. I didn't like doctors...but he was a nurse...technicality, right?

“This isn't their job!”

“He's already bloodied, look at him! He's killed slavers!”

Finally, I heard Protégé's voice clearly ring out through the opposition.

“They may aid us.”

The shouting reached a height upon which I could not even detect individual voices. My head hurt...

Protégé raised a hoof for silence, aided by The Master slamming his huge hoof on the desk for order. At their combination of wills, the slavers shut up immediately.

“Brimstone has never defied our rules as a worker unless Glimmerlight is threatened, that much I understand. In this case, I have no reason to doubt his resolve in this matter.”

“I *am* going in.” Glimmerlight stated the matter with a seriousness I'd never heard before. “Coral Eve is in there and come hell or high water I *will* get her out. She may hate me...but until I know why or what caused it I'm not turning my back.”

Protégé nodded assuringly.

“You will have your chance, Glimmerlight. We-”

A screaming suddenly broke through the background noise, begging and high pitched. A buck's voice, fearful and simply howling.

“Don't! Please, oh please, no! DON'T! NO! PLE-”

A detonation from the plaza erupted up, cracking and damaging the internal windows that looked upon the plaza. Everypony present ducked, but the tough glass held. We all ran to the windows, looking down to see a small mushroom cloud of smoke rising from a series of exploded boxes. Raiders were laughing and running around it. I could swear I saw bound pony parts away from the centre of the explosion. Had they just tied somepony down to them and execu...oh Celestia on high...

I saw Protégé scowl, Brimstone merely watched with glazed eyes.

“Just for the sheer fun of it...they're working themselves into a frenzy down there, every bit of hate and crazed ideas that raiders get...that perversion of freedom...you trapped it. Pushed them into a hole, let it build up, boil to the top...now you're seeing it unleashed like a volcanic eruption of a sadistic hell.”

Protégé's brow narrowed, before he turned away from the window, staring at every slaver in the room, nodding to Glimmerlight.

“We will end it. We are a faction of believers in a dream, of a better Equestria when everypony might help one another in better terms. Who are we to deny those wishing to save lives by aiding us? I will not stand to see workers killed in such senseless violence. We put them through enough in the pursuit of Unity...they deserve rescue from this. It is our *duty* to use whatever we can.”

Calm and polite...yet authoritative and permitting no nay-saying, Protégé had their attention. To my amazement, I saw The Master nod and speak.

“I say let the slaves work with him. That's what they're here for after all. To work *for* us.”

Around the table, I saw at least half of the slavers suddenly agreeing. Had Protégé swayed them with his more idealistic words or were they just agreeing with The Master? I had a nasty feeling where the real power in this room lay, regardless of rank...

“Thank you, Chainlink Shackles. Working together we can bring an end to this atrocity. Brimstone, you know Barb well?”

He nodded. “One of my Big Four, spent the best part of a decade running with him. If he's commanding them...you're not going to be able to play by any rules.”

“Right, well we want you at the briefing then. In fact, all four of you come along. Shackles? You too. Mosin, bring your assistant to help discuss what we have to correctly arm ourselves up. Ragini, make sure the defence cordons are still in place. How long do we have until Stern's griffins arrive to raid?”

“No word yet, but I'd say slightly over an hour. By the time we make a push, it may be just about sixty minutes. They won't wait long before launching an all out aggressive storming of the plaza.”

“Right. That isn't going to happen, keep your ear to the sky and find out for me exactly how long the moment you can get word from the griffins. Everypony do your duty now and reconvene here in less than five minutes. We can end this without unnecessary bloodshed of those who are trapped in there.”

He trotted over to the blueprints, stomping a hoof on them before glancing over the table at each slaver and slave in turn. His eyes met mine, resting there for a few seconds before looking up again.

“It's time to prove that we really are pursuing the dream we all signed up to achieve.”

Preparations begun immediately.

Protégé was busy organising the slavers into teams for the assault; the rest of them had left to deal with their various duties on the defence lines. We were effectively left to ourselves in the old security room, amidst the hustle and bustle of preparations and frantic calling to get together for Protégé's briefing. Alone, dodging out of the way of a swearing slaver dragging heavy boxes of ammo across the floor on a cart, I looked around.

Now empty cages lined each wall where weapons were once kept. Feeling vulnerable, I found myself trotting over to lie down with my head in my hooves inside one...it felt familiar and reassuring...

...to be sat in a cage...

Glimmerlight had been staring through the window, Brimstone beside her. Those two...they were so convicted to go into the battle to come. Both had reasons and those to protect. They simply felt they needed to, choosing to be the good pony. Already I could see Caduceus standing beside Glimmerlight, laying a hoof on her shoulder and nuzzling her gently, clearly about to make his own choice.

“Glimmer...you'll need *somepony* who can treat a wound in there, I'm coming.”

“You don't have to, Caddy...my life's mess ups aren't yours to-”

“Help all those who need help.' That's what Helpinghoof told me. We all believed it in there...him, me, Life Bloom and all the others working or studying in that clinic. Trapped here, I found a new meaning to it with Doctor Weathervane, that sometimes we need to not just wait for those in need to come to us...I *want* to help. Not just because it's you...even if that *may* be a part of it...heh.”

He grinned, to which I saw Glimmerlight only chuckle lightly, seemingly thankful for the more innocent notion. Her hoof tapped his cheek.

“You're such an oddity in this world...a real gentlecolt. But stick behind me, okay? Don't get in the firing line. Besides, I doubt you'll have a problem with that view on things, eh?”

He blushed, but couldn't help but nod. The pair giggled, quickly hugging. Alone at the back of the room, I could see the little bonds that aided each other...the mutual humour and ease of speech that was keeping them calm about their choice to do this.

...now he was in as well...just leaving me alone in the cage wondering about my own place in this...the only pony in the room still too afraid to say 'yes'.

I wasn't a fighter or a healer. I didn't know how to survive battles. The one I had been properly in had ended with my begging and screaming before being stabbed in the shoulder...I'd been a liability...

A thick stomping announced the brass hoof clad Brimstone moving across the room. He had been touring the defences. Many times I'd heard his voice cry out to force slavers into a better position or when to expect a push. He may not have known how to fire too accurately...but it was clear Brimstone wasn't a 'Grand Warlord' for just the fancy title, with his grasp of tactics and understanding of his enemy.

I'd just hid in here...away from all the fighting outside, oddly detached from it all...

Settling near me, the armour clattered as he sat, before I saw one eye peering down at me in the wall cage.

He nodded at the pair of Glimmer and Caduceus, who were sat around an old rifle, Glimmerlight stripping it down while chatting to him about random nothings.

“Seems that wee buck's gonna follow her wherever. So, you coming along, kid?”

Lifting my head out of my front hooves, I glanced up at the big earth pony with wide eyes.

“N-no...”

“Hmm?” He seemed surprised, turning more to face me.

I just looked away, quivering slightly. I knew he didn't mean to put me under pressure...it was just his way of life to be direct.

“I'm...I'm scared...” I rubbed my shoulder. The sight of that knife pushing its way into my flesh...our encounter with the raiders had brought it all to the surface. “I don't want hurt again. I'm afraid of Barb...”

“Everypony gets scared.” Brimstone spoke quietly, closing his eyes. “Glim's scared of losing Coral. I'm scared of losing her. It's just about whether you can push it down, put on a brave face and keep going.”

“But I'm not worth anything to this, I'd just get in the way. This is just...just too direct, too big for me. It's best if I stay here and...and just pray for you all.”

Brimstone shrugged.

“No need to stand still to pray...actions speak louder than words to the Goddesses, Murk. You've made it this far...survived this much. You think I'd really let you hang around if I thought you were causing us problems?”

I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not. Still shivering, I met his eyes before he slipped one hoof free of the brass weapons and gently tapped my head. It still felt like being hit with a frying pan. He only chuckled at my whimper and squeak.

“Just have a think, Murk. But you don't need to come if you don't want to...just know you're welcome.”

Well...that was surprising...was he trying to make up for earlier? That melancholy tone was in his voice again...

“I know I'd feel better knowing those ears of yours were watching out for us. You've got a place with us now. But it's up to you. Just remember what you've already managed to do...you're braver than you think.”

Getting up, the raider stomped off toward the window, glowering through it with gritted teeth. I curled up again, whimpering as I heard another drawn out wail, a female voice this time from within the plaza. The sound of Glimmer screaming shot back through my head like a sickening wave. Nothing waited in there but pain...I'd be up against Barb. I *couldn't* beat him! He was just too good, too beyond any ability I had. He'd stalk us, outwit us and kill me. He'd hurt my friends...

“Weapons here! Get armed up!”

Mosin had returned, galloping in with a cart from the corridors where the battle still raged to hold the raiders at bay, a small wheeled tray of weapons right behind him pulled by another pony. A younger assistant was guiding it...a unicorn buck, light grey as though a less severe version of Mosin himself, but clad in oddly clean blue clothing. He hummed loudly as he polished an ornate pistol with gold trimmings and an *absurdly* large scope on top the moment he stopped. That was likely the extravagant assistant Mosin had mentioned outside the Stable.

“Hoi! *Oyobuk!*” Mosin clipped the assistant over the ear. “I tell you! This is serious planning, not *ebanaty* weapon convention! Put away compensation, Blunderbuck, distribute rifles!”

“Ow! Don't talk about her that way...”

He rubbed his head, muttering something under his breath that I was sure only I heard. Something about 'old fashioned blunt idiot who didn't know the beauty of a unique weapon if it was shoved up his-'

“Is silly filly gun! Not proper weapon unless at least slightly rusty and still working. Proves is gun for *stallion*. Now shut hole and get working or I *morgaly vikalayu, padla!*”

Outside, many slavers ran in, heads low. Shots whined past the doorway of the security room. Could Protégé not have put his planning room further from the front line?!

They clattered to the armoury cart, snapping up magazines, spare rounds and energy cells for the rarer magic weapons. A rush moved past my little hiding spot, clattering hooves on the floor making me hold my ears closed. Oh this was all too much...ponies were reloading, test sighting, sharpening knives all for the big fight...

I spotted Protégé running amidst it all.

“You there! Get those mines down to the armoury floor as a last resort! Hardnut, I want you to take three of

your subordinates to guard the storage room against further flanking efforts, go! Does anyone-DOWN!”

At the command, everypony dropped before the toughened windows that were our only way to observe the raiders within the plaza were peppered with gunfire. Some flew right through, ricocheting from the roof to ping around and lance into slavers. I saw one ping from Brimstone's armour when he sheltered Glimmerlight. Caduceus leapt immediately to the screaming slaver, holding him down to work on his neck. Five slavers sprayed blind fire from unicorn magic-held weapons over the broken sections of glass. I huddled into the corner.

Too much...just...just fighting and pain and death...too much...

“Those were armour piercing rounds...Mosin, how much stock of them did they possibly get?!”

“Not much! I must trust slavers with *potato* long before I trust them with AP rounds!”

“Those will chew through cover at the wrong time if they save them though. We need something to even the odds. Do you think you can stock us up with some better equipment and ammunition?”

The strange armspony snorted. “Is no trouble. Armoury is precisely for this role after all. As you requested, I have brought appropriate weaponry upon cart from assistant. All may arm from him for higher quality firearms!”

His eyes crept over to Brimstone.

“Even if means this *svoloch'* may break more rifles...”

Brimstone stamped one brass hoof hard enough to make almost everypony jump in shock...myself included.

“Won't need any of your pop guns now.” He almost growled at the armspony as he wandered past him into the far side of the security room to wait.

Glimmerlight rubbed her chin with a hoof, cantering over to the cart. Four more slavers were picked out as the arming up began. In the end, Glimmerlight had drawn a long rifle and simple pistol for herself, along with some leather armour stitched up with small metal plates on the shoulders. She dropped Caduceus a larger saddlebag of stored medical supplies and a small sub-machine gun for self defence.

I simply stuck back from the rush to get at the weaponry...was I even allowed? Glancing across at Protégé, I saw him slipping some extra marked ammunition for his revolver into a pocket upon his battle barding. My master glanced back at me even as his magic drew another small backup pistol to store in a second holster.

Our eyes met briefly, or rather his *eye*. Even with one visible, anything beyond the visage of Unity's student was hard to tell...

“Right, everypony! Briefing time, gather around, we don't have long!”

Thus began the sequence of planning.

Everypony leaned in over the table, a couple dozen in all. I simply hung back in my cage.

My friends turned back toward the table, slavers were filing in. Ragini swept through the larger doors from storage where she had been checking to make sure it was all clear. Brimstone and Caduceus trotted over. Glimmerlight stopped near me.

“...made a decision, Murky?”

She tried to offer a smile, but it was strained. Her eyes held fear, apprehension and yet still determination.

I didn't want to leave her...I...I...

I shook my head.

“I'm not going...I...I just...sorry...I'm too scared of him.”

My eyes couldn't match hers, I looked away, curling up inside the cage to spend my time. Her hoof gently

ruffled my mane, leading me to look upwards again and see her grin.

“It's alright, it's not going to be nice in there. No shame, okay? We'll take care of it.”

With another gentle pat, she moved on toward the table. I watched her go, followed by Caduceus.

Everypony was coming together to help save a few slaves, Brim's raw power, Protégé and his slaver teams, Glimmer's training and stoic mindset, Caduceus' medical abilities...everypony throwing in every little ability they had. How did they do it? How could they be so brave and go in there without being scared?

Brimstone's words echoed back to me. *Everypony gets scared...*

But...but wasn't being brave that you weren't scared?

Protégé held the spot before the Mall's blueprints. Already I could see markings with chalk on the paper that circled various corridors.

“Now...the raiders have broken well free of the areas we sought to contain them in.” Protégé's voice was terse. “The guard room that should have held them has fallen, permitting them access to firearms and a defended position that makes a direct assault on the plaza incredibly difficult. The only main entrance to the plaza is through the cage door, the very thing we used is now the biggest obstacle to us. It's a chokepoint. Not only that, but they've also branched out, here, here and here.”

A small cane pointed to three corridors leading out from the guard room away from the plaza cage door. Each had a red scrawled line.

“In other words, *polnyi pizdets*. Armoury is secure, but slaves have acquired much inventory from guards.” Mosin tossed his head back to his small cart, tapping that wooden hoof over what I guessed was the armoury on the map. “There is no chance of them reaching the armoury now, however.”

“Good.” Protégé moved the cane. “Those red lines show where we stopped them, but it's clear Barb knew exactly what he was doing, those positions were hard to take and cost him dear...but very easy to defend from. Straight corridors with no cover and a hard shelter at the far end.”

Mosin grunted. I began to wonder if he held more of a tactical position than I had previously realised within Protégé's staff of slavers.

“Makes little difference, we have rocket propelled grenade. *Boom, yes?*”

“Normally, yes.” My master's face sunk a little, before tapping the lines again with the cane. “Those sick wretches have strapped the workers to their cover as living shields. Any assault would have to kill them to get by. That is not something I will accept as a course of action.”

Brimstone nodded, simmering a little.

“Just what I'd have done...but he won't kill them himself. Those shields are all that's stopping anypony launching some hot metal down the corridor and blowing everything in it to hell.”

“You're sure?”

“Barb isn't stupid...he knows his raiders can't take a direct assault from a heavily armed and organised group in a meatgrinder assault.”

That made Protégé pause a second, rubbing a hoof against his chin.

“Then why make this whole stand in the first place? He must know that griffins or, if it got real bad, alicorns would simply wipe out the entire population.”

Brimstone actually laughed, making many of the slavers cast unsure glances to one another.

“He's smart, but that don't mean the wee bastard's not still a raider! They don't want a slow death in here, boy. They want to burn out in a blaze of glory. To make people see their great last surge of violence and make all those behind fear them in their nightmares. He doesn't *want* out of this.”

Wait...no! That wasn't true, Barb had said as much that he *could* get out and return to the wastes more powerful than before. But why *was* he doing this then? Why incite The Master against him by destroying

his slaves? He had a deal going...what was all this risk about?

I wanted to shout it, let them know he clearly had something else in mind...but those light green watchful eyes just kept staring into my heart from across the table. He seemed to chuckle as I withered under his gaze.

“Then what do you propose, master?” Ragini had been quiet thus far, but spoke up, trying to divert the discussion back toward the matter of the mission.

“A question, Ragini. A question to the most experienced warfighter in this entire room. Warlord Brimstone, what would you suggest is the best way to placate this gang?”

Brim shot Protégé a harsh look. “They are *not* a gang. Get that thought from your head now or this is not going to last long. They may not say it anymore, but they are a *clan*. Strong as a group, ferocious in numbers and without fear given proper motivation. Death before failure. One strong leader can make a rag tag group of mad ponies into an unending wave of frenzied aggression. They take after their leader...that's why so many of them are as brutal. They had *me*. But now many are shifting to Barb's style, deceptive and backstabbing. He is their icon. Kill the leader...kill the brain and the soul in one stroke. They will be much easier to bring down after that.”

“You think we can get to him? Last we spotted him from the internal windows, he was on the higher areas, deep within what is now their territory.”

“Barb is where he wants to be, don't trust your eyes with him. As for hunting him?” He gestured to the slavers. “With this pish lot? Not a chance.”

The slavers erupted in protest, swearing at Brimstone. Glimmerlight leaned in, muttering by his side.

“Very diplomatic, Brim...”

Shackles slammed a hoof again, silencing them. He had been quiet thus far...simply sitting there and thinking with a blank look.

“Quiet down, all of you wretches! I won't stand to see a stock under *me* lost like this! Shut up and listen or get out now! **Understand?**”

That shut them up. I wasn't even talking and I felt myself nodding along with them that I was now listening. Protégé, meanwhile, seemed to go into thought for a while.

“Well...then we give them what they want...or what they think they'll be getting. A distraction. We don't assault properly, but detonate a lot of explosives and throw a lot of deliberately inaccurate fire toward them. Make it seem like a large storming that's just stalled and is consistently failing on their barricades. Take all their attention. I'll need three teams. Shackles, I want you to organ-”

Protégé's eyes crossed across mine across the table and room. He must have seen something in my look...he stopped on the spot, thinking deeply. I knew he had his own suspicions...

“...no. Mosin, make up three teams from the guard groups. Call in any you need. Shackles, I want you to go and try to delay the griffins as long as you can. Stern has already contacted me to say her raid team will *not* be considering workers a valued hostage to rescue. We *must* get this done before they arrive.”

If The Master had spotted the divergence, he stayed quiet about it and carefully hidden. Instead, he just gruffly snorted and tossed his filthy mane at the mundane job offer.

“While we do what to get the slaves?”

“A raid. A small team shall infiltrate the plaza...I believe there is an outside door leading to one of the shop cells.”

So he *did* know...

“I will take a group including Brimstone, Ragini and a select few others to launch a surgical strike into the heart of the raiders while the majority are distracted out in the guard room with the false assault. The object is simple...to kill Barb by any means and if possible, clear one barricade from behind once we have a sustainable position inside the plaza. Other guards will follow us in greater numbers to cover our backs once

the element of surprise is lost. Fast, direct and aggressive. Cut off the head and let the body wither.”

Glimmerlight immediately spoke up, shifting away from me to lift her front hooves onto the table, trying to take what authority she could. I could feel her shivering...my poor friend was still feeling the shock of earlier...

“If there's a team going in, I'm going too. We can try to secure the slaves inside or get them out the side door. Some of them do *not* deserve this.”

Shackles actually laughed.

“Silence, slave. Your *masters* will choose who goes and who stays. You offered your help, but a rookie *initiate* is not going to alter our plans.”

“No.” Protégé spoke quickly. “While I cannot say I fully agree with either of you, you are welcome to come and attempt to protect any we find or Coral should you locate her, Glimmerlight. But Barb's death takes precedence to end the greater incident.”

“That's fine...so long as I get a chance to help them.”

“Good. Get your things ready, we will be leaving soon.”

Glimmerlight nodded firmly and turned to canter to the other side of the room, continuing to strip the long rifle down and pull parts from Mosin's cart...without him looking, I noticed.

Caduceus glanced at her snapping it all together, joining the growing noise of preparations and then respectfully bowed his head to Protégé.

“You'll need a healer with you, I had already decided to follow Glimmer. I suspect many of the slaves will require immediate attention after being under the raiders' activities.”

“That is acceptable, I would also wish to ask you, Murk, if you wish to accompany the raid team. That hearing could provide a useful asset...that and a pony who can sneak around may be helpful against the Shades. Will you accompany us?”

Words caught in my throat. I'd been simply a bystander to all the *important* ponies in their planning and discussion. Now I felt eyes on me...everypony at the table had shifted to look across the room. I could see the same look on Protégé's face as Glimmer's. There was no shame to say no.

I wanted to say yes...I really did...

But I simply looked away, curling up again. My body was shivering and aching from wounds that, although healed still seemed to hurt the more I thought about what these ponies were preparing for.

Just a coward...

I heard Protégé sigh lightly, before tapping for attention.

“The rest of you, stock up on every explosive and louder weapon you can to make the false offensive as convincing as possible. Mosin, find four of the best guards in the Mall to join us for the raid. Nine should be large enough for the team. Assault teams, be ready to make the push if we clear a barricade, once inside, force a perimeter to any slaves and evacuate them above all else! This is our time to show them that their service is valued more than any. We move in fifteen minutes, so we'll only have a short time to make it happen, let's do it!”

The cheer hardly sounded enthusiastic, but everypony split off into a mass of final readiness.

Three stallions and one mare appeared from Mosin's picking and moved quickly to the weapons cart, stripping it almost bare of what remained. Two of the stallions, earth ponies, took a riot shotgun each and a couple of heavy duty pistols. The others, the unicorn stallion and mare, acquired carbines, one as a dual barrelled battle saddle (That lucky...). All stuck with the thick padding of their slaver guard, strapping a couple of cylindrical canisters to themselves and making sure their gasmasks were ready.

They were going on what sounded like a suicide mission...

Glimmerlight racked shut the bolt of the rifle with her hooves, while holding a few test rounds in her magic. She'd left small parts all over the floor, instead crafting what looked like crude metal sights for the top out of some scrap. Her face was still and serious, concentrating on the work. Even as I watched...she moved onto a spark battery, stripping the casing off till I could see the pulsating magic gem at the centre. She held it near the barrel...what was she *planning* with that thing?

How could she think so calmly to do this? Going in with a team to the centre of almost a hundred raiders? They were all going to die! How...just...what let them make the choice?

Glimmerlight's eyes hadn't looked brave...but she was going in there anyway.

I just didn't understand...how could you be brave and scared at the same time? That...that wasn't how it worked, right? I wished I had time to tune into DJ-Pon3...he would know what to say...how the 'good fight' worked.

But there was another voice in my memory...the mare. Back when I had been beaten down...hurt and degraded in front of an entire city...she had been willing to stand up and show her support of me, despite her fear of The Master. She'd said something...

“Please, don't give up, there is a bright future. You will find your courage, Murky.”

After those words...I'd stood on my own and walked almost proudly away, not letting The Master have the satisfaction of me being hurt before her.

...I'd been scared...but I'd done it anyway.

Back in the Stable, when I had been trapped, separated from the ponies I had only then begun to see as friends, I had finally begun to know what it was like to take strength in others. To trust and have confidence in somepony.

I'd been scared then too...but Glimmer had talked me into knowing I could do it anyway.

Was that what bravery was? To be scared...but to be able to stand up tall and push through even when your mind tells you it won't end well? To take the risks because you know they have to be done?

I was so scared of Barb...that one pony was everything I feared. Somepony I couldn't hear or sneak away from. His raiders had caused me pain and tears in so many amounts. They had almost...almost hurt Glimmerlight beyond thinking not one hour ago. They...they had to be stopped...

Another voice I remembered...much more recently, the Ministry Mare herself...Twilight Sparkle. The twinkling lights of that star-shape message emerged in my mind to utter those words...

“Make friends, take time to make amends, do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world. This message is to let you see from me the thoughts and fears of everypony now. We're all dreaming of the same peace, even if we don't know it. Good luck...”

Brim was right...everypony was scared. We were all afraid, but we all wanted the same thing in the end...

A final voice, amidst the clutter and banging of the battle and arming up, it was so clear, just like before in the wreck of Mosin's wagon outside the city...

“The obstacles in our path can be overcome if we just work together. So don't abandon those you care about y'hear? These days that which we fight against is bigger, more obvious and deadlier than any ponies in the past ever had to deal with. Only by sticking together can we truly save lives and make ourselves better...no matter what horrors we all must share along the way...”

DJ-Pon3 had inspired me to take up arms before to defend my friends that little bit longer. Very quickly, a greater fear began to come to mind. I had seen the raiders execute somepony in the plaza, heard them torture others.

What if those were my friends next time and I simply had to sit in here and listen to it happen?

Those words, from ponies I cared for, were inspired by or had learned from circled around my mind, repeating, meshing together their messages. My eyes were clenched shut, hearing ponies scream for help before being cut short in drawn out and agonising howls of pain. I heard slavers planning and shouting orders. Heard Brimstone galloping around, tirelessly aiding in the defence I hadn't even worked up courage to *look at*. Heard Glimmerlight muttering nothing but numbers and theories about her weapon work.

...but those three voices cut through my cluttered head...the mare...Twilight Sparkle...DJ-Pon3...words of courage...of hope...of inspiration...

“Please, don't give up, there is a bright future. You will find your courage, Murky.”

“Only by sticking together can we truly save lives and make ourselves better...no matter what horrors we all must share along the way...”

“Make friends, take time to make amends, do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world.”

They whirled, as I remembered them time and time again...those voices that had helped me in each individual case finally coming together...the one message I knew they had *all* been telling made up of their combined words. The message that in one beautiful moment of clarity, shut out all sound as I heard it simply spoken in my mind...

“Only by sticking together can we truly save lives...do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world...you will find your courage, Murky.”

No...

I stood, quickly grabbing my saddlebag, fighting back the tears. I had come this far, survived Ministries, a Stable, the Fillydelphia crater, the parasprite pits and even survived two escape attempts. Each had required me to gather my courage again and again. They were nothing near as dangerous as this was going to be...

But it *had* to be done. I couldn't let them face it alone.

Galloping across the security station, I ran into the room where everypony was gathering. Just let The Master watch me...I wasn't beaten yet.

Glimmerlight, Brimstone, Caduceus, Protégé, Ragini, The Master, Mosin and every other slaver present turned at my pitter patter hooves running in. Stopping, tears dripping from my eyes, I tried to get my breath through a rough heat scorched throat.

“I'm...I'm in...I'm scared but...but it needs done...”

Glimmerlight smiled. I even saw Brimstone nod in respect. Protégé maintained watching me, before grinning slightly with a knowing tilt of his head. The Master seemed to chuckle from the back of the room, but stayed quiet. I stomped my front hooves, trying to look serious. This was a proper rescue, I couldn't let myself lose momentum...

“So...so...”

They all craned in, curious.

“...what do I do first?”

The silence that lasted was somewhat uncomfortable, broken only by Ragini snorting with laughter into a wing. I even caught Glimmerlight lightly chuckling. Hey...

Protégé just nodded and stomped a hoof on the blueprints.

“Your aid is greatly welcomed, Murk. May I request your presence with the raid team?”

I had to stick with my friends...be brave for them...

“Y-yes, master...”

Please don't let this just be me following orders because *he* asked me to...please...

But I felt my heart sink, the inevitable slide into something I *didn't want to do* edging past the point of no return. Terror clenched at me...I'd just agreed to go into this...oh Goddesses...

“Good. Fetch the armament you require. I want you beside me for this, warn me if you hear *anything*.”

“Yes, master.”

I turned, trotting over on shaky legs to the weapons cart. I found it almost empty in the wake of my friends and the slavers. All that was left were some long rifles larger than myself and a small series of revolvers that I just *knew* would be a nightmare to reload. Umzing and aahing, I paced around the cart, biting my lip. No battle saddles? Oh come on...

“Murk, is something wrong?” Protégé wandered past, checking his own revolver.

“I...I don't know what to pick. I'm not really f-familiar with guns...”

“I see...” He turned away from me. “Mosin! Can you sort something out for little Murk here?”

“Negative. Nothing in the cart that won't break his little teeth. I assumed you only wanted tiny pony for warning when he cries or to act as distraction.” Mosin seemed to chuckle a little at me.

“I am not prone to wasting those under me, Mosin. Find him something, I won't leave Murk unprotected.”

“Fine...fine...but not me. Too much *real* work to do arming ponies who won't leave puddle on each shot. Blunderbuck! Blunderbuck, where are you?”

The assistant reappeared from where he had been helping one of the slavers to attach grenades to his barding in a floral pattern (Okaaay...) and began waltzing his way across the floor to join us. Right...this buck was a little weird...

“Blunder, reporting!”

“Find this filly weapon. Take to the armoury and get something that will function on his level. Don't take too long to equip the little filly or-”

“Uh...Mosin, I don't think he's a fill-”

“Could have fooled me! Now *toropit'sya!*”

The buck saluted dramatically on the spot, before spinning in a completely unnecessary direction to face me, smiling entirely too much.

“Are you ready to *get* ready, Murk?”

“Uh...”

“Let's get you to the armoury, oh we are going to have *such* fun finding you something!”

Slack jawed at the entirely over enthusiastic, sing-song voiced Blunderbuck, I just stared to the side, noting Glimmerlight nodding her head encouragingly.

“Go with him, Murky. He's alright, I've spent a little *time* with him before.”

Blunderbuck brightened up.

“Ah! You remember me! Yes...Murky, is it? Wonderful!”

Protégé trotted past, away from the cart, nodding to his assistant armourer and myself.

“Be back within a few minutes if you can, we commence in ten minutes, with or without. We'll only have an hour or so to commence the raid.”

“Got it, sah!”

“Y-yes, master...”

I felt myself being pulled by Blunderbuck out into the hallway, where he happily trotted beside me.

“S-so, what are we going to do, um...specifi...specfu...exactly?”

“Do?” He asked with wide eyes. “Dear Murk, this is an important thing, a pony's proper outfitting is like acquiring a new suit! Oh we must find you that something that fits just right...oh yes...I know you'll just love them! And they'll love you!”

He took off at a gallop, his magic pulling me lightly along.

“This will be so fun! Time to *find a gun!* Oh *yes!*”

* * *

The armoury was *gigantic* in the Mall. Behind a dozen guards and a huge door that was over a foot thick it was even more secure than storage or the plaza, this must have been some sort of safe vault back in Old Equestria. But now, the large cages within it contained benches and racks of all sorts of weaponry. Massive wall docks housed shelf after shelf of parts and boxes of ammunition. Another cage had explosive warning signs all over it. All this from just the entrance...and I could see it only went further in.

Blunderbuck danced his way into it, springing from hoof to hoof before spinning to face me, a rather too large smile on his face as I trotted in, wide eyed.

“Oh, Murky my dear, I cannot express my delight! It's abundantly clear that somewhere in here is the gun that will fit you just right!”

Carefully trotting away from all warning signs, I followed him into the primary workshop, surrounded by all sorts of bizarre de-constructed firearms. Nervously, I tried to offer at least *some* requirements to avoid breaking my own mouth...

“I...uh...can't wait to get started. But first, can I say a few things? It's kinda important the gun that I get, is something that's quiet and small...”

He swaggered past me, passing a hoof around my neck briefly to wink and dive off into one of the large cages.

“Quiet! Small! Got it!”

A dull crash sounded as he dragged a box off a cabinet top to dig around, shouting out to me as he searched. I picked at what seemed to be a giant cannon with a tiny bayonet attached to the end...

“I have so many wonderful firearms, just wait! You will see!”

I poked my head in the cage, finding him surrounded by a wealth of guns strewn all over the floor. He looked like one of the foals I'd seen in a Hearth's Warming Eve poster years ago with presents...

“Can I have something that fires a small bullet, so it won't hurt me?”

“Sure! How 'bout a *shotgun?* It's loud and proud and powerful as can be!”

The massive combat shotgun hovered up in front of me...the barrel about as wide as my *hoof*. Even I found myself looking around it with a little exasperation.

“...loud, proud? Have you even *seen* me?”

“Ah...well. Murky, have faith!” He threw one hoof around me, the other arcing out over the racks of pistols, rifles and shotguns. “You see I will *bet* you...that somewhere in here is the gun that will get you! Come on! I've got everything from mouth held to battle saddles!”

I gasped on the spot. Yes! “Battle saddles sound good! I'd like one of th-”

I was distracted by a crash, caused by Blunderbuck throwing open another cage door and dragging out a box filled to the brim with pistols of all shapes and sizes. Digging through it eagerly, he drew one, shoving it right into my mouth without so much as asking. I felt my tooth loosen again...

“Really? Because I think this big magnum has your name written *all* over it! Aww...look it matches your mane!”

Glancing down, I saw the grip did indeed have a wooden construction rather similar to my own filthy hair...but the chambers revealed bullets liable to make me *swallow the gun* if I fired it. Sighing, I spat it back into the box.

“Uh...pass.”

But Blunderbuck was already gone, heaving open a third of the tall cage doors to throw out weapon after weapon that, standing in the main workshop, I found myself dodging repeatedly. Behind him, I could see two larger cages in the darkness, heavily secured with more advanced locks. I could swear there was a pony shaped something back there...something *big*, easily a foot taller than Brimstone himself.

“I have so many wonderful choices for you to decide!”

Galloping back out, he threw or dragged a couple of items up to me whilst I glanced into the back of the room until I was literally surrounded.

“There are big launchers and guns for massive fun!”

Indeed...all of them had long bullets or thick grenade shells dropped near them as examples. Finding my lower body half buried in them as I sat down, I just sighed on the spot.

“Launchers and big hunting guns are not *quiet!*”

Blunderbuck trotted over, almost disappointed looking before he nudged one of the thick grenade launchers, or rather the enlarged places where what seemed like small artillery shells would go instead. Mister Peace would have gotten along with Blunderbuck, I was certain.

“Maybe not...but I've heard of this *particular* shell launcher throwing people ten feet in the air when it lands!”

Urgh...this buck was just insane. I'd likely be better off asking Glimmer if I could borrow her backup pistol again. I stood up, crawling out from under the pile of firearms and weapons.

“That's all, I think...I'm gonna head outta here and-”

“Wait! There must be a gun here that will fit the ticket, how 'bout a minigun or a nice flamer?”

His magic pulled them out, holding the massive weapons beside him. True to Mosin's tale before, I could see a *sniper scope* on the flamer. What was with this...

...wait...

Those weapons were attached to battle saddles! *Eee!* Maybe he had one in my size!

“Smaller and lighter!”

“Smaller, lighter, right!” Blunderbuck dropped the heavy equipment onto the ground haphazardly (was that flamer full?!) and darted off to his workbench, where he started yanking a small mesh crate from below it, snapping together various parts. “I've got just the thing in this box, Murk! Meet your new fabulous big sniper!”

Holding it out proudly, I saw a silver and gemstone decorated anti-machine rifle emblazoned with some unknown writing along the side. It was garish to my art minded eyes...but just seemed to be like any other of the half dozen big rifles I could see on the walls.

“It's...just a big and loud sniper...”

“Not just any big and loud sniper! A *silenced* big and loud sniper!”

He pointed with a hoof to a tiny bit on the end of the barrel that looked like it would silence it in the same way that me standing on a small book would make me tall.

“So...um...like I said...”

I sighed, turning to face the rather dejected looking armourer pony. He held the silver rifle close.

“Blunderbuck, please...these won't do it. Any gun in my mouth will just hurt me...I need something on a saddle, something tiny! With recoil that won't make me defy gravity!”

“Hmm...” Blunderbuck rubbed his chin, scratching his light grey coat. The rifle folding and disassembling back into the box. He began casting his eyes toward a yet untouched cage that only now I saw was filled with straps...saddles! “I'm sensing you want a gun that's small...”

Even I couldn't cull the sardonic tone from my voice. “You *think*?”

Not one to seemingly let my denial of his favourite big guns get the better of him, Blunderbuck swivelled on the spot, smiling the moment he came to face me again. I hate to admit...the joyful eccentric manner was starting to catch me up in his sheer enthusiasm. *Especially* as it might have a battle saddle by the end of it!

He began scrambling to throw open the cage door, ushering me inside before grabbing a measuring tape with his magic and checking me over with it.

“I have plenty of wonderful guns that'll go by your side! Like a sweet combat shotty or a giant dual IF-9!”

“Better, but smaller!”

He began to pull some leather straps with small gears and slides of metal off the racks, wrapping them around me. I could barely contain my excitement, he was *customising* it for me! I was getting my very own at last! But what to have on it? Oh the possibilities!

“I see...well how bout a carbine, or a sawn off or a pistol? There are so many wonderful firearms the likes of that.”

Each swept into the cage or down from above to hang before me where I let my wide eyes glance across them...oooh...

“Or there are plasmas and lasers...they have both *no* recoil! Or perhaps what you need is a hushed and poisoned dart?”

“Now you're talking!”

The odd contraptions for energy weapons hurt my brain to even imagine how they worked. But bright coloured flashes sounded really cool! I could even make them match my coat and mane! I wanted to skip in a circle, but the gradually building light battle saddle around me held me in place. I heard a whirring and sliding as it wound its way around my fleece, attaching little spindles and mechanical instruments to one side. The hooks for weaponry and tools went on next!

Blunderbuck hopped around me if anything, his voice becoming higher pitched the more he wildly got excited. But I cast my eyes across the half dozen weapons arrayed before me. I wasn't even really into shooting...but a battle saddle was just so *cool* that I had no idea what to pick for it...when would I ever get the chance again? My fear of the mission was thrown back, hidden if for now by the delight of all this choice.

“Hm...but instead of just one stand out...now that's too many...”

He craned a hoof over me, holding his head against mine. Normally, I'd have recoiled at somepony being so close, but too much excitement was whirling around in my body to care.

“Not a bad problem to have if you ask me!”

Once again, I cast my eyes over it, feeling the momentum of the moment and his excitement mesh with my own.

“The darts would be awesome...but the carbine I'm liking too...do you have something in a longer ranged dart?”

“No...but I've got a dart that's less than lethal, if them dying's not for you!”

Arggh, so much choice! “Oh...what to do...what to do...OH!”

I visibly hopped, an idea finally coming to mind!

“Of course! That's it! There's really just one way, to find the gun that really suits me best!”

Blunderbuck's eyes widened, seemingly confused as I hopped into the racks and racks of small pistols, searching and searching.

“A shiny pistol! That's small! Quiet and polite...that will fit on this saddle just right!”

Aha! There it was! My hooves dumped dozens upon dozens of pistols out of the way or threw open the cages to spot it. *Rarity's Grace* lay atop a pile, right where it had been left! As gorgeous looking as ever, it would sit gracefully and artistically upon this new battle saddle of mine! I grabbed it in my mouth, before it flew out again from Blunderbuck's magic and began to clip on amongst the various fragile pieces he was attaching to my sides.

“Don't forget style! That should be considered!”

“So we know for sure it won't sparkle and glitter?”

“For the one who is sneaky and small...”

“Just like me!”

Finally, leather straps and a small metal frame descended over it. The entire saddle felt tiny on me, tight fitting and thin with *Rarity's Grace* covered by thin black leather to hide the sheen. This saddle was probably the lightest one I'd ever seen to fit me and only capable of holding small weaponry and tools...but I didn't care! I had one! I had one at last!

“It might hold much less, but it feels the best!”

“Cos it's all measured up just for you, see?”

Blunderbuck laughed out loud at hearing my pleasure with it. Pulling a strap tight to latch the mouthpiece to my...side? Well that was interesting, but with a quick flick of my hoof, pulled by Blunderbuck, the mouthpiece whipped off my side and flicked around to be ready in front of my jawline. Oh *wow!* Another flick sent it flipping back out of the way! But it didn't restrict me moving at all! It was just an extra little bit of leather and metal that sat around me to support light arms and things! I smiled so much to Blunderbuck, why couldn't all slavers be as cool as him?

“This is the number one, greatest and perfectest saddle in the world for me!”

Armed up, no...*saddled* up, I trotted in a circle, grinning, before heading to the doorway. *Rarity's Grace* felt snug and smooth beside me under a little flap of dark leather to stop it glinting. Blunderbuck accompanied me into the corridor before waving goodbye.

“Then let the mission begin...and may the best side win!”

With a laugh, I turned and galloped off back toward the briefing. I'd be scared as all hell soon...but for now...I could be happy with a proper little saddle just for me at last!

...eee!

* * *

Unfortunately, merely owning a battle saddle didn't particularly make me feel any more powerful en-route back to the security room. Twice I was ushered by galloping slavers to simply flee with them away from a barricade as armour piercing rounds ripped through it. The corridors were a warzone of barely blocked off defences holding the ferocious raiders inside. They weren't the best shots...but they had a frenzied courage to not flinch from any incoming fire.

Sticking low, I dodged under slavers that returned the shots with their own, squealing whenever somepony kicked my small form out of the way or knocked past me in doorways.

I just stayed happy inside...tried to force it all out and concentrate on the reassuringly tight and comfortable feel of a little battle saddle around me. Yes...stay happy...stay brave.

The thought occurred that Protégé must really trust me to simply hand me a weapon for the raid. Not

too long ago, he had *shot* me. From taking so long to properly heal, I now had a scar on my chest from that. He had stood before me, denied me and brought me down with a bullet. Now I was being permitted to be around him...carrying a loaded firearm.

The shock of the thought made me stop just outside the doorway to the security room.

What if I'd been the one with a gun? Could I have pulled the trigger if he had been in my way to freedom?

Somehow, achingly...I began to suspect that I could not have. Despite everything that he had done to me, I could not envision myself in that position and going through with the last horrific pull of a trigger to find freedom at the cost of killing somepony who seemed to care for me...as twisted as that kindness was.

Sighing and trotting inside, I found most ponies still in a state of half-readiness. Somepony had dumped armour and suits from the security station lockers on the floor, where they had been stripped of their metal plates. But the atmosphere was different...no-pony was really talking. Most seemed to be in their own little worlds; checking weapons, carving wood with magic into little shapes, cleaning a bolt or barrel. Brimstone paced nearby. I couldn't see him in this portion of the multi-roomed security station, but I could certainly *hear* him. Part of me wanted to talk to him...but even with our little exchange earlier...I just didn't feel quite ready to know what to say to the hulking raider so soon after his complete rampage in the storage room...

Everypony had their little tricks to keep themselves distracted, to try and prepare themselves mentally for the upcoming storm. I could see Glimmerlight still working around her long rifle, attaching the spark battery to the end of the barrel. It's light blue glow shone through the protective casing with clearly overloaded energy. I could see three other drained batteries near her...whatever she was up to, I doubted I wanted to be near it when it went off.

She looked up as I trotted nearer, smiling widely to me. But I'd been around her long enough to spot when it was just her forcing it. Even Glimmerlight couldn't be too happy about this situation. She'd had a rough day with Coral revealing her secrets to us all and then the encounter with Barb's raiders...

"You're looking swanky in that saddle, Murky. It suits you!"

I tried to smile as well...succeeding in a much less effective manner.

"T-thanks...it just feel good to have...and...and look!"

I twitched my front leg in that certain way, making the mouthpiece pop out and flick around on sprung gears. The oh-so-satisfying sound made my smile a little more genuine. With the same movement...I sent it back...then out again. Eventually, Glimmerlight just laughed, reaching over to ruffle my mane. But her eyes were more serious, looking into mine.

"Good stuff...loving the flick action. But I'd prefer if you didn't need to use it. Please, Murky...try to stay back from the fighting when it starts. I..I don't know how I'd feel if I had to lose you so soon after we've met, y'know? After hearing from Coral I just..."

She looked away, then back, before hugging me tightly.

"...I just feel glad knowing there's still a few folks care for an overly promiscuous casual mare like myself who's got barely any respect for her own life and memories. Don't think I didn't see you *trying* to help when those raiders..."

I just tugged tightly back, nuzzling into my 'sister's' shoulder. My voice was muffled, but I tried to make it as sincere as I could.

"I just wanted you to be okay. I don't know what I'd have done up till now without you. If I'd been left to...to hear Sundial talk about his mother without you around to...to help..."

"We help each other, Murky...we're both hurting, but we're in this hell together. But, I have to save Coral now, no matter what, I'm going all out. So...if...if anything happens in there..."

I cut her off. "No. We'll both..."

Glimmer didn't even let me continue. "If *anything* happens to me...I want you to stick with Brim, alright? He says he's all for me, but I *know* he's better than that. He'll protect you."

Already I could feel my eyes tearing up, but I held it back at just a few drips, forcing myself to nod. "I will..."

"Thanks, Murky. But don't worry...there's plenty of fight left in this mare here. Now...go see Caduceus, he wants to check you over before we head in. Don't worry about me..."

She tapped the strange rifle she was toying with. I could actually see the individual bullets all popped open to be adjusted with something...what *was* she doing?

"I've got plenty of bang all readied up for those bastards in there. We'll go in, get the slaves, kill Barb and then piss off to the Roamer to get stinking drunk. Might even try to hook you up with somepony."

I blushed on the spot, feeling embarrassment overwhelm even fear for one wonderful moment of simple worry. I hugged her once more, before leaving Glimmer to her work and wandering toward a huge pile of armour that had the nurse earth pony sitting near it sat nearby.

Caduceus was leaning on the wall and organising his medical supplies into neat rows, organising and counting. Most apparently for his pack or into the armour he had pulled from the pile earlier for quick reaching. Bandages, small healing potions and a couple syringes stood out to me. He brushed that thick blonde mane from his face to glance at me. Compared to most of the slave bucks, he seemed better fed...likely due to his specialised role, giving him a much nicer reassuring 'non-filthy slave' feel to permit him to check me over. I kinda needed it regularly anyway...

"Ah, Murk. How are you feeling after those healing potions?"

"Better...my shoulder and chest don't hurt really anymore. But I still...still feel..."

"Beaten? Unsettled?"

"Yeah...my ribs and eyes hurt...and my forehead..."

Caduceus motioned for me to sit as he checked me over, resting his hoof over my chest or examining my scar. The young buck was firm, professional and oddly...comforting. He'd proven his will to help out by putting himself in harms way for us twice already and by helping heal me after Barb's raiders had their way...

"You *are* mostly fine...I believe it's mostly just the body knowing it's not *quite* right yet. Healing potions, for all their power are pretty imprecise, we never can tell quite where most of their power is going to go if somepony has as many hurt parts as you did. But I can assure you, as far as such a hurt little pony as you can be...you've got nothing critical other than your lungs left over for this mission. Even your shrapnel wound's closed up at last."

He was right, although I'd tried to ignore the hideous mark the chunk of shrapnel had left on my lower leg, it had stopped bleeding since I'd stolen The Master's healing potions. That was worth smiling about...right? I tried to do so to Caduceus...really I'd given him too little credit.

"Caduceus...I, uh...thanks..."

"It's alright, Murk. Just doing what I do. Or what I should be doing, anyway..."

I must have raised an eyebrow in confusion, as he looked right at me and began to explain before I could even voice the question. Darn healers...always so...so perceptive...

Caduceus settled down, letting the armour barding fall before him lightly.

"See, Murk, like I was saying before, I've spent all my time in Helpinghoof Clinic or in Hearts and Hooves Hospital. I've had patients brought to me again and again...handing me nothing more than the instructions to take care of them. My only goal was to be an actual doctor...like Helpinghoof himself or Weathervane. But it was just...horrible, now that I think about it."

"Horrible?"

“Every day, ponies were being wheeled in to me, hurt or dying. Many we would save or help out...but there was always more. The wasteland or Fillydelphia...they just created more and more ponies with injuries, hurt so many that our job was nothing but just hour after hour of pain and seeing torment.”

He stopped, shrugging.

“I guess...I guess meeting you guys...I've just realised I don't want that. I don't want to be the one who just sits in a clinic waiting for people to get hurt. I'm no grand healer...but I can't ignore this chance here...to use my skills in a way to *prevent* harm, not just *cure* it. If that includes offering my healing knowledge to you in your escape...I'm in.”

That was pretty admirable, I had to admit. The thought of him accompanying us was very comforting. But the buck bashfully seemed to bite his lip.

“So...uh...I know Glimmer's fine with me but...if I may be as forward, would you accept me as one of your little group?”

The question surprised me. *Me* being given some sort of query for permission? But he deserved it...he really did.

“Um...sure?”

Much to my surprise, he leaned forward, quickly giving me a hug. I just sat in shock. What was he...

“Thank you. Sorry to sort of throw that on you, but really, I felt you needed to know Glimmer isn't the only one of us around you who feels you need a little hug now and again. You are a poor little thing...”

...but that I guess I could be fine with. I could tell he was speaking the truth. Coughing into my hoof, still feeling a little awkward, I just mumbled a thank you. Having friends still felt so new...the idea that ponies could just be so nice and comforting to one another like this felt so strange.

“Now, I better get all this organised...I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared witless but...a stands a stand, right?”

“S-sure...I'll just get some armour or something...”

He nodded, smiling and turning back to his saddlebag and own barding.

Trotting toward the pile of armour, I began piecing through it, carefully attempting to not make a noise that would disturb the dozen or so ponies around me that lay in wait for the time to move. Everything outside, the raider attacks, the desperate defence and the cries of the slave hostages every so often as they were thrown and shoved into cells with each other for 'storage'...it all seemed muted in here. Two ponies watched the window, training rifles through it that kept most raiders out of line of sight.

Somehow, I was more afraid of making a noise here than when trying to avoid most slavers out to get me...like I would disturb their peace.

Most of the armour was simply too big or heavy for me. Some plates of armour, stripped from combat barding looked the right size, but upon lifting were immensely heavy, as though from a highly dense material. I dragged out a small vest, it seemed the right size...all nice and black too! But a quick examination found the actual armour inside had been stripped out. Just my luck...

Digging through more, I found one that still had its armour plates inside. While not black, it was still dark blue and seemed about the right size I could sew down a little and fit into if I had time. It certainly seemed like a uniform of the ponies who worked here. I couldn't read, but even I could recognise the same shape of words. This one bore an emblazoned word in bright yellow upon its back, the same as above the door to this room's station, one all too easy to guess.

'SECURITY'

Immediately, I simply dropped it from my hooves, sighing at a lack of anything worthwhile. What kind of *idiot* would wear something like that? Anypony would see those bright yellow letters for miles! You couldn't hide and sneak around with them...

Eventually, I simply decided to forget anything big. Armour wasn't my thing, as I'd found in the past. It only slowed me down or made it harder to squeeze into little places. If I was being shot at, I was doing something wrong anyway. It'd be better to just stay light and as agile as my frail little body could ever manage to avoid everything altogether. To that end, I simply took a few small pieces of thickened leather to shove inside my fleece around my torso. At the very least it'd stop it hurting so much when I hit the ground from diving or being thrown.

Pulling my fleece and battle saddle (Eee!) back on, I began to trot around, looking for someplace to curl up in and wait myself. I would sketch until the time to go...hopefully of good things to calm my mind that was quickly beginning to readjust and remember what I'd agreed to do here. I'd have to draw something very nice to distract myself. Something that would make me smile and feel happy and warm inside and...and...

...and I could almost *hear* Glimmerlight teasing me in my mind for thinking of what my mind had defaulted to. Oh come on...now she was invading my own subconscious?

But trotting through the station back to my little darkened cage, I instead spotted one pony standing separate from everypony else. Ragini was leaned against the cage I'd wanted to go into anyway, fiddling with the scope on her light flyer's rifle. But Protégé...he stood alone, apart from everypony else near an internal window that gave security guards of old a view into the plaza. It was pock marked with bullet impacts, clearly until somepony gave up trying to get him through it.

I could see his face reflected in it, looking more sombre and forlorn than I'd ever imagined he could. Without really knowing why, I began quietly trotting up towards my master. His revolver floated in the air beside him, reloading...unloading...reloading again...a consistent activity that was just an ongoing twinge from his telekinesis. Spotting me in the window, he turned just enough for his one visible eye to see me.

“I see you've acquired something you always longed for then, Murk? Good for you.”

“Yes, master...thank you.”

Trotting up further, I hopped up to peer into the plaza. It was mostly empty, but clouds of smoke emerged from burning wood near the fountain. Clearly, most of them were all in the shop cells for cover or underneath us in the guardroom for defence from slaver assaults. I had to stifle my whine and tears as I saw the horrific sight of two ponies hung from the balconies that connected either side of the higher levels above the floor. Their limp bodies, one buck and one mare, swayed gently.

We said nothing more for a few seconds, while I tried to pull myself together. Protégé seemed to gaze at everything and yet nothing in any detail. He didn't even turn to me as he finally broke the silence. Speaking softly and barely moving his lips.

“I had a dream once, you know?”

“Master?”

“A dream of Equestria...of green fields, bright sunlight and vivid colours amongst a peaceful and safe world for everypony. Of a time in which there are no divisions between individuals and no hatred of purpose and direction. A world in which we did not live in fear that we'd never get to be what we truly wanted. No masters...no slaves, simply a free nation of opportunity and optimism. As best I can, I pursue that dream, Murk. Master Red Eye gave me this chance to create a world which I might be prouder of than the one I was born into.”

He lifted a hoof, placing it on the glass, staring intently past it into the plaza, at the atrocities committed within, at the bloodstained and wrecked shop fronts. I had seen this world Protégé spoke of in Aurora's memory orb...had he done the same? He was a unicorn...

“But this...this just isn't what I ever wanted to happen...”

I turned my head to look at him. Almost shocked into gasping, I could see a look on his face I'd only once seen before atop a roof outside Fillydelphia...pain. Pain and sadness deep in his eyes. He wasn't a harsh taskmaster or cruel overseer...right now all I saw was one pony who longed for something better than the hand even he had been dealt.

“I'm sorry, master...”

“No, Murk...it is me who is sorry. For everything you've been through as a part of all this whole mess in Fillydelphia. No-pony deserves to be born a slave...to never even know or be allowed to choose their own life.”

I shuffled on the spot, turning to the window again, feeling a little awkward to see my master express such emotion even through a simple look.

“I mean...I'm sorry that all this has happened...” I barely muttered it.

Protégé glanced briefly at me, as though judging to see if I were truly meaning it. I was surprised to find I did. Even if I felt guilty inside at helping cause it.

“...thank you, Murk. I'm just glad you and your friends are safe at the very least. But I have let down those I swore to protect. If I had the resources or options to keep those raiders separate...I would have. Fillydelphia, for all its ideals...I sometimes wish could do more to help those who don't deserve such a life in here...”

An awkward silence took over again. It was clear exactly who part of that last sentence was really meant to refer to. Resting my head on my hooves that were up on the window lip, I simply remained beside him for a while. But something began to bug me...from his journal I'd seen and from the things I'd heard every slaver say about him, he just felt so out of place amongst slavers...

“M-master...can I ask you, s-something, um...before we go in there?”

“Of course, Murk.”

I scuffed a hoof, trying to build the courage to just ask...finally, I took a breath and spoke.

“Why are you with Red Eye?”

My master still didn't turn round, his eye following one slave as she made a break for it below, trying with all her might to stand, gallop and escape...before being dragged right back into her cage by a raider...

Eventually, his eyepiece clicked off, hovering around before his face where he simply stared at the little device as though it alone contained the answer.

“To find freedom.”

Those were not the words I expected. Swivelling on the spot, I more properly faced him; finding both of those bright red eyes staring back at me. Only now did I begin to see how unkept and clearly run ragged he was amongst the riot that had shattered his work in the Mall apart. His mane had straggled, strands loose from being tied back falling across his face while his eyes were sullen.

“Freedom from more than just the chains that bind...freedom from the wasteland entirely, from the horrors that we all experience. But not just for myself...for all other ponies who seek it or deserve it. Ponies like you.”

He reached one hoof across, laying it on my shoulder with a weak smile that died immediately.

“Master Red Eye helped me, Murk. He found me when I had nothing left, no belief driving me or virtue to take heart in. He saved my life...offering a direction to pursue a better world with. The road was hard, harder than anything I had ever been told to do before...but I knew it was worth travelling. Now...I seek to do the same for others that he did to me. To find those who deserve a better life or who have more to offer...and help make that happen.”

My eyes widened.

“You mean...you mean you want me to *join* you? To find other ponies who aren't all bad to make things better in here?”

“I want to *help* you and those like you, Murk. To help them find their freedom through Fillydelphia and to also help find *everypony* freedom through the work that we do here. That is why I brought you here, that I might try to keep you safer and on a more stable path to what it is you want in the end. Whether that be

simply your freedom from all slavery...or to perhaps try to do more for Fillydelphia once you have freed yourself. I can teach you, aid you and protect you as best I can if you stick by my side.”

“I...I just want to be free...to just for one day know what it's like to be beyond the wall...no matter where that wall's ever been.”

“That is your choice. But I promise Murk, when we come back from this, I will do more for you. Perhaps...a chance to remain by my side more, away from those that may harm you when not serving your two year quest. Everypony deserves a fair chance to succeed.”

“But what about Glimmerlight, master? What about Coral Eve and all the others? You don't give them half the attention or...or...”

I stammered on the word...afraid to say it.

“...or *care*...that you give me.”

He went quiet. I felt his hoof rest a little more firmly on my shoulder, before he lightly patted it instead.

“...some ponies have it worse than others. I've told you so many times that I understand what you're going through on these duties for two years, Murk. That I know what it's like to have such hardship. Perhaps the calm before the storm of battle has made me willing to reflect on life...but I have never once lied or meant those as anything but an absolute *literal* saying...”

My mouth dropped open, drawing air sharply as some clouds in my mind cleared and put two and two together.

“You...you went through...”

“Two years is a hard journey, Murk. It is filled with danger, hard choices and the attentions of those who don't care about you reaching the end. Especially hard for somepony who was born into slavery.”

Attaching the eyepiece to his barding, Protégé turned from the window to face in at the team making their final preparations. He stopped, turning his head back, but not looking directly at me. His eyes simply seemed to look at nothing in particular...I knew that look...I'd worn it many times when I'd been looking backward on my life. But he had been...he was once a...

“It's not nice...is it Murk? Not knowing how to think for yourself or know what choices to make? Not understanding the emotions that flow through you after meeting the one pony who finally opens your eyes to something more?”

I couldn't speak, only stand with a mouth struggling to not just hang slightly open and quiver in an attempt to say anything. More than ever, I finally understood the link, the way that he always just 'got' how I was feeling or what I was thinking. The one element of life that connected us in a way only we could ever understand to ourselves. Protégé looked more the striving lonely pony than I had ever truly seen before, as I saw him offer a thin smile and turn back to the teams as Ragini returned and strode over to him. I hadn't even noticed her leave.

“Word from Shackles on the griffins. Sixty minutes, master! That's all they said they'd permit you to handle the matter internally before they make an example of everypony inside for rioting. Apparently a couple dozen slaves don't matter to them beside of making a proper showcase of why you don't riot. But Mosin reports all teams are ready for the false assault.”

“Thank you, Ragini. Then I suppose we should get started, we don't have long.”

Everypony looked over at the words. Stood in the centre of the team, under the gaze of Glimmerlight, Brimstone, Caduceus, Ragini, the four slavers accompanying us and...of course...my own stunned look, he just spoke quietly.

“I shall not make a grand speech or shout words of encouragement. But our course is set in. Ponies require our aid in there. Whether we are simply following orders or pursuing something of greater idealism, we are one team seeking to save the lives of those who have no reason to die in a forgotten pain inside those walls.”

He turned, eyeing each of them in turn. His gaze was sad...but not just for others, now I knew the great truth behind why he cared so much about slaves. I saw Brimstone match it with that rock solid glare...saw Caduceus pull his saddlebag tighter...saw Glimmerlight show her support with a little wink.

“We do not stop. We do not leave them to this fate in the same building with which we have been striving to create a better way than what we see every day out in the other worker dens.”

Finally, his eyes stopped across mine.

“...no-pony deserves to just be a forgotten number.”

My eyes were welling, but I controlled it, forcing it all down and with great trepidation...nodded. In response, Protégé seemed to lift the corners of his mouth a little. Turning away, slowly, the eyepiece returned to his face.

“Goddesses watch over you all. Let's go.”

* * *

An artificial night blanketed Fillydelphia.

Storm clouds moved above us, rolling and swirling amongst the smog, creating a charcoal roof that darkened the normally red haze of Fillydelphia. Glows of the industry were the exception rather than the rule all too suddenly, as most ponies had rushed indoors or under cover from the trepidation of the oncoming thunderstorm.

With good reason. In Fillydelphia...the rain *burned*.

The wind whipped at me, whirling down the larger streets and howling in the alleyways, it was more like a siren of its own, warning everypony to get away from what the sky was about to unleash. On far streets...I could see the thin lights of a cordon keeping the Mall under watch for any raider break outs...

We waited around the back of the Mall, hiding in silence amongst ditches just away from the shop cell's metal stock entrance. Protégé and Ragini were up ahead, Glimmer and Brimstone behind them, then the four slavers and finally Caduceus and myself bringing up the rear...the early warning and the medic. Behind us lay another couple dozen slavers...awaiting the chance to rush in and support out first push. Truth be told, part of me wanted to be up front right now, with Protégé. My mind was whirling, confused, afraid, panicking and absolutely curious now I knew what he truly *was*.

Really, everything of how I saw him had been turned on its head. When we got back after all this...*if* we got back...I needed to have a long talk with him.

I sat amongst the dirt, crouching low and watching the door. I was tasked to hear the assault starting...but that meant I could also hear every gunshot...every scream from inside...

That is if I could hear it above all this wind. It actually hurt my ears, sending my big one flapping back and forth as it blew madly all over Fillydelphia and send small twisting dervishes along the dusty roads.

With any luck the primary storm would just miss us before-

Flash!

“*Eek!*”

I found myself wrapped around the nearest pony. Unfortunately for him, that turned out to be Caduceus. Half choking as my front legs crushed his windpipe in shock, holding onto him with wide eyes. The sky had lit up for half a second...lightning...I didn't *like* lightning...with luck like mine I was always afraid it would just hit me wherever I was...

Almost lethargically, the storm brewing above let out a distant and deep rumble of thunder that made my mismatched ears throb and jitter above my head. The sound grew and went on far longer than any normal sky had a right doing. Without pegasi properly treating it...the Equestrian weather patterns could be downright ferocious.

The sky rumbled again, louder, more urgent and wild. Squeaking, I crushed tighter, barely even hearing Caduceus' gasps and frantic hoofing of me to stop it. I hated storms...

“...-urk! Ca...breath!”

I dropped off him, still shivering on the spot. But suddenly altogether sullen as I saw the earth pony nurse choke and gasp.

“Oh...oh I'm so sorry...sorry sorry sorry...I didn't mean to-”

“It's...phew...” He lay on his side for a moment, rubbing his throat. “It's alright...no harm, whew...done. When I said hugs were fine that wasn't quite what I meant...heh...”

He forced a smile nodded that he was indeed fine, but I still sat back in my ditch nervously. This waiting for making me so nervous that I felt ready to leap and just run or dig into the earth any second. I felt so exposed out here, even with the rickety corrugated metal shelters above our positions short of the door. Just waiting...waiting for it all to start in the blowing wind and hoping this storm didn't get worse...

Then I heard a drip.

It was followed by another...and another...then three more in quick succession. A little warm plop on my head was followed by even more...

Without any more warning...the clouds opened and streams of water battered down from the sky. Blocking sight lines, covering all around us and striking the ground so hard that it pinged back upwards by a good two feet. The wind sent it whirling under our shelter, washing across us every few seconds. The lightning wracked the sky once more, flaring the majestic shape of the Mall into stark relief before us. But its contents only made me nervous now...a raider stronghold...

Every exposed piece of skin began tingling, a prelude to the squirming and stinging that would be only a precursor to burning pains if you were left out in the rain for too long. But we had to hold here...we couldn't go any closer without risking alerting the raiders by sound until we absolutely had the assault's noise cover. That meant we simply had to endure...ever the tale of the slave.

Already my brow was stinging, my mane flattened almost immediately across it. Puddles formed, I almost lost myself in the oddly lukewarm water with my short legs. Caduceus was tossing his head, trying to flick it all off. He was blinking a lot, same as me...the water was making my eyes sear and ache. Whimpering, trying not to scream in fear of making too much noise, I did my best to stay under the little shelter we had. Those around us were almost invisible through the deluge, some of the slavers cursing as exposed bodies felt their skin crawl with pain.

“Well...thanks for that, Celestia, you great big bitch...” muttered one of the slavers, the unicorn mare. She caught my shocked look, before just rolling her eyes and turning away.

Protégé just seemed to stand alone, watching the crater under the rain that was striking the ground so hard it bounced as high as my head, sometimes spitting up into my eyes.

Really...I knew this was an opportunity, but my courage to ask had failed me. Now I didn't even know if I was looking at a slave or a master anymore. He was both and yet neither...stuck between two worlds and choosing the one that set him apart from me. Even just watching him standing and staring into the distant crater...I felt nervous to even think about his life. But it explained so much about him...

Under the storm's blackness, the crater was an eerie sight. I'd been in it before, it had just seemed like a blasted ruin. But in such darkness, I could see an ominous light glow coming from the core, drifting in the dust that swayed on the wind between the irregular torrents of rainfall. There was no-pony but the raid teams around, giving rise to an odd sense of isolation within the normally bustling city.

Tossing my head and whimpering at the growing pain from the rain as it blew into my face, I tried to shelter down in the ditch as best I could, but the ground was becoming muddy...dripping water down the sides to cluster below my hooves. Everypony was fidgeting...all except Brimstone in his fairly enclosed armour and Protégé, who simply stood with his eyepiece off and staring deeply into it.

Already, my stomach was twisting over and over at the terror of what would happen once we went beyond that door. Fear kept building...we were uncomfortable, trapped in the humid and heavy air, in pain from the poisoned water and just awaiting the signal to begin a brutal assault. Even my rampant curiosity and confused glances toward Protégé now were not helping me to fight the urge to run and hide...

But I could hardly think on that now...my eyes kept returning to him standing just short of the rain.

But I really didn't know if I were staring at a fellow slave just like me or whether I simply saw my master...

When we got back...I needed a long talk with him...I had to-

Thoom!

My ears perked before my face even reacted, was that thunder? But immediately after, there was a second...a third...

My heart began to slow...like I wanted to ignore it, deny it...

It had been an explosion, dull and far off through many walls, muffled by the rain. But I had heard it...

I immediately reached over and clattered my hoof on a slab of metal, alerting Protégé without having to raise our voices. He turned, watching me intently.

“Murk?”

A roar of gunfire began to pick up. Those closer to the door were even beginning to look up now, I saw Ragini nod.

“...the assault...”

Protégé wasted no time, drawing his revolver and clipping the eyepiece back on.

“This is it, team! Brimstone, get the door! Everypony else, weapons at the ready and kill all noise. We infiltrate as far as we can before we have to open fire!”

Brimstone rushed up to the door, his great hooves wrapping around the bars to tug it open; the rain washing off his armour while he did so. He'd ditched the helmet, I guessed out of fear of what it brought out in him. Everypony else readied up...drawing weapons or tightening armour as we galloped up through the sodden ground. My skin *burned* under the rain, my mane flopping and fleece soaking it up within seconds of moving into the thick deluge.

I flicked my leg, making the mouthpiece flip out for *Rarity's Grace*. I had its three shots and the two grenades I'd stolen from The Master's locker...it'd have to do in my protection. But a strange wave of calm overcame me. The waiting was over...all problems were lesser now compared to the coming storm. The sky itself was reflecting the mood...

With a creak and groan, Brimstone threw the door open, heavy metal hinges sliding uneasily on rusted joints. Even above the thunderstorm and rain, the firefight was now audible at a ferocious level inside...punctuated by all sorts of explosions.

Protégé was first up, disappearing inside, followed by Ragini. Everypony else followed, Glimmer with a last firm nod to me...Brimstone with that grim expression...the slavers who warily trooped in...

Caduceus stopped, offering a hoof back as the other 'back end' pony.

“Just keep moving, we stall and I'll probably be too scared to move too...we'll just stick together Murk, the two of us. Okay?”

Standing in the harsh wind...I took a few breaths before nodding...reaching out to take his hoof...and disappearing inside.

Here we go...

* * *

We were home.

The back of our shop cell was decimated. The sofa torn up and the scrap pile tossed and scattered from raiders searching for anything. Shelves were toppled and the stench of waste and blood drifted throughout...

Brimstone hauled the door closed as lightly as he could behind us, leaving one stone in the hinge to let the relief force behind us in when their time came. But he hadn't needed to be that quiet...for the assault was drowning everything out. Explosions every few seconds and the staccato retort of gunfire pounded throughout the building. I could hear raiders galloping by the front of the cell, rushing to the guard rooms and returning fire with long bursts.

Protégé was up front, ready and edging closer to the door. Looking back, he motioned me over as the remainder of the raid team settled into the corners, staying silent. I crept over, hustling up beside him and feeling the unicorn lean close to my ear.

“We need to know what's out there...you have it?”

I did indeed. My new toy. A few minutes waiting had been spent making it. Pulling the little mirror I'd found from the containers out, it was now attached to a thin piece of metal and bound on with fabric. My master took it, his magic angling it just out to peer around the corner and into the main shop.

Both of us stared at it, oh-so-patiently angling it for the best viewpoint that would show us the front of the store and whether there were any guards. Occasional blurs of motion on the dirty mirror gave rise to them pushing past the front in twos or threes. We waited...still...stay still...

I listened carefully...after a while, with no more movement on the mirror and no sounds nearby...I nodded.

The responsibility of the decision weighed heavy, but despite recent knowledge, I found myself eager to do as Protégé wished of me. Somehow, he felt closer...like I had to help him all the more.

Ragini went first, proving herself remarkably stealthy as she slid around the corner and behind the counter of the shop. But then...she *had* followed me all night once without me ever spotting her...

Protégé went after her, followed by Glimmerlight. Two of the slavers were waved into the store, where I saw them roll behind a low shelving unit in the middle. Each stayed in cover, out of the way of the main open entrance. I just hung back in the stock room with Caduceus and Brimstone; the big raider would move with us...waiting for anything to kick off for his might to be unleashed.

As if we needed any more...the assault was ear shattering. Automatic gunfire and echoes reverberating everywhere accompanied by frantic shouting about reloading or to cover each other crossed over whoops of frenzied delight. It may have all been out of the plaza and past the guard room, but to me...it was as though I was right in the middle of it.

This was the hard bit...we knew Barb was on the upper levels, but the only staircase was out of the shop front and then fifty metres to the right across ground that was visible from above. Most of the raiders would be out front, away in the corridors...but any that were above would likely spot us. The entire point was just to get as far as we could before that happened...

“Everypony ready?” Protégé's voice hissed out, responded by a series of light taps. I didn't tap...I wasn't ready, but I knew I had no say in this.

It was just going to be a straight run...one brutal rush to get upstairs and kill Barb before bunkering down around any slaves we could find.

“Go!”

Protégé and Ragini swept out of the store front. Glimmerlight went right after them, followed by the slaver fireteam. Brimstone shoved Caduceus and myself out before him and we galloped across the shop into the plaza...

...into hell.

Under the storm, the plaza was leaking terribly, water dripped from the skylight above or down from rusty

pipes on the walls. Already the whirling wind could be heard under the rumble of thunder. Lightning flared, lighting the entire grisly sight of a raider encampment. Fires had their smoke mixed with the rain, offering sight upon the mutilated bodies that were hung from balconies or horribly tortured unto death while lashed to wooden planks. Skins or bloodstained clothes were scattered everywhere and the stench...

...my stomach twisted all the more with revulsion, requiring Caduceus to grab my hoof and pull me on. We galloped right into it, hopping over the foul remnants as we stuck to the wall of shops and every shadow we could. Above us I could hear the raiders...if I turned my head I could see one or two on the opposite side of the plaza, up above on the balcony. They weren't looking down, instead distracted by the sounds coming from the guardroom.

“Cover!”

Protégé's voice sounded just loud enough for me to relay the message by tugging the others. We dropped into the next shop alone, scrambling behind old jewellery stands to hide. Poking my head out just enough...I saw three more raiders run across the plaza from the stairs. We'd dodged all sight by sheer luck...

The next stretch of the plaza would cover us much better. The balconies didn't exist this far back, as the entire level above stretched across the entire plaza, filling the whole gap above us. But that didn't mean raiders couldn't be *anywhere*.

Already, I could hear them trotting around above us through the lower roof...we would have to fight at the top of the stairs one way or another. Listening intently, I heard the door we came in open again, the second team of more slavers creeping in to await their back up assault. The stage was set...

“Move!” Protégé was curt and simple in his commands, avoiding too much noise. Ragini led this time, moving out around the shop to-

She walked *right* into a raider! The mare reacted with shock at the griffin, before opening her mouth to cry out and throw a hoof. Why hadn't I heard her? Had she just been lying in the shadows out there sleeping?!

Ragini wasted no time. Before a single sound could be made, her talon wrapped around the mare's mouth, using her superior size and strength to quickly wrench the raider's neck hard enough that I heard a sickening *pop*. Shaking under both the tension and fear...I had to calm my stomach by looking away when I spotted the mare still living for a few seconds before the injury caught up with her brain.

I'd always thought that killed instantly...

Proving me tragically wrong, the mare's eyes flickered, panicking...and finally going dead. Wrenching the neck once more to make sure, Protégé's griffin bodyguard pulled the mare inside and dumped her in the corner. The griffin saw my horrified face, just winking at me.

“Too much for you, flightless?” Her hushed whisper drifted into my ears. “Bet you just wish you had that pigsty back, right?”

I just looked away, leaving her to flick her wings with a grin and move back to the store front. Was she *enjoying* this?

We slipped out as one team, keeping to the wall. A low sound of moaning and pain entered my ears...multiple voices alongside plenty of shuffling nearby. Slaves? I sped up, aiming to move over to Protégé and alert him that we were near the prisoners. This was going well, if we could just-

Protégé was blown clean off his hooves before I even heard the thumping sound of a gunshot reach us.

“SNIPER!”

“Where is he?!”

The slavers spun, but Ragini was well ahead of them, taking to the air and raising her energy rifle. Across the plaza, in another shop cell, a second muzzle flare kicked up that took a chunk out of the concrete wall above Protégé's head. With a flare and snap of discharged magic, Ragini melted the sniper's head clean off

with a green lance of light.

That was it. There was one brief moment of horrendous silence...I hoped that it might have been lost in the noise of the assault. But then one shout went out, calling 'everypony up', then another to get guns...then a half dozen hooves...

We were busted.

Caduceus ran forward to Protégé, as did I. The slave master was already trying to pull himself up, favouring his left side.

“Hold still! Hold still! Let me get a look at-”

“I'm just winded, the armour took it, we need to-ergh! We need to...move! Go!”

Even so, Caduceus and I still helped him up. Around us, the raiders were realising they had been breached. Hooves on stairs sounded alongside the screams of slaves as they were presumably threatened to stay still. Carrying a limping Protégé, we let Ragini and the slave armed with a battle saddle lead. Simply rushing now, we reached the stairway.

It was not unguarded. Large and wide, the stairwell to the upper floors was thick enough to take eight ponies at a time...and not your scrawny post-bombs ponies either. But barricades were set up on it, one at the halfway point up where the stairway reversed and went back on itself to the upper level and one at the bottom. A dozen raiders were spread out, immediately rushing down to meet us coming the other way. A large set of more barricades were right in front of us, clearly a fall back point for the raiders should they have lost the guard room.

Trapped between us and them were a great mass of slaves...all cowering at the sides or below the stairs.

Throwing ourselves behind the closer barricades, the gunfire began. I found myself trapped in a small bit of cover behind an overturned refrigerator, almost pressed into Caduceus' chest to keep all our hooves behind it.

“Kill em all! KILL!”

Shots made the fridge jar and shift on the spot. Shotgun slugs thudded deeply into it, so hard that the metal surface smacked me in the face. Protégé lifted his revolver above it with magic and let off three rounds blindly, relieving some of the pressure. But he was breathing hard, a hoof on his side. Yet still...he managed to raise his voice.

“Don't get bogged down! Fire and move! *Fire and move!* We have to keep going!”

Around us, the team has clustered into what we could. Glimmerlight was beside the female unicorn slaver, firing a few shots with her pistol around the side of the stripped metal plates they had to stay alive behind.

Ragini was actually above us, using a thick metal sign hanging from the roof as a hiding spot to fire off snap shots that were above the raiders' own cover. Boy...flying was *handy* in a fight!

But the raiders were digging in hard. Made even worse by the slaves who were struggling to stay to the side, our line of fire was restricted. The barricade on the first stairwell platform was just pumping out too many shots from five or so raiders behind it.

We were pinned. Protégé hastily reloaded his revolver to open fire again, but we couldn't aim properly to get ahead. Nearby, I heard a cry of pain that only went on and on with horror. An armour piercing round had punched right through the barricade and sheared the leg off one of the buck earth pony slavers with us.

Flailing and panicking, he was cut down out of cover. I heard Caduceus hiss in anger...unable to move over and aid the pony. The nurse was rattling off what shots he dared with that small sub-machine gun of his, but he was clearly not very accurate with it.

“Anypony got any bright ideas?!” Protégé shouted out, quickly snapping a shot at a raider trying to push forward and get around us. The pony went down, nursing their shoulder, but pulled themselves into cover.

I wish I had...but I was useless here, just a bystander in a firefight. I just winced every time a shot spanked off our cover...whimpering with terror that an armour piercing shot might rip through it any moment...

“Give me some cover!” Glimmerlight cried out, holding the long rifle tipped with the spark battery, surprisingly, in her hooves.

The command went out, everypony leaned up and unleashed what firepower they had. All except me. I only had a few bullets in *Rarity's Grace* for self defence...but nothing for mass firing. But between Ragini, Caduceus, Protégé, three slavers and even Brimstone with the fallen slaver's weapon. I actually screamed at the pain in my ears, so much gunfire going off so close to my head was like a crowbar being jammed in my ear. But the raiders' died down, giving Glimmerlight an opportunity.

The Ranger Initiate leaned up, settling the rifle on the barricade with her hooves to get her eye right down and aim properly...what on Equestria was it going to-

She fired. With a loud *crack* and ping, the spark battery on the tip catapulted off, flying high and arcing down toward the barricade up ahead. Smashing into the lip of it, the spark battery flared and ignited, exploding with a blue haze and arcing magical energies. Raiders screamed, diving away with their bodies burned and disintegrating. One in the middle I saw turned simply to ash under the full force of the explosion. She's made an energy *grenade* to be fired from that rifle...

I wasn't sure whether to be horrified at the effect or proud of my 'sis for breaking the deadlock. The slavers got their weapons back up, shooting back more properly now their biggest source of incoming fire was down.

“Go! Get on their flanks! On their flanks, Ragini, move!”

Protégé shouted the order, falling back as the fridge lurched under a heavy rifle round to knock his likely heavily bruised side again. Caduceus caught him as he fell back, while I looked up. On their flanks? Why that? We weren't even anywhere close enough to be touching-

...oh...oh right, that's what he meant. I really was *useless* at this fighting business...

Ragini swept down, her energy rifle flashing to the left. Slaves dived away from cover, trying to escape a raider who was using them as a hostage. Ragini's fire cut him down before the execution shots went in. On the other side, I saw Brimstone rush up, pulverising one piece of cover under the sheer weight of him and his armour to allow the slavers following him to move in. Protégé turned to me and Caduceus.

“You two, move up and follow Brimstone, they're going to start swinging more fire back here now that they've seen me leading them. I'll support Ragini's side while Muzzle Flare and Granite Hoof keep up fire from the centre! Go!”

But...but I didn't...

“GO!”

My master commanded, making me turn and gallop across the battle line towards Brimstone's cleared area. The big raider was now hiding behind a pillar until he could get a chance to push forward again. What if- ARGH! ARGH ARGH AARRGH!

Shots were whizzing around me, pinging off the ground. *They were firing at me!* Where do I go? Where do I stop? *What cover is good?!*

Screaming, almost dancing on my hooves, a sudden weight slammed into me and pulled me to the floor. Kicking and scrambling toward cover, I found Caduceus was the one pulling me in, wrapping his hooves about me to tug me to safety behind another wide pillar. Behind me, I saw the fridge torn apart. If we'd stayed there...

Protégé hadn't gotten far. The ground was chewed up near where he must have run, but now he was beside Glimmerlight, who was struggling to attach another spark battery to her rifle. She was so intent...falling into a drill. I began to see the real Ranger Initiate in her, more than just the fun loving mare I knew. I often forgot she had been born into a militaristic upbringing.

“SHIT!”

Caduceus swore, the first time I could ever remember hearing him do so. But turned my head, I almost

joined him (*almost...it might have been 'sugar!'*) as I saw one raider coming down the opposite staircase on the other side of the plaza. He had a clean shot!

Caduceus sprayed his sub-machine gun. He was inaccurate, but dumping the entire amount of his rounds brought down the raider. Breathing hard, the nurse just stared at the corpse.

“...do...do no harm...do no harm...he was...he was going to harm more...”

Breathing through clenched teeth, the buck seemed to hug me for support, realising what he'd done.

But this battle was escalating. Three more raiders ran down the stairwell from above. Protégé downed two, Ragini the last one, but *another* two followed, galloping to join their clan comrades. What if any more came behind us? We were too exposed, in real danger...I had two grenades...maybe I could...

No! Any glance out showed me the slaves trapped on the edges and near the slavers. I couldn't throw explosives in there! But I had to do...something...

Reaching down, I picked up a rock in my mouth. Pushing Caduceus' hooves away, I leapt out and began sneaking along the edge of cover nearer Brimstone. Ducking down, scooting as best I could and trying to ignore the foul taste of the rock, I edged as close as I could...

“GRENADE!” I screamed all I could, diving back behind the barricade. Up ahead, the shout was echoed, before half a dozen raiders leapt out of cover, along with screaming slaves rushing away. One of the slavers, Muzzle Flare, I thought, raised her carbine in a telekinetic field and took three out with well placed snap shots. Wow...she was *good*. Ragini, swapping out for her light bullet fed rifle, picked another one off.

Somehow, without even realising I'd had a big effect...I had changed the momentum. There were only four raiders left now, after I spied the one Protégé had winged earlier now lying still...he'd bled out.

“Stop 'em getting higher! Come get some ya fuckers!”

But the remaining ones were not giving out. I squealed and screamed as combined fire chewed at the wooden barricade I was behind. Bullets flew through, spraying me with woodchips. I heard Caduceus scream for me to get back to the pillar, but I'd locked up with fear. If...If I left they'd just shoot me in the open!

A grinding, shrieking of metal on rock hit my ears. Glancing up, I saw Protégé and Glimmerlight pushing an old metal rubbish bin, heavy and square, toward the last raider position. The pair were drawing fire, giving me time to leap back toward Caduceus. Protégé's revolver shot over the top, such close range pushing the raiders back to further away cover...but giving the flanking elements a chance to move.

Brimstone and Ragini descended. The former charged, bellowing a warcry and hurling a stone the size of a *boulder* at one. The stallion's head cracked, showing blood, before their previous leader crashed into the other, pulverizing her head off the railing of the staircase with repeated crushing blows. Ragini swept down in a strafing run, blasting one in the rump before descending in a dive with her rear legs outstretched. Between Brimstone and the griffin...they tore the remainder apart in close combat.

There was still a small war going on in the guardroom...still another whole level to go...but somehow I felt a certain degree of pause and relief. Protégé set the slavers to guard the stairwell until we could properly regroup, before Ragini flew out to watch for anypony trying to come up behind us on another stairwell from the opposite side.

We gathered in the middle, Caduceus immediately running into the slaves. Protégé lay down against a barricade, breathing hard and clutching his side. I could see Glimmerlight busy searching for Coral Eve, while Brimstone I did not want to approach just post-battle. As such...I found myself trotting over to my master.

“Are...are you alright?”

“Well...if being shot and being alive counts, I s-suppose...ergh...but the slaves here are safe. Too late for many though, damn raiders...”

He cast his eyes around, mine following them. The atrocity was clear. Many of who I thought were simply tired slaves lying at the side simply were not. We'd secured the majority, but the raiders had done so much damage to them. I saw ponies weeping over lost ones, bloodstained rugs covering bodies and those who simply lay in corners with wide eyes, nervous of anypony coming close. Caduceus was fighting to help one pony whose mouth had been cut at either side into some sort of grim smile. But she was consistently moving away from him, screaming and pushing herself closer to other mares. I could only stare and shockingly know why...

We couldn't pause long, they would be fortifying the area above. At the very least, we controlled the stairwell, so they couldn't send anypony to summon their guard room defence backwards. But it was only a matter of time before we were overwhelmed...we had to push on and call the relief force once we had cleared the balcony above.

“Coral! Oh Celestia...Caduceus, over here!”

I spotted the nurse galloping before I even saw Glimmer trying to help the light grey unicorn up. She was a mess...battered, bruised and bleeding. Her coat, just off-white to a tinge of grey was pockmarked with all a matter of beatings while that long blue, white and black mane had been cut out of its braiding to hang loose. But even with her exhausted strength, she was still trying to push Glimmer away.

“Get...get *off* me!”

“Coral, *please*, let me help you here...”

Caduceus took over for her, gently moving Glimmerlight to the side himself. Clearly, he figured that Coral would respond better to somepony different. Drawing some bandages and a healing salve, Caduceus set to work. Coral's eyes, however seemed to focus on me.

“Y-you...Murk...you came in to h-help...?”

Gulping, I nodded. “Yes...so did Caduceus...and Glimmer. She wanted to help you...”

“Great...being helped back into the same slavery her actions put me within in the first place. That and-”

She stopped, her eyes focussing behind me. Coral shivered...a look of sudden fear and blinding *hatred* all at once in her eyes. Turning slowly, I simply found Brimstone Blitz nearby behind me. His own beady eyes matched Coral's now fierce glare.

“*You!* Glimmer...don't tell me you're working with this...this *monster!* Don't you remember what he did to us?!”

“He's changing, Coral! He's trying to be better and make up for things, just like I am to-”

“Shut up! SHUT UP! You say you're trying to seek my forgiveness...then you work with the beast that destroyed our village? That *killed* our families and friends? The one that brought us here?!”

My mind reeled. Sat amongst them, I found myself unknowing of even who to look at. Coral was made of sheer fury in her face right now, Glimmerlight pleading...Brimstone was just an impassive rock that simply stared back before finally looking away...he didn't say a word.

Brimstone...had been the one to do that to them? To bring them in here? Sweet Celestia, why hadn't they told me?! I just paced on the spot, looking from pony to pony...

Glimmerlight stomped a hoof. “Brimstone's saved my life over and over again, Coral! He's saved Murky too! He's changed, Coral, becoming a better-

“Glimmer that raider destroyed our lives! Even *aside* from what *you* did, he is a blight on this world! Nothing better than Barb and his lot, they're the same clan!”

“Brimstone's trying to help us stop Barb! Trying to redeem himself-”

“Stop right there!”

Coral pulled herself up, pointing a hoof accusingly at Glimmer.

“There is *no* redeeming yourself for an entire life of being what he is! How many ponies has he killed, Glimmer? How many children left homeless and orphaned because of what he did to their parents? Ponyville would still be around, we'd still have a home! But *no*, you betrayed us! He destroyed us! It'd be a mercy for him to just be killed!”

Throughout the exchange, Brimstone merely stood solemnly, eyes closed. The big earth pony seemed to show little emotion normally, but after knowing him for a while I could see the lack of an expression...the one that stated something had penetrated that thick hide of his...

I was still trying to get around it all, decipher it all in my head. I'd thought Glimmer and Brimstone had only first met in here...it cast a whole new immediate reality on just the sort of things Brimstone had been responsible for in his life.

“There's no fixing it, huh?” Glimmerlight spoke curtly, keeping her eyes everywhere but on Coral.

“Well...forgive me for trying. But I'm going to go do that now.”

“What are you-”

“Barb's up there...he's done all this now. We're going to stop him. You say they're all the same...well here's where we prove Brim isn't. Because him and I are going up there...we're going to help Protégé in killing that bastard once and for all. We'll show you things aren't the same...then afterwards...”

“Then what?”

“I'm going to remember, Coral.”

“Hm?”

Glimmer's eyes narrowed. “I'm going to *remember*. If that's what it takes to understand...to know what I did. I'm going to work on it, go through my orbs...remember what it was I did. I...I can't promise I'll be quick or...or easy with it but...I want to know what it was I did to you. Just so I can understand...you were my best friend, Coral...”

The pale grey unicorn seemed to bite back another bitter remark, but shifted on the spot, testing her bandaged hoof on the ground before returning the look.

“I just hope that someday I can be half the pony Brimstone is...he doesn't hide from his past like I do! He *told* me when we met and you know what? I still forgave him! Perhaps it was easier because I didn't remember...that it was nothing other than an unseen fact of history. So maybe you're right that my will to forgive anypony and anything is a lie! Maybe I'm not that beautiful pony who can bury any hatchet and just smile! But I can't change that now...all I can do is keep trying to make the best of what I have! Right now? That's by showing that I'm going to take steps.”

Coral seemed a little stunned...as though she had never expected Glimmer to show that amount of sudden maturity or serious thought.

“Steps...?”

Glimmer's horn lit, pulling the long rifle toward her where she wracked the bolt.

“By going up there...and bringing down one of the ponies who destroyed *our* village, Brim's going up too. Maybe once you see him try to end this, show he's on the other side now...you'll know I...we...mean it.”

There was an uneasy silence after that. I could see Protégé standing nearby, clearly only a few seconds off giving the order to keep pushing. We'd been stopped for a couple minutes to reload and get our breath back, what felt like an eternity when we were still exposed in this plaza. Finally, Coral looked away, snorting.

“You've got a long way to go, Glimmer...if you ever hope to even want to make me see you as ever really looking to properly apologise. This was no accident or random consequence, what you did. When you finally remember...just be ready to accept who you really are. But do *not* ask me to see that raider as anything other than that...he's done too much to me already. I'd still have my son with me if it weren't for you two...not have him locked away with Red Eye.”

With that, she turned, limping away to the clusters of slaves again, stopping only briefly to turn her head and speak quietly.

“If you're looking for Barb, he's upstairs in the old restaurant. He's been lording it up...having mares sent to him and suchlike, as though it's his fortress now.”

Then she was out of sight, behind the staircase. Silently, under Protégé's nod of approval, we began cantering up the stairs...above us, I could hear the raiders shout that we were coming...the real battle was about to begin.

But as I passed the lip of the stairwell, dodging the piles of ash from Glimmer's energy grenade...I could only hear the faint sniffs of a sound from below it that I knew all too well from a thousand times of doing it myself.

The sound of somepony crying.

* * *

Battle had been joined before I even caught up to the top of the staircase. The others had pushed ahead, leaving myself and Caduceus to follow up in our own time. The young nurse was still in a state of half shock at his self defence earlier...I wished I could understand. I'd never killed anypony...

I began to feel I might have to the moment I saw what we approached.

The sound was catastrophic, energy flares, bullet echoes and pings surrounded by the chip and shatter of concrete and whipping fabric. Screams, shouts, taunts and orders rung out alongside frantic scrambling and sliding.

When I finally saw it...I almost stopped just to stare.

The raid team had run forward, pushing off the stairs with sheer speed to get out of the chokepoint, but they had met a wall of resistance. Up ahead, behind more scrappy barricades, raiders were ducking and diving, throwing all sorts of fire out at Protégé and his team. Smoke and mist flew into the air as either side's cover was chewed up or blown apart. Already I saw Protégé himself running out under fire to dive and roll on his side, crying out in pain from the impact just to take better cover. Three raiders lay dead in between where they had clearly charged.

Into this madness, I ran.

Leaping up and over a fallen concrete block riddled with holes, I passed by Ragini sniping from the back, the retort of her rifle dizzying me as we pushed onward. Three seconds of tense galloping later, I dropped beside Glimmer into heavier cover. Already, the thunderstorm was getting worse. Lightning lit the firefight, shattering the skies and the atmosphere with every thick white flare of illumination. Higher up to the skylight, the wind was even blowing down and in, carrying the burning rain inside to leak and fall upon the floor.

Between the shots, whipping dust, rain and storm, the entire thing was complete sensory overload, a madness of violence and chaos that swept across the entire second plaza level.

“Push in! Push in! We **cannot stop!**” Protégé's voice carried out, followed by the pounding as I saw Brimstone charge right past us heedlessly, directly into the lane of fire.

Using the chance, Glimmerlight leaned out, fired the rifle and then charged after him. So much smoke was being kicked up from missed shots that we could almost move without being seen across the second level of the plaza. A rending crash sounded ahead, Brimstone bucking a metal plate so hard it collided with the raiders behind it, before we all ducked behind it again. Opposite us, Protégé and the three slavers poured a ridiculous level of firepower ahead of them to force the raiders back.

“Murky, stay down! *Stay down!*” Glimmer shoved me to the floor rather roughly, a torrent of fire washing over our cover enough to fling shrapnel of concrete and metal all over us. Cowering upon the floor, I witnessed my friend firing and hiding, firing and hiding, over and over again. Each time racking the bolt with enough force I was afraid it'd break. To my surprise, a few more ponies rushed up behind us...more of

the slaves with captured weaponry charged up the stairwell, unloading everything they could into the raiders with vengeance in their eyes.

Anything above two feet from the ground became a killing ground. One of the slaves was beheaded by the heavy round before they could even scatter, but their distraction allowed the slavers to run up, whooping as they decapitated a raider in appropriate response.

Glimmerlight forced me down as Brimstone took the bulk of the barricade's metal plate and actually lifted it similar to how he had done in the Stable. Acting as moving cover, he pushed onward with Glimmer taking pot shots behind him. Keeping low, I ran to the side, screaming as I heard an energy blast sizzle close enough to char my tail until I dropped alongside Protégé.

“Clear the balconies for the relief force to push in and support us, they can flank beneath us on the other stairwell. Then it's a straight shot with a cornered Barb.” He quickly turned to me. “You holding up?”

I wasn't. It was an effort to barely stop myself from fleeing the brutal gunfight. But only the fear of being shot down really kept me in one spot. Only from my skin tingling did I realise that a leak in the skylight was dropping down. Glancing up, through the whizzing rounds and blasts, I could see the oddly skeletal shape of a platform below the skylight. Rain dripped around it, down upon me. Already, most of us were soaking again.

Seeing me clearly speechless, Protégé pushed me down with a hoof.

“Stay here! Just shout if you hear them flanking up behind us!”

Leaning out, he took a shot with his revolver before rushing forward, disappearing into the madness. Raiders were *everywhere*. Shots came from above, on the third level of the plaza, from either side in shop cells or directly ahead behind barricades. A scream went out, before I saw Muzzle Flare fall to the side, her neck punctured. Caduceus rushed to her, pressing hard on the wound while he dug out a potion.

But if I dared peer out, crying and whimpering as my ears threatened to deaden under the cacophony of chaos, I saw what Protégé meant. The balconies that overlooked where we'd come in were swarming. No relief force could come in that way under that watch! Around me, ponies, slaver and slave, pushed into it. Another of the six remaining slave volunteers went down, dropping just in front of my cover. Brimstone's advance was all that was keeping us going, along with Ragini diving from area to area, her wings carrying the journey while she sniped at those on the third level. I saw one fall from his balcony, wailing on his way down to impact in a growing puddle upon the floor. The thunder coincided with his impact.

Then the order came, we had no other choice.

“Everypony, **charge! We need to clear the balcony! CHARGE! MOVE!**”

I didn't know if that meant me or not, but his voice was commanding and definite. I saw raiders beginning to flank around us from the opposite stairwell...I had to move! Now!

As one, we broke cover, galloping into the maelstrom of incoming fire out of sheer need, one suicidal rush to clear the balcony and let the relief force in! Brimstone hurled the barricade, smashing asunder two raiders blocking the way with a captured tripod machine gun. Glimmerlight fired another energy grenade to the high level, ripping away a fence and blasting the two raider snipers away. I found myself behind Protégé and Caduceus. The latter was dragging the injured Muzzle with him, spraying fire from his mouth held weapon. My master fired precise shots to all sides, but was limping and slowing down.

Rushing up, I forced myself along side him, helping to keep him going. Terror gripped me so hard that I just fell back into my basest instincts. *Help your master*. Blood sprayed across me, Muzzle Flare inadvertently being the only thing keeping Caduceus from losing his head as her shoulder evaporated. Dropping the corpse, he joined our charge.

Everything became a blur...but before I knew it, we were on the balcony. Brimstone threw a raider off the edge, Ragini was fighting a raider with a knife, rolling across the floor with him. She had taken a bullet to a hind leg. Glimmerlight fell. My cry of shock stopped only as I saw she wasn't shot...simply rolling under the balcony lip to stay in cover.

We were under fire from all heights and locations...too much to take on. Most of us were wounded, the slaves were simply firing scared...but we had done it, we had cleared the balcony. Protégé leaned over, crying out so hard his voice broke.

“RELIEF TEAM! MOVE IN! **MOVE IN!**”

The slaver with the carbine battle saddle blasted a raider running up with a sledgehammer, making the buck catapult head over hooves. Another followed...and another. Brimstone intercepted them, engaging in combat with multiple attackers, his armour sparking from the rounds striking it. Their efforts were barely holding off the tide, a half dozen small combats as part of one greater whole to keep this one point clear. Below us, I saw movement at the shop cell. Reinforcements! They spread out, getting ready to charge in toward the stairwells now the balcony wouldn't simply massacre them. About time too...we could barely hold this position any longer.

...why weren't they moving?

“RELIEF TEAM! STAIRWELLS! NOW!” Protégé screamed, waving his revolver toward the ends we had moved up from. A bullet chipped off the balcony ledge, sending shrapnel to dig into both of us. I cried out, falling backward toward the fence around an already wrecked hole, clutching the side of my neck. My hoof came away bloody...shaking horribly. Looking down, I saw the reinforcements just standing there, why where they-

Then I saw *him*.

Moving sideways through them, casually touring it and watching the brutal scene engaging the raid team above...The Master casually stepped to the leader and laid a hoof on his shoulder...before shaking his head.

“SHACKLES! MOVE IN! MOVE IN **NOW!**”

The Master merely turned, seeing the bleeding, wounded and desperate Protégé trying to order the rest in...and shook his head. Grinning that hideous grin...he simply stepped backwards, followed by the entire team meant to support and reinforce us...

“**SHACKLES!**” Protégé's voice barely seemed to carry now...as the reality sunk home.

We'd been abandoned...betrayed...left to die. Protégé had tried to keep him out of it...but he had come back. The slavers obeyed *him*.

“Where are the fucking second team?! We can't hold this!” Glimmerlight swore again, colourfully, struggling to reload her rifle while dodging fire from a dozen sources. Ahead of us, echoing a blood curdling wacry, a huge rush of raiders erupted forth from the shop cells where they'd been hiding in the shadows...and charged us.

I flipped the mouthpiece of my battle saddle out, gripping it in my mouth. Protégé was already firing, his revolver slapping six shots toward the incoming mass. I saw Ragini blasted from the air, firing with one arm on the ground with a steely look in her eyes. Turning toward the raiders, driven by pure fear and desperation, I snapped the three shots I had off. One raider went down, the small bullet not even making him cry out before he struggled back up, nursing the dented armour plate he had stolen.

Brimstone Blitz hit them like a cannonball, crashing through them with a charge of his own. But they swarmed him. Although gutted and crushed under his assault, they just kept appearing.

They had been hiding in here this whole time...they'd only left a few to defend the 'fake assault.' Like they'd known all along...

The slaves were torn apart, caught in the open behind us, the snipers picked them off one by one. Screaming, I found myself chased by a raider wielding a knife. My shoulder felt cold and numb, images flickering into my mind as I saw his studded and pierced face bounding through the melee. Three shots landed beside me, making me fall on my back. The raider never got close, Glimmerlight swinging her rifle into his muzzle, out of all ammo. She swung it to and fro...before being dragged down, screaming as a half dozen raiders piled onto her with clubs. My cry was never even heard.

Ragini tried to rise once again...but a gunshot snapped right into her chest, putting her on her back again, firing her rifle until the last shot with one hand at the oncoming raiders. Had her armour stopped the round? Oh Goddesses...was she...

One by one...we were going down, overwhelmed and outflanked on all sides. I felt myself being picked up, thrown and leapt upon. Yelling, begging, I lashed out and scrambled...but a hoof only slapped into my head, knocking me to the ground with a sharp pain and dizzied vision. A rifle went off near my head, almost deafening me. The battle saddle slave was leapt upon, his throat torn apart until Brimstone's ongoing brawl swept by him, taking the attacker off his back. He still fell...bleeding copiously...

Then...the unthinkable.

Throwing the last pony from his back, Brimstone rounded off...for a shot to smash right into the front of his armour and *penetrate*. The big raider staggered, before a mass of other shots rattled against his armour. Heedless of friendly fire, they were shooting even while others rammed and attacked him. My throat was raw from screaming as I saw him fall...

The last remaining on his hooves...Protégé spun, his revolver snapping off precise shots aimed with his E.F.S. Raiders fell on every side, the last two shots even going high, bringing down two of the snipers. A series of clicks announced he was empty, leading to his backup pistol being drawn and snapping off more shots at those trying to close on him. That too ran dry. His face was a mask of fear, anger, hate, guilt and *absolute burning determination*. Screaming to the sky above through the skylight, whipping rain and lightning in the air around him, his magic lifted a half dozen weapons, unloading in all directions, even as I saw him stagger, rounds skiffing him or impacting on his armour. Raiders fell one after another, being knocked away or forced back. All weapons empty, he even smashed raiders in the face with his empty revolver, but for every one he struck, another two leapt forward...dragging, pulling...and finally striking. A club swung...and my master dropped. Hoisting his, I hoped, unconscious body up, they cheered, yelling and laughing at their prize.

I...I had two grenades...I could...I could...

Then the brass hoof impacted on my head...and I could do no more but fall into the darkness that awaited.

* * *

An immense pressure was across me. A force...pulling me down and down...my legs wouldn't work...my neck felt sluggish to move...

A red glow washed across me, twisting and warping in abstract shapes to slowly come together.

I was in Fillydelphia...witnessing the shape of the great Wall before me, taller than ever. Dizzy, tired and parched, I could only lethargically shift and moan toward it as the construct got higher and higher...growing from the ground while my own place of lying only got deeper. A monumental force around my torso, tugging and striving, holding me down and pulling me deeper into the crater. Across the lip and slipping further and further in...

I couldn't even scream...I couldn't cry out. My throat was burning, the radiation from the crater affecting me. Tasting blood, it dribbled from my mouth.

But there..ahead of me I saw a light. A shining beacon of hope that held itself amongst an aura of calming magic. It grew...rising and floating into the sky toward the top of the massive wall, now reaching the clouds and bending backward over me. Choking on blood, my lungs spasming and retching, I forced one leg to wave, to shout for help...

But the light only kept ascending...flying without wings toward the lip of the Wall and disappearing into the world beyond...never to be seen again.

The glowing heart of the crater only awaited me, every part of my body beginning to ache and shiver from radiation poisoning. My chest swelled up, the tainted lungs bulging and throbbing. I...I couldn't breathe...I was dro-dro...*drowning*...

The sickened last gurgling scream to leave my lips was only responded to by that one hated line, emanating from Fillydelphia as a whole...

...*she didn't save you*...

Everything began fading, a darkness beyond black creeping in at the edges of my vision, only being broken by one brief sight of somepony reaching out toward me, shining with an inner light. G-Glimmer? Coral? S-Sundial? Who was...

* * *

Every sense was brought into the horrid weight of reality by the slap across the face. My head twisted, coughing and spluttering on the taste of iron in my mouth. A sweet and sickly stench drifted into my nostrils..the back of my head felt wet...

“Wake up, filly...you've had your rest.”

No...no, don't open my eyes...all a nightmare...all a nightmare...all a-

The second slap threw my head back down again. A thick lump on the back of my skull ached terribly, pounding on my brain.

“Oooh no...no sleep anymore for you, filly. Time to get up and face the music. Dreamland's too good for you.”

I whimpered, curling my legs inward, striving to stay in the darkness, praying to wake up to somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

“I said **wake up!**”

My head was lifted, pulling my entire body from the floor, shaken, slapped and thrown back again. Two hooves clasped either side of my face, squeezing hard enough until I began to whinny and murmur in pain. My cheeks were being crushed...my jaw pushed aside...

Finally, I opened my eyes to see my assailant. I knew who it was by voice alone...but seeing Barb's sick grin made me want to break down in tears on the spot. We were in darkness, an enclosed room...around me were a few other ponies lying in various states of health. Some of them had died...one had been lying *right next* to me with open mouth and eyes, three curved knives embedded in his sternum. The gunfire had finally stopped...but other, more messy and sickening sounds had replaced it within the immediate vicinity.

Barb, however...gradually came into clarity. Upon witnessing him...I simply screamed.

The chieftain wore the carved skins of dark coated ponies. Hanging across his torso like crude barding, they, if anything, helped him *blend* into the darkness even more. He...he'd made *camouflage* out of ponies! Draped across his shoulders, I could see the dark blood still sticking to the back of his neck. Layered like barding, it settled across thin leather armour that bore carved designs of barbed wire running below the still wet skins. Held on his front hoof, a long blade seemed to pulse with dark magic...a spell imbued weapon or something? Seeing my gaze flicker from side to side of his new sick attire, Barb chuckled, trotting forward, making my eyes go wide when the barding of skin rippled and glistened.

“Theeere we go...all awake at last.” I was released from the telekinetic field, thrown to the ground and left to curl up in this macabre place. “I was beginning to think we might have needed your little buckfriend to keep you alive for a while...pity he's a little busy right now...”

Another fleshy crunch sounded from outside, accompanied by a shocked gasp of pain and retching. Oh...Caduceus...

“It really is quite lovely, you know? That satisfaction of seeing somepony rush blindly into your trap and just *knowing* you're going to have fun with them afterwards. Welcome to the *kill room*, little filly...”

Glancing from side to side, shivering as each lifeless corpse stared back or was frozen in a horrified

expression. They'd all died *knowing*...

“W-What do you want with me...”

“Oh, *that* question!” Barb seemed delighted, trotting in a circle waving his head with a smile. “I do so *love* that question, it always allows one of the better answers.”

Backing away, I squeaked as I accidentally nudged into another of the multiple corpses in the darkened room. I could barely see...my vision wasn't adjusting in this odd half-light. Barb moved forward, his crisp white teeth showing with a mad grin.

“Which is simply...nothing.”

“N-nothing...?”

“Nothing at all. You aren't special to me, not anymore. You've done your part, stayed silent when I needed you to and got those keys. Oh no... now you're simply the next in line for me to throw to my Shades. All bets are off now that *you're* here, filly. Must feel nice...knowing your life is about to become nothing more than our plaything to humiliate, break and harm. But that's what you get when you become *our* prisoner. Now get up, the game starts soon.”

My only response was a wet cough and a weak of my head.

“Please...please, Barb, I-I...”

“If you're going to beg. Save it for the Shades.” His eyes turned dangerously. “Begging won't help you now...but it will entertain *them*. Feel free to cry as much as you want then. They *love* that. Hehehe...”

Already my eyes began to tear up, the stark horror playing its way into my head. We were trapped with raiders in a place no-pony could get to...or wanted to get to. Betrayed and left to be captured. Feeling disbelief and horror threaten to overwhelm me, it took Barb actually pulling me with his magic to rip me from the ground and yank me outside, crying the entire way. When the light hit me, it became clear how little I had. I'd been stripped of everything...my saddlebag was gone...my battle saddle torn off and even my fleece had disappeared. I felt horribly exposed...

But what lay out of the room was so much worse...

That same hell I saw on my way in now lay around me within an old restaurant. Raiders screamed and whooped, laughing and savagely picking on the new influx of prisoners. They staggered or lay on the ground, their malnourished slave bodies unable to cope with the 'fun' the raiders were having. Others lay lifeless, just hunks of skinned meat hung over the balconies of the plaza. The remaining slaver who had charged with us was lying in a heap, bloodied and stained atop the restaurant counter like some hideous living trophy. I could see one mare humiliating and seemingly ready to take advantage of one weak looking buck. A hideous cry went out, followed by a ripping sound of which I didn't want to guess the origin of. It had come from another back room behind the restaurant's kitchen where blood now seeped out of the doorway. Knowing Barb's new 'armour', I began to feel distinctly sick as to what that rip and agonised cry was. But each of my friends and allies...oh Goddesses they were alive, around me...

That was about where the good news ended. My eyes first saw Caduceus, dropping across the floor, his snout broken and leaking blood. Three raiders rushed around, laughing and picking him back up again. The nurse limply let his head drift from side to side...clearly nearing unconsciousness. Glimmerlight was here...but kept contained in an old rusted cage on the other side of the room. One of her eyes was swollen, closed over as she lay on her side, breathing very thinly. Brimstone and Ragini were near her, both kept chained to the ground on thick manacles that the raiders had hammered into the concrete floor. Even as I watched, raiders were taking it in turns to rush in and strike the trapped warlord, laughing as they dodged his return attacks...constrained by the chains. His fury was clear to see.

Protégé was no-where to be seen. Oh no...

“Eurgh!” Another hard crack as a raider bucked Caduceus in the stomach, while he was being held up. The buck doubled over, blood spraying from his mouth. I tried to run to him, attempting to help him up. I felt his

hooves latch onto me, shivering and desperate, turning his face to exhaustedly look at me.

“Murk...run...run...run, Murk...” He tried to gasp, now trying to push me somewhere...too beaten and dazed to think straight. But magic gripped my midsection, pulling me back. Our hooves separated as I tried to keep a hold of the pony who'd kept me alive in the battle. Barb sauntered among the entire scene, absent-mindedly tugging me with him. Below us, I could hear the slaves we had secured being rounded up and herded. Across the room, some of them were cowed in the corners, the light grey of Coral between two other mares was clear to see. She was unconscious.

“Welcome to our little playhouse, filly. Course that play only goes one way...not that we exactly care. Hey, boys! Filly's up!”

My blood chilled as the raiders, bearing bleeding piercings and crude bloodied warpaint swung up, cheering and moving forward toward me. I saw Glimmerlight's head rise sharply at my presence, before pushing her hooves against the cage.

“Just leave him be! He doesn't deserve anything in here!”

They didn't care, reaching me, I found myself being shoved from raider to raider. One of them grabbed me, turning his head to Glimmer.

“He shot me in the fuckin' chest! Big bruise there now, who's to say I dun get my revenge, eh? Oh, it'll be just sweet to hear you squeal when we pluck those wings...make sure to beg nice and loud now, eh?”

He shoved me to the ground, teeth clamping onto a wing. Anything I even wanted to say was drowned out, knocking my little hooves away. Hidden from Glimmerlight by the crowd, I heard her scream for me, only louder as my own shriek of terror echoed above it, high pitched and pleading.

“Leave them alone...for now.” Barb waved his subordinate away. My wing snapped back into its deadened held state, aching and cricking from the movement. I felt the wrongly grown bones grind under my skin.

“Get him in a chair, we've got a warm up to do first...time for a little Six-Shooter Surprise while we wait for Shackles, boys!”

The bellowing roar momentarily deafened me. I was hoofed across the face, dizzied and dragged across the floor to be pressed against a small bench. Course rope was wound around me, cutting off circulation and burning my skin. Only when I realised it was soaked in rainwater did it become clear why. The storm was still raging, more and more water beginning to leak through the roof and puddle on floors or sweep across the plaza. I could hear the skylight banging in the wind...hear the thunder smashing its way across the sky, punctuated by lightning that gave the raiders a terrifying, demonic appearance every minute or so.

“Murky! *Murky!* Are you alright? Did they do anything?”

Glimmerlight's voice shouted toward me, if I strained my neck I could just turn my head to see her cage. The mare was pressed against it, looking through one eye to check on me. They hadn't...but there was another problem bubbling up inside me.

“I n-n-need my RadAway, Glimmer...it's getting worse...”

I could feel my throat searing and aching from more than just swallowed rainwater. The cough I followed up with only helped prove it. I had two sachets in my saddlebag...but wherever that was I didn't know...

“Oh, I'm so sorry, Murky...just...just stay strong...I'm here, alright?”

“HAH! Not for long!” One raider hoofed her cage, before leering in, his eyes clearly not on her face. “Soon as the game's done...we're having a little *auktion* for you, slut.”

Hissing back, she struck the cage toward him with a fiery backlash of anger. The raider only laughed. “We'll see how long that attitude lasts...don't think I've forgotten what you sounded like when I got you *last* time...”

Any defiance on her face seemed to drain immediately. She wouldn't have known...the memories of the village raid had been stripped by her own choosing. Seeing the foul raider stallion's look...I could justify it. I wished I could remove some things from my mind. But he just laughed at the sudden despondence on her

face, trotting on to help with their set-up. Holding a hoof over her damaged eye, my dear friend just silently pleaded with her eyes to me. The words clear, *we'll get out somehow*.

The raiders pulled a single small table out with two hard wooden chairs either side. All the rest were removed, thrown away or over the edge until they had an area left over. Cries went out for 'the first two!' Chants and bellows of choosing went. I heard "The filly!" a few times, or "The traitor!" Barb, presiding at the middle, waved his hooves to take it all in.

"You all know the rules! The leader gets first pick...then we'll let you all vote on the lucky two! **First round!** I say..."

His eyes cast about...from me to Glimmer...then they rested on Brimstone before looking back at Glimmerlight. He grinned, before turning to point at the one surviving slaver.

"Let's have him! Don't we all remember him throwing food across old Rusty Nail? Let's bring him in to see how brave he is *now!*"

A cheer went out, dragging the struggling and shouting slaver toward the table. Immediately they began chanting.

"Next! Next! Next!"

Barb's eyes settled on the impassive Brimstone, then again on Glimmerlight...before grinning wickedly. Oh no...*oh no...*

Then his hoof shot to the side, away from her. "The griffin!"

But Ragini would not be taken so easily. The moment they approached her, the griffin lashed out, scything her talons across ones face and even beating her strong wings to slap them back. Laughing, Barb hopped down from his perch to look at her.

"Still so resistant, featherbrain...what? You think you've got a hope? You think someone's coming to save you?"

"Stern's lot are going to fucking *waste* you all...I can grin knowing you're going to be taking an anti-machine round to the head *very* soon..."

"Ooooooh..." Barb chuckled, accompanied by the raiders. "But you see...dear griffin...they aren't coming. I'm sure you've noticed that I'm no idiot...you think I'd have started this if it were anything but a completely controlled move? Do you not remember Shackles casting you and your coltcuddling master to us? Oh no...right now he'll be out there telling the griffins that all is fine! That I've agreed to negotiate with him and end the violence...sure we might get a little punishment...but we're a tough lot. Only now...there won't be any Protégé in power, he'll be *long* dead by then..."

Ragini struck out, her claws whizzing inches from Barb's face. The raider didn't even move.

"Really, you all played your part *so* well in our plan to get Shackles in power, where ponies like me will benefit *so* much under his protection and interests. Poor Protégé...the prodigal 'son' of Red Eye...cut down while foolishly leading a suicidal mission against me. Only for Chainlink Shackles to show his worth by ending this with *words*. He'll be praised. Really, did you all honestly think I didn't know about that side door? *Really?*"

Fury swept Ragini, with a loud cry, she leapt forward. Her chains, thinner than Brimstone's, partially broke from the wall, till her talons swept across Barb's face. Forced to move, he recovered his posturing as fast as he could...but everypony had seen him have to react quickly. It broke the spell of arrogance...

I knew his anger when he was forced to have to react...that same dangerous voice cut in.

"Oh big mistake, griffin...*big* mistake. No...you're not going in the game, you get to *suffer*. To suffer the worst thing any flyer could ever have."

His eyes looked to the side, finding me. Then he grinned...getting an idea...

“...pin her down. Break her wings. This bird won't fly ever again.”

Ragini struggled immediately, pulling on the chains, slashing out. From nearby, I saw raiders pulling over an old iron block along with a sledgehammer. My sides *tortuously* ached, tears springing into my eyes. The imagery of a slave master holding an anvil and a hammer ready, of being dragged toward it...*Oh Sweet Celestia and Great Luna help.*

But nothing could, we were simply their toys now.

Even as it began, I struggled helplessly, trying to hide my own wings out of fear alone. Barb only sat beside me on the bench, holding my face toward Ragini as the raiders pinned the large creature down, pulled out her first wing...and swung.

I hadn't known griffins could scream that loud...

Hideous minutes passed. Each crunching impact making me cry out and try to look away. But he held me there...one hoof despicably caressing my wings to just *remind* me. The piercing cries of the griffin echoed all around the plaza, going on and on. Barb only chuckled, delighting in the 'performance' before finally signalling them to stop. Each wing, pulverised and broken beyond repair, drooped at her sides. She was controlling her expression, holding back tears...but I *knew* that look, that horrible realisation of what she had now lost. Ragini had never liked me...but I quickly began to feel only I would really understand her pain right now. Very quickly, I saw her seem to pass out on the spot, the agony overwhelming her.

“Well, well, well! A nice warm up! Now back to the event...we'll need somepony else now! How about...”

Scanning his eyes across, I saw him clearly tempted by Brimstone. The warlord just met his gaze...as though daring him for whatever sick game this was. Barb only grinned, changing his glare to Glimmerlight. No! *Oh no!* His hoof shot out to the side again, just like before, like he knew it was taunting me. But this time did not land upon somepony I had little connection to.

“The mare's new little fuck-toy! Bring him up here!”

Caduceus, held up by two raiders, reacted with shock, pushing backward. But they closed around him, dragging the buck over to the table where the slaver was being forced into the seat and held at gunpoint. Glimmerlight bucked the cage, crying out to him. I did too, but all I received was a hoof to the skull. Crying out in pain, I only briefly saw them pushing Caduceus into the chair before Barb silenced them again.

“Six! Shooter! SURPRISE!” Another resounding cheer. “As I said, something to keep us all entertained while Shackles sorts out the talks with the griffins! So for those *six-shooter virgins* out there...”

A raucous laugh from the raiders.

“...the rules...”

Protégé's revolver slammed down on the table between them. It had been horribly customised and ruined. There seemed to be a new metal sheath covering the back of the revolver itself, preventing anypony seeing the chambers, while the trigger had been extended on the mouth grip to allow a hoof to press it easily. His magic, dark shadowy and whispering, picked it up before loading a single round into it.

“You may recognise the idea similar to one many gamblers play with if they're feeling a little extreme...but we take it a step further...”

The revolver snapped shut, spinning the drum wildly. He then held it between the two. Caduceus glanced at it, nervously watching the gun. The slaver was breathing heavily, easily calmer than the nurse. Caduceus, looking toward me and Glimmer, just shook his head.

“I...I don't want to play your game! Look, I can heal-”

“Tough! You stood against us, so it's you or him now! This gun's going to spin, right? Whoever it lands on takes the gun and pulls the trigger against their *own head*. End of the match, *somepony's* going to be dead...so who will it be? Slaver or nurse? Calm or nervous? You look ready to piss yourself, healer!”

The raider's laughed again. Caduceus was wounded, sweating and tired. I could see him shaking...please Goddesses...pull him through this...

“Please!” Caduceus thumped a hoof on the table. “There's no reason to do any of this!”

“Shut up! You're *playing!*”

The revolver whipped him across his broken muzzle, drawing a sharp cry and leaving Caduceus leaning heavily to one side.

I could feel myself wanting to shout support...but my throat was raspy and I wasn't sure if it even felt right. Him winning meant somepony else dying. There was no happy end to this...it was a decided game. One death, one survivor to whatever else the raiders wanted to do. The inevitability of it was heartbreaking. We were trapped in their deluded world.

“Round ONE!”

Yes...we were trapped. Now the sick games were beginning.

The gun span in Barb's magic. The raiders began cheering, just as a roll of thunder made the room shake. The table overlooked the plaza, blowing the two duelling ponies' manes in the wind. The revolver sped up and spun madly...before slowing...turning...aiming...

...right at Caduceus. The gathered ponies whooped, laughing as I saw Caduceus gasp in horror. The poor buck had only come to help ponies...he didn't deserve this! Shaking, he reached out his hooves, taking the revolver so lightly he nearly dropped it.

“Look, we can-”

“DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!”

“They want you to pull that trigger! Best not upset them or it's kneecaps for you, lad! HAHA!”

Wiping his mane, Caduceus took the pistol. Shaking, he began holding it against the bottom of his muzzle, pointing upward through his skull. Glimmerlight was pressing her nose through the bars, soundlessly moving her lips, prayer after prayer.

Whimpering, Caduceus closed his eyes...a hoof resting on the enlarged trigger.

Click.

The gun slammed down, Caduceus gasping and breathing hard, shivering intently. The slaver met his glare harshly, staying silent and preparing should it ever land on him. I squirmed, trying to move. Caduceus needed support, somepony beside him!

“Round TWO!”

Spin, spin, spin...the revolver travelled even faster, blurring before finally slowing down. Caduceus slammed a hoof on the table.

“Please! Stop this madness, before somepon-”

His watcher behind his chair rocketed Caduceus' head forward into the table. I screamed out loud, stopped only as my throat lurched and spat blood across the chair. It kept coming, slight spray after slight spray. Bound down, it hurt my body, unable to properly move with it. Caduceus was pushing himself up...but I could see his eyes on me.

“Somepony...get him RadAway...he..he need-”

Crack! Another hoof to his skull. Recovering from my coughing fit, feeling myself flush with heat and shiver in fever, I was awestruck. Here he was in the middle of this sick game...still following his oath.

“Maybe if you win...hehe...we'll say that if you win, you can get him what he needs to survive. Sound fair, everypony? Nurse wins and the filly gets his medicine! Pressure's on now, 'Caddy', hehe...”

The gun was still spinning, sped up again during the distraction by Barb. But now it came to rest on the

slaver. Growling, the slaver picked it up, holding the barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger quickly while roaring in anger.

Click.

Slamming the gun back down, he shook out his black mane.

“Fucking game...fucking raiders...fucking sick *bastards!*”

The game did not stop. The gun spun...the gun stopped. Once again, it faced the slaver who swore, pounding the table with a hoof. Snarling and knocking back a raider who tried to force his hoof, he just picked up the gun and held it.

“Fuck...fuck...*fuck...*”

The gun was raised to his head.

“FUUUUU-” *Click.* “-UUCK!”

Crying out, punching a hoof up on sheer terror filled adrenaline, the slaver celebrated in sheer relief.

“Half way down! We're into the home run here, my friends!” Barb announced, waving a hoof in grand fashion. Lightning lit him from behind, flaring him into a mad silhouette, that skinned barding becoming beaded with raindrops that sizzled on the dead flesh. His magic pulled the gun from the slaver, leaving him to breathe out, snarling a sudden grin at his 'opponent'.

“One in three, nurse...one in three...”

Caduceus just sat and stared at it, looking on the verge of breaking down completely. The gun began to speed up again, but I saw him only now turning to look toward Glimmerlight. The two just stared at one another, sharing unspoken support in the middle of this hellish nightmare we had been trapped in. I kept trying to think of ways out...but there *weren't*. No-pony was coming for us until we were already dead...we had no way out...no way out...other than to survive this...

The gun stopped facing Caduceus again. I heard his near silent whimper of fear. He was putting on as brave a face as he could, but I could see his cheeks stained with stressful tears. Turning, he saw me looking, even though my building sickness, I made sure to keep my eyes on him, trying to offer what pitiful support a coward like me could.

But his face hardened upon seeing me. I could see the look in his eyes. Barb had promised him a chance to get me RadAway if he lived...that was just the little bit of freedom we needed. *Come on, Caduceus!*

Steeling himself, the buck turned, sweeping up the gun and planting it under his head again. Breathing deeply, closing his eyes...he seemed to go utterly calm. Raiders were chanting, the slaver was thumping his hoof on the table, as though getting caught up in this.

“Right...right...do it and I can heal...Goddesses...forgive me for doing harm in this moment...”

He pulled the trigger. Ever so slowly I saw the gun move...react and...

Click.

The cheer was enough to make me whine in pain at the noise. Raiders were taking bets, bets of all things from caps to 'turns' with prisoners. One mare seemed *particularly* eager to get a hold of Caduceus if he won. I wasn't sure he appreciated it much, falling to lie his head on the table, hyperventilating in shocked relief.

Suddenly...the slaver didn't look so calm.

Glimmerlight was pressed against the bars, watching with a hurt look. We shared a glance...this was coming to its end, Caduceus had survived one more round...it felt sick, praying that somepony else got the bullet, but he was our *friend!*

“Next round!” Barb announced, the gun spinning for an incredibly long time. Finally...it began slowing, twisting and sometimes accelerating again to draw out more thunderous stomping from the raiders. Even the

raiders below us watching the doorways were cheering as they waited to hear the bang.

Slowly...dreadfully...it pointed back at Caduceus again.

I heard Glimmerlight scream out. "You can do it! Trust! Trust in something! *You can still win this, Caddy!*"

He was shaking so much, hooves cradling the revolver, looking across at Glimmerlight. I could hear his voice stammering.

"One...one more...fifty percent chance...oh...oh Goddesses... "

"Come on! Do it! DO IT!"

"Go ya coward!"

Finally, shakily, it went up to his jawline one again. His eyes looked sideways at me, before becoming determined...beginning to utter something...a healer's oath...

"We pledge to the Great Goddesses...to the Ministries as one...to Equestria as a whole..." He began reciting. "...we of the Ministry of Peace choose to suffer any hardship to bring healing to those who need it, who require our aid, be they pony or any creature. Kindness in all things, strength to carry through and *let those in need know we have the courage to stand in the line of fire to save them!*"

Raising his voice, shouting above the raiders, he took one last look at the slaver before him, who was already beginning to look nervous.

"I may have been born long after a time such an oath was meant for, but I see ponies in need of my skills...I will find the courage to stand up for them! Weathervane taught me that much to go through fear to find the chance to heal!"

Glimmerlight could hardly look prouder, smiling, crying, nodding her support to him. He could do this...come on, one last chance! One last-

BLAM!

Every sound ceased...other than the echo of the revolver going off slamming back and forth between the plaza walls. Slumping forward and to the side...his body fell off the chair and collapsed lifelessly upon the ground.

Glimmer's voice reached my ears before I could even take a breath, a drawn out wail of horror and loss. My own cry strangled itself on my rough throat...the effort forcing me almost to unconsciousness and feverish fainting. My eyes were just locked on him on the floor...just...but...but no warning or...or goodbye...

The raiders whooped, laughing and stomping. Bets changed hooves. The slaver cheered out, throwing his hooves in the air, slamming the table in jubilation. Brimstone merely lowered his head, snarling with barely repressed fury. Barb took centre stage, recovering the gun.

"And just like that it's over! What a round! What a surprise for the good doctor, eh?"

I'd lost a friend before I even got to properly know him...through the most unfair and random chance possible. The wastes claiming another good pony without regret or reason. He was gone...

Just...like...that.

"NEXT! ROOOOUND!" Barb, loud and proud, was demonstrating all the presence of the leader now, the shadow left to lie silent. My tears wouldn't stop coming. I kept remembering the scant day or so around Caduceus...another pony who had been kind to me torn away by some *stupid reason!* I'd...I'd been starting to really like him...with that polite and professional attitude...the way he wasn't afraid to just give me a hug or take care of me even when he knew he shouldn't be away from the hospital...

...he'd risked his life to save us...

Now Fillydelphia had left him as just another corpse. That same body that was now being heaved over the

balcony to fall into the half flooded plaza below. Glimmerlight was calling them every name under the sun, banging the cage. Even Brimstone took a swipe at one raider who got too close, sending him smashing back into the others...they just *laughed*. *They didn't care about anypony!* Feral and sadistic...they just cared about satisfying their messed up minds!

But he...he couldn't be just gone like that...it wasn't right, it was too early! He was meant to survive! To...to escape with us! *No...*

“Now *who's next*...how about you lot choose this time, eh?”

Immediately, the crowd began chanting. I saw Ragini wake up from the noise, moaning in pain as her ruined wings spasmed or tried to move. The raiders threw hooves in all directions, calling for who they wanted.

Some pointed at slavers they hated, others at slaves who they thought would be funny. Many all crowded to get Brimstone in there...

But there was one or two names meaning the same pony above all of it...

“FILLY! FILLY! FILLY!”

“PEGASUS! PEGASUS!”

“The little runt it is!”

Their cheer almost drowned out the thunder itself. The rain had only gotten harder, the ongoing thumping of it hitting the ground merging with my shivering and matching the sudden increase in terror I felt. Under the hiss of rainfall, I felt hooves clasp over me, tearing my bonds free. I heard Glimmerlight scream for them to let go of me and heard Brimstone bellow. They were not kind, not respectful and filled with a frenzied mob mentality. I screamed again, feeling myself being born aloft by them and carried to the now bloodstained table and chair. Hooves grabbed or pushed me all over as they massed around to force me in. My wounds were knocked, making me cry out. Places I wanted *no-pony* touching me were shoved or pushed from the crowd, making me shrilly plead and push back. Many of them imitated my high voice, none of them managing to get to the same height. One even spanked me with a hoof, getting a big laugh for my reaction. I felt so powerless...

My rump landed on the sticky seat, I tried to push away, but they were insistent. Then the barrel of a rifle was pointed against my cheek.

“You try to run...we *don't* kill you, filly.” Barb spoke from behind the riflepony. “We'll only stop ya running...trust me, we can do *so much worse* if entertainment isn't our business. I'm sure there's a few ponies in here would just *love* a pegasus...you know what they call wings? Handlebars!”

Whining and curling up on the seat, trying to cover every part of myself I could as the sick joke made them roar in laughter. I could see Glimmerlight trying to buck open her cage again, with little luck. Brimstone was striving, pushing against the wall with all his might...but the chains were in deep...he fell to the ground, his wounds hurting.

“Our next challenger! Now who shall we get to face him?” Barb swung around, brandishing the revolver. “I said I'd let you choose...but may I offer a recommendation?”

The raiders went quiet. They were too excited, too hyped up to worry about who got what now. This was their pay off, for weeks of waiting without opportunity to really cut loose...and I was in their sights. But who would they-

“What about...his *master*?”

My heart skipped a beat. Amongst a *colossal* cheer that shook the very roof with their stomping, one of the doors leading out of the restaurant onto the second floor of the plaza was knocked open...a sorry sight being dragged in. Protégé had been horrendously beaten, barely able to even trot as they shoved and pushed the normally so proud unicorn in. Seeing me sitting opposite the table, he just scowled at them.

“You won't achieve anything with this!”

Barb chuckled. "On the contrary. I don't want to. We just want a good time! Win or lose...you're not going back to your bed tonight! Now...get in the seat and we'll begin..."

"We can-URGH!"

One of the raiders, a sickly yellow mare with an old grenade pin through her nostrils, slammed a pipe into his back legs. My master went down, before they began pulling him across to the table. I wanted to run around it...to help him, but the rifle's cold muzzle still pressed against my neck...

"Now! Master or slave, which will survive Six Shooter Surprise?" Barb announced to the rest of the raiders. Protégé and I just looked at one another...this was...oh Goddesses lift me from this hell...this wasn't right.

Me or him. There was no way out of it.

One of us was going to die.

* * *

Barb spent some time building the raiders up into another frenzy of excitement. Many of the slaves were being forgotten, thrown in locked rooms or held down with chains and shackles. A huge portion of the gang had come up to view this match. Surrounding us on all sides, we were alone in a sea of raiders against the balcony of the plaza. Behind us, rain poured through the skylight, the wind making the Ministry Mare posters billow and whip around. Only through a small gap could I see Glimmerlight, Coral and Brimstone at the back.

I couldn't stop crying, trying to not look at the gun, not wanting to imagine what we were going to actually do.

But Protégé would not be cowed so easily. He was unsteady on his hooves, but he still managed to summon a little strength to sit up straight and point a hoof.

"You're only allowing yourself time to...to end up dead, Barb! Talk with me...we can end this without any more blood!"

Barb simply leaned against the balcony, tossing his long dark blue mane out. Then he sneered.

"I've put up with this idealistic shit since the moment you woke up, kid. I'm a little *sick* of it by now. I *know* what you are...Shackles told me pretty clearly...slave. I'm thinking that I can't stand to see one of Red Eye's nonces through this entire game. I'd rather look at the real pony behind the mask."

He nodded to four raiders.

"Strip him."

Without hesitation, they bounded forward, grabbing and pulling Protégé off the seat. He fought back, but the big burly earth ponies were far too strong. The eyepiece, something I was surprised he even still had on, was tossed aside, being taken by Barb. Then they began pulling, ripping at buckles and forcefully tugging at his barding and clothing. Over the course of a minute, they pulled everything that signified his uniform I'd come to know from the poor unicorn, leaving me to watch in horror.

"I got it! I got it! Off ya come!"

There was a tear of fabric...and finally, the barding was torn away, ripping the last of his clothing off my master, even the clasp for his ponytail was taken, letting his mane fall loose around his head. Shoving him over, Protégé landed in a puddle, wincing from the acidic liquid.

...but he was no longer a slaver...

Before me, battered, dirtied, sleep deprived and kept away from food by a combination of duty and captivity...I saw a slave. Those two deep red eyes just found mine...seeing my open mouth. He really was just like me...

Whipscars covered his body, even one old gunshot wound somewhere along his stomach line. Patches where his coat hadn't regrown properly were a lighter shade of black, the legacy of Fillydelphia's sicknesses. The

large swelling from the shot earlier was there too. He'd been through a life just like me. But one thing caught my eye, something I'd never seen before...

...his cutie mark...

Everything had seemed to fall away as my mind processed what I saw, the symbol that both hurt and inspired, that was both a dream and a trap. He bore upon his flank the symbol of Equestria itself, two Goddesses circling one another...while the red eye glowed at the centre between them.

To save Equestria...under Red Eye. It was everything that he was...everything he dreamed...and everything that was controlling his life.

It was beautiful and yet...tragic.

Now, the slave before me was picked up, hurled back into his seat. We were only a foot or two away from each other at this small table, almost like a staring contest. Barb chuckled, spinning the revolver absent-mindedly. "There...there...now isn't that better? Nothing between the two of you now. The one who hid his wings and the one who hid his past, both out of shame. You can look right into their eyes...or even reach out for comfort if you aren't afraid to show it to all of us. We won't laugh...much. Now let's get to business. But...how about we up the stakes?"

The revolver's drum slid open, Barb inserting *two* bullets, one beside the other, before respinning.

"Two rounds...less free slots before *somepony* gets it. GAME ON!"

The revolver slammed down before us, before lifting and beginning to spin. I was quaking, looking to Protégé for help or advice or...or anything. But he sat there, silent and as withdrawn as he could be. Stripped of his uniform and eyepiece, reduced back to a rougher and more hurt pony, he just didn't cast that same easy confidence anymore. Even so, he met my eyes, eventually speaking quietly.

"I'm sorry...Murk."

I gulped, nodding that I understood.

"I...I...I think it's...it's not you...The Master w-was going to d-do something anyway..."

"Oh...gag..." Barb muttered, before the revolver started to slow...

Protégé looked up at me, shivering in pain from the multitude of large bruising wounds on his side. "He what?"

Tears dripping, I fought to muster the courage. This could well be my last few minutes, I had to say...come clean at last...let Protégé know that he'd been assailed from every direction, not just by Shackles! To say that Grindstone was-

The revolver stopped spinning, pointed at me. My train of thought derailed immediately, making me shriek and fall backwards from the weapon. My watcher caught me, shoving me back toward it.

"No turning away! It's your turn, pick it up!" The raider forced my hoof forward, where I felt the heavy weapon. How Protégé's magic fired this so reliably I'd never know. I held it, crying over it...feeling every wound throb and my sickness grow from the added stress. But Protégé kept staring at me, as though silently trying to offer any courage he could...no...he was still the pony I could look up to.

Slowly, I raised the gun...pushing the barrel into my mouth to help support its weight. I looked to Barb.

"P-please...d-don't do all this..."

"Either beg louder so we can all hear and ignore or just get on with it, filly." There was no negotiation...

Whimpering, closing my eyes, my hooves graced the trigger, the feeling making my whinny at a high pitch. Around me, some raiders chuckled, beginning to exchange more bets. The intensity of the moment was making me sweat, an odd heavy heat in the air even amongst the storm whirling outside.

Please...please Goddesses please...please let me-

Click.

Dropping the weapon, I cried out, my hooves waving and holding my own face in shock. I hadn't even realised I'd pulled it! Oh Goddesses...oh no...oh boy...I...I...

“The game begins! Round TWO! Five cylinders and two bullets remaining!”

“Murk!” Protégé spoke sharply as I laid my head on the table, crying profusely. My eyes actually hurt from tearing up so much in such a short time. My gasps were just raspy coughs. “Murk! Stay. Strong. The griffins might-”

“The griffins will do *nothing*, colt-cuddler. I told you when *you* woke up in the kill room! Shackles is having a little chat with them as we speak...”

Protégé glared up, anger crossing his face, his surprisingly long mane waving around his head. “You *trust* Shackles? He saw fit to betray me, to betray somepony on the same side as him! What makes you think he'll not just *let* Stern and her griffins go ahead with their raid to remove a troublesome lying raider as well?!”

“He fears me, boy. What I'd do if he tried. *Everypony* does-”

“Chainlink Shackles fears no-pony! You don't ever consider yourself above him! That's his *thing*, he believes no-pony is ever more controlling than he is! Your arrogance is blinding you to the-ARGH!”

The yellow raider mare made her presence known again, the pipe cracking against Protégé's damaged ribs. Barb nodded thankfully to her, before returning his gaze to the revolver. Slowly, it kept spinning...before finally settling on Protégé. My mas...or...or whatever he was to me, *I didn't know*, looked at it, before snatching it up in his own magic field. He took long breaths, hissing on each one, sucking the air in deeply. Simmering with frustration and nerves, he drew it up, turning the barrel against his own head...before taking a breath.

“This will come to hurt you in the end, Barb...”

I saw the trigger begin to pull...tightening...tightening...I didn't want him to die, he didn't deserve it! But...but I didn't want to either...

His face screwed up, gritting his teeth. The raiders cheered at seeing any sort of tension or fear on his face. Seeing the proud master they'd laboured under so worked up and working to stay strong at all. I hated this so much, this was wrong, twisted, humiliating and sick and wrong and terrible and...and...

Click.

Breathing out, sinking into the chair, Protégé let the revolver rest again, dropping it the last foot from his telekinesis. The crowd jeered the second round's failure to fire. Even Protégé was shaking on the spot, I could tell how much courage it took him to do that. The atmosphere was mentally straining on him as much as I, what with us backed against this wet and exposed balcony by a mass of raiders.

“One more down! Round THREE! Four cylinders left with two bullets! Off it goes!”

It immediately began spinning again, making me shiver every time the barrel passed by me. I just tried to look at Protégé, to find the courage to speak up. But seeing that defeated look in his eyes, knowing he'd been abandoned to this with me. It hurt so badly. My own terror wasn't helping, of course. It was all I could do to not becoming a mewling heap on the ground.

The revolver began spinning harder. I heard the raiders pick up their bets, larger sums of cash or ponies being promised and exchanged. One wanted my wings when I died. It was going to happen even if I survived...the gut wrenching sickness of that was only held back as I saw Protégé's face staring at me.

“I...I'm really s-sorry...m-master...” I began stammering. A feeling was building in me...one last thing I could do before we died.

“...Murk?” He seemed surprised, looking up.

“I...I lied to y-you...”

Barb's eyes met mine sharply, before grinning. He knew it as much as I...we were both dead anyway, it wouldn't harm anything now.

“It...it was The Master who...who hurt me. I'm so sorry! I was just scared! Scared like always!” My head fell into my hooves upon the table, sobbing. “I...I knew this might happen...but he told me not to say! He threatened me! Scared me! I couldn't resist him! I could...could have made this not happen...”

It all came out, even as the revolver began to slow down, arcing past my eyes with its lethal threat, I just kept telling it all. About the Stable, about Grindstone...about what The Master did to me. I saw Protégé just stare back, unable to tell if he was hurt or feeling pity...

Then finally, the revolver stopped moving...pointed at me. I broke down further, only to feel a hoof stretch out and rest upon the side of my head. Glancing up...it was Protégé.

“You have nothing to apologise for, Murk...” His voice was quiet, soft and shaky through the tension of the moment. “You know what I am now...what I was...to not know choice or a will of your own...I *know* that...I...”

His eyes closed, before I saw one single tear form.

“...I've been through the same before I earned my freedom. *I understand.*”

Those two words, those two beautiful words that for the first time in my *life* really meant something. Friends had said it, masters had implied it, many had believed it. But for the absolute first time *ever* did I now see a pony...a born slave...who could truly *know*. I wanted to ask so many questions, to spend time and just...just share in understanding...

But Barb's hoof slammed down, separating us and his magic tossing us both back into our seats.

“All well and disgusting to my eyes, doesn't matter now! Filly? It's your tuuurn...careful with that trigger this time.” He sneered, bringing me crashing back to the horrific reality we were stuck in. Fifty-fifty chance with this one...the same chances Caduceus had had...oh Goddesses, if it were to happen now, please no...

“Pick it up!”

“Please, I-”

“I said, pick it up!”

“PLEASE! Don't do this! *I don't want to d-*”

“**Pick it up!**” The revolver slammed into my hooves, hard and stinging, tossed by his magic. Almost falling off my chair, my head twisting to avoid the impact; I saw Glimmer staring over, her eyes wet and a look of absolute horror on her face. She'd lost somepony already, we both had...but now she was watching another of her friends go through it.

“**Do it!**” Barb's hoof impacted on the table, making me shriek in shock, turning back to look at the gun. Crying openly, I began to pick it up properly, hearing the raiders chant to 'DO IT!' over and over. Protégé just looked on in despair, clearly frustrated and hurt beyond measure at the inability to escape this.

Slowly...tasting the metallic tang and residue from the last shot that killed Caduceus...I placed the barrel in my mouth. My heartbeat seemed to grow louder, thumping...growing faster as the panic set in. Whimpering, whining, whinnying, I just sat and shook with my eyes closed. Part of me began to hope that I was even holding this right...the thought of not actually being killed outright made my entire body shiver in horror.

My hoof closed upon the trigger, the chant and beat of my heart only growing louder each time. Be brave...be brave like Caduceus. My teeth chattered on the barrel, that loose one stinging even as I cried out and pulled the trigger to-

BLAM!

My head *exploded* into agony. My entire body falling away from the chair and landing, surrounded by

blood. Screaming, wailing and thrashing at the immense searing *pain* that had blown through my head as I clutched my hooves to my mouth and howled into them. The sound reverberated in the air, echoing and making my ears hurt even...even...

Quaking on the ground, the pain started to fade quickly...replaced with the growing pain of my ears being assaulted by raider laughter. Above me, Barb stood with a *second* revolver that had gone off just behind my ears. The blood below me was from Caduceus...

“Always gets them, every time!”

They simply laughed.

I broke down on the spot, the horror of the cruel joke and fake execution stretching my courage far past the breaking point. I didn't care if they even laughed at me any more. They would not let me lie however, two raiders picking me up. I fought, trying to pull away. I cracked one in the shin, trying to pull myself nearer the balcony, but their magic gripped my mid-section tightly, pulling me back to the seat and returning the revolver to the table. My face felt sticky with Caduceus' blood from the floor...I could barely sit upright, crying and falling forward, my nose running and throat hiccuping painfully. Like a foal begging for something from their mother, I couldn't stop the simple wish from crying forth.

“Please just let me go!”

“Guess what? NO! HAHA!” The raider to my right knocked me in the head. Immediately before me, the revolver began spinning again...the game was *still on*.

“Round FOUR! *Three* cylinders left with two bullets! More bullets than not now, my friends! Get your intense bets in now for which one's gonna buy it first!”

“MURK!” Brimstone's voice bellowed above *all* of the raiders. “You can pull through this. Remember what I first said to you!”

The shout felt so rare...for Brimstone to offer any sort of cry amongst his old peers. But my memory, in a moment of strange accuracy, did remember the first line. I'd been a mess in the Pit...quivering on the spot in the presence of my icon herself. Terrified to die...in an inescapable position...

“Put on a braver face there. Don't let them have the pleasure.”

It wasn't the words that meant so much...it was the reminder. That one moment when I had been inspired beyond all others at the sight of the Stable Dweller escaping Fillydelphia before my eyes. A sobering thought...to face it with better dignity...

I could...I *could*...I-

A knife descended into the table, narrowly missing my hoof. Broken from any recovery, I screamed, clutching my shoulder out of habit.

“Stop spacing out there, filly...” Barb whispered into my ear, “I don't want my lot to have anything but you at your most terrified and pathetic...I know you really are inside so just let it out...”

Whimpering, seeing Brimstone growl and stomp at his chains again, to absolutely no avail, I could sense his frustration. But Barb had me where *he* wanted me. The knife slid up my leg as he drew it away, causing another filly-like whine to emanate from my mouth. His audience was getting what they wanted...the absolute humiliation of two ponies. One of shattered pride...one of sadistic breaking.

The revolver was still spinning. Finally, it came to rest upon Protégé. Breathing heavily and quickly, he just stared at it, his chest panting hard. Gripping it in his telekinesis again...the barrel raised...

“Barb...this won't end well for you. Shackles and Grindstone don't care for anypony but themselves! Even then they'll be in it for their *individual* benefit, I'll bet...you'll gain nothing from this in the end, that I-”

“Oh get on with it!” Barb wickedly laughed, slapping the table. “Pull the trigger! Let's see how much of that

big brain really can come out!”

Scowling, frustrated beyond measure, I saw his eyes return to me. Protégé still breathing quickly and harshly. Fighting to stop himself shaking, sweating enough that his mane was becoming bedraggled, he fixed me with a stare.

“If...if this one is it, please, just one thing...”

“...y-yes?”

“I...I hope my only impression upon you was not that of a tyrant...Murk...”

It took me a few attempts to muster any words, my throat beginning to clam up. My vision was hazy, but I could still see those two pale red eyes sadly staring at me.

“It wasn't...”

“Then...perhaps that's one regret I can rest easy upon should...should this be...”

Closing his eyes, gritting his teeth, the revolver pressed firmly on his temple, Protégé hissed deeply and took one great last breath.

“Don't lose sight...you *can* be free, Murk...I've never said it but I know you can do it. My way or...or your own...”

I wanted to rush over...to grab hold of that gun and move it so badly...but a rifle barrel touched the back of my neck. I could only watch him, watch as he began seething at the mouth and pulling the trigger *hard*.

Click.

The entire gathering of raiders went stock still...before exploding in sheer excitement. Protégé simply sat, stunned. Every odd had been against the last empty chamber being next...but it had been. That meant...oh no...that meant-

“A ROUND FIVE! SUDDEN DEATH! Two cylinders and two bullets! All bets up!”

This...this was it.

Behind me, knowing the stakes, I heard Brimstone lash at his chains. His legs were bleeding from the effort, harming himself in every effort to get free. Waving his raiders away, Barb gazed over at the massive figure.

“Oh don't even try, traitor. You couldn't break that metal in your prime fifteen years ago when we all had that big laugh, never mind as the washed up, old and declining bastard you are now. What are you? Fifty five? Sixty? Hah, I made *sure* it's the same stuff we scavenged out of the yards. It goes right through the wall to hold on the other side too. You are *not* moving. Besides...”

He nodded to a nearby raider carrying a sledgehammer, the same they had used on the virtually unmoving Ragini. With a sick grin, the hammer swung around, impacting directly over the still bleeding bullet wound on his chest. Roaring loudly in anger more than pain...Brimstone still fell to the floor.

“Can't pull anything with a wound like *that* on your chest. Now...back to our game...”

Barb grinned at me, seeing my look of horror.

“What? Oh, I'm sorry, was he your last hope here? That the big old Brim would swing into action? Forget it. No-pony's coming to help you. Now...time to *spin the gun!*”

Slamming it down again, the drama of thumping it before us never getting old with the raiders, I just gazed across at Protégé with tear filled eyes. I knew I was giving that pleading look to end this, to stop it all somehow...but I couldn't help it. It was the Pit all over again, the inevitable inescapably of it all crushing down on my emotions, turning me into a blubbing wreck.

For his part, my master just continued to stare at me, breathing hard on wounded ribs and trying to keep my eyes focussed on him rather than the gun as it moved aching irregularly...side to side...spinning...spinning...

It began slowing...

“Murk, look at me.” I couldn't the gun was-

“Look at me!” His authoritative tone returned, briefly. My eyes snapped upwards to see Protégé staring with an intense look, ignoring all the raiders stomping and prying for a better look than the others.

“Pro...Protégé I...I...”

“Just keep looking at me, don't look at them, don't let them get to you, Murk. Look at *me*.”

The gun began to wind down...moving deathly slow in arcs to face either way. But my eyes avoided it at last, focussing on Protégé.

“You're a stronger pony than you know...you've come this far, Murk. Even if...even if something ends today...you can be proud. *I'm* proud of you.”

“Please, I don't want to-”

The revolver barrel slowly moved just a bit further, achingly slow as it faced me...

...then Protégé.

...then back to me.

I didn't even move, just stared at the inevitable conclusion. Murky Number Seven, that unlucky corruption of the number and victim to the life that had been nothing but toil and pain the entire way...all to end tonight at the barrel of a gun in my mouth.

To be born a slave...you know of only two endings. The quick execution that brings your life to a close...or the long sickness and exhaustion until you finally keel over on the job. I now faced the former. A life of slavery, filled with hope at the end...but finishing today.

Strangely, a form of clarity overcame me...that...that I was somewhat...okay with it. I'd screamed, wailing that I didn't want to die.

But the idea of a quick bullet to the brain...one flare and it all being finally over...all the pain...the starvation and sickness...finally peace...

My hooves lifted the gun. Slowly, I placed it in my mouth. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Glimmerlight crying openly, battering the cage door in sheer despair. It hurt to leave her behind...Protégé too seemed pained that it was me and not him...Brimstone merely looked lost, like a part of what was helping him was about to disappear forever.

My hoof found the trigger. I...I didn't really want to go, hope was still there, screaming in my breast to keep fighting...to look for some way out! I could escape still! I had...I had my friends all here! I couldn't leave them, I couldn't...*I couldn't*...but I had no say any more...

My wet eyes turned across all of my friends, imagining them all as much as seeing them.

“...I'm sorry...”

The barrel was pushed into my mouth more fully, I had to do this right.

The mare, alone and searching for her buckfriend, or hopefully having found him...they'd promised to come for me, they would be searching for the already dead...

Slipping around the trigger, I began to push.

Glimmerlight and Brimstone, the most unlikely pair of friends to ever grace the wasteland...their efforts to get out losing one of their number forever...

With one last effort, screaming out as I did so, all the pain coming out...

Protégé...witnessing the one born slave who understood him killing himself before his eyes.

...goodbye...goodbye all...

...and let it end...

Click.

Three seconds. That's how long it took my brain to process what had happened...but they lasted longer in my mind than I could bear to stand.

Nothing...it...it hadn't fired...but what...

My scream faded, the gun dropping limply in my hooves. Protégé was awestruck...the raiders silent.

Then Barb revealed a bullet in his hoof...and grinned.

“Hoofed the round when I last held the revolver, dumb filly...so...”

He narrowed his eyes, that mad grin spreading.

“How's it feel to have committed suicide and know you did it?”

I...there...there were no words. I just started shaking, realisation and horror beginning to take shape. My mouth quivered, eyes widening, unable to cry any more than I already was. Small strangled sounds escaped my throat. I heard the revolver clatter to the floor from my shaking hooves.

I'd...I'd just....*Oh Goddesses forgive me!* I'd actually...pulled....the trigger...

The control tower all over again, only...only I'd gone over the edge. *What had I just done?* I felt anger bubble inside, at myself for knowing it'd been *ok* with it. To know that a part of me still saw that sort of thing as a nice easy way out that I'd ever consider. Oh Celestia...that thought terrified me more than any raider.

What had I done...

Still shaking terribly, sniffing and whimpering ever louder, I eventually just cried out, feeling a wash of self hatred and shame come over me. I wanted to find somepony, to grab them and hold them and just cry and cry. To curl up with Glimmerlight, or feel Caduceus' comforting grip or...or even just fall into Protégé's shoulder again, *anypony*...

“Aww, look at 'em! I think we upset the little thing, lads! Oh, I'm a bad pony...” Barb cackled, relishing in the opportunity to just completely screw with my head and emotions. “But the game isn't over, we've still got one more cylinder! You've got to keep playing little Murk...you don't get to cry and run away now!”

“I don't want to-”

“You **will!** Spin the gun!”

Following his own instruction, the shadowy magic began to pick up over the revolver again. Building speed, faster than ever before, the modified firearm began to whirl and blur on the spot.

“Round and round the revolver goes...” Barb chanted, the raiders joining in. “...who it'll kill...**no-pony knows!** Last round! There's no tricks or jokes here, just one bullet and a chosen pony!”

Even Protégé couldn't keep his eyes off the weapon, glancing up to me occasionally. From the look on his face, watching me pull that trigger had drawn harsh emotions from him too. But both of us were simply silent now...both knowing that the weapon would pick one of us.

Back and forth...round and round...barrel...grip...barrel...grip...barrel...grip...

Eventually...it began to slow. The barrel drifted more lazily, flying on the momentum of the spin and slowing after every turn. Heart in my mouth, tears and sweat dripping off my face onto the table, my eyes just stared unblinking at it. I...I couldn't do it again...*if it picked me I knew I couldn't...*

It was time, the barrel was stopping...

...pointed directly at me...

...before shifting, slowly...the last bits of energy to creep around one more half turn to point directly at my master.

I would have looked up, to gaze with apologies and words, fighting to know what I should say to him, whether I should thank him or...or just stay silent...or tell him that I was glad to have met him in here...that I'd try to remember him or do something for him...

...but the barrel had one last tiny eek of momentum still...so slowly it stretched every emotion to just see it gradually moving and juddering...before coming back to me and *finally* stopping...

It was me.

The raiders erupted into cheering and screaming. Bets were thrown back and forward already with the end result chosen. Arguments started, whooping and promises drifting between them. But I just sat and stared at the revolver. That one revolver that had stopped the closest bid for freedom I'd ever made.

Would *ever* make.

I felt myself shaken by the raider behind me, pointing a hoof at the gun. Shivering, I picked it up under duress of punishment, holding the weighty revolver in my hooves. This...this wasn't...no, it wasn't *fair*. I...I was supposed to escape...

Glancing upwards and unsteadily holding the gun, I saw Protégé only look sad; trying to maintain his posture under the oppressive atmosphere. The storm's wind circling in through the skylight whipped that mane across his face, sometimes hiding those pained eyes. He was a born slave...the one who sought freedom in, if anything, a differing story to my own. A grander story of the slave who rose out of the pits to be somepony more...

One I may have to now accept would go on while my own ended here, after finally having made a decision to come here to try and help ponies.

“We're all *waiting*, filly...not going to show you're just a complete coward? Come on, you did it once, let's see that brain matter fly! Probably the only flying *you'll* ever do!”

My master glanced angrily to Barb, taking the raider chieftain's glare without so much as flinching.

“You're nothing but a blight to all ponies, Barb. You think this is going to help Equestria at all? That there's some purpose?”

“On the contrary, I don't *care*. Equestria's dead and gone, might as well get on board the fucked-up-train of the future, boy! I'm the conductor here and I say it ends here for him.”

I had never seen my master scowl quite so much, real, proper anger.

“I swear to you, raider...if there was a seventh shot in this sick game...I wouldn't even care what your cronies did, it would be for *you*.”

Barb merely chuckled, patting Protégé's shoulder. “I think not...”

He nodded to the clan, from where a dozen weapons pointed at Protégé immediately, oddly, my master looked more to me than them, frowning.

“You so much as raise the gun to me you'll be gone before you know it. We're rough and ready...but we aren't without our skill, y'see. Oh and filly?”

My hooves were still holding the gun, not wanting to move it to my mouth...I...I couldn't...but on the mention of his nickname, I looked up, quivering.

“Don't think about trying to hoof the bullet or something either, I can feel the weight of the round in it, or lack of, should you even try to remove it. Oh, that bullet's only going one place...now come on kiddo...*get it done!*”

The raider behind me began forcing my hooves upwards, ramming the barrel into my mouth and jarring

against my loose tooth and swollen gums from their previous beating. Mumbling in pain through the heavy metal barrel almost choking me, I felt my hoof raised to the trigger and left to do the pushing on the strange inverted customised grip. I was terrified my shaking would set it off, unwilling to apply pressure.

I...I didn't want to die...

I didn't want to die.

The well of emotion began surging up, hatred and shame that I'd pulled that trigger once, it only reminded me of that horrible voice deep down that always whispered...telling me about the one choice every slave always had to make it all end at last. To cast yourself into the oblivion and the embrace of the Goddesses and *pray* they'll forgive you for doing it. To even think it was still in there made me want to be...to be...

I did. Falling to the side, convulsing as my sickness crept up and left me in a fit of coughing and retching, my blood mixing with Caduceus'. I landed upon the floor, the revolver falling beneath me and clattering into the granite ground. Spitting red, struggling to breathe, my kicking hooves caught those trying to force me back up on the shins or knees. A wave of fresh terror approached as I felt myself almost go blind, eyes rolling back as the pain and tightness in my lungs and chest flared up. It lasted for some time, almost half a minute, before finally the convulsions passed, leaving me exhausted, bloody and dying...

I was pulled up, my hooves fumbling below me with the revolver to keep it with me. They left me lying against the balcony, my back to the long drop and the storm above.

"I can't do it..."

"Oh you will."

"I can't do it!" I screamed aloud. *"I..."*

Looking up with blood dribbling from my lips, still shaking violently inside and liable to expire any minute without my RadAway, I caught Protégé's eye. I couldn't do this myself...I...

"I want...I want Protégé to do it. It's...it's only one shot, he'd do it right..."

"Murk, you-"

"Please!" I half shouted. "I...I can't do it. They'll only make it worse if...if I don't take the bullet...please just make it quick..."

The last words were nought but a whisper. But I saw him finally look at me, sigh...and nod. Barb chuckled again, trotting to grab the revolver from me. The raiders raised their guns the moment Protégé took it, guarding him.

"I think we'd all like to see this, the master forced to execute the one slave he really began to like? How *wonderful!* I almost wish I'd thought of it, filly. Now get to work my dear 'master.'"

Stepping aside, he waved a hoof for Protégé to approach me. Gripping the revolver in his telekinesis with a steady familiarity, the unicorn glared at the raider leader...before standing up. His eyes travelled to every raider there was, silently seeming to voice his disgust of them. Pointing their weapons back, they just grinned around the mouth grips. Slowly, keeping his head high, Protégé trotted toward me...and knelt down.

Everything other than the storm had gone silent, each sharp sound of his hooves closing toward me like an individual movement closer to the end...

"Murk...I...I just don't know what to say..."

Trying to calm my own shivering, I stared back toward him. The rain was dripping around us, itching and stinging...but that didn't matter now.

"S-sorry...I j-just couldn't do this...too scared of it...of it hurting...I never wanted to die badly..."

"No-pony does. I...I'll make sure it won't hurt, I *promise.*"

He pushed over, beside me. Without really knowing why, I felt myself leaning into him, felt one of his hooves wrap around my shoulders tightly. I was so scared about what was going to happen...but it felt a little

better knowing he was there when I couldn't even see my other friends through the crush of raiders eagerly awaiting the sight they would be entertained by.

“Never wanted it to go like this. I regret I couldn't, no...wish I could, have let you go, Murk. But...but, Master Red Eye-”

“I know...”

Opening my eyes briefly, I saw him looking down, rainwater dripping from his mane.

“Born slave...remember?”

His mouth seemed to lightly curl up at my words. We were even...understanding. Slowly, I felt the barrel press lightly against my temple at a certain angle. Oh...so that was the better way then. I trusted him.

“I didn't want it to end this way, Murk. M-Master Red Eye gave me a chance...stuck by me, kept me alive and guided me to the freedom at the end. To make the choice for myself to go or stay. I...I wanted...”

Oh Goddesses...to see the pain in his eyes...

“...I wanted to do the same for you. I saw so much of myself from the moment we first met, when I told you that you needed to know freedom. I...I tried to give you what I could of it, give you choices. Allow you those reckless moments to roam free into the crater or the hospital because I knew it was teaching you the one thing that mattered. You impressed me so many times...more than anypony else. I won't forget you...”

I know. Neither I to you when I'm gone.

Clutching tightly, I heard the trigger begin to move, shivering as the moment approached. I'm sorry to put you through this, Protégé...but it just has to be you...I...I couldn't do this part...

Here it comes...

Click.

Silence. Absolute silence. My eyes crept open, seeing the stunned look on Protégé's face as the gun did not fire. But even more was the look of abject shock upon Barb's. The leader stood among his raiders, where their jaws had dropped, some with their weapons falling to the floor. They turned, looking away or between themselves as the reality of the moment finally landed home.

“...what.”

Barb looked from side to side, his dumbfounded slaves shaking their heads or murmuring. The guards were chattering to each other, did it misfire? A bad bullet?

“...WHAT.”

Barb stormed forward two steps, fury overtaking his expression. Then he found my eyes...he *saw* that look. That cheeky look that meant *I'd done something to the gun.*

“You...you little...you did something when you had that gun below you on the ground! But the bullet was still in it! *I felt the weight myself!*”

Coughing once, I just glared back up, with a brief intense stare to Protégé.

“I didn't take it out...”

Barb's eyebrow raised, my eyes moving back to him.

“...I just moved it one more cylinder along.”

Picking up on the momentum faster than any of the raiders, Protégé swept up, the confused guards rifles not immediately pointed at us. The barrel swept around, aiming as he spoke.

“Lucky number *seven* you sadistic son of a bitch!”

BLAM! The revolver finally went off, lighting the entire darkened restaurant with the huge muzzle

flare. Barb dove to the side, the bullet slapped into his shoulder and hurling the chieftain back into the guard who had watched me. Dropping his rifle, Protégé's magic swept it up, dumping half the rounds into the ground with a painfully loud burst of echoing gunfire, sweeping just in front of the raiders on the floor. The sparking rounds made them lurch backward, clearing away from us. He began pointing it back and forward at them before they got their own ones up from their confusion.

“Don't move! Anyone wants a shot, you'll get one to the face before it kills me!”

Finally, their weapons were re-aimed, the wounded Barb hissing for them to keep us guarded. Protégé backed off to the balcony barrier, pulling me behind him. His eyes left none of the raiders...swinging the rifle back and forth rapidly.

“You stupid buck...*you stupid, idiot **colt-fondling little fucker!***” Barb bellowed, limping forward, his shoulder bleeding rapidly. How was he even standing after that round?! “You think you can pull something? We've got you covered! You two are **fucking dead** for this! You've got no-where to go! Nothing but half a mag left and no plan worth a damn that won't have you caught and tortured till we make you scream like the *filly!*”

We were backed in, the raiders advancing till we were completely surrounded. Our backs to the wall, Protégé keeping me guarded behind him. I felt the wind behind us off the plaza balcony, the long drop, swirling banners and lashing leaks of rain to our rear providing a violent backdrop to our shaky position from the perspective of the raider gang keeping us trapped. Protégé ground his teeth, valiantly keeping me defended before the thirty or so weapons aimed directly at our precarious little position.

My master's eyes glanced from side to side, the rifle following them, held close even in his magic field. Barb only sneered, but Protégé remained steadfast, working through with nothing but desperation. Then I caught him out of the corner of his eye, a little glance and curl of his mouth.

“Maybe you're right...”

To my horror, he raised the gun upwards, the wind blowing at his mane ever more violently, as though giving up. But before Barb could even shout the command to take us, Protégé pulled the trigger. Half a magazine's rifle rounds soared upwards, shattering the skylight and punching toward the roof.

“Maybe we have nothing...” he began to speak softly, “...but maybe neither do you. I told you, Shackles isn't going to trust you as an ally. He doesn't fear you like anypony sane would. You're wearing my eyepiece...I'm surprised you haven't been wondering what that little counter at the top is. The one that started counting down from sixty about fifty minutes ago when I set the timer...”

I saw Barb's eye flick up, before scowling.

“What of it?!”

“Sixty minutes to end this before the griffins came in...I'd hoped we'd last the full sixty before now...so you've sort of forced my hoof a little.”

Then he smiled.

“I'll bet those griffins are up there right now around the skylight, preparing to raid...so what if I just gave them a reason to go ten minutes early?”

Barb's mouth opened to bellow a command, but it was lost amongst the explosive chaos that Protégé had set the fuse to.

A great roar of detonation bellowed through the plaza from above. One whole section of the skylight blasted in, sending millions of shards of glass cascading down amidst the rain and smoke. As one, a dozen griffins dropped in...firing as they came into the mass of raiders that had so conveniently gathered in such a tight cluster around Protégé and I.

We dived to the ground, Protégé dragging me below him as the massive anti-machine rounds tore through the raiders, two or even three in a line. Barb had disappeared almost instantly, his raiders falling to the ground in

droves. The griffins whirled in the air, rounding off and dodging the little incoming fire to let their second wave divebomb in after them under the cover of the first.

Protégé grabbed a broken and fallen rifle, tugging the magazine off for his own before opening fire, knocking one raider off her feet while she galloped for us. Firing in short bursts, he held the raiders off me, keeping me safe behind the cover of the balcony. Even so, I still managed to turn and buck one raider *reeeeeally* hard (by my standards) in the only place I properly knew how. My little hooves got right in between the legs to deliver a satisfying crunch, the raider going down, his voice as high as mine. (Karma, for once!)

The incoming griffin fire was less now that the raiders had rushed off in all directions to take cover, as had the griffins. Many had landed on the opposite balconies to snipe across. Heavy rounds rocketed above us, decapitating raiders or chewing the restaurant to pieces. I hoped they knew to watch for us.

“Murk, careful!”

Two raiders turned their guns on me, hiding low themselves. One snapped back from Protégé's last round, the second snapped away, before re-aiming, snarling. An azure light overtook his weapon, every pin, nut, bolt and part coming apart in his mouth until he was left with nothing but a trigger (that he still pulled, I guessed, in a vague dejection). The barrel upturned, smacking him in the face. Glimmerlight's horn glowed in the background, screaming at me to get to cover. Both Ragini and Brimstone had grabbed whoever was nearest, talons or massive hooves ending their lives quickly.

Three others attempted to rush together. But a magical spark and crackling sounded out, before a blast of overpressure blew across the room. The three were sent spiralling through the air, along with multiple chairs, clean off the balcony edge to tumble to the ground. Coral Eve, exhausted, her horn blackened around the tip and barely able to stand, snarled at the results of her telekinetic wave blast.

The combination of griffin fire and our efforts within the restaurant had mostly cleared it of raiders in less than a minute. Most had fled or died in the initial barrage, but it was almost ours! One sniper shot missed a raider, making him duck down and scramble to two of his comrades behind a table. Continuing on its path, the shot snapped one of Brimstone's chains. Free to bring more weight and strength to bear, the warlord began tugging, making the concrete crack behind him on the remaining chain across his foreleg. Pent up rage, anger and frenzy was oozing off him, so much so the big pony seemed able to ignore the wound upon his chest. It quickly became clear how he'd stayed at the top of the pack so damn long...

“Get him!”

Three raiders, dodging under the incoming fire that made everything above the thick balcony wall a killzone, took aim at the escaping Brimstone. Then, with a mighty roar, the last chain sprung free, swirling around as he pulled the entire thing from the wall, a massive chunk of concrete *with* it. The large rock pulverised the raiders, smashing one head and flooring the other two. Bellowing his warcry, their old leader stormed into them, wielding the two chains in his forehooves like flails that snapped bones and tore at flesh.

With Brimstone free, even wounded, the battle swung so hard in our direction that it lasted little more than a few more seconds. Protégé signalled to the griffins, who raised their rifles in recognition before soaring off to hunt down the remaining raiders.

The restaurant was clear.

“We...we did it...we *did it!*” I fell to the floor, gasping from exhaustion before rampantly coughing.

Springing free when Brimstone shattered the lock, Glimmerlight immediately galloped to the restaurant serving window. Throwing bags and satchels to the side, she seemed to know where they had kept their loot. Feeling my chest tighten, I only caught a brief glimpse of her charging across, her magic already ripping open a sachet. Grabbing and hugging me tightly, pushing the opening to my mouth, I grabbed it and let the rank orange taste fill my mouth. Faster than I'd ever done, I downed the liquid, simply leaning in and holding Glimmerlight in return.

Up close, I could see the marks, swellings and bruises brought back fresh since the healing potions we'd found. Around us, Brimstone and Protégé began to scavenge our weapons back, while other griffins arrived to secure Ragini and free her. I could hear them gasp in horror, swearing revenge upon her attacker.

But Glimmerlight and I just held one another, unable to really say anything. We both knew the reason...who we were mourning together. Blinking open one eye, I saw Coral Eve watching us, seeming surprised, startled even at the way Glimmerlight was acting. But seeing me look back...she simply turned away, looking ready to collapse.

“The slaves have moved further into the plaza, we'll take it from here, sir. They won't get out of here alive.”

“No! The *raiders* have moved in, but they have taken slaves are living shields, your assault will only-”

Protégé was arguing with the griffins, who had secured the restaurant. I could hear fire breaking out on the plaza again, further back and around the corner, an area only used for simple slave living space. I hadn't even really been there before, only seen it briefly from the stairs. But it was a dead end...a last stand the raiders had retreated to.

“No survivors! That's the orders from the top, Protégé! Stern's up on the roof if you want to check with her! They ruined a sister's wings, they will die for this!”

“Not every slave is-” The griffin took off. “DAMN YOU!”

My master, bleeding, tired and still shaking on sheer adrenaline, swung away from the griffin's moving back as he began to grab what ammunition for his revolver as he could.

“Not on my watch...*no-pony* else will die today! If Barb dies, the rest will likely surrender, right Brimstone?”

The gruff raider nodded curtly, fishing around the loot the raiders had acquired. His brass hooves were returned to him for now, as was my pack, fleece and battle saddle (Thank the Goddesses!). He also located a few healing potions, just enough to get anypony around in the dangerzone back to stable health for later when healers could move in. Brimstone himself took one for his chest wound, stamping the ground as his strength returned.

“Not if. **When.** I'm going to crush that little upstart.”

The name earned him an odd glance from Protégé. Somehow, I felt he had chosen it on purpose to wind up the slaver. But they nodded to one another, knowing that at least the two of them would go this extra mile...

...no, not alone.

We both knew we had to. Slipping my fleece, weapon and saddlebag back on, I joined Glimmerlight as we trotted forward as well. The unicorn was retrieving her rifle and some scavenged ammunition. A green magic energy pistol lying on the ground was added to her hoof holster in replacement of the sidearm she'd carried in and lost. Barb had done too much...hurt too many...I wasn't any good in a fight, but I wasn't going to abandon my friends. If the most I did was simply listen for anypony flanking or distract them a little...it would be enough.

The slaves still trapped deserved it be done...

Caduceus deserved it to be finished for all he had given...

Together, the four of us galloped out and toward the end of the plaza. Behind us, I saw Coral Eve watching once more, before turning back to start helping the slaves fortify their position and wait for healers...

* * *

The griffins had been stalled. The dead end was a perfect defensive point from the main plaza, all the way at the back of the slave area. Raiders had left dozens of barricades across it, strewing the way in with sharpened metal shapes on the floor to prevent wild assault charges. It was no obstacle to griffins...but if they took to the air, they also lost all their cover and became bigger targets with extended wings. We found them ducked behind pillars and higher balconies, fighting on all levels in a vertical battle to push forward.

The raiders clearly had stockpiled the ammo they had stolen, most of it being down there. One large

tripod gun (*why* was that in the guard room to be stolen?) had been set up and surrounded by thick plates to lay misery upon any who strayed into the middle. Its heavy death-rattle coincided with solid flooring and pillars being torn up and decimated. I could see two or three griffins lying mangled upon the floor, their armour buckled and shredded.

We approached up the side, Protégé taking in their tactics at a glance.

“The griffins will be readying up a firestorm of heavy rounds to batter through those barricades, explosives and everything. It'll kill every hostage and raider without care! Likely the heavy weapons are being brought up as we speak, we don't have much time.”

The unicorn looked around, before settling on one of the shop cells on the side.

“In there!”

We followed his orders, respect as much as rank. The shop cell was dank, stinking of waste and filled with muddy looking mattresses. Suddenly I was very glad for our couch we had...

“The wall in here is cracked, probably weak.”

“How do you know that in such detail? There's a hundred cells in here.” Glimmerlight asked as we moved in. Indeed, it was cracked, just as he had said.

Protégé just turned, glancing at the mattresses with an oddly familiar gaze.

“Two years is a long time to remember every detail...now, if we can get some explosives or some large metal object to wedge in we could-”

“COMIN' THROUGH!”

We dived aside, landing on the musty beds as Brimstone clattered past, charging the wall at full pelt. It didn't even *slightly* stop him. Only one cinderblock thick and coated in the cracked plaster, the wall simply disappeared in a big, Brim-shaped, hole.

“...that too.” Protégé seemed a little bewildered, his elaborate plan suddenly becoming a little pointless.

“Don't worry, he does that a lot. You should see him and terminals.” Glimmerlight winked to the unicorn as she cantered after Brim. I followed with a rather perplexed Protégé in tow.

Rarity's Grace felt snug at my side. With great effort, I'd reloaded it on the way, springing the top of the shielded three shot drum open to carefully hoof the small rounds in. Flicking my front left hoof, the mouthpiece sprang out and around to the right position. The rooms beyond the shop cell were not open to the plaza, perhaps the back of another storage area that merely shared the same walls. Large crates and small cubicle offices passed us on all sides on the final run to find a way in behind the raider position.

Eventually, we found a doorway made of thick steel and heavily locked. Brimstone hammered on it, bucking with brass hooves and all. At most...it dented slightly. But by the side lay a terminal. Glimmerlight leapt to work, tip-tapping away madly. While she worked, Protégé turned back to us.

“Right...Barb will be in there somewhere. The sooner we kill him, the sooner this battle is over. I know we all want a shot at him...but remember those slaves need somepony to protect them.”

He dumped a small sack he'd been carrying, it had a dozen looted weapons from the restaurant.

“We get these to the slaves and do what we can to protect them while we get Barb, whoever spots and gets to him first. But no agendas...who gets the chance takes it, but the slaves *need* protecting. Understood?”

The door clicked, the locks retracted. Glimmerlight spun off of it, leaning on her hind legs against the terminal. You'd never have thought she had just been through what we had been...I was still shaking at the mere thought of *any* gun right now...I didn't want to see one up close for a long...long time...

“Gotcha. Now...we doin' this?”

Pausing for only a second, almost seeming to regard himself for a second, looking at his own cutie mark, Protégé nodded.

“We are.” He approached the door...took a breath...

...and went for it.

Piling through the doorway, we emerged behind the raiders. The door had been a staff entrance, exiting directly onto the plaza itself. The raiders were but ten feet away to our right in the curved dead end. Our first shots took a good half dozen off their feet. Or rather, Glimmer and Protégé's shots. Brimstone leapt immediately into them from from the rear, charging from barricade to barricade.

But I hung back, watching and waiting from the shadows. After a second, I realised I wasn't alone. Where we'd emerged couldn't have been luckier, the slaves were right here! Just off to the other side of the door I saw the vast majority of them cowering under gunfire. Some had been hit bad. I galloped up to them, dragging Protégé's bag while hoping against hope my three friends could hold off the raiders. I began tossing out pistols and sawn off shotguns to the ponies willing to take them. The injured I pointed to the doorway. Many of them recognised me, many hisses about 'the pegasus' beginning to go out. But they obeyed, too afraid and hurt to argue. I couldn't blame them...without the others, I'd have been among them...

They were all that gave me the courage to go on.

Behind me, Brimstone's warcry echoed amongst the plaza. Turning, even as slaves began to guard the door to let the injured be carried out, I saw him gun across the barricades, charging directly for one pony...

Barb.

Amongst the confusion, the raiders' position had shattered. Those on the balconies above were still holding the griffins back and I could see more slaves being held around the barricades as cover, we'd gotten a large amount of them here...but Barb *had* to go down...it would be a massacre of innocents if not. The raiders on this level were too busy keeping the griffins at check to bring every gun to bear back on our flank attack, so Brimstone had a clear shot at their chieftain. The thin unicorn had been guiding them from the front, but upon seeing the rival raider rush him...drew a knife and leapt forward. He must have been healing too...the revolver wound had disappeared.

Tearing across their lines, Brimstone reared, swinging the chained blade upon his brass hoof to whip out. His opponent leapt, but had to duck from a griffin bullet whipping overhead. Feeling my hopes leap, Brimstone's chain snapped around Barb and slammed the side of the blade into his neck. I saw him yanked toward Brimstone with enough force I thought his spine would just snap! Half way into the air, Barb seemed to glide out of the chains with unnatural grace, sliding through the strong shadows and dust of battle to instead leap, knives bared, at my friend.

This was a whole new kind of fight. I'd seen Brim take on brute strength, but here I saw a clash between vastly differing raiders. Under the harsh light and strong shadows, Brimstone fought an enemy who was elusive and wily. His massive hooves swung fast and strong, but only ever seemed to catch Barb's faded edges as his shadow spells took effect. In return, the brass hooves deflected wicked knife strikes that launched from behind or the sides. It was taking all of Brimstone's experience and often forgotten intelligence to predict and react to Barb's sneak attacks. Clearly...Brimstone had long kept combating this menace in mind as the target for any leadership challenge.

But while he fought, Glimmerlight and Protégé were being pinned down. Protégé waved over to me.

“Murk! We need those grenades you've got! Try to get to me!”

I...I had to go into that multi-levelled war? Oh...oh my...

The slaves behind me seemed to be able to hold their position, ranking way lower than the griffins for the attention of the raiders remaining on this level. I began trying to sneak what I could, sticking to behind barricades and scooting along the back wall. Protégé wasn't far, but griffin anti-machine fire was slapping across this same area above my head. Eventually, rolling painfully across my wings, I came to be beside the unicorn. Digging in my saddlebag, I found the two apple shaped grenades we could-

The moment I even reached for them, Glimmer screamed.

“INCOMING! DOWN! GET DOWN!”

We hit the deck hard, the eerie whistle of a rocket tearing down the plaza. I saw it whip between Barb and Brimstone, separating them with the concussive blast that knocked both of them back and took out the heavy machine gun position. Shrapnel flew everywhere, savagely laying low both raiders and slaves.

“Bloodletters! Shades! To me and kill the traitor!” Barb's voice hissed through the air, calling a dozen ponies from the shadows that flowed across the battleground, his elite core of the warband that now assailed Brimstone. Whirling the chains around his hooves, he took them head on. Glimmerlight was pushed back, hiding behind a pillar at the side and trying to shove more clips into her rifle while snapping off flaring green shots with the pistol to keep the raiders not going at the griffins away from her.

Ahead of Protégé and I, Barb began galloping for the stairwell...he was getting away!

“Come on, Murk! We have to end this *now!* Too many ponies are dying from that assault. He needs to go down *right now!*”

With me tagging behind, we galloped across the plaza, dodging fire that kicked up concrete below our hooves. Protégé shot down two raiders trying to block our path, while I slid underneath a fallen pillar to dodge one that aimed to chase me. He couldn't follow through such a space. The moment he went over, a griffin took his head off. Part of me wanted to be sickened, so much blood and death would normally horrify me...but the stakes were too high, the violence too constant. If I stopped to worry...I'd be dead.

Barb turned, seeing Protégé and I gunning for him. The chieftain snarled, heading upstairs again the moment we reached the bottom of stairwell. Fear gripped me of following this deathly raider, but there was no turning back now. I...I'd just listen for him and let Protégé know...he could take Barb, right?

I hoped so...if not, I was suddenly going to be very alone with a pony who could kill me without even trying...

The stairwell led up much further than the one higher level I had expected, what was this? Some sort of maintenance staircase? The sound of the battle below, so painful to my hypersensitive ears, was beginning to dull the higher we went. The echoes of it beginning to become audible alongside the ongoing crashes of thunder. But even more worrying...the higher we went, the darker things got...

Finally, we emerged into a room. Barb was nowhere to be seen...

For the entire room was in darkness. No natural lights were still active here. Terror shot through me...this was Barb's ideal area. Some sort of old high ventilation room, large banks of machinery made the entire place a criss cross of hiding places. Normally I'd feel right at home and able to hide here, but now every shadow felt threatening. Even the small war below had become a distant thumping in this isolated and contained place.

“Come out, Barb! It's all over now!” Protégé shouted into the darkness, his revolver training around, watching piles of work tools, boxes of sand next to mops and small crates of wires and a thousand other small hiding places while we trotted further in. Above us, the roof seemed to clatter with the wind beating at the building. We much have been right below the rooftop itself.

Slowly, a deliberate and dragging laugh emanated from the darkness.

“Ha...ha...ha...over? I believe differently, 'master.' You really think I couldn't just slip out of here? Start anew? Fillydelphia isn't a cage to me. The moment you two are dry on the floor...then I'll make my way from here. They won't even know I'm gone.”

The voice came from *everywhere*. His magic was throwing the voice, no doubt. Protégé swung the revolver on every side, peering as best he could to see into the dark.

“You're in my world now, not even your precious little E.F.S. to help you hunt me down. You won't leave this room alive. Dear filly? Take a seat...watch the master of shadows at work.”

A thud came from behind us, watching my reaction, Protégé spun, firing a shot. The flare of the gun lit the

entire room for a fraction of a second, showing nothing more than a crate that had tipped being blown to splinters. The laughter came again.

“One shot down...five to go...only this time there's no clear kill.”

The door we had come through slammed shut, locking hard. Sticking side to side and facing opposite directions, I strove to let my eyesight work in here...but even with a vague idea of where we were, Barb was utterly impossible to locate. Small sounds came from every side, confusing us...misleading us...

Within the sounds I heard that of something hissing, spinning in the air...

“KNIFE!” I screamed, more of fear than warning; dropping away and covering my shoulder while quaking. Protégé dove to the side, rolling back to his hooves as the thin blade pinged off the large fan assembly we'd passed. Aiming quickly, two heavy shots battered into the darkness, the flares revealing a dark shadow flickering over the top and away. He'd missed by *miles*.

“Oooohohoho...getting panicky now, are we? Two hasty shots? I thought you were Red Eye's *apprentice*, boy! Trained by the pony who created a superpower with nothing but charisma and smarts! I must say I'm disappointed...”

Pausing on the spot, Protégé seemed to dial down any anger, before his horn lit up more than the usual telekinesis. A red aura sprang around us, lighting the area within twenty or so feet. I could see the reason...it gave us something, but Barb no doubt could have seen us anyway no matter how dark it was. I drew my PipBuck from my back, strapping it to my now healed leg and activating the light too. My vision began to settle, now I had something to work as ambient light. But shadows danced in the room...everywhere I looked I saw small bits of movement. Circling around in our lonely island of light, we stuck together against the darkness that threatened to bring us low.

Then Protégé took the initiative. His magic grabbed two boxes of wires, the ease he had with multi-tasking sending bunches of them hurtling into the darkness at any slight sounds we heard. Then the crates went flying...and the tools...anything to try and gauge an impact.

Beep!

Now?! *Really?! Another hissing sound, another knife. I heard Protégé grunt in pain as it skiffed him, drawing blood along his side. Not wanting to lose any momentum, he charged forward, trusting me to follow without distracting words. I dialled down the PipBuck volume. Oh Sundial...not now...*

But I could still hear it.

Beep!

Click...

“I...hi...geez...oh Luna, sorry...exhausted, want to get this before sleep...”

“Watch out, Murk!”

The warning came for a huge string of wires across the floor, we jumped over them, trying to chase him down and catch him in our aura of light around the maintenance room. Charging from corner to corner, I tried to keep up with the taller unicorn.

“Those zebras, they came back! They asked me again about the plans, about how I could make money, I don't know who I should tell or...or what I should do! They just appeared from no-where in the dark alleyway with those cloaks! Hidden in the darkness...”

Barb had been silent for a while now...the waiting was only making things worse. Our lights weren't strong enough to properly cast across the room, he could be simply...following...us...

I spun, expecting to see a knife...but there was nothing...

“Getting to you, filly...?”

“They scare me so much, just not knowing when they'll pop out of hiding. No wonder the Ministry of Morale's been so active. I...I tried to run from them, but they followed me, cornered me, asked the question again. To give up plans, what if their offer turns nasty? It was so scary...seeing the snow landing on something that isn't there and form a shape...”

Wait...

“Protégé!”

My master spun around, I quickly flicked my eyes to the boxes of sand, likely used to clean up spills with the mops beside them. Nodding briefly back to me, Protégé began backing us toward the boxes. He let out another shot into the darkness, lighting up a darting shape *atop* the machinery. Then he was gone again...

“Oh, come now, really? I thought you'd realised how pointless that was to waste a bullet? Well well...are you even sure that *was* me?”

We waited...waited still. Closing my eyes...I concentrated everything I could on my hearing. Please...please now, work! I crouched to the ground, trying to ignore the danger...ignore the fact my friends were fighting for their lives below me...

“But they're offering so much...it's...it's tempting. But I saw a spritebot floating around my apartment a few times today...are the Ministry onto me? Watching to see if I would slip up? I just...just need a sleep...but Sky needs something to help her live if this all goes bad! I...I feel paranoid, like any small sound at night makes me wake up and lock myself in the bathroom. Any small sound...”

I heard the slide of a knife from a pocket...

“Now!”

Protégé's horn flared, launching the boxes of sand into the air and spinning wildly. The sand erupted into the air, coating everything, including us. But I heard one splutter amongst the darkness and immediately pointed my hoof. Two shots from Protégé's revolver rang out at the direction. Each flare revealed a freeze-frame of Barb charging us, dodging around the bullets. A knife flashed between us, both of us dodging to either side.

“The zebras are watching, I just know it! They knew who I was. What if...what if they kill me?”

“A child's trick with sand? Oh my, but you've used up all your bullets my dear Protégé! Time for this to end!”

Rolling away, I turned to see Barb within our sphere of light, slashing and stabbing at Protégé. The unicorn was backing off furiously, throwing everything he could at the raider while he struggled to reload individual bullets from the looting we'd done. Box after bucket after tool kept Barb just out of knife range. After three bullets were in he re-aimed, taking another shot that Barb ducked around a workbench to avoid and disappeared. The sand wasn't staying on him, it had only bought us that one shot!

“They might get somepony else as their helper, if...if I only give them non-critical bits...I don't think I have a choice anymore. It's like they're always behind me...just waiting...”

“Behind you!”

I saw Barb launch off the workbench and into our aura, two knives in his magic. A telekinetic duel began of sorts, as Protégé struggled to keep those knives away from him. I watched in horror as the pony I only today had truly began to care for in return fought for his life with the raider. The revolver fired, Barb's own magic knocking the aim off the same as his knives were being stopped. Changing the stakes, Barb launched forward, going physical on Protégé as the two tussled, both hoof to hoof and magic to magic they fought...and Protégé was clearly losing. Barb was impossible to keep a grip of, sliding and slithering in ways no-pony should be able to move or letting Protégé's attempts to grapple him down slide off that sickeningly damp skin-armour. Already, my master, had a half dozen knife slashes from near misses.

“All I know is, I need to make a decision. Take action.”

I bit down on the mouthpiece, aiming *Rarity's Grace*. My one shot went wild, but the distraction made Barb break off and away. A knife hurtled toward me, making me scream and fall from the hissing metal passing so close overhead. How many did he *have*?

But the distraction cost him dear. Unable to fight him head on, Protégé's magic changed purpose. Ripping the eyepiece from Barb's face, he aimed the revolver, holding fire only as the raider dropped back into the shadows at a moment's notice.

Only now...Protégé had his E.F.S.

The revolver and its single shot tracked him, following the raider all around. I fell back again, the ferocity of their brutal duel becoming far too much for me. They weren't speaking, weren't taunting or boasting now.

This was a fight. A life or death event that both of them wanted to win badly. Protégé sent spanners and hammers hurling after Barb, tracking him on the eyepiece and ducked and dove, crying out as another knife sliced through his ear, almost taking it entirely off. He staggered back, wincing and muttering in pain, the revolver drooping...no!

“But first...sleep, so tired...goodnight...”

Click.

Barb launched from the shadows, almost stretching out amongst them as the knife descended.

Protégé was bluffing.

The wires spun up, his strong multi-tasking telekinetic skills sending dozen of them whipping around him on all sides. Wrapping around the raider, they tangled him roughly, before a box of heavy sand smashed against his head. Barb landed heavily on his back, face bleeding from the impact. The knives all dropped, falling as his spell broke, bringing his full body into sharp relief. Spinning, Protégé brought the last round he had on him to bear, pointing directly at his head. Barb glanced up, sudden immediate fear in his eyes.

The look on Protégé's face was stern, authoritative and confident. I'd only seen such a look on one pony before.

Red Eye.

*“This is for Caduceus and everypony else you *murdered*.”*

Barb's hooves came up, but it was too late. Protégé's revolver blew his head clean apart...

...into a dark mist, as the rest of his body faded.

No, wait...I'd seen this! NO!

“MASTER, BEHIND YOU!”

Looking up in shock, he tried to spin, but the shadowed knife slammed home into his shoulder, diagonally lancing to pierce right through and out from his chest. Barb had dropped onto his back from above, before twisting it horribly and drawing a loud scream of pain from the unicorn.

“Hurts...doesn't it?” Barb whispered into his ear, another sick twist only gave another drawn out cry from his prey. I felt rooted to the spot, my mouth gaping. No...*NO!*

They fell to the ground, the knife ripping free as Barb straddled over the prone slave master. It was a wickedly black dagger now I saw it better, seeming to drift with shadows on the blade. Protégé fell limp with Barb on his back. The raider's magic grabbed Protégé's mane, yanking his head back to expose his neck, keeping Protégé head between him and I as cover. The blood soaked blade curled around it and began to pull...*slowly*...I even saw the blood began to dribble forth to mix with the copious bleeding of his shoulder, he was slitting his neck wide open!

“Born slave to loyal slaver...never truly your own pony, pathetic! Now...bye-bye!”

I saw him tense to pull Protégé's head right back, to rip the cut throat apart. Without even really knowing what I was doing, I charged forward, galloping with all the force I could gather and hurling myself at Barb with a loud cry. Even my weight was enough, slamming the raider off of Protégé and beating at him with my hooves as best I could. The shadowblade flew away into the darkness. Rolling one over the other, I was picked up and hurled into the metal machinery like a rag doll. Trying to stand, I flipped the mouthpiece out again, the shot firing upward from his magic re-aiming my weapon, before Barb bucked me again, knocking me another seven feet away.

“Now what do we have here? The little filly got some spine, eh? Thought he could take on a raider chieftain at his own game before he got his kill? Gotta hand it to you, kid...didn't expect it.”

He darted forward, blinking through my vision and appearing before me, his front hoof smashing me across the jawline. Falling to the side, I spat blood, my gums burst. But he wasn't done, his magic lifting me up to telekinetically throw me even further. Clattering off the ground, I felt my ribs jar and the wind crushed out of me on impact. Unable to even scream, I simply rolled over, moaning loudly as I clutched at myself.

“But he's dead one way or the other, why, just take a look!”

Drawing my head up, he forced my glance back to Protégé, where I felt my eyes widen in horror. He was jittering on the ground, trying to hold his neck shut...bleeding out rapidly, unable to move at all.

“No...it's just you and I, filly. You...and I...”

I lashed out in desperation, my hoof trying to catch him by surprise. No such luck, I felt my hoof battered away, before I was thrown through a doorway.

Suddenly...light and sound...

The battle below us raged. A sense of vertigo overtook me as I realised what I'd been thrown onto.

The platform above the plaza I had seen, that skeletal shape right below the skylight. This had all led upward to it, above the long drop downwards. The bottom was nothing but hard mesh to trot on, no solid floor at all. I could see right down. Struggling to stand, my body aching, I found myself crying in sheer terror. I...I couldn't win!

I screamed even more as I felt the terrible sensation of a knife slit across my back. Crawling away, I felt another...not daring to look back. But I yelled...feeling my back sear in pain. They weren't deep...he was taunting me...torturing me. My hooves scrambled, trying to crawl across the platform, away from him.

“You know, filly. You and I are pretty alike. Small amongst our peers...back there, even your master could give me a run in a straight fight. But with you...oh it all changes...”

I was kicked again, flung further out onto the platform. The entire thing swung on the cords beneath the thunderstorm above. Rain lashed at us through the skylight, wind almost threatening to blow me off the edge. His long mane was whipping around as he strode toward me. Lit by a flare of lightning, that grin turned almost demonic, those eyes predatory. We were soaked, in the brute presence of the wasteland storm above. I tried to turn, to shoot out the glass above his head and drop him, but my mouthpiece was broken. That grin widened, he sensed easy blood...

“See, with *you*, I don't need all that. I can, for once, enjoy a little physical superiority! You can't hide or sneak better than I can, your peer. So it's all useless to you! No...all you can do is lie there and *cry* while I do all the things I never could to anypony else!”

The thunder clashed above us, the skylight's remaining fixtures shaking and making the entire platform unsteady. Seeing my blood on the ground behind me, I just tried to stay away from that knife. But his magic could reach me, flipping me over onto my front...

“Don't think I don't know your fears, filly. The terrors you hold from one of my crew...”

I felt the tip of a blade draw across my back, before resting above my shoulder and beginning to

press...no...*no please...*

“Welcome back to hell...”

The piercing pain shot through me and pinned me to the ground, feeling a foot long blade punch through my body. The *same shoulder*.

Against the thundercrash above, almost lost in the sound, I *screamed*.

Kneeling down beside me, he pushed my head against the grated bottom of the platform, making me see the battle below through tear stained eyes and a throat struggling to be able to scream as much as I wanted for help.

“You *need* your allies, without them you're nothing, filly, *nothing!* You think they're gonna save you now? Poor master's bleeding out, the mare and the traitor are still down there, see them?”

I...I could...they didn't even see me, they were just fighting for their lives, unable to move from bad cover for fear of the griffins hitting them. The slaves were backed into a corner, desperately struggling to survive from both raiders and griffin incoming fire.

“No, for once you're all alone and there's *nothing* you can do, filly! Nothing but scream and cry while you watch your friends *die!*”

My body was failing from the stab wound, my tearducts empty. Barb drew the knife out, making me cry out...curling up. No...no more...please...no more...why couldn't we all just...just live...

Everything seemed slow, the wind becoming lethargic and lazy...the gunshots taking longer...

“*Only by sticking together can we truly save lives...do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world...you will find your courage, Murky.*”

Those voices in my memory...in my mind...they were what had inspired me to come here. To do all this, to this absolute end of all effort. To finish this and save lives...to help everypony make something better!

Just...just you watch, LittlePip...I'll fail...but I won't destroy everything you've given me!

It hurt...it hurt so badly, but remembering the faces of everypony who had been hurt more to get here...I began to push myself up, facing Barb. I...I had two grenades left, I began trying to dig for them, watching him, and-

His hoof caught me across the face.

“Applause for effort, filly! But you're outmatched here! I'm stronger, faster, smarter, bigger and stealthier than you'll ever be!”

His other hoof, slapping me again the other way, I staggered back again toward the edge...

“Every plan, every idea, *every trick* I've seen before! You're nothing but the little pony no-pony actually believes will do anything in the end! You wanted to *escape? You?! You'll never* get out of here, kid!”

Pulling myself together, my body protesting, I readied up. My shoulder and front leg was useless. But one last effort...I...I just had to try! I charged him head on again, wrestling with the raider atop the platform, trying to hit him with my PipBuck. He threw me everywhere, his knife drawing blood on slits and cuts. His hooves battered my face till one eye went blind...but I pushed into him, hooves grabbing his disgusting clothing to tug and pull in his pockets...before he simply threw me off. Gravity disappeared, my hoof jarred as it caught around a pole at the edge...the rest of my body flung away from the platform to now hang above the drop. The entire platform shuddered, leaning down to drop my weight. From above, the rain was cascading down even harder across us, the stinging making my hoof go weak. I tried to grab with my other one, but all the efforts had made the stab wound become much worse...I...I couldn't move my leg at all...my hind ones just kicked out over the massive drop.

“Guess this is it, filly. You've been fun! But I told you. *Nothing* you can do, not one thing you can pull out on me that I don't know better.”

Struggling, trying to keep attached, I propped my head back on the platform. Leaning up...I fixed him with a look before I spat out blood...

...along with two grenade pins.

“E-every trick? Ever...ever heard of the reverse pickpocket?”

If I weren't bleeding to death and hanging off such a ledge...the look on his face would have been satisfying. The raider stepped back, as though wondering if I were joking, before frantically beginning to search his many pockets and hidden sections of clothing, realising the mistake he'd made...falling into the pride and rush of being a physically stronger pony for once that he'd forgotten what it was to be sneaky.

“You...no, you couldn't have! A reverse...NO! Not *you!* Damn you! DAMN YOU!”

My leg gave way...I couldn't hold on any longer. Feeling darkness creep over me, I saw the horrified look on Barb's face move further and further away as he felt the two bumps in his clothing even while I fell...

“NO! Not to a...stupid...*fucking....filly! IT WON'T HELP! YOU'RE STUCK HERE! YOU'LL NEVER GET OU-*”

The sharp crack and echoing boom rocked through the air...the blinding flash atop the platform throwing the broken and shredded form of Barb off the opposite side from myself. The concussive blast slapped across me. Then, seconds later, after everypony below looked skyward...the second explosion of the other grenade blasted the remains into ashes within the sight of his entire clan.

Barb was gone...I simply fell to my death. A strange calm overtook me as I fell through the rain from on high, I had...I had done *something*...

Then I hit something, not the ground, but a heavy fabric. A vast pink face enveloped me, slowing my descend as my light weight was caught in the billowing banner that had blown out horizontally to catch me. But even so...I rolled down it, tumbling, speeding up again for the last single storey yet to fall. I closed my eyes, the impact eventually coming...and striking hard.

Everything went out.

* * *

A warm light. That inner glow from before...it fell around me, fell across my broken and tired body. Slowly...I was lifted up. Helped to my hooves once again.

A...a pony! It was a pony! It turned that shimmering head with mine, ahead of us lying the Wall, as grand and imposing as ever.

Slowly, I felt a hoof clutch mine, as we began moving toward it, bolstered...braver...reminded of our potential...

“Together...”

Other words, another four drifting words that seemed so far...far...away...

I couldn't hear them...there was too much noise, too many other words, not beautiful...not as wondrous...they were foul...they were crude...they were-

* * *

“-before I push it there myself! Come on you flipping bunghole pipe fucking experiment! There's too many casualties for you to sit around dicktickling some buck with a sprained leg all day!”

My eyes wouldn't see anything but vague blurs...but I was lying on cold ground. The rotten shape of a ghoul over me. Weathervane...

“-and while you're there get me some Celestia-damned Med-X! I don't give two fucks if the guard says it isn't for slaves!” A pause. “No I don't give a *single* fuck either! BLOODY MOVE! I can't move him till we

know if his back's gone or not!"

Then then yellowed face turned back to me, seeing my hazed eyes drifting open. He gained in clarity...as I slowly began to realise I was still alive. But I couldn't move...my shoulder was a mess of twisted pain, the feeling making me want to cry and shiver. A knife, again...

"Fuck the eighteen generations of your ancestors, kid, you're lucky to be alive." Weathervane began re-strapping a thick wad of bandage around my shoulder, being careful to keep my back from moving. Behind him I could see dozens of healers galloping around the Mall's plaza floor, tending to so many ponies...

"I...I had to, the...the grenade..."

"Lucky about the grenade? Fuck the *grenade*, kid! You landed on *Stern!* Just hope she doesn't want compensation for the piece of armour you dented on your fall. Leastways she broke your impact a little, better than can be said for some of the slaves those bastards got their hooves on..."

My mind raced, sudden panic fighting through. Apparently...my back worked just fine, as I launched up, grabbing the ghoul.

"*Protégé!* Is...is he..."

Doctor Weathervane pressed me firmly back down, as the pain only then hit me from my sudden movement. Nearby...I saw ponies being wheeled out to the hospital, Glimmerlight...Coral...they both watched me as they passed, Glimmer offering a thin smile, clutching a bullet wound. But I could only await the answer...

"We found him upstairs..."

Oh no...

"...living, but in critical condition. He's lost a lot of blood..."

"But...but you can help him! Potions and spells and-"

"Normally, yes. But we're not sure what Barb did to that blade because those wounds just aren't healing no matter how many potions we throw into him. We've got doctors keeping him alive by the thinnest of threads right now but...it's not looking good. Even at the most optimistic, he's out of the game for a while."

Behind him, I saw one more stretcher pass out...surrounded by crowding healers, all of their horns flaring. I caught a few glances of a black coat. Oh Goddesses protect such a poor pony in his hour of need...please Celestia...please Luna, bring him through this arduous time and give him the strength to live...

Weathervane glanced at them, before sighing.

"They say Red Eye's personal physician will take to him...they don't like 'outsiders' like me working on Red Eye's little prodigy there. Despite the fact I'm more 'inside' than any of those fuckers, Fillydelphia's my fucking *home*. Now...we're getting you to Hearts and Hooves, Murk...you've got a little pass. Before he went under, Protégé muttered something about getting you all the care you needed. We'll see that happens..."

It was over. The Mall was devastated, ruined...destroyed. Blood ran everywhere, balconies had collapsed and there was enough battle damage to render it useless for a little while. But I could see the slaves cowering at the side...we'd saved them...even now, healers moved among them, tending to them in their hour of need.

...I'd known one who had done so *before* then...even as I watched, for a second I thought I witnessed a blonde mane looking up quickly, smiling as he helped other ponies. Then he was gone...just another face to the memories...

The first chance I got...I was going to draw him...he deserved it...

I was wheeled out soon after, doped up on Med-X and lifted upon the stretchers as they returned for more. Weathervane returned with me, staying silent en-route. But as we left the Mall, I looked back into the war-torn destruction left behind and saw one pony standing among it.

The Master.

He looked up and around...casting his eyes over the Mall, over every cell and barrier with keen eyes...like

somepony viewing a new home for the first time...

...and smiled.

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Sleight of Hoof (Rank 2!) - Giving and taking, it's all the same to you now. That little bit of damning evidence or unfortunate item may now mysteriously end up in your enemy's possession without them even realising. Reverse pickpocketing is now significantly easier to achieve with heavier objects!

Chapter 13: The Mare in the Mirror

* * *

“Quite pleased to make your acquaintance actually. Let's get the other bit of politeness taken care of, shall we? What the bloody, bloody, bloody hell are you doing here?!”

“What's it like to look back on how far you'd come?”

You know, I guess I'd never even thought about it that way. Barb's death was something of an end to one of the larger parts of my new life in Fillydelphia. Since I had made that first fateful escape attempt, he had been there in the background and somewhat involved in almost every facet of my struggles since.

But it's more than that, isn't it? This was...this was the first time I'd ever really *done* something that mattered. That really changed anything. Sure there had been helping Protégé to get the sani...sanitoo...

“Sanitiser.”

Yeah, that. But that was almost all just a test, a ploy by him to get me to think outside the box and try making choices for myself. But taking on Barb was an *event*. Something big that I was involved with which ended in our success.

...well...if you could call it a success...we'd lost many innocent ponies in the battle, along with one who had been fast becoming somepony we'd expected to stick with us until we made an attempt or something. We were all injured, Protégé was seriously hurt and taken from us into the machine of Red Eye's city. We might have stopped Barb...but it had all just been part of a greater plan by somepony else...The Master. He wasn't officially in command, but he was chosen to oversee the repairs. Protégé's efforts to bring down Barb were likely the only thing that had stopped his absolute success...even so, if Protégé didn't return to service soon...

S-sorry...I'm getting off the question, aren't I?

“Huh? Oh...look, don't worry about it, we're not in any rush. We're going to be around one another a long time now, remember? Plenty of opportunity to go at your own pace.”

Yeah...yeah true...ok, I'll try...

So...I suppose that it's more than just since I tried to escape. It goes all the way back to when I first remember struggling to pull a sled weighed down with rocks near Shattered Hoof. That little skinny legged colt with the mismatching ears straining to move it even one inch. He'd never have thought he'd someday wrestle a raider chieftain atop a platform in a thunderstorm to save innocent ponies fighting for their lives below. He didn't see anything but just a future full of toil and sweat till eventually it all ended.

But now I was involved in the secret planning of a grand escape from the most inescapable slave fortress in the wastes. I had others around me, ponies who I had earned the trust and friendship of, ending over a decade of loneliness. Every good pony I had met had changed me, helped me move one step closer to true freedom of the mind. Really, it's their success more than mine. To think how short a time it had been...how much I'd been through, culminating on the battle against Barb's raiders. It's easy to forget...well, just how many of those small steps I'd taken amidst the mad rush.

But the game had changed, as much as we'd done our part, the true winner in the end had been The Master. His ambition...it...he just scares me, so much hate and sadistic will in one pony. The stakes were growing, the need for escape becoming ever more important. That we had to just keep bounding forward, doing every little thing we could to swing the odds back in our favour. Every scrap of food, every drop of

water and every trinket, tool or tactic we could gather had to be taken in.

But as I said, even though I'd come so far so soon...there were still some things that I had to go back to. Some ponies that had been there in the very beginning. Before any of this, before even the Stable Dweller. Somepony who was still out there in Fillydelphia that mattered deeply to me and deserved escape. Somepony who didn't even know I was still alive...

But it all hinged on one fact. If Protégé didn't return to power soon, anypony I tried to help might simply end up being led into the clutches of The Master in the same way I was. I had to just trust he'd be alright...that the pony I had only just begun to see *as* a pony had not been taken from me forever...

* * *

It was still raining.

In this long neglected wing of Heart and Hooves Hospital, the windows had gone completely without repair since they were blown in by the Balefire megaspell. Allowing the rain to continue its foul lashing and spraying from a dark sky and cast a chill wind through the empty frames. Alone in my hospital bed, I curled up with the meagre blanket and tried to keep as much of the cold away as possible.

At least the storm had passed over, I'd heard the slavers on guard inside the hospital saying that the rain should go soon as well. But until then I was stuck here...one of the last to leave. Glimmerlight and Brimstone had been returned to the Mall long ago, their less serious wounds 'permitting' them to return to work sooner. Me? I had the 'privilege' of getting to rest a while longer. As if taking a knife to the back of your shoulder was some sort of pass to a day of rest...

I'd been waking up multiple times screaming, leaving me hazy and heavy eyed when awake. The pain of the wound when I tossed or turned only skewing my nightmares to remind me of the sick puncturing feeling that I'd had *twice* now. They...they said you're meant to get used to hardship and become weathered to it. If only...I just felt more scared of knives than ever. The sick looks of the raider or Barb as they let the weapon plunge into my flesh simply left me a shivering wreck now. Weathervane had called it 'psychological scarring', a wound that persists in pain even if the body has entirely healed. Something that could easily flare up when in fear of the initial attack happening again. Likely another thing to live with throughout my life. I'd never carry a knife...never.

But after the fear and adrenaline, my body was beginning to 'remember' the other ailments. My eye infection was worse, itching and making my right eye swell all the more. Blackened rings surrounded them still from the torture Barb's raiders had given me after running from Slit, leaving my face sore and aching from the effort to cry on the many *many* times I did. My nose felt blocked, no doubt having caught something in the storm and due to my immunity to illness being so low, which made it all the harder to have to breathe through my mouth. This was never easy, given the raspy burning that I got in my throat from overuse. Weathervane had dropped off my one remaining RadAway with a promise to try and find more spare...but the stocks were being carefully monitored now. I was trying to let it last till I *really* needed it. As such, more than once I'd endured the spasm inducing coughing fits while recovering. Clutching a thin pillow to my empty stomach, I'd simply squeezed it as tightly as I could, trying to put all the pain and fear of radiation and taint away, trying to forget about the clock that was slowly ticking down the seconds of my life...

It hadn't worked too well...

The wind blew in again from the craterside window, lifting the tails of my blanket until I could clamp it down and roll up, but I lost my page in my journal. I'd been drawing, gently easing the lines out upon parchment to uphold a promise and attempt to distract myself. This wasn't going to be just another picture though...this had to matter. Caduceus...he had barely gotten to know us, but in even just a short, almost criminally forgettable time, he had proven himself a brave and kind buck. Now I'd never know his quirks, likes or thoughts on various things...never get to go to him for help or do him a favour like friends did. But he'd risked himself for us in the hope of being our friend...in the end, he deserved that place in our hearts.

I hoofed the pages back against the wind, coming to the growing piece of art that I knew he had to be in.

Myself and Glimmerlight were upon it already, me in the bottom middle left, her just across from me to the right of the middle. It brought a little grin to my face, seeing the extravagant and beaming face I'd drawn her with, cheekily lowering her eyebrows in *that* look only she could really do. I decided to place him beside her, where he'd have wanted to be. Just to her left and slightly behind her with that gentlecolt-like polite stance and warm smile he'd had.

Struggling to remember, I let my subconscious do the work for me, gently swishing the charcoal in little tight curves for his body as I imagined it would have been had he not been stuck here. Bold flicks, like those confident little motions he would exude to me, formed his mane. Big and fluffy, not trodden down from months without cleaning. In honour of his dedication, I gave his saddlebag the symbol of Fluttershy's medical teams. Were they a Ministry again? My memory wasn't too great on that...

But his eyes...the moment I finished them, the charcoal dipped in my mouth. Seeing that happy look from the paper...knowing the this drawing would be the *only* way I'd ever truly see him again forever, that felt harsh. Glimmerlight could bring up memories...but those were hers, not mine. Even if she extracted some of my own for me, it was still just the past. What lay before me in my style...was the end.

Another blast of wind scattered the pages again, making me mutter in annoyance when the charcoal got messed up on a correction of his mane. Leaning down to correct it, the page only flew up in my face, flicking madly back to earlier images. I almost froze as I saw one of my first pictures I could remember...that of the mare. That long mane, ruined and straggled into a mess by slavery, the cut tail and hard worked body...I'd drawn her as reality showed her that time. She was looking up at the Wall...as though wishing to leave herself. If only I could get to her...I'd spent less than ten minutes around her, never knowing her name or anything. I hadn't even seen her cutie mark. I couldn't just leave her and her buck behind, could I? In such a short time, she had helped change my life. She had stood up to The Master for me. Please be safe still...

Whistling, the wind once again threw the page over, ruining the moment of reflection.

"Oh...f...f...*fairy*cakes." I slammed the journal shut. Sitting alone in this room while the healing magic slowly finalised its work wasn't doing me any favours. I felt lonely, miserable in the wet weather and with only my own worried thoughts to really keep me company. As strange as it felt to a pony like me who not long ago would have simply hidden and cried...I wanted somepony around. Anypony...just to feel a little safer. Even just a little trot through the corridors where others were might help better than dwelling in misery.

Wrapping the blanket around me, I hopped off the bed, keeping the hoof of my injured shoulder off the ground as I hobbled forward. Part of the blanket dragged behind me on the floor as I stepped into the busy corridors. Ponies cantered to and fro on errands for chems, medicine or to find somepony who knew a certain spell. I stuck to the sides...avoiding any rush or hurrying doctor. I could hear the rasping voice of Weathervane far off, clearly fighting to save somepony's life. The hospital was dark, the unreliable lighting and magic power inside having gone offline from the storm earlier. Candles were lit or curtains pulled back to let the little light Fillydelphia had back in. Right now...it all just felt like the deepest, harshest hole in the world that I was stuck in, surrounded by all the others who now cried or moaned in pain from its tortures.

One little hurt pony wrapped in a once white blanket, limping past the horrors that seemed all too willing to exude their experiences upon him.

Backing into a room to avoid a stretcher bearing a lifeless scrawny mare past, I saw the nurse from before when I had last visited. She glanced at me, nodding briefly, before sadly continuing to carry the body around back. I'd smelled smoke earlier...a proper burial wasn't something any slave could expect. Already, no doubt Caduceus had been...been...

"...Murk?"

I squeaked, jumping on the spot and stumbling against the doorframe. Spinning to inside the room, there were three beds. Two had bucks out cold...the third contained a mare sitting up. Coral Eve.

Her horn seemed to carry an irregular magical haze in the gloom, an unhealthy pale version of the full

light I'd seen it carry before. Seeing my glance, she raised a tired looking wasted hoof to it, rubbing her own horn gently.

“Old case of horn rot years ago, dear. The wastes isn't without its own diseases compared to Fillydelphia. Been unreliable and prone to sporadic power surges since. Hey, you don't need to stand in the doorway. Come closer, it's alright.”

She patted the rather too large bed beside her, leading me to obey and wander forward. She definitely had a somewhat maternal tone to her, probably because I was a lot younger. Either way...I feel myself moving to simply abide by the command. Hopping up, she grabbed my good hoof to help me sit in my blanket beside her.

“Now...how're you doing?” Her voice was tender, mature and pleasant. A far cry from the bitter mare I'd seen in the Mall. Was this...what she was normally like?

I held my shoulder.

“It's sore...Doctor Weathervane says it shouldn't hurt since he healed it, but it still hurts...be...because my mind thinks it should.”

“Yeah, I've heard of that. You been stabbed there before, dear?” Her hoof carefully moved the blanket aside to look at my shoulder, seeing the still marked, but healed wound when I lifted the bandage up.

A little bit of my coat had yet to regrow from where Weathervane had been doing his work with rather powerful magic. Glancing at it myself, I nodded, motioning to the underside of my shoulder.

“One of Barb's raiders outside the Stable. Just pinned me down and...and...”

Cold metal...piercing the skin and ripping apart till I could see my own *bone*...the feelings washed over me all again.

Oh please, don't let me cry here in front of her. I tried to look away, instead looking toward the shower outside the surprisingly intact window in this room. Even so, the thought of that lashing rain made me shiver, my skin still tingled from the exposure during the battle and sick games. It was nothing more than a constant battle now that the adrenaline was over. A battle to not remember the spinning revolver and nerve crushing tension on each dead click.

In a word, I felt simply traumatised. Part of me doubted I'd ever be truly able to 'get over' the twisted experience Barb put me through.

Much to my surprise, I felt Coral's hoof pass over me, tucking the blanket back around me, probably because I will still shaking so much. The older mare tried to smile, but just sighed.

“You shouldn't have been caught up in that, not you. I've raised a colt, Murk, I know that look of innocence when I see it. That's why I forgave you for that day in here when we first saw one another. I could see the look my son once had when I caught him trying to steal medicine off a trader to help an injury one of his little friends had. The look of somepony who doesn't deserve to be in such a place.”

Regardless, I still felt guilty, but I sensed an opportunity. She clearly didn't mind me individually...perhaps if it came from me...

“We're all trying to get out, Coral. We're gathering what we can, we've got a plan and...and Glimmer *really* wants you and your son to come with us. She doesn't care how you see her...but she just wants to save you.”

The mood swung, Coral's face screwing up as she fought to control her emotions and clearly short temper.

“That mare doesn't see anything past short term satisfaction, Murk. A stiff drink, a quick rut or a splendidly overenthusiastic plan that'll end up hurting us all by the end of this. Look at how her working with Barb turned out, huh? He told us how you three were involved. Now I don't blame you, I *know* he'd have done it anyway...but she still agreed to it, believed in it. She never truly *thinks* about the consequences

of her actions. You want to know how many mares and stallions I knew in the village thought they had found someone to love for the rest of their life in her? Or how many of them were left embarrassed when it became clear she only wanted them for a fun time? She doesn't know how to commit, how to choose and stick to it.

Give it a few days...she'll try something else with this 'plan', hell she's already now wanting it to go from you three to including swiping a colt from under Red Eye's nose and getting a larger group out.”

Coral snorted, tossing her ponytailed and braided mane a little carefully, apparently some muscles along her back remaining injured.

“She's smart, brave and yes, even caring in her own way. But Glimmerlight isn't somepony you want to ever rely on for too long...it'll come down and hurt you in the end...”

The question was far too simple, it felt almost wrong to ask...but I couldn't stop it. The query had been burning in my head for too long.

“Coral...what did she *do*?”

Her pale grey face glanced back at me, as though trying to spot if this were some sort of ploy.

“I...I won't tell her, I don't think she wants to find out like that anyway...I promise?” My voice died away as I spoke, but Coral Eve only sighed, shifting her weight to lie on her side.

“You know we're both from Creaky Hollow village. Middle of no-where, a little spot that had *just* enough to sustain a small population. Safe, secluded...about as good as you can get out in the wastes if you don't have the caps to live in the big towns. We had our occasional problems with the wildlife but...we lived in decent peace. Never so much as had seen a raider if you'd been born there. Sometimes we took ponies in if they had something to offer. Glimmerlight did.”

The generator and other technical aspects...that I remembered from her projected memory.

“But she betrayed us Murk, gave up where we were to Brimstone Blitz's clan for her own reward. They'd been crawling around the dead forest we were in, so we just kept our heads down and covered any trails leading back. But it was no good...they came in the night. With fire and blade they sacked Creaky Hollow just like they'd done to the small resettlement in Ponyville. Turned out she'd snuck out in the night to sell where we were to them, led them right back to our village.”

“No!”

“I watched our elder cut down as she pleaded with them, saw friends and ponies I considered my family torn apart. Some of us fought back, maybe held off their vanguard for a few minutes. But then *he* arrived. The Dragon, your 'Brim.' They fought like ponies possessed the moment he was around, tore anyone who resisted down and put them to horrible deaths. The rest of us...sold to Red Eye.”

Coral sniffed sharply, just keeping a hard glare on my shocked face.

“She got what she deserved, they turned on her the moment they had what they wanted. Look at what just happened in the Mall. There's your proof of what I'm saying. If she feels she needs something, Glimmer won't think about the consequences. The only silver lining to it was the third betrayal, when Red Eye took in the raiders as well after trapping them in a minefield with snipers and alicorns. Serves them all right to be here...”

There were no words, none at all. But...I knew with all my heart that Glimmerlight wouldn't do that...there had to be a reason, *there had to be!* I curled up, resting my chin on my front hooves through the blanket. Really, I wasn't sure if I felt comforted by Coral's hoof stroking the back of my neck as though to calm me down.

“Look, maybe...maybe she's right and being in here's made her want to change or face up to her past, Murk. But her rash thinking's already helped one more raider hurt ponies again and I'll bet she'll be back at the Mall right now stripping out the worst bits from her mind. You can always come to me, I saw you fighting to save us, Murk. You're a good pony. But...just be careful around Glimmerlight...you don't deserve to be hurt any more than you clearly already have been from Barb.”

It wasn't really helping. Glimmerlight was the best thing that had kept me going and staying happy. My big sister best friend forever. She'd been the first pony since I was a colt to hug me, one who had made me able to smile and laugh with her and helped make me more confident. To think that she'd...no, even if it were exactly how Coral said, that wasn't who she was now. I was *sure* of it.

“Murk?! Murk, where the bloody hell did you scamper off to?”

Weathervane's rasping tone shouted down the corridor, before his head poked in the door and saw us.

“There you are. They saw that eternal fucking rain's starting to let up out there, you're good enough to head back now, Mall's only on light duties of clean up so you should be fine. Now come on, we'll need this room soon, get back to your ward. We've got an accident from the FunFarm coming in within the hour. One of the old scaffolds fell. I told them they needed that ass-backward design tightened up *two hundred and fifteen fucking years ago* when I took Sundial there as a colt. I guess they didn't think *this* far ahead but still...tight-wadded cockwaffles...”

The ghoul wandered off, ranting and raving to anypony nearby that seemed willing to listen.

Biting my lip and trying to force down the feelings from even hearing the poor ghoul mention his son's name, I turned back to Coral and reluctantly pulled myself out of the blanket. I saw her eyes stare at my wings, bound up from Weathervane's attention. Clearly, the unicorn wasn't too used to the fact that I was a pegasus yet.

“S-sorry...I'll be careful, but I trust her, I really do. She's saved my life more than once, Coral. I...I wouldn't have been able to do what I did in there without her. She wants to make things better for you, so...so will you come with us?”

It felt almost childish. To 'make up' for all this. But Coral Eve's eyes only remained hard, before losing the anger and just being replaced with exhaustion. She slumped back into the bed.

“Glimmerlight's actions put me, my son and many of my friends in here, Murk. I'm sorry...but she's going to have to accept that I can't simply let that slide by easily or forgive her by words alone.”

I saw her wipe an eye.

“To have her be around the very pony I saw behead my friend, the one who dragged poor Jotter Note out and just *pulled* her head off, with her screaming, right in front of me. I'm *surrounded* by ponies that hurt me, betrayed me or punish me, Murk...I don't have a life any more.”

Her front hooves curled up her own blanket, clutching it as though it were a small foal inside it, almost out of habit.

“I was a mother, Murk...I had friends and family and...and a son...a best friend. I had safety and a peaceful life before I came here but now I...I don't have *any* of that. Now I'm only surrounded by pain and bad memories. Everypony's been taken from me, even my best friend. Even my son...”

Not for the first time, I found myself at a complete loss as to what to do...what to say or how to act in this circumstance. I'd seen the bitter and angry side of Coral but here, amidst the rain and darkness of a covered Fillydelphia in the wake of barely getting away with our lives, I was seeing the pain that drove such a temper.

“I gave up on hope a long time ago, Murk. There's nothing left for me out there. My son is in *here*, he's all I care about seeing, my little boy...so I'm sorry if I don't seem more eager about you and Glimmer gathering an escape attempt. Especially with *him*. I want nothing to do with that beast.”

Standing beside the bed, I hopped up on my front hooves, pushing one forward to rest on hers. It was all I could really offer...a little show that, well...I felt sorry for her. A few tears dripped from my eyes. Coral glanced down at my hoof, before forcing a smile on her pained face, albeit a thin one, and rested her other front hoof above mine.

“Thank you, Murk...please, don't feel shy to come by and say hello sometimes, alright? I'd like that...and...and when you see Glimmer, I...tell her...um...”

She seemed to sigh again, clenching my hoof tightly.

“Tell her that for all that's happened I...I'm thankful for what she did there in the Mall...to help us. I can't forgive her, not yet, but it's...it's a step.”

“I will.”

“...Thank you.”

I left the room slowly, dragging my blanket around me to make the journey back to my cold and lonely own ward. Casting one last look across to her, I just saw a forced small smile toward me. With a timid wave, I trotted into the corridor, feeling more than a little wretched as it began to hit home that virtually every slave in here would have a similar story...

To my elation, I saw my fleece still had the thin and light battle saddle strapped to it, albeit devoid of actual weaponry, back at my own bed. Weathervane must have dropped them off when he was trying to find me. Gently, I hobbled to the window and stared out at Fillydelphia. Two floors up in the hospital, I had a wonderful view of an absolutely hellish landscape under the rain that was only slowly beginning to lighten off. I pulled the blanket tighter as the wind whipped through the empty window pane.

As such, I didn't even hear Weathervane enter over the sound of so many ponies outside.

“You're back here? Good, get into your things, Murk. It's time for you to go.”

The order weighed heavy on me. To have to leave this place of rest. I wasn't in any mood for more bad news...I just wanted to go and think after meeting poor Coral...

But I couldn't *not* ask.

“D-Doctor...is there any word on Protégé?” I played with my fleece in my hooves nervously.

He seemed to bite his rotting lips briefly, exhaling for a long time. Then he just shook his head and stamped forward, his magic pulling the blanket from around me.

“Everything I've heard down the line's not been good, kid. Poison, magical damage, nerve cluster severance, slit windpipe...you name it, it's pretty much happened. That slippery raider bastard knew his work like a Goddesses damned surgeon. Now come on, get into your fleece, *now*.”

I silently offered up a prayer for his recovery to Celestia, then Luna as well...to see him through the nights too. But the doctor's insistence was unnerving me, surely they didn't need this place that urgently? Weathervane seemed to pace on the spot, as though eager to get going, before glancing out the window.

“I didn't call you back here for no reason, Murk. You need to be on your way, before he comes looking for you.”

“H-he?”

Weathervane's eyes closed, amidst a gurgling raspy sigh. He led me away from the window, quickly as though in a hurry, directing me toward the bed as his magic firmly slammed the ward door shut. Sitting beside the bed as though about to doctor for me again, the old ghoul just dropped his file on the surface before leaning on a hoof.

“You were with young Caduceus in there...he spoke highly of you and your friends, even if that mare blew him off after a one night rut. Naïve little boy, far as I was concerned, but he had talent. Kind of buck I used to have a dozen of in the old Ministry. Now he's gone and fuck me if I don't feel it in what remains of my heart. Paternal instinct or some shit, I don't know...”

He was stroking his stringy beard, before glancing across to me standing meekly in the doorway.

“You were with him when he died, Murk. Glimmerlight talked about how you'd stepped up to help them at the last moment while I was treating her wounds. Now it isn't my place to blame her for what Caduceus wanted to do or not. But she said you and Caduceus stuck together through most of the fighting.”

Well, technically that was true...it was mostly him pulling me along or keeping me in cover.

“So I guess, as a means of thanks, I feel I ought to tell you the hard truth here ahead of time.”

Weathervane seemed unwilling to meet my face. I shifted forward on the bed, trying to get his attention back.

“H-hard truth? Who do you mean by 'he?' Not...not...”

The ghoul finally turned back, groaning and seeming rather internally angry. His eyes kept glancing to the door.

“I'm sorry, Murk...it goes against *everything* am as a doctor to knowingly send somepony to harm. But since you've been here...Chainlink Shackles has assumed command of the Mall and its entire stock...”

I bit my lip...feeling a chill shoot down my spine.

“...including you.”

Weathervane's magic caught me before I fell off the bed, my limbs locking up and growing stiff under the pain of the drop. I'd imagined it...worried about it...had nightmares about it. But here was the confirmation that I'd dreaded since I saw that ambitious looking sick grin come across The Master's face after the battle. Feeling myself being held upright and slowly pushed to sit again, I let my head fall into my hooves. Those chains around my heart...upon my flank...embedded in my very *soul* felt like they were tightening ever more.

“The jury is out on Protégé back at Red Eye's headquarters, where they're keeping him in an unstable condition. Trying to decide if he's fit to continue after all of this. But until then, it's Shackles' call...and he's making the most of his time already. We've had reports already coming back from his work teams repairing the Mall, he's changing things...adding mesh fencing, digging isolation pits...turning it into a real nightmare.”

Oh Goddesses...Glimmer and Brimstone were already there...

“But he made it very clear to me last time I went to check the wounded...he wanted *you* back the moment you could walk or he'd come collect you himself soon once the rain stopped.”

I was crying...he had me. He really had me now. I could tell it was hurting Weathervane to tell me this...but it was a warning. I felt him trot over, pulling bandages around my wings tightly, enough to make me squirm and squeak in pain. Any crying I had was cut off by his attentions and muttering. The damp bandages held firmly around my restored feathers.

“These are soaked in an old potion type we used to give pegasi with muscle problems in their wings. It's part of the first few stages to trying to see if you've not permanently lost movement in them.”

Oh! I turned my head to look at one, as though expecting to try to move it any instant, but I felt Weathervane's clipboard tap me on the head.

“Don't go bloody trying! Let the medicine do its work and stay off of them if you can! No fucking rolling, no fucking falling and most fucking definitely no fucking squeezing around! Your bones still need a lot of work, but if this medicine does its job after being a hundred years out of date...well, maybe it'll help reduce the pain in your muscles. Can't promise anything, of course. They won't flap, but we'll see. Now get your damned fleece on, the weather's lightening up so you don't have long to get going.”

He was already throwing my sodden fleece to me. I hopped and struggled to get myself into it as fast as possible, feeling my body ache from the movements. It was still disgustingly damp and thick from soaked up rainwater, making me shiver and groan from the horrible feeling.

“Please...is...is there *any* way I can get away?! He'll...he'll...”

“I don't think you heard me, Murk.” Weathervane's voice was stern, gurgling away in his ruined throat. “I said you don't have long to *get going*.”

Outside, I could hear slavers wandering past the door...before I caught Weathervane's milky eyes. Oh...that...that's what he meant...

But another sound broke through the thin wooden walls in this older part of the hospital. The sound of the main door being thrown open, coinciding almost freakishly with a roll of thunder from far in the distance away from Fillydelphia. Hopping to my hooves, both Weathervane and I stared at the ward's door...located almost right above the main entrance.

“You! The nurse, yes you! Where's the little pegasus?”

“Who? Um...y-you mean-”

“The only wretched winged pony in the city! Number. Seven. Take me to him!”

“Yes! Yes, sorry! I will!”

Slowly backing away toward the window, I caught myself filled with terror. He was here! Oh Goddesses I could hear his hooves on the wooden flooring! Could...could I do this? Defying The Master, at least until Protégé was back to keep myself safe? If he caught me...

The sound of Fillydelphia's balefire siren wailing amidst my last attempt to evade him was still too fresh...the feeling of pursuit brimmed with terror and a lack of real confidence in myself. All the same...what choice did I have? I couldn't let him get me...I couldn't...

“Too slow! Again!”

He'd almost broken me forever in under an hour before. He'd *destroyed* Sunny's pride and strength in only slightly more. I couldn't last till Protégé got back, not under him.

Weathervane spun to me, shoving my saddlebag over me.

“Come on, kid! They won't dare take him somewhere else, we've got to fucking move!”

I had to get going...he was right. This was my only chance to stay away from The Master. Grabbing everything I could, finishing putting on my fleece and strapping on the saddlebag, throwing my journal and goggles into the bag quickly, I hopped from the bed and almost fell from my shoulder aching terribly on the spot.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“Hurry, you cretin! You think I have all day? Take me to my property, there are things to oversee at the Mall!”

His hooves were coming upstairs! Pulled up by Weathervane, we moved into the corridor. The stairs were on the right, a large shadow forming around them. Quickly, Weathervane pushed me to go back down the corridor out of the ward. I couldn't move like him...limping, feeling my leg seize up and the cuts across my back sting under the damp fleece, I trailed badly. One large cough sent me staggering. Weathervane moved back to try and pull me, but every heaving step felt slow...I...I couldn't properly stand...

I wasn't going to make it...I could hear him coming up! Oh Goddesses! Dropping, attracting Weathervane's attention, I tugged myself behind a filing cabinet in the hallway, pressing my back to it before he entered the ward's outer areas. I could barely fit behind it...please don't be seen!

“T-this is his ward, Master...”

The door was slammed open again. I heard Weathervane trot into the ward three doors down. The Master would surely know to come to him if seen.

“Rest's over, Number Seven! Time to come play.”

The horrid waiting that followed was punctuated only by a wretched silence. The Master was brutal, loud and imposing. But when he was *silent*...slowly, I only heard the growing...bubbling and throaty scowl under his breath. He was in the room...I had a chance! Moving as quiet as I could, using everything I knew to stay unheard...I began to creep toward where Weathervane waited...if he came out now...

“Heard me coming, eh? **Oh, I know you can hear me, Number Seven! You can't run forever, not**

from me! Now come out, your Master demands you come out!”

The words slapped across my mind, a life of instinctive response kicking in that led me to stop on the spot. The everlasting chain...the born slaver for the born slave...he *was* my rightful Master by birth and...and...

I hesitated...I waited for him to see me. The thumping of his hooves as The Master began to leave the room and turn his head...

Weathervane grabbed me, dragging me with all his magical might down the corridor, a flare of his horn dulling much of the pain. I almost skidded my hooves before reality caught up. The Master's spell of mental trickery broken, I began to panic and run after the doctor. No time to sneak!

“I HEAR you!”

The horrid thumping of those massive hooves pervaded the crunch of the nurse being knocked aside. The chase was on! We tore down the wards, the sound of dragging chains and bellowed commands following in our wake. Weathervane threw a supply door open with his magic, pulling me inside and locking the door behind us.

“Come on! There's a back stairwell to the lower operating room below! Fuck sake he's determined...but no more...I'm not letting one more fucking pony get taken by him if I can help it!”

We were halfway down the thin stairwell when the door was smashed asunder. The ponies within the operating theatre were already in the middle of something, prompting many complaints and curses as their senior surgeon and myself galloped past. I fought to not let the edges of my vision blur from terrified and panicked tears, simply following Weathervane. Bursting out into the main corridor, he led me to a back supply room for the bedsheets. Knocking open the window, Weathervane began throwing piles of musty bedding out of it and down the large drop to the ground down a small recess in the courtyard. We could hear The Master screaming and demanding the ponies tell him where we'd gone. I doubted they'd lie. Pushing me to the window, Weathervane knelt down, looking me eye to eye.

“Find who you can to help, keep away till Protégé's back and this cuntknuckle's gone. I'll leave my basement open...if you ever need me. Stay low, kid.”

Hope was falling, but there was one little thing to hold onto for now. Weathervane was foul, rude, aggressive and lacking in pleasant nature...but he'd done nothing but help since the day I'd met him. Even after everything he'd gone through over two hundred years of hell...after everypony he'd lost. A little spirit of goodwill emerged in me, potentially the last for a while. I hopped to all fours, facing him and trying to put on a smile, my mane flopping over my face.

“Th-thank you! For everything, I mean...you're...I mean, I really appreciate all you've done for me!”

A little look in his eye stood out to me, like he'd been shocked ever so briefly. Curious, I tilted my head, feeling my big ear flop down. The doctor just shook his head and then nodded it toward the window.

“Nothing...just a little deja fuckin'vu. Now scram, son. Stay off those wings and keep away from any trouble. Just hope your best that Protégé will be back soon as, stay safe till then.”

Even as I clambered onto the windowsill and saw the looming drop, I glanced back at him. I could see a small photo clipped to the top of his patient records clamped to his decaying uniform.

Clearly...Coral wasn't alone with that kind of hurt....

“Number Seven! You know it's pointless!”

“Go!” Weathervane pushed me. Yelping, I fell...tumbling the twenty feet to the cushioned landing. Fighting my flailing limbs and a non-solid surface, I flopped my way to the gravel. I heard the sound of a doorway being thrown open.

“What are you fucking doing here? Have you no respect for a hos-”

CRACK! The sound of somepony being hoofed across the face *hard* echoed from the room. I galloped

away, running through the hospital gates. Diving into the nearest old crater, I curled up, ignoring even the small puddle that stung and burned my coat.

“You can't run forever, Number Seven! You know who is meant to own you! It's all you're meant for! I'll find you! Oh, I'll find you!”

I whimpered, covering my ears, but bellowing from the window, knowing I was out here, close by but having escaped for now...but he *knew*...

“Leaving your friends with me now, eh? What a proud pony you must be, galloping off and leaving them! You'll be begging me to take you in someday, Number Seven! BEGGING!”

Crying loudly, sticking to the shadows...I simply ran away. Scared, guilty and unable to even deny it...I just ran, alone, into the growing darkness of a storm-tossed Fillydelphia, The Master's cackling laughter at my back.

* * *

The area around me, although within a hundred feet of the refinery I'd worked so many days in, felt like an entirely different city.

Trotting on three legs, hobbling my way slowly on tired muscles, I hurried as fast as I could into the darker areas of Fillydelphia, sweating and praying that I didn't hear the shout behind me. I needed somewhere...somewhere quiet to go to ground!

The storm had passed, but the thick black clouds seemed to dominate the sky, leaving Fillydelphia in an almost perpetual night until the sky could clear and let the smog escape upwards again. I passed factories pulsing internally with an orange glow, pits that cast light around their mesh tops and saw the burning barrels around where the guards stood in their roosts above.

What now? I had ran into the night...but soon the hunt would be on. I needed *somewhere* to go...

No...not somewhere to go. Some*pony* to go to. Loneliness began to eat at me, the same I'd felt every time I'd been separated and left to fend on my own. But I had none...they were trapped, all within The Master's clutches. Guilt churned in my stomach, even though I knew they would want me to do this...I was leaving my friends to his treatments, knowingly and willingly abandoning them.

The thought hurt...but it was the truth...I was nothing but a coward. I wasn't running because I knew my friends would want to protect me this way. I was running because I was *scared*.

The area was deserted after the threat of continuing rain, leaving me alone in a small dark park alongside burned out dead trees. Shadows stretched like crooked fingers across the ground, enveloping and twisting upon the irregular breezes. I didn't want to linger in this strange, darkened side of Fillydelphia too long...Barb was gone but the shadows still seemed to promise vengeance. The horrid wonder if I'd even killed the *right* Barb still taunted me. He'd cheated death at least twice before my eyes.

Heck...the fact I'd *killed* him was bad enough. I wasn't sure if that fact had truly landed...or if it ever would. I hadn't just shot somepony or stabbed them...my hoof had been forced by need of survival.

That...that made it okay, right? The Goddesses wouldn't scorn me for taking another pony's life? The thought of my mother finding out that her son had *killed somepony*.

I'd killed him and not even debated the thought.

...alright...alright maybe it was settling in a little...

I wasn't sure what I should feel. Sickened that I'd taken a life...or horrified that I honestly didn't feel too worked up about it. Had a life in such conditions just desensitised me to it? I still felt Caduceus' death like a hollow ache in my heart, was it only for people who mattered to me? That thought scared me, that the concept of death was *selective*. Old Equestria wouldn't have been like that...

Hooves quaking, I picked up the pace, clattering back onto old roads that would, if I followed it, lead me back behind the pegasus airport I'd visited so long ago in a quest for my journal. I'd been alone then as well.

Eventually, feeling my shoulder aching, I stopped and dropped into hiding behind a series of large rubbish tips. All these thoughts were just distracting me...the slavers would be looking for me. I was now a runaway trapped inside the Walls! I needed some place to stay! To be able to sleep...to find food! Even in my hiding spot here, I could hear slavers galloping in the distance. Slavers always ran around...but how was I to know what they'd be hunting for? Was it me? Would every slaver know my face? Would *slaves* be offered a reward to turn me in? Oh Goddesses protect me...

Kneeling down...I did the only thing I knew I could wish for help. Taking off my weighty saddlebag and calmly sitting my journal safely atop it, I gently set my front hooves before me. Lowering my head to them, I simply prayed to Celestia and Luna for deliverance, sniffing and having to repeat words lost as my voice began to heave amongst tears. To seek the strength from above that I could stand this rampantly lonely path I'd been set until Protégé was well again. Uttering words I'd long practised, phrases I'd often said but rarely knelt and offered with a full belief and faith to try and take strength. *Please*...I just needed somepony...

The wind picked up...just like in the hospital. Following a squeak of shock from me, the journal blew open, flickering madly from beginning to end. Reaching out a hoof, I stamped it down, stopping the pages...only to find the one pony I did have staring back.

The mare...smiling so kindly off the page. The first pony I'd met in here who had been nice to me. Who had been there even *before* LittlePip. She was still out there. I didn't even remember doing this picture! Likely from my maddened rush of drawings from just before the Pit! At a loss for all direction or hope, about to be hunted by the entire city if they had to...I had been shown the *one* pony I could go to! Funny...that after all had changed and happened, that my life would repeat itself with such importance to remind me where I had come from.

Picking up my materials...I immediately made tracks toward the place this had all began.

I had to return to the FunFarm, hopefully before The Master figured it out too.

There was a horrible suspicion in my mind that I wasn't the first one to think of it.

* * *

It took some degree of courage. I knew the way, the exact place to go to and even remembered who to look for. But to actually take step after step and return to where it had all started held enough emotion for me that as I came closer my mind ran with conflicting fears and apprehension.

To go back to the place I'd spent the most time in during my stay here. While I had been passed from master to master amongst Fillydelphia, Whiplash had been the first to keep a hold of me. Before that it had just become a blur...I didn't even remember who I'd had before Whiplash. Only that eventually I ended up in the Pig Sty so quickly it had shocked me to wake up there after my first night under him.

I took the only route I remembered to that side of Fillydelphia, the same one The Master had dragged me down in humiliation after my grand failure. Trotting it in reverse, sticking in the darkness by the side of the better lit main roads, it felt painfully lonely. There were others, there always were. But compared to the crowds that had galloped from their places of rest, work or defence to watch a *pegasus* be displayed as a prisoner, the few marching columns or huddled groups still around felt empty. Clustered around burning barrels in the ruins of mills and shops, slaves shivered with fever or stared with lost and hopeless eyes at anypony passing by. A mare followed me with a deathly gaze, one eye long lost to a large infected scald across her face and muzzle. Whimpering and tearing my eyes away...I maintained my advance across Fillydelphia to find my destination. Not once while travelling this city did I ever fail to be stunned by the sheer scale of the suffering in here.

It was easy to believe...I was part of it.

The FunFarm was not particularly difficult to locate once in the area I recognised. Even at night, I spotted certain signs or buildings to guide me. I passed the last workshop the mare had been chained to,

where she had stood up to The Master. Wicked Slit's factory loomed on the next street over, smoke belching from the one hastily remade chimney to join the thick black clouds above. The one main road I had walked a hundred times to and from the places of work felt all too achingly familiar under my hooves. Even that one guard on the gantry above that ran from factory to housing where slavers stayed seemed to watch me as he always had. Staring at him, I almost blundered into an advancing caged wagon carrying a dozen ponies looking terrified beyond measure...new slaves...I prayed they would stay as well as they could.

I tried to stay consistent...not to look in a hurry or guilty of anything. Oh please don't have been informed yet to look for me...please...

But then I was past, the guard turning away...and there it was. The giant barn, the helter-skelter's multicoloured top, a wrecked rollercoaster...the landmarks stood out above the houses as a clear direction.

Soon enough, I found myself at the busy main entrance to the fenced FunFarm. Looking in from the main road, my eyes couldn't help but spot the Petting Zoo den near the entrance over the scrap wall. I wouldn't have to head there...if Noose or Lemon saw me I doubted they would welcome me all too well. I'd faced down a raider chieftain...why did they still scare me? Why was that feeling still in my breast and making my heart pump faster?

The answer, it seemed, was familiarity...I could *feel* my body falling into the same routines, the same consistent obedience. Even as I trotted forward, I found myself headed for the barrier gateway that made it easier to go right to the Petting Zoo, even though I had to head the other way.

Of course...*it*...was still there. The one mocking imagery that had repeatedly unnerved me that sat near the mirror I had once gazed at the ruin of my own body in.

Beside the entrance, a rusted yet still operating...Pinkie Pie mock up. She stood on three legs, the fourth a separate piece of metal attached to a small motor. The arm waved, traversing back and forth. Two hundred years just...waving. It hadn't ever stopped and no-pony ever bothered to make it. An old courtesy that never ceased waving in an odd direction toward the nearby Wall of Fillydelphia...simply saying goodbye to a blank nothing on the main road that led all the way up to the Wall itself. The face had always crept me out...instead of the normally huge mad grin, it simply held a sort of content and well meaning smile. Just weird...

Shivering at the odd standee, I pushed into the FunFarm. This place had grown since I was last here...with slaves now taking cover under most of the carnival stands in groups of four or five. A wealth of accents gave rise to the very clear notion that Red Eye's reach was indeed expanding. But I had only one objective. I knew where she resided, where I would find her. I even still knew the shifts for the FunFarm dens off by heart, back when I'd never dared miss a single one. The bumper plough den would be in a rest period right now.

Unable to stop myself, after testing my hoof on the ground, finding the confidence to use my shoulder again, I began to move at a canter toward it. Passing the Hall of Mirrors where I had once prepared my daring escape, I simply tunnel visioned myself to find her. As I passed the Hall, a faint sound of crying began to eek into my ears from it. Somepony trying to hide away from the slavers no doubt...

Trying my hoof on the ground a little more, I found that my shoulder didn't hurt *that* much now if I really thought about who I was going to see! Just remember, psy...cococoloco...ian scars...or whatever the fancy word he'd used was, it's not as hurt as you think it is! Up ahead, the sheltered area began to appear, a simple shallow pit covered by a wooden roof lined with mesh. To think she'd been *this* close the whole time I'd been in the Petting Zoo!

Cantering up, I stuck to the side and ducked behind the game stands lining the wall toward the den. Sticking to shadows, passing by the half sleeping overseer was no problem provided I stick behind the stands, close to the outer wall of the FunFarm. I didn't dare allow anypony else to see me right now. With trepidation, I leaned forward, poking my head around...oh please let her be here!

I saw the slaves lying upon pathetically thin rugs on the concrete floor, perhaps a couple dozen at most. Carefully, I scrutinised each one, not knowing how she might have changed since. Every boil infested and

half choking slave I cast my eye across held no resemblance, a buck there...a mare too tall afterwards...disappointment after disappointment. A group were mingled at the back, talking quietly in the far corner, leaving me unable to see them all. Well...one thing for it.

I advanced, slipping into the slave den as though I was one of them and limping (all too realistically) between those suffering nightmares in their scant permitted sleep. Worry began to cross...if the overseer woke up, I might end up trapped as one of his crew...simply for The Master to come pick me up. Wait! A cream mare! She looked up as I passed...but under the oil that stained her mane I saw a bright green.

Backing away, apologising for staring profusely, I set another slave off swearing madly when I tripped over his slumbering form.

“Shit! Watch it, pal!”

“I'm sorry! I'm so-no, no!”

Despite my waving hooves, I was bucked off him, landing just short of the far group and clutching my shoulder. Okay...okay...that was *definitely* real pain that time...why *always* the damn shoulders and hooves? The group turned to me, revealing two ponies that had been hidden to my sight. The view of a light orange mane grabbed my eyes, forcing me to stagger up. The wide, gentle and hurt eyes stared from behind a mask of burns that had torn the features from their face...

Oh *please* no...

“Hey-uh...buddy, you alright? Never seen-uh...you before.”

It was a *buck*. The burns were so severe (how had he even survived?) that I hadn't been able to tell by facial features alone. She...she wasn't here...

But if she wasn't here that meant she'd been moved or...or...somepony had...had got here first...

I remembered the ponies I'd heard running quickly by me.

“We often will meet people only briefly...know so little about them and never know the truth. Fleeting glimpses and random luck to bring two ponies together...never to meet again.”

Some of the last words she'd said to me after saving my life in this very FunFarm from that very rollercoaster were of how unlikely we were to ever meet again. The nameless mare, the first kind face I'd ever seen in Fillydelphia...

Gone...

Dropping into a small heap upon the floor of the Bumper Plough pit, I just curled up, feeling unable to avoid simply falling back into my old familiar emotional reaction I'd spent weeks in this very FunFarm doing. That same feeling of helpless loss and inability to change something that my masters had done exuded through sobbing tears. Even as other slaves scoffed or offered confused queries, I just ignored them before eventually galloping off past the bewildered overseer, my eyes tightly closed.

* * *

I'd hidden in an old food tent, ducking behind the counter until the moment had passed, simply staring at her picture before me, feeling like a piece of my newfound heart had simply been lost. A certain hope, just gone. I'd run away from my Master...seeking to avoid him for as long as possible within Fillydelphia until Protégé could protect me again. I'd had *one* pony that mattered I could go to! *One* pony I could...could take with me and hide with together! Once Protégé was around we could join him to keep her safe too!

But no...even as I drifted from the food tent, drained and feeling my hopes crushed, I just aimlessly wandered. Not wanting to just give up and leave to whatever dark hole I would make my home for the next foreseeable future, I kept trying to pretend that...that maybe she was just on an odd shift! Maybe she'd be back soon? Passing the helter-skelter, where I had learned to laugh and imagine better days, I eventually began to slowly and vaguely return to the gates; my eyes still wet. Even so...I took the long way, trotting in

the slim hope she would return any minute.

Every mare I passed my eyes darted to, uncaring if they felt weirded out by me staring carefully for any familiar sign. Who was I kidding, I didn't know her name or...or even her cutie mark! I'd never looked or hadn't remembered...even my drawings were just blank. With Glimmerlight, Brimstone and soon to be even Coral out of reach, with the loss of Protégé and with the failure of my trip...I felt desperately lonely. The thought of going back to being on my own to deal with all of Fillydelphia's problems in a constant running battle to avoid *everypony* terrified me beyond compare.

Every so often I would spy a certain mane or hear a chime of a voice...prompting me to gallop backwards and try to find her. I even crept near the Petting Zoo once, before quickly departing the moment I heard Whiplash's commands start up. He wouldn't let a sighting of me go unknown.

I had travelled here for one and one reason only, to meet her. I couldn't just leave, I *needed* this to be true! But she wasn't here. No, she couldn't be gone! Not after Caduceus had just been taken like he was! Not somepony else! Please, Goddesses, give me at least this! It wasn't fair! My mind belted small shouted thoughts back and forward as much as I cantered and drifted around. From place to place, den to den and all the way from the ice rink Pit to the House of Mirrors beside me now, nothing but constant heartbreak as I began to gradually realise that Fillydelphia had claimed another victim...

The scream caught me so off guard that I felt myself join in.

Frozen the spot in shock, I quickly pieced together the location of the sound; from the place of crying earlier...

The Hall of Mirrors.

But...it...it had been a female scream! What if some slavers were trying to...oh dear. Somepony had found that poor pony in there trying to hide! I felt my hooves wanting to flee...but in the wake of what I had been through...what I had seen other ponies give their *lives* to do, I could not run in shame, not now. That and one little hope still pervaded in my mind.

I couldn't fight...even after Barb I knew I couldn't. But if I could maybe distract them and let somepony get away it would be enough. It had to be.

Steeling my heart and hopping into the main entrance I found myself immediately surrounded by shattered shards alongside twisted and broken sights of myself. Carved Pinkie Pie's giggled on the walls, the paint peeling from her face. I trotted quietly on...leaping into the darkness that swelled within the abandoned building. Hearing loud crying, gasping and a fading whimper...I began to highly regret not having *Rarity's Grace* any longer. What if I was too late? What had the attacker done? Or was *doing*? I had to speak, startle them to stopping it then creep around!

“H-hello?”

The whimpering ceased on the spot. Instead...I heard somepony breathing quietly, trying to stay quiet. Hooves began to fall as quietly as they could. They were trying to ambush me as well! Just...just hold on, whoever you are...

Around me, my reflected self expanded or shrunk to skeletal sizes (more than usual) while I crept across the broken glass that surrounded my hooves. The darkness seemed to warp with the strange mirrored surfaces everywhere, giving the distinctly odd feeling I'd found when Barb had stalked me.

What if a Shade had escaped? It...it might be one of them! I could still hear the crying near the centre...the hooves having stopped. Soon after, the crying stopped as well the moment my hoof scuffed a shard, making a small tinkle. I imagined a knife being held to their throat. No...they couldn't! I was going to help them, if I couldn't get the mare back I was going to help somepony! Be it her or *not*!

Emerging to the one spot I had once sat and prepared for the bravest act I had ever made in my life until then, I now couldn't even dare poke my head around. Instead, pulling my little mirror on a stick out, I lay it gently around to use the wall mirrors and try to spot any movements in the shadows...

Nothing...nothing in the main room at all...

Oh boy, what had I gotten into? They weren't in the centre...that meant they were creeping around the corridors somewhere, hidden behind a mask of reflections. Stepping gently back, I turned to face out, moving past a wall of mirrors and-

The shape of a pony in shadows came directly at me from behind. I screamed, high pitched and shocked as I kicked up glass in my rush to run from the shadowy figure. A great cry pierced my ears as I saw it suddenly move too. Charging backward, another pony ran directly at me. Immediately, we both skidded to a halt and dove to the left in perfect sync. Stopping to try and spot them again, I simply felt dizzy amongst this maze. Suddenly, another scrawny figure galloped across three surfaces around me, their hooves sounding from somewhere *completely different*.

I moved again, squealing in shock as that pony from before reappeared beside me and dove away at the same moment I did. Which was the attacker? Wait...which was my reflection? Confusion and fear drove me to simply buck the glass until it broke and put my back to it. That other figure zipped past once more, a ghost shown only in the mirrors about me, leading me to head in the other direction to avoid whoever it was hunting me.

Galloping, I ran-

Directly into them behind me. Colliding heads, we both fell over. My vision whirled, seeing stars as my scar ached at the collision. Falling, I even felt shards of glass nip at my side through the thick fleece. But the pony dropped atop me, prompting me to thrash when their hooves pushed and struggled to pin me. Rolling end over end, we fell back into the main room before being thrown apart. Aha! They weren't very strong! They had to be another...

...slave...

Eyes adjusting to the darkness quickly, I caught the whirling sight of somepony staggering backwards and tripping into the broken mirrors of a far wall, holding their head while they got up.

While *she* got up...

A dirty mane whipping round to reveal her eyes locked around at me, squinting to see me in the darkness.

“Who...who's there?! Who is that?! *Leave me alone!*”

It was her!

Oil stained and ash marked...I still recognised the long mane, light orange and tinged with faint red streaks above a cream coat that had been soiled and dirtied by a life of slavery. Almost golden hazel eyes were wide, filled with terror, staring across the room without blinking from where she now leaned against the wall.

“It's alright! It's...it's me...”

Feeling my mouth gape and my heart both freeze and lift at the same time with nerves and a desire of absolute elation and relief...I stepped out of the shadows I blended in with like a timid little animal. Across the room that threw our reflections onto both floor and walls amongst the shards, I saw her simply stare in disbelief.

“*Murk...?*”

A few hesitant trots and rubbing of eyelids took place, both of us almost unwilling to believe in a good fortune...of another meeting, of us finally finding one another again after so long. After both believing the other had been gone for good or in terrible danger.

Five seconds felt like five days in Fillydelphia, for how long it took our minds to catch up and realise...

Before we both simply ran forward, staggering and desperate for mutual comfort amongst the darkness,

falling into one another's thankful and relieved embrace.

* * *

As much as I would have wanted to simply hold this moment and lose track of all the pain and nightmares the outside world held, we split soon after. Moreso for I could feel her shivers...she was terrified of something. Settling back, the mare gathered herself, holding a hoof across her opposite front leg.

“Are we safe? I heard you scream and...and I thought somepony was-”

“No...no I'm alone. Murk...I...what are you doing here? I thought you were...I mean I heard about the riot and executions and...”

She stopped, wiping away the long mane from her face. The mare had shrunk since I last saw her, starvation beginning to set in as it did with everypony in here. We were just two weakened ponies together now.

“I got away from The Master...I had to find you, let you know I'm still here and...and to get you out of here. He'll be coming soon! I had to know you're still safe...”

She smiled, apparently out of relief, reaching forward to take one of my hooves, as though seeking physical proof that it was indeed me before her. It quickly occurred to me that everything I'd learned about sneaking about to stay safe could frighten somepony who saw my vague shape creeping around...she must have seen my reflection too and run from it. In a weird way...it was almost funny, we'd both been scared of the others reflection. Now, settled with her proof, the mare sighed.

“It's so simple to say and easy to understate but, I'm so glad you're alive. Why are...what did you...oh, sorry I'm...”

Flustered was the word, even without me saying anything she shivered, drawn and pale while her eyes kept glancing to the sides at the mirrors. Looking around, I moved closer and held her hoof back, she'd helped me enough, I wasn't going to let this be one sided any longer. She looked like absolute hell, her eyes drawn from lack of sleep and overwork. But more than any they had that same look I'd seen in a mirror so many times...the one I gave when I had been shocked or frightened more than normal.

“What happened to scare you? I heard you crying earlier I think, then a scream and just galloped in and...and I thought somepony had caught somepony else or something.”

The mare felt quiet, eyes looking to the floor. We were absolutely alone in the empty halls, my ears would hear anypony on this messy floor. What *had* scared her?

“I...I come in here sometimes to get away or cry sometimes, just to avoid the others who steal my food or hurt the weaker slaves. I can't stop them so I just...stay away from the fighting and worse by creeping off here to let it out sometimes. Or to think about him.”

It was clear who she meant, her lover...I even saw the sad look in her eyes that told all. She still hadn't been reunited with her special somepony...the one who meant so much to her.

“I'm sorry...”

“They told me I'd see him again, Murk. The slave master who organised him being sent to the Pit even told me he'd make sure he was sent back to me! But...but that's not what scared me. I...I came in here to get away and I think I bumped one of the mirrors and...and...”

I'd never seen her this unsteady, she had always been so gentle and carefully held. But I followed her eyes to the side and felt a cold stab through my heart.

She was looking directly at the mirror that I had long tried to forget. The one that my tired and terrified mind had once seen something other than myself in. Hidden in here, preparing to make my escape...I had touched the same mirror she undoubtedly had now. It had shown me my own image as a little colt, wings

outstretched and looking with naïve eyes yet to be burdened by the life he would lead.

“That mirror, Murk! *That mirror!* It shows us at our worst! Something unnatural that gets into your very soul; I can *feel* it! I...I saw myself with him...only he wasn't there.”

The mare turned, a brief flare of a temper arising to scowl at the dark glass. Slowly, she began to trot toward it.

“It was just me, acting as though I had somepony I loved right beside me without any image of them there at all! Me at my worst...the horrid realisation that after so long in this city it's all starting to blur together! I barely *remember* the outside world any more, Murk, like they're just *beating* it out of my mind through illness, starvation and...and just being locked into the same thing day after *day* after *day!*”

Stamping a hoof on each repeated term, she finally raised up, smacking a hoof against the mirror hard. The fragile looking glass shimmered but remained solid, knocking the mare back a foot. Gasping, like she'd just come up from drowning in cold water...her eyes returned to it, seeing herself standing to one side. While I didn't know if she saw something I didn't...the space to her left was utterly empty, as though somepony else could have been standing *with* her...

“But it's starting to do that to my memories of him as well, Murk...it's like everything I know about him is just fading and blurring before my eyes! What he looked like or...or his name...like my memories are just falling apart and getting harder to remember!”

Standing off to the side, I saw her face in the mirror, lines down her face where the tears had moved through the ash below her eyes. But they were lit with anger, frustration and outright heartbreak. Heedless of the cursed mirror, staring right at it, pacing on the spot, the mare continued on...as though letting it all out, all the pain and anguish Fillydelphia had brought to her. One hoof on the frame, her face came to within inches of the surface, glaring as though in hatred at her own mirrored image.

“What have they done to me, Murk? With their work or...or has somepony taken my only memories of the buck I loved and made it so I don't know it? Have I just forgotten? The mare I saw in that thing wasn't who I am any more, maybe a long time ago. Why can't I just have him **back**? Why can't I **remember**?!”

Almost resting her face on the mirror, I saw her shoulders quake. One mare, alone with her reflection, one she had apparently shared with somepony else dear to her long ago. Goddesses, how long had she been in Fillydelphia?

Meek and nervous, I stood nearby, out of the gaze of that mirror. But seeing her like this, every instinct led me to wander forward, trotting up, out of the shadows, to be by her left hand side and place a hoof on her shoulder before looking at ourselves in the mirror. Myself as the wasted slave in a threadbare fleece with a light utility saddle and her, clad only in a thin short rag, beside me. Two slaves reflected upon the reality of themselves. We'd both been hurt, but at least I could understand what she saw...the mirror had shown the same thing for me. A pony I no longer was.

“Y-you're not alone...I'm still here. I...I know what it's like, I don't remember my mother...they made me forget her too, long ago.”

I was shocked internally, to admit that to somepony I'd known so briefly? But it was the mare...somehow I just knew she needed to hear it. Glancing to one another, we simply moved closer again, hugging lightly until she could stem her tears. Before, I had felt cared for by her, now after knowing what friendship really was...I knew I had to care in return, share the comfort.

...share and care...okay, you win this round, Pinkie...

But I had not come here without reason. The Master knew about her, understood she was a way to force my hoof. We had to go, escape into the night together and hide until somepony better was back in charge! I couldn't leave her to be just another victim in The Master's rampage to find me. Stepping back, I drew myself up, finding her not actually more than an inch or two taller than myself, letting me match her eye

to...well...nose. Almost...

“Look, I...I've found other ponies...good ponies. I'm so sorry I failed and scared you but...”

I looked from side to side, before returning, conspiratorially to her tearstained face, placing a hardened look as best I could on mine.

“We're getting out of here...we have a plan! There's a nicer master, he'll take better care of all of us until we can do it! I...I want you to come with me...*please*...I can't leave you behind. I don't think I'd be able to escape to safety and know you're still in here, but we need to get you away from the FunFarm. You...you and I. We'll go hide in the ruins!”

She seemed stunned, looking at me as though she was seeing an entirely new pony than the terrified wretch she'd met not so long ago being dragged by The Master through the streets. But she still shook her head.

“I can't...not without him. We were both going to escape, or neither of us was. That's what we said to one another. I'm so sorry, Murk. I need to learn who he was, he was strong and dedicated to finding freedom before I lost him. We always looked out for one another, stole food together or shared the punishments. I can't abandon him. I know you're trying but-”

“Then...” I felt awful interrupting her, trying to fight down that she had done the one thing I had been unable to less than an hour ago. “Then...we'll...go get him first!”

The mare just blinked, silently repeating my words as though confused by the very meaning of them. I stood my ground, trying to keep what courage I had been lent by proving myself against Barb not falter now...I'd run through an underground ghoulish bunker, two Ministries and a Stable...I could do *this*...right?

“The big Fun Barn, the slaver headquarters...it's got all the details of slaves involved in stuff like the Pit, right? It has to! They're still repairing it since the Stable Dweller wrecked a whole bunch of it so...we...we get in and find out where he is! And...”

Another thought crossed my mind. Her buck wasn't the *only* pony we could look for in there. One more I knew myself was inside.

“...and somepony that matters to me is inside there too, badly hurt, I need to see him.”

“Another slave?”

I paused for a second, before nodding.

“Yes...yes he is, we can go together and find them both, then escape! Wait for a better time and get back to the others and get ready to break out of Fillydelphia!”

Lightly stomping a hoof on the floor, carefully avoiding the glass, I felt the saddle's mouthpiece whip out rather by accident. My eyes glanced down at it...before retracting it slowly. Well, didn't that just ruin the grandeur of the moment...

But the mare seemed to not care for it. She simply stood before me. Finally, that wonderfully caring and kind smile drifted across her features, if a little weak. The hope returned to her expression.

“I don't know where you came from, Murky...but I'm so glad I met you. Remember what I said? That good attracts good in places of great evil? Well...you met me when you were at your worst and...and now here you are when I was in despair. They say that's harmony at its greatest...that there'll always be a friend willing to help you, no matter how dark it seems. Now here we are, two little weak slaves planning to stand up and defy those who seek to enslave us. To run off into the night and steal from them. Are...are we really going to try and do this?”

I had asked myself the same question a thousand times since I had first met her, in regards to everything. But here, now, back at the start with the mare that I hadn't stopped thinking about in some way to meet again...I knew I wouldn't abandon her to her plight. We were going to go in, find her lover...find Protégé to let him know that I was avoiding Shackles and then see if he had anypony he knew who could help us. Yes!

I had a direction again...a goal to chase after until we could get back on track! Oh yes...we *were* doing this...

“Yes...I...I guess we are...oh and-”

She glanced back at me properly, rather than just through the mirror's reflection.

“T-thank you. It's been so hard and I've been so scared since I saw you...below the ground in the dark or having my dreams crushed but you...you helped me be able to do any of it. Things you said stayed with me. Thank you...”

She smiled gently, clearly trying to force her own fears back.

“It's not been easy for me either, Murky...I don't think I could have kept going on my own if you taking a run at that wall hadn't inspired me to want to show that same courage. The little brave pegasus who risked it all for just one impossible chance. But we're back together now, ready to help each other. Each the others little light in the darkness right now, huh? Just when it all seemed to be going dark, Filly is near demonic under this storm...”

That was true...times had changed now. Amidst my new threat to stay away from the Mall as much as I could, the entire city suddenly felt lethal. For a second, the idea of going right into the lion's den simply felt insane. But both of us needed something in there, something *bad*. Without Protégé's protection I was done for in the long term...without her buck, I doubted the mare would have much hope to go on.

“Y-yeah...it is. I think we should go, before anypony else comes looking. I'm not meant to be here, The Master wants me back...”

“Oh, Murky...I'm so sorry. So yes, let's get moving and get this done. We'll properly catch up when we're all together and safe.”

She began to move toward the exit, but I hesitated, casting one more look at the mirror as though expecting to see something else within it. But I only saw the mare trotting away from me. She was limping, clearly nursing some strain or wound, but despite all the terror knowing of the monster that would come pursuing me...knowing she was *here* with me just helped settle me enough to not break down again. I tried to smile...managing a thin grimace as I saw her briefly stop to look at another mirror.

I almost felt guilty...but I couldn't exactly not notice that she likely would have been quite pretty had she not been in here. But with a drawn stomach, scars along her legs and a mostly severed tail, any real element of beauty she held underneath was long ruined. Every artistic sense I had could only feel hollow at seeing it all wasted. The sight made me wonder just how *I* could have looked had I not been trapped in slavery all my *life*...

But then my eyes caught something else, just as she turned...I saw it. I witnessed her cutie mark...

Three golden statuettes. An earth pony, a unicorn...and a pegasus.

“W-wait!” I stammered out, turning to canter after her, stretching my hoof forward as the mare made to leave the building. We had planning to do, but the question couldn't wait any longer. I built all my courage...wondered for too long. Now that I saw her mark, the trio of ponies there as one image...I couldn't lose the chance this time. 'The Mare' wouldn't escape unknown this time.

Seeing those golden eyes turn around, raising an eyebrow in confusion, I stopped...shuffling a hoof and trying to fight the embarrassment that I even had to ask.

“What...what's your name? We never got a chance to...”

“Oh? Didn't I say?” She seemed shocked, that gentle and warm look passing through the hurt body of a poor slave to remind me of how she *could* look. Not awaiting a response other than a dull shake of my head, she smiled and gathered herself. Then...she spoke one word, one simple word that suddenly made so much sense between how she had been so important in my life and the imagery of her cutie mark. Of how she hadn't discriminated or hated me because I had wings...of how she saw such harmony filled potential in ponies as one great whole...

That one word...one *beautiful* word...

Unity.

Her name...was Unity.

* * *

The moment we exited the Hall of Mirrors, my heart nearly stopped on the spot.

“**Gone?! What do you mean, gone?!**”

I didn't even look, I simply grabbed Unity and dragged her as fast as I could over the road and back into the food court opposite. There were dozens of tents, stalls, wagons and small buildings crammed around one large eating area. The benched area had been turned into one of the worst slave dens in the FunFarm, utterly exposed to the elements. But beside it, amongst the slew of small food dispensaries, was a veritable maze of hiding spots I had used before.

“Murk? What is it...oh no!”

Poking our heads around, I could clearly see her overseer quivering in fear below the massive form of The Master. He was surrounded by half a dozen of his loyalists, twisted looking slavers of all shapes and sizes. Stomping his hoof upon the tarmac, The Master leaned right over the slaver.

“So you're saying that you let a little pegasus come in and *take* her, is that right?”

“No, no! I didn't!”

“So then you're saying you didn't let them...so you *failed* at your job, eh? It's one way or the other.”

“She sometimes goes off! Old...Old Grizzly gets her jobs! Please, I don't know where she is right now!”

I could feel Unity's hoof tightening around my own...the immediacy of my warning clearly sinking in that The Master was after her as a link to me.

“Then I guess I better go pay him a visit...you stay here. I'll be back once I've decided what your punishment shall be.”

“Please! I...I...”

“**Quiet!** A slaver who allows his stock to run wild and *know* about it does not deserve to be a slaver at all! Report to the Mall tonight...bring four of your stock that you...hehe...don't mind missing. Maybe I'll even let you have a chance to not become one yourself”

“Y...yes...Master...”

Seeing him turning, we dove backwards, hiding behind the food tent, clutching one another as The Master stomped not five feet from us. Suddenly...he stopped. Biting my lip, I just held my head down...feeling Unity quiver in fear just as much as I. The Master sniffed...before growling. Oh Goddesses...could he *smell* me? True, I was soaked in a pungent medicine upon my wings. Somepony *help*...

“Hmph...stinking FunFarm. Land of the hopeless. Get the griffins on the line to look for those two. They're now officially runaways. Just make sure they're brought to *me*...”

Allowing him time to put some distance between us and them, we hid and only moved when things had gone silent...finally daring to even breathe out. The hunt was on, but I hoped that our journey toward the FunBarn would be the last place The Master would expect.

Unity had proven apt at staying low and quiet, as any slave smaller or weaker than the average no doubt did. Sticking close, she followed me silently. All the way I found myself looking back, not because I lost track of her...but simply to remind me that she was there. That I had found her in time. It almost felt strange, knowing her name. 'The Mare' had been such a figure of my wishes and dreams to meet the mysterious pony again...but to now know her on a name to name basis felt almost bizarre. Sort of how it had felt to learn the

Stable Dweller's name from Protégé.

“So...how are we going to get in anyway, Murky? This *is* Red Eye's fortress after all...not exactly open for visitors.”

Stopping short of a main bypass toward the FunFarm's 'Foal Land', I hid behind a cardboard cut out of a giant toothless alligator and cast my eyes to the Barn. Still under repair, I saw ponies hanging from some sections on utility saddles similar to my own (In my mind it was still a *battle* saddle. No matter what anypony told me!) with grapple hooks and tools, mid-construction. I highly doubted they'd be getting slavers to do that...maybe there was a way in.

Once again, LittlePip's rampant destruction of Fillydelphia in her grand escape to the wastes was about to aid me. I just hoped news of a runaway slave wouldn't be sent to the FunBarn yet.

“They're taking slaves in to repair it with tool saddles...I've got one, maybe we can just pose as workers once we get by the guards and sneak off?”

“Sounds like a plan. Safer to try it than just barging in, right?”

I nodded, feeling a little better. Just knowing she was *safe* and still alive made it all just feel...worth it. Unable to really know what to say to the unexpected compliment, I nodded to the far side of the road, leading us to begin trotting onwards again. Crawling beneath a wooden fence, we entered a section I'd once heard the others call 'Foal Land.'

Masses of mouldy stuffed ponies and animals had fallen from overhanging wires or been burned into twisted hunks of nylon. This area was deserted...slavers never came inside here past the outskirts like that one before. It was too small to do anything with and long stripped bare of worthwhile materials. 'Foal Land' had simply been left to rot. Beyond it, the colossal rollercoaster rose above the children's play areas. Glancing back, Unity seemed to stop and gather an idea in her head.

“Hey! I just thought. I've been doing some jobs on the side for a slave master, the one that monster mentioned? Old Grizzly! Getting him stuff from the factories, running errands...that sort of thing. It's still slavery but...well I sometimes get a few perks for it. A healing potion for my ribs, extra food, stuff like that. I was hoping to save up enough offers to maybe get a transfer to someplace better than the FunFarm for me and my buck. It was Grizzly who promised to get him to me from the Pit...provided we both survived. But he's got an office in there!”

We stopped, I turned to her suddenly, looking around and perking my ears up.

“If he has a terminal or something, he'll have records. He seems like that sort of slaver. I think I heard him complaining once that they didn't get him an office in the more protected areas, we may not have to go too deep.”

Now it was my turn to feel impressed and reassured by the information she could provide. A sense of teamwork and mutual offerings began to emerge as we continued trotting. She seemed to have let the hope get to her, that we could indeed find him.

“Funny how little things like that just matter, huh?” She grinned to me. “So I guess it's not all been a waste of time. Maybe that's how you have to think about it in places like this...that everything still matters. Hah...sorry, I know I'm bad for running off on little philosophical tangents when I talk...”

I had no idea what she had just said at the end of that sentence. Not in the slightest. But I just shook my head anyway.

“It's...well, okay. I kinda liked them. I wish I was good with words too...”

“And I wish I was as good with artwork as you are...done anything nice lately?”

I caught that look in her eye below the nicer question. I'd seen it on Glimmerlight's face occasionally. Unity knew *precisely* what artwork she had asked about...I simply blushed, my ears drooping and my eyes taking a great interest in an immolated figure of a cow beside an old play park instead. She giggled a little, her eyes lying on my Fluttershy saddlebag as though hoping to see it. I wished we had time. Gathering a

little courage, thinking of how Glimmerlight would want me to be more self confident, turning back to face her rather than just avoiding her eyes like even more of a coward than I already was.

“Yeah...yeah I guess so...um, nice stuff too!” Oh *why* did I say it like that? “Lots of things that mean a lot to me, I just draw whatever I feel...like...like what I choose on the spot, I don't really think about it ahead of time...”

“You draw from the heart, escaping to your own little world of creation. That's just lovely. If we get a moment, can I have a look? Share in the dreams?”

“Um, sure? I mean...most of it's like that. Some is...uh...just poses or, um...something a friend asked for and-”

Her laugh cut me off, shaking her head. “Hey, come on, don't worry about it. I didn't laugh at you when we first met, did I? It's not something we see in the wasteland often, any creation at all is good. You're a wonderful little artist, Murky. Don't forget that...please?”

'Artist.' I'd...I'd honestly never thought about that title before. I just drew...just sketched what came to mind and didn't think about what looked good or not. It was bringing to life the thoughts and emotions of my mind, like a kind of therapy and outlet that wasn't simply crying. But artists were like...ponies who knew how to make *good* art...weren't they? I couldn't do those amazing pictures, I didn't even know how to colour!

“I'll...I'll try, Unity. I'll try...I guess?”

“It's all we can ever do, Murky. Huh, hey, look!”

She pointed a hoof. Up ahead, past the end of Foal Land was the rollercoaster. Much of it had been stripped down now, used for metal in the factories after the structure had been made unsteady and half destroyed by rocket launcher fire during LittlePip's escape. For a second, I was curious about what Unity saw, before she began to canter ahead, looking not at the coaster itself...but toward a small area of benches below it. An old picnic area, I guessed, for ponies not brave enough to go on the rollercoaster. (Ponies like me, then.) They were kept away from the underside of the ride by a chainlink fence beside a large map of the FunFarm and a long broken statue of Pinkie Pie. Even with the limbs missing and eyes showing no pupils in the cast brass...I found even more reason to keep my own glances away from it.

But beside it, next to a plaque, I noticed dozens...no...*hundreds* of little items attached to the fences. What on Equestria...

Unity galloped up to them, casting her eyes around. Trotting up beside her...I finally saw what it was as I wandered down the line of the fence.

Locks. Padlocks...every one of them attached into a rung of the chains around where the plaque stood. A couple of containers were below, filled with open padlocks. Closed forever on the fence so thickly that I couldn't even see through in places. Every one of them bore scratchings upon their surfaces, often with little love hearts or sketches of cutie marks. Many of them on the fence had pink ribbons or the rotted remains of flowers attached to them. I saw one with a pair of dogtags...

“What in Equestria's name are these?” I breathed the words quietly, looking at the padlocks...they just kept going, almost blocking sight through the fence in some places. All shapes and sizes...all colours and designs...

“Lovelocks, Murky. Like the plaque says...”

She cleared her throat.

“In honour of Hearts and Hooves Day, for those ponies lucky enough to have that one special somepony in their lives, the one they may rest in harmony with until the end. The one they would never break the bond with...never leave behind and trust in *forever*...have our metalworker engrave your names to lock forever upon the fence.”

As she spoke, I lifted a few with my hoof. Sure enough, upon them were scribbled words. Some engraved...others in faded pen. Some were just scratched on. Unity looked up, following me down the

fence. Hundreds of couples...all lost to history. I remembered the Memorial Wall in the Stable, filled with memories. But here lay proof positive of the caring that had permeated Equestria a long time ago...

“Ponies in the old days declared their love to the ones they wouldn't ever part with by placing a lock up here, Murky. A symbol that even the balefire didn't bring it down. They say that the tradition started just after some event showed just how strong the power of love could really be when things were at their darkest.”

Across the ground, there lay not *one* padlock that had fallen...not one that had lost its meaning. Across Foal Land...across the FunFarm, there were many sounds. But standing before such a sight, backlit by the fires underneath the rollercoaster and the dull smog of a storm ridden Fillydelphia...I saw one thing that had *not* been broken by any effort of the wasteland.

“Love amongst the darkness, I like to think they're still together up there, Murky. Some slaves even do it today...”

Stopping, her hoof rested upon one padlock. Dirty, rusted and with merely scratched words...she glanced down and sighed.

“Just his initials...see?” Sadly, she held it toward me.

I bit my lip. Scratched words and a crude little shape of Celestia's Sun and a small heart. I nodded...as though pretending I understood. She and her buckfriend had...they had done this old tradition even now with the hope that no matter what happened to them...they'd be together through it all. I didn't dare sully the moment with the whole 'I can't read' speech.

“The day we put this on...I remember *that*, Murky. That was when we made the promise. We were escaping, together, or not at all. We locked it as one...”

I could clearly see her fighting back some tears, but her horn sparkled a lush red and drew something from her ragged barding. A small length of thin pipe with a stamped end and what looked like a bobby pin.

“...we aren't any more. Until I see him...*remember* everything about him, I don't deserve this. Once we get him, Murky...we'll come back here, relock it into a new declaration of dedication of escape from whatever Red Eye's done to him.”

Twisting the metal rod and the pin into the lock, I heard it ping...before the hook sprang out. Unity left it on the fence...swaying lightly on the locking hook.

“I swear, if it turns out to be old Grindstone that's taken him...I always did hear he wanted him back since he got transferred out.” She sighed. “I'll get you back, love...wherever they've trapped you, we'll be join this together again one day.”

She finally looked away from the lock, her long mane hiding her face when she lowered her head. Master Grindstone? Somehow...it almost felt likely. That donkey was in cahoots with The Master. But outside of their horrid betrayal of Protégé, something I could *never* hope to prove or kick up any fuss about, I could only feel the aching inevitability that they were up to something else in whatever great game the slavers had going. For now...the most I could understand to do was trot over and simply be there.

Turning, letting me see one half of her face under the mane, looking ever so vulnerable and strained. Unity seemed to take at least a little comfort by somepony else being there for once.

“Y...you know, Murky...I can see you're a little nervous to all this social stuff but...this'd be a real good time to give a lil'mare a hug...”

If there was one thing I could do...it was obey commands. Without hesitating, I slid forward to gently hold her. Feeling her lean against my own neck, I even dared to offer a little firmer hold. Sniffing, Unity seemed to quake a little. I felt her breathing quicken for a few seconds...before slowly calming down and gripping me a little tighter.

“Sorry you have to see me like this, Murky...you've got your own problems and...and mine is-”

“I-important!” The word stammered out, the first one I could quickly think of. Quickly, I rushed to try and

think of others. Yeah...okay...*words*, here we go. “We're all getting out...me and Glimmerlight, Brim and Coral...her son...we've all got little odd things we need sorted and help out each other for! I want you and your friend to come with us too, so I want to help you because you're nice and really helped me and... and, uh...”

I hesitated, before thinking like I was drawing, yes, go with that!

“When we're out we can all make a little village together and...and just be all out of the way, free to do what we want. You two can come with us...we'll all help you find him, I know they will! Just like one...um..big happy family?”

For a second, I wasn't sure if the slight jerking convulsions I felt from her shoulders and head were further crying or laughter. But she leaned back, wiping her eyes and smiling. Was it...both?

“I wish I had your imagination, Murky...thanks. I don't know what somepony's done to him...or me, if this isn't just Fillydelphia messing with my head...but I'm going to find out. I never even got to see him before the Pit...it's been so long since we were properly together. That's going to end. He was always talking about escape plans and stuff to me to get my input, we tried once...but that didn't go too well. If we can find one another again, we'll put everything we learned to helping your escape plan, Murky.”

My escape plan? I figured it'd be best to let her stay hopeful and not say that it was more sort of Glimmer's...she was the effective leader of our little group anyway. But another couple's information was a valuable asset, something we couldn't ignore for the eventual attempt.

“Sounds...um...good. Let's...go get him?”

Glimmerlight made big emotional mission decisions sound so easy to come up with, a trait I obviously hadn't been born with. But it seemed to at least do the job for Unity nodded and stood alongside me for the final trek to the Barn.

“Yes, lets.” She glanced at me once more. “I still remember what I told you the last time we met...when that nasty slaver had you in a collar. That you'd find what kept you going. To hold out until we could run into one another again. I said we'd come and help you...but now it's you coming to my aid. You sure found your courage, Murky...”

“Y-yeah...but not in me. It's...I found it in wanting to help those I cared about more than anything...”

“...like me?” She sounded surprised.

Nervous, I nodded lightly, almost blushing. “You changed my life...I drew the first thing I chose for myself because you said I could...”

We both seemed a little unsure of how to really say it, but as we moved down the line of padlocks on the fence, them gradually becoming less and less frequent, Unity just nodded and looked back ahead.

“It's the strangest meetings of random chance...the oddest little things you say that somepony takes in a manner you never could expect. I hadn't known that meant so much to you. From the look on your face...I don't think you expected what you did running for the Wall to mean as much to me either. I'd been ready to give up until I saw somepony willing to go that crazy distance. So lets do this together, Murky. Prove to each other, ourselves and everypony else that there's still hope left. We'll go find out where he is and get you to your friend at the same time.”

We shared a little glance at the end of the fence, after the last padlock had passed. A little mutual matching of eyes and nod...before we both galloped off toward the Barn.

* * *

The main fortress area was still a little away, safe behind multiple layers of security. It was so much bigger than I'd ever imagined...so much more imposing up close. To think...Red Eye could be in there right now. What if we ran into him? Oh boy...

Dropping into a trench dug out for wiring, we crouched low, watching the patrols that drifted to and fro ahead

of us. I let my eyes drift around past them, observing the wall that surrounded the Fun Barn since the riots. Security was tight, absolutely no way to 'sneak past' in the normal ways and no overhanging material to jump from like the Ministry. The rollercoaster had been cut away from where it had once passed through the Barn, as though deliberately for that express purpose. There were a few gates...mostly for messengers and higher ranked members of Red Eye's inner circles. Others were for wagons that carried various supplies or spoils of war to the more advanced facilities Red Eye had built up inside. Those wagons were trundling along a newly cleared path that drifted between the rollercoaster's scaffolds. Yes...

"Come on, Unity!" I took off, moving into the underside of the rollercoaster, an area filled with higher mounds of wreckage and piles of dull red scrap. Ruined coaster cars lay here and there, one of which I pulled us below.

"What are you-oooh..."

She seemed to get it the moment we saw one of the carts move inside the gates. We just had to wait for another one, then sneak into the back under the tarps that covered them! Even better, no chances of being stuck in a box this time!

Taking cover under the upturned coaster car to wait, we pulled some wooden beams across to keep us hidden. There were patrols around here, masked soldiers that were *not* slavers. They simply did one job, combat. Many of them recruited from the tougher gangs of the wastes to be given purpose and better equipment. Already I could see and hear a few groups nearer the walls, but our little hidey hole was almost undetectable. All the same...we would have to wait for another wagon we could use.

To pass the time and avoid our nerves shredding under the oppression and fear, I passed my journal to Unity. She glanced across it, taking in the new images I had done since. She seemed *stunned* to know what I'd drawn her (Thank the Goddesses I hadn't let *some* of my ideas be done, oh thank you Luna!) and almost gave us away with a loud squeak of happiness.

"Oh that's wonderful! Thank you, Murky!"

"It's...it's fine. The one I promised though, we'll...we'll do it when we're out of here, okay? First picture I draw when we go." I smiled, feeling a little more confident. "Maybe you could even pose for it because we'll both be there!"

About two seconds after I spoke, did I realise what that could be misconstrued as.

"I...I mean like...like *nicely!* Not...um..."

She turned the page and nodded her head at it.

"Not like her, you mean?" Unity slyly grinned like we had the first time she'd looked at it. I glanced at the drawing.

"Yeah! Yeah, not like that!"

"Mm...this one's really well done. *Very* realistic. Boy, Murky...you must have had your eye on her for a while, huh?"

My voicebox temporarily stopped working, producing only a strangled squeak of embarrassment accompanied by a blush I was afraid would give us away by glow alone.

She just chuckled lightly. "Oh sorry, I'm terrible sometimes. But really, all the other ponies in here...your friends and...family?"

Gulping to regain the power of speech, glad she'd moved away from one of my more...uh...*personal* pictures...I saw she was on the one of myself, Glimmer and Caduceus. For once, we began to properly talk in hushed voices any time I could confirm there were no ponies nearby. Ten minutes or so passed, within which I took a great delight in explaining who Glimmerlight was ("My big sister best friend forever since two days after meeting her!") or took a comfort in feeling a gentle nuzzle from Unity against my cheek while I told her of Caduceus' loss.

“I'm so sorry to hear that...he sounded really nice.”

Sniffing sharply, I wiped my eyes with a filthy hoof, just trying to keep myself from tearing up in front of her. Instead, I just felt her lean over slightly, sharing a tender little closeness. I hadn't been able to let it out with anyone yet...so I found a sense of immense thankfulness growing that Unity was willing to offer comfort. I hadn't realised how deeply he'd really settled in before it happened, the momentum of *having friends* stitching his presence into my soul in such a short time...only to have it ripped out.

Somehow...feeling someone else that I didn't know as well as Glimmer be the one to offer such a close and caring physical expression helped some of that emotion to finally come out.

Finally, like a spring suddenly snapping, I felt myself lean toward her myself, sniffing with my eyes closed and permitted her to be the one comforting me this time in a moment of emotional collapse. Even these mere minutes we'd spent were like all the hurt we'd gone through separately were just being shared with the one pony we'd both met before any of it really started.

Wagons still failed to appear...so we shared stories, such as my trip to the Stable and the hoof-bitingly close run for freedom. Or me hearing of her surprisingly heroic little tales to steal items from Slit's very office!

Things she had been hoarding from other overseers that had more of a care of their charges. She laughed as she heard about where my goggles came from and revealed a whetstone used for sharpening a knife in her own barding. My own story, it seemed, was not the only one of a slave trying to find their way to survive by aiding those that trapped them...

Suddenly, my ears pricked, Unity dropping her sentence midway as she saw stark terror upon my face at one certain thing I'd heard. We pressed low...as I listened to the sound every slave feared from above. The sound of wings, larger than a griffin, beating against the thick and heavy air.

Monsters. The purple, blue and green ponies soared through the air toward our goal building. Alicorns...Red Eye's personal bodyguards and most lethal servants. I could hear my own teeth chattering from fear at their passing. They said they could read minds...if they thought we were up to anything we were done for! Even that one minute it took the six of them to pass was pregnant with my imagined outcomes of them dropping to rip the cart away and...and do whatever it was they did. Even fewer had seen them fight, but the legends were, well...*legendary* amongst slaves.

Watching them land upon the roof, I ducked back in, sighing. I wanted to stay silent forever now...but...but forget it...I needed to talk, anything to distract myself from the fear. I'd been an outcast all my life, but my mind couldn't stop thinking about those horrors or...or The Master coming striding down the road and just *sensing* me. No...I had a thousand questions I wanted to ask Unity that had been building in my mind, but with a quick glance to her cutie mark, I knew the first on my list. With a mark like that, so grand...so much better than my own cursed flank...

“U-Unity? What's your special talent?” I tried to not make it look like I'd been staring. Oh please don't think I was staring!

She glanced back from staring up at the passing beasts above, drawing away the rags to show the three types on ponies again, before smiling sadly.

“Sort of a strange one...I guess you could say I bring ponies together.”

“That sounds nice...” I saw her smile a little at that, before looking away wistfully. Of course...there was one pony I knew she wanted to be reunited with more than any.

I wanted to ask in what way, to find out what she meant, but Unity instead quickly glanced toward the edge of the road running under the rollercoaster. My eyes followed and widened; a cart was approaching! Alone too, as luck would have it. Perfect!

Stuffing my sketchbook into my saddlebag and readying up, I slipped my goggles down out of sheer habit for 'go time' and held myself ready. The cart's clattering iron reinforced wheels bounced and chipped off the harsh unsteady concrete ground, carrying enough weight that to end up trapped beneath it would be a death sentence in rather messy fashion. Nodding to Unity, we shared a quick glance...before diving toward it the moment the cart passed by. The one weary slave pulling it under the slaver on tops whip driven directions

didn't even turn his head away from the commands of 'faster!' to see us.

I went first galloping low and quiet to get behind it. The back of the cart didn't have any cover, too high as well! Damn!

We were caught in the open behind it, a few heart stopping seconds without cover. Already, I could see a trio of black clad guards beginning another arc across the rollercoaster patrol route! In a panic, I pointed a hoof at the underside. We could hold onto the bottom and drop off when inside! Galloping after it again, hearing the beat of wings once more to set my heart pounding from whatever stopping it'd been doing, I scurried under, grabbing hold of the supports to haul myself onto, upside down. Unity was right behind me, good girl! Just running under and-

“HEY! You there, the mare! Stop right there!”

A guard's voice cut through the air from toward the walls into the Fun Barn. I almost shrieked at the thought, Unity had been spotted before she'd got in! I waved at her, encouraging her to duck under or drop off myself to run! But she reached forward, keeping up just long enough to tap my mouth shut with a hoof and shoot me a serious look...before dropping back out.

“Sorry! Sorry I...I just dropped something under the cart and-”

Thwack! Hooves clattered into view, a baton slapping down across her face. I saw Unity fall...felt the wagon stop on the spot at the commotion. No, no, no! All I could see where the pairs of hooves from guards surrounding her where she lay. Her cheek was bleeding, one eye closed with pain. The other caught my own eyes only briefly as she was dragged up...the clear unspoken words. “Stay hidden!” Groaning, Unity was picked to her hooves and pulled around the side.

“Dropped something my flank! Trying to sneak around to get some good shit to sell on the slave market, huh? Well that's just what we call a *big* offence around here! What were you after, our smokes?”

“N-nothing! I was-”

“Shut up, you'll answer to the big wigs inside. You wanted to see the Fun Barn? Well you'll get to see its *cell!* Take her in, we'll get her overseer over later to send her to the sprite pits or something. Move, bitch!”

The mare's baton swung, catching Unity's rump with a humiliating smacking sound to force her to trot onward toward the FunBarn beside the very wagon I now hide alone in. I was in tears, my feelings wrenching to see her being marched away...pulled from me *again!*

No...I'd...I'd just met her, led her into danger! This had been my idea, to help Unity get her buck and get back to Protégé with her where she might be safer with his advice and understanding! It was all falling apart before we'd even started. I just wished I had...had the courage to...

She'd been the one who told me I'd find it. Unity had stood up the The Master once...if she could do that, then it was worth the risk! Anything was better than knowing she was just rotting away and starving to death in the FunFarn. All this time, I'd been running away, protecting myself. I had just *proven* I could go to help others, but even then with major backup and help.

This was my test before me, a friend being taken to evil ends and knowing that I had to help her.

Nothing ventured...nothing gained. You have to *dare*.

As the wagon began rolling again, I clung tighter. After all this...everything I'd been through, I wasn't letting her get away *this* time! I was going to get her out, come rain or shine! Hang on, Unity...

As if to just dare me on...the clouds immediately cast their hissing rain down once more.

* * *

Finally, I let my tired hooves drop from the cart after ten minutes of agonising cramps and struggles to ensure no-pony was in the area of the courtyard in the Fun Barn's interior areas. Spittle from the lashing rain kicked up under the lip of the wagon, scathing my exposed coat. Now, however, I dropped into the mud, feeling the

wool in my already damp fleece cake itself in wet slimy muck. Trying to keep my wings from slapping the ground, heeding Weathervane's instructions that they *had* to remain safe, I immediately darted out from under the wagon toward the nearest set of covered scaffold. Squeezing behind it, I got my first good look at Red Eye's headquarters. My infected eye itched terribly, but I dared not remove my goggles to scratch with so much of this hissing rain springing off the ground. The Mall suddenly felt so inviting with that sofa we had under shelter...

Not much of the Barn was really visible through the rain. The storm was kicking up once again, restricting vision and making sure you couldn't open your eyes too wide for fear of them being burned by the toxic downpour. Some ponies in gasmasks and full body barding moved unfettered, but most had galloped back into the main building to wait out the torrential rain. The interior behind the wall was as rough as any place in Fillydelphia, really. Outside the doors it was simply a low stretch of ground that contained much of the materials to come and go. I saw heavy lead laden wagons being dragged in as fast as they could, tugging through sodding mud kicked up from old garden earth. They were filled with radioactive materials, some even glowing, for whatever mad science they were pulling in here. We all heard the rumours, but honestly, it was beyond my intelligence to remember what it all meant.

Unity was still visible, flanked by two guards in thick black and red combat barding. I could see her trying not to glance toward the wagon I'd just left, feeling a surge of pride at her bravery to still think of me. I'd have been blubbering on the ground in her position. All the same, I could see her posture failing as the rain lashed across her...no doubt causing a hot burning sensation all down her face, neck and back. Out of the Barn stepped a griffin, seemingly not caring for the rain under her thick coat of feathers. The massive armour didn't seem to hurt either...

“This the squirt you lot caught?”

“Please, I was-”

“Shut up!” Gasping, I saw Unity struck across her already bleeding cheek, crying out and dropping to the floor. Magic pulled her up.

“Yes, Ma'am. She-”

“Get her inside...cells are empty, you'll give that fatass jailor something to actually do for a change. She the one they're looking for?”

“Dunno, Ma'am, we were going to-”

“Then do it! I don't need to know what you're *doing*, only results!”

Even *I* could point out a thousand flaws with that logic. Wicked Slit would probably burst a blood vessel. But horribly, I saw Unity trooped away from me, forced, shoved and slapped with a baton into the central section of the FunBarn before I had to duck back down behind the scaffolds. Damn...they *knew*, The Master had gotten the word out. I needed to get her out of that prison before he came to collect!

Right, time to go, before my courage failed me if I thought about this madness too long! Under this darkness, Luna lend me your blessing to remain unseen, please!

They trooped into a larger warehouse that had been built out of the huge ground floors of the Barn.

Heck...Barn wasn't the right word, this place was huge! Multiple levels, from the ground to the decimated higher sections the rollercoaster *used* to have passed through rose before me while the base floor extended in every direction with even stairs leading down underground. Who knew theme parks had such large basements? Whatever was really inside there was only disguised as a barn, for I could see concrete walls inside through the open warehouse doors lined with metal supports. Old buckets contained masses of those sprite-bots, long ruined. Up high, through the mist, I could see the lights on the roof still there. I could clearly see why it seemed appropriate for setting up a headquarters in, it had presence beyond compare. The barn that watched you forever.

The rain was seriously beginning to burn my hooves from standing still in puddles. I was already pacing on the spot, murmuring in pain. Intent to go soon, watching for a break in the guard's patrols, I hopped out and

ran quietly alongside a wagon being noisily tugged by two slaves into the warehouse to keep them from spotting me. Gritting my teeth and fighting the urge to whinny as I felt my brow, neck and rump sting from the rain, I ducked away the moment we passed under the cavernous doorways that Red Eye had demolished from the Barn walls. There was so much more cover inside, watched only by a few quartermasters and their entourages. Clearly...the idea of somepony penetrating in here hadn't much applied. After all...who would really want to come in here *anyway*?

The area was massive, filled with mechanical devices and enough conveyors that I began to wonder if it was a hidden factory. But most of it remained defunct, still bearing loads that hadn't fallen when the bombs shut down everything. But it was the contents that caught my eye while I ducked and rolled under a thick pallet.

The machines were *pink*. Upon them lay presents of all shapes and sizes, clad in shiny or colourful paper and wrapped with thick bows. Items like small foal's scooters and bouncy balls went in one end of a machine...on the other they came out wrapped. Like one giant processing line for gifts. Old rusted carts lay ready to be loaded on the far side before the main doors to the Barn's production area. I presumed those doors had rusted shut, hence the alternate ones cut into the wooden construction. This entire wing was almost separate from Red Eye's more prominent "main Barn tower", but I quickly began to wonder just how much more this place really was than a Barn, originally...

The presents weren't alone, however. Other machines, still pink and splattered with yellow and light blue spirals of paint, seemed to have a dozen workers clambering over them. From their conveyors I saw piles of sprite-bots, lying non-operational upon the floor or in crates. Geez...what was this weird place?

But in the middle of it all, amongst the suspended walkways...the one sight atop the machines almost gave me a heart attack on the spot. A colossal pink *sphere* filling my vision, that grin stretching all around it with massive eyes that stared down upon me...*a giant Pinkie Pie head decoration*. Easily ten to twelve times the size of a pony in height, it sat as an eternal watcher upon the factory, cast from iron and riveted together.

Honestly...was there anywhere in Equestria somepony could go without her just being...*there*?

"Hey! Flimsy Pack! Get that lot in out the rain for now! We can't move the talismans until it's clear, that rain burns the stuff up!"

Perking up at the sound of many hooves beginning to rush for the doorways...I knew I had to move. This place was about to get a lot more crowded. Keeping near to the sides, I kept low, crawling beneath scaffold shelves and around-WOAH!

Stopping on the spot, I pulled back, hopped up and dragged myself into a small and empty present box, right before a pony's head peered down from the corner where I'd almost crawled out right in front of him. Curled up tightly, I just shivered...waiting for him to pass...hearing him right beside the present box.

"Huh...coulda' sworn I heard somepony..."

The present was knocked, oh no...he was climbing up to have a look in...um...um...think quick, Murky!

"Ah, shit!" I heard him slip on the wet floor, half tripping as he was on his hind legs to bump into the present. It wouldn't have fallen...but I threw my weight to *make* fall, before tumbling out on the opposite side of the shelving unit and scampering down the line of boxes before he peered over.

"Damn it...hey, somepony get some slaves with mops over here soon enough, eh?"

He trotted off. Phew. Following the line of conveyors, I moved for the back of the room, where numerous doors led further into the Barn. For once, a little luck aided me as the guards were distracted keeping the slaves tugging materials inside in line. As such, slipping into the building further was as simple as waiting my time and then darting past them.

Beyond was a serried rank of doors upon one side of the corridor, with the other beating open plan offices crammed with terminals. Many ponies sat at them, clip-clopping away upon their keyboards. Behind the small internal fence that separated them from the corridor, I carefully nuzzled my way through, briefly diving into one of the doors to dodge a guard cantering toward the warehouse. Edging the door open...I began to feel a sense of pride grow in me. That I really could start to do this whole sneaky thing well! In the past, I'd

always failed dismally...but here I really was managing it and without even the screw ups of even the Ministry of Arcane whatever-it-was!

There were a few more guards coming, so I ducked back again, closing myself inside the small room and digging out my PipBuck to activate its light. As much as I loved wearing it...the little broken machine really was too much of an attention magnet. But under the light green hue, I found the cupboard a rather perplexing little place...

Party supplies surrounded me, as did posters of balloons, leaping Pinkies (yes, plural...how?!) and cardboard boxes of absolute junk. This had to be the storage areas for the party production line in the Barn's side building! Hearing a great many ponies outside, I began to dig through them to spend the time until I could move again. Mostly party hats, balloons and...oooh...

Firecrackers!

Having to strain to not grin, I began pulling a row of them into my saddlebag. Sooner or later, I had a feeling they would come in handy as a distraction or, at worst, something to add to our growing escape-kit pile.

...alright...maybe I put in a few party hats too. A buck could dream, right?

The slavers outside weren't moving for some time it seemed. Their chatter was all complaints about the rain, length of shifts or the price of ale at the Roamer. Crossed over behind them were the dozens of ponies working at terminals, likely doing all the grunt work to organise such a wasteland superpower as Fillydelphia. Gently pulling open another box, I found it filled with lots of little bottles of black dust. Lifting one out, staring carefully at the door as I heard somepony lean against it, I pulled my PipBuck closer to get a look.

It held words. Oh why did it have to be *words*? Spinning it around, to my delight I saw it had a little picture of a pony looking like she was blowing her nose really hard. Somepony was laughing behind her. Ooh! Medicine for ponies with colds! Feeling my own nose almost entirely blocked, I grinned, struggling with the foal-lock to pull it open in my teeth. Popping the top, I glanced down into it...praying I'd get the dosage right and taking as big a sniff as I could manage to try and gauge the flavour. The black dust drifted around the tip, light and moved even by the currents of my nose. Before I knew it, a small cluster of it was floating before me. This...uh...would help me?

Instead, I just felt my nose tingle...then itch...then itch *badly*...before I felt muscles quiver.

Before I even knew what was happening, splitting pain wracked through my face and black eyes all the way to my wicked scar as I convulsed...and sneezed.

It was a high pitched sneeze, a squeaking with a shrill little snort alongside it. My body almost jumped under it. Eyes watering, clutching my pain and moaning, I heard the *last* thing I wanted.

“...somepony just sneeze in the cupboard?”

The slavers had heard me! There wasn't a way out! Oh...oh find a place to hide, quickly, Then I could...I...I...

Sneezed. Again. Trying to ignore the throbbing pain all across my eyes and up the swollen red line that went up to my left ear, I staggered into the wall, attempting to hold my nose shut with my front hooves.

“I swear I heard somepony! Get it open! Sounded like a little filly or somethin'.”

Oh come on!

Eyes watering from the sneezes, feeling another one building, I simply threw myself behind the door and tried not to scream in pain when it crushed me against the wall. Light streamed into the room...while I did my best to fumble for the PipBuck light.

“See? No-pony, told you to lay off the damned Dash, mate. Now c'mon, boss won't appreciate it if we're late back from break. If we take the shortcut through the prison we'll get there in time. Maybe see if that mare they dragged in's any good, eh?”

Flattened into the tiny space, my eyes widened. The prison! I had to follow them! The moment the door was loosened off, I simply stuffed the PipBuck and black dust powder stuff into my saddlebag and poked my head around the moment I heard them depart. Two bucks, almost identical brothers it seemed, were trotting away. Still fighting the urge to cough or sneeze, I quickly slipped out after them, keeping low enough (not hard...) that the terminal ponies wouldn't see me. I didn't envy their job, having to just sit and...type.

Following them was not especially difficult; there were thankfully few others around who were already travelling. Under the black sky, there was little indoors illumination if not in a crucial area, so the FunBarn's interior was a stark contrast of hazed light and thick shadow. Unlike much of the buildings I'd been in, this one was much more open plan, with us crossing a large room that could look up to the next floor entirely via interior balconies. Above one side lay a massive window that let in what little light Fillydelphia possessed.

It reminded me of the real barn back at the rock farm, only much much bigger and filled to the brim with an inventory of expensive looking items amidst a cube farm of desk areas and research tables. Upon the wide windowed side rooms, I saw ponies bubbling up chems or handling radioactive materials. In others, the hum of spark technology was prevalent, machinery in guarded labs or rooms doing jobs I couldn't comprehend. A full bank of screens showed various areas of Fillydelphia and even the wasteland, with three workers sitting watching them intently. Hearing the couple I was tailing, one of the observers turned to the door, making me duck across quickly. Really...this entire hub was just a huge and busy network of varied experiments and technologies. No wonder Red Eye kept it all so close.

What *really* worried me was the way that many of the research sections were hoisting weapons together...

Part of me felt tempted to find a way to smash or steal some of it...maybe it would help out LittlePip! But I couldn't risk drawing attention...so I contented myself with stealing somepony's sandwich out of a small fridge beneath their desk while they were away. Heehee!

For all the interest and potential though...this place was a nightmare of direction. Rooms went into the next at seemingly random intervals, as though a maniac designed it. Entire walls had been cut down by Red Eye's workers to expand working areas and I could see holes in the roof above the main atrium where slaves hung on grapplehooks to bridge the gaps and repair it. I keenly remembered the sight of a gigantic shielded monster tearing through this place. Everything seemed to have been cobbled back together in a mish mash of placement since that epic demolishing operation that had gone on in the middle of the Pit Riot.

Altogether, if it weren't for these two being kindly oblivious, I'd have been lost long ago. The walls held poster after poster of Pinkie Pie while the furniture often had brightly painted design all over what would otherwise have been dull. The effect was something like a zany pony rushing through the place with ten tins of paint and no real forward artistic plan. Thankfully, it made it fairly east to creep alongside the many desks and office dividers. The only real worry was anypony on the balconies above...but with the rain falling upon them, no-pony really was willing to cross below the gaps.

“Eh, mate, wait a 'mo. I gotta' check on the intel, boss wanted an update, remember?”

Crap! I hopped backward, pushing myself into one of the open topped cube offices, squeezing so tightly behind a filing cabinet that one of my wings flared in grinding pain. Biting my own lip so hard I drew blood to stifle the pained yelp, I heard them trot back my way and move into the room with all the monitors.

I settled down to wait again, trying to briefly master the art of telepathy to apologise to Weathervane for breaking his instructions about my wings. Come on...I had to *go*...Unity needed me!

“Hey, egghead, any signals back from the outer elements yet?”

A younger voice, female and nasal, pipped up. “Please, I told you not to call me that!”

“Fits ya. Now I asked a question, we ain't got long.”

“Fine...fine. Scouts got back earlier, dropped off a report but...eh, nothing huge to be honest. The Cathedral prep is coming along as the big guy predicted, that slave caravan we lost is confirmed to have been raiders and there was a brief tussle at the Manehattan blockade force. The alicorns...um...'took care' of it, was all

he'd say. I think that one's late, though, scout got delayed en route from sickness. Anything else Stern wants to know before you go get roasted?"

"Urgh...yeah, she still ain't in a good mood after that fuck up at the Mall. It's either swearing about it happening at all or screaming about headaches from somepony dropping on her head."

Oops.

"Talking of which, forgot to say. I'd stay away from taking anything to the main office for a few hours, the higher ranks are going to be starting their jury on what to do about the Mall. Old Grizzly said he'd take charge until Protégé's back on his hooves...but Grindstone's having none of it, wants the little guy out of there completely, saying he isn't fit to lead. Expect it to explode in there."

"Duly noted...I won't trot near it. Isn't it Red Eye's call though? It *was* his student."

Oddly, her voice sounded a little more monotone than I'd have expected from the agreement to not get too close.

"All the more reason. You think Red Eye wants to look as though he's playing favourites? Nah, Red Eye might elect to have him retake power eventually, but for now the kid's on his own. Or rather, in Grizzly's hooves, given he's still in medical. Just keep away from all that, egghead. Too much politics for you or me and way too much danger of making big time enemies. Now...you got the list of factions we're looking into next for Stern? I *really* want to get there before the debate starts."

"Yeah, sure. Not much, we've scared off most of them or have deals already, but tell her she can look at the Gun Gallop Crew or Spark Suitors to see if they've got any good kit worth buying out. The Appleloosa traintrack remains unrepaired but that ghoul's still doing her flying delivery. The Golden Cap Caravans are making moves lately too if we need to see about local transport. Want my advice though? We should just stick to our own supply lines, the ghoul wants nothing to do with us and the wasteland's like a ticking time bomb out there..."

"Which is why I'm *here*. Thanks, egghead. Now keep your head down."

"Not difficult in here..."

Only now remembering to open my mouth and let go of my lip, I gently peered around to see the pair of stallions leave. Exiting the atrium, they began to speed up, cantering downstairs. Simply praying they would assume my galloping sounds were somepony unimportant (most ponies had that by simply looking at me), I sped up after them, passing behind 'egghead's' chair without her so much as looking up.

But even as I followed the pair into the door, I cast a look back around the doorframe. Alongside several miserable looking ponies beside her on desks...I could see she was silently crying onto her keyboard, chained to a thick weight upon the floor.

* * *

Below ground in the FunBarn was anything but *fun*.

Behind a set of thick doors designed like Canterlot castle gates (I'd seen pictures, I could know stuff too!) the light had drastically lowered, giving rise to the sheer opposite of above ground.

Dingy corridors that were higher than they were wide, lined with thin doorways of cast metal and bearing only a single low vision slit. Padlocks held many shut, while others lay slightly ajar. Allowing the pair time to get ahead, I gently pushed one open...before immediately darting away...breathing heavily.

A nightmare. They held...a *nightmare*. Just unlit black concrete rooms bearing a single wooden chair with straps. A sheer physical manifestation of my innermost fears of being trapped forever. The whiplash of design was still reeling in my mind, scaring me and driving my heartrate up to the point I almost felt like I was hyperventilating. *What was this place?*

The hellish thoughts in my mind only grew as I heard some ponies moaning or crying inside some of the locked cells. Oh Luna give them your mercy in the unforgiving dark...

Tip-tapping my way across the cobblestone floor toward the three way junction that the stallions had gone left at, I peered around to see them approach another such junction again. The undecorated and unmarked design down here was becoming all the more painfully monotone. One went to go right...until pulled left.

“Hey! I thought we were gonna go see the new one in the cells?”

“We don't have time for you to sit and stare at her rump, you weirdo. I'm not going into Stern's office alone! No, you're coming with me.”

“Aww...I heard she was a good one...”

“Oh shut up, she'll still be here.”

The hell she will. Almost surprising myself with the inner determination (And cursing? I didn't actually say it, Celestia, honest! Honest!), I crept down after them the moment they departed left...before heading right. The rooms grew larger, sitting open. But they were not unlit, spewing small drifts of multicoloured light out of each doorway. Unable to contain my curiosity...I peeked in.

I...I *had* to bring Glimmerlight here...

Memory orbs. Hundreds of memory orbs! Of all colours imaginable, they lined the metal shelves that had been bolted into the very stone of the walls. Many were flickering on the floor, having fallen and become damaged. Could orbs be broken? Were they just bad extracts? There were so *many*...

Standing among them, I couldn't but feel more than a little apprehensive. Amongst this...this dungeon, such a sight only filled me with dread. Everything I had seen of memory left me confused on just what ponies should be playing with. Aurora Star and Twilight seemed to see a lot of good in them...but then I had seen the effect they'd had on Glimmer's life...and Unity's, depending on what had happened. It didn't take a smart pony to work out these were not willingly extracted.

Very quickly, the purpose of the chairs became very real indeed. A chill rolled from my neck to my hind legs...imagining the reality. Strapped in pitch black...being nothing but a resource of information that gradually lost more and more of yourself as it was torn out...forgetting ponies you knew and having no outside input to restore it!

Turning on the spot, feeling my eyes becoming wet, I simply ran my eyes over each row of the orbs, the idea that in many cases, these might be all that remained of those ponies came to light.

“Whoever you all are...I'm so sorry...”

“**Bastards!** Where's mah damn food?!”

Jumping on the spot, skittering around on my bad leg and tripping over various orbs, I staggered to the door, casting my head down the corridor. A light shone from one of the larger doors...from where that shout had come from. Cautiously, I approached and used my mirror to take a quick peek without putting my head in a visible position.

My heart leapt...the cells!

Within, there were two large caged sections of a room, the rest made up of one huge desk and two cabinets. It was *filthy*. Mould grotted around the edges of tiles that made up both floor and walls, while a rank stench emerged that suddenly left me *very* glad for my cold. But it was the slaver inside that drew my eyes more. While Brimstone was tall, thick and muscular; and The Master was wide and heavily built, this pony was simply overweight, a real rarity to the wastes. He lounged upon a large cushion, clad in rotten looking canvas with a foul yellow coat. In the corners, I saw bones and filthy bowls piled up.

Very quickly, I realised *he* was the source of the stink.

But all my attention was drawn away the moment I panned over the cells. Unity! She was huddled at the back of one, as far from the jailer as she could possibly be. Damn...there wasn't any way I could sneak in and I doubted this obese pony was going to get up to check too many things outside.

“OI! Little bastards, are ya there? You're late by twenty seconds!”

He slammed a hoof on the desk, making an array of random trinkets hop up or fall off. Behind me, I heard the pitter patter of tiny hooves and a duller stumbling of thicker set hooves on the stone flooring, accompanied by a panicked breathing.

“I'm...phew...I'm coming, sir!”

“Yeah! We're on our way!”

I knew those voices...recognition was pinging in my mind. But *anypony* seeing me hiding here would be bad. I began to creep back to the memory orb room to hide, just hoping I'd reach it before they did...

“Don't drop it, Pike! Watch out!”

“*You* watch out!”

“You!”

Wait! Pike?! Pike and Cosh? The ponies that had given me trouble in the air terminal were in the *FunBarn*? Some of the few ponies I'd ever caught out through speech. Hmm...

I had an idea.

I didn't hide, instead, I ran toward them as fast as I could. Rounding the corner of the three way junction, I went twenty feet away from them on the third corridor...before running back as though approaching the area for the first time when they appeared. The lanky form of Pike with his vomit coloured coat and dull orange mane alongside the stubbier shape of Cosh almost ran directly into me. They had plates balanced on their heads and backs, moving as quickly as they dared in rather haphazard fashion. I didn't even let them speak first.

“Hey! Hey!”

“Woah, it's the pega-”

I cut him off, rushing forward and pressing my front hooves to their chests.

“He changed the order! It's...uh...less!”

“You don't work for him! Stop trying to steal food! Hah! Thought you'd steal some from us? Haha, hey Pike, he thought he could steal some!”

“Shut up, Cosh! Get out our way, shorty!”

Pike knocked me against the side of the tunnels with a hoof. After all I'd been through, I was almost surprised when the hit made me squirm inside at being thrown around. But I jumped forward, trying to get near the plates.

“No, no! Please, he told me to change it! That...that he wants me to take this and-”

“Get off, pegasus! Our boss still wants you! We'll tell you're here to him!”

We were fighting in the small corridor...well, pushing and shoving mostly. We were all pretty small in some way, giving rise to perhaps the most pathetic scuffle in Equestrian history. Eventually, however, Cosh butted me on the side of the head, knocking me to the floor. I covered my head while they hoofed my body a few times.

“Little rat! You wait there, I want that shiny thing you had last time back!”

They galloped on, accompanied by another roar from the jailer about being late. Shivering, clutching my aching scar with one hoof...I just led the other one slide the empty sneezing powder pot back into my saddlebag.

Oh the fun was about to begin...

* * *

“You get away from me!”

The voice made me cringe, hearing Unity shout at whichever pony it was that had moved toward her cell. Watching carefully on my mirror, I held the next closest door open, ready to leap inside should anypony move for a quick exit. Pike and Cosh I could simply see looking at Unity like she was some sort of tourist attraction, while the jailer was pulling his bulk up to the desk, ready to eat.

“Huh! She's feisty!”

“Reeeecal feisty!”

“Shut up, the pair of you.” The jailer snapped at them. “I didn't borrow your services from that braided idiot for your wits! She's my prisoner until Shackles gets here.”

Every muscle in my body clamped tightly.

“Means you don't get to have her touch you, *slaves*. She says she's taken anyway...wants her buck back. Didn't stop rattling my ear about it! Pfft...not like you can't get any of the dozen or so desperate ponies looking for a quick shag wherever you end up!”

I heard Unity snort, stamping a hoof nearer the bars.

“Like I *would*. There are better things in this world than the dejected base desires you all have! You may think there's nothing but...but gluttony and carnal lust, but *real* ponies know there's far more to be had from somepony you truly love and trust to be your companion throughout life!”

The jailer simply chuckled.

“Then what's his name, again?”

A sick feeling shot through my stomach at the look upon her face, leading Pike and Cosh to snort with shrill laughter. Grinning at her, licking his lips, the jailer dug into his meal. I held my breath.

I had expected to wait for a few minutes...but apparently, the entire pot had more immediate effects.

The desk rattled, hopping as his hooves flailed and rose to his mouth. Choking, gasping and coughing, the jailer roared aloud, sucking in air and gurgling...attempting to wipe his tongue with a yellowed sheet of his clothing.

“Blurrgh! Ya...yain...FUCKIN THRO-YAAARGH!”

The desk rocketed up and flipped, sending food and tabletop items flying. Pike and Cosh moved closer, seeming to hug one another while their temporary master stomped and flailed to and fro, gagging and panting. Sneezing madly, his voice reaching higher pitches to more the powder burned the inside of his throat...I saw his eyes lock on them.

“Ya...YA TWO!”

“Run, Pike!”

“Way ahead of ya!”

I dove into the waiting doorway as they clattered out, mere second later, a wobbling and rippling obese jailer staggered out after them, screaming from the powder in his throat, swearing loudly and chasing them off down the hallways. The *moment* he had passed, I dove into the jail, running up to Unity's cell. She looked up suddenly, having been curled at the back, looking down at a small bronze like object.

“Murky?! You...you came down here?”

“The M-Master is coming, we need to get you out!”

I glanced down at the lock, finding it to have a keyhole. Perfect!

“Can you pick it?”

“They took my lockpick rod, but I still have a bobby pin from my mane! Can you find anything in here to

work with it? If so, yes, I can!”

In the distance, I could still hear the jailer shouting. Damn it, he hadn't gone far! I had to search quickly.

I took to the mess the jailer had left behind, tearing out drawers and looting the cabinets. The jailer's voice was becoming louder again. He was coming back! Throwing open the second cabinet, I found a small cupboard filled with tools. Some of them were reddened. Stifling the sick realisation, I began digging through them, feeling the panic rise. Hammer? No. Spanner? No. Screwdriver? Damn it, no! A power drill? Just sick...

“There's nothing!”

“Keep looking! Try his desk, maybe he has spare keys!”

Vaulting over the fallen desk, I started hunting through the mass of fallen items, tossing them aside. Heavy hoof treading accompanied by mass swearing and spluttering was echoing back down the tunnels already.

We had to go *now* if we wanted to avoid him by running in the opposite direction out the door! I hoped he was further away and this place was just playing tricks on my ears.

“Come on, Murk!” Unity hissed, her eyes watching the doorway. “If...if nothings there, just go...”

“Not again.” I muttered, striving to not let my mind get clouded by worry for my friends, before my hooves found a little tin box and opened it. Four labelled keys looked up at me. “I got them!”

“Good! It's cell two, get the one for cell two! Hurry, Murky, I can hear him coming!”

A loud belch and sudden sneeze came seconds apart from outside, the sound drifting to my ears as much as his loud hoofsteps were to Unity's. I looked down at the keys to grab the second along and threw it to Unity, who caught it in her magic. After a brief attempt, she raised it up.

“...Murky, this says cell three on it! How did you mess that up?!”

She didn't sound angry, just bewildered and strained from worry about us being caught. My mouth gaped as I looked down...they...they hadn't been in order? Screwing my eyes shut, I just slid the entire box to her.

“I...I can't *read*, okay? I'm sorry...”

Unity even took a half second to just stare with wide eyes, before her shoulders sank. But her eyes rolled as her voice deadpanned.

“My hero...”

Looking down, evading my embarrassed blush, she whipped up the key, twisting it around in the lock and trying to force it in. I stood nearby, pacing in worry.

“Stupid...stupid fucking slaves...damned *pepper* on a damned radroach stew? Oh they'll pa-OH!”

His hooves stopped on the spot, his deep voice rising in shock, as though surprised by something.

“I suggest you care less about your *meal* and more about why you're not at your post, **lackey**.”

All sound other than that voice *ceased*. Oh...oh no...he was here! I spun to Unity, trying to help her with the lock.

“Murky, what-”

“We have to go! We have to go *now*!”

The jailer's thick tread was joined by that inevitably terrifying stomping. He must have come down the other passage! Wiggling the key through the rusted gate, I gave it one large shove to finally jam it in. Together, her magic and my weak strength, we tried to force the large lock around. To my horror, I felt the key bending...but we couldn't stop now! More...more...

Ping. Tink...tink...tink...

I staggered back, mouth open as I saw the snapped key. But Unity stared at it, closed her eyes and strained. Seeing the deep red aura around the remains of the key, she shivered with the effort to turn it in her magic...before it finally clicked. Together, we struggled to pull the rusty gate open and be properly reunited. Phew...but no rest!

“Come on!” I moved to pull her out, but Unity turned back, grabbing that little object. What was it? A shaped piece of metal? She simply tossed it into her rags, not giving me a chance to see it properly.

“Okay, done, now we go!”

Leaning forward, pulling her quickly, we galloped together out of the jail and down the corridor, charging around a corner the moment I heard The Master and one hell of an unfortunate jailer return. The odd thought that with all this nick of time running...I'd not actually *seen* The Master since Barb's death in the Mall. I'd always been too afraid to look back...

Forever chasing me...something I couldn't ever look back because I dared not out of terror.

Terror...of seeing what could close around my neck once again.

To that end, we didn't wait, we didn't judge...we simply galloped as fast as our tired bodies would carry us until we found stairs upwards. Hearing nothing behind us other than a spine chilling *roar* of anger.

Doubling up to shove aside the thick dungeon doors, we found ourselves back in the atrium. Immediately, we ducked into the side of the room and began heading to avoid this main nexus of activity. Ponies were moving between the cubes or dragging small carts to the experimental areas and chemistry labs, giving us few exits. Most of the other doorways were blocked by old rubble, I guessed from the balefire or the riot destruction. But...but where else?

I felt Unity tugging me. There was one hole left, where a door had once stood at the opposite end from the large broken window. A thousand shards of glass still seemed to be embedded into the walls surrounding it. Amongst this mess of a central hub...it was only one more oddity. Perhaps a little recklessly, we galloped across the floor, trying to blend in like two ponies rushing to work. In a minute or so, I knew The Master would come tearing up after us and raise the alarm...if we wanted to find Old Grizzly's office, we had to move quickly, *very* quickly.

I just prayed we could somehow find Protégé amongst all of this.

Hopping through the hole, raising a few complaints from the slaves trying to work on picking out all the glass with tongs, we found a stairwell that had clearly only *just* been repaired from almost nothing. Even one more level up, it began to feel like this entire section had been repaired in a way that did not reflect the original style. Under all the patchwork, I could see a peeling pink wallpaper.

“Do you know the way to his office?”

“No! But I know where the higher rank offices *are*, we'll just look for the name on the door!”

Galloping out onto a floor, we shared a look, before Unity bit her lip and turned back to look ahead.

“...ok. *I'll*...look for the name on the door...”

Emerging onto a more traditional corridor (Oh hooray...) with more of that horrible pink hue decorating it, Unity began to look at each door in turn. Behind us, I heard a great commotion going up in the main rebuilt atrium research labs. Clearly...The Master had emerged from the dungeon. Perhaps we could-

I heard trotting. Darting forward, I almost tackled Unity through the door she was checking, for us to land in a heap beyond it. Clamping a hoof to her mouth to avoid any sound of surprise, I gently let her go as another pony cantered past...

No...not another pony. *Grindstone*. The old donkey was pushing his way down the corridor, grumbling and hissing with anger to himself. Remembering the stallion's warning...I figured that council jury chamber was about to get *very* heated once he arrived. Behind him trotted a young mare, desperately trying to get his attention.

“But, Master Grindstone! The machine can't be repaired if it becomes strained, we can't risk-”

“It was built by Aurora Star herself, known for memory technology that functioned in great stress. You will carry out the orders! Now leave me alone, the hearing is in five minutes.”

“I'm so sorry, but we *can't!* If we turn it up, the pony in it could be kill-”

“One wretched life matters nothing to me! You think I care about that buck any longer? Now that ridiculous robot is gone, you can do what you want with the machine, can't you? Get the capsules operating at peak efficiency for *our* workers to explore the memories, not some random buck. I don't care what memories he's searching for! Now get away from me! This hearing is crucial, if I get it the way I want, that little buck will be back with the slaves, where he belongs.”

“Y-yes...master.”

They passed down the same rickety stairwell we'd come up. I pressed against the doorway, listening carefully while nervously chewing my lip. Good luck, Protégé...

Unity shifted up to me.

“Somepony that matters to you? If they're on Grindstone's bad side then I'm on their side.” Unity had stood up again, moving back to the door herself. “What's his name? What did he mean about 'back' to the slaves?”

I only hesitated for a second, before mentally bucking myself for being so paranoid these days. It was *Unity*, of course I could tell her.

“...his name is Protégé. My...my master.”

“*What?*”

Turning quickly, I lifted my hooves to her shoulders. “But...but he used to be a slave, like us! He's a good pony underneath, really! Just...converted.”

Looking away, I dropped back down to all four hooves and glanced around as a means of trying to change the subject. But amongst the empty wall safes and a discarded cloak upon the floor there was nothing to give me the opportunity. Instead, I just sighed.

“But I swear, I sometimes see who he really is. It's like he just feels lonely and lost inside. Like he's been searching for somepony else without even realising it beneath what...what Red Eye's done to how he sees things. Somepony who understands or...sees more to life. He was really hurt and...and I wanted to find him, tell him where I was going!”

To my surprise, she seemed to react a lot less than I'd expected, taking my words at face value to just smile and pat my (uninjured) shoulder.

“Then we'll go find him if we can, Murky. I trust you for him. But I think Grizzly's office is just down this corridor. We'll get there, then judge where we are, okay?”

“Right...”

The corridor was empty again. No doubt all these higher ranks who deserved offices were moving off to the hearing on Protégé's future. I let Unity lead, checking each name plate in turn. Below us, there was rampant shouting and rushing around...I simply hoped they didn't presume our escape route to be deeper into this beehive of slavers.

“This one!”

Unity tapped a door emblazoned with three balloons. (Ones somepony had once tried to chisel off, it seemed.) Not hesitating, she simply shoved her way inside, casting one more look back down the corridor...half expecting The Master to be waiting...I trotted inside and closed the door. The sound of dozens of ponies beginning to gallop around was growing. We didn't have much longer. Turning back to the office I...woah...

This was no normal office. Tall and with a balcony that blew in hot stormy air, it indeed had a large

pink desk and a chair...but that was where the 'normal' stopped. The walls were covered in small pigeonhole boxes, bearing hundreds...no...*thousands*, of letters. Large sacks had been tossed in a corner as part of a futile attempt to tidy up. Now they simply overflowed, dropping even more thin pink letters everywhere. Below my hooves was a thick carpet, also pink, that was strangely comfortable to stomp on. An odd brass tube seemed to run into the pigeonholes with wires connecting it to a terminal on the wall, for whatever use I couldn't even fathom. It had little highlights of...yup...pink.

Oh yeah...this room sure was *pink*.

Somehow, I didn't even need to read the little plaque upon the desk marked with three balloons to know who *this* office belonged to. Already I could feel eyes watching me from somewhere. Together, we wandered into one of Pinkie's rooms, finding both our pairs of eyes fixated on the letters.

“What are these?” I looked closely at one as Unity raised it with her magic.

“Well, not like anypony's going to shout at us for taking a little peek, huh?” Carefully, she began unfolding it. But what *was* it anyway? It didn't escape my ever active imagination that all these were meant for somepony who had died, though...

But each of them bore the same icon beside that of a Ministry badge...a birthday cake.

“It's a birthday card...” Unity whispered quietly, raising the little white slip from the envelope. “Says...Hi, Pearly Swirl! Happy super-duper twirly twirl Birthday! You didn't think your old pal Pinkie would forget it, did you? Enjoy the gift and make this the bestest day ever until the *next* bestest day ever next year too! Signed, The Pinkiest of Pink Ponies, Pinkie Pie! PS...don't go near any doors today, take it from your bestest friend Pinkie!”

Finishing the short letter, we both just looked up, probably even more confused than *before* she'd read it.

“Uh...that was...”

“Weird?”

“Yeah, weird.”

“Definitely weird.”

“*Absolutely* weird.”

She gently placed it upon the desk, immediately cantering over to the (pink) table's (also pink) terminal on the desk and seating herself upon the (again, pink) chair. I just ran my eyes along the walls, finding a giant map of Equestria. Lines from Fillydelphia were drawn to every settlement...trade routes.

I had no idea if this was the most endearing or *terrifying* thing I'd ever seen. No...no surely my imagination was playing tricks on me. She couldn't have known the birthday of everypony in *Equestria*! It...it made no sense! There wasn't any automation or space for a large workforce...just maybe a couple helpers and the mare herself. How was this possible?!

Watching everypony...FOREVER.

Absent mindedly needing some air, I wandered to the balcony and glanced out. From here, you could see the entire rollercoaster on this side of the FunBarn. Below us lay the much longer and lower section of the Barn where I had seen all the machines creating presents. To my horror, I saw the guards rushing to cover every single exit around the wall.

“Unity...we need to go quickly...”

“In a second, he said he keeps lists of all their names on here for ponies who go on special assignments or get sent to the Pit. I *will* find him, Murky, this could be the only link I have! There we go! I'm in! Let's see...'Pony Database!’”

She kept typing away, furiously hammering the keys with her hooves, lacking Glimmer's natural duality of magic and physical interaction but making it all up in determination.

“It doesn't search by initials! One second, I'll put *my* name in, see if anything comes up! There...we...go!”

Fwip!

The sound caught both our attentions, the tube attached to the wall of letters sending a small envelope firing out of it to land upon the middle of the floor. Sharing glances, I moved to pick it up, while I saw Unity look back at the screen and scowl. The expression didn't seem to suit her...

“It's got info on him alright! I can see the request he put in that my 'lover' be sent back to me if he survived, which he did! None of the ponies who went into the Pit were the kind I'd love, I know *that* if not who *he* is! But it's got no name. Wait!”

She almost hammered the keypads into submission with her hooves in excitement.

“There's something saying about a transfer to another role for Red Eye's empire, they took him somewhere else in Fillydelphia but...but no record of where...”

Her head lay in her hooves.

“I was so *close*...I...I thought I had him! Murky, what happened to him? Was somepony giving me false memories? Was he not really in the Pit? I...I just don't know! I just. Don't. Know!”

Her front hooves slammed on the keypad of the terminal with each word, before she slumped over it, sobbing through her own frustrated anger. That flattened dirty mane fell either side of her head. But then she stopped, as though realising something.

“Wait...Grindstone was talking about a buck back there...do...do you think he could have slipped him off there? But that could be anypony...how am I meant to know what to pursue?” She quaked, holding back a scream of frustration. “Why can two ponies who simply love one another not be together, Murky? Why does this world have to *do* this to us?”

Picking up the envelop in my mouth, I dropped it on the desk before moving beside her.

“Maybe...maybe this?”

“Murky...that's just some stupid thing Pinkie used to do...”

“But...it came out with your name so...”

“Look, Murky, I-huh?” She had looked up to knock down the idea, but I saw her eyes simply stare at the seal...before shivering. “M-Murky...?”

“What? What is it?” I leaned over, but the words were absolutely unreadable in the same writing style I had seen Pinkie use on the other letters. But Unity's face was one of abject shock...of a mixture between wonder and stark fear. “What does it *say*?”

Her mouth quivered, before she spoke slowly, gulping and forcing the words out.

“It's...it's addressed to-”

She took a breath.

“...to us.”

* * *

To,

Murky and Unity.

So super super sorry that this letter took sooooo long to arrive, but when I knew I had to send it, I was just like 'Aaaaaaaaah!' for at least a minute! I mean, can you imagine?

I'm really really sorry that it missed your last few birthdays, Unity. That's why I want to make my gift to

you really special! I just want to tell you that you don't need to panic, it's all going to be fine! I hate to say it, but there's a hard road to go first, before you see the buck you once knew. I wish I could just tell you...but I don't really know all the itty-bitty details, this isn't like one of Twilight's crazy organised experiments, y'know! I'm sure you'll work it out together. You're a smart pony, smart ponies always figure things out! Except me. But then, I can't figure me out either! How crazy is that?!

Just trust me, Unity...you'll be with him again. Together or not at all, right?

Hey, Murky-Murk? You're what set off my Pinkie Sense so bad that I spilled somepony's sarsaparilla! I mean...a pony who never had a birthday party in his life? I will not, as Ministry Mare of Morale, let this happen! But it's a few days till your birthday yet, Murky. Be patient, okay?

Oh, and Murky? Listen very carefully to your Auntie Pinkie. Don't. Worry. When the time comes to make a choice, whether to leap or not...you'll know what to do.

I'll be watching out for you two, from wherever I am.

With hugs, (Give each other one for me! Hehe!)

Pinkie Pie!

PS – I'd leave the office right now if I were you.

* * *

Unity let the letter droop after finishing her read through.

Speechless...utterly...utterly...speechless.

My mind didn't actually even know where to begin with the process of figuring out what I'd just heard.

“I'll...I'll see him again?” Unity spoke gently, lowering the letter back to the desk, her eyes still wet. But then her teeth gritted, with a smile that only somepony with their mind set on the daring could make. “Yes...yes she's right, I *will*. I don't care how long the journey is, Murk, or how hard it is. I'll trot it if I have to. Whatever...whatever Grindstone's done to him!”

“There...there might be something. I was in Grindstone's place before, that machine he mentioned, it had a buck in it. I...I don't know him and some robot said he was there for a lot longer than...than recently. But...but maybe that has something to do with it? Maybe it's him!”

She was quivering on the spot, resting her hooves upon the desk. But her took my hoof, holding it tightly and nodding.

“Yes...I...I hope so. We'll get in there someday, Murky. If you're right, maybe that is him! Grindstone was always hunting us when he could, like that other beast that's after you.”

We had something to go on...and I knew I had an ally in the Ministry. It was decided, we had another objective after all this. My mind was reeling of my portion too. A birthday? What choice to make?

They were details for later...right now I did the only thing I knew I could do immediately and gave Pinkie her only request...by hugging Unity amidst her shaken thoughts. Her hooves wrapped around me tightly enough that I felt my wings ache. We were both scared witless, not even trying to comprehend the truth of what we'd just found or...or how or *why*. But all I could think about were those eyes that seemed to follow me everywhere and the dungeon below. Was...was I right to trust a two hundred year dead pony with a *dungeon*?

A crash sounded through the hallway. The sound of a door being bucked in.

“Check every damned room, they have to be up here!”

Jolted back to the harsh reality of Fillydelphia from the voices of the past, our faces swivelled to the doorway. I could hear slavers smashing open every office door and storming the rooms. They were coming! Grabbing our things, Unity and I galloped back to the door, peering out to see a half dozen slavers armed with rifles barge into a room six doors down.

“Go now!” I hissed, before we moved into the corridor, moving away from the way we'd come up. Side by side, we sprinted for all our combined worth to reach the next corner.

“There they are! There they are!”

The shout behind us was followed by an ear splitting crack from a rifle. The wall to my left splintered, a warning shot no doubt. But there was no stopping me now, Unity and I had our ponies to find...the ones that mattered to us.

Another shot came much closer, I screamed as it tore through my saddlebag. My journal! Oh please be okay, please be okay!

We turned a corner, three shots slamming into the wall behind us, to see the balcony over the research areas up ahead. No going that way! Instead, we turned down a side corridor through a massive steel door.

“Look, Murky! That sign says 'Medical!' This way!”

Those chasing us were gaining, but passing through into the medical wing, our combined strength was just enough to shove the thick door shut and spin the lock. Pre-war ponies may not have known anything about safety railings, but they sure could make a big doorway! On the other side, I heard many attempts to spin the lock, before we pulled a pipe from the wall and jammed the doorway.

Now to hope there was another way out. But instead I just heard Unity shriek.

“Murky, you're bleeding! You've been shot!”

My hooves stumbled in terror. I...I was? But I hadn't felt it! Unity pushed me to the ground, her hooves becoming slick with...

...with orange liquid.

Unfortunately, that brought even greater fear. Dread realisation emerged as I began pulling open the saddlebag.

“No, no, no, NO!” I simply panicked, tussling around in the mass of...of *stuff* I'd acquired over time. I felt a sticky liquid as I drew out the *one remaining* RadAway sachet I had. It was leaking badly.

“NO!”

“Murky, what's wrong?!”

I didn't even answer, just trying to press the liquid back in, but hooves weren't meant for such a role. Crying, hyperventilating and feeling my lungs flare up as though sensing the only lifeline I had left being drained away, I instead just crammed it toward my mouth, downing every bit of it that I could. I...I didn't have to take it for another twelve hours...it felt like such a waste, to be throwing away something I'd need. Clutching the empty packet, I just cried...the realisation setting in.

I was dry of RadAway.

“I...I need it to live! My lungs they...they get real bad and...and I don't understand it but the doctors say they can't fix it! They can't fix it, Unity! I...I cough and get blood and...and...oh Goddesses help me...I'm going to die in a day if I can't get more!”

Unity's face bore a mask of horror, before steeling herself.

“I...I didn't know, but Murky, we need to get out of here first...we're going to *medical*, we'll try and steal some! But we have to get moving!”

Allowing myself to be led, my limbs shaking in fear, I couldn't help but remember every time I'd been through this hell. In the air terminal...in the crater...the pits and in the Ministry. The one thing that I couldn't

get rid of that lurked within my chest, eating away at my life. Through a mask of tears, I followed Unity. Yes...yes, medical, we'd...we'd get some and-

Medical was heavily guarded. *Very* heavily guarded.

The corridor opened out onto a selection of small rooms, each walled by thick glass. Beds lay among them, sometimes with an unconscious slaver on them. But at the end I could see griffins surrounding a large door. Past that there were crowds of ponies. Unity and I ducked low, staying underneath the lowest height of the windows and moving around parts of the room the griffins couldn't see through too.

The ponies were arguing, one donkey too. I heard Grindstone's deep and rough voice.

“The boy is an embarrassment, garnering nothing but advancement through his association with our leader! It's bad enough that we be dragged down here by Master Grizzly to have to be doing this under some stuffy bureaucratic means to be in Protégé's presence...but to have any capability he has held up as good for Fillydelphia? Absolutely not!”

Many ponies cheered and roared their support. Another voice, stern and wise, barked back.

“You accuse our leader of permitting anypony to hold rank without proving themselves? Protégé spent two *years* proving himself to Red Eye and took on the responsibilities only after Red Eye's personal approval! In his duty, he has carried out numerous-”

“He *failed*, Grizzly! Did you not see the Stable débâcle? He let Steel Rangers destroy most of the workforce until Stern had to rescue them!”

I felt a personal objection and unthinkably frustrating well of emotion at that. That mad donkey had set that damn ambush up himself!

“Not only that, but he then proceeds to fail to control his own slaves, resulting in a riot that killed over twenty slavers and over eighty slaves! It was his warmongering attitude to launch an all out assault, with no tactics and without even attempting diplomatic negotiations that almost got him killed!”

The urge to scream and rant in response was almost *overwhelming* at the sheer...sheer...*gall* of Grindstone to say such things as truth! Protégé hadn't done that! But hearing the amount of ponies hollering and agreeing made my painfully grind my remaining teeth to bite down the anger. I...I had to find Protégé in here, which room was he *in*?

The medical station held several windows in the far wall that looked in one more secure rooms. It seemed likely they might be there. But to get there...I'd have to cross the primary 'path' through the centre. The griffins couldn't not see me then.

Sitting back, sweating, still afraid for my own health...I tried thinking. Boy...I really *was* in a tight spot.

“You have no proof for any of those claims!” I heard Old Grizzly, the one voice shouting back for Protégé, speak up again. “You have yet to hear his side of the story!”

“Chainlink Shackles has offered a witness' viewpoint, Grizzly. Many slavers back him up, including Quartermaster Mosin. They report that Protégé ignored any advice in an apparent effort to attempt to impress Red Eye. He is not worthy to lead! He should be cast from our ranks! Thrown back into the pits!”

Another pony, rough voiced.

“I say we just let him die! I lost friends in that fuck up he caused! He deserves punishment! Shackles is the hero, trying to calm it, but then Protégé went and caused another mess up with friendly fire on the griffins!”

“Yeah!”

“Punishment!”

I couldn't stop myself. My hoof slammed off the floor, painfully, in a mere effort to let out the building aggression at this show trial. The urge to just run up and give a “witness viewpoint” of my own was tempered only by the natural fear I had of Grindstone. Unity, having been sitting so quietly that I almost lost

track of her, lay a hoof over mine, stopping any further self harm. She spoke quietly, gently.

“Politics, Murky...they want him out...Old Grizzly's a nice guy who'll want somepony as good as you say in. We can't change that...I'm sorry.”

“I...I know...j-just he did so much! Gave so much of himself, saved my life so many times and...and put his life on the line to help slaves...and *this* is what happens! They make him into the...the fall pony...it's not *fair!*”

“Come on...we should get moving. We need to cross here anyway, when you dumped your bag, were those firecrackers I saw?”

Oh? Ooooh...

That improved my mood a little. I couldn't speak out on this horridly biased version of events...but I *could* interrupt them! Tearing them out, I ripped the ignition strip from the top of the line and passed them to Unity. Holding them in her magic...she threw them to a far corner of the medical chambers. I covered my ears...

But nothing happened.

“...did...did it fail? When's it going to-”

It went. A mad burst of noise and fire cracking off in rapid succession, like a gun on full auto fire, they sparked and blasted around the corner of one operating theatre. Clutching my ears closed, gritting my teeth, I tried to watch as the griffins immediately bounded forward, flanking around the room to check out the commotion. I heard the higher ranked masters scatter, some dropping to the ground. To my delight...even a few cries of fear. The moment the griffins were past, Unity and I ran into the next chamber of this wing and started pushing the next security door.

We got it half shut...when I saw Grindstone stagger forward and cast one beady eye at us. In one moment...I saw his eyes go wide at the sight of me, like a surprise at seeing such a slave here.

“You...”

“PUSH, MURKY!” Unity screamed, throwing her weight against the door as Grindstone called the griffins and charged the doorway, horns lowered.

“You trespassers! Thieves! Guards, get over here!”

The door slammed shut. Repeating the same trick, Unity jammed the wheel and dragged me further in.

“You've got a few minutes! I'll look for a way out, you find him!”

She took off, running into the facility while I began cantering around each window. The door shook from gunfire rattling against it, seeming to bulge in places. I could hear the zap and crackle of energy weaponry too. Knocking aside chairs and skittering about on the slippery tiled floor, I hopped up to the windows of every enclosed area and side room, checking for my master. Most were empty, a couple bore incredibly confused and sick slavers who merely let their eyes wander at all the noise. One had clearly been at the receiving end of an auto-axe, displaying a grisly sight indeed.

But then my sight fell to one side room at the far end...secured by a whole separate door and with a thick window looking in. Slowly...tentatively, I trotted forward and hopped up.

The fight to not explode into tears on the spot was one of the toughest I had ever faced.

He lay upon the bed, his shoulders, chest and throat swamped in blooded gauze. Tubes ran into his nose and mouth, needles were inserted upon his front left hoof and a machine in the corner fed liquids down the tubing while maintaining a watchful vigil. It marked his life by a small picture of a pony that flashed red around the neck area.

Protégé lay unconscious...they hadn't even covered him, just leaving him to lie on the bed under the medical treatment. His cutie mark was still before me, carrying with it his dreams and hopes...under the Red Eye or not. Every wound, whip scar and burn on his body from years of slavery made it all too easy to see why they

hated him. He wasn't one of them, not truly. He never *could* be in their eyes, yet for all his life it was what he *wanted*. To work beside his idol.

Hadn't I wished so often for the same? To travel with LittlePip and aspire to her goals?

Leaning on the glass, noticing it steam up from my hot tears...hearing the growing thumping on the door...I knew that he was in danger. They wanted to execute him or...or punish him to all the slavers! I had to get him out of here, get him safe with Unity and I! We could...we could prepare together! Go back for Glimmer, Brim and...and Coral, her son and even Sunny! We'd all get out!

I galloped to the door, tugging on the same wheel lock the barrier between me and the griffins now had. Wrapping my hooves around, I *tugged*.

WHOOM! WHOOM!

Two explosions rocked the room, the security door behind me bulging in the middle. Dust fell from the ceiling and instruments scattered. Patients cried out in fear. I simply pulled, dropping my pitiful weight on the wheel to try and force it to just MOVE!

WHOOM! WHOOM! WHOOM!

A horrible creaking behind me gave rise to a new sound of ponies shouting...they'd made a small hole! Come on! COME ON! I couldn't let them take him! I couldn't!

My muscles strained, my tiny little strength causing me to cry in sheer anger at everything about being born a slave! From being here...here at all to even the horrible weakness of body it left you with! Even Protégé, better fed and trained since, was still a little smaller than most ponies. But my light boned and bodies pegasus stature only made it worse. Come on! Come on, move, door! MOVE!

WHOOM! KREEE-

A patter of hooves galloping sounded behind me, as Unity returned and ran over to me.

“Murky, we're out of time!”

“HE'S HERE! I have to get him!”

To her credit she, without even looking in the room, trusted and tugged with me...the wheel moved slightly, grinding around from whoever had locked it so tight! But two weak slaves just...we couldn't...

“It's jammed! Murky, we can't get this, they'll be in here within seconds!”

WHOOM!

“I'm not leaving him! They...they're going to hurt him!”

WHOOM! “Almost! Get them! Two more hits!”

“I'm sorry, Murky! I'm so so sorry! But you can't help him if you're dead!” She tugged at me, but I only screamed and dove back at the door. Remembering every time he'd leapt in for me, begged me to let him help me, guarded me with *his own body* and fought in my defence!

A loud crunch announced the door's top joint breaking from the wall. Unity whirled me around, pinning me against the window and pushing her muzzle almost right against mine.

“MURKY! I know what you're feeling! I...I know it too! My buck's out there somewhere too and Goddesses know I want him back! I want to search here for more information to call out Grindstone and know for real if that's what it is! But the ponies we care about won't be helped by us getting killed!

The metal groaned...they were bending the door! Staring right into her crying eyes...I realised what I hadn't even thought. She'd come here for the same reason as I. A voice from the past reassuring us or no...she was having to leave without him too. Deep in those golden hazel eyes...I recognised my own pain. We'd...we'd failed...but that didn't mean we had to give up.

“Y-you're right...”

Unity dropped back from me.

“Then come on, I found a way out! Fillydelphia wins today, Murky...but ponies even in Old Equestria sometimes had to face the chaotic darkness before the dawn. We'll have another chance...”

She turned, leading the way. I hesitated only just for a second, turning to look back through the glass. Smoke was billowing in from the door now, whirling around this chamber. I simply gazed in at my master...at the only other born slave I'd ever known to share the pain with.

...he opened one eye.

My gut wrenched...the first sight he'd seen of me...and I had to run into the smoke.

“I'm sorry...” I muttered, backing away. That one eye, tired and in pain, seemed to quiver. “I'm SORRY!”

I hoped...somehow...through that clearly soundproof glass, that he understood...before I turned and ran to catch up.

* * *

We made it a good thirty feet down a side passage away from the medical wing before the door busted in. I heard it crash down, followed by the scathing sound of talons on tiles. Unity led the way, bringing us out to a section of unrepaired roofing. Scaffold lay around us with many tools, all open to the sky. Unity quickly spun back to me, rushing over and starting to tug at my fleece.

“What are you doing?!” I was still reeling with emotion, but this genuinely caught me off guard.

“Helping you get your wings free! They'll spot us if we go too far, but if you can just fly us over the little wall here we can make a run for it!”

My face flushed, feeling rather hollow, I gently brushed her off and looked away, screwing my eyes shut.

“I'm...I'm sorry, I never told you but...I can't fly. My wings are broken...”

Letting my eyes creak open a little...the look she gave me could only be described as absolute heartbreak...before she galloped up to nuzzle close for a second.

“Oh Murky...I'm so sorry, it...it's like if I lost my horn or something I...I wouldn't know what to do! You poor thing! But what do we do then?! That was my plan!”

Behind us, I could hear them approaching our dead end. Casting my eyes around...I spotted what could be our only way out. Near the tools, I located one of the utility saddle grapple launchers.

“Help me get this on my saddle!”

It took a few tense seconds of work...but Blunderbuck had done his work well. It was as easy as slotting on the tool, tightening the gear and hooking it up to the wires! Suitably equipped, I flexed my front hoof, springing the mouthpiece out. Trotting up to the edge, I cast my eye around...spotting the rungs of the rollercoaster above us. Below us lay the same wide factory level of the Barn I'd seen on my way in.

“Hold tight, Unity! I...I have *no* idea what I'm doing!”

“Aren't you reassuring. Well...geronimo!”

She fed her hooves around me, hugging tightly. Gripping the mouthpiece, squinting through the rain...I aimed for the rollercoaster...and bit down.

My body jerked backward from the pneumatic force of the grapple rocketing from the launcher. Trailing a thin wire from the canister, I saw it...by some miracle, wrap around a rung of the rollercoaster. Well...now or...I gulped, never!

“Y'know, Murky...about that whole geronimo thing? I *really* don't feel quite as confident about that as I

first did!”

“Neither do I!”

“There they are, get them!”

I didn't even look back at hearing the voice...I simply jumped forward. We screamed (my voice higher) as we simply fell, losing all sense of direction in the plummet...before the wire went taut! My entire torso twisted, making me cough loudly and cry out in pain, before I felt our weights being swung like a pendulum low over the roof of the factory segment. Picking up speed, an insane sense of adrenaline and surging motion blasted through my senses. Almost crazily, I felt my mouth widen into a mad smile. We...we were doing it! We were-

Ping!

...falling! I felt the hook drop loose from the coaster, my eyes catching a brief glimpse of that rusty structure breaking under our weight. Barely feet from the factory, soaring through the burning rain and incoming fire from above, we hit the new corrugated roof and bounced, rolling over one another along the soft metal like a mad two-pony-shaped bowling ball. My body flared in pain, my wings screaming in agony before we finally came to a stop upon a clear plastic skylight. Breathing hard...eyes wide...hooves locked around one another in sheer panic. I didn't even move when the grapple zipped back in and returned to the launcher by my side.

“W-w-wow...”

“T-that w-was...s-some ride...”

It wasn't over. To our combined screaming, the roof gave way beneath our weight, dropping us into the factory...right into the view of about forty slavers below. After a bone crunching landing on hard metal...they all stared up at us on our unstable platform of...

....huh? *Up* at us?

Getting a sense of my bearings, feeling my balance lurch beneath me and my body ache...I realised that was had landed on the giant Pinkie head I'd seen...that now was beginning to topple very dangerously.

“Hey, that's those runaways! Get down from there!”

The slavers surrounded us while we got up, struggling to keep our balance.

“Uh...Murky...I think this is going to go!”

My life had been punctuated by moments of rebellious insanity in here...it seemed I was about to add another one. Looking down at the almost spherical shape of Pinkie's head...only one idea came to mind.

“Lean forward!” I didn't wait for her, pushing us both forward and feeling the unsteady massive ball beneath us lean.

“I said get off! GET OFF or we'll just gun ya down! Bosses want ya alive!”

They had us utterly encircled, weapons pointed...I just hoped for the element of surprise. With a creak and a moan of twisting metal...Pinkie Pie's head broke loose. Unity and I screamed, backpedaling madly to stay atop the rolling metal ball as it fell the ten feet to the floor and delivered the headbutt of the *millennium* to one poor slaver who didn't get the hell out the way fast enough.

Slowly...it began to build speed. The dull rumbling offset by the sudden bump and jerk every time Pinkie's muzzle hit the ground and made the entire thing hop like a mad bouncy ball.

My hooves quaked from the unsteady mad ride, like some crazy circus act as Pinkie's head rolled forward, gaining speed on the smooth floor and beginning to thunder across the factory with us atop it. Turning, we had to *gallop* for all we were worth in the opposite direction to not be pulled under it!

“*This* was your idea?!”

“I'm sorry!”

“Just glad I didn't see what your plan for the first escape was then!”

Looking over my shoulder, gasping for breath, I saw slavers and even slaves scattering in all directions from the oncoming pink ball of devastation. Boxes were crushed, machines knocked aside and shelves toppled. But at the end of it...we were approaching the main closed doorway...the one normally too rusted to open.

Well...we were going to help Red Eye in *one* way at least.

Behind a rending crash of thin metal, the entire door was torn from its hinges, propelling us back into the outside. Churning through the earth, our transport threw waves of pooled water to either side behind it.

Almost immediately, the rain lashed upon Pinkie's head, picking up mud and dampening the surface. Our hooves skidded...slipped...and fell. In desperation, we dived to the side, freefalling once more before landing in the thick mud.

“Urgh...get up! Get up, Murky! The way's clear! Come on!”

Groaning, I tried to roll to my hooves, finding my body complaining all the more. Unity was pulling me, hissing through her teeth at the burning rain on her back. Around us, slavers were galloping and slipping about...but the gate was clear! The guards had fled the ball that now careened out into the FunFarm! We could go...we could...

Fail. Around us, shimmering and instant, a colossal shield slammed down into the ground ten metres to either side. The rain ceased when it enclosed us...trapping us in one green hue. Staggering to a halt...I spun and shrieked. Just outside the shield...one of those *beasts* knelt. A green alicorn! Its horn was glowing and sparking brightly, projecting the thick magic shield that had trapped us.

And that was that...the slavers closed in, surrounding us and ending the escape about as suddenly as it had begun.

Behind us, I heard one final crash as Pinkie's head rolled over and sat atop a rather recognisable looking den. I heard one familiar overseer's voice echo across the storm.

“OH FOR FUCKS SAKE!” Screamed Whiplash.

* * *

We waited together. Pressed against each other's side for support...we simply waited as slaver after slaver surrounded us back inside the factory. Weapons were loaded and aimed and we were the centre of a dozen furious glances. Griffins watched from the rafters...all awaiting a master to come and judge us. I silently prayed to myself...I knew which ones would be after *me* in particular.

“Sorry...Unity...I...I didn't want you to be-”

“Ssh...it's alright, Murky. I chose to come. We might be alright still, look!”

She pointed with a hoof toward the door that came from the main building, where a somewhat shaggy looking pony approached. A monotone colouring upon his mane and coat was tinged with light and dark grey, almost covering his eyes. He moved with a certain poise and harsh eyes that seemed to widen upon seeing us. Raising one unshorn hoof, he waved the guards to lower their weapons.

“Unity...I had dreaded it was you. Pray tell, what *are* you doing! I told you to stay out of trouble for now!”

This must be Old Grizzly. Wiping my soaking wet brow, I squinted my sore black eyes to get a better look at him. A tightly worn jerkin covered his thick, earth pony body, loaded with small pockets that held extra magazines for a long barrelled pistol strapped onto his hoof.

“My buck, master! I told you I wanted to find out about him...but you've been lying to me when you said there was nothing! You knew he was-”

“Silence!” Old Grizzly cut her off, his voice leaving the calm and wise demeanour to remind me that yes...he was *still* a slave master. “You are still the slave here, Unity! You will mind your tone to me. This is unacceptable...many slavers are calling for you both to be thrown at Hive's teams until you're just eaten alive!”

I've half a mind to agree, with all the damage you've done in here! I cannot prevent a true punishment from arising here!”

I felt Unity quiver...that wasn't good. Old Grizzly certainly still seemed more intense than Protégé.

“But...I saw the records, master! He was taken somewhere when you said he'd be brought back to me! Why?!”

I presumed she felt it best to not blame Grindstone in the presence of so many potential allies of the donkey. Old Grizzly's eyebrows raised, before sighing and wiping a hoof across his brow.

“I have told you all I knew, Unity. I placed the request for him to be returned to you after the Pit, which he did survive. Past that I do not know! Fillydelphia is a complex machine, sometimes ponies fall through the cracks...”

“But...but it said he was carted off somewhere!”

“Standard procedure for *most* ponies...” I saw him eye me. “...after the Pit. To not let blood fuelled maniacs go axe-crazy on their cellmates. Past that I *do not know*, Unity. They were told to-”

“Oh...I can answer that one...”

The third voice, deep and hateful, rumbled across the factory floor. Half limping, pulling his old body along...Master Grindstone moved at the front of a dozen huge and imposing slavers. They all bore symbols of power or clear higher rank...but Grindstone was their figurehead...shuffling along to Old Grizzly. I felt Unity shake with anger, her eyes locking onto the old mule.

“Really...you're all idiots for not spotting it. Makes an old vet like me fearful for the dejected upcoming generations in here! Haven't any of you figured it out yet?”

Unity and I exchanged glances...I saw that she looked to Grindstone with sheer hatred. She'd mentioned him before...had she spent time under him? The donkey looked at us both, scowling at me in particular. Meekly, I averted my eyes. Old Grizzly huffed, turning to his fellow slaver.

“If you have some revelation...do share, Grindstone, I've had *enough* of listening to your poisonous words all day.”

“You idiot ponies...her *name!* The transfer, stated that this 'buck' was to be returned to her. To Unity. To be sent to *Unity.*”

Against me, I felt Unity shiver...no doubt a shot of horror going right down her spine. Taking a few seconds longer to get it...I twisted to look at her. Unity's face was drawn...pale and devoid of that warmth she normally possessed.

Oh...*Goddesses*...

I caught her before the stagger led her to fall. My friend simple stood limply, staring at Old Grizzly. The big slaver seemed morose, Grindstone's harsh words finally settling in as to the reality of what had happened.

“You...you approved that, didn't you!?” Grizzly snarled at the donkey.

“Hah! What does it matter? I just did a little checking up behind you after seeing you get a little too close to the *labour*. Just doesn't take a half intelligent being to figure it out when you look at the logs! Some idiot just looked, saw your dumb demand and took it at face value! Best place for them...we needed more back then anyway...”

“You watch your tongue, Grindstone...”

“Oh, do give it up...I'm much too old to be sneered at. Now, deal with your rogue slave, get her to the pits and get back to your workplace...”

“No!”

Everypony turned...Unity had shouted the one word with such conviction that even Grindstone's head moved with surprise. She looked at me, remarkably holding back tears. Holding her head high, Unity looked at the

slavers.

“I’m...I’m not going to the pits.”

“I’m afraid you are, slave. You don’t get a say in-”

“I’m going to *Unity!*”

An audible gasp passed around, mine included. Pulling her around, I tried to get her attention.

“No...no-pony comes back from there! I...I’m sorry he was sent but...you don’t have to g-”

“No...Murky...” She gently moved my hooves away, only now allowing small tears to form. “I...I do...”

She fixed me with a sad look.

“Together or not at all, I promised him that...at least this way, whatever *Unity* really is...we’ll be...hopefully, together. We’ll face it as one. It’s what Pinkie told us. A hard road...but that I’d find him at the end of it.”

“This...this isn’t right...I just *found* you!”

Unity shivered, trying to catch herself, before leaning forward to embrace me gently.

“You helped me so much, Murky. Got me this far, but it’s alright...so long as I know he’s there, I...I can face it. I’m sorry to leave you, but stay by those that matter to you, alright? I know that Protégé will need you before the end. Thank you...Murky.”

Letting go slightly, I felt her lean in and lightly kiss me on the cheek, before we nuzzled slightly. I couldn’t prevent myself from crying...feeling like I was losing her forever. No-pony...*no-pony*...survived coming back from Unity...

“Oh...one thing.”

Unity backed off, digging into her ragged barding. Finally...she drew out a small object, a brass item. The one I’d seen in the prison cell...but clearly now, I saw a small statuette of a little pony carved from metals and small pieces of scrap. A tiny unicorn...held aloft by her own magic and bearing a PipBuck on her right hoof.

“I told you my special talent was bringing ponies together, Murky...this is how I do it. To create objects that forever remain as a link between ponies. I...I made this one, hoping I’d see you again. I know what she means to you, Murky. There’s a little bit of myself in it...so you’ll always remember me through the inspiration the Stable Dweller gave you.”

Gently, she let it drift to my hooves, before tucking it away in my saddlebag for me. I saw it to have a couple of words along the base, unreadable. I didn’t dare spoil the moment to *ask*.

“Th-thank you...”

“Thank *you*, Murky...just remember. Even in darkness, Equestria lives on in us. Through us...I don’t know what their version is but...*my* Unity is that this statuette will keep the spirit of friendship strong between us as well as give you the strength of such a hero. Goodbye...”

She backed away...moving toward Old Grizzly. Every step wrenched my heart, seeing her move all the further away. The one beautiful mare, for all the hurt slavery had done to her, giving herself up to the darkest secret of Fillydelphia in pursuit of one buck that meant the world to her. Somepony she couldn’t even *remember*...

The tragedy of her bravery struck me hard...almost too hard as I saw Old Grizzly nod.

“The next shipment to Unity isn’t for some time, you’ll be waiting in containment till then. I’ll...I’ll try and see if there’s anypony over there who’s been asking for you...”

“Thank you, master...”

My tears dripped onto the ground as I saw her led away by two guards, back into the FunBarn. Most of the masters left...Grindstone casting me a harsh look before moving back inside too. Silence reigned around the

factory...even the slavers stunned at her volunteering, only my sobbing breaking the quiet air. Soon, I saw Old Grizzly turn back, but not directly look at me, speaking quietly.

“You're Protégé's little helper, aren't you?”

“Y-yes...master...”

His eyes glanced down through that thick mane. He seemed so much older, watching one of the slaves he somewhat cared for leave. Probably as old as Brimstone.

“You saw what happened in the Mall. He'll need ponies like you...stay low and get going. I can protect him from true punishment, Red Eye wouldn't allow it...but he will *not* be returning to power. They decided...”

No...

“Chainlink Shackles is now the permanent master of the Mall.”

“Oh...Oh Goddesses...”

“I know...Murk. I know. He offends me as much he did your now previous master. I was Protégé's tutor to the ways of our work here, the things Red Eye doesn't directly teach himself, like maintaining workforces and shift patterns. I would prefer it if you were not near Shackles, Murk. That pony...he's more than just a nasty basket case of sadism, much *much* more. Believe me, he is entirely sane, one of the old timers that held power in Fillydelphia before Red Eye came along. Do not trifle with him, Murk. I don't want you to get involved in the madness of a pony forged in the fires of what this nightmare city used to be.”

My mind reeled and filled with horror in equal amounts. The Master was...was a constant. A singular constant in my life now that he had become almost predictable and terrifying in his sheer weight of presence. But to know that there was more in there...a life when Fillydelphia was not as ordered, for all the modern horrors.

“So...I'm going to let you go.”

“H-huh?!”

“Be wary...I heard Grindstone sending somepony to fetch him, knowing you were here. So go...*run*.” His voice lowered. “Stay safe, I may need your witness account when Red Eye is told of this by Protégé upon his recovery. You've become suddenly very important in a great game of politics and intrigue, Murk. I need you to disappear. So play along...”

Shivering...fearing Shackles would stomp out the door at any moment from wherever he was hunting...I nodded.

“Right...now **get going, you stupid slave! Hive's waiting! MOVE!**”

I shrieked, the volume hurting my ears. Turning, I skittered, tripped and fell in my blind hurt and sadness to leave Unity with them. Finding my hooves...I galloped...it hurt my aching body...but I simply galloped and did not slow down.

* * *

Choking...retching...in pain and exhausted...I finally collapsed in the first safer place I could think of.

Foal Land. Hidden amongst the old stuffed toys...I fell to my side and hoarsely took in what air I could.

But my eyes still moved...and they found one thing nearby. Upon a chainlink fence...sitting amongst a thousand others of its type...only detached, separated...without union.

Pulling myself over...I gently reached out and clicked Unity's lovelock back together once again, before collapsing at the bottom of the fence.

* * *

Hours later...I dropped into my hiding hole amongst the residential areas of Fillydelphia...a basement long abandoned. Hiding in the dark...fearing every hoofstep and wingbeat above, I simply curled up, clutching the

LittlePip Statuette. Somehow...just by holding it, I felt better, like Unity's calming influence was crossed with the strength of my beloved legend.

Somehow...someday...I wasn't going to let them have her. The impossible in my mind was a quickly growing list...to escape...to free Sunny from The Master...

And now to bring two lovers back from the brink of Unity itself.

But I was alone...without weapons other than a grappling hook on my saddle...without food bar one solitary sandwich...no RadAway to speak of and only twenty four hours to live in a city that desperately sought to ruin me in every way possible.

I needed help...I needed strength. Holding the statuette close, I drew my PipBuck and curled up around it, switching on to Pon-3's news slot. Let his tales of LittlePip bring me to bravery, as always!

“Good evening, wasteland...”

If there's one job that a DJ can often learn to get a little bit feisty about, it's repeating stuff now and again in the times when we have no new information. It gets a little boring sometimes to have to repeat tales that I know all of you ponies have heard time and time again.

But sometimes...just sometimes, the truth of the matter is those stories that no DJ wants to keep repeating just have to be done for the benefit of those who miss other slots. So it is with great regret that I tell those of you who missed it the news from the town of Arbu...”

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Mad Gallop – Without any concentration for shooting back, you can put more emphasis on just staying hard to target by diving around! (Now if only you could *outrun* them too...) While galloping, enemies suffer a penalty to hit you with ranged weaponry outside their own natural perception range.

Chapter 14: The Lost Virtue of Legends

* * *

“I know who you are. You are walking death, a plague in pony form. Where you trot, blood flows like a river.”

“What's it like to lose faith?”

A downward spiral...

Like...like I'd been low. I'd been *really* low in my life up till now. Most of the nights I knew I could remember were spent curled up in a corner or under the harsh wasteland weather, crying myself to sleep and failing to dream as any pony should.

But the last while had been building me up, filling me with sources of strength, the ones that *any* other pony has to some degree. Friends, advice, self decision and even small victories amongst the darkness. Reunions with those that mattered. I was waking up for the first time in my life.

At my core, however, I had *one* pushing urge greater than any. One that had been with me since the moment I had witnessed her soar above the Pit I had lain stricken in, rising from the stagnant horrors into the light. My belief in the Stable Dweller, in her *legend*. They had been telling me that she was not the hero I believed...but I knew better. I knew *better!* Every day on the radio I listened to DJ-Pon3 talk of her exploits, old and new, like the tales of some mythical being that had once crossed my path. She was my absolute. The one thing I could hold to, believe in and trust the efforts of, that the outside world was...was a better place than Fillydelphia. That Red Eye was wrong.

LittlePip is more to me than just a hero or some stupid crush. She was my proof that I had somewhere to go. That...that were was something for me out there! She was the slave that broke free from below Red Eye's very gaze!

But...but...

“But then that message about Arbu...”

...yes...

It...it just...it still hurts. I think I just lay and...and clutched that PipBuck until I was forced to move by hunger. I didn't believe it. I didn't *want* to believe it! She wouldn't do that! **She wouldn't!** The Stable Dweller was *my* hero! Perfect and...and strong and brave and kind and modest and lovely and...and...and everything! Every minute I just felt my chest ache as I waited for the broadcast that would tell me it was all a horrible mistake and she'd saved them all from raiders or something! She did good! She *always* did good!

I...I...oh Goddesses...

...Oh Goddesses above protect me...please...

“You're crying...are you gonna be-”

No! **No!** I'm not fine, all right?! Because I had to sit alone, away from *everypony* and listen as the DJ set about destroying the only faith I'd ever held short of Celestia and Luna themselves with that news! How do you think it *feels* to have the thing that made you think for yourself ripped out of you and twisted until you feel guilty for believing in it?!

My mind only knew one way to cope. To fall back on mere belief. I...I had my faith in her and it had to

remain strong! Little...sorry...LittlePip was *good* and this was all just a lie! Heroes...heroes don't just change like that! Ponies who do so much for others and Equestria couldn't be corrupted like that. Living legends that protect and inspire us and...

...sorry...I...I don't mean to shout and...and...I'm just scared...

“Of what?”

I was alone! Alone and more outcast than ever before when I had a crisis of belief. But...but it's knowing what was coming. I'm just scared of...of remembering. I know where this led now. I thought I was vulnerable before the Pit...but fractured at my very innermost inspirations, my life began to take a downward spiral. One I couldn't turn back from no matter how hard I tried. One that just kept going and hurting and forcing me down. I still feel it.

The legends of Equestria were beginning to fall around me.

Without them...I was defenceless, unable to feel the hope.

If they could fall...if those mighty titans of wonder could fall to the wasteland's corrupting visage...how could somepony like me rise up? I would be better off just staying a slave and realising the truth that there never was any great and inspired 'better' world to escape to in the first place...

That...that message was what started the descent.

The descent into the darkest period of my entire life...

* * *

Lines...lines became...a line...

Shivering, I spat out the charcoal, before ripping the page from my journal entirely. Throwing it to the side, it landed within the damp corner of my hideout. I began staring at the blank page...taking the charcoal up once again and lowered my head to...to...to place a single dot and...

...and draw a...a line...

It squiggled, juddering from side to side. Then...then it could be her tail! I'll just move it to the side and fit her in the corner then! Lifting the charcoal, I repositioned and gently drew an arc. Yes...yes, curves! Curves came next! Draw a c-curve...

The line ground across the paper much harder than it needed, chipping the charcoal. Her head! Yes...round it up and flick for the ear...just...flick and-

NO! Too much! My hooves wiped across my straggled mane, biting my lower lip so hard I felt the taste of blood. My hoof scraped at the paper, trying to rub a little bit out. It just smudged...wait...wait maybe if I smudged it *all* I could redo the main bits in sharper lines!

My hoof rubbed, harshly ripping away at all I had drawn to turn it to nothing but a black mist. Quaking, I took up the charcoal and attempted to start again. She'd just be darker than normal...not as bright as I'd once seen her in the sky. Just...just like they s-said...

Lines...lines...

I looked upon the lines I had drawn, like a crude foal's stick figure.

Crying out in frustration, I took up the journal and tore another page out...

* * *

“Get that little rat! Somepony grab him! Thief!”

I burst from the back door of the old supermarket, skidding across the mud and falling onto my side. My wing stinging madly, I staggered to my hooves, hearing the clatter of hooves behind me. Breathing quickly around the clasp I held in my mouth...I fled. Behind me, the stout quartermaster from one of Red

Eye's supply depots in this supermarket knocked the door open again so hard it smacked against the wall. Brandishing a cleaver in his magic, the bearded unicorn swivelled his eyes, spotting me clambering out of the mud and galloping off.

“There he is! Guards! *Guards!*”

A chainlink fence surrounded the supermarket. The only gate in was immediately swarmed by six slavers in masks, kicking their battle saddles into gear to take aim. Panicking, breathing hard, I instead ran around the opposite side of the building to where a dozen large rubbish containers sat awaiting somepony to ever arrive to empty them. Screams to circle around the building permeated the air, guards pursued behind me.

Diving between two of the garbage containers, I began stuffing my saddlebag and the package through the small hole I'd dug under the fence. Immediately after, I pushed my head through and started kicking furiously at the dirt.

“Get those containers out the way! Grab his legs!”

Shrieking at them being so *close*, I bucked out of habit, only striking the solid metal surface of a container, before yanking myself through the slick and searing mud. The rain had come and gone in Fillydelphia, keeping it drenched and dark amidst occasional electrical storms. Yelping when the sharp underside of the fence tore along my back and rump, I felt my body finally slip through and-

“Ah! Gotcha!”

My body jarred to a halt, feeling a pain shoot right from the top of my rump. Turning, sweating and pulling at the ground, I saw a slaver with his head right down at the hole, grasping my tail between his teeth. A gas mask was pushed up over his head.

“Go roun'! I 'ot 'im!” He snarled through my filthy tail, fixing me with a look. Behind him, I saw the slavers going back for the entranceway, aiming to properly get me.

Panic overtook me, before I lashed out with a back hoof onto the fence. The impact didn't hit him, but the sharp impact on the metal near his face distracted him enough that my tail slipped out, tearing a few strands along with it. Crying out loud again at the sharp twang, I fell forward. No...I couldn't stop now! I...I had too much right now!

Either side, slavers were coming around the fences, galloping toward me. Scrambling to retrieve the package I'd stolen, I simply took off toward the closest groups of buildings that I could. I needed cover! Somewhere to hide and wait them out! Immediately, in my rush, I slipped and fell upon the mud. I was caked in it, from the...the time spent crawling or falling in it within the desperate efforts to escape everypony who had heeded the word of the slavers that the one who brought in the pegasus would immediately win a reprieve from work for a week.

My limbs were tired already...how...how long had I been on the run? Was it just hours? Had it been days? My eyes felt heavy, my limbs leaden and my mind drawn thin with exhaustion. I hadn't slept since the hospital over a day ago. My one sandwich had lasted one short meal to recover from the efforts in the FunBarn.

It could have only been a couple hours...but to me it simply felt like an unending rush to survive.

Up ahead, a group of slavers heard the calls of those skidding across the mud behind me and began rushing to cut me off. I was standing on a road between the supermarket and a housing estate. To my right lay busy factories...to my left a large soiled field filled in wet slop that in better days had once been a grassy expanse.

“Come on...come on, Murky...ideas...*ideas*...”

Feeling tears running down my face as the slavers closed in, I paced rapidly on the spot, before simply screaming and running away from them all...no matter whether I knew the way or not. Finding myself heading toward the factories, I pushed my legs to gallop madly, trying to lengthen the time before they

caught me. Glancing back, I saw the horror of six slavers catching up at a frightening pace. Why did everypony else have to be so tall or have such long strides?!

Slaves looked up as they saw the chase pass by. Many of them recognised me, but few dared interrupt the slavers (who, naturally, had a much greater reward for catching me than any mere slave) in their efforts other than some who stood up, considering joining the chase. At their head was the quartermaster, that cleaver following him the entire way. Ducking around groups of slaves, trying to put as many tight corners between me and them as possible, I simply tried to break line of sight amidst the construction materials and large stockpiles of bar iron outside the main factory building.

Ahead of me there was a huge ditch that fell away by a good fifteen feet into what seemed to be a small quarry or deep storage basin. A storm drain ran along the bottom, filled with a green gunk. Striving to reach the ledge to slide down, I found my way blocked by a mesh fence that had been crudely stamped into the ground. The top was lined with razorwire. Above it a massive crane loomed between the factory ground and the quarry. Its stairway was blocked off. Crashing against the fence, I spun to look behind me, finding confused slaves looking at me. In the distance, I saw the slavers searching around the buildings. I had a little space! Time to dig! Then I could-YARGH!

“Hold him! Hold him! They'll like us if we just slow him down!”

Two slaves had grabbed my hind legs. Hooves were not the greatest for holding, I lashed out, bucking and trying to stop one stinking tar coated slave from lying over me to pin me down. Her hooves knocked my bandaged shoulder, drawing a squeal from me.

“Over here! He's here!”

“Please! Let me go! I'm like you! *I'm like you!*”

“Shut up, featherbrain! I'm getting a break for you!”

The slavers closed in, finding me held down by the slaves. Slowing, breathing hard, the quartermaster grinned and cackled.

“Think you can steal from Pony Moe's market, huh? I'm gonna have you strung up by your balls for this! Right outside my storehouse so *no-pony* will ever think about that again, you little thieving rat! We got you red-hoofed...”

I struggled, pulling my hooves in vain against the slaves who kept me on my back and spread-eagled before the slaver. My eyes couldn't leave that huge bloodstained cleaver.

Wailing, I paused for just a second...before letting loose what desperation I could muster and simply *biting* the muzzle of the slave atop me with the savagery I could only draw from sheer terror. She sprung back, howling as I felt a chunk of skin come out. Lashing out...crying...panicking and pushing myself against the fence with at least one part of my body free, I flicked my hoof to deploy my battle saddle's mouthpiece and looked skyward before pulling the trigger.

With a jolt, the grappling hook rocketed vertically toward the crane with a burst of pressurised air. Above me, I heard the clang of impact. Kicking at the slaves trying to hold my back hooves down, I bit hard on the mouthpiece, pressing my tongue onto the trigger to make the device start retracting.

The rope went taut, before I bucked once again at my captors and swung free into the air, pulled almost vertically upwards by the gun winding in the rope. Pulling my legs up, the cleaver whizzed below me, narrowly skiffing the hairs of my tail before the grapple gun got into its stride and whisked me upwards more properly. Bouncing off the fence, pulling my legs up and away from them, I only barely missed the razorwire before whizzing off to a good height about them all. The storm's wind spun me until my stomach churned, blowing me back and forth like a pendulum. I...I had to get this right...

Unable to properly see where I was, hanging twenty feet from the ground by a rope attached to a crane and spinning madly like some wretched and well beaten piñata...I tried to gauge the right moment...and bit down on the mouthpiece to release the hook from the crane.

Suddenly...gravity took over rather harshly.

I fell, tumbling through the air, dull red horizon after grey earth after black stormclouds in a whirling spiral before the wind was bludgeoned from my body. Gasping in shock as much as pain, I felt my body roll and fall further, sliding down a steep embankment of rough rocks and loose gravel. Shouting, whimpering and struggling to get upright, my hooves skittered out before I simply fell again onto my side, bouncing off the uneven ground to slam down again and again. Bones ground in my wings and I felt my muzzle's rad-sore savagely tore at before everything thudded to a halt upon an earth level surface. My balance was shot, the instinctive effort to get up and *run* leading onto to a dizzied fall and pathetic pedalling of my rear hooves. My front hooves simply clutched my own torso, breathing through gritted teeth until the pain subsided.

Don't stop, Murky...don't stop, they'll be coming! Get the package and go! You need it!

Forcing all the pain into a howl of frustration and determination...I slowly pulled myself to my feet, finding the grapple lying nearby. I bit the mouthpiece again, drawing the last length of it back into the saddle. Turning my head, my muzzle now seeping infected looking fluids from the sores, I glanced toward the fence at the top of the large embankment I'd just fallen down. Slavers were tearing at the fencing, drawing bolt cutters from the tool chests nearby to start cutting through. Even as I watched, that cleaver flashed and separated an entire set of links. His eyes met mine, before they started trying to force through. They promised a lot more than just being handed over to The Master.

Groaning, I began limping...then trotting...then a painful canter toward my goal, the drainpipe of the storm trench. I could see a small gap...just large enough for me...in the thick bars that covered it. It...it would take me back to my hideout! Dragging the messenger bag package behind me from my teeth, I heard the scuffling of hooves on gravel.

“Stop there, slave!”

Don't listen, you'll obey...don't listen, you'll obey...*don't listen!*

“I said, STOP!”

I half tripped, my hooves juddering and trying to halt on the spot out of fear of offending my masters further. But I kept going...sloshing through liquid waste and pus yellow slop around the drain entrance to drag my shrivelled body through a gap no-pony else could hope to get through. Behind me, the slaves and even a few slaves rushed the drainage ditch, clambering down the sides and surging forward. With one more striving push...I popped through, scant feet ahead of them. The quartermaster slammed against the bars, his cleaver flying between them in his magic to swing at me. Screaming, I backed off, pushing myself into the huge pipeline of Fillydelphia's sewer system to get out of his magical reach. The slaver beat against the bars, laughing maniacally and hollering at me.

“You can't run forever, runt! *We'll get you eventually! Shackles wants ya! SHACKLES WANTS YA!*
YOU CAN'T RUN!”

Knee deep in sewage, I turned the first corner I could see before lying against the sewer wall to get my breath back. My nose was still blocked, unable to take any smells in, but I could still taste the rank atmosphere and feel the stuffy heat of Fillydelphia trapped down here. My eyes felt too dry to cry...so I simply huddled down and quivered, clutching the package closely. My body was failing...the hunt for RadAway not going well. Everything felt hot...the sprint from the supermarket leaving me dizzy and my lungs burning. Biting a leg to stop the coughing, I searched inside the package for them...

My hoof drew out three small dry biscuits, almost crushed completely. Feeling my stomach twist and cramp...I guzzled the biscuit shrapnel as best I could.

That was it.

Still desperately hungry, my dry throat crying out for water that wasn't simply taken from the brown sludge in puddles that seared my throat from the acidity...I lay back to let my legs recover. While doing so, I felt the little jab in my chest...before drawing out the newest valuable I'd acquired and kept close to my heart.

The little statuette of the Stable Dweller that Unity had made for me...

I should have taken comfort in it...strength in it...

But with one sentence from a radio...half its meaning had been taken away before I'd even gotten the chance to enjoy having it...

* * *

No! No! **No!**

It wasn't **right!**

Scrunching up the paper, I hurled it behind me, landing amongst the few others that now slowly dissolved on the wet cobblestone floor of the sewer maintenance room. Her neck had been way too long and...and stupid...argh! Come on, Murky! Just draw her **right** this time!

You know what she looks like...draw her all...all heroic and...

My charcoal stick lowered, shivering and tentatively drawing one long curve. Yes...yes that's her back, now flick it upward and make a small circle to rough out the head...a...a shape! The curve becomes a shape and then the shape...

I stopped, before letting out a foal-like whine and whinny of sheer annoyance and frustration. Her head was too big! I started adding new lines, the old ones I could work into her mane, *I could save this! I could save her!* Save how I saw her!

The charcoal stick scribbled, making one new curve for the head...too small! Another...too long! Another! *Another! Another and another and-*

That's too many! I...I couldn't fix it.

“PLEASE!” I cried at the paper itself, breathing hard and hearing my lungs wheeze. I was sweating, both from sickness and the frantic worry. I...I couldn't draw any more! Everything I did just...just turned to a mess!

No...I had to keep trying! Drawing was how I saw the world, viewed it, judged it; how I *believed in it!* Why couldn't I make her look good again?

Why couldn't I make her look good again?!

“You didn't do it...you didn't do it, Pip...I know you didn't...it's all a lie...all a lie!”

The horrible mess of lines and awful curves was torn away...joining the growing pile behind me where all my charcoal attempts of the Stable Dweller slowly darkened until they almost seemed to gel with the black stone itself.

* * *

Panting, my entire body jittering and stinging, I skidded around the corner of the hallway and dove into the bathroom. Three sets of hooves thudded and rumbled across the teak wooden flooring in pursuit, rounding off at the top of the stairs and locking onto me like fervent predators. Whimpering, shouting my pleads and begs to them, I slammed the door shut, pushing my back against it.

The first impact nearly knocked me clean away, the doorway burst open by a few inches. Catching my hooves, I threw myself back against it again, holding it shut.

“He won't give you anything! Leave me alone! Please!”

“Push it! Push the door! *Harder!*”

The slaves rushed it, bucking and ramming the doorway. My little hooves struggled, being bashed and bruised upon the door that let its fragile nature be known when it kept smashing back in my face. Weeping openly, I just kept pushing my hooves against the slippery tiled floor to try and keep it shut between each impact. Eyes flickering, I saw this was a dead end. I'd run here simply to put a door between myself and the three slaves who'd spotted me. I hadn't even *thought* about what I was trapping myself in!

I fumbled for the lock, but the rusted latch fell right off, being knocked away as the door was forced inwards by a good couple of feet. A hoof appeared around it, being pulled back sharply as I knocked it back and jammed them in the door.

“*Argh!* You little *fucker!* You're getting it! GET HIM!”

Again, again and again, the door was assaulted, starting to chip in places but all too horrifyingly being forced open against my pitiful strength. I couldn't shut it fully, I just couldn't compete with their power! A body wedged itself into the gap, a hoof swinging to grab or strike me. Knocked onto my back, I braved myself against the wall behind the door and just shoved my back hooves against the bottom, frantically trying to keep it shut just a few seconds longer by using my own full body as a brace. Each crushing blow send a jarring pain through my spine, giving me more than enough reason to keep shouting for them to stop.

One more charge and forcing wrench from the wedged stallion...and I was knocked clean away from it. My back hit the far wall of light wood, shattering much of it to fall down the gap between the outer and inner walls of the house. My assailants were in. Nursing my neck, I held one hoof up to the first one bearing a nasty cut on her hoof...the one I'd jammed in. Looking up from behind it, I saw them come to claim their prize. Noose, Lemon and presumably their new stallion member of the gang.

“No, no! I'll come! I'll come, just don't-”

Her hoof whipped across my face, dropping me to my side amongst a splitting and searing wash of pain in my cheek. Curling up, I felt another three or four stamps upon my ribs...clearly held back or they would have been pulverised. Noose was angered enough to hurt me...not frenzied enough to ruin The Master's prize. But it drove all the fight from me, leaving me a groaning heap before them. Hissing through her teeth, Noose shook her patchwork mane and snarled. Her ganglife colleagues flanked her, the rough form of Lemon and the new and very *large* stallion.

“Ya gotta do anythin' you can in here to survive. So if that means giving you up, runt, I'm happy! You thought we wouldn't recognise you in the crowd? Trying to blend in, huh? Well I remember your fucking face!”

Even as I had tried to sit up again, she struck it once more, right across the jawline. I felt my head whiplash around and strike against the porcelain of the toilet. Stars spun, my vision turning hazy. I simply rolled onto my back, moaning. The blurry shape of Noose stood up more fully, before heaving and hauking a wad of spit onto my face.

“A damned *pegasus*...wish I'd just beat you to death in the airport for what you brought on one of our gang. Well now you're going back to him. Lemon! Get that rope, tie him up!”

Both my eyes were throbbing, still blackened from but a couple of days ago with Barb's raiders and around a discoloured face, all that pain had rushed to the surface. But squinting them open, I saw Noose toss a length of rope to Lemon...the same rope she used to tie me up in for fun. To make me miss shifts that she could watch the results. But now it promised only one thing...that it would lead only to chains. My body wouldn't move to stand...but I felt a depression beside me.

What was...

My hoof went through the wall...I'd knocked a hole!

Feeling the trundle of Lemon's approach, I did all I knew I could...I just rolled into the hole between the walls of the house.

Immediately falling I felt the gap, far too thin to properly accommodate even a pony of my size, splinter and scrape at my sides. Thick cobwebs broke beneath me, coating my face and hooves in them. But the fragile wood was also slowing me down...ensuring I never simply tumbled to the ground floor and crushed myself from the height of the fall.

Not that it made it any easier...

A sudden impact marked the ground floor, void of any further injury. My head ached terribly, the close darkness and complete blindness not helping any. Only then did I realise the real horror.

The ground floor had been made of brick on either side.

I was trapped.

My breathing accelerated, the gap was so thin I felt my sides being crushed in, unable to move forward or backwards due to the tightening width...I couldn't pull myself upwards and the floor was beneath me. In complete darkness, covered in thick web, I could barely even struggle while my limbs burned and full of small splinters. My hind leg was wedged awkwardly backward at an angle that was already beginning to cramp. Above me, the curses of the gang echoed downward, but I couldn't turn my head to see upward.

The thought of being stuck here...unable to escape and slowly dying of starvation hit me. I'd...I'd be nothing but a lost soul, *no-pony* would know what had happened to me! I'd just be a skeleton in a wall to scare somepony else in the far on future...

No...no...no...*no no no NO!*

I began simply struggling and stamping my hooves. The only movement I could, just to make some vain effort to feel like I hadn't consigned myself to a few days of a lingering death. Below me, I heard a crack. Fixating on it entirely, ignoring the shouts of the gang that they were dropping a rope if I would *prefer* to go with them, I kept slamming my little hooves on the dry flooring. It was wood! Maybe I could...I could...

I heard a creak. Oh dear...here we go again...

The floor splintered and shattered below me, drawing a long shriek as my sides once again ripped against the walls. I prayed my wings weren't damaged further, as I dropped another ten feet into darkness before striking concrete. Landing on my hooves before simply falling to the side, my hooves cradled my injured head before it slapped against the concrete I now lay on. Under my mane, I could feel the welt of my scar...red and angry as it ever had been. But I breathed in the rotten and trapped air like it were a saving grace...I had fallen into a full *room*. Oh thank the Goddesses...thank you for freeing me...

Finally, blinking, I let my eyes adjust to the dark down here. (I didn't dare use my PipBuck's light.) Small wooden pillars held up the ceiling but the rest of it was just like an old antique store. Everything from cabinets to tables and chairs were littered amongst packing crates and dressing boards. Massive cobwebs hung on the diagonals off the pillars or between the furniture. I could see two wooden staircases rising to differing doorways. Trotting up, I found one that seemed open...but far too heavy for me to push while injured.

Above me, dust dropped from the ceiling, dislodged by a rampant clatter of hooves on the floors above. Oh no...they were coming down, I didn't have the time to force any doors. Right...plenty of hiding spots, get one! Get one!

Dragging myself up, I staggered over to a thick collection of furniture. The door to the basement slammed open only just as I tugged away some of the larger webs and reluctantly forced myself into the sticky confines behind a musty old couch. Noose and her gang galloped down the stairway.

“We know you're in here! Better to come out and let me beat your head in than me getting angry looking for you and letting Barbell do his thing! I hear he *likes* little bucks. They squeal louder!”

I dreaded to think. But I simply huddled close. The sofa was buried beneath a few upturned tables and bore dozens of old bags stuffed with long lost possessions...so I simply prayed they considered it too thickly

buried to be a hiding spot. As such...I just waited.

It took a lot of willpower, by my standards, to ignore that odd feeling of something creeping up my left hind leg. My skin *crawled*.

The sound of furniture being thrown and bags torn open reverberated around the basement. They moved nearer and further away in apparently random decisions to ransack the entire place. I heard Lemon holler upon pulling away something.

“SHIT! SHIT SHIT!”

“What?! What is it? You got 'im?” Noose screamed over to him.

“NO!” Lemon sounded strung out. “Fucking *spider nest* just crawled from this bag! Just...FUCK!”

“Shut up, you pussy. An' keep looking.”

“Pretty rich, that coming from *you*.”

“I said shut up! It means coward. Not 'female', you stupid lunk! Hey, runt! I said come out! You still hiding? Hoping? You got nothing to hope for, kid! Word's spreading about that bitch in the wastes killin' our gangers and all that. We know you always liked her! Ha! You've lost her, runt! She turned! One of us now! Never gonna go pork her now, are you? She's *one of us*! So just give up!”

Every shiver, every smash that neared me just bore a new wave of terror. I tried to blank her out. To not listen. She...she wasn't! I couldn't just stop and start believing that there was nothing worth fighting for! Heroes didn't fall like that!

“You'll learn...wasteland's fucked up worse in places out there than here...you'll learn...”

I wanted to move, to jump, as I felt whatever it was move up around my rump and over my cutie mark. Rapid, light touches...like many legs. I tried to shift a front hoof back to swat at it, or use my tail. But that only gave way to a rapid movement that skittered across my back. Biting my lip as hard as I dared, I whined into my hoof.

“Ere', there's a second door up there.” That must have been the new pony, Barbell. His voice was richer, it would have been almost oddly relaxing if I hadn't already known his allegiance.

“So?”

“Just thinkin', maybe he went and ran off up it. Might not be here...little buck seemed in a rush.”

“...shit, you're right. Go!”

Luck, it seemed, felt good in these times. The three of them darted off, rushing up the stairs. One of them seemed to hesitate, snorting and smashing something made of glass...before they all departed. No sooner had the door shut than I immediately pushed and tugged myself free from behind the sofa. Rolling, I swatted and flailed at my hindquarters until I was sure nothing was on me. In the darkness, I saw something the size of somepony's hoof skitter off under the sofa again.

Then, I collapsed.

I had wanted to run upstairs, hide in a room till they went further...but the fear, adrenaline and emotional pain just slammed down...driving me to simply fall on my side upon the floor. The dusty air here was giving my throat hell. My excursion to try and steal from a supply cart had gone so badly when they'd spotted me. I'd seen RadAway on it...something I desperately needed. Coughing fits were becoming more common. My spit had a metallic tang to it while the pressure in my head and chest was growing. Even past my cold...I was definitely feeling the initial effects of radiation poisoning. Breathing lightly, holding my head and feeling the lump growing from my cheek...I simply did my best to keep believing.

There was *still* something out there...it *wasn't true*. There was more to life than slavery, she'd shown me that!

Opening my eyes...I almost jumped as I saw what had been broken on their retreat. An old dusty

mirror...now in shards upon the floor. It showed everything that I now felt.

In one shard, I saw my PipBuck...a symbol. But in another...the scar upon my forehead. A third held my eyes, a fourth the weltering rad-sores that began to swell on my muzzle as my deadline neared for death. Another held my cutie mark...

All separate...all meaning different things now.

My entire body and soul, fracturing apart.

* * *

Water was flowing.

From the waste tunnels in roaring cascades that broke upon the brickwork and let steam rise from the algae and sewage that it ate and dissolved in its path. The spray washed over the sides, flowing its bitter burning taste into the old sewer workshop.

It flowed from the ceiling, centuries of neglect leaving fractures and leaks to allow water to trickle and gush from corners and down the walls, pooling amongst the cobblestone. It soaked and destroyed the bottom layers of the growing pile of scrap paper into a mushy mess that stank and shifted.

But it also flowed from my eyes. Streaming and unending, it came from puffy injured eyes and clung to my face before dripping constantly upon the failures beneath my head. Tears fell onto lines of charcoal that were already obsolete and forgotten, my desperate efforts concentrating elsewhere on a page.

Another page was torn and thrown. Then another. And another. All began to lie in corners, all around me or upon the slowly dampening pile.

Lines...remember *lines*...they lead to *curves*...make *shapes* from the curves and it comes to life! It always worked that way! Why wasn't it working now? I...I had been awoken to draw by inspiration and love, given the soul of the artist by the emotions I felt and wanted to release upon paper rather than simply through all too common tears. But it was being pulled away from me, a skill lost...had I not practised enough? I hadn't drawn properly in a little while. Not like when I'd first learned how!

Wiping the tears and wet spray from my damp coat over my face...I took up the charcoal and tried again. Draw just any normal pony...make it basic, make it simple! Start small, Murky...start small and relearn it all!

The stick slid, gaining momentum. Yes...yes, yes! It flowed, her back and spinal shape. Then curve up into her neck...yes! A circle! Her head! I had her head! Two ears flicked over it...careful smooth triangles in *just* the right place. I even went back to the other end of her back, curving it around and down to her hind legs. I went over it a couple times, make it *just* right. Come on, Murky...you've got a little crush, don't feel bad about...about feeling a little cheeky! Yes...if it helps, it helps! It's still a part of you!

I sat back, wiping my brow with a hoof, breathing heavily with worry. Telling myself constantly how to draw...to not worry about what, yes, that was it! I saw her in many ways, how I felt, no matter how *stupid* it was, could be a part of it!

Now...now her face. I could see her face again. Determined and of goodwill, telling me through her eyes alone that everything would be fine. That she was still the good pony I had come to believe in and feel more than a little liking of after seeing. I was trapped in a stinking sewer under Fillydelphia...a million miles from any knowing home, while she was out saving Equestria. But I could still have faith to meet my own ends.

If I could...just...get her face right...

Gently, I began placing her muzzle in...using a cross across the circle I'd drawn to shape it all out. I could always erase that later! I just needed one drawing, one *little sketch* to prove I could still do this! I could still save her in my eyes...prove to myself she was good.

Muzzle...bring it out...a little line for the mouth for now. Back to her eyes...please let her eyes work,

they would *make* it complete! Slowly...tentatively, I let two circles of charcoal form, shaped around her head...and...and...

A ridiculous wannabe of a pony stared back at me. The muzzle was at completely the wrong angle, her eyes not even shaped right in the perspective.

“No...*pleeeeeease!* Don't do this!”

My charcoal stick flew back down. I...I could fix this! Frantic, rushed fixes, add the proper mouth, I could work from its perspective instead! Add her mane, that was easy, right? But it covered her eyes. I tried redrawing them, again and again. The charcoal pressed harder each time, scraping and zigzagging across the paper in mad strokes born of utmost need and panic.

“Why can't I draw? *I want to draw!*”

I sat back, panting...looking at the mad mess of shapes and incredibly stupid looking face that could have been drawn by a *foal* that looked back at me.

I...had no words. Nothing but a wailing screech of sheer frustration and a welt of tears burst from me as I fell down on the journal, pressing the side of my face upon it and beating upon the hard cobblestone with my hoof. Savage coughing broke through, making my little skeleton-like body spasm and shake. Filled with anger at myself...the page was torn and ripped in half, tearing the perfectly finely drawn middle of her body down the centre...before they were thrown to the water.

Around it...the water just kept flowing. From the tunnels...the walls...and my eyes.

* * *

The shelves rattled as I hopped up and clambered all over them to reach my goal. Living as an outlaw in Fillydelphia...even for the short amount of time I had done, was proving to be a nightmare all unto itself. Everypony, from slave to slaver could recognise me. Anypony might be a threat like Noose and her cronies had been. Merely finding enough food to see me by a few more hours had been an adventure unto itself.

My balance almost went...perched on the little ladder (Why ladders? We had *hooves!*) I felt my head spin and blur. The light panels above me seemed to burn like the sun, hurting my eyes and making my headache worse. But I kept searching.

I'd finally remembered that I'd dug into the container storage yard when I'd last been here and been seen by Slit. The moment I'd found a break in the rain...I'd galloped out to retrace my steps and enter through the hole she'd cut in the fence. One of these containers had to have something! Any RadAway would have been taken...but...but the ingredients! Weathervane could make some, he knew how!

The horror had struck my mind that I didn't remember what the fluid used to create it even looked like. I cursed my memory, along with my inability to read. The container I'd slunk into had been filled with row upon row of liquids and stored gels. Mostly they looked like lubricant, but I *did* remember Magister Heartcare in the ghoul bunker saying they had used the stuff for that purpose too! Maybe...maybe they made the same mistake here if they didn't know what else it was for!

But only now I had no idea what was what. I'd hoped that I might remember what it looked like, but now I only realised they were like so many other things in the industrial cities of old Equestria. Standardised and brain achingly similar to one another. In frustration, pushing my way around the shelves, I eventually just jumped off to land in the crowded mess that was the floor of the liquids container. Well...I only needed one RadAway to survive for *now*. The logical thing would be to take one of everything and let Weathervane figure it out! I could always come back for more.

Pausing, I heard somepony shift past the outside of the container. A heavy pallet was being dragged behind them. Holding my breath, I simply prayed they didn't come inside this one. Gradually...after a moment of tension, the sound faded off. Assured that no-pony was outside, I grabbed bag after bag of the gel like fluids and stuffed them into my saddlebag. Grumbling, I found I had to take a lot out and store them in

the many pockets of my fleece. My journal went underneath me in my belly pocket, various papers and plans that Protégé had given me of the Ministry were folded up and placed in my front leg pockets. The remaining pepper canister and a few scraps of old parchment found spots on my leg pockets too. Looking over my shoulder...I quickly transferred my, uh, 'reference' magazines into my belly pouch alongside my journal.

Finally...gingerly...with utmost respect, I lifted Twilight's visual memory orb out to very carefully store on my left hand torso. I had so many questions about that thing...mostly why such a personal item had still been in Aurora's office. Twilight had seemed to trust her to a certain extent as a colleague...but it hadn't seemed like a message anypony in power would want heard.

A mystery for another time, no doubt.

But it made enough space in the end that I could fit just about every sachet of the clear fluid in.

Hopefully...it would be enough to give Weathervane a way to make things up with what ingredients he had left. Right...time to go. The rain could come back on any moment, with the storm linger for so long above. I was hurt enough...limping and feeling my entire skull pound as much as burn with rad-fever...without body burns from acidic rain to compete with too. I'd get out of here...get to Hearts and Hooves and hide out in Weathervane's basement lab until he next came in.

It wasn't difficult to make my way out of the container area. The hole in the fence from Slit's pursuit was, of course, still there. I wrapped a piece of wafting cloth from the container around my head like a shawl...griffin spotters were *everywhere*.

Before I even contemplated moving out of the container yard itself, I held myself low near the fence...watching the road that led between it and the industrial skyport Slit had chased me into. A few carts passed, mostly pulled by slaves. A column trudged by on the opposite side, whips cracking as some faltered on cracked hooves. Nothing massive...nothing that I couldn't wander with under my shawl. All the same, the sight of so many ponies being led to whatever form of work there was made even me in my battered state wince. Finally pushing myself through, I began to trot in the same direction as them...slowly working my way into the crush of sick and coughing ponies. I fitted right in with my own blood-spat coughs to-

“Get moving, worms!”

I was ducked between two ponies before my mind could even begin to *think*. Though all my illness, my medical condition, my injuries and even my crisis of faith...I felt it all overruled by an immediacy of terror that locked my muscles in place, giving me an awkward stumbling gait.

“You there! You! Three seconds to get up. One! Two! Three!”

A whip cracked, accompanied by the meaty slap of hard leather on flesh. A mare screamed out loud. She must have fallen...I heard him again.

“One! Two! Three!”

The scream came again...and again...and again...every time she failed to get up. I recognised the torture method all too clearly. Struck by overwhelming curiosity and worry...I raised up my cowl, squinting out between the ponies I was travelling with.

The Master stood in the middle of the road, commanding the long line of slaves through the city. My eyes widened at the sight of him. He stood taller than that crazed hunch he'd once had, a straighter neck and outstretched legs telling of an authority he was *born* into now finally being handed to him in an official manner. Around him, slaves cowered, obeying his every glance to look away or go on. I saw ponies with crippling injuries, burns and festering infections cantering far faster than any hurt pony should be able to. The line went on for a long way...if this was the Mall, he must have brought more in. But he controlled them all absolutely, a length of ponies in almost calm, if distraught, order.

The same line I'd wandered into. Oh...*Goddesses* this was bad...

I was seeing The Master in his real element at last. No longer just the overseer known for being harsh...he truly was his own *Master* now. It made sense why he was kept around, if this was the sort of brutal short term efficiency and result he could drive from ponies that Fillydelphia couldn't properly feed anyway. I

thought of what Grizzly had said...that he had come from before Red Eye in Fillydelphia. What kind of life had he grown up with to become this bastion of symbolic slavery?

Below him, the target of his attentions lay in a shivering heap, her back bleeding rapidly.

All the attention I might have had held to The Master was removed if but for a few seconds...

Sunny.

She was bucked from the ground a good four feet back into the line. A few bucks pulled her up as roughly as any slaver would. The fear on their faces was clear. If they didn't get her back on her feet, aggressive as it was...it would only be worse for her. But my once saviour was in a very poor way. Even below the fresh blood I could see long welts that would scar by the night's end. The Master's whip skills were a whole new world beyond what I'd ever seen before.

I'd felt them once...never again...*never again.*

Sunny was stumbling, coughing and limping. I could see a crude split on one leg and some hastily wrapped tough leather on her neck. But horrifyingly, one of her cutie marks seemed to have been burned clean off from whatever foul forge of fiery area she'd been to work in. Either that or it had been punishment...one way or the other, that smiling sun had forever set. Replaced by a rank and singed welt of blackened flesh.

“Don't you all go get ideas of lazing off! You've got work to do, if we don't get another twenty feet today in the mines, you're *all* losing food rations.”

The Master's whip slapped against the ground, sending pebbles pinging in every direction. One of them struck amidst the ponies I hid behind, giving me reason to squeak and drop back down.

“Master! Master!”

A galloping pony came up the road. I heard his sharp clip-clop above the low rumble of three dozen ponies in the column. Just keep moving...wait your chance...don't make eye contact with him. I was sweating...breathing quickly.

“What is it?”

The galloping stopped. I poked my head around the side, close to the ground to see that scrawny assistant, burdened down in scrolls and messenger bags. He bowed before The Master, before offering one scroll up.

“Master Grindstone reports that they may be making progress on the shared memory projector, Master! They didn't think it possible, but somepony got hold of one of Aurora Star's technical blueprints.”

“This matters to me, **how?**” The Master glowered at his assistant. “Grindstone can chase side projects from his home in that Ministry all he wants.”

“Well...you...you see, Master. In those blueprints there was a note...it mentioned something that he...he wants to tell all of you. He's called a meeting...later on tomorrow at the Ministry. He...um...*requests* that you attend.”

I saw The Master grin. “Good choice of words to replace his message with...you're *learning*. I'll speak with the ass later. For now, I want you to go back to the Mall. Keep those slaves working, the repairs aren't done nearly as fast as I'd like. Cancel all food supplies until its done. They'll survive till its done, but it'll give them the shake up they need to work *faster*.”

My heart leapt into my mouth. Glimmer, Brimstone and Coral were still there...I hadn't seen them in the column. If the food was being cut out...oh no...

“In fact...tell the biggest slaver to start running the competition. That'll get some unwarranted shifts out of 'em...heh.”

“Y-yes, Master! Right away, Master!”

He didn't overstay his welcome, galloping off, despite his own tiredness. Biting my lip in worry, I looked back to The Master, shivering and trying to remain as still and quiet as I could. We were headed away from the Hospital...but I just needed to get to the other side of the road and use the mass of supply yards behind the skyport for cover. I could lose even a griffin in there. Up ahead I could see the long hill that moved down to the skyport...the one leading to that workshop I'd ran to before Barb caught me. If I could just get near it...

“**Keep the pace up!**” His voice bellowed forth...leading me to jump at the command and start cantering. I'd reacted before any of them...

That wasn't a very good sign...

But we advanced all the quicker. So much so, I hoped that we might pass right by him and turn a corner...the moment he couldn't see me I'd *go*.

Something held me back from going all out though. Just ahead of me...just through the crush, I could see Sunny pushing herself in the travel line with a pained look. Just a few words...just let her know we were coming for her eventually...

“Sunny!” I hissed, whispering as loudly as I dared. The Master was casting his eyes over the line. “*Sunny!*”

I saw her ear twitch. She was blinking, confused...afraid. I pressed closer.

“Sunny...it's me. *Murky.*”

Now wandering right beside her, almost using her for cover from The Master's sightline, I tapped her side to get her attention. A large slap of guilt shot through me as I saw her jump in fear of anypony touching her and whip her head round with wide eyes. The ramifications of what had been done to her to incite that sort of reaction almost made me want to cry on the spot.

“M...Murk?” Her voice was breathless, like somepony talking in their sleep.

Pushing my shawl away slightly, I nodded lightly. Sunny seemed unable to really emote what, if anything, she felt. A crazed mixture of terror, surprise, relief, guilt and sadness. Her pupils seemed to just shake, contracted until they were little more than just dots.

“Y...you have t-to...run. Stay away...”

“I'm on the run, he's after me, I know. But...but I had to let you know. We're *going* to get out. Me and a few others, my friends you saw...we're putting together a plan. Just...just hold on in there, we won't leave without you.”

“He's a *monster*, Murk...I...I can't...”

“I know...but we will be coming for you! I pro-”

“**Halt right there! All of you!**”

The column juddered to a stop so quickly I ran into the rump of the mare in front of me. Silence fell. Some ponies looked over toward The Master. I joined them, peering around Sunny to see what he was doing.

“Now...something isn't right here. Whoever you are that slipped in...you think that a **born slaver** wouldn't spot a discrepancy in his stock? Somepony who **doesn't belong?**”

Pain flared on my forehead, that throbbing warning. My loose tooth quaked and stung. My cutie mark itched. Every sign of slavery and reminder in my mindset rang the warning bells as the fear set in. Looking to every direction...there was nothing. The road was at least twenty feet from any cover on either side...either the skyport or back to the container yard. Any attempt to gallop away would be noticed.

Behind me, The Master shoved into the column, throwing ponies out left and right, storming his way through it and pulling back shawls or staring into eyes deeply. Had he been *counting* his slaves or something? Oh this was bad...very very bad. The cries of injured ponies being stallion-handled so roughly

were just getting closer as he worked his way up. My covers may have hid me from his general perception...but he'd spot my size the moment he got close enough.

“Listen...Sunny...please, just keep it together. He...he won't try to make it quick so...so just hang in there...”

Unity's own advice to me days ago was all that rung to mind. The sting of guilt and fear as I began to feel the weight of impossibility to rescue her too only slammed home again and again. Oh...Unity...

“There's no escaping him...no escaping that everlasting chain...”

“There *is*. Just...just find something or somepony to...to believe in. I did, I found-”

I stalled, my heart in my throat. Had I *really* anymore? Did I truly believe I could do this? It all felt so impossible now...we could plan and talk about it...but what had we really *done* yet? What if there...if there wasn't a way out?

“**Aha...up here, eh?**”

I span, keeping my shawl tightly over my face. The Master was barging his way through, that immense bulk towering over all the rest as he stomped directly toward me. With one horrible moment...he stopped dead about twenty feet away down the column.

His eyes fixed directly on mine.

...then he grinned.

I began to back away...to move as far as I could before the commands came.

“I'm sorry, Sunny...”

The Master advanced, stomping slowly.

“Knew I'd recognise my own eyes...**like father...**”

“I'm *so* sorry, Sunny...I didn't mean this for you...”

“...**like son!**”

“I'M SORRY!”

I broke off the moment The Master moved directly for me. Ducking beneath the other slaves, I galloped down the embankment toward the skyport.

“**Get him! Everypony! Bring the born slave home!**”

To my absolute horror, the thundering sound that was dozens of hooves galloping quickly built. A huge mass of ponies, driven by an indomitable will and terror of refusing an order, turned and commenced a grand charge down the slope after me like a wartime attack formation. Simply screaming, I pushed my hooves harder and harder, dashing over the broken metal and pipes that littered the edges of the runway. Turning my head back, my shawl flying off from the wind, I wasn't sure what horrified me more.

That The Master was leading the charge by some distance and still grinning.

Or the fact that Sunny was *with* them. I hoped with all my heart she was simply protecting herself by not being the one to refuse. But looking at the way she galloped on that splinted leg...I almost doubted it.

Already exhaustion was kicking in. I was no sprinter, a lifetime of day long activities and toils had built a slow burn stamina into me (and even *that* was lower than most ponies) rather than the ability to quickly explode and run hell for leather. The sound only got louder, the swarm of slaves closing in. Already, faster ponies at the flanks were beginning to arc ahead...as though seeking to enclose me entirely. The ground itself shook as they began to near...the thick thuds of The Master's hooves always audible over it all. I heard the clank of chains around his neck, the jingle of a collar dragging. There was no-where to go! Any cover was *way* too far away!

I had...I had nothing...*literally nothing...*

My eyes misted up, finding it hard to see. I began to stumble, fall and trip over rocks and slippery sections of mud. Going around behind the runway, still littered with old sky chariots lashed to cracking bones, I finally collapsed. A harsh metal clang impacted on my side against the grapple.

Taking the first breath I had since I ran...I saw that I'd landed on a drain cover to wash rainwater from the runway. The lined both sides all the way down!

I'd already been trapped in a small hole once today...if this went wrong...

“That's it, Number Seven! You know it's worthless trying, you'll always be mine in the end.”

I glared up, The Master had stopped, bringing the clatter of the slaves to circle around. I saw Sunny looking conflicted and pale...her back leg was bleeding terribly. Then...The Master began to trot forward.

“You've led me a merry chase, slave. Don't think you won't pay for that insult. You know there's nowhere for you to go. I *know* about your little hero...not anymore is she? You know the truth, just accept it. A slave is all you've ever been, it's all you ever will be! She didn't save you and now you're seeing the reason why!”

Trying not to listen, I slowly let my hooves rest on the hinge of the draincover. I'd only get one quick chance at this. He was *wrong*. One of the few things I could genuinely hear from his mouth and know in my heart that he was *wrong*! Why couldn't ponies just see that she was right? That to be like her could help us! Why did they have to make up lies? *Heroes didn't do that!*

“Don't even think of pulling that!”

My hoof froze. Of *course* he'd spot it, he wasn't stupid! But I still tried to keep my muscles tensed...no...more than tensed. I had to do this! I couldn't get caught now! I...I had to escape, for Unity...for Sunny...to...to somehow find a way to prove to everypony that LittlePip was still worth believing in! I *couldn't get caught now!*

I pulled.

The draincover lifted...the five seconds it took to pull it...to watch him break forward and bellow an order...to try and throw myself down...it felt like five minutes of constant worry and tension. Head first...I simply dived...the dark hole barely fitting my body...before...

Stopping.

My back leg jarred in pain, something catching it. Crying out at the shock and harsh pull upon it, I twisted, but being unable to turn my head far enough in the thin pipe. Below me was nothing but a black void and the sound of rushing water. I had stopped...

He had grabbed my hind leg, pressing it under his hoof against the floor.

“You don't get away, Number Seven! Not this time!”

With crushing power...I felt my leg being dragged. The rainwater still draining in sloshed past my face and body, making it tough to breathe, the more I came out, the more it washed into my eyes and mouth...stinging and hissing. I was being dragged free...bit by bit...I couldn't even struggle, the hole was too small. I was terrified that if I did fall I would simply get stuck upside down in a small pipe underground...but if I didn't...

“I got him! I got him for you!”

Sunny? No...Sunny don't...don't! I felt her bite my tail, pushing in to help pull me out...but knocking the others aside. Even The Master's hoof seemed to lessen off...just enough that my weight and a careful release from her mouth on my tail dropped me into the darkness...

In those scant half seconds before my descent...I only heard the rage filled roar of The Master...before the horrid sound of somepony being assaulted by him. I could only know who...

Thank you...Sunny...you did it again for me...a *proper* hero.

But there was little time to think on anything...as my life became nothing more than a painful scraping hell falling vertically in a space that any normal sized pony would have been jammed in instantly. My skull bounced, my legs grazed and my torso thudded from side to side. I felt it all closing in...a thinner pipe as it went down. Before finally...I was thrown from it. In pitch darkness, I hit water...being propelled under it. I kicked out, trashing...my inability to swim at all leading me to simply flail and try. I hadn't gotten a breath in...there *was* no surface...I could only feel the pipe on all sides of me...*I couldn't see at all...oh Goddesses help!*

A current picked me up, swirling me onward and away. Over and over, tumbling, feeling my sick lungs burn with the effort of holding my breath. My whole body juddered...lack of oxygen making me lose all sense of up and down as I was thrown this way and that by the current. A steady roar began to drift to my ears through the darkness...an accelerating speed...before the sudden shock of being thrown free.

Above water...in the air, I tumbled. I tried to grab what breaths I could. The waterfall threw me out and forced me down. A hard wet slap across my belly only dragged me underwater once again, forcing the air from my lungs. A mouthful of water gulped down my throat, a coughing fit kicking in from the irritation. Sucking down more and more water...drowning on the spot. I felt myself being tumbled over and over, unable to force my way up. I kicked out...throwing every effort to simply save my life. Yes...yes I was moving I was...

...pushing my way to the bottom.

Disorientation was kicking in bad. My head throbbed...loss of consciousness beginning to become a very real danger. I pushed off the ground, feeling the force of the waterfall crushing down upon my head above. Moaning and fighting the urge to take one breath, I let it carry me further along before then trying again. The current was less...I fought up...up...all four limbs wildly surging in the filthy water. My saddlebag dragged me down...the weight of my fleece soaking it all up making it hard to move. My lungs were empty...filled with dead air, my throat in agony as I held a full radiation driven fever fit at bay to not take in more water. I considered dropping my saddlebag or my fleece...but I didn't have the time to even do that. I just kept kicking and kicking and...

The surface! I broke it...and fell down again, lacking the ability to tread water. Again and again I broke the water, gulping air and feeling my entire inside body ache from the water intake. My eyes adjusted quickly...I could see bricks nearby! A...a ledge! Fighting the current, my muscles heavy and sore, I kept pushing and pushing, underwater, on the surface, underwater again...again and again...a pathetic struggle against drowning until I finally felt the cold wet brick under my hooves. Almost surprising myself, the adrenaline and terror forced me to push myself up and roll onto it...finally out...

Retching, spinning onto my hooves, I threw up more water than I thought possible. Sucking air in between the convulsions, it was interspersed by crying over my *burning* eyes from the water and the tingle all over my body from the shivering fever that now wracked me. Finally...restlessly...I fell to the side, pausing only to draw out my items to let them dry on the higher brickwork. I could see a door...some sort of workshop...but that could wait...

That was too close...too close...he had almost got me that time. If it hadn't been for Sunny...

All the worries...lies...guilt...it all just faded. I could do nothing but just concentrate on breathing.

To concentrate on not believing those same four words that echoed again and again...

She didn't save you.

* * *

But I could still save *her*.

So many ponies not believing in her, readily insulting her with all these *lies* on the radio! I could...I

could show them! I'd draw her good, draw her heroic and show them all how good she was!

I couldn't.

Every drawing, every sketch, rough draft and vague attempt turned to nothing but a pitiful mess. It never looked right! I'd tried everything I knew how. *Everything*. I must have used up a whole quarter of the thick journal...ripping page after page out to throw them across the room. I'd tried the walls, drawing over damp cobblestone...surrounding me in the failed attempts that stared back with their unreal proportions, messy outlines and mismatched scales. None of them looked right.

The artist's nightmare. My mane had collapsed around my head in the damp environment, still soaking from dragging myself out of the water earlier.

I was livid. Terrified and in anguish of the mind, frenziedly tearing the charcoal across the paper so hard it sometimes tore. My shaky tooth ached, my entire face bulged from Noose's strike and made the very act of drawing hurt. But I couldn't stop...I couldn't...*I couldn't!*

It all came to one horrid lashing of my hooves in an explosion of feelings that I simply couldn't comprehend. The charcoal stick went flying as I simply sat and screamed at the blank pages...at why this had to happen to me. Why something as simple as a legend to believe in could be torn away from my very soul like it had. Everything felt conflicted. I wanted to believe, but everypony kept telling me otherwise. I wanted to be the one strong pony who didn't lose hope...who denied it all and believed that the truth would emerge later. But I couldn't deny that it had taken grip of me too...

The Stable Dweller had fallen to the wasteland like so many had before.

Simply sitting still, I closed my eyes...trying to remember her. To remember that look on her face as she defied Red Eye...climbed from the Pit...

I could still see it, still believe in that memory. But *why couldn't I draw it?* My body began shaking, building with the frustration and sheer self anger at my inability to save her memories back to the hero I once thought I knew. To fall in love with a *legend* and then have it shattered...it...it was just so...so...

“UNFAIR!”

Screeching the word, I picked up the journal, hurling it across the room to clatter against the wall. It bounced, rolling on the spine back within reach. Simply furious, feeling the red mist of a cruel life and corrupting wasteland fall across my belief in heroes, I picked it up. If...if they weren't true then *nothing* was! What was life without ponies who could be better?

I dragged it outside the workshop, grabbing it up in my hooves near the frothing waterline that I'd come down. If I'd lost my ability to draw, then what was the point of owning this thing that would only serve to remind me of a lost hero?! I'd just be rid of it. Give up and only rely on those I knew I could trust, my friends! Only what I could see...not what I could dream of. Lifting the journal, I drew back my front legs and...and...

I threw it...back into the workshop. I couldn't bring myself to do it...to lose it all forever. But I ran after it, standing over the journal as though it had personally insulted me.

“*Why won't you let me draw you?!*” I simply screamed at it, knocking open the pages to work after work I'd done of LittlePip. “WHAT'S WRONG?!”

The pictures offered no response. Eventually reaching the latest, scrawled and pitiful attempt. My hoof thumped into it again and again. Eventually, the hardship and tiredness of my body caught up to me, twisting the anger and bile into a hot fevered episode of retching and clutching my stomach. Blood speckled from my mouth...landing across the drawing's page. I just couldn't stop trying to fight some dread realisation that perhaps I was just a dying slave in Fillydelphia...desperately trying to end his life with some sort of hope by believing a lie.

Shivering, tightly hugging myself, I slowly drew my head up and pulled my mane from my eyes. Above me, a noise had ceased...the slow thudding of the rain above ground had eased off. It was time to

move...I needed to get to Weathervane and have my ingredients mixed up into RadAway. Moving slowly, carefully, I simply packed and left, leaving all the ruined paper to slowly mould and dissolve behind me forever.

Keep moving...just keep moving and believing. They were wrong, even if I was worried...they were *wrong*. I'd show them all someday. I would.

* * *

Flowerpot greeted me in his usual fashion. The lack of the oncoming tirade of cursing to shut him up gave rise to the thought that Weathervane wasn't down here at the moment. As such, I let myself in...the radiation of the trip into the basement had already made my chest feel swollen and painful. Flowerpot's howling screams and slams on the reinforced door only made my head hurt worse.

His lab was much barer than I had last seen it...presumably Weathervane had to have used his supplies to aid ponies from the Mall. I searched in vain for any RadAway or even RadPurge...but none were kept down here any longer. Just a mass of beakers and glasses filled with liquids I didn't dare touch. The silver magic orb was still sat upon the research table, sparkling and gently glowing with barely contained medical power. If only it could have healed me...

My legs were weakening. I'd had to gallop twice on the way over to avoid groups of ponies who'd heard me and come to investigate. They hadn't spotted me...but it'd been terrifying enough. As such, I simply pulled myself onto the main stretcher and lay down on my side, wheezing hard on an enclosed throat. Still dripping wet, I felt the blanket soak under me and drip off the sides onto the vinyl flooring.

My eyes spotted the photoframe of Sundial and his father on Weathervane's desk. I tried to just focus on that...on better times. He looked so happy...innocent under that overgrown blonde mane, a lot like Caduceus' had been, only bushier and clean. It was enough to make me want to forget everything...forget I was sick and dying in slave labour two hundred years into his future amidst a ruined damn *wasteland*. Why...why couldn't I have had his...his life...

My eyes felt heavy, the dizziness kicking in even worse. Even as I felt my exhaustion and injuries catching up, I just kept looking at him. At least for now I could believe in his fun times and pretend that when I woke up I'd be just awakening from this whole nightmare once and for all.

Instead, I had a sharp pain in my front left leg to startle me away from sleep.

Colour and light flashed back to me so quickly I actually jerked and choked on a bit of saliva that went down the wrong way. Firm hooves kept me pinned down.

"Fucking calm it! Stay down!" The raspy tone was recognisable...oddly comforting and expected by now. I took a deep breath...before settling down and raising my leg.

"Had to put you on intravenous RadAway drip from that stuff you brought in, it'll do more for you than just ingesting the drinkable version, but it won't be as comfortable. You needed the rest, so just take it. Stay lying there till the drip's done. Now roll over and let me get a look at those wings."

Wiping the sweat of fear from my brow, I nodded, lethargically pulling myself onto my front. The drip feed was injected into my leg all right, giving an uncomfortably painful swelling in my veins as the liquid passed into me. Weathervane trotted around to where I could see him. The doctor looked haggard, no doubt run off his hooves. Rubbing my eyes, I blinked and refocussed on him.

"T-thank you...for before and...and for now." I wasn't sure what else to bring up. Really, I still felt empty and rotten at my failed drawing attempts.

"In the job description when I signed on to that Ministry in the first place, kid. You've done me good bringing that stuff though...and that swamp donkey in the stores told me they had none of it fucking left either. I'll go crack some heads up their own arses later about it. Now...how are you coping?"

I sniffed. "N-not well...I can barely get food, they keep it so locked up! Every slave wants me...The

Master almost caught me...I lost a friend and the high ranking slavers got me involved in some big game of theirs now. I...I can't do this! I can't live like a rat in a sewer from day to day, perpetually running away!"

One of my wings was painfully yanked out. Squeaking loudly, I looked around to see Weathervane moving each feather in turn, swivelling it in the base joint. The wing was dead...I couldn't do anything with its movement. But...but it didn't hurt as much as it once might have.

"Well...for all that activity, these have settled the atrophied muscles pretty damn well."

He quickly jerked it to one side, making my yell and tear up. I shot him a harsh glance.

"Apparently not completely yet...well, this sort of shitty injury so early will take a lot of effort to heal up. That bastard must have really done a number on you. Speaking of...you aren't the only winged one I've treated recently..."

I felt confused for a second. Another pegasus? Or, wait!

"Ragini?"

"That's her...those fucknuggets in the Mall didn't mess around. I could repair the damage, similar to yours. But, I'm sorry to say...she'll never fly again. Too much trauma in too short a time, plus one of the fuckers actually struck her wing *base* and tore it apart so badly the only thing connecting it to her body was her *skin*."

I felt my torso shiver. Ragini was a foul creature who clearly hated me...but anypony (or griffin) with wings could relate to that sort of hurt. I certainly could. The feeling of being held down and my wing stretched over a cold anvil still was far too icy and real for comfort...

I spent the next half hour under Weathervane's care; telling him, often through tears, about what had happened to me and just letting it all out. The doctor didn't often seem to care, but he at least listened. He gave me something that made me throw up again and again, ejecting dull water into a pan and making my lungs feel a little clearer. An ointment smothered cloth was rubbed against my bruises, taking the edge off the injury. To my surprise, he even permitted me a small healing potion to keep my ribs from bruising over.

Eventually, I found myself explaining about Unity...that caught his attention more.

"Mm, well...I can certainly relate there, kid. Sending Sundial off to that Stable was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Watching him go and knowing that it was the last time. It's not easy...but at least you got to say goodbye."

The double impact of discussing Unity and hearing him referring to Sundial hit me hard. I wanted to tell him how I'd not given up on her yet...but I simply couldn't find it in myself to continue that line of questioning. Instead...I just sighed and lay down, finding *any* way to change the subject from a potentially dangerous one about his son.

"Doctor Weathervane...have...have you ever believed in somepony really *really* strongly...and then just had it taken away from you?"

The ghoul had been moving back to his desk to wait out my drip feed. But he stopped, turning his head and lowering his eyes.

"You heard that one, huh?" His voice was, for once, oddly soft and caring. I simply nodded.

Sighing, Weathervane turned and sat in his chair.

"Yes, you could say that. Most ponies like me could. Two hundred fucking years and you'll see a lot of ponies rise and fall, see the wasteland corrupt them or force them to do things that no good pony would ever dare. But that's not the ones I mean...for me it came *long* before."

His horn lit, dragging a cabinet open and pulling from it an old rotted piece of paper on a wooden backboard, bearing a pink ribbon. I couldn't read any of it, but I saw the symbol of three butterflies emblazoned upon it.

"My certificate to become one of the leads at the Fillydelphia Ministry of Peace. Signed by one of

them. Means a lot, to go up and shake the hoof of somepony who looks just as nervous...just as real as anypony you'll ever meet. To see a hero face to face and hear them thank you for your service. To see two of her friends, two other heroes of Equestria, waiting in the background and attending the ceremony. Makes you really start to think you can make a difference if you just keep believing in them. Not just those three either..."

His milky eyes seemed to waver in their sockets, before he blinked and reasserted them.

"Six times, even. Six ponies, who told us they would save us all and stop the war. Not necessarily win, just *stop*. Every single day, as I treated pegasi who'd had their wings torn off or eyes shattered under cracking visors, I thought of them. Every time I pulled closed the zip on one more lost young soul, I thought of them. *Every. Fucking. Time...* that I had to go to the parents and explain to them why I couldn't save their *child*, I thought of those six. Trusted them...believed in them. We had faith in the medical side, we all did. Fluttershy was, at least from what I saw, the most determined of them all to do better. You know, one day she brought us into this hall in Canterlot's Ministry of Peace hub...stood up and told such a speech that if anypony who cared today heard it...it'd change their entire fucking life. About how we had to do *better*. To be the good ponies in a world turning bad. We believed it. We strived for years believing it, taking comfort in that they were always doing the right thing."

Weathervane turned, looking at the certificate for a long time. Before, without warning, he simply hurled it across the room to clatter into the darkness. I was sure it bent.

"Bunch of piss damned nonsense. In the end, one of them turned our lives into a non-stop worry over who was watching. One built even *more* weapons. One banned books and learning from our schools if they didn't fit the 'image' they wanted. One did near enough fucking *nothing*. Even Twilight Sparkle got involved in some serious shit no-pony wanted to be a part of. When me and my colleagues got calls to rush out and help somepony with 'unidentified alterations' at the Arcane Ministry then told to keep quiet about the shit that we saw? That was bad enough to make you wanna go feral to just forget it. But Fluttershy..."

He stopped, as though realising something he was about to say. Then he just shook his head and inclined a hoof to the silver orb.

"I helped work on the spells to amplify magic for healing. We all knew it could be used for other things. Let's just say, even if I wasn't one of the core team and even if I'm not sure who exactly did it, I know my own projects when I see them."

The ghoul glanced in the mirror.

"And I saw it pretty fucking well. Point is, kid, legends don't last. They're only legendary for the time it takes for people to see the shit that comes with being that important. We all had to endure the downfall of six great ponies, ones I'd watched save my world numerous times before. If you want my advice, put the girl out your mind, son. It'll only come back again and again to clamp down on your ass until it drives you insane."

His magic pulled the drip from my leg. I hadn't even noticed it finished, so the sudden sting made me squeak. Wandering over, Weathervane wrapped the bleeding hole in gauze.

"I've seen it enough times in these wastes. Take it from somepony who's seen a dozen bright sparks turn into bastards, a hundred believers become ruined fucking shells. If you're proven right about believing in her, then it happens...but don't hold hope for the impossible. You're trying for enough insane shit with your life as it is."

"But I-"

"Murk."

His steely gaze met mine as I twisted painfully off the stretcher. My complaint was lost in my throat.

"Six of the greatest mares in Equestrian history, ones who saved the world more than once...they fell, made mistakes...became what they weren't. If they couldn't maintain what they were, what hope does one little mare from a Stable stand? Legends have to end eventually...take comfort in what she gave you, no more. Now...there are ponies close to you who need your presence."

“H-huh?”

“Your friend, Glimmerlight. She asked if I could send you to her at the Mall if I ever saw you. The Master has them all camping outside till it's repaired, so you should be able to get in to her no problem.”

“The...The Master said he would be seeing Grindstone or something...”

“Even better. I think it's about your plan. I imagine you'll want to see her anyway.”

Yes! I really did. *She* would know what to say to help me! Glimmerlight always knew the best things to keep us all optimistic and happy...even if I'd likely have to be embarrassed to make it happen. That at least brought a small surge of hope to me.

“I'll...I'll go right now! Before the rain starts!”

Weathervane nodded gently. Wandering into the corner, I saw him lift the certificate and unbend the crease. The pink ribbon had fallen off.

“Harmony fell...Harmony failed. The faith of an entire *realm* destroyed. Don't make the same mistake we did by believing in mere ponies, Murk. I don't want to see that pain hit you hard if it turns out to be true in the same way it did for me. Even now I feel it at the back of my mind...making me angrier than I used to be, more...feral. An animal inside trying to make me remember it all and fall into the darkness, to get angry enough that I'll just stop caring about anything and become one of *them*.”

I didn't move. It was the first time I'd ever heard him talk of any real danger of falling to the feral mindset. I just bit my lip, unsure what to say. The way he spoke...it was like even just one more horrid event or truth could drive him over that edge. That caring and sticking to his goals was all that kept him going these days. I couldn't ever tell him...it hurt...but I couldn't let him know, it would break him...

“Now get the hell out of here...you don't want Shackles coming back to the Mall on you.”

I was about to leave...but one thing came to my mind, making me turn back and start digging in my pockets. Weathervane, sat amongst his picture frames, almost looked angry at my insistence to stay. But I kept digging, before I brought out the Twilight orb, placing it upon its stand. The ghouls' eyes widened as the whispering illuminations forming in the air intertwined and shifted together into star shapes and projected the form of one of the ponies he had once believed in.

“I don't know who you are or where you found this, nor how long has passed since I recorded it. Aurora Star has promised that they do not break easily...so this could be as far as I might imagine into the future. So please, allow me to introduce myself...”

Backing away as I saw the old father stand and lower his head a little in respect...I left him to the message, praying that it might do something, *anything* to help him find some way to push back the fall into a feral a little more...

* * *

Around the Mall lay a hasty mesh fence and shanty town of tents and old shacks. Apparently, everypony was living out here now that the inside was under repairs to prevent entire floors from collapsing or ensure better security. I could see work teams on the roof edges, hoisting up materials via shackled groups on the ground pulling as beasts of burden. Others dragged slates of rubble out the front doors. Many others simply lay under flimsy cover, shivering and sniffing after the drenching they no doubt had to endure. They had wrapped themselves in anything they could to stave off the burning rain. The guards watched the new perimeter, observing from quick built towers above the slave grounds. The new slave camp seemed to extend right around the Mall.

But the Mall itself...it had already changed. From the dull yet grand scale of concrete and sheet metal, it had now been repaired and rebuilt using all a manner of rusted metals that now covered the holes. Multiple layers of pipes formed barriers to the scaffold walks that ran around the entire building, topped with mesh as a crude roof. Pits had been dug in the earth surrounding it, covered over with corrugated steel and weighed

down by thick slabs of rock. I could hear the cries of those who had been left in them. Solitary confinement, I guessed. From many of the holes in the Mall, red ash belched forth from...incinerators? I dreaded to think why The Master needed *those*. I hadn't really thought about how much the Mall had begun to mean something to me as a better place under Protégé...with its shelter and more regular food. But now to see it becoming the same red hell of steel, pipe, ash and chainlink fence as the rest of Fillydelphia made the city feel all the more cramped than it already did...

It became quickly clear to me, viewing from a nearby second floor of a building, that The Master had brought his own hidden stock out to join the Mall. There were far more slaves here than had survived the riots. At least it afforded me better cover. It wasn't a difficult matter to get in, now I had my battle saddle's grappling hook.

Glimmerlight wasn't hard to spot in such a slave containment, sitting towards a corner of the enclosed area. I could see two tents, one large beside her and the other much smaller, set up just beside it where she now rested, fiddling with something in her hooves. Hobbling for all I was worth through the stodgy remains of the Mall's decorative garden, I moved toward her.

The huge cheer, however, grabbed my attention.

Off toward the Mall, closer to the entrance there was a large congregation of slaves and slavers. The cheer had been preceded by a sharp *tunk* of something striking a wooden surface hard. I noticed it was only the slavers whooping...what was going on over there?

I saw The Master's assistant, that wiry pony. A group of burly earth pony slavers had many of the slaves lined up beside him near a small table. The slaver sitting beside it in tattered green barding was grinning like a lunatic. A rather exhausted looking earth pony slave wandered away from him, dejected.

"Who's *next*?" His voice rattled out, loud and tinged with malicious glee. The slaves seemed to look at one another, before one of them gulped and moved forward to sit opposite the slaver. Oh Goddesses...please tell me the guards hadn't gotten a taste for Six Shooter Surprise! With a thump, I saw him rest one hoof on the table to...

...hoof wrestle? *Huh?* All right then...

As far as slavers went, that seemed fairly benign, which of course only gave rise to me feeling like I'd missed something here. I continued toward Glimmerlight, aiming to duck into the tent and hide from them as soon as I could...

My friend was sat alone, her initiate robes pulled close. Her head wasn't up as I approached, instead it just hung low, toying with a clear little sphere between her hooves. Beside her, hooked to an old sign was an odd contraption made out of some rubber hose, rusted piping and what seemed to be a few layers of cloth. Water still dripped into a small mug below it. Had Glimmer managed to rig up something to purify the rain of its acid? She still didn't seem too happy though, occasionally lifting the sphere before sighing and letting it drop again. Even from here, I could hear her stomach growling and see the weary look of a pony been thrown through the grind far too many times in too short a period.

"Hey, sis?" I used our little shared acknowledgement, feeling a surge of delight when she sharply looked up and smiled at me approaching. It didn't take long for me to rush forward into her embrace, before she pulled me inside the tent to hide. Holding me by the shoulders, her tired face lit up a little as she glanced me over.

"A grapplegun and a disguise...you really are coming into your own, Murky. It's such a relief to know you're all right. You know I don't like to act all...well...nervous, but I've been worried sick! When I heard they were hunting you. Hell, even when I saw you fall in the Mall I...I swear my heart stopped. I didn't even know you'd gone up to fight Barb with Protégé. I'm so proud of you, taking him out probably saved all our lives."

I flushed a little, but gladly accepted the happiness in knowing that merely visiting her from my outlaw status was something to help cheer her up too. But the more I looked at her, the more it began to settle in. Her stomach was drawn, her limbs thin and small flecks around her lips betrayed a lack of proper sustenance

and aid. After a moment...I could see she was clearly thinking the same about me.

Somehow...it made us both chuckle and lie together once again. Just having her here...knowing that for these few minutes we could be reassured the other was, broadly, fine made things seem a little better. We spent a little time talking, letting me get out a lot of what I wouldn't dare tell Weathervane or feel he'd understand. I told her about Unity and The Master's attempts. About Sunny and my desperate attempts to survive. Glimmerlight seemed interested in Unity being unable to remember, suggesting if it was anything like her own problems. But I shook my head, Unity wouldn't have forgotten him on purpose. Her entire *thing* was bringing ponies together.

Something wasn't right with Glimmer's voice as she talked though, it lacked that spark the moment we crossed onto the issue of memory. Where were the embarrassing jokes? The old stories of rampant casual pleasure? Shifting around, I tried to force a little assertiveness into me, I couldn't let friendship be a one way thing here. I watched her sit back, toying with that orb again in her hooves and occasionally staring at it, biting her lip as though fighting some temptation.

Then it struck me, something that in such a rush and having Unity to talk to about it had slowly lessened for me. She hadn't had anypony to really talk about losing Caduceus with yet...

“Sis? I...I'm sorry about-”

She interrupted me, her eyes not leaving the orb.

“Murky...please. I...I don't deal with events not being extracted too well yet. I've just been trying to think on it, well...a little peripherally. I don't think I'm ready to really talk about it yet. About poor Caddy...”

I just nodded slowly, feeling a little upset that I'd asked something she didn't want to discuss. Instead, I heard her sigh and look across to me.

“There's a bit of a giant minotaur in the room here, Murky. You...you heard the radio?”

Gradually, she began to catch my eye and clearly see the ton sadness within. I nodded, clutching my belly, feeling both the journal and my LittlePip Statuette in their pockets.

“It's not the end of you believing in her, y'know? Like the DJ said...they still don't know quite what happened.”

Sighing, I lowered my head onto my front hooves and nodded. If I could get through this without crying, I'd be happy.

“I know...but no-pony else does. They keep saying she's...she's turned bad! That the wasteland got to her and really messed her up...that she slaughtered an entire settlement! I keep telling myself that...that it's a lie and I try to draw her and make it all better but I j-just...just can't...”

Well...so much for getting through it without crying. I felt her hoof wrap around me.

“We've still got each other, Murky. If you can't feel you can trust her yet, you can trust in us for now until you know the truth. If it's worth anything, I don't think she's gone yet. It's too...sudden, y'know?”

Her hoof lifted my head up gently, before kissing my forehead.

“No matter what, you *saw* her escape that Pit. You *saw* her defy Red Eye and escape Fillydelphia. That's the bit that matters to you and *no-one* will ever take that away from you.”

Just as I'd hoped...Glimmerlight *always* knew what to say. Feeling a smile creep onto my face, my tears more of relief and a little happiness than outright mental anguish anymore. I pressed my head against her neck, hugging her briefly.

“Thank you...” I simply murmured it. The pain wasn't gone, the worry and turmoil the news report had stirred in my heart still present. But Glimmer's words had taken the edge off it for now.

“Now...we've got other stuff to worry about. Now, get comfy at the back and I'll explain. We've not got any food...Shackles took all of it and I can't get to our hidden stash inside yet, but I've got some purified water from the little doodad I hooked up. You look like you need some...”

She wandered to the entrance, humming to herself. The transition from somber pony trying to help me to the swaggering mare I knew seemed almost shocking, like she was just shoving everything to the back of her mind briefly. Either that, or looking at some of the memory orbs hanging from her bags...I began to worry over what details of the Mall might already have been put away for good. I remembered what Coral had said...that I would come back here to find Glimmer doing the same things all over again...

“Took a little work to get it going, really. You wouldn't *believe* how hard it is to get a hold of a rubber hose in this place. Almost had to use some latex if you know what I mean.”

I really didn't.

“So, while we get this thing working...I've been looking through those metro plans and comparing them to the map we found in Protégé's office. That station that Aurora bought out for the Ministry to keep underground? Turns out it's actually a bit of a weird one, not really in the inner *or* outer circles. It's sort of between them, hence why I thought it was in the, uh, inner. Doesn't change the plan though, that we need to get down there, find the place this unfinished station was placed, dig through to it from the inner, then dig into the outer from the Ministry Station and escape! Simple, eh?”

“I hope so...”

“I *know* so. Just perfect, even gives us a staging post, y'know? We could get you, me, Brim, Coral and her son; Unity and her buck...even Sunny. Hell, you can even bring Protégé if you seduce him in time.”

The metal mug I'd been fetching to hand to her dropped from my hooves and clattered off the rocks upon the ground.

“I...I...but...what...*huh?*”

“Oh don't *worry*...I can give you all the advice you'll need on just where bucks like to be-”

“But...but I don't...I like mares...”

The look she gave me was very homely. Unspoken. 'I know, just go with the humour, stay bright.' Picking up the mug in her magic, she began squeezing the filthy looking water into it. I guess 'purified' was all a matter of scale in this place. All the same, I eagerly accepted a chance to get some real fluid into me. Even the metallic and sickly taste wasn't enough to keep the lukewarm water from settling a lot of the dryness in my throat. Rejoining me, Glimmer pulled over the metro map.

“You know where this is in Fillydelphia?”

“Mhm...”

“Well,” she began, “this is what I needed you here for. I can't be sure, but I think this is perhaps the closest metro station to what I guess we'll call 'The Ministry Station.' You being an outlaw actually works out for us, keeps you away from that *bastard* in charge here and gives you a chance to scout out our route ahead of time. I was hoping you could use your sneaky-sneakiness to sneak into the metro and sneak around a bit, real sneaky like, see?”

Glancing my eyes along the map, I could see that the station was somewhere near the Ministry itself. No wonder Glimmer had chosen it. It did seem the most likely place that one Aurora wanted would be located, if any. Already I felt a little scared, but I'd done worse by now...underground where it was all dark seemed much my sort of place to sneak around in. Not to mention, the feeling of actively preparing for our escape was beginning to come back.

We'd get out...get *everypony* out...then I'd go find LittlePip and prove it was all wrong...

My attention however, was drawn to another slam of hoof on wood and the rowdy cheer of the slavers.

“Next *victim!*” The slaver's voice bellowed above it all. Another pony wandered off with a despairing face.

“What are they doing over there?” I poked my head out to look at them, seeing the ponies involved looking wretched, drawn out and staggering. Glimmerlight sighed, shaking her head.

“Hoof wrestling, gambling. If they win they get a free break from a shift and an extra meal. Something many of us need to survive right now. Shackles has thrown us on triple shifts, I just got off an eight hour one and I'm back on in another twenty minutes. Trying to win at their little game is his way of taunting us to try and get slapped down again...”

She clutched her own stomach with a hoof. I could hear the gurgling quite clearly, if the ragged expression on her face wasn't obvious enough. Indeed...Glimmer looked a little weak on her hooves.

“...if they lose...?”

Glimmerlight bit her lip, as though pondering whether to tell me or not. Eventually, watching the one pony drop under his corrugated shelter after losing, she looked down to me.

“The losers have to pull an extra shift under somepony else, chosen by *Shackles* of all ponies. He sometimes mentions mines. The ones that return just looked wasted, more than most of us. Goddesses...I knew I wanted a slim figure but even I'm starting to want to put on a few pounds, Murky.”

The joke fell a little flat between us, but took the edge off the extortion The Master had going through his teams.

Glimmerlight filled another mug for herself, before telekinetically drawing it across. The teasing of sustenance was only making my own drawn underside groan in need, though. Pressing a hoof to it, feeling my own ribs far more than anypony should, I just fell to the side. Oh, what I'd do for another apple stew from Protégé right about now...

I looked up at Glimmer toying with her scrap-built filter again. Her eyes were focused, as though trying to forget her own hunger and deteriorating body by stint of just getting on with it. How could this mare have sold out a village to raiders? I had to ask Brimstone on the side sometime...he'd know something about it if he'd led the clan. Had somepony lied to Coral about what she'd done? But then...why did she erase the memory?

Moreover, I began to worry if the same light that she was in my life would remain the same without her coping mechanism. To imagine her falling from being anything other than an energetic radiance of goodness in my life hurt terribly to imagine. She saw me looking up as she had her front hooves above her with the filter. Trying to force a smile on, she leaned down to ruffle my head once more.

“You get any news on Protégé? Rather have him in charge than, well...you know.”

I nodded gently. “He's lost command of the Mall. Weathervane says he's really badly hurt...”

“So I saw when they wheeled him out. I guess he really is a nicer guy than I maybe gave credit. The way he tried to keep you in the game or defend you once he made his move. He seems like he has this absolute determination to protect slaves, you in particular. Reminds me...he said something about spending two years to know about that breaking wall? Any idea? You think he was-”

Again, I nodded curtly, cutting her off. Quietly, I explained what I now knew, much to Glimmerlight's surprise. Clearly...she hadn't anticipated much from the chances of actually succeeding in the two year task. To think how much Protégé had pushed through it and judging by the way he seemed only slightly older than me, he must have been a little younger when it started too.

Glimmer sat mystified, but oddly relaxed. Finally, rubbing her chin, she shrugged a little, looking down at me.

“Well, if anything...good sign, right? He knows the problems we have. Makes it a little easier to want him back in power. Heck...part of me even wonders if he'd even be willing to offer what inside help he could. We've got more ponies than we thought to get out now.”

That was true...Coral had said as much as well. Herself and her son. There were at least two other ponies I knew I needed to fetch at some point too. Clearly Glimmerlight was still building water supplies for us here and I'd have been surprised if Brimstone wasn't up to something...but we'd need much more supplies the more ponies we brought into this.

“I think I'd like Protégé on top of the Mall operations again. At least he got us food inside our stomachs...you agree?” She clutched her stomach again.

Sadly, I just nodded, sighing. “Mhm...yeah, I'd like him on top, so I can get something inside me too.”

There was a rather sudden pause from Glimmerlight. Curious, I looked up to find her straining to clearly not erupt into laughter, snorting gently and biting her lip while looking at me. Eventually, she could hold it no longer, falling to the side and roaring with laughter.

“Oh, you are *too easy* sometimes! HAHA! Oh Goddesses that's just classic!”

“What?! *WHAT?!*” I stood up in the tent, protesting. What? What had I-

...oh. *Very* quickly, I found myself blushing fiercely.

Under the almost ear-splitting sound of my friend at least acting a little more joyful again, I took refuge in the mug of water instead. Still snorting to herself, thanking me for helping her to at least laugh properly for the first time since the battle, she went back to work on her contraption.

“Just finish your drink before you go anywhere, Murky...truth be told I'd rather you be here for all you could be while *he's* away...I hate thinking of you all alone out there.”

For the next few minutes, accompanied only by the cheers of those slaves desperate for food trying to take on The Master, we were left to ourselves.

The thick stomping of somepony very big was all that eventually brought us up to take notice when Brimstone Blitz returned from his shift hauling the pulley systems to the roof.

Trotting toward the larger tent, he dumped a bag of large tools from his back and thumped the ground with his four hooves, stretching them out. Dour faced, he just gruffly nodded to me about my return.

Apparently...that was all I'd get from him. But by now I knew even an acknowledgement meant a lot from the big guy. I nodded back, a little hesitantly. Smiling thinly to her hulking protector, Glimmerlight came back into the tent to tinker with a piece of machinery. Carefully watching around, I crept over to Brimstone's tent a few feet away instead.

I was pretty sure Brimstone spotted me wanting to talk, shaking the dust and ash out of his tent flooring by tossing the ragged thin cotton blanket around, he just glanced back over again. Clearly, he read something on my face about some apprehension to ask this...

“Somethin' got you skittish about me, kid?”

Squeaking on the spot, prompting a confused little glance from Glimmer, I shook my head frantically.

“No! No, no...nothing! Just...”

My head wandered over to Glimmerlight, still humming away to herself and working on the filter to eek out what she could from it. Her eyes, I noticed, kept glancing down to that one empty orb beside her pack. I dearly wanted to talk about it with her...but I couldn't force the subject. She may not have loved Caduceus...but those two had been, as far as newly met friends could be, close. In here...that counted for a lot. Shaking my head, I looked back at Brimstone again.

“Just...you...you destroyed her village.”

“My *clan* did that. I just turned up to get the best loot. Clan was bloody big, kid, hundred plus ponies and other folks too. Not to mention any raider groups we knocked into line. That village was one of half a dozen places in the area we turned over that day, wasn't my raid to lead. Recognised her only *after* I'd saved her the first time...didn't know her name before that. Just another lass in a cage far as I cared in the wastes...”

His words slowed, a little more painful as he reminisced on how he had seen her before Fillydelphia.

“So if you're wondering if I know what that other unicorn means about her betraying them, I'm not the one to go to. All I heard was they found the place, not how. That was enough for me to tell them to go nut it over.”

“Hey, you two done swapping stories of drunken adventures over there?” Glimmerlight dropped from the filter, turning back to us. “Cos you know, I'm not exactly *excluded* from that club, remember? Still to tell you the time I climbed Friendship City's spires drunk while singing the Carol of Hearth's Warming Eve!”

I *prayed* my face didn't look too suspicious. She likely would understand...but I couldn't bring it up for her. Not now.

“No! No, uh...I was just asking Brimstone about the past!” There...that was still kinda true. “Like, um, how he lost his ear!”

The look Brimstone gave me spoke *volumes*.

“Oh? Huh, I've not heard that one either. Well, come on, out with it big guy!”

He shrugged, turning away from me and sitting down with a dull thump, apparently consigned to tell the story to pass the time.

“Good while back now...bunch of the clan and I were off teaching a small gang a lesson for claiming they owned a part of *our* territory near Ponyville. Dealt with those wee arseholes easy enough...but on the way back, the dozen of us on the trip thought we'd make a run at a settlement, see what we could pick off. New Appleloosa...that was it.”

“That's a bit out of your way...” Glimmer cocked his head, making her still damp mane slide over her face. “New Appleloosa's a fair distance from Ponyville.”

“Not for us. Could gallop for a whole day and still pound somepony into red paste. Anyway, we never went near it...but we did spy this one little caravan coming from the town over a gulley...figured we'd just take it. Well...that was a mistake.”

“Oh?” I couldn't help but feel curious...any story of the wastes interested me. The place I always wanted to be free in...

“Sniper. Some little arse with a dual shot rifle, probably a saddle, playing hero from on high, higher than any hill I can tell you that. Never did see no-pony, but the first bullet went right between my armour plates...the second took off my ear. Two hits at long range...fuckin' good shot. Put me right down, scared off the rest of them when I went to the ground. We pulled back. Was fightin' off challengers for leadership for a whole damned month after that...”

“Damn, Brim...” Glimmer muttered, whistling lightly, “can't say I particularly feel the sympathy, but sniping with a twin gunned battle saddle? Impressive stuff.”

Brimstone just grunted. “Guess it's good they kept me from doing something I'd regret today.. Just not sure if I want to shake his hoof for stopping me or nut the bastard into oblivion for giving me hearing problems the rest of my life.”

I tilted my head, speaking up. “I didn't know you had hearing problems...”

“What?”

“I said, I didn't know you had...oh...”

Spotting Brimstone grinning and winking down at me as well, I just rolled my eyes and dropped onto my knees, realisation setting in. Oh come on...why couldn't I be smart and witty too?

Only then did I spot Glimmerlight snorting, mouthing 'too easy' once again.

Thunk! “Ha! Next up!”

The slaver's voice echoed up, accompanied by another of the regular cheers from the slavers. Their game was still going. I saw Brimstone raise his head to watch them...before grinning and getting up.

“I'll be right back...”

Trotting his way down the gentle slop toward the walls of the Mall, I found Glimmerlight and I watching each other. A slow grin came over her face before we both upped and began following at a fair

distance. She followed Brim, while I lightly hopped between tents, eventually settling in an unoccupied one close by to the commotion. Pulling the cover over, I held my eyes up to a small gap left over, with Glimmerlight just outside the entrance. Really, I felt a little proud...I could really *do* this sneaky stuff sometimes...

They were still cheering, slapping hooves on the burly slaver's back while he grinned around. Others had joined, forcing some slaves forward who were meekly determined to try for the food that would keep them in a healthier state. Many were crying in the queue, knowing that the obvious hope of the slaver being tired out by the time they arrived for their turn was looking unlikely. But the moment Brimstone stomped in...the cheering fell to simple silence. In a moment of satisfaction, I saw the slaver turn a little pale. Without even waiting a turn, Brimstone sat himself down at the table.

“Hold it right there!”

Any positive hope I'd had jarred in my mind. The Master's voice cracked across the yard, before I saw him approach from the main gate...his immense bulk flanked by numerous weedy looking assistants that dragged checklists. Moving around the hoof wrestling table, he let his gaze fall to Brimstone. Shivering, I backed into the tent a little more. Oh Goddesses...he was meant to be somewhere! Or was that tomorrow? I couldn't remember...oh dear...oh dear...

“The great heroes of the Mall come try their luck at the food-hoof wrestle, eh? Good for you. Oh...and don't think I can't see you standing at the back there, Ranger. Don't you worry...I'll find something for you to do soon enough. Could always use a *personal* assistant while I'm hunting for my pet...hehe...”

No! Even I could feel the shot of fear go through Glimmerlight. Imagining what he'd done to Sunny, but to my best friend! To my sis! Goddesses, Celestia and Luna in your power protect her!

“Hold on one second.”

Brimstone's voice slid right in, effortlessly sharing the authority of the scene. I saw at least a dozen ponies step back from the two of them...the two largest ponies in the area when one had defied the other.

“You set this up, this gamble for a free shift and food. I'm not doing this for *me*.” Brimstone cast a glance back, right toward my friend. “I'm doing it for her. I lose, she gets that extra shift...I win and she stays away from *you* for a day longer.”

Brimstone's glance threw a stare back at Shackles behind the wrestling slaver.

The Master didn't even stop grinning, a hoof tapping the slaver before him on the shoulder. “Could say that's bending the rules there, eh? In that case let us make a substitution...”

The hoof hurled the slaver off the chair as though it weighed nothing...along with the chair. With a sharp thump, he moved his own massive body into the space instead.

“Me.”

That was it. Around us, dozens of slaves and slavers were even dropping their work to cluster around. Very soon, I felt trapped...masses of ponies crowding around the tent to see the table where the two largest ponies I'd ever seen stared each other down. Was he really doing this? I had every confidence in Brimstone's strength but...but The Master would abuse every ounce of the winnings if he came out on top. Oh Brim...please know what you're doing...

Glimmerlight trotted forward to Brimstone.

“Brim...are you sure? Look, you *know* how Shackles works, he'll have something planned or know he would-”

“Glim.” The syllable didn't even include his eyes moving from the light green of his opponent. “Back off. You're hiding it well, but I know the first signs of starvation when I see it. You need the food and the time off after your injuries in the riots. Besides...”

His eyes squinted eyes.

“I've wanted to do this for a *long* time...”

“Sure you still have what it takes, old stallion? Hehe...” The Master cackled.

One of the slavers stepped up, signalling them to move their hooves forward. The Master did so first, slamming one front leg on the table with a sick grin. Brim's slapped into his to make a savage and tight grip immediately, accompanied by a sharp crack from their large bony hooves meeting. After Barb...I'd had *enough* of games to decide my friend's futures, even with it being Brim, part of me couldn't help but worry. Above, some slavers swung their searchlights from the scaffolding down onto the table, highlighting them under the hot rays. Cast in contrast, the crowd of slaves and slavers equally beginning to build up a frenzy for the expectant match were blacked out in the darkness of the post-storm Fillydelphia...me amongst their horrid singular moving black shadows.

“First hoof to hit the table loses! You go on three, no other limb movement and any interdiction from outside seen by me disqualifies the one benefiting! Take the strain!”

Muscles crunched, the judder of movement between the two set the tight strain prior to the start.

Brimstone looked like an unmoving rock, his entire body still and staring from a blank face. The Master just licked his pock marked lips with his tongue, grinning through yellowed teeth while shaking off his shoulders. The chain around his neck jingled...that metal collar he had attached to it swinging loosely to the side. As though sensing me watching, his other hoof just stroked it gently. I felt my stomach turn.

“One!” The crowd joined in. “*Two!*” The pair matched a hard glance.

“...*THREE!*”

The table actually shook from the sudden rush of power going under their legs up to the hooves on their ends. The crowd began screaming out, every slaver for The Master...most slaves just a general cheer. They didn't dare support The Master's opponent directly. I saw Glimmerlight stomp a hoof and smile as Brimstone's hoof gained the immediate advantage, getting the first push in to knock The Master's back a good few inches already. But it had stopped there...where they now strained and matched strengths.

“Come on raider...is a cheap first push all you have? Perhaps you're still wounded?”

Brimstone gave no reaction, simply keeping up the pressure. Despite his boast, The Master's hoof was slowly being pushed down. Shaking and gradual...Brimstone was like an advancing unstoppable *wall* of power that gave no ground. Muscles and veins bulged on both their legs as Brimstone brought him half way to the table, forcing on the advantage.

“Hgn...not bad...not bad...” To my horror, The Master just grinned. “...for a pony long past his prime. You're just an old stallion now, 'warlord', a relic of your own...sssh...history! Me? I'm still part of the present, headed to a future you can't stop!”

Their hooves ceased, before with a warping of his face and twitching of an eyebrow in strain, The Master began exerting his power. My mouth slowly began falling open as I saw him actually resist, match and then *push* backward, returning the battle closer to the middle. The slavers were deafening, stomping the thick mud up to splash my eyes and coat my...well...coat, with wet muck that flew in through the tent entrance. Squinting, I felt Glimmerlight and I wrap out two front hooves around one another in silent support under the flap. Brimstone wouldn't want us distracting him with cheers...but *come on...*

No...no...the denial entered my head as I saw Brimstone's hoof move past the centre, slowly losing ground. The Master's shoulders and body seemed larger than I'd ever imagined, bringing forth *far* more power than I'd ever thought that wide body ever possessed. Brimstone was taller and ripped upon every muscle on his body, while The Master was simply broad and had a certain squat power that belied his own large height and thickset torso. It dawned on me that though Brimstone was clearly stronger, The Master's physical stature may actually place him at a huge advantage in this particular game.

He *knew* that going in...of course, he never did anything without absolutely knowing. Whimpering, I just watched as Brimstone's huge muscles shook and strained to try and stop the gradual pressure of The Master's hoof pressing him past the half way point to losing.

“You're trying to protect the little whore with this, warlord?” The Master eyed Brimstone, receiving a harsh look in response. “Oh, I'm going to enjoy having her *all* to myself the moment I'm done here. I'm sure you know the feeling...raider. Hehehe...”

Oh boy...that did it. *That* did it.

Brimstone's hoof stopped on the spot, six inches from the table. Brimstone's eyes widened, baring his teeth as he reversed the momentum, stopping just short of the point of no return.

“She won't be yours, nor will *he*, not while I can change *anything* to try and keep anypony away from you, Shackles.”

A growing strength began building in his body. It became clear how much more he still had left to give as he began to lift The Master's hoof up...round past the half way point with apparent ease as he threw what seemed to be every bit of power he had into the game. Two of the biggest and strongest ponies together...but one showing just how outrageously powerful he could suddenly be. The Master seemed to be cut short of a comeback, sweat beading off of his head when his hoof was bent over...being forced down toward the table on the other side. Around me, the cheering had wisely stopped from the slaves, the slavers decrying Brimstone and stomping for their leader to up his game. To 'crush the raider.'

I began to feel a little elation, Brimstone was doing it! Glimmerlight was fearlessly cheering for him, hopping up on her hind legs to stomp with both front hooves.

Then I saw The Master's eyes once more...I saw the truth.

He wasn't desperate and losing...not at all. He'd wanted to give us *hope*.

“Not...bad...warlord...” His eyes remained on mine, grinning wider and wider as he struggled to keep Brimstone's power back. The raider was almost leaning over, snorting to finish this now. “Not...bad...at all...pity I've been holding back...*no-pony* beats me at this...”

The tables turned on the spot. His back seemed to arch, those massive shoulders under the plate armour twisting and bellowing out loud, The Master threw every ounce of his real untapped strength behind the game. Under the cheering of the slavers, Brimstone's hoof came back...back and back at a horrible rate. Struggling, I saw a drop of sweat actually drip from his forehead. The Master's new assault stalled...stammered, but then crushed down with unceasing power. Laughing out loud, he brought Brimstone's hoof over to the other side of the table...holding it above it...

“Last chance to win out, warlord! How's it feel to know you're past your time? All downhill from **here!**”

I saw Brimstone offer one last push...but The Master's hoof slammed down, dropping his weight and strength to throw Brimstone's hoof right down.

Tunk!

The crowd exploded in cheering. Bets that had been made changed hooves upon that one sound of the table being struck. I saw Glimmerlight stagger backward, feeling myself already trying to pull her away into the tent...to get her *away* from the Master before he came to claim my sister. She was...she was...*his*...for the day. No...no, *how* could Brimstone have lost? *HOW?*

“Hey, wait, what the **fuck?**”

The shout of the slaver overseeing the match sent a jolt of silence around, as everypony looked back at the pair. The Master was still straining, frowning, sweating and giving it his all.

Brimstone's hoof had simply *ceased to move* a half inch from the table. The noise had been his other hoof, tapping on the tabletop as though bored. Letting my eyes glance up, I saw him just staring with calm eyes. The sweat hadn't been exertion...it had been *heat* from the lamps on them. Had he just been *toying* with The Master? Then, he cleared his throat.

“So, we done warming up? You ready to play for real, Shackles?”

“What...you...”

“Three, two, one, go.” Brimstone deadpanned...before actually trying for the first time all along.

The muscles along his leg swelled, bulging like I'd never seen as the legendary warlord let a life's worth of grown strength and raw power flow. Snarling, letting that primal instinct take over to reach heights of irresistible energy combine with that massive earth pony spirit...he let fly with his real strength. Their hooves snapped over almost too fast for me to even follow, slamming down on the table hard enough to snap the entire thing in half and shatter pieces of wood across the crowd. Shackles was flung from his protesting chair, dumped on his side below Brimstone to collapse in the mud.

That...oh...*that* made the crowd go silent. The Master had just been defied. In public.

He swirled, roaring with rage to get to his hooves and stamp the floor, shoving a slaver who tried to help him away. I could hear him muttering below his breath as dozens of ponies decided to make themselves scarce...both slavers and slaves.

“Oh you fool...daring to do that...to try **embarrassing** your Master?!”

Rounding off to stare at Brimstone, he found the raider's steely gaze simply looking him in the eye. No-pony was near them, anticipating the outbreak of a serious incident. The Master looked ready to simply destroy him...but Brimstone didn't even blink. I saw my friend lean closer, almost whispering.

“You're going to *what* then? Punish me? You just *lost*, Shackles. Take it from a veteran...you don't hold your end of the bargain, you throw the toy out the pram? You'll lose more respect of your position than you'll ever recover with anger and fear alone.”

“So you 'protected' the mare...grand job, but I still have *you* to order around. Don't think you're free of 'repercussions' here, raider!”

I doubted many could hear them. I stood rock still, watching two of the most lethal ponies I knew in the middle of a heated argument. Oh this could be bad...this could be very bad...

“So you're going to...what? Give me extra shifts? I *welcome* them, Shackles! Execute me? I *deserve* it. Along with every torture, humiliation, punishment and sick little idea you could dream up, because it's *nothing* compared to what I did to Equestria over my life! You want to damage my body? Go ahead...you'll get nothing out of me. Make me work and I'll get the job done happily. Face it, Shackles...”

Their faces came close together.

“I'm the one pony you'll *never* be able to hurt. So you're going to have to just accept that...back off...and get the order to get Glim some food and a free day if you want to claw back *any* respect from your underlings.”

The Master's seething with an underlying rage I'd never seen him exude. This was no mere show of force...for once he was truly and utterly angry. But Brimstone merely met it with a cold glare.

Slowly...against all my belief, I saw The Master step to the side, snarling at Brimstone before barking to one of his subordinates to fetch some oatmeal for their tent. Sensing the real entertainment had passed, many of the ponies around had returned to work or shoving others to work. No-pony dared go near The Master as Brimstone turned, trotting back toward us with his eyes firmly (smartly, I presumed) set on him. He simply continued to growl, eyes occasionally glancing to the pale Glimmer, like she was a toy denied.

“Only until I *find* a way to hurt you, slave...hurt you *bad*...oh I'll find a way. Just you wait...you've made a mistake that will cost you someday with this...”

With that, he turned his thick bulk around, stomping off. I highly pitied whoever was next on his schedule. But what he'd said. That sounded like a threat...but The Master didn't make threats...Slit had told me as much.

Somehow...that only made it worse...

We were left alone until the food came, past a quick attempt to congratulate Brimstone from Glimmer. The

moment we had some much needed sustenance to share, even if it was sloppy and milky out of date oatmeal...we began to make plans. Brimstone and Glimmerlight detailed what we still had. The stashes inside were allegedly safe, just too important to risk bringing to the outdoor temporary camp. That meant we still had some food and drink, plus whatever Glimmerlight's filter could make from the last rainfall. Added into that were three spell-orbs that Glimmer had stolen from Protégé's desk and hidden deep in her own robes between the seams. In the rush for medical support...no-pony had really searched us. That and we'd been seen to be helping the slavers, I guessed that afforded some trust.

Including Barb's death and the pacification of the raiders...we might have called this a complete success now that we ended with more materials than we'd gone in with. But the looming depression of having lost somepony who said they'd help us kept reality in firm check. We were slaves...prone to punishment, labour and accident more than anypony.

But we did come to one conclusion...I still had a little space to work in, being on the run. Before too long had passed, it became clear I needed to make myself scarce. I couldn't hide in their tents forever before *somepony* came to fetch them for a shift.

“You remember the way? Just look for anything you can in that metro, Murky. Be it hiding spots, loose walls, locked doors...scout anything, draw it out if you can to a map.”

A pang of hurt shot down my spine. I couldn't draw *anything* right now...but I nodded, allowing Glimmer to saddle me up for leaving. But even as I approached the wall to grapple over it into the darkness...I felt her lunge forward to embrace me once more. I returned it...holding it for just a little while more...

“Maybe...maybe when you're back I can talk, Murky...just give me time, please...we can start on trying to help me remember then. Thanks for coming back.”

“I...I'll help you. I promised. Cross my heart...”

“...hope to fly.” She finished for me, leaning back to smile lightly, before ruffling my mane. “We'll see you around, Murky, stay safe out there.”

Stepping back, I separated from her. Brimstone gave another curt nod, as impassive as ever.

“Take care of her, please?”

“Always. We'll get by. You just concentrate on finding us a path to escape.”

It took a lot of effort to turn around...fire that grapple...and leave them behind under The Master's rule. Enough that I spent a little part of the journey letting it all out through my eyes...

* * *

The metro station lay before me. The journey across had been fairly easy, what with most slaves and slavers inside out of the rain earlier. Now, I hid in an overturned food cart across the street and cast my eyes to the metro itself. A skeleton of metal and rotted wood, it had clearly once been a building made almost entirely of glass that had been blown out. The street and floor was covered in shards that had been broken time and time again. It left behind a strangely empty looking shell of a cover for the metro station's entrance. I could hear ponies inside, mostly chatting calmly...likely slavers then. Two more patrolled outside, just calmly keeping an eye on the street. They wouldn't be any trouble to avoid, even from here I could see a building by the side that would let me creep in, now that the windows were all gone.

I thought while I made my way around, trying to avoid splashing through puddles and making a noise.

Protégé had told me that the inner metro circle was simply used as a shelter for some slaves now, or to house supplies where they might be more preserved. It was all too likely I was wandering my way into a slaver den. That would explain the low security...

Why couldn't I ever go any place nice?

Carefully pulling my (still rather sore) body around tumbled furniture, I dropped into the alley through a window of the adjoining building. Glass tinkled below me, leading me to freeze on the spot. Had they heard

me?

A few minutes later I heard no change in their patrols...no, they hadn't...

Sticking to hopping between fallen rocks to avoid the glass covered floor, I made my way into the metro station from the side. I emerged into a small cafeteria, surrounded by a low wall bearing dead plant life atop it. Immediately, it became apparent how new this place must have been before the balefire hit. Many of the chromed metal turnstiles and benches were still somewhat shiny; whatever process that had created them preserving their coat. Beside the wooden slots for small kiosks and rotted plants, it created a very strange duality of old and new. I saw closed shutters on the windows for tickets, a higher level with offices (probably management) and a few tunnels leading to overground railroads near the back of this area. In the middle of the hub was a large opening with long and shallow steps that led underground...that *had* to be it.

Unfortunately, there were plenty enough slavers lazing around on the benches that to get by would be an exercise in futility. A couple were playing an odd game on a checkered board while others cleaned some rather unclean looking weapons. One snoozed off even as I watched her. There was *no* going down from the normal route. Gargh...there had to be a way! This station was likely our best bet to find the Ministry Station and our ticket to the outer circle. Glimmer and Brimstone were relying on me to scout this out and find us a way to sneak past all this! Ducking back into the cafeteria, I had a thought.

Metro lines were underground...this had been a world that lived in perpetual fear of zebra strikes. Even if it wasn't a megaspell, even I'd heard tales of zebra terror attacks upon Equestria. A cramped metro seemed, to me, a likely target. If I could figure that out, likely so could the architects of old. If *I* were designing this place...I'd want to have alternate entrances and exits to the underground to help give ponies a way out should the worst happen...

Taking my time, emboldened by the thought, I began to sneak around the edge. Sticking to the cafeteria, I hopped out of it and hid behind a large marble square that had once housed an interior tree. Bit by bit, I jumped from square to square...heading for the ticket kiosk. If there were any way down, surely the staff would have control of it? One of the toughened glass windows lay around the corner from the sight of the slavers, so I rolled toward it instead. Tugging my saddlebag off, I pushed it through the thin gap where caps would have been exchanged. (Pre-war used caps too, right? I would have. They were so shiny and colourful!) After that, I squeezed my own body through, trying not to let the obvious worry about how thin I had to be to even *permit* that take hold in my mind. I didn't get stuck, but it was a bit of a tug, before I finally popped out and landed on the other side, knocking the revolving chair flying. I landed with a grunt of pain, failing to stop the chair before it fell.

“You hear that?”

Immediately, the sound of trotting emerged. I stuffed myself into the shelves below the counter, pulling my saddlebag into my belly as tightly as I could. The trotting came closer, followed by another. A vibration went through the counter as they tapped on the glass of the kiosk.

“The hell are you doin'?”

“Makin' noise. Scares radroaches off if it's them.”

An argument about what radroaches were really scared of or not took place, followed by more tapping on the window. I really wished they'd stop...every 'thunk' was only making my hypersensitive ears twitch and my head pound from the noise. After a while, I heard somepony sniffing at the gap.

“Urgh...yeah, radroaches. Stinks in there...”

Oh come on...

“Well, I ain't getting it. They'll just come back anyway. C'mon, it's your move. By the way, you hear that on the radio? 'Bout the Dweller?”

“Shit, man! Quiet! You want them to know you've been listening to that banned station? Yes, I heard. About fucking time she realised there's not any point after giving us such a hard time.”

They trotted away slowly. Trying to force the *insults* they laid at her hooves out of my mind, I dropped back out of the shelf and stretched my legs. Almost to my shock, the mouthpiece of my saddle sprung out the moment I did. Grumbling, I flicked it away again. Someday I'd get used to this thing. Not that it made me any less gleeful to have it, sometimes...I found myself just looking back at it around me and smiling like a foal with a present. It had helped keep my mind off the pressures of being an outlaw.

A little quiet exploration found a back office. I'd feared for any remains, but there was nothing but someplace that had clearly been left in a hurry. Well...if you have a metro nearby, of course you'd run there the moment those deathly sirens had started. There were, surprisingly, no desks (a first for everything...) but rather just one long work surface that ran around the edge of the room, covered in old tickets and a few faulty looking terminals. I spotted another holstered set of audio diaries beside one. A single diary lay on the floor, still bleeping a little red light. Glancing around me, I pulled out my PipBuck and adjusted the volume to low before picking up the diary and clipping it on. It took a few seconds of fiddling and remembering what buttons did what, but I eventually got it to play, hearing the busy sounds of an office behind a mare's voice.

“End of day list for Friday, assistant manager Creamy Pop. Hey, Bulb? When you get this tomorrow, I'm real sorry but the terminals went down today so the cash up hasn't been sent to HQ yet. That's about it, other than that there may be a complaint coming into you tomorrow too. Nothing big, just some idiot who can't read the rules. Oh and...I know you had family in Manehattan so...lemme know how it all is, okay? Everyone's talking about the rumours that they got hit a few minutes ago by some sort of terror strike. Just let me know, okay? We're going to head to the news desks to wait for information, hopefully we won't-”

I felt my entire body clench tightly. In the background of the diary, a low and wailing note was beginning to pick up and gain in volume. Ever-present and immediately controlling the atmosphere, the siren began to sound.

“Oh Goddesses...is that...is that a drill? Hey, everypony, you heard of any drills? Please tell me it's just a drill!”

“Terminal doesn't say, but they were planning on having a surprise one this month. My brother works at Stable-Tec; says they keep requesting them for Stable ticket holders. Hey, listen!”

The sound in the background didn't change, what were they listening for...?

“It's still going...”

“So?”

“Don't you read the brochures, Creamy? A long one that doesn't change is 'alert', one that warbles and goes up and down is 'attack.' It'll be the drill, they wouldn't dare use 'attack' for one. We should treat it like it's real though, you know what Bulb's like for following Ministry Law for drill practice...”

“All right, we'll go by the book. Everypony! Pack up and get underground now! Get the PA system to the public and move to the service stairs at the back! Oh horseapples, those sirens creep me out, that's the third time this year already...”

“I think that's the point, boss. Let's go.”

The diary hit the desk before falling to the ground, I could hear the clacks as it was dropped.

“Ah, damn! Broke the record button...well that's this one done in. C'mon! Move it! I don't want to be up here with those things longer than I have to. Chills down my spine...you'd think they could make a nicer-”

Click.

“End of day recording limit reached.”

My entire body was shivering. Drill or not...that noise had elicited a reaction in me. Like in my escape attempt when they had sounded it as an alarm. As though the knowledge that it *had actually happened* was enough to biologically condition all newborns of the pony race with the same blood freezing terror of that deathly wail. Those same ponies in the drill would have heard the real thing, the 'attack' variant. They knew the difference...they'd have known on the spot their world was over.

But it had at least confirmed what I sought...there were some alternate ways down back here. Still trying to fight that sound from my memory, I limped on. It wasn't far...just through past some old toilets and down into the back area for all the shops and staff members. A spiral stairway, almost too short for four legged ponies, was built into the corner. Glancing around, I could see each of the shop back doors had been flung open, items strewn everywhere from the last rush for the *real* siren. Very quickly, I began to fear what I might find below ground. As though unwilling, I spent a little time hunting around the debris. I located a few old plastic bottles for Glimmer to fill up inside a long non-functional fridge as well as, to my delight, a single can of unopened food.

It took a little working with one of my grappling gun's hooks, but I finally managed to break open the seal. Inside, I found a thick white mush...potato! Sticking my muzzle in as far as I could to lap it all out, lacking a utensil...I found it to be powdery, dry and lacking in any real taste. But it was sustenance...it was *something*, and my growling stomach was all the more grateful. Pulling the tin off, feeling my muzzle's raw sores stinging from the rub, I let out as much of a satisfied breath as I could. Unfortunately, this seemed to just have been somepony's old lunch. Everything else was rotted or long spilled. Without venturing too close to the shop windows (I could still hear the slavers outside) I took one last look around and pocketed an old mouth-torch before finally moving to the stairs. Casting a glance down, I saw a rather shocking drop beneath me. My eyes turned briefly to my PipBuck...likely I would be hearing from Sundial soon as well.

Well...here goes...time to find the first steps of my way home...

* * *

Taking my time, I began to realise that underground was not perhaps what I was expecting. Things had been fine and isolated upon my descent, but I had stopped now.

I'd heard something.

A low noise, like background hum and ambience that rippled up the long vertical walls of the service stairwell. Unpredictable, bereft of any pattern, it continued its low and undulating groan that picked up the deeper I went. Remembering Protégé's tales of the metro...I could only bite my lip and almost hope that this was something as simple as a slaver den. Occasionally, louder sounds would spike up, higher pitched and sharper. But it was, all of it, simply cast into an unidentifiable drifting mess by the shape of the tunnels and height that I was hearing it from.

Gradually...I began to continue, my ears twitching and my mind worrying. The noise kept eating away at my already frayed nerves, growing and then dropping. Always there in the background, just waiting to-

Beep!

My hooves scrambled, falling against the wall and covering my head with a squeal that dropped off into a whimper.

Beep!

Quickly...I began to realise. I'd been so high strung that even Sundial's messages startled me. Quickly digging the PipBuck out and tying it to my hoof to listen, I continued. At least he could keep me distracted from the growing volume.

Click.

Instead, I got a mare's voice, fast talking and playful, one I recognised from before.

"Hi there, Sundial's nightly update! So sorry he can't do it himself, so I guess I'll do it for him. I just know

he'd have wanted to say, 'Hi there! I'm Sundial and I have the greatest marefriend in history, she's so perfect in every way! She is soooo understanding that she even saw the magazines I had under my bed and didn't mind a-"

"H-hey! Are you recording on that?!"

"Oh, hello sweetie! Just offering the 'Sky-eye-view' on your life!"

"Aw, come on, Sky! They don't need to hear about...oh..."

"Just realised what I said, huh?"

"...yeah..."

I heard Skydancer giggle, before a soft sound of somepony kissing another was heard.

"You are so cute when you blush, you know that? Fiiiine, I'll let you have your little toy back, I've got to head home to get ready anyway. So, bye-bye, ponies of the future!"

"You really are crazy, Sky..."

"You know you love it. If the feisty looks in those photos of the magazine are anything to go by-"

"Hey! Gimme that, please, Sky!"

"Gotta take iiii!"

A little playful scuffle broke out, in which I could hear the PipBuck being tugged away behind Skydancer giggling madly and Sundial's pleading. Sometimes his words were interrupted with an altogether more loving sound of a quick peck on the lips. Finally, with a little exhale of air, I heard somepony pinned down.

"Hah! Some earth pony! Pinned by a little pegasus like me? Here you go, hun. I'll see you tomorrow after work, flying the night shift tonight."

"Phew...yeah...okay. I'll see you then."

They said their goodbyes, the wonderful sound of them interacting as buck and mare with such a light hearted *fun* to their relationship making me both feel warmed inside as much as it hit home like a sharp envy in my heart...

Sundial seemed to dust himself off, muttering about 'that crazy mare' and laughing to himself, before sitting down again (I presumed) with the PipBuck.

"Uh...sorry about all that. I might delete it...dunno. Anyway, for the proper update...I've made a choice. I can't let her go, I can't even risk having to let her go again. There are more and more drills, like somepony up top's beginning to fear we need the practice. I...I'm going to sell something to the zebras. The money they're offering is just too large to ignore, with it, I could afford another ticket in under a few months! I...I've decided to try something that seems important...an old design of armour we abandoned before the current project. They'll think it's all high tech, but it was way over designed and barely worked at all, so it won't hurt Equestria, right?"

Beneath me, the sound was only getting louder. I felt I recognised the sounds...what were they? Everything was so distorted in this strange spiral shaft.

"So long as somepony else doesn't give up the good stuff, they won't ever know I'm feeding them long

out of date info. Maybe...maybe this could work for Equestria in the end, huh? Like...counter espionage or something. Oh I don't know...the Ministry of Morale's gonna take me away if they ever find out! But the meeting's tonight, I've already got the blueprints copied to hand over. This entire city just feels lethal now...we've all heard the reports of ponies being taken from the refugee camps, disappearing into the night with no trace. The Ministry of Peace has been running all over the place trying to find them, even investigating a few workers who went missing from our factory last month. I figure they just bailed and went to the country...the cities aren't what they once were."

Suddenly, one of the noises got much louder, more clarity coming to it as I neared the bottom.

Oh Goddesses...I knew what that sound was...I'd heard it a million times in my life...

"I best be going...the zebras were very specific. Ten at night, around the back of the factory complex. I have to admit...them being here and a bunch of refugees going missing? Seems way too much of a coincidence...it'd be just like the stripes to kill off a few defenceless refugees to keep them spreading fear and worry amongst another populace. Urgh. Right, they're getting their plans, I'm getting my money and then Sky and I will be off to a Stable to be safe forever. That's all that matters now to me. Wish me luck..."

"Good luck..."

"Heh...I guess I'll get around to telling this thing about how I got my cutie mark someday, huh? Goodnight."

"Night, Sundial..."

Click.

Biting my lip, I wanted to sit and think for a pony that was quickly, through all of time, becoming like another friend to me. But the noise was too great, *far* too great now...and I knew what it was.

It was the sound of ponies in misery.

Slowly, like the reveal of a grand hall upon entering the gates, the metro came to light before me through a fallen section of wall near the bottom of the shaft. Massive, spreading in all directions, the opening into the main trainstop filled my gaze. Dual layered, with the platforms beneath and an open plan suspended waiting area at the top, it almost felt like an outdoors site. An old and chipped mosaic lined the roof, depicting the great cycle of night and day between the great Goddesses. In the middle, lined along the twilight between times, lay the six symbols of the Ministries.

But it was no longer a metro station.

It was a gate into hell.

Under the symbols of the past, lay the horror of the future laid bare. Opposite the entranceway, had I taken the normal route, there lay a large doorway from which a dull red light exhumed forth. Outside it lay lines of slaves in neck-chains, kept standing by a will seeking to dominate their life. Many of them were tugging full converted metro trains that were laid low on their suspensions with thick rock and wreckage. Others advanced into the tunnels bearing tools across their backs, pickaxes, autoaxes and spades. Those coming in off their work were dragged ruthlessly into the gate, disappearing into the red light to join the commotion that seemed to drift out of it and up the shaft I had descended. The looks on their faces...I knew it from my own, the day I had been put in that collar.

Below Fillydelphia itself, the slavery only went on, even more brutal than on the surface...

It all flowed outward from a central point that explained everything, absolutely everything, as to why this was such a nightmare made real for ponies like me. At the centre of the raised platform, I could see one pony overseeing everything, standing before it all.

The Master.

This was the entrance to The Master's personal slave camp.

Fear told me to go back, to report that this was not a way out.

Hope told me that this was the only known link we had to find evidence of a way out.

Courage...courage was silent. In the wake of the Mall riots, I had proven myself to at least have some. But it had been drawn from examples and determination to protect. The last day had already proven one of those examples had been corrupted in my mind...

But loyalty...that still drove me. Loyalty to find a way home for my friends. The same loyalty that Protégé had proven and shown to me.

I had to go on.

At least an element of logic comforted me. I wouldn't have to go into his camp, the tunnels left in many more directions than that, with enough of a crowd and large trains being carted down them that being able to sneak along wouldn't be impossible.

But beyond the emotions and the thoughtlines...it was tough to keep going, to descend those stairs to the bottom and know that *he* was observing from above. I found that the service stairway led to a door in the side of one a tunnel. That was good...at least I could exit and not be visible.

Pressing my front hooves against it, the rusting locks almost seemed to crust apart under being moved at all. But all the sounds here were reverberating off the walls, pounding into my head far worse than they should. A mare's cries shot above it all amongst the crack of a whip. A buck weeping openly in the chain gang had the sound of sobbing echoing back and forward. They were, all of them, like the ponies I'd seen earlier around Sunny. Blackened, choking, sick and covered in burns or crudely healed injuries. I'd seen such things on many slaves above ground...but it was *everypony* down here.

I fell back inside the door for a second to get my bearings, drawing the map to think about directions and which tunnel would go closest to the Ministry.

“Why are you lying down? You will stand, slave! Stand and await your cart!”

Everypony around who even was slightly kneeling shot to their hooves...whether or not they were the ones being called out. I did too.

...that wasn't a good sign...why was I obeying? *Why was I obeying?!*

“The second shift of the night shall begin! Slavers! Take them back to their cages, their third shift will begin in one hour.”

A chorus of slavers chanted out in agreement, as willingly obedient as the slaves. Forcing my legs to crouch again in the service room, I used my PipBuck light on the map. If I was reading it right (Something I highly doubted) the closest tunnel to the Ministry was one the same side as my stairwell...but the one on the other side of the platform from the way the door opened. I'd need to briefly go out there to make it in...

Folding up the map, I bit my lip. The Master could spot me in a crowd *instantly*. He knew my every movement, shape and size. He was far too observant to just hide in a box or something either. If I moved, I'd have to do it with absolute stealth. Why was he even *here* anyway? Didn't he have the Mall to take care of?

It was like he knew where to just wait and terrify me from. I wondered if he knew I'd been so close...he was just messing with me, screwing up my head by always being in the right place to make me scared...before the collar would suddenly clamp around my neck when I least expected it.

Right...Murky...be brave. Just be brave, you can do this. Be brave like Brim and Glimmer and...and Protégé and LittlePi-...

My train of thought jarred, feeling a welling of emotion that I had to almost beat back down. I couldn't let it affect me now. I'd cry over her later...but I needed to focus!

It was perhaps the most terrifying twenty feet of my entire life up till now.

Sticking low to the ground, I slid around the corner and into the main station itself. Immediately, I rushed up and crouched behind a series of seats. Drawing my mirror, I angled it to watch for The Master to look away each time. The rest of the slavers I'd just have to pray didn't care as much to look. Slaves glanced at me with dead and hopeless eyes, their mouths hanging open like mentally damaged patients who had been stripped of all personality. Oh, look away! You'll give me away!

“Eyes front! Back in line!”

Their heads snapped around. *Please* don't look at what they saw. The mirror showed his head turning to snap at some others while speaking to another of his seemingly many assistants. Over the cacophony, I couldn't detect the individual words, just his rumbling and scraggly voice. Taking the opportunity, I leapt forward to behind an old advertisement board. Pinkie Pie stared down at me from the other side of it, seemingly advertising a new brand of singing party sprite-bot, judging by the little song notes coming out of it. I recognised the design...I'd seen those odd ones with video screens now and again around Fillydelphia.

Part of me found a little respite in thinking about them. Anything other than concentrating on the ongoing, never-screams of anguish emerging from that hateful gateway...

I made the jump to the next one, catching The Master's face *whipping* around the moment I did. Pulling my tail in quickly, I sat and huddled up behind the next bench...the last one before the next tunnel! I didn't even dare put my mirror around the corner...but I could feel his gaze witheringly directed at this one spot...feel it chilling my body more than any siren could.

“Get off the bench! Not your place! Now get back to work, I expect to see another ten feet by the time I'm back!”

He was leaving, oh thank the Goddesses...I could hear his stomping coming down, passing by the entrance to his den and across the platforms toward the stairs. Then he stopped...

“Somepony close that door, who opened it?”

I heard chains clatter as he drove toward the area. Figuring his attention was away, I dashed forward and hopped around the corner. Behind me, glancing out, I saw a group of slaves point my way.

“S-slave...”

The Master's hoof crunched upon the buck's face, throwing him back in line.

“Wrong answer, wretch. What. Slave?”

The buck pointed this way. I leapt back and immediately began galloping down the tunnel, not even caring about the other slaves that looked up, surprised at one of their number moving as fast. But I could hear the thumping sound of The Master approaching, seeking out the rebellious one of his number. If he even got a clue it was me, the entire place would go on lock-down! The tunnel was uneven, hard to run down with the rail tracks overlapping one another and interspersed with debris and old slippery puddles. I ran alongside a huge metro-train cart that was loaded up with tools to go back in. The sides were barricaded up with scrap metal, making it impossible to leap up and hide! So I ran on, into the darkness. Down the tunnel, the groans and sniffs of dozens of ponies echoed and solidified even more. Crimson hazes washed down from behind us, giving the darkness a thick quality that mixed with the bloodstained slaves. Behind me I could see the massive silhouette against his den's red light standing at the entranceway.

Praying that the darkness hid me enough, I spotted one indent into the side wall of the cramped metro tunnel. Hoping between lines of automaton like slaves, I tripped over their chains, landing face down on the tracks.

The solid impact on my chin dizzied me...making the remainder of my stagger into the gap all the more haphazard. My teeth shook, my loose one wobbling in the gums from the impact. The gap was fairly large, surrounded with wire fencing...probably an old maintenance cubby hole. Jamming myself against the nearest side of the wall I could, I listened for The Master approaching.

...nothing...

Eventually, I dared to risk peeking my head out. Focusing my eyes past the procession of slaves heading into

the same tunnel on part of his ongoing operations down here, I saw no silhouette in the tunnel entrance forty feet back at the station itself. Phew...

Turning back into the cubby hole, I took a second to rest. Allowing my eyes to move around...I almost screamed.

It was a dumping ground...for slaves. Piled high, those that had passed out in the tunnels had simply been thrown in here to be dealt with later. Still 'fresh', many lay with open eyes or mouths...every one of them simply looking tired and drawn. I could see ribs, leg joints and pelvis' protruding through threadbare coats and thin skin. They had simply been worked to death.

A little list in a locker...

Backing off, I fell into the main tunnel again, my eyes not leaving the grotesque heap. Amongst the smells of rancid slaves and thick dust I could still smell that sweet sickly flavour in the air...the one I'd so wretchedly had to be immersed in once long ago.

Why...just...just why?! What was the purpose of all this? Why did he want to do this to ponies?! Why...why couldn't there just be some good left in the heroes of legend...

Behind me, the slaves offered no answer, trudging onward on the commands that they had been giving, not willing to look or see for anything better for fear of being singled out. Unable to take it all on board, I merely continued galloping into the tunnel, sticking to the edges and ignoring every one of the foul stinking corpse dens from then on...

* * *

The sound of rock chipping and the whine of auto-axes began to waft up the tunnels. I had perhaps slowed down to take the next hundred metres carefully. Occasionally having to join the slaves or hide behind a moving cart as a slaver trotted past, I nervously kept advancing. So far, this wasn't looking much like a good route to the Ministry Station, even if it *were* down here. The proximity of The Master's own personal den just behind me was a threat enough, but the tunnels were active and seemingly in constant use. This one workforce that was down here seemed to be perpetually on the job. Those coming back down the tunnel were dust covered and choking, staggering by sheer exhaustion. The ones going in bore a look that could only be described as harsh acceptance of their place in life. For the first time, I began to get a sense of what it was like to look at me from the outside sometimes...

I reached a junction, where the tunnels split off into about four others. No doubt service tunnels or older routes. Some of them bore shattered wooden planks along the ground like they'd been reopened. In the hazy darkness, the heavy dust and strong heat down here, slavers washed dim torches back and forth, lighting the reality of work down here.

They were mining...

Along every stretch of wall, slaves were chipping and picking away at the solid rock or concrete. Swung by weary heads or flickering weak magic...the axes seemed to only graze a little off at a time. Clearly, The Master preferred to work by a 'slow but constant' method down here. Moving away from the entrance, I ducked behind one of the many waiting carts where slaves were heaving scraps of rock in for removal. In this darkness it was easy to simply lie low.

Something still made me itch though...The Master never just 'gave up' like before. Had I really given him the slip again or was he just waiting back there at my way out?

Shaking my head, trying to clear the horrid thoughts that being so close to (or within) his den were giving me. I could *still* hear the sounds from back there...the low moan drifting through the metro from his own little corner of deprived practice. I could see many of the slaves here bearing obvious scars. No way were that buck's lash scars from just a mistake...that mare was likely walking with a limp for another reason...

This was...*sick*...even by Fillydelphia's standards. These ponies were literally working themselves to death down here, trapped in whatever horrors went on behind those gates. The stench of rancid sweat and the horrid conditions around their own filth while not being allowed to cease mining gave a reason to why the

slavers trotted with their gas masks firmly on. Catching a draft down one tunnel in a bad way almost made me throw up on the spot. Ponies had to *work* in this...

But really, my other thought was what they were *doing* here anyway. What was there to mine in a metro?

The thought slapped me across like a leather whip. It was so obvious.

They *knew* about the Ministry Station.

The Master was in league with Grindstone. No doubt the old donkey had seen the same things I did in Aurora's office and made the same conclusions as Glimmer. He had wanted Aurora's research from Stable Ninety-Three. He was trying to make her inventions work. Now he and The Master wanted her hidden stash of whatever it was they were putting together down here. I began to wonder if even Red Eye knew of their real intentions outside of trying to locate Ministry secrets. Would they 'do a Sundial' and perhaps only give him the things they didn't want to keep secret? Grizzly had mentioned some great political game going on...was I seeing one of the more covert large operations?

Even as I watched, one slave collapsed from the wall. Falling backward, she landed on the tracks and seemed to have a spasm on the spot. A filthy yellow infection on her belly looked distended...weeping pus across the floor. Slavers immediately galloped over, hauling the poor mare to her feet. To my horror...they simply set her, at gunpoint, to work again. She cried even as she kept striking the wall, her stomach visibly weeping infectious fluids still. Across the junction, another mare was set upon by a second slaver for pausing. A baton cracked across her neck, leaving thick lumps after only a few seconds. Her screams of pain only joined the others echoing in the air. Along the walls, occasionally I saw whole groups of ponies lying together? Dead?! No...resting. They weren't even allowed to leave the mining wall to sleep. Many twitched...clearly in the throes of the same nightmare they would soon be woken to again.

Shivering, I pulled myself tighter...this really was a truly proper hell for slaves down here. Trapped in the dark, forced to work at a blank face, seemingly almost all day.

Carefully, I began to pull myself through the busy intersections in the middle. Carts were being pulled along the rails and swivelled on some large turntable (pulled by slaves, of course) until they faced down another tunnel where other teams worked. Trying the old trick of getting under one of them, I managed to make it to the far side fairly easily. Really the hardest thing was trying to not let my emotions and fears get the better of my tearducts. This was such an atrocity against ponies.

The further I crept down the tunnels, the more I got a sense of just how long this had lasted. Wall after wall had been chipped away at for a few feet, before being given up on. This entire tunnel past a certain point bore the markings. They had to have been at this for *months!*

No...I...I needed somewhere to hide for a moment. This was just too much...

Checking around me, I slid into the nearest maintenance room, noting an odd scrawled sign by the door. Immediate inside, I gagged, letting the coughing out to fall to my side and dig out a section of cloth to cover my mouth with. There was nothing in here but the sad sight of a great many dead ponies...long rotting. By now, it almost felt routine in this place. I was filled with all sorts of sudden emotion. Sadness at their plight, fury and anger at the same and a heavy frustration that I could do *nothing* to help them mixed in with the terror of being trapped within it all myself. That I had kept going down here in the darkness to blend in and sneak well was a testament to that I *really* still wanted out. I still had some courage to work with...

"Still...still able..." I breathed out.

"Still able to what, hairball?"

The rough voice made me scream, spinning to see the corpses *standing up!* Memories of a janitor in the Mall almost made me run madly for the door, before I saw the light of intelligence in their eyes. Ghouls! It was just ghouls...

Looking at the chains that linked them all together, it became apparent to me that they were slaves.

“Asked you a question, hairball, still able to what?”

“Answer him, come on. Not like we get much talk down here...”

“Mm...”

“Yes...”

Talking almost like a committee, the ghouls formed an arc around me, all staring with yellowed or bleeding eyes over their blackened and rotten skin or muscle. Whimpering, I looked up at them.

“Still able to go on...to keep hopeful that I'll...I'll get out...”

They laughed. Ghouls laughing were rather unsettling sounds, filled with a dry and cracked wheeze of air.

“Get out of Shackles' tunnels? You don't get out! You just keep workin till you drop...pity for us we can't.”

“W-who are you?”

The lead ghoul glanced at his comrades. Most of them wandered back to the rear wall to settle down again. Clearly they didn't get to rest much, but four remained. Looking back at me, I was told to lie down...I obeyed rather immediately. They settled, weariness showing in their movements. Many were carrying injuries that seeped oddly coloured blood.

He indicated a mare to his left with a few very long strands of hair left in her mane and tail.

“Nurse Splint. She keeps us going best she can, worked for the last few hundred years...”

Another mare on the same side, bearing a wrap around where her eyes, I guessed, used to be.

“Nurse Bedlay Bloom, bastards took her eyes for looking at them wrong.”

He then indicated a buck on the other side of him, the last one.

“Lastly, the rookie, if you could call him that these days. Windtail Breeze, was the student doctor when the bombs hit. Me? I'm Baton Round, was head of security at Hearts and Hooves Hospital...we all worked there.”

Hearts and Hooves...I almost sprang up, finding an instant middle subject we might all know! Perhaps these ghouls had some good information if I could get on their side!

“Hearts and Hooves Hospital?! You must know Doctor Weathervane!”

There was a sudden silence, before Baton Round finally stopped blinking...his chipped horn lit with a wavy yellow to close the door behind me.

“Weathervane...been a long time since I last heard of that cranky old bastard. Been a long time under Shackles...too long. Yes, we know him. Was a friend of mine, actually...I took care of a war trauma patient about to gut him and he healed the gutting that I got given instead. Sort of forges a bond that sort of thing...the rest worked under him. Good terms, right?”

There was a murmuring. Nurse Bedlay Bloom looked up, her face not even looking directly at me, the wrap around her eyes staring at the wall instead.

“He helped me deliver my first foal when there were complications...I was so proud to work under him.”

Splint nodded and smiled. “Deliver your child? He delivered *me*. Good stallion, he is...good stallion. He really liked us being around...good days...good days...”

Very quickly, I sensed to scale of this conversation flying way beyond my ability to relate. These ponies had all worked with Weathervane back before the bombs. Hell, they'd seen old Equestria in the same way Weathervane had. Now they were slaves in their own city...

But something didn't make sense.

“If...if you're all ghouls. Why don't you sign onto the crater duty? A few months and you're free, no way The Master could stop you...that's Red Eye's rules!”

Windtail Breeze shook his head sadly.

“You think Shackles plays by the rules? Well...you're right in this case that he couldn't stop us. But...this is our city. We were all born here, worked here...died here. We rose again together and we survived together. Now we're rebuilding it together. We won't abandon Fillydelphia to the balefire...we'll do what we can to repair it before we go. Even...even if it means this...it's what kept us sane...that thought that we could one day see it proper again before we let go and fall to the feral...”

“You...*choose* to stay?!”

“Yes,” muttered Baton Round, “we do. It's our home. Means a lot to a ghoul that does...out there? We wouldn't recognise it...never left Filly even before the megaspells. I'd just be in a place where I'd fall to the feral all the faster. Here at least I got something to cling to...to keep me alive and going. Just wish it weren't in here though...Shackles wouldn't let us get any word out to join somethin' else if we tried. No-pony else comes down here either...”

“What keeps you going, little one?” Bedlam Bloom turned vaguely in my direction. “Your voice sounds so small...weak. You are scared...”

“I...I am...it's terrible down here...”

“It's terrible everywhere. Here...worse, yes. I try...I try to forget what they are doing to us. The last few months have been bad. Even many of the unlife ponies like us are passing. Their games...their experiments...killing us gradually off. Behind those gates lies nothing but pain, young one. Your words betray you do not know it yet...I am sorry you are here now.”

I considered she must have been an incredible nurse with such a calming tone. I could see the horrid injuries across her body. Deep cuts, infections to her very body visible without her skin and a mangled back right hoof. I wondered just how long these ghouls had left. They all looked about ready to fall apart in a few days. It probably explained their rather drifting nostalgia about the past...

“I'm not a slave down here...I'm...I'm on the run. Trying to find a way out. C...can you help me? I could...well, see about helping you too...”

“How, murky pony?”

“My name's Murky Number Seven...”

“Appropriate and scary...” muttered Windtail.

“How could you help us then, Murky Number Seven?” Baton Round cut in.

I took a slow breath...then regretted it instantly in the cramped room with so many ghouls. Outside, I could hear the slavers moving around. But this was sort of what I'd hoped for, some inside intelligence on the tunnels!

“Some of us, we're planning to use the tunnels to get out...to find the Ministry Station and get to the outer circle. If...if we can, we could maybe get you away from The Master at least...somewhere you could do *proper* work to help repair your city. We...um...we just need help down here. It's too heavily guarded to get lots of ponies down.”

They seemed to glance at one another, before Baton Round, their obvious leader by stint of (apparent) maturity, nodded.

“We are nearing our end down here, Murky. I'd...I'd quite like to see old Weathervane again before it comes to my time. Please, if you could get us topside in your escape...we will give you all the help you want. We're all scared, Murky...we try to deny it, but we're terrified. Two hundred years is a long time to feel wasted with death down here. Please...Weathervane needs us back too. Before we were sent down here, I was fearing he was turning. Getting angrier...”

“He told me to 'shut the Goddesses damned hell the fucking shit fuck up' last time...” Windtail murmured off to the side. “But I don't wanna die down here...so much left to do. Lots of bad fates for ghouls below ground when they become useless. Please...if you can get us out, get us to Weathervane. He knows how to treat ghouls...he could save us, I know it...we're his friends Murk. We need him to live, he needs us to help him through his pain. Please...”

“I'll try!” I was trying to not let me be crying tears for them. Thankfully the dry and dead air was making that very easy. Baton Round seemed pleased, he turned me toward the doorway.

“Shackles has us all mining down here, looking for something in the walls. But these tunnels go on for a long way. I don't know where this Ministry Station is, but I can tell you that you don't need to use the entrance you did through this hellhole. Along this tunnel is another service shaft that leads to the surface. It's shaky...unstable, but a few ponies could go up or down it with a little effort. You can use it to get back out. The mining never stops, but we're here about this time each day between our shifts. There's a radioactive water leak at the back of this room we use to heal up as best we can.”

He indicated further down the tunnel, where he'd mentioned.

“Plenty of hiding spots down here, if we weren't in chains we'd break for them. Just keep following the inner circle service line and you'll avoid most of Red Eye's storage areas in the metro. No-pony really uses the service line since it was collapsed away from the outer circle.”

I tried to keep all this information in my mind. This was *crucial*. Our way out could very well depend on being able to survive down here for a few days. Baton Round and the help of his ghouls could make this go a lot faster if we could figure out just *where* to mine that The Master hadn't. Frankly, I trusted Glimmer's ability to read memory orbs and the past a lot more than I did Grindstone's.

“Th-thank you, sir...I'll make sure to try and come back. I'll...I'll tell Weathervane about you. Let him know you're still alive. I hope you can come with us. We...we all have our reasons to want to go. Like...one of my friends, she wants to get her son free. Another wants to help repair her life and get back to her parents.”

Splint nodded, as though feeling the sting of long lost parents herself, but then she looked closely at me.

“What about you, young Murky? What's your reason?”

Gulping, I looked back to her.

“I...I've never been free...”

The ghouls seemed to share a moment of sadness for me. No doubt the medical driven mindsets still at work, somewhere deep inside those broken bodies. Even as I watched, I could see Baton Round's muzzle seem to slip and move in ways no muzzle should be able to. Had it been...snapped? Splint sighed, patting my fleece lightly.

“Oh...I'm so sorry...”

“I *want* to be though, it's all I've done since the Pit. Since the Stable Dweller showed me I could be so much more! She's like...my inspiration, faith and hero all in one!”

There was an odd silence amongst the ghouls. They cast looks to one another. In the background, many of the other ghouls looked over at the group speaking to me. I could see one of them held a radio. Oh no...

“The fallen mare...”

Bedlay Bloom frowned, shivering and sitting down. Baton Round lay a hoof over her back before turning to me.

“I despair to be the one to bring you foul news, young slave. But-”

“*It's not true!*” I blurted forth, interrupting them long before they could speak the *lies* I had been dealing with since that one report. “She didn't do that! It's...it's somepony just using her name to ruin her reputation! She would *never!*”

The ghouls glanced to one another, I could *feel* the unspoken conversation. Baton looked back at me,

like one might look at an idiot child barely grown.

“You have a rather frighteningly short sighted faith in her, Murky Number Seven. This is how the wastelands go. If you've never been free to know, then I don't blame you for-”

“I know! All right? I know it's not her! She saved...she saved me from the Pit! Showed me what it meant to be free! I don't care what you say, she's a good pony! *A good pony!* Why can't anypony but me see that?” I settled down, turning my head away. These were good ponies, these ghouls...but they actually bought into this stuff?

“Murk, allow me to tell you a story...” Baton sat down. “You know, I know how it feels to watch your hero be taken by the morality and horror of the wastes like this. I really do. Remember, I've been in Fillydelphia since it happened. It used to be even worse...no order at all. We hid from gangs who wanted to commit genocide on ghouls. We watched ponies nailed to beams and held skyward for all to see and fear from. There was no authority, no organisation...just an unending war between gangs and slave traders. Slaves themselves were handed guns and forced into the fires that raged uncontrollably, some normal...some balefire. Beasts emerged from the sewers and found a lush hunting ground. Hellhounds came in from the wastes. It was the culmination of everything the wasteland had to offer...Murk, we lived within Tartarus itself. An inferno of violence, depravity and pointless agony on anypony still within the borders.”

He glanced at his friends.

“We lost most of those who survived with us...either early on or as ghouls. Falls to the feral side were regular, consumed by the hate rising from that crater. It seemed Fillydelphia would extinguish itself in the brutality that wracked every street and tunnel. Chainlink Shackles was born into this, Murk. Why do you think he turned out like he did? I watched him go from a commanding infant to a brutal up and coming slaver who had believed *since birth* that those his family owned were his property...that *everypony* was just another waiting addition to his collection. Raised by hate and living in the flames bred a pony the likes of which terrifies me to the core, Murk. But he wasn't the only pony of note...”

The mentions of The Master made me shiver. I couldn't imagine him as a young pony, but it was such a perfect duality, like The Master had said. I had been born an accident...a tribute to slavery's demands on a young mare. He had been born on the other side of the fence...forever the symbol against what innocence I possessed.

“Th-then who else?”

Baton smiled.

“A pony from across the wastes. He came to Fillydelphia and we *laughed* at him. He didn't shoot or hurt ponies, he just talked to them. But oh...when he talked. I remember he approached our shelter, calmly drawing us out with a helping of his own supplies and food. We sat with him and he told us of how things could be better. This stallion aided us, providing us with other allies he had found amongst the madness. What a pony! Kind, generous and a great dreamer, he set about organising us to help work and create safe zones for those who willed it. Under his direction, we fought to defend those he cared for. A greater Equestria to come about! If only we would all pull together and work for it...he was our hero. Our faith and belief all in one.”

The smile vanished, I sat with an open mouth...beginning to catch up to what he was gearing toward...

“His name was Red Eye. We were the first 'workers', Murk. Don't place all your hope in legends...you never know what they'll become. At least you were around to be hurt by what yours did.”

I simply huddled my front legs close to my body, sniffing. No...she was different from him...she was *different*...

“She wouldn't...”

“Legends don't last...somepony wiser than me told me that hundreds of years ago. Don't let it get to you. These things happen to ponies in the modern wasteland.”

How could they be so flippant and disillusioned about it? Was being alive that long what made them so willing to forget the good? Maybe even Red Eye could be good again! Or his ideals picked up by somepony else like Protégé?! Was I really being too naïve? Believing in heroes and legends in a world that adamantly believed they didn't exist?

“All right, you slags! Next section of wall! Come on! Where's the rots? Get them out here now, they've had enough rest in their little rad-den!”

The ghouls began to get up. Baton looked toward the door and immediately moved over to me.

“Don't give up hope...but trust in who's around you. Not in who's out there. But all the same...I hope that you'll come back. I don't wanna rot down here until I die...there's my city up there needs rebuilding. Get going, Murky Number Seven...we'll wait for you.”

The ghouls began to filter past in their chained up order. Baton Round and Bedlay Bloom shimmied forward first, Windtail and Splint a little afterward. The 'younger' Windtail looked at me almost pleadingly. The massive metal collar far too large for his neck, where it left weighty marks from years of servitude...

“We'll wait for you...”

The ghouls trooped past the door and toward the mining tunnels. Keeping back, I hid in the darkness before making off to find the service shaft. But I kept watching backward as they disappeared around the corner...limping and slowly dying. I wondered how many times they'd let their hope rise...and whether I was simply giving them another last hope before I too would turn out to let them down...

* * *

Leaving the metro was difficult. Not in the physical sense...for my grappling hook let me climb the stairwell Baton had mentioned with ease, suffering only a few squealing falls onto my rump. (To be fair, I hadn't had much chance to practice with this thing yet...)

No, it was difficult, because I remembered everything The Master had said before. About wanting twenty feet 'done' while marching Sunny's column in this direction.

I was knowingly leaving my twice hero behind to the metro.

Rather slowly, it began to dawn on me that any hope she saw in me was as likely misplaced as many found in their own heroes throughout time...

* * *

The Mall was quiet. Or rather the camp around it was. No doubt in The Master's absence to the tunnels, the slaves not on shifts took what time they could to rest and relax. Those on the job were still clambering across the Mall, sliding new twisting lengths of razorwire onto the window ledges and scaffold tops. Using the same method as before, I dropped down behind the fence and immediately took cover. My eyes found Glimmerlight's rather pitiful looking and leaky tent. Brimstone wasn't present...but I could see a shadow on Glimmer's tent of somepony inside. She was here...oh thank Celestia...

Quietly hoofing it over, I ducked behind crude shelters and hit in old craters to close the distance. Oh how I wanted to simply gallop to her side again and report that we had a potential way out if we could rig climbing equipment to get down that shaft again. Moving up to the area, I started creeping from cover to move into the-

Somepony quickly looked up from nearby toward me. Were they a slaver?! I couldn't take the chance, I rushed forward and *dove* into Glimmerlight's tent. Tumbling through the flap, I fell against somepony, hearing a feminine yelp of surprise. Then a second feminine cry.

Then a third.

Oh wait...the last one had been me...

Covers tussled, I felt two ponies struggling out from under them on either side of me in the cramped little tent. I'd fallen between two resting ponies. Lying on my back, I now found Glimmerlight to one side of me

and her...new friend...on the other. An earth pony mare with a lavender mane and soft blue coat sat up in shock out of the blanket. If it weren't for Glimmerlight seeming at ease (if surprised) I figured she might have been out of the tent. Instead, Glimmer reached over to softly stroke her mane and look down at me lying half snuggled (by accident, I swear!) between them.

“Oh, hello there!” Glimmer was entirely too cheery. I could only *imagine* why.

“You...you invited a buck too?” The mare leaned over me to speak to my friend, glancing down at me on my back with my hooves in the air. “So...who's your friend?”

“Oh, this is Murky!” Glimmerlight shimmied in, pressing herself against me in a little half hug. I felt my face turn a hasty shade of beetroot as I felt Glimmer's 'bed buddy' do the same.

“Nah, didn't *invite* him, not in *that* sense. He's just back way earlier than I thought!” Glimmerlight only continued, winking at me as she ruffled my mane. “He's also just the most adorably little innocent buck around, just look at that blush, Leafshine!”

They giggled together. Clearly of the same type of humour to embarrass me shamelessly by snuggling in on either side.

“L...L...I scouted...”

“Ah...business later, Murky. Comfy rest time now...good thing you weren't five minutes earlier. Leafshine and I were just...taking the edge off developments.”

“You're lucky to have Glimmerlight, Murk.” Leafshine chuckled in her clipped accent, stroking a hoof around Glimmer's jawline. “Just a wonderful pony who knows how to make things seem nicer.”

“Y-y-yes...s-s-she d-does...” I could feel my ears *burning* with embarrassment as I saw Leafshine lean over to lightly kiss my...uh...friend. “In other ways, mostly...”

“Mhm! Like my little bro, you are, Murky! Hey, Leafshine! You wanna have a look at his journal? Come on, Murky, lets all have a look. We're all somewhat mature ponies here!”

“Ooooh...the one you said you got that pose from? Yes, lets!”

The pair leaned in, grinning eagerly.

I just covered my face with my hooves, why...oh...why...did it always have to be me?

Oh my...

* * *

Leafshine departed soon after the monolithically embarrassing art showcase. I might have taken at least some pride in it...but looking at the imagery I had once drawn so fluidly, it only reminded me of my *inability* to do the same now.

Another part of me felt somewhat annoyed at myself after Leafshine had offered to pose for me. She had wanted to see herself drawn to look like she wasn't a bedraggled slave. I wished I could have...but I had only politely declined, citing that I didn't want to do her an injustice with my skills. The words seemed to make Glimmerlight look at me with a worried expression.

It raised my curiosity, that somepony as in grief over Caduceus' death would find another mare so fast to help cheer herself up with...I guessed it was just one way of her coping...

I forced it to the back of my mind, concentrating instead of explaining everything about the tunnels, den and the ghouls to Glimmerlight. The news that The Master had knowledge of Ministry Station was bad enough, leading her to think for some time. She concluded that we could still go ahead, but that we needed to find some sort of edge to locate the Ministry Station *first* and then be able to hide our progress. We would make a little den of our own inside it and slowly smuggle ponies inside to hiding before making our break into the lethal outer circle.

But right now...plans updated, I now heard the report from Glimmerlight's side of things. The first news

wasn't great...

“Brim's gone.”

“What?!” I almost dropped the blanket I'd been forced to cover myself with in my short visit to here. The tent wasn't very warm and the rain threatened to tear it off. When was this storm going to end?!

“The Master...his revenge I guess. He couldn't hurt Brimstone, but he could still send him away. He's been sent on a temporary posting to the mustering yards to haul heavy weaponry onto the trains and caravans. Brute work to keep him busy and away from The Master I guess. He'll be back in a while but...we're on our own again for now, Murky.”

The thought just struck up every annoyance in my mind. Every single *one* of them. Every time we made a hoof forward, we were knocked back by something stupid like this. Why was The Master even doing that? Petty revenge wasn't his thing, even I knew that! Brimstone would likely *enjoy* the work.

“B-but you...will you be all right without him?”

“I'll get by, hun. I managed for a while before Brimstone too and most of the worse ponies were taken out with the riots. Not counting Shackles' efforts to make our lives a living hell of course...sure wish Caduceus was here to help, though. A healer is just what the doctor would have ordered...”

The atmosphere seemed to chill a little, I edged forward, looking at her azure eyes as seriously as I could.

“You...you want to talk about him, now?”

“I guess so, hun...” Glimmer's face went a little void. “I've gotta talk sometime. Just...just wish he was still here. Poor Caddy...he didn't deserve that. I just...I keep feeling temptations...”

“Temptations to what?”

She glanced to me, before her horn lit and carried a small orb to me, the one I'd seen her toying with earlier. It was unspoken, we both knew what she meant. Again and again, I heard Coral's warning and words from the hospital. Glimmer didn't know how to deal with consequence...how to commit to her actions...

“Please, you can't. You said-”

“I know what I said, Murky! But I've been doing everything I can to just try and not think about it! To shut it out, to immerse myself in research, to build gemlights and purifiers. Hell I even spent half an hour with Leafshine to get my mind off losing somepony like that! I just keep seeing him, Murky...keep seeing him putting that revolver in his mouth and *blowing his own fucking face off!* I can't handle that...I'm remembering why I kept forgetting things.”

She wasn't crying, but it wasn't far off. Feeling a little pushing influence to my mind, I moved forward, wrapping the blanket around her as well as myself.

“It'll...it'll, um, get better...”

“So I keep telling myself. I...I could just take those few seconds. The moment where he pulled the trigger and get rid of that, couldn't I? But that's how this all started. Just a few horrible minutes...then maybe an afternoon I didn't like...a day isn't too much, right? It all builds like some sort of ridiculous addiction to chipping and smoothing my life into the one I want. The one where I'm just happy...maybe Coral's right...”

“She...she said-”

Glimmerlight looked up, almost falling out our blanket as she spun to face me.

“You talked to her?”

Her eyes seemed desperate, her hooves grabbing me around the shoulders.

“You spoke to Coral? I...I probably shouldn't ask this but, what about?”

Nervously, I bit my lip before replying. “A-about you, mostly...she wanted me to pass on a message.

That she's..."

I paused.

"Grateful...she's grateful that you saved her. She...she said that you did it...proved you are willing t-to do something about your life. You did it, you got her interest, Glimmer. She's...she's wanting you to know that she does want you to try to be better. To be the friend you used to be to her..."

I was taking liberties a little, but Glimmerlight *needed* this. I couldn't let her fall back into her 'orb addictions', Caduceus didn't die to be forgotten piece by piece until he was nothing but a series of series of chosen moments! I knew Coral needed it too, she hadn't said it, but I could see the need for somepony there for her too. She was truly alone without her family, friends or even her own *son*.

My friend, my BSBFF, simply sat still, before tears started draining from her eyes. I'd seen her cry...seen her upset...but now I simply saw an empty pony *really* needing others around.

"Murky..."

"Yes, sis?"

"...help me. I...I want to do it. I want to remember...will you help me do it? Before you go?"

I could barely survive. I couldn't save all the ponies I wanted. Sunny...Weathervane's sanity...his friends in the tunnels...Unity...they had all been taken or were in danger of being lost. But here, in this moment, I could do this. I would help Glimmerlight repair her *life*.

"I will..."

Glimmerlight pulled the blanket around us tighter, before her magic started pulling her bag across to dig through the *mounds* of orbs. She slowly examined each at a time, speaking slowly and lowly. The mood had gone dark...neither of us knew what we'd find.

"Coral is a better pony than I ever can be, Murky...she didn't forget any of what happened to her. Whatever they did to her...whatever they did to her family in front of her eyes. Of her son being dragged away. She *remembers* it...and she's still got it together enough to be a strong pony and...and look to offer me at least a *chance* to prove myself by facing what I did. If any pony deserves to be known as the virtue of forgiveness...it's her, Murky. Not me."

Eventually, one dull blue orb hung out of the mass she had placed down around us. We were surrounded in the windswept tent by glittering memories...the chosen one hanging in the air.

"This...this is older. Maybe before it all happened but...but I'll need to start slow, okay? I don't know what this'll contain..."

I laid my hoof over hers.

"I...I'm here."

Her horn lit. I felt her tense up. She was so fragile right now. I could feel her ready to shout at me...tell me to stop agreeing with her to do this. But then the sparkles flew from her horn, the orb glowed...and we drifted away.

oooOOOooo

The world span...my 'self' quickly faded to be replaced by foreign feelings. A sense of stretching...of being taller, better built and healthier. Before I knew it...I was in the wasteland again. That unsettling sense of being trapped within my own body settled home hard. I tried to ignore it...to simply watch what was happening.

I was Glimmerlight...her mane still felt much longer than it was these days. She was trotting under a forest of dead trees, the same one I'd seen surrounding her new home, Creaky Hollow. The light wasteland wind drifted and made her long pink mane flow and blow across her face, while the light seemed almost blinding compared to the storm swept Fillydelphia.

She wasn't alone...beside her I could see somepony else. A wasteland weathered and tattooed buck. He had a slightly dopey expression under a face that held a few scars below his eyes. His voice seemed relatively informal.

“Thanks fer walkin' me out, Glim. Always means a lot to get a chance to see you in between caravan trips. Sure you can't take me home? We'd make a good trade for you lot, wherever you are in these woods.”

I...sorry...*Glimmer* laughed. She shook her head.

“Sorry, hun. Village rules and all. We stay out the way. Hell, I don't think I'm even meant to be out here seeing *you* never mind take you back to meet the town. You know I'm always gonna bring a few caps to get stuff with you. Try to come back this way again soon, huh?”

She stepped forward, hugging him tightly. I could feel his coat was rough, but thick and the sort of one I *wished* I could possess.

“You betcha, Glim. S'all I think about on the road...getting back to my little pink dreamer for a couple days out in the woods.”

“Don't I look forward to it? Never gonna take me to see the caravan though? I could trade on the village's behalf...”

The stallion shook his head. As he stepped back, I got a better look at him. Clad in tied leather armour with a heavy fabric undershirt, he looked a lot like a rougher, darker coloured version of Caduceus. *Glimmer's* obvious attraction points were looking a little obvious. On his flanks I could see a cutie mark of a marred, dirty and chipped diamond beside a small pickaxe. Wait...I was looking at his flanks? Oh, come on, *Glimmer*...the guy's trying to say goodbye here...

“Fraid not, Glim. They don't like dealing like that, please...it's best if you don't come to them. We'll just stick one to one, okay? I got your needs for gems and orbs anyway. I'll see you later, pink dream.”

“See you later, Diamond. Take care out there in the wastes, all right? I don't want to have to come save your fantastic flank.”

They shared a giggle, before *Glimmer* cut it short with a rather aggressively assertive kiss right to his lips. My mind barely had a moment to think before the reality hit home that...I was *kissing a buck*. Oh, please, *Glimmer*! Have a little restraint, don't use your-

She did. Uuurrgh. Ooooh boy...

With her eyes thankfully closed, I just kept trying to distract myself by thinking about the situation. Thus far, this memory didn't seem to hold anything particularly traumatic (by her standards, anyway) so why get rid of this?

I could feel myself...I mean *her*...beginning to blush as they shared the ongoing intimacy of their mouths. Geez...*Glimmer* *really* didn't hold back. It took him to gasp for air and lightly push her off to stop it. I felt her grin cheekily and lower her eyes. *That* look. He seemed to flush.

“Oh don't tempt me...”

Please, sis. Don't.

“...cause I've gotta get on the way. See ya roun', Glim!”

She waved as he trotted off into the dry bushes and away, licking her lips and grinning to herself. He was quiet on his hooves...or was that just the dull hearing of ponies other than me?

Apparently not, I heard a crack behind her from a twig breaking. Swinging, I felt her mane wash around. I *wished* could see her mane like this. She would look *amazing*. But her eyes now found the newcomer now emerging up a path through bracken, pushing it away with a hoof.

“*Glimmer*...was that him again?”

Her voice was a world apart. I saw her better fed and kept. Coral Eve was dressed in a light dress stitched

from wool, a basket over her back. Most surprisingly...she had none of the bitter resentment and anger that I saw in her eyes.

“Yeah...I figure you saw him anyway. Don't worry, we just met out in the woods.”

“I know Glimmer, I know. Here, c'mon, we need to get back before the elder comes looking. You do remember what I said, right?”

The pair began to trot home. I saw Glimmer's eyes focus on the thicker innards of the forest. I couldn't even vaguely see the village...it was *really* well hidden.

“To be careful? Sure, I don't need to worry about that. Initiate implant, they don't like the kids reproducing in a low population base on a bridge to-”

“I don't mean *that!*” Coral almost seemed to laugh, lightly prodding Glimmer's side. “I mean about *him*. Did you see those tattoos? The scars? He's had a rough life in the wastes...I don't want you to get hurt, dear. Caravanner types lead harsh lives, lots of inter-company rivalries and stuff.”

“Aw, c'mon, he's not like that! You should meet him, then you'll see. He's really lovely! Look what he brought me?”

Glimmer pulled a small bag from her own saddle. Opening it, I saw a luminous shine that seemed to *glow* on its own accord. It was full of gemstones of all types! Despite her worry, I could see Coral's eyes go wide at the sight.

“Wow...generous for a wastelander...”

“I know, right? Plus, he's a real sweet one in the throes of the moment, I'll tell you that. Gives as much as he receives.”

She leaned close, whispering the end of the line. They shared a friendly chuckle, holding one another over the shoulders at the cheeky bit of gossip. They had stopped briefly, leaning on a seemingly random part of fence still standing. I could see the rest fallen through the browned bushes around them. Their laughter grew, but Coral stifled hers first, patting her friend on the shoulders.

“That's all lovely, Glim. Just take care, all right? You know I love you like one of my own family...I just don't want anything to happen to you. You've been a world of good to the village...even if you are a little...”

“Friendly?”

“...I'll go with that. Look, if this stallion gives you someone to commit to...I'm happy for you. But just take care. Maybe we'll bring it up to the elder at the next meeting, okay? Now, let's get going. I don't wanna leave Chirpy too long alone.”

“Thanks, Coral. Love you.”

Glimmer gave her a little friendly peck on the cheek. I felt it returned. They shared a hug, before cantering on down the trail. They seemed to race...laughing as they went...running into the darkness that began to surround my viewpoint from Glimmer's eyes...the darkness that...

oooOOOooo

...faded into the black tent. The light had gone out while we were under. The calm wasteland day was replaced with the howling wind that seared through the open flaps and washed over our bodies hidden beneath the blanket. Rubbing my eyes...dizzy and groaning, I sat up. Glimmer seemed less affected than I, already crouched over, holding the orb carefully.

“Diamond...” She barely whispered it. “I...I don't remember a Diamond...but it was like I...I *really* liked him. He's the only thing I'd want to forget from that, nothing else was out of place! But...but he seemed nice...”

She hugged the orb close.

“It's something about him, it has to be...what did I do? Did...did I break the rules? Did I sell them out to him

for something? Was he really not nice? Coral seemed wary but...but I know I was always a bit reckless. Oh Murky...what have I *done*...what if I was the one who led those who destroyed Creaky Hollow in? If he was a *raider*. I lay down with a fucking *raider* and sold them out to him! Oh Goddesses..."

"It's...it's maybe not that!"

"What else *could* it be, Murky?"

Her voice snapped, swivelling her head around at me. I recoiled, seeing the hard stare.

"Glimmerlight, the village *ride*, slapping flanks with a torturing and raping *beast* because he wanted to get her home out of her! I'm an *idiot*, Murky. Coral's got every reason to hate me for...for not hearing her warning. Oh...oh Murky, I'm sorry..."

She clearly saw the shock in my eyes. Moving over, she hugged me tightly.

"I'm sorry...it's just..."

"It's...it's okay...you knew it'd be hard. But...but maybe there's still a lot to see, we'll take our time, okay? I'm...I'm with you. Always."

Glimmerlight sniffed, squeezing me once and not letting go. We simply sat and shook, both our minds running over theories and ideas. But it all kept coming back to the one horrid fact over just who this Diamond really was...

"A toast!"

"A TOAST! YEAH!"

Only now...the ambient sound was beginning to come to my mind. We could hear a lot more commotion outside from the slaves. Hooves pounded on the ground. Voices roared. We looked at each other, before immediately moving to poke our heads out.

A congregation of slaves had gathered. Weak, diseased...yet still showing a sudden surge of strength together. They had brought what water they could from the rain, many of them trying to copy Glimmer's purifier (with varying success, I saw one with a *sock*), to get what they could into mugs and waterskins. Some even just held bowls in their telekinesis. But they were clustered around an old stone pillar surrounded with fire barrels. The wind blew the sooty smoke through the tents as they chanted and stomped. What was going on?

"What do we toast to?"

"THE FALLEN!"

"To WHAT?"

"**THE FALLEN!**"

Many of them swilled the foul water. What did they mean by the fallen? What was...

Oh...no they did *not*.

A slave raised a hoof, aiming for silence.

"We got the shit end of the stick, but what did we get then? Some pony galloping around, thinking she was the Goddesses own fucking messiah or something? Causing trouble in Filly and getting dozens of us shot for her escape? Well did we see her helping us?"

"NO!" The crowd cheered.

"So drink, fellow slaves of the great shit end! Finally an end to all that lording it up bullshit as we find out she's *just like the rest of us!* She gonna shoot me because I stole from farms to survive? Gonna kill Skippy over there cos he had to give his clients a beating if they couldn't pay? You know she wasn't gonna stop at raiders!"

"NOT STOP!" They picked up the line with a raising of mugs.

“Not any more! She's guilty and now somepony can end her rampage to our way of life! So drink, friends, drink to the restoration of order for our families still out there trying to survive. No more gunhappy mare shooting up the place!”

No...

“No more stupid Dweller riling up the raiders and giving us hell!”

How...how *dare* they...

All day, I'd found ponies who didn't believe in heroes...ponies who had lost faith in legends. I'd fought and driven myself to near insanity in an effort to keep clinging onto some hope. I was *not* hearing this now!

“No more false 'hero' only making things *worse!*”

Why did everypony think that?! No...she...wasn't! Legends *could* exist! They could! THEY COULD! What was wrong with everypony to stay so bad?

“Nothing but a murderer herself! Red Eye should get her back in here! The corrupted pony!”

Well I had had *enough* of it.

“*HOW DARE YOU!*”

The words screamed from my throat so hard that I felt my vocal chords go raw and sore. But they heard me, heads turned. I rushed forward, feeling Glimmerlight fail to restrain me. Galloping between the tents, I ran into the crowd, standing near the barrels amongst a hundred staring eyes.

“How can you all say that?! Can't *anypony* see? Everypony keeps saying she's turned or gone bad. She's good! She is! You should trust in her!”

“Shut up, runt!”

“Get lost! She's just a shitty shade of grey like any of us! Get over yourself!”

I hopped onto the base of the ruined pillar, shouting to merely be heard above them.

“I...I saw her! How can you all just sit here and cheer about this, happily wasting your lives with nothing to look up to? The Stable Dweller is trying to help the world to make this sort of stuff stop! Why can't you all see that? She's trying to help you! She's trying to help everypony! Please, listen to me!”

I didn't know why...but I found myself climbing just to be seen to the crowd. Up the pillar...until I stood atop it, ten feet up and list from the fires of the barrels below. The arc of scowling slaves surrounded it, all looking up at this strange little slave shouting at them.

“The wasteland just wants everypony to give in and be horrible to one another! She tried to do something about it. Like...like so many ponies before! But you all, while in this hellhole, keep saying that's the wrong thing? She's stopped raiders! She saved slaves!”

“I don't see my life changing, did she stop to save us? She just ran away for herself and a fucking *stripe!*”

“*She's trying!* She...”

The words were soul crushing to have to admit...that I wasn't under her protection...

“...she can't save everypony...” I forced myself to go on, feeling those words sting. “Not if they don't want to be saved! I heard you all in the Pit, screaming for her to be killed like some bloodsport! Why can't you all just see that she's trying to be good and you all need to help out? She's the one last good pony really doing something out there and you all belittle her for it! How is that anything like Equestria? *HOW?!*”

That got their attention...a silence followed. Stomping a hoof, tears in my eyes, I kept going, feeling my whole body shaking with nerves, fear and outright adrenaline.

“So many ponies have died trying to save our world...they all try so hard and sometimes they fail or go bad! I've seen them, I've seen the past! I've heard the stories of Red Eye. How many could have gone further if

other people, not just ponies, had stood together instead of always fighting? They...they cried like me, they fought so hard and it didn't matter! Because it's not one pony who changes everything, they can only show the way and *inspire!* Like she inspired me! Gave me a life I never had before! She showed you all the same thing! Why can't you see that? Why can't you see anything beyond just yourselves?!"

I sniffed, tears dripping off the pillar...falling below into the burning smoke that stung my eyes.

"Why can't we all just be better ponies? The Stable Dweller...she's...she's what we should be! How can you celebrate the bad and try to knock down the good? We're all ponies inside...can't you feel that longing to be a part of a good Equestria again? That need we all have? That little spark in all of us that knows this is wrong? Ponies like The Master try to turn us against one another and feed the fires of hatred and discord to all of us. She is trying to restore what we once were!"

"She murdered a whole fucking village!"

"I knew ponies there!"

"She's just a fucking psychopath! Least now we know it!"

"No she isn't!"

"SHE IS!"

"She wouldn't! I believe she wouldn't!"

From within the smoke, a half brick flew past my head.

"You're just talkin' bullshit, kid! She's a fucking raider now! Always was and just lying!"

"But she's good! She's trying to save all of-OW!"

A pebble, propelled by telekinesis, struck my forehead. A mug hit the pillar and sloshed filthy water of me. The shouting began.

"I heard she helps the fucking Rangers!"

"Just shoots ponies everywhere! We don't want her!"

"Yeah!"

"We just want our lives back, her riots killed loads of us in here because of her!"

"*She was trying to save you-*"

"BULLSHIT!"

More items pinged or struck off me. Another rock hit my chest, making me almost fall. I was simply shrieking, hollering. The wind swirled the ash and smoke around, making the crowd seem like one horrible entity, shifting and heaving as a singular force. Like I was seeing the physical manifestation of the wasteland itself before my eyes, recoiling and sneering at any effort to fight it.

"She's trying to save all of us! ALL OF US! PLEASE, BELIEVE ME SHE-ARGH!"

Flaming wood crashed again upon the pillar, I almost tripped. Terror was overtaking the faithful will to try and convince the crowd.

Faith...

I had to believe...to have *faith* that this would work.

"I...I'LL PROVE IT! IT'S ALL A LIE! That all this stuff on the radio is just a mistake!"

They stopped only briefly, my bruised but defiant body standing above them. I pulled my PipBuck from my bag...strapped it to my hoof and began pressing the buttons to get to the radio. Please...please LittlePip...I *believe* in you. Have this be solved...have the truth come out now. Please DJ...please Goddesses...I *need* this now...

I need this now...as much as anypony else...

“LISTEN!”

I threw my hoof in the air, cranking the volume to maximum. A straggly static washed across the area, before I heard DJ-Pon3's wonderful voice break through.

“-wastelanders. We have, right now for the first time since Arbu...an update on the incident for all those who missed my last news...”

Yes! The newscast at the perfect time...this...this could work...

Everypony beneath seemed stunned at the seemingly prophetic timing, glancing upward with wide eyes.

“News is slow filtering back but...but I'm sorry to say...”

My heart stopped.

“It's happened again. Another settlement has gone lights out, close to Arbu. But this time it's no defenceless village...it's that bastion of the Steel Rangers themselves, Bucklynn Cross. Lost with all ponies, they're saying. No-pony got out alive after the Stable Dweller's band were seen heading there...”

All the sound in the world stopped...the crowd didn't matter as I felt every emotion in my heart collapse. But one thought forced my head to turn away from the slowly angering crowd.. Beside the tents at the side...through the fires, I saw Glimmerlight standing in abject shock, looking at my PipBuck. Her eyes filled with tears immediately, her legs trembling...the horror upon her face actually painful to take in...

“Ah don't know what to think of this, my little ponies. Another whole group of folks, Rangers or not...it's just not right. All reports say it simple. No-pony in Bucklynn Cross survived the massacre. No-pony...”

I could see her mouth moving...

“Bucklynn Cross...Mom...dad...”

No...oh no...

Oh...Goddesses...why? *Why*...my hero...what...what have you done?

She took off, running through the crowds into the darkness. At the same time, a pain exploded across my face as a halfbrick slammed into my temple. The shock almost threw me off into a fiery barrel until I grabbed the pillar. The jeering, the shouting and betrayed horror that drove their anger was worse than ever...and I had just offered myself as a target. Under a barrage of projectiles, I covered my face as everything from stones to old hoof-boots clanged and whizzed past me. Flicking my hoof, yelping on every impact over my torso, I grabbed the mouthpiece of my battle saddle and fired toward the Mall. Hearing the impact...worrying for anything to knock me out cold, I simply leapt and let it retract me in. The fall wasn't graceful, but I at least evaded their wrath...skidding across the ground and crashing through somepony's tent to come to a stop.

I could have worried about them...I could have feared for my life at being seen. But all I knew was that Glimmer needed somepony. I saw her galloping, away into the Mall to escape everything. Shouting, I pulled myself to my feet, muscles aching...running after her.

“Glimmer!” No reply. “GLIMMER!”

Passing inside, I saw her stumble on the stairs, grief driving her to be barely able to see through misted eyes. Falling to her side, I rushed up...

“I...I'm sorry! There's some mistake or...or lies or-”

“NO!” Her hoof pushed me off, a face filled with anguish and furious sadness spinning on me. “That's it! That is...it! Once is something to be wary about but a second time?! Murky...that's the proof...it had to have been her!”

“She wouldn't!”

“*She damn well did, Murk!*”

I wasn't sure what stung me more...that my friend believed this...or that in her anger she'd reverted to...to what *others* called me...

“Bucklynn Cross was a *fortress!* My...my mom wouldn't be killed off by some random raider, she was a *Paladin!* It had to have been her! They were too powerful to go down! Twice in a row...can't you see? I'm so sorry, Murky...she's fallen...”

I stomped my two front hooves, refusing to let her believe this.

“No she hasn't! LittlePip wouldn't-”

“You can say that all you like but it doesn't *change* anything, Murky! Wake up and smell the ashes...she's just murdered my fucking parents! My whole family in the wastes! You have to stop believing in her, she'll only keep hurting you! You can't follow somepony like this! That mare isn't what you thought, I'm sorry-”

“I don't believe that!”

We stood facing each other, her higher on the stairs than myself. The dull glow of Fillydelphia, lingering crimson and reflecting everything that came forth...the conflicted belief and anger.

“She's the only thing that gave me hope in the beginning, Glimmer! She saved my life!”

“She saved *herself!* You just got caught up in it, believe in *us*, Murky! Not some mare out there! How can...how can you *dare* speak good of her after what she did? Two settlements, dozens of innocents and my own mom and dad?”

“NO! I won't believe that she's bad! I don't care what I hear or what you say, LittlePip is good! I spent days with nothing but *her* to believe in and keep going, she's a hero! A legend!”

We both stopped, breathing heavily. Our eyes wouldn't blink...wouldn't move from the other. But finally, I saw Glimmer step back and snort.

“Then perhaps you shouldn't be around me for a while...if you're going to praise high and fucking mighty the mare that just killed my folks in *cold blood*. Too many times to be a coincidence now and while you wear that PipBuck *like* her and carry a statue *of* her with that childish belief...I don't think I *want* to be around you. Not for now, at any rate.”

“But-”

I stopped myself...as her words only just hit home.

“Look at it from my side, Murk. I'm seeing somepony I considered a friend telling me my parents' killer is some perfect pony. You expect me to just laugh and smile that off? Maybe...maybe once you start to realise the reality of life and *maybe* once I have time to...to mourn...maybe then we'll meet back up. But till then I think you should just *go*.”

She turned past me to walk onward.

“Go hide and stay...stay safe, because Goddesses help me I can't bring myself to want anything bad to happen to you. I don't want to be the one that hurts you if you stay around, preaching her name to my face when I just lost my parents to her attack! We'll...we'll maybe meet later but...but for now just...just...go.”

Glimmerlight began to trot on into the Mall, her voice cracking under wracking sobs on the last few words. I...I didn't...what did I...what could I say? I...

“...sis?”

“Don't even think of calling me that right now.”

Her head low, filled with tears...she galloped off into the musky corridors. Somehow, seeing her go...feeling

the weight of the argument with her...I found myself falling to the stairs in great sobs. My front hooves wrapped around my head...I could only remember the times we had laughed together, played and bantered. The times we'd saved one another's lives and...and been chosen siblings...

She was my big sister best friend...forever...

But now we'd never do anything...together...

* * *

Silence lay across the lonely stairwell...populated only by me.

Instead of helping an ally...I'd just lost a sister...

I don't know how long I lay, crying into my hooves. I'd...I'd hurt her, somehow and I didn't even know how. I had to believe in LittlePip...if I stopped, then that was it. She was my *foundation*...but...but my belief in her was hurting a pony near me who thought otherwise...

Hooves approached, from back the way Glimmer had gone. Trotting close, I felt the presence of somepony above me.

Gently...slowly, I felt a hoof ruffle my mane, exactly as she did. She...she was...

"I'm sorry!" I wailed with my eyes closed. "I...I'm so sorry!"

Then I opened my eyes and looked up...to see my own staring back at me. Light green...my mouth began to widen to scream.

"Oh...*you will be.*" The Master leered down from above me.

My hooves screamed into action...but it was far *far* too late. A weight descended as I felt it clamp around my neck, the collar dropping hard and snapping shut before locking. Kicking out, I ran anyway, before my neck tugged and jarred to a halt, throwing my hooves from below me.

Lying on my side, thrashing...but being dragged all the same across the ground into the Mall, I could only scream and scream...accompanied by the triumphant laughter of My Master.

* * *

"Please...if anypony out there knows anything...anything...let us here at the radio know. You know I don't like sounding emotional on here, wastelanders but...hope's been taken from us. I imagine there's a lot of folks out there clustering around their radios, waiting for it to be renewed. There'll be a lot of hurt ponies who need her back, need that light in their lives..."

I don't pretend to ignore that some poor little wishful pony's life out there might rely on it.

So I plead of you, wasteland. Find anypony...anypony with a little information on what happened. Because I'll wager there's a lot of folks depending on it right about now to save them...

Let me bring them the truth...no matter how bad it hurts."

* * *

Perk lost...

Path of the Lightbringer – Something has fallen in you, a faith shaken to the point of great loss. Somehow...you just can't muster the same unwavering hope to keep you going any longer. You no longer receive the adrenaline rush when low on health.

Chapter 15: Like Father, Like Son

* * *

“Does The Master really want progress or does he just want slavery?”

“What...what is it like to be *his* slave?”

My greatest fear. To be trapped forever. It was finally coming true.

The collar snapped shut and with it, so did many of my hopes and dreams. The weight around my neck only drawing the slave in my mind to the fore. He had me, his. His *own*. But I just...I couldn't think about anything but how I'd managed to hurt one of my friends in the moment that she'd needed me to be there for her most. Hearing Glimmerlight tell me to just...go. That wracked my heart in ways no slaver ever could.

Very quickly...everything was beginning to fall away from me. Every step after that one glorious moment of feeling like I'd *done* something by ending Barb's riot had only led me farther and farther away from the ponies I knew and loved. With them leaving, being taken from me or turning out to...to not be what I thought they were...

That's all I could think of, amidst my screams and begs to My Master, I could only feel the true pain of losing the friendships I'd suffered and worked so hard to attain. All the toil, constant running and desperate attempts to survive had been taking their toll. By the time he found me...I was already weak with a lack of proper rest and just ripe for him to...to...

Sorry...I...I just need a minute...

“It's alright...sorry, you probably don't want to—”

No! I...I want to, I'm just...scared. I said before how scared I am of him, the way he's always there in my life in some way or another. Inescapable and never ending. The eternal chain.

But this was it. I was now his...his...

“Slave?”

...pet...

Just a wretched trophy, the born slave, the crippled pegasus, the pony with a set of his shackles as his cutie mark. The ultimate symbol to all those around him of what he represented, to all his peers of why *he* was the real slaver and a reminder to all ponies in Fillydelphia of just how they were trapped. That even those with *wings* were grounded and held deep within the bowls of the fiery industry. You couldn't escape Fillydelphia. Never *ever* could. Not unless you were already outside the Wall and got lucky like Brimstone, a situation I'd never be allowed in again, or some sort of legendary figure like LittlePip.

Of course...the idea of legends was fast fading from my mind, held only by a tenuous belief born of hope.

I had fallen so far, bereft of friends and weak of body, he saw the momentary weakness and pounced. He *knew* it wouldn't take much...that he only needed to push a little, get into my head and start to mould me back into what I had once been. I didn't want it, the idea of the chains snapping shut once again and casting me into the never ending blur of true slavery makes my heart beat and my head pound...it always does. I was about to be thrown through his world, subject to his whims and fancies and little more than a living *toy* with which he could sate his appetite for control and power over all others around him. But...I was so vulnerable...so crying out for a purpose and a direction that...that I...

“...no...you didn't.”

I started to believe him...

“...I...”

My Master, he's not like other ponies! I'm sorry, I'm *so so sorry* but this is the truth of it! You ask what it's like under him? Well this is the reality! The darkest days, as I said...he wouldn't let my life be anything but controlled. Like something was hard-wired into my *skull* that I had to listen to him! An authority born into both of us!

But there was one little hope in my mind. Just...just one direction that mattered. The one thing I would *not* let him take from my dreams...Glimmerlight. I needed to...to get to her, say whatever I needed to and...and just do something to make it all fine again! I didn't know how...I didn't know what it was like to lose somepony until a day before then with Caduceus and even then...Goddesses forgive me for saying...I hadn't really 'known' him. I just had to...try...

That's...that's all that I had to go on...

“But...what about your escape? Didn't you want to escape? That driving force? Surely you didn't forget about...”

He...he told me to...

“...oh no...”

* * *

My neck jarred, the bones of my neck along my spine jumped and felt like the gaps were separating far further than they should have as the collar tugged hard enough to pull me from all four hooves.

“**Keep up!**”

Choking out a strangled gasp, my front hooves pawed helplessly at the thick metal as it pulled again...

“**I said KEEP UP, SLAVE!**”

The chain jolted, biting upward into my neck and cut off my windpipe. Thrashing, fighting to get my hooves under me, he gave me no quarter to think. Pulling me again and again...dragging me, pull by pull, down the corridors against all my efforts.

He would stride ahead, stomping his way through the Mall and yank the chain every time my weakened body would fall behind. My head swam with terror, both for Glimmerlight and myself. We'd been in circles multiple times as he toured the Mall, observing the slaves. My only breaks were when he'd stopped to whip somepony into getting back to work. Gradually...bit by bit...it had all become a blur. A couple desperate steps...followed always by that tug of my collar. My neck was already reddened and sore, bruising badly and becoming ever more painful to simply have on. Sores blistered over around where it hung.

No purpose to it...other than the continual reminder of who I was...and to showcase to everypony else that he had me. The entire time I simply watched for Glimmer when I could, desperate to at least be able to shout two words, the two words I knew I had to say...

“**Keep up!**”

I *was* moving quickly! But I only choked as I was pulled onto my face again, before being dragged another twenty feet for falling. My Master was just a giant blurry form to my oxygen starved dizzied perception now, trying to suck in air. Occasionally I'd just see those light green eyes staring and try to get back up...

How...how long were we going to go on? I couldn't...I...I couldn't cope with...

“**Keep UP!**”

The chain tugged, my neck whiplashed and pulled me to my hooves to begin another circuit...carried along for no reason other than to remind me of my place.

* * *

“Inside, Number Seven! Go!”

“W-what's in-ARRGH!”

My cry was simply from being picked up by the chain and hurled through a door. I hit something hard and wooden, collapsing upside down onto my head. My fleece tore on something...the saddlebag landing beneath me as I rolled to the side and scampered backward into a desk before curling up, trying to pull the collar away from my rapidly worsening throat.

It was his office. I...I'd seen this before! My eyes spotted the ventilation duct above I'd once spied upon Barb and My Master from. The same heavy desk that I'd impacted upon...the same low and filthy bed...but now I could see more. Filing cabinets, taken from other places, were now ranked along the sides. Another two doors went away from the old office, leading to two private interview rooms, I guessed. A metal grated and heavily locked cage cupboard bore the weapons I had seen him use now and again. The walls were of rotted old wood and peeling wallpaper while I saw chains hanging from sharp hooks alongside a mass of items...all entrapment...all to restrict and prevent somepony moving in some way. The corners bore simple refuse and old clothing. This was as far from the calm library of Protégé as I could ever be...

But my eyes quickly turned back to him as I scrambled away from the desk, breathing hard and fast as I scampered for the back of the room...pressing myself into a little ball in the corner to be as far away from *him* as possible.

My Master strode into his own office. He was wearing a cackling grin of absolute satisfaction as he advanced to the centre and kept his eyes staring at me. Chains swung from around his neck, attached to me. A thick whip hung from his armour. Slowly, with delight, he closed the door behind us.

Filling my vision in the smaller office, he advanced on those giant hooves until his bulk covered the meagre green lamp in the corner. Then he...he just *stood* there...watching as I shivered and felt more and more afraid as the length went on. Minutes or...was it an hour? How did time work here? *I didn't know!* He just kept staring and making me afraid every time he took a breath that he might speak or do something to me. Oh Goddesses help me!

“I'll let you off for forgetting the word 'Master' this **once**, Number Seven. Finally...oh, finally...you're right *here*...”

The words slid from his mouth like creeping touches to my skin, making me whine and mutter small begs under my breath as he began to move forward. With a retch of my aching throat, I was pulled upward, his hoof wrapping around the chains to lift me up before him right off the ground. I struggled in the air, my hooves holding the collar to lift my neck up from it to...to be able to *breathe!* He...he was hanging me with my own collar!

“You've defied me...ran from me...tried to keep other ponies from me. Oh you will be punished for this, slave. Oh...you will. Eventually. You probably think I'm going to torture you, don't you, Number Seven?”

I choked, any words lost in a pain upon my throat as the heavy metal collar dug in. Swinging back and forth, I flailed and struggled, my eyes going wide and making noises that sounded nothing but sick.

“Well? **Do you?**”

My mouth tried to form words, it really did! But every time I just...fell short, gurgling and failing to even scream as my throat was pinched. My hind legs kicked out fruitlessly off the floor, seeing little silver spots in my vision before I closed my eyes.

He dropped me. I fell at his hooves, coughing and spluttering before just curling up at his hooves, gasping and retching. The reality of it all was sinking in. Please...somepony be there! Brimstone could come back or...or Protégé could turn up at the door or...or *anypony please!*

“Look at your Master when he is talking, Number Seven!”

A hoof swung backward and caught me across the face, throwing me back into the wall as My Master advanced. Crying openly as I felt my cheek bleed...I obeyed. My eyes shot upward to gaze upon him...and feeling sick at the mere sight.

“Better! Now...I asked you a question!”

He...he had! I was so out of practice! I...I should have answered immediately...

“Y-yes...”

“Yes, WHAT?” A hoof struck me again only making me feel like crying louder as the horribly familiar feeling began to set in. I'd been going to say it anyway, really, honest!

“YES, MASTER! PLEASE...PLEASE DON'T, MASTER!”

My Master stepped backward, grunting under his breath.

“Well...it may come as a surprise to you, Number Seven. But I don't torture ponies...”

...h-huh?

“Surprised?”

I nodded, then squeaked, remembering. “Yes, Master!”

“No...no...I don't *torture* ponies...I'm a slaver, Number Seven. I only *punish* them. Now that we finally have a little...heh...*private* time...knowing you're *mine*. So we can get along with making you into what you're meant to be. Wouldn't you like to finally find your destiny, slave? Accepting your punishment like a good little slave and coming back home where you know your place, eh? Don't you want to feel the comfort of knowing who you are again?”

He moved around the desk, his eyes never leaving me. Soaked by my own tears, I kept moving away, until I found myself pressed up against the bed.

“I...want to be free, Master...” My voice felt tiny, a shrill whisper against his commanding tone.

“So selfish...want doesn't get, Number Seven. Oh no...this is your destiny right **here!**” His hoof thundered onto the desk, making it shake terribly. “By my side! My little *pet!* Don't you like that? Heh...your shrivelled little flanks seem to think so, eh?”

“Please just let me-”

“BE QUIET, SLAVE!” The chain tugged, I screamed and was cut off by the dig in my throat as I was pulled toward him until I felt a gigantic hoof press down across my chest and belly, forcing me onto my back as his face leered down from above and slowly grew closer with every word. His other hoof slapped against one of my flanks and my cutie mark, demeaning and invasive upon my body and hard enough that I cried out every time. **“THIS IS WHAT YOU ARE!”**

My ears burned, the bellow ending inches from my face, I couldn't close my eyes, feeling my chest crushed under his weight...shivering at the horrid sense of spit and rage induced drool dripping or being shouted over my face. The stench of rancid sweat and rotten teeth flew over me. But his face softened...losing the anger...easing off my chest.

“Perhaps we just need to find the best way for you to realise it, little Number Seven...you've drifted from your place in life. You've let the raider and the whore fill your brain with ideas you were never meant for. Let some little mare give you hope that was always going to be crushed. Perhaps we should let you see what life **I** can give you...”

He raised up, allowing me to once again retreat away. I could feel something dripping near the pain on my neck. A stray tear? Spit? *Blood?!*

My Master wandered back to his desk, his hoof touching objects across it idly, before his eyes snapped back.

“Did I **say** you could lie down, slave?”

“No, Master!” I actually cried in pain as I pushed injured limbs under me, driven past pain by obedience to stand up rock still.

“Better...now, as I was saying, Number Seven. You probably think I'm going to torture you...be some sadistic slaver that hurts you every day for his own sick amusement. But you'd be wrong...your punishment will come eventually. For now...you are going to begin your time as my *personal* slave.”

My mind was hurting. Well...my *skull* was hurting...but it pretty much meant the same thing. What kind of trick was this? I had expected the water torture again...or...or to be sent to his mines. Or worse. But I could barely think straight. My vision kept hazing, my fears for Glimmerlight still aching away in my head alongside the gut clenching terror that I was locked to My Master.

“Nooo...no. As I said, Number Seven, I'm not a torturer. I just...” He paused, before cackling and sneering at me, staring down from his massive height. “...command. I only punish those who don't *follow*. Everypony is a slave, Number Seven...just some don't know it yet. So you **will** follow what I say. Now...admit what you are...and perhaps we might lessen your punishment for disobeying me and running away.”

It hurt more than I could ever imagine to let the words come out...but I had no choice here.

“A...a slave, Master...”

Crack! I stumbled and screamed, the wooden floor chipping as the whip struck it. How did he use it so fast?!

“**You are not ANYPONY'S slave! WHAT ARE YOU?**”

“Your slave! Your...your slave, Master! Your...” I felt the tears keep rolling down my cheeks, the bitter words coming out as hatefully as if I were throwing up. “...p-p-pet...”

My Master's smile only increased...his chest swelling as he heard the term. I wanted to be sick...the feel of a whip cracking had thrown me back in life, making me say what I'd thought for a moment was true. I was so scared...

“Then it is time you began to act it. You are **mine** now. You will follow me, be my personal slave. You will keep your collar on **at all times!** You will remain in my office, you will sleep here when **I** tell you that you may, you will only eat what **I** give you, your life is mine now. But at some point, you-**REMAIN STILL!**”

I bolted upright from where I had been dizzily swaying, standing almost to attention.

“So **first**, you're going to perform a task for me while I finish the rounds for the day. I didn't expect you to so kindly return to me, Number Seven...so you've interrupted my schedule. Get over here.”

Trembling, I started to-

“**NOW!**”

I galloped forward, stopping short of the desk, shivering and sore. The chain jangled no matter when I moved. Literally every movement of my own was reminding me that I was...was *attached* to him. That thought alone turned my stomach.

What he had for me was completely beyond anything I could have predicted...of all the horrible imagined pains...it avoided every one of them.

“I want you to organise this room, Number Seven. Before I come back, I want everything back somewhere that it makes sense. All the spare ammo on the ground...the chains stacked on their rings...the papers organised on the desk. You will clean for me and you will do it promptly. We'll break you in softly, eh? Hehe...”

“I...I understand, Master...” The words stammered out weakly, caught by the pressure around my throat. It was a constant fight to not pull at it even while I stared, confused at the, well, easy task.

My Master leered down, before his hoof settled on my head...before gently running around over an ear and curving across my scar down to my cheek and lifting my head.

“You're where you should be, slave. Where you were always meant to be. Fillydelphia was always to be the climax of your life...where you would finally find your true Master. You can rest now...relax and know you've found your true role in life.”

The other hoof came up, grasping my other cheek and squeezing them between his hooves as his face leaned forward, pressing his forehead against mine. My body twitched...I wanted to struggle, but those eyes just stared and stared...holding me still.

“Now we're finally together...whether by blood or destiny...you're where you always were meant to be. Just like when I found this city too, I found where I was *meant* to be. We're bonded...you and I. You've turned out just how I'd have always wanted when growing up. A little pony to own for myself, the one I wanted when I *took* her.”

Tears were beginning to drop from my eyes. How...how dare he talk of that! The words alone stung and disgusted me. I...I didn't remember her but...but...

I...just wanted to cry alone...it wasn't true...I just couldn't face the thought of it. *It wasn't true...I wasn't his!*

His rancid breath washed over my face and made me oh-so-glad for my blocked nose. I just breathed shortly and sharply, not daring to speak out of turn to My Master. Finally...he leaned back, removing the chain from his armour and locking it to a thick hoop welded to a plate on the floor.

“Now...I'll leave you to your duty. Also...”

Chuckling, almost muttering a little tune to himself, he turned to the door...before moving to a mouldy looking inactive fridge and removing a small bowl contained in a humming box. He placed it on the desk, before lifting it with a waft of slight steam and a small wash of heat.

A smell hit my nostrils...even through the mucus blocking them I could detect it. A warm smell...rich and thick and fruity and...*real* food...

My Master pushed it toward me, right up to my hooves...a serious look.

“I will return in under an hour. Get this task done.”

There was no other response. “Yes, Master!”

“Good...”

With that, he turned, his massive bulk almost not fitting properly in his own room as he blew out the lamp, sidled through the doorway, and slammed it behind him. The room fell into darkness and remained still. I heard at least three locks on the outside slam shut...and I was left alone in my collar...chained to the room itself. My ears heard him move away, stomping down the creaky floors to the stairwell and descending.

I waited only till I could not hear him...before I leapt to the one providence. It killed me to obey him to eat when he told me to...to slurp and guzzle only by his will to feed me when he wanted to...but I couldn't turn it down. To my relieved delight...it was a thick stew, pushing past my head cold and warming my insides along with quickly filling my shrunken stomach. I kept eating, tipping the bowl to get every bit I could before almost pathetically licking the bowl clean for every scrap I could. The bowl bumped off my thick collar, but I wouldn't let any of it drop. He was probably not going to feed me for another *week* or something...maybe if I acted sicker he'd give me more to keep me alive? No...he'd know. He *always* knew.

That quaking thought of having to consider such drastic measures to merely get food let a lot of it really sink in.

Technically...I should have started right away, but I just couldn't. Not...not after so much in so short a time. Gently lifting the heavy chain, almost as thick as one of my skeletal little legs itself, I just sighed and curled up on the spot, hearing the dull clanking of metal every time I moved. The entire situation was driving me to keep closing and opening my eyes in a desperate attempt to find that this nightmare wasn't real. I didn't want to do it...to do his work and fall into his world. Any minute now I'd...I'd wake up again. I'd scream and fall out of bed beside...beside Glimmer! She'd hug me and we'd feel better because we were...together...

...Glimmer...

Already, I missed her. Not like before...now I missed the knowledge that she'd be waiting with a tight hug and a teasy joke to make me smile through a blush. I missed the reassurance she brought to my life and the reminders of how we were all going to escape! I missed that knowledge that no matter how bad it got, no matter what pain I endured, she'd always be there at the end for me to go and take refuge with. That we...we were escaping...

I missed that feeling of being on the brink of freedom...

I missed my sis even more...

My eyes were already streaming before I even realised it. I didn't even fully understand what had happened. I kept playing the argument over and over in my mind. I'd...I'd tried to reassure her that Littlepip was good and we'd...we'd all find some way to know that she didn't do it!

The chain clanked and dragged below my hooves as I pulled myself over to the first pile of cloth to sort out, fold and place...well, somewhere. Part of me wondered why I'd been allowed to keep my PipBuck, saddle and all my other possessions still, but such things were trivial. Even if I could have fired my grapple to the airduct...I was still chained and collared to the floor with no method of breaking such thick locks and metal rings. Shivering in disgust, I began to pull and sort the warm and musty clothing and rags. Already I could see tiny things crawling over them as I lifted them...making me whimper even as I threw them into piles.

My mind kept revolving about everything, finally settling on trying to think about the confrontation with Glimmer to...to get away from thinking about My Master. How could I sort it? I...I just wanted her to be happy and...and to feel better about things!

That's when it finally made sense.

I'd been trying to calm her over, Littlepip. Somepony *else* when she didn't care about them in the slightest because she'd just lost friends and family! Guilt shot through me. Was I...was I *that* out of touch with real life? I'd been taken from my mom...but I didn't know what it was like to have anypony to really lose until I'd seen Caduceus go.

Glimmerlight had just lost everypony outside these walls that she'd ever truly known to go back to. Coral Eve's story was coming back to me, that she had lost her hope because everypony she knew or loved was dead or now in here.

Now Glimmer had been struck with the same...and I'd not even realised it in my own grief to see my hero be...be shouted down...

I stayed crying as I worked, hanging the chains by having to throw them upward. I threw my grief, guilt and pain into the efforts, seeking anything to keep my mind off of losing my best friend *ever* because I'd been so...so *stupid* and out of touch with how *normal* ponies who aren't *born damned slaves* work! The chain in my hooves was thrown upward with force, bouncing from the wall and dropping. Again and again I threw it, screaming and shouting my anger and feelings at it until after it had finally caught...I simply fell back against the wall holding my head and feeling the blood of my split cheek running between my hooves to drip into my already burning neck from the tight collar. The cold had gotten worse...already I could feel the coughs in between my heaving sobs.

I wished I could go back...say it all differently. Littlepip meant so much to me but...but I hadn't realised

how it would feel to lose something *I'd never had*. My home...

Glimmer was going through something I couldn't possibly imagine right now and I'd just completely ignored it.

Was...was this it then? Was this how it ended? Us all driven apart and me taken by My Master until I died and they...

No, she wouldn't just...leave me, would she? They wouldn't go on their plan without me...

Maybe My Master was right...I was being selfish to want out. They all had reasons too. But he was wrong...I wasn't going to stay here! I was scared, alone in a dark room and being kept as his...ugh...pet. But step one was...was to find Glimmerlight. Find my sister and...and somehow make it all better to get her back! I wasn't the same pony My Master found in the FunFarm so long ago who'd just lie down and accept it this time! (Or what my rather restricted views of 'long ago' really were.) There were still...still some routes to get back in the saddle.

No...this was a...a set back.

I'd get out...

I had to...

My eyes turned back to the room, filled with filthy and untidy objects I'd been tasked to pointlessly clean up when I knew it wouldn't stay like this.

I had to...because the terror of being his for too long was something I knew that my vulnerable mind and ever-weakening body couldn't cope with. The thought of being his *forever* simply enough to make me want to curl up, cry and do nothing until I simply died.

* * *

Even through the thick concrete walls and multiple floors above me...I could still hear the roar of thunder and the washing drone of the rain. Whatever storm was blanketing Fillydelphia was still more than present, shaking the very foundations of the Mall as it renewed itself once again in fury, casting its wrath down upon the darkened city. If I listened very carefully...I could swear I heard the hissing as the water burned surfaces or struck the forgefires surrounding the Mall. Trapped in a small room within darkness, I felt like it was all just crushing in from every side, the cold seeping through the stone.

I couldn't simply remain still, though. Driven by a mind that wandered to all a manner of subjects to try and work out what to feel and say to Glimmerlight, my task was finished fairly quickly. Often in the past I'd been instructed to do such menial work and compared to what I'd seen My Master's other slaves doing...I'd happily clean up his filthy office. I couldn't read his papers on the desk, but I had looked for patterns in their formats and gathered them together in a rough order before stacking them in little piles. I'd, with some degree of disgust, straightened out his bed and hung any stinking clothing in the cupboard he kept at the back. In curiosity I'd tried the two doors, but both had been kept locked. At the time, it had only emerged as something less for me to actually clean.

To and fro...clanking my way on that chain across the floor again and again. I fell blindly into the work like I always had in the past, allowing the slave inside to take over my activities. All while letting my mind drift to working out what I'd do when I saw Glimmerlight. The words felt...impossible. Drawn away from me like every time I found one I lost the others or they no longer made sense in context. I wished somepony was here to help me with them...

Caduceus would likely have known. He'd been a smart pony...

I forced myself to think about him...remembering his death and the scant time I'd known him for. Less than a day to most ponies...a much longer time to a slave. But he was the only thing close to what Glimmer was going through I had to relate. It wasn't easy...forcing myself to remember what I'd seen and gone

through under Barb's sick showmanship for his band of raiders. A few times...while weeping, I'd finally began to make myself feel a little of what I missed...how I'd never see him back no matter what I wished.

It really wasn't much. Caduceus had been a good pony and a potential friend...but Glimmerlight had lost the ponies that had raised her. Everypony who she'd once trained with, laughed with, fought with or shared moments with. How could I compare? Oh Goddesses...please give me the understanding and the forgiveness for my wrongdoings...don't take my friend away from me, please!

What if...what if she hated me now. What if she just wanted to go off with her new friend Leafshine and escape with her instead? What...what if Brimstone threw me away because I'd hurt the pony he protected?

Stopping briefly, resting my head into my hooves to quietly pray for our friendship to endure. So many scenarios of being turned down...forced away and once again cast alone into the darkness ran through my head like stark terror. If...if My Master became the only pony who cared about who I was...

I couldn't think about that. I just couldn't. In desperation, I pulled out my journal to try and...and do *anything*. For long minutes I trembled and hopelessly attempted to make even a vague pony shape. But it just wasn't happening. Every leg was too long, every eye mismatched with the other one and scaling problems that just wouldn't go away. A feral zombie ghoul would have looked more like a normal pony...let alone who I really wanted to draw.

It...it just wasn't happening. So it was true then...I'd lost the one little talent I sought refuge in to let it all out through. In a sudden rage, I threw the journal closed and stuffed it deep into my saddlebag before turning my back on it. At...at least I could still cry to let it out...

The thought to try the radio came to me, but I didn't even get to my PipBuck before the fear of what I might hear began to ring in my mind. What if it was Tenpony Tower next? Or Friendship City? What if I heard news that a slave camp near Shattered Hoof had been slaughtered by the Stable Dweller with...with all ponies dead?

A thick stomping began to echo around the hallways. My ears twitched gently at the sound, before shivers began to roll through me. There was only one place he could be coming...

I'd finished the work well on time, not even realising how long I'd spent rubbing a cloth over everything with now numb and bleach stained hooves. The shock of finding how easily I'd slipped into the blurry routine of slavery was like a bucket of cold water being dropped over me. But now I only had to wait, hope, pray and fear for what came next. The thick clank of heavy locks thudded in through the door. Reasserting myself, I fixed up a crease at the end of his bed, hid away everything I'd been using and painfully galloped to the middle of the room to stand upright and ready like every good slave should when his Master approaches. The feeling of having to do so sickened me, my own body lay in ruin from my throat, sickness, weariness and bleeding cheek...yet his office was now tidy and clean.

At least I could still consciously know I hated it. That was *something*. If I were to survive what was...oh Goddesses...what was coming, I'd need every little thing I could to hold onto in my head.

Light flooded the room amongst an ear splitting sudden creak of the old metal hinges around the oaken door. I lowered my head and bowed slightly as I saw the massive shape in the corridor's light.

My Master walked in, immediately causing me have to fight a shiver of fear at his proximity once more. Creaking the floorboards or chipping on the stone sections of the ground, he lit the green lamp and trotted around the room, locking the door behind him. His eyes kept swinging back to me...until he disappeared out of sight from my field of view. I didn't dare move my head. But the sounds were clear. I heard him fuss over his desk...smooth a hoof on his bed...check the cupboards and rattle the jars I'd used to sort the spare shotgun shells he'd left lying around. Please...please be satisfied...please be okay with it Master...

The trotting carried on behind me, moving close enough that I could almost feel him inches away. Screwing my eyes shut against the uncomfortable sense of that, I just stifled the growing whimper in my throat.

"I see you haven't forgotten how to do *basic* slave work, Number Seven." The words were low, almost

muttered and carrying a quietly stern tone, “You work well with my things. Hmm, almost like you were *meant* to be doing this, eh?”

My Master finished his tour of the room, coming to stand before me. I'd wanted to protest that last sentence...tell him that I'd never be a slave again. But the instinctive slave in my mind knew far better what I was supposed to say...

“I...I just tried my best, Master...”

“Mm...that you did. Good...good.”

His eyes travelled back to me, sliding over my body downwards until they passed to something before me on the floor.

“Then...” his voice took a terrifying drop in tone, “...would you explain to me why you disobeyed me already?”

A cold stab of fear shot through my spine. I staggered back, hearing the chain clatter around.

“I...I didn't! I did it all as you asked, Master! I-ARGH!”

He had grabbed the chain, wrapping it around a hoof and dragging me toward him, before simply hurling me into the far wall. Screaming, I slapped against it, cracking the plaster and falling to the ground in a shower of paint flakes and dust. Seconds later, something was thrown across the room, impacting on my hooves as they covered my face before I felt myself lifted and pushed against the wall by my chest. My Master's face glowered closely. When...when could he move so *fast*?

The thrown item was lifted in his other hoof...held before my eyes. The...the stew bowl...

“Did I TELL you that you were allowed to eat this, Number Seven? DID I?”

My mind rebelled as the sudden realisation sank home. He...he hadn't! He'd just put it near me...he hadn't...oh...oh no...no no no!

“N-no...Maste-” I was cut off, again by a scream as the bowl crashed over my head hard enough to crack it. My left forehead, from my eye to my ear along the swollen scar, ached and stung under the impact. Dizzied, I slumped against his hoof with my vision reeling.

“NO! I did NOT!” His words were almost making me go deaf already, my ears unable to handle the close volume. **“You stole it because you were selfish, Number Seven! You wanted it! What did I tell you before? You do not choose when a slave waits until his Master commands him!”**

I tried to squeak my apologies, every thin leg struggling against his one gigantic hoof that seemed to cover my entire torso. But he was having none of it. Falling to the ground roughly, he dropped the bowl on me before rounding off, moving a few feet away.

Everything was cast into stark relief. I'd thought he was perhaps showing that 'normal' life as a personal slave may have been more like an assistant or aid.

No...this...this was going to be as bad as I'd always feared...

“Stand up, slave...”

I weakly strove to obey, clutching my now bleeding forehead. Warily, I opened my eyes to look at him.

“I'm sorry...I'm sorry, Master...”

“Silence, slave. It isn't up to your voice and *choice* to be sorry. Do you not remember what I told you? I don't torture...I simply punish those slaves who do not know their place. The ones who have drifted from their role in life. How many times do I need to repeat this to you, Number Seven?”

His voice wasn't shouting. It was those times he scared me the most. When he simply trotted back and forth around the room, speaking as though in deep thought.

“A slave as recently rebellious as yourself...I shouldn't have *assumed* that you would know what to do. You know that I might have simply asked you to carry my files for me to my meeting had you obeyed from the beginning? I see that isn't what you want...”

It took a few seconds, but I began to see where he was going with this. Sweating, I stepped forward, my voice rising in pitch.

“No...no! I'll do better! Please...please I just made a mistake and...and assumed-”

“**It isn't your place to assume! It isn't your place to think!** But you'll learn...”

His eyes finally settled on me, regarding everything.

“Beginning with all this. These...'things' you carry around. Gifts...toys of a spirit you do not truly own and clothing that hides your shame beneath it. Remove them. **Strip.** You disobeyed...now I need to remind you of some things.”

I bit my lip, suddenly breathing a lot faster. But I felt my hoof moving to the clasp of my saddlebag...steadily shivering over the fastening.

“**Too slow, Number Seven! I said STRIP! You will trot bare from now on, as you should be! Bearing your winged shame for all to see! You haven't earned clothing!**”

Squeaking with terror, I felt myself obeying, crying openly as I dropped my saddlebag and pulled my goggles from my head. Struggling and shivering, falling to my side, I tugged my fleece and attached saddle over my head, revealing my bandaged wings and feeling *horribly* vulnerable and exposed. But the sight as I brought my head out only gave rise to a sudden shock of tears and begging.

My Master had unfastened his heavy whip...letting it uncoil onto the floor.

“Throw it all behind you, slave...”

My quaking hooves just crept over my face. The shouted repeat of the command made me do it.

“Now turn around.”

I could barely stand, hearing the drip of tears off the floor as my hearing seemed to become more perceptive from sheer instinct and fear. I could feel the sweat rolling over me.

“Turn. Around.”

I almost fell, shivering on the spot with my eyes clenched shut as I slowly rotated.

“Please...”

“**Silence.** You *earned* this, Number Seven...the moment you thought you had a will to make your own choice to eat. I control your life now. You will not even *cry* without my permission. You *will* obey, even if you feel you won't. But you'll learn over time...”

I heard the hiss of the whip being drawn back. I closed my eyes tightly.

“You'll learn...”

* * *

I didn't dare open my eyes.

My Master had a meeting soon, one I was to attend with him. I had time to do things. But I didn't dare open my eyes.

He had opened one of the doors of his office to reveal a cell. The walls thick and lined with sharp edged metal plates and mouldy tile. The floorboards were gone, revealing nothing but ruined concrete that resembled hewn rock. The moment I'd been thrown in there to wait and 'think about my place in life'...I hadn't dared open my eyes.

I simply lay, feeling my back and rump swell and swell with growing pain. Feeling the dull throb of pain growing to a searing burn that twisted and surged all across my skin. Feeling the dread helplessness all over again of being ordered to stand still and take it...no matter how much I'd shrieked and begged. I wanted to see the damage...it felt like my back's skin had been flayed clean from my body as I felt trickles of blood flow beneath the swollen lines and thin slitted cracks where my skin had split. At least I could ignore one command...I could still cry. But I didn't dare open my eyes.

The door had slammed shut and left me to 'think about my place in life', alone in a soundproofed cell with nought but the cold stone and the hot pain to feel. No ambient light to see by. I'd curled up, seeking to take comfort by hugging myself into as little a ball as I could, but the movement had opened ever wound in my back enough that my scream had resonated in the small chamber enough to hurt my ears. It was so small that I...I dared not open my eyes.

I couldn't see...couldn't hear...couldn't go anywhere...

So I had retreated inside. Closed my eyes and tried to remember the things I liked. But all I could remember was stroke after stroke after stroke. Each one feeling different. Every single time giving rise to a snapshot of my past flickering in my mind's eye. Of rock farms and cart pulling. Of punishments and long shifts. Of obedience through fear and acceptance through hopelessness. I had retreated inside to try and escape it to the past and remember the gentle world I'd seen so little of and bring all my friends and heroes into with me. To open my eyes...to see the truth...

I couldn't handle that.

So I dared not open my eyes.

I simply dared to dream.

* * *

The Mall had changed. Being dragged out and chained to My Master once more, I had been led around at his heel with my head low. But I had glimpsed what had been done to what had once been Protégé's work to accomplish something greater if he'd ever gotten the support he wanted.

Now it was simply becoming the same nightmare I'd seen elsewhere already.

My Master tugged me to keep up, something I was quickly learning was more like an exhausting half-gallop than a simple canter. Half tripping over my own hooves, I was taken upstairs for his final checks before leaving. Every little step was giving my back pain.

"You will remember your lesson for hours...days, perhaps, slave." He had told me that as we'd left the room and I had begun whimpering in pain within feet.

The corridors had been tunnelled out in places now, knocked down to create a maze of additional routes through offices and store rooms. Whether it was more efficient or simply to My Master's preference was unknown. But I saw slaves toiling away under gunpoint to hammer out the brickwork and thick concrete while others dragged in metal boxes full of tools and disassembled workbenches. What was he planning here?

The slaves and slavers all turned to look at me. They looked at me...my wings...my scars...my collar. Some laughed. Some grinned. Some just looked glad it wasn't them.

None showed any form of pity. Either they didn't care or they didn't dare.

Eventually, after many sets of stairs, we emerged to the main balcony I had once been thrown from in the plaza. Oh...how it had changed. My Master permitted me to gaze over the edge and see what had been started.

The Plaza balconies were blocked by sheets of rusted chicken wire now, razor wire running around the edges to dissuade anyone attempting to pry it off. Each shop cell was being converted into a true prison.

Thicker bars were being welded in and the doors kept locked as I saw the slaves being led back into the Mall. In small groups, they were assigned cells and shut in tightly. Others were being dragged out, often looking dead on their feet. I saw whips slash across necks, backs and rumps to those who were slow dragging themselves up...only reminding me of my own burning wounds. My knees felt weak enough to want to fall from the searing feeling...but I couldn't...if I did he'd only do it more!

Behind the fountain lurked a new item...a small incinerator. Thick, bulky and with four small gates to the furnace inside, ponies were throwing scraps of wood into it. I was almost sick on the spot as I saw a small commotion around a cell turn into the guards simply throwing a corpse onto it. She just hadn't woken up...

The smoke carried upward, belching through the hole in the ceiling that had been covered over with a cage again. But already I could see the smog collecting on the upper levels where slaves covered their mouths with cloth and lay in coughing heaps. Craters, bullet holes and battle damage still ravaged the area, but the worst craters in the floor had been dug out and turned into more of the curious confinement cells covered by cages or sheet metal.

Even as I watched...I saw one buck dragged across the ground, thrashing in panic before being hurled into one. Immediately after they slammed the lid shut...I heard a squealing shriek and horribly high pitched wail beside the helpless sound of hooves fighting to scramble up a sheer rock surface. My skin crawled at the sound.

“Now you see a *true* bastion of slavery, Number Seven.” My Master grabbed my head, keeping my eyes forward. “The slavers command! The slaves obey! The disobedient are punished! This is how things *should* be run. Doesn't this look familiar? Feel like somewhere you know so very well?”

I *hated* his questions...they were cruel and obvious in their intent. He *knew* that I hated it...but if I denied it he'd...he'd do things...

I nodded. “Y-yes...Master...”

“Mm...feels like home. Welcome to your new life.” He paused, then grinned. “Hehe...look who it is. Recognise anypony?”

He wrenched my head enough that I cried out and would have fallen but for him holding me as the movement tugged every bleeding lash upon my back. My eyes were pointed down into the plaza. Blinking and trying to focus, I felt a sudden shock and will to leap into it pass through me.

Glimmer!

She was being roughly handled by a slaver, dragged in alongside three soot stained slaves. They were pressed toward her old cell, now newly locked over. But I could see she barely put up any real resistance, allowing herself to be led and tossed around with a lot less of the spirit I'd once known from my friend. I could see her hooves were frayed and sore from some form of physical labour and her back bore the dull marks of heavy weight pulling. But something else was becoming apparent. Her cheeks were flushed and her movements...dizzy. Like some sort of fever...

“Yes...your *once* friend. We've had her working all those proper shifts she missed after the weakling only gave her work repairing technology. She's been cast to *proper* work now, carting materials from the crater teams to the radiation engine Red Eye uses.”

Radiation?! Then that meant it...it was a radfever! Poisoning! My Master must have seen the look on my face, for he just crudely cackled and patted me on the head with a hoof.

“Don't worry...if she learns to work hard and becomes sick enough we might give her a little RadAway...just to keep her working and not taking the easy way out. No-pony escapes their duty until they've worked themselves for all they possibly can.”

Panic was rising in my mind. I could see clearer and clearer than in the hours since I'd last seen her, *something* had started to affect her badly. It must have been intense! She *needed* help but...but she couldn't

take RadAway! It'd kill her!

I...I had to...do what? What *could* I do? I was even more trapped than her...

I wasn't given the chance to even shout to her. The collar pulled tight, choking any words from my throat before I could even gasp a breath to make a noise and dragging me to lie against My Master's leg. Unable to speak up, I saw her pink mane and dull red robes disappear into the old shop before her gate was slammed shut.

"P-p-please...Master...let me say so--"

His leg I was pulled against kicked out, knocking me on my side a good five feet away before the chain caught and stopped my slide just short of the edge. Again, I felt the rubbed raw skin on my throat tug and sting.

"I instructed no crying, slave! You don't get to **ask** for things. Now...we have a meeting to attend at the Ministry of Arcane Science. **Get up!**"

Quickly, I obeyed, keeping my head low.

"Better...now, we--"

"Master! Master!"

A thin nasal voice cut through, one I recognised all too well as his assistant. That scrawny thin pony that seemed to take care of any general paperwork and message carrying for My Master. Daring to lift my eyelids up a little, I saw him approach quickly and abase himself even faster, rather out of breath.

"I have somewhere to be, Wormtail. This had *better* be good..."

"I...phew...I bring news from...from Red Eye himself! He wants to speak with y-you, Master."

There was a brief silence. It became clear that My Master had taken that as rather important news indeed. I could understand entirely. Master Red Eye was, well, *The* Master of Fillydelphia. Everypony reported to him.

"Hmm...it seems he has received my request then if he wants to see me. Very well! Wormtail, run ahead and inform him I shall not be long. The ass will have to wait. Now..."

I quickly lowered my gaze as I saw My Master turn back to me.

"We can't have a pegasus snivelling around our great leader now, can we? Not his sort of thing..."

"N-no, Master..."

The chain pulled *hard*, jerking my head back as I fell to the ground, muzzle and chest first. It was followed by a half kick with his front hoof hard enough to drive the wind from me.

"I didn't ask you! Learn your place and when to speak, Number Seven! Now...we need to find someplace for you..."

Curling up, choking and trying to suck air in, I heard his assistant laugh in that shrill, demeaning tone. He shut up at a quick glance. My Master turned, unhooking the chain.

"You there!" He shouted to a passing slaver. "Take this slave to the Plaza until I return. Make sure he's *not* in with the Ranger. Somewhere far back, out of sight."

"Yes, Master!"

The chain was passed. It was almost a relief...I could keep up with this slaver on my shaky legs as I was led to the stairs once more. Behind me, My Master kept glaring until I was out of sight. I...I had to use what time I had, find Glimmer and...and try to get her RadPurge from Weathervane!

I may have lost her friendship...I *wasn't* going to watch her lose her life!

Just...*how?*

The Plaza was even worse up close. The sickly stench of decay slapped through even my choking cold. I was led across the clattering metal that now covered some craters, pulled between slaves who worked themselves to the (sometimes literal) bone on pulling the enormous pulleys for lifting giant rock debris through the roof. Every one of the covered confinement pits contained either a crying whine or dull defeated moaning tinged with occasional whines of pain they had simply fallen into harsh acceptance of. Despite morbid curiosity...I still couldn't see into them. I could only smell a horrid rot seeping through each.

Quickly, I really began to hate my cold...it only seemed to let the *bad* smells through...

But my eyes could only keep going back to a certain cage...praying to myself I'd see somepony there.

There wasn't. As such...I was simply led, whimpering and limping my way behind my allotted slaver toward the back of the Plaza. The area was chewed up, where the last confrontation between the griffins and raiders had taken place. I could still see horrid stains on the floor and pillars.

“Eh, this'll do. In here, runt!”

The chain was removed from my collar, before a half buck punted me through the doorway into the darkness of an old store front. Curling on the ground, I heard the door slam shut behind me and solidly lock, leaving me to the darkness. Already I heard slaves shifting around, but I just moved back to the bars. I was still bleeding from my back...tired, scared and sore...but I just wanted to crane my neck through and look for any sign of Glimmerlight. Even just another glance to...to maybe catch her eye...

But the bars were too close...pressing my face against them, I slumped down, miserable. Everything was just coming apart...

Behind me, I picked out the sounds of hooves approaching. A couple of foul looking earth pony bucks were coming up behind me. Turning my back to the bars, I saw one grin.

“Look who it is...”

“Yeah...remember us, kid?”

I really didn't. Whinnying as my back scraped on the ground, I pulled my pained body away from them.

“Don't remember seeing us lying around under Barb's raiders? Don't remember the sounds of flaying skin?”

He advanced into the light from the plaza entrance...to my horror I saw that one flank was just a red angry scar of muscle and barely healed flesh.

“We *saw* you helping them raiders to begin with...you helped put us all in that!”

“Just your luck you're with us now, eh, little wings? Grab him!”

They lunged. Back to the side wall, I just screamed as they charged forward.

A feeling of overpressure in the air raced through my ears, before an eruption of force washed across the entire cell. A solid wave of telekinetic power that blew up all the dust and pebbles on the ground to blast the two bucks like leaves caught in a hurricane into the bars of the cell. Crouching low, my mane whipped as I felt the forces unleashed tear at me and my exposed back. They cried out, before silencing at the bone crunching slam of their impacts as the wave of energy began to settle. Aside from a white blue flare...it had been entirely unseen, like the wind or an invisible tidal wave.

“Get *away* from him, you two! *Shoo!*”

A female voice I knew! Opening my eyes...I saw the bucks lying in a dizzied, sore and groaning heap near the wall bars, slowly trying to crawl away holding their heads. Turning...the sparking light of a faulty looking horn had rushed up beside me.

“C-Coral?”

“Ssh...Murk, come in here. Ignore those louts.”

Her hoof carefully wrapped around my neck as we limped together into the darkness. With my eyes beginning to adjust, I saw it was an old confectionery shop with dozens of spilled (and unfortunately empty...damn...) sweetie jars. She led me past the counter, into the back. A small glowing gemlamp, like many slaves had managed to purchase from the likes of Sooty Morass, lit the tiny hovel of a room. The store room beyond had collapsed, remaining inaccessible. Coral showed me to a thin mattress on the floor beside the gentle blue glow of the lamp and softly pressed me to lie on it.

“Don't worry about that pair...they won't dare do anything to you with me around. They know I'd blast them through the bars if they ever got on my bad-ow!”

Her horn sparked, flicking and sizzling. I saw fizzles of energy drip from it as her hoof rested against the side, breathing heavily until it calmed down.

“Are...are you alright?”

“I'm...fine, nothing I'm not used to for years, now settle. Shh...”

Her hoof gently pressed on the back of my head, stroking my mane gently as I saw her eyes flow with horror to my back. It almost sounded out of place, to hear such a colourful curse surge from her mouth with disgust while she lifted the lamp over to get a closer look.

“That monster...”

I could only nod, resting my head in my forehooves. Lying still...it gave me more time to really remember just how much I could feel the demeaning scars upon my back still reminding me of...of those few minutes under his punishment...

“It...it hurts...”

“I know it does, my dear...ssh...lay still. I'll do what I can.”

Coral Eve produced a small bucket from the corner, making me begin to wonder if this was a cleaning cupboard. Water sloshed in it as she soaked a cloth and began to gently clean me. Such a moment...feeling a motherly touch from somepony who really was one. Even if she wasn't mine...even if it stung and hurt...having somepony to just wipe away the blood and grime from my back and rump that the lashes had left upon me was enough to give me a moments respite from the hell that my life was quickly heading toward. Hearing her soft coo's, feeling the firm yet gentle strokes of a wet cloth and feeling the hurt flow off me under the thin light. If I looked up, I could see her ruined long mane of white and black, tinged with blue and crudely tied into two braids and a long ponytail as though desperate to remember how she used to look. Her thin grey coat was smeared and scarred like any other slave now.

“I'm so sorry he got you, Murk...I really was hoping you'd gotten away. I...I wish I could do something to stop him taking you again...you poor thing. No-pony deserves what he gives out.”

I didn't reply, other than to lean my head to her side slightly for some measure of comfort. Only after a few moments of squirming and whining as she gently cleaned the lash cuts and carefully refitted my wing bandages with all the skill of hoof an earth pony might have. A little bond went from me to her...both of us had lost our primary born method to really go about life and had been forced to adapt.

“Th-thank you...by the way...”

“It's alright, my dear. I told you before...I know an innocent little young buck who needs help when I see one. If I...if I can't care for my own...it would be wrong of me to ignore you.”

I lifted my head. “C-can I come back here, if I'm allowed?”

“Of course! You've *more* than earned that, Murk, with all you've done to help me. Although, I would have thought you'd go to, well...Glimmer.”

There was an awkward silence.

Then it was broken only by the soft sounds of me fighting to choke back all the emotions as I finally let

it all out to somepony about what had happened...falling into her hooves' grasp and not even caring about her past with Glimmer as she let me get it all out of my system.

Feeling the crushing guilt, I told her about our argument...about what had happened to cause it. About LittlePip and about what The Master had been doing. Coral Eve only listened quietly, before gently embracing me.

“Listen, Murk...it doesn't matter about me and Glimmerlight. *You* need help too and I...I trust that she'll be good to you too. She's proven that much to me, even if her and I are, well...a long way from seeing eye to eye...”

I looked up to her face, twitching slightly as I heard some guards canter past, slapping batons along the cages. Coral seemed genuine. Glimmerlight's assertion of who *really* was the true forgiver between them rung in my head over and over...

“So I want you to know you can *always* come back to me, alright? Any good ponies need to stick together in here. That and, well...I could do with somepony around sometimes as well...”

A hoof wiped her eye, before she looked back at me amidst the shouting of somepony being dragged to a late shift. I just nodded, unsure of what I could say beside her. But seeing Coral smile at least a little...that was the first true moment of relief I'd had all day...

“I'll...I'll try. But I don't know what he wants with me...and I don't know if...if I can go back to Glimmerlight...she probably hates me now and she's sick and-”

“She's *what*?” Coral blurted it out, before pausing, biting her lip and reasserted herself. “She's sick now?”

I nodded, a little perplexed at how suddenly emotional her response had been toward someone she 'hated.' “R-r-radiation sickness l-like before...like you...they're going to give her RadAway to keep her working...but she can't take it and I'm s-scared for her because I...”

I fell out of her grasp back onto the mattress, holding my eyes.

“...I don't want her to die...even if she doesn't ever want to see me again...”

“I wouldn't want her to die either...”

There was an odd silence, before I looked up at Coral once more. “Y..you wouldn't?”

“No matter how I...I feel...no-pony deserves to be in this prison city or to die the horrible lingering end that it provides. Look, if...if you want to know something, she *won't* hate you. I don't think she really can. You should have seen to arguments we used to have. If...if you talk to her...or make a gesture to just show that you're, well...sorry...maybe a drawing?”

Sighing, I just shook my head. I had no journal on me...I had nothing but the bandages upon my wings and the collar around my neck.

“Well...I've got a piece of paper here if you want it...”

Coral shifted in the darkness, producing a single slip of paper bearing masses of tables and figures on one side, lots of small ticks in a grid covered it. But one side was almost deliciously white and untouched...

I sat and stared, shivering at the burning of my back and the heady fever I had...as I saw *one* chance. Just *one*.

One drawing to help save a friendship and...and show her what she meant to me and how sorry I was.

My mouth trembled. Could...could I draw? I...I'd failed so much and...and just not done anything! It all came out wrong and terrible!

But I *had* to...

“**Alright, slaver! Bring the pegasus to me!**”

The voice cut the air with as much finesse as a sledgehammer, making me sit up straight with a shock. No time to think or worry, I turned to Coral Eve.

“I...sorry I don't have time to say but...but I'll do it! Th-thank you and...and Glimmer was working to remember...”

The look on Coral's face, just for a moment, gave me a little hope. That soft relief of somepony hearing about a promise being upheld.

“If...if I can save her, somehow...I want to keep helping her to...to remember and we, um, we can all come together to get out of here? Please say yes...I...”

I shivered.

“I don't think I can last under him...I'm so scared, Coral...”

“**Where is he?**”

“Right here, Master!”

Coral looked back to me. “If you feel the courage to do it...then do it. Do what you need to, Murk...”

I heard the cage start to be rattled at, felt my forehead, back and throat ache as I put my two tiny front hooves to Coral's chest.

“I'll try...and I will...I mean, spend time with you too. She really wants to help you...so do I...but please I need t-to...ask...before they take me! C-can you write something for me on this? I don't know how...”

“Yes...of course, hun, but hurry! What do you need?”

Less than a minute later, they got the rusty door open, throwing it to the side and coming to reattach my chain and drag me away...

As I once again was left to the mercy of My Master. Lurching his bulk through the centre of the Mall to take my chain and offer a 'caring' stroke of my chin, he reattached the chain to his armour. He tugged me hard, whimsically noting my cleaner back and taking a sick pleasure in the way I trotted obediently alongside him. My head remained low...

But as we passed a certain shop cell...I saw her. Lying upon the floor, flushed and panting for breath from aching limbs...she had pulled herself from the stuffy back to take what breeze she could coming in from the skylight.

Our eyes didn't meet...I didn't even know if I saw them closing because she was avoiding me or not. But I had the last ditch effort of paper. I had it tucked into my bandages.

I had the words. Three words stronger...

The plaza door was opened and I was forced through, even as I saw Glimmer's head slump to the ground amidst a wracking cough. Leafshine was bent over her...shaking Glimmer by the shoulders and crying into her ear.

To save her life and to save our friendship, my only spot of hope now, no matter what it cost me from My Master. For Glimmer. For Coral. For all of us...

I just prayed that I could dodge the repercussions.

* * *

Fillydelphia glowered in the dark. The streets toward our destination beginning to bustle again after a brief reprieve from the storm. Stumbling, limping and sniffing from a running nose I followed My Master, feeling the light drizzle of hot and damp air stinging my exposed back.

One thing became clear very quickly. This was not the way to the Ministry of Magic-whatever it was. As though picking up on my nervous trotting requiring a harsh drag every few seconds, My Master looked

down at me. I cringed back, eyes darting to all the ponies looking upon My Master and his pet dejectedly being dragged alongside.

“Our meeting is now in the old central factory, where the Ministry of Wartime Technology considered their hub. Thanks to the delay from our 'leader' we had to move the venue.” My Master turned as he trotted, staring at me, eye to eye. “You will remain silent unless spoken to...these are important figures, Number Seven. You will obey them if asked anything. You will be the meeting's servant. They will require drinks in the hot factory. You are *not* permitted to take any unless I instruct you this time. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master!” I almost shouted it, nodding fervently through clenched teeth. The pain in my rump was terrible...every time it shifted from a step only making it worse...

“**Good!** Now hurry up...”

Our pace increased. I could swear it was deliberate, as the added effort on my torso was making my cuts open and close repeatedly. If it hadn't been for Coral...I worried that they might have become infected already. Who knew what My Master would have made me do for any medicine?

The journey was not long, thankfully. However I began to notice that we were moving closer toward the crater than I had expected. Its baleful glow emanated over the rooftops and between alleyways in the thick misty dark. Part of me felt glad...it meant I was nearer to Hearts and Hooves Hospital, my only hope for RadPurge. Could I do this? Could I mount an escape from the chains during the meeting and somehow escape to get a desperate run of RadPurge to Glimmer? Could I even get away again afterwards?

Not to mention at some point find more RadAway. Amongst all the pain, I hadn't even noticed that my throat was feeling...tight. Not from the collar's chaffing either. Had I went through radiation without knowing? Had it been from the metro? What if it was just a worsening condition like before? This was too early since my last RadAway. The worry began to strike me...did My Master know what I needed to survive? What would he hold me to for it? Oh Goddesses, please in your great generosity provide...

“Here we are, Number Seven...”

The chain was pulled, briefly dragging me along to stand beside him. Before us lay the largest factory in the entire city. I had sometimes seen it in the distance, spotting the sheer scale of the wide manufactory itself. Aside from coolant towers, it was not particularly tall, but it must have covered at least ten blocks worth of the city behind thick walls and containing immense yards of old military technology. No wonder Red Eye had taken such an immediate interest here...

Before us lay the metal gates, made of metal fence and thick bars, they lay open to allow the slave workers in and out under the watch of two enclosed guard towers with griffin snipers. The wall wasn't fully intact...this close to the crater much of it had been collapsed and even one of the immense shop floors toward the craterside wing had seen its roof tumble inward. Like more hubs however...it had resisted the balefire well...even if the structure had been seared and blackened. Above the primary central headquarters I saw an immense symbol of an apple, hanging on cords rather precariously.

The guards let us through, glancing and chuckling as I was led on me leash beside My Master. One of them mockingly barked once we'd passed and I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment at how this looked. His 'pet' indeed...

Inside the gates, I began to get a sense of the scale of this manufactory's produce. On every side of me lay ranks of old sky chariots, armoured and streamlined. There were protected wagons with long supply beds and strange V-shaped underhulls. Rotor-driven aircraft, driven by pedals and containing side seats for ponies alongside empty pintle-mounts lay derelict. Ponies were moving between them all, examining the carcasses of the war machines and checking things off or taking notes. No doubt trying to see which ones from the vast arsenal were repairable or better as use for parts on the other frames. Dozens...maybe even well over a hundred ponies were slaving away with auto axes, shearing the salvageable elements from the more ruined platforms under *strict* guard. I saw one struck with the hard wooden butt of an ancient hunting shotgun for merely even looking away from his station of work. Others were prying the head off of a massive tracked sentinel robot, one of a dozen lined under cloth-covers beside serried ranks of robot ponies with bulbous

heads and empty weapon mounts.

I was seeing Equestria's primary industrial base for its armies before me...

Our advance took us through a cleared route toward the main entrance, forming of about a dozen doorways all lined up beside one another. That alone gave a concept of how many ponies had once entered and left this place at once. If Red Eye could get even a portion of this working...

Very quickly, I gained a whole new respect for the capabilities of his army. The creepy hot air balloons and transport wagons were only to be the beginning. I didn't want to imagine the amount of time, sweat and lives it had took (or would take) to get this colossal place operational again and start producing the replacement parts for the fields of war machines. But if it did...Red Eye would have access to the full military and industrial might of the Equestrian inventory.

My eyes were so concentrated on the military technology that I almost tripped upon the stairs leading up to the way in. Passing through the doors led to an open plan reception, high and wide with at least eight separate terminal stations at the large oval desk in its centre. Above me, a balcony ran all the way around three sides with two stairways leading up to it on either side of the reception desk. A rather skinny looking unicorn stallion with an almost zebra-like contrast of white coat and black mane was keeping two dozen workers under control there as they tapped away on the reactivated terminals, with wires running all over the floor. No doubt they were the control hub for this place, a necessity to keep track of the immense capabilities.

"S-sir...I've finished cataloguing the Whirligig reports for the south field, it's not much better than the north one, sir. Without the rotation mounts they can't-"

"I *know* why they can't, just get it archived and add it to the part list for when they repair the aviation manufacturing hall. Hey! Hey you, what's taking so damn long on the weapon locker counts?"

"N-nothing, sir! Just the ponies who come to take them for the army aren't telling us how many they've taken..."

"Bloody plank-headed grunts...make your best guess, most of it's in crap condition anyway. They'll be back within the hour once they realise the receivers are ready to fall apart. Tell them they'll just have to wait for them to be repaired or go ask the Ironshod outlet in the west wing for new produce. Oh! Master Shackles, I do say hello!"

My Master simply grunted, placing a hoof on the desk. I was left to meekly look up at it from the rubble strewn floor. After a second of wondering why there was so much coloured glass at my hooves...I looked up to see a massive stained glass window of a Steel Ranger that had blown inward in the bombs. My Master tapped the counter a few times.

"Keep your politeness to yourself, where is Grindstone?"

"You mean Master Gri-"

"Do you think I care for your formalities?"

The overseer went pale...even through his bone white coat...simply shaking his head. "H-he's in...in the old meeting room...central Ministry research h-hall...just off the place Ironshod used to use to-"

"I know the way. Now be quiet and send a runner along to tell him I'm here."

Gulping, I saw him wave to one of the slaves, who (rather intelligently) just nodded and left, having listened in without needing to ask for clarification. My Master began to pull me toward the stairs, without so much as a word to the overseer.

The inside was unthinkably complex and massive. I saw multiple doors almost as large as Stable gates and about as thick laying open and revealing everything from massive chariot construction halls to paper stuffed archives. Each door bore a separate symbol. One an apple...another a sword and cog. Very quickly, it became apparent that this facility had been rented out or bought in sections by varying companies to act as a unified production front...even if they still kept to themselves for their secrets. No wonder the Ministry had

chosen to come here...now who was their Ministry Mare again? The...the rainbow one? She'd looked angry and warlike enough...

A long hallway led before us, crossing a skybridge between two of the immense warehouse like buildings. Windows had shattered on every side, giving rise to an ash filled wind that blew my mane wildly and stung my eyes and back. If My Master cared for the annoyance...he showed no sign, simply dragging me along over the thick and musty red carpet toward a huge set of double doors. Battle saddled guards flanked each side of it, giving rise to a pang of sadness...thinking of my own personal little one from Blunderbuck languishing in a corner of My Master's office so far away...along with everything else that meant anything to me.

“Master! They are awaiting you inside since the runner passed on word!”

“Good...once I am through and the runner is gone, close the doors. We are not to be disturbed.”

“Yes, Master!”

Clearly...everypony knew the routine to stay on his safer side, I really had to drill that back into me. Call your Master by his title. Always...always always always...

Inside, I was taken through a set of offices and meeting rooms behind toughened glass. I could see various stairways that led to a machine shop right below us. Up here though, things were quieter. The terminals were all destroyed by the shrapnel that must have blown in from the windows I could see facing the crater. Almost teasingly...I could see Hearts and Hooves Hospital, its half ruined shape silhouetted against the crater's evil hue. At one side, I spied a little canteen for them to take breaks in. Even from here I could smell the rot and stale stench over its foul looking surfaces.

To my curiosity, I saw many of the desks had cutie marks carved into the polished wood of their construction. A set of pears...two screwdrivers...three intercrossing cogs...a sundial...

Wait.

The chain locked as I fell behind, drawing a choke and a reprimanding tug to keep moving. But my eyes just stayed fixated on it. In a far corner, near the windows overlooking the machine floor below. He...he had worked here, that I knew! It *had* to be! Two inactive terminals rested beside one another, connected to a single keyboard. His chair had been knocked over, falling against a long looted looking filing cabinet. Behind him on the wall, I could see papers and posters bearing schematics and rough sketches of metal ponies (or Ranger armour?) and dozens of individual parts far beyond my knowledge. But upon his desk I could see all manner of little things...amongst the tools there were photo frames and small dead plants with musty looking ribbons attached. Gifts...

I dared only imagine what was in the photo frames. I wanted to go over...to look, to see what Skydancer had looked like. He *had* to have her on it! I...I could draw them together!

But My Master would never have let me...the crushing disappointment as I was inexorably motioned onward felt like I'd turned hollow.

One more detail caught my eye though...just as I was passing. Between each wall he was near, a kind of ribbon surrounded his work desk at chest height. Pink...decorated with little faces of Ministry Mare Pinkie Pie looking rather stern and holding up a hoof to bar entry...

I wasn't given much opportunity to ponder it, the chain tugged with an impatient snort and once again my attention was forced forward. But ahead of us...the usual desk farms and tables gave way to something much grander.

Another set of stairs rose toward a much more secure looking doorway. It lay open at the top but before it, embedded into the wide stairwell itself, was a thick stone plinth wrapped in plaques and metal borders. Atop it...stood a Steel Ranger. I squeaked, falling in behind My Master. Only after hearing his amused cackle did it become clearer...it was just an inactive set of the armour propped up as a statue. If it had ever been operational. Whatever metal they used to build the armour had stood the test of time well. It *gleamed*.

A more heroic and shining set of armour compared to the flame streaked and battle scarred metal gods of war I'd once seen in terrifying action outside the Walls. The symbol of the Ministry rested upon its flank while no weapons rested by its side.

An eternal guardian to the Ministry's secrets within the hub...but one that had stood idle whilst a mad-pony had looted it all. Crimson and gold trimmed carpets led up the stairs to a very...official...looking brass and wood high doorway bearing four more of the guards. Without a word, they simply nodded and opened them as we moved around the Ranger statue.

“Aaah...Chainlink Shackles, so you join us!”

The familiar voice rumbled from the interior of the primary meeting room. Deep and heavily bass toned, Master Grindstone trotted to meet us at the door. Like an indomitable presence, shaking the very floor, his twisted cybernetic monster of a minotaur bodyguard lumbered along behind him leaving marks on the carpet. It sauntered like some sort of primate I'd seen in picture books, its bionic hand and immense crusher claw resting on the floor before its feet. Upon sighting me, it snorted and let out a sudden and short roar.

Only the chain stopped me in my flight of the room entirely, snapping at its full length until my body flew out under my head entirely, dropping me on my back with a dull thump. I'd almost gotten as far as the nearby canteen to hide in.

“The runner did mention you brought your...pet. I see you finally caught up with him.” Grindstone glanced past My Master, watching me as I shakily got back to my hooves and meekly hid behind a desk...before I was simply pulled out and toward the board room once again.

“A pony can't outrun their purpose and destiny, Grindstone. He's mine now. Where I go, he goes. In this case...he's to be our little refreshment servant. Aren't you, cutie pie?”

“Y-yes, Master...” I tried to speak without letting the revulsion at that name get the better of me. Grindstone just continued to stare at me, before waving his gigantic minotaur guard back to the side of the room and stood aside for us to enter. Behind us...the guards locked the door.

The lights were low, the windows boarded over and the walls clearly thick. This was to be a no-doubt private meeting. Grindstone remained looking at me, before snorting and without reason slapped one of his almost elderly hooves across my face. Pain stung at my already sore cheeks. I began to wonder if my eyes would ever be allowed to heal from their blackening.

“That's for ever defying me, runt. Nothing compared to what Shackles does, I'll bet. But you ran from me too when you fled with that mare, Unity.”

He rose his hoof again, before snorting and turning away. I winced, finding a little spike of hate for this donkey emerging as he dared mention Unity's name, referring to when she had been sent away from me.

“At least I know good old Shackles will give you the treatment in punishment enough without me having to lift my old body now...don't dare bother me or I'll have Big Brutus here relieve you of those wings *permanently*.”

The bodyguard, hearing its name, stomped on the spot enough to garner everypony else's attention. But it remained loyal and stood still in the corner, like the Ranger monument outside...silent and vigilant. My Master began to move me across the room. Around me I saw several dark slaver figures...each of them rough and wicked looking. That particular rough style Grindstone and My Master shared that led me to wonder if they were all from the 'old days' of Fillydelphia as well. Trotting on his wooden peg-hoof, I recognised the scruffy and disgruntled figure of Mister Mosin at the far end too. Remembering his allegiance with My Master in the riots...it only made sense he was here too.

“Well, well, well...it would be ye, laddie...”

Oh *no*...

Maybe not *all* from back in the long past then...

True to the unmistakable accent, turning my head revealed Sooty Morass coming out from the small side kitchen I was likely to be sent to work in. The grin between his braided mane gave way to a hoof around my shoulders.

“Seems ye've gotten yersel' in another little pickle, haven't ye lad? Going down while I only go up. Isn't that just precious? Doing well with the illness are we?”

I didn't reply...I just kept my head down and tried to ignore the foul pony. At least, I tried, before my Master's hoof forced me to the floor, holding me down while he leaned to my ear.

“I told you! You will obey if asked by anypony in here! Now OBEY!”

Spittle flew across my face amidst my frantic nodding and cries of 'Yes, Master!' Shivering, hating every second of being made to look so belittled in front of Sooty. He was clearly enjoying watching me squirm...please...this, this was just demeaning...

“I...I'm not doing well, sir...it's a constant fight to get the RadAway I need to stay alive and...and I think it's getting worse. My sickness is...is accelerating...sir.”

“Oooh...sir', eh? I think I like hearing that from ye, laddie. Shackles sure has ye broken in well. Well, come talk to me afterwards, always room in me new trade for a little squealing whinnier amongst me clients. I'm sure we could work somethin' out for me stocks...if your Master permits it.”

What? What trade did he mean aga...

My mind finally caught up. The look of abject dread and shame was enough to make Sooty cackle, ruffle my mane and trot on past, happily lording up his new found power. Was...was he a full on slaver now? Or just a position of power with dirt on enough ponies to ensure a business trade within the city? I swallowed deeply...fighting to keep my imagination from going too far in its fear.

Sweating, I just tried to keep to the side of the room. Now that my eyesight was adjusting and the ponies were beginning to take their seats, I could see what we had.

My Master, of course, towered above everypony else bar the minotaur. Opposite him sat the old figure of Grindstone, clearly a symbol of authority. Sooty Morass sat off to the far end, likely one of their newest members to this little...club, while Mosin was fairly close to the middle, near My Master. He spotted me with his one eye and made something between a snort and a sigh of exasperation. Another five ponies were sat various around them, two stallions and three mares of a mix between earth pony and unicorn. All of them at least once regarded my curious looks with a snarl or fierce look until I glanced away. But one thing was clear...they were all short of word and very considered. I could see the intelligence in their eyes, for all the hate and brutality they exuded. My Master was among his kind here...experienced and savvy kinds of twisted. No wonder Sooty had found a home with them...

Along those lines, those glances I got suddenly made a lot more sense. I could see each and every one of them working out just how they would punish me in their mind...

In a bit of a worry...I slunk off into the kitchen, the smile from My Master making it all too clear that I was supposed to anyway. They began to talk...simple greetings, reports on things I didn't fully understand...

Wandering inside, I found a somewhat cleaner looking kitchen designed for catering groups providing for long meetings. But before anything else...another pony caught my eye standing and eating what seemed to be raw meat at the far end. Much younger than the rest, but still a fully grown stallion. A unicorn, dirty white of coat and one of the most muscular looking unicorns I'd ever seen. His mane was a ruin, almost ghoulish like and caked with the remains of a dozen dark shades of all coloured hues, dye no doubt. A *horrid* scar ran across his snout, around and across his mouth like some form of bladed weapon had sank into it before. More deep wounds decorated his balding head alongside the multi-coloured remnants of his mane, giving rise to a huge question of why he was still alive. His eyes were of two colours...red and hazel while he bore piercings through his ears, nose, mouth, eyelids and even just through his skin in general. My stomach churned as I saw they weren't metal...they were bone.

He was a raider...

He also saw me staring. Those eyes spun to face me...wide and with massive pupils, they looked at me almost disbelievingly to think that I was looking at him. The quake of severe drug damage in his system was all too obvious, yet he exuded a presence somewhere between uncertainty and unnatural authority. His whole body jittered for a few moments, before he spoke.

“You looking to me?”

Oh Goddesses...I had to reply, My Master's rules...

“I...j-just seeing who was-”

“Ah! Ah! I asked if you looking to me? You seein' somethin', eh? Seeing something here? Something *about* me?”

He began advancing, his voice sharp and speaking almost far too whimsical and fast. What to any other pony might have sounded like ignorant bullying threats emerged as an unsettling detachment from reason. As he turned, I saw his cutie mark. A hook, like one an old master of mine had used to hunt riverlife, but large and tinged with blood. My chain kept me moving too far away...he moved close. Already I could see he carried a large machete across either side of his torso along with a coil of rope.

“N-no! I didn't-”

“Thinkin' something about me? Out with it? You got something AGAINST me, huh? All starin'? Ah dun like that! Ah dun like people staring, cause they don't see the real truth, right? So I make em not able to see, how 'bout that? Yeah...how 'bout we do that?”

His magic, a sickly yellow, drew from his side the very hook I'd seen on his flank, attached to the rope.

“I'm sorry! I...I didn't mean to-”

His hoof slammed into a cupboard door, those thick muscles of his snapping the thick wood in one strike. He wasn't anywhere near the size of Brimstone...but this raider towered above me all the same with more build than any raider I'd seen in Barb's gang.

“I said. *Stop. Looking at me!* You think I'm crazy? Huh, that's it? Think something about me makes me worse?”

“I-”

I didn't even get the chance to finish my sentence. He leapt forward at me suddenly with a keen howl. I fell backward, hollering out loud as he landed atop me and drew back the thin hook to-

...laugh?

“Hehehehaaaahaha! Oooh...oh you...hehe, I'm just fuckin' with you. You see it, right? You see you should be scared and...hah...I like the scream. Screaming's good, right? ARRRRRGGHHH! See? Good to scream...tells you that you're *alive!* Hehehe...c'mon! Laugh! Not gonna laugh, it's funny right? Laugh!”

Chuckling, he wandered back off me, the smile doing strange things with his scar to twist his face in a particularly mad way. The more I looked...the more I saw simply *no* sanity in those mismatched eyes. Suddenly, he snarled, fierce and hateful.

“You not gonna laugh with me?! C'mon little pony, laugh! Lets laugh together! *Laugh!*”

Squeaking...I tried to...

“Heh...hehe?” I was backed against the kitchen counter. “Hahaha? Yeah...um...funny? Haha?”

He looked at me, the smile suddenly disappearing from his face into a kind of bewilderment again. A low danger in his eyes...

“...you laughin' at me?”

“Ha...huh? I...”

“I said, *you laughin' at me?* You was just laughin', was that at me?!” He advanced forward, the hook drawn again. I backed away, finding myself in a corner...the chain tugging tightly through to the next room at its maximum pull.

The raider snarled, fierce anger appearing upon his wild face. His hoof stabbed at my chest, lifting my head up to face him.

“I...don't like ponies laughing at me...why was you laughing at me there?” The eyes blinked, the pupils wide and mad. “That's it...yer fuckin' getting' it, laughin' at me like something's wrong? I don't even like the way you're looking at me...like you're better than me? Thinkin' yer fuckin' better!”

The large hook rose, I closed my eyes, begging loudly as it began to move for my mouth. I felt the tip reaching inside for my tongue.

“Leave him be, Wildcard. The runt doesn't know you. He doesn't die.”

I felt him pause....daring to open my eyes to find it mere inches away. The mad raider was looking over his shoulder at the doorway. My Master stood there. His words had seemed calm...but they carried a lot of weight. 'Wildcard' seemed to pause...then smile...then helped me up with a little pat to the cheek.

“Aw...I was just playin', it's no worry. I'm chill, no worries, big guy I'm chill. Chilled. We're cool.”

Wildcard affixed his hook again to his hard leather armour, a bloody red colour and tinged with marks where it had once been cream. My eyes tried to avoid his as he trotted out, snorting with laughter. He paused briefly at the door, looking over at me and grinning with only half his mouth. The other half twisted into a sick frown with the scar.

“We cool, little kiddo? Yeah, we cool...gonna play sometime, eh? Get some of my boys together...make a night of it! Haha! They'll love ya, you can even join in, ha?”

He left to the main room, before suddenly firing his head around the doorway with a scream. I scrambled backward, falling and shrieking as he laughed and wandered off.

My Master jangled the chain to get my attention, glowering at the doorway.

“I wouldn't disturb Wildcard, Number Seven. Chieftain or slave now...heh...he's a lethal weapon of ours to point and let go. We don't want you getting strung up if he gets in the mood. You wouldn't know him, of course...although, your 'friend' Brimstone would. One of his 'Big Four' so they say. Still leads the raiders that joined the Pit...trains them, slaughters the weak and toughens the best with cutting and beatings. Hehe...so mad no-pony ever challenged him for any sort of leadership.”

He paused, looking back out as I heard Wildcard muttering and chuckling in equal amounts. Then he turned back to me, his eyes low.

“You didn't really think Barb was the only pony with a position of authority in his Clan who liked the idea of working with us to get back at their traitorous leader? To take on their 'betrayal', as much as Barb wanted to?”

“No...Master...”

“Good. So let that sink in a little...just think what Barb was like and then remember Wildcard held the same position of power. Strong as any big earth pony and with a dozen lethal spells too, natural born killer. He may not seem it, ooh I know...but he fought Brimstone over and over for leadership.”

For anypony to even consider *voluntarily* attacking Brimstone spoke volumes. My Master stomped more fully into the kitchen.

“Now...you'll find your things here. Put together drinks, whatever you find and serve the meeting as you are called. You will obey them, you will not speak at any point during our meeting and you will say nothing outside these walls. I trust you won't...Number Seven. After all...just remember who owns your friend's life now...we've got Wildcard in the same way we had Barb to make any paybacks if you squeal. I promise, his

methods may not be as efficient but they *are* somewhat...slower, than Barb's were...hehe.”

The chain was removed from his plated armour, instead affixed to a pipe on the wall coming from an old boiler right beside the door, allowing me to access both rooms. Making some of the tiles shimmy below him from their loose cement, he stomped out. Quickly...I found myself left alone.

My heart was still beating fast from Wildcard. That pony was...was *terrifying*. He had the build of an earth pony with the magic of a unicorn and his...his mind and the way he acted...

Very quickly...I began to worry about exactly what he might do next. Which I suspected was entirely the point. What might he have done had My Master not been here? What had he done to ponies in the past? Barb would *always* be a very...personal...fear and memory. But I hadn't expected another of Brim's old gang to be so close to my life so soon. I didn't want him near me...I didn't want *anything* to do with somepony so...so off the deep end of the wasteland's insanity. If...if he was anything like Barb was, I...

I returned to the corner, curling up immediately on the cold floor, collapsing and trying to make myself cry a little to let it out. I could have sworn it was harder...

It hadn't just been Wildcard that had been affecting me...my lungs were starting to feel swollen and ineffectual. Every breath came with a little wheeze. It...it really was getting worse to advance this fast...

At...at least I had some time. Groaning, whimpering slightly at the touch on my wings, I drew the slot of paper bearing those three important words out along with a stick of charcoal.

Taking a deep breath, wheezing and sore...trying to ignore the arguing and harsh discussions next door...I began to create the most important drawing in my life.

* * *

“Number Seven! Get through here!”

I almost tripped over my own hooves. Chain rattling, I dove across to where I'd left the tray. As the time had passed...everything had been split between fearful entrances to the room bearing trays of the water I'd found inside a walk in fridge and desperate slow sketching whenever I could. As fast as I could, I threw the drinks upon it. A mix of water, Sparkle Cola and a few heady mixes of alcohol I'd located all went on together. I had fast learned how to carry it upon my back...through great pain. The cold tray rubbed and ground at my whip wounds, leading to my time around the table delivering their drinks to be little more than a continual fight to not make a sound.

Seething as I placed their next round of refreshments upon it...I trotted in and struggled to carefully move around their table and get their attention without speaking a word...

Grindstone was speaking at the moment, his eyes only briefly acknowledging me before making it very clear I was to ignore him. A few clips around the ear had educated me very quickly in reading their moods.

“From what I can gather, you're proceeding as you should. I expect you all to-”

“You should not **expect** anything of me, Grindstone...” My Master growled across the table, the cutting tone making me very happy I was considered somewhat invisible to the assembled ponies. “Do not pretend to think that just because you are in the position to organise things means you hold **authority**. Just remember who ruled these camps before Red Eye...”

Wandering past Mosin, I felt him pick a bottle of clear liquid for himself and swig it, carefully watching the confrontation. Grindstone sat silent, before raising a hoof.

“What I was saying...was that I expect good things as a *prediction*, Shackles.” Grindstone continued rather diplomatically. “Your authority is and always has been recognised. None of us would be where we were but for your work. Now...I do have to report that while Ministry Station has yet to be located, my slavers *did* unveil plans that it may not have been the Ministry's only outlet for research...”

“You're joking...you mean there's another right below our hooves and we never bloody knew?” One of the mares had leaned forward, swatting at me as I'd moved close by. Almost tripping over the chain and fell

back against Mosin who cursed in his own tongue and batted me away with a clip to the ear. I'd only barely kept the tray level...

“No.” Grindstone lowered his eyes. “Not beneath us. Above us. In the mountains outside Fillydelphia, atop their snowy peaks where Red Eye began his mining operations months ago. The Ministry moved a great deal of researchers up there on short notice. Including...I may add, many of Aurora Star's chief leads on the memory projects. That alone warrants that we must pursue this as a critical element. But we cannot simply go up as a small team...that would...arouse suspicion.”

My Master nodded, casting a careful eye to me as I wandered past. Shivering, I kept my head low. The only noise I made was the soft jingle of my chain. Looking up, I had to bite my whimper short as I saw Wildcard beckoning me over. Before him rested the remains of a dozen drinks already. Trembling, I began to trot forward, nervously passing beneath the heavily breathing minotaur. Those beady red blinking eyes focussed like a target lock on me as I heard My Master begin speaking once again.

“You propose we use our newly found slaves to create a mining force of our own?”

“Indeed...the reports back were not very successful without proper mining kit. If we found anypony with mining experience in our combined ranks...we could create a task group to offer as an experienced alternative. That would get us up there.”

The moment I came near Wildcard, he lifted the entire tray with his magic...before offering me a bottle of stronger looking alcohol. Sudden panic shot through me as I saw My Master looking. I...I wasn't to take any of it without his permission. But if I turned down Wildcard, what might he *do*? Shivering, I shook my head...

Sooty chuckled, his first sounds in the meeting so far. “Aye...I'm sure I could acquire a few wee bits of tools for them, help sell the appearance, y'know? Yer all filling me coffers with caps from the clients ye bring in anyway, so I can tab ye for them and you won't be out a profit.”

“Good.” Grindstone watched their newcomer warily. “Mosin, arm some of them, the mountains are not without their dangers.”

“Shall be no issue. Old shipment of arctic qualified rifles were found year ago. Only need to prevent *pizdets* of an assistant fucking with poor things till they resemble Hearth's Warming *tree*. *On menya zaebal...*”

I felt a brief prod on my muzzle. Turning back, I saw the bottle, again, offered from Wildcard. He wore a somewhat disgusted look...as though amazed somepony would refuse an offer. I just shook my head again...backing off. Per...perhaps if I just turned and went back to the kitchen I would...

“Eh! Don't you turn your *fucking back on me!*”

I couldn't help it, I squeaked and spun around at his voice above the discussion in the room, just in time to catch the bottle with my face. Spluttering and moaning as I clutched my muzzle, I heard the uproar of protests at the interruption. Very quickly, I felt myself lifted.

“I **told** you, Number Seven! Don't disturb anypony and don't make a sound! Now **get in there and shut up!**”

I was hurled, passing through the door and impacting on the hard kitchen floor until I slid to the far end. Even before I had stopped, through my aching nose, I shouted out.

“I'm sorry, Master! I'm s-so-”

“**Shut up! A slave should be invisible until they are needed! Do not bother us again! I'll deal with you later for this.**”

My mind rebelled...but it had been *Wildcard* and...and he had...

Oh...what was the point...I was just the one who got blamed anyway...

Pulling myself back to my drawing, choking on a heated and metal-tasting bile in my throat, I picked up

the charcoal once again. It hadn't been going well. I was being slow...careful...not moving on until I had made sure each bit looked *perfect!* But at this rate it would take me days to finish what I needed to do...

Carefully, I settled the charcoal stick to the paper, holding back tears as best I could to not stain it. A slow arc...somepony's neck...round it off and...and make it thicker for the back. Yes...yes that worked...

I could still hear them talking. I wanted to just draw, but I kept hearing those names too many times to avoid listening...

“Aurora Star...” Grindstone continued, “we have now concluded had more than a few 'personal projects' going on. Things that received no funding but which she continued with herself. I suspect that many of these may have illegally laundered funds and elements of proper funded projects to aid her. Her record of interviews from Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle after her funding was cut is...suffice to say, rather long. If you're wondering why this matters to us...the reason is simply this. If Ministry Station didn't have enough of a presence to have its records on file in the Ministry proper...why did she go to so much effort to acquire it and then just use it for nothing but storage?”

A stallion, gruff voiced, spoke up. “We *know* this, Master Grindstone...because the Ministry was keeping something pretty damn secret down there...”

Ah! Nooo! I carefully rubbed out a part of their back on my paper, hers would have been thinner than that! Oh come on...I couldn't have too many smudges. Maybe...maybe if I worked on him instead. I moved to the other side, where more incomplete bits of pony sat apart...

“Yes...yes you are right. But my theory is now this. Aurora Star *personally* dealt with it all and I have never found a single record check by Twilight Sparkle of it. Ever. From what we can gather, she was *particularly* keen on these things so anything lacking them gives a high indication of something outwith the publicised projects. Nor did I find any audit checks even by her *own* Ministry.”

My Master's voice rumbled across the table. “You think that even the Ministry staff believed it was simply storage...other than Aurora Star herself? That she was making one of her own projects down there?”

“Believe? No...it's too obvious. She'd never have gotten away with it. Do I suspect it may be linked to that something we're searching for though? Perhaps. Fillydelphia was full of more holes than the primary hub of the Ministry of Morale here may have ever admitted. It was too industrial...too bustling and active and everchanging for them to keep up with. Just look at the reports of technology selling and we *know* the zebras were taking refugees away. If you wanted me to say one thing...it would be that I'm beginning to wonder how she got the resources for these 'personal' projects she sent into that supposed storage area. Now...I shan't theorise more lest we move off in an incorrect direction...concentrate on the Ministry Station and on preparing a mountain slave force for now.”

“Aye.”

“Yes, Master.”

I sat for a second. I couldn't have missed them referring to Sundial's activities there...nor the refugees situation I'd occasionally heard ponies from the past mentioning. It had become long obvious that there was some sort of power play going on to gain favour in Red Eye's...well...eye. One they didn't want other slavers knowing about to share the gains with. One they were seeking to uncover the past to hunt for. I began to wonder just how much of this was really interconnected...hadn't I heard something about disappearing Wartime workers too?

Below me, however, 'connection' was just what was finally beginning to happen. Delight surged through my weary mind as I saw a pony's face staring back at me. One that...that smiled.

I could do this!

Thoughts of the past drifted from my mind as I heard them start discussing logistics. Yes...that gave me time to concentrate...I...I had to do this! It had to mean what I felt! Show what I meant...

I stopped...breathing out, trying to relax. I felt the vision of my drawing enter my mind...felt the pain fade away. I was alone without any danger...just...draw...

I drew...lines...

The lines...they...they weren't perfect but...they began to curve...and...and...

Became shapes to link the others I had done together...

I was drawing faster, all the voices and arguments over who did what nothing but the same background noises I'd drawn through a hundred times in my life. Thick swipes for a ragged mane...a gently breezy curve for a tail...a little imagination and picturing the past to round out that body a little...

The shapes...gradually, beautifully...they came to *life*.

The charcoal clattered from my mouth, rolling across the paper and falling between two tiles on the floor. Softly, I lifted the paper before me...

It...

It was *awful*.

I knew fine well what my own skills were capable of, but every out of proportion leg or twist of a spine that made *no sense* was all there before my eyes! Why wasn't she looking at him when she should have been? Why were his legs too long?

Clamping my eyes shut...I almost tore it up then and there...why...couldn't...*I just...draw?!*

But I *couldn't*...it had been my one effort. It had to be enough! I just didn't have any other choice now! That anger slowly began to build in me. The frustration and hatred of the news that had turned me into this talentless mewling no-pony. That I would have to give this to her as an apology and it was ALL WRONG and looked horrible...she'd *hate* it...

But I had no other choice...

I had my apology at last. Now I...I just had to get out of here somehow before their meeting ended. This would be my best chance, alone in a kitchen and unsupervised. Slowly, I tucked the drawing back into my wing's now filthy bandages. Standing up, I realised how weak I really was beginning to feel...but if...if I could just get this and a gift of RadPurge to her I'd...I'd feel better.

Taking one breath...I turned to the kitchen to find my way free of these chains. To find my way back to my friend.

* * *

Problem one. My only way out is locked in the occupied room.

Problem two. I am chained to a pipe on the wall.

Problem three. I am beside a large group of incredibly dangerous ponies.

Add to that...limited time. It was no wonder why my searching of the kitchen was as frantic and panicked as it was stealthy and careful. Each cupboard being opened was slow and methodical, offering only the occasional rustle of a chain to convince anypony listening that I was just merely shifting about in discomfort. As soon as a door was open...I would cast my eyes madly around to hunt for anything. Pots and pans, old degraded cardboard boxes of now blue cereal and even tubs of bleach and cleaning fluids, the smell of which wafted out enough to make my eyes water. Nothing of any use!

Next door, Mosin and Sooty were engaged in a very accent heavy argument over the exact procurement of parts for his armoury. Amongst the raging words and the occasional bellows of other ponies for them to quiet down, I dragged a stool over to clamber up on and get onto the worktop. They must have been unicorns in here...for I could see cupboards no pony could ever have hoped to normally reach. Pulling them open I found lengths of tubing, replacement lightbulbs and bags of nuts and nails. Argh! Come on, was there

nothing in here?

Moving around, I started even lightly tapping the wall to look for any hollow spots. I *dreaded* the idea of falling down another wall cavity...but at this rate I might have to. Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap-

Tunk.

I froze on the spot, the hollow metallic noise far louder than I expected. The speech had quietened down and I could hear My Master beginning to outline who should send what slaves. To my horror, I heard the name of 'Leafshine' mentioned as one of the 'volunteers.' Glimmerlight wouldn't like that...oh dear...

But I couldn't help that right now. It was obvious their meeting was beginning to start rounding up all the remaining details. I didn't have long! Pulling away the masses of stacked trays from the wall...I stared in amazement at what I saw had languished behind them.

Like a small elevator, just big enough to fit trays of food or a large pot...some sort of transport to another preparation area on a lower level! Beside it, my heart leapt as I saw the light was *still on*. It would work! Problem one, solved! Almost too easy, really. I mentally kicked myself for not looking earlier, was I getting that slow in the head? My fever certainly was picking up amongst the groupings of hurt I had from My Master's 'punishments.'

Now...problem two was going to be a lot harder...

“Are in agreement?”

“Aye!”

“Indeed so...”

“Seems fine to me.”

“Good, any last elements?”

Crap! They were wrapping up! I'd hoped to get a larger head start, but now it would be a rush just to get out at all! Stumbling back along the worktop, I once again began digging into the cupboards. I tried my best on the slippery surface from my occasional drinks spillages earlier, hoofing it carefully over plates and glasses. Hopping up on my hind legs, sweating profusely, I began to rummage once again. At first, I felt delight as I saw a set of boltcutters...but they would be far too loud. *No-pony* would miss the distinctive sound they'd make! All the same...I took them out and lay them upon the worktop., Maybe they could-

My back hoof hit a plate and slipped...

My hooves spinning, I felt plate after plate slip off with it, along with some glasses and pots. I went with them, my vision spinning as I dropped wildly off the worktop to thud on my rump upon the floor. My entire backside and torso *flared* in piercing agony as the punishment from earlier wracked my body, giving rise to a loud squeal and moan. Pots kept falling around me...again and again. It was a miracle I hadn't landed on any broken shards.

My skin *crawled* however at the single sound I heard...of a chair scraping back and somepony approaching. I just curled up under the mass of broken items and shivered as I heard them enter. I *knew* who.

“I...have given you very simple instructions...Number Seven...”

Oh no...please please please no...

“I asked you to stay still and to **stay quiet! You are the most useless slave I have ever seen! What part of your orders did you not UNDERSTAND?**”

“I...I got scared, Master! I...I thought I saw a radroach and...I tried to climb up the-”

“**SHUT UP!**” I was dragged from the pile by my chain. I could see other slave masters looking on from the door in addition to the grinning face of Wildcard. My Master flipped me over onto my front, over the stool. I only prayed none of them spotted the cleared elevator or the boltcutters...

“A good slave knows to obey instructions! **A good son knows not to disobey his elders!**”

My stomach lurched...that one *word*. No...I wouldn't believe it! It couldn't be true! I wasn't his! *I wasn't his! I wasn't his! Please let it not be true!* I struggled, my underside hurting on the stool, before he held me down. I felt him shift to have one hoof holding me and the other hoof raised.

“I think you know how children are disciplined...”

What? No! I...I was already hurt ther-

He gave me no warning. Savage, demeaning and harshly embarrassing as I heard them snigger and chuckle at my high pitched cries every time his hoof descended upon my bare wounds over my rump from earlier. Again and again his hoof fell, unceasing until I had begun to simply lay still and...and just take it, beyond the constant pain. Only when he had driven me to the point of simply murmuring and accepting it did he finally stop and allow me to drop. My front hooves bent over as I curled to cradle myself...feeling the whip scars now angry and swelling all over again.

“Good...at least you're learning to not cry. You're starting to obey, Number Seven...now remain quiet and await us. We shall not be long. I will deal with **you** when we get back.”

They left...leaving me on the floor. But amongst the shivering and moaning...seeing in a reflective fridge door that my rump was bruised and the wounds a fierce red...I realised I hadn't shed a tear.

Before...that might have meant that I simply had gotten over it or...or learned to take it. But here I realised I was subconsciously obeying.

He'd told me not to cry without permission.

That...that wasn't a good sign...I *wanted* to. By the Goddesses I *wanted* to cry and bawl and let it all out, but I couldn't! Even...even when I tried to make myself they wouldn't come! A frustration grew...it became anger, an anger at myself for messing up and making so much noise. Whether it was because it threatened my escape or because I'd disobeyed him I didn't know...*I didn't know!*

I had to get out of here...before he warped my mind any more. I *had* to. I couldn't cry...so I threw all the anger into my body and drove myself to my feet, feeling my rump ache as my hind legs moved. I had to move before I was pushed down any further. Every punishment I felt breaking me more into my subconscious slavery. Their discussion had been broken...I had a...a *little* time to drag myself out of here...away from him...

I dragged the stool over again, pulling myself up to the cupboard. There had been a screwdriver up there...there *had* to be if there were nails. It stood to reason! Silently...I reached in and fished around until I felt my mouth bite on a handle. Yes! A screwdriver! Just what I needed! I wasted no time in hopping down, having to stifle a loud cry at the jerking movement along my back and rump, before sneaking over to the pipe. Nearby to the door, I couldn't make a single sound as I began to work the screwdriver in my mouth...feeling that every annoying loose tooth ache. I cursed it in my mind...always aching whenever I was feeling controlled like some nervous twitch to tell me when...when somepony had control of me!

Carefully...carefully...I slotted it into the first screw holding the segment of pipe to the wall and began to turn. There were four screws. If I could get them off I'd be free! I'd just take the boltcutters with me and cut the chain on my collar's end someplace else when I could! Blinking...feeling fuzzy inside, I got to work.

“Master Shackles, before we go, do you have any estimate on the time to find the Ministry Station in your den?”

The screw was rusty...I strained, feeling sweat running down my brow and stinging my eyes...

“Hmph...we've done fifty percent of the rough area. If the room containing the records of it hadn't been destroyed...”

“We can't fix that now, how long do you think?”

It began to move...my tongue swirled skilfully, around and around, poking into the handle's concave end to wind the screw slowly out...

“Two weeks at most. If we can get more slaves, especially ghouls, it'll go faster. They work quicker...less affected by any radiation pockets. The ones I've got have been working down there for months constant. They're a bit...heh...droopy.”

“You'll get them. Anything else?”

C'mon! The first screw just kept coming and coming, how long was it?! I could hear them ending!

“No...I think that's us...”

There! The screw dropped, the tiny noise I suspected only I had heard. Breathing fast, struggling to keep a grip on the screwdriver and trying not to sit on my rump I moved to the second one in a rush.

“Very well then. We'll meet again in a few days to see where we stand for the trip to the mountain mines. Good day to you all.”

No no no! I was only on the second of them! Twisting madly, feeling a headache break in and my throat clam up in a dizzy spell, I slipped and dropped the screwdriver completely. NO! Damn my...my disease, it was making me dizzy. Fighting down the coughs, I began scrambling around and got it into my mouth along with a clump of lint it had fallen into from the floor. Retching, I just went back to work. I couldn't hope to not be spotted now! I could hear them all moving out. Wildcard giggled at the 'boring' meeting ending. By the sound of it, he was prancing out of the door.

“Master Shackles, a moment...”

“Yes, Grindstone?”

“Our leader's prodigy...what of him? He survives, yet he knows of your betrayal at the Mall.”

My ears listened out, but I was having a lot of trouble with the second screw. The screwdriver wasn't fitting properly. Come ON!

“Heh...don't worry about him. Or the griffin for that matter. He won't be waking up anytime soon and she's bound by contract not to interfere in the political matters of her employers. If he does wake up...hehe...we'll have him dealt with more...hmm, permanently. He has no real support against the word of those he would accuse anyway. Now, I must return to the Mall. I have a slave to discipline...”

The second screw was wiggling around, far longer than the first. I just tugged at it with my teeth, panic driving me to rip at it until it finally popped out.

“Very well...but I would appreciate it if you had any spares, you might send them to the Ministry? I do need some aid in searching through all the things recovered from the Stable if you have anypony with experience.”

“Yes, yes...”

I had no time for the others, shaking so much I could barely see. My hooves reached out and tried to gently bend the pipe outward through its rusted joints so I could slip the loop of chain off. I could hear My Master pacing...he would be coming any second! My hooves strained...my mouth gripping the chain fought to not drop it...the heat in my chest only grew. What was wrong with me? My...my disease hasn't gotten worse this fast since the crater!

Ping!

I blinked, staring at the pipe for a second before I realised what had happened...I was free...the loop of chain in my mouth. I didn't waste any time. I could hear My Master coming, so grabbing the boltcutters I simply threw myself up and into the elevator...hoofing the control panel's biggest button before tugging every part of the chain in with me. I heard his bellow for what the noise was...before I turned and saw him while I was squeezing into the tiny crawlspace. Behind me, I heard a clank of grinding chains and the smell of dust burning from an engine long abandoned. Come on...come on!

“What...**get out of there, slave!**”

I began to wriggle around, trying to dislodge whatever brakes were still, on, screaming as I saw him charge for me and bellow to get out again. Whether I was going to obey or not...gravity had other ideas. With a jerk and a creak of torsion wire, the tiny box I'd crawled into dropped. Bit by bit, shuddering and falling before jarring to a halt every few feet...I lost sight of him in a cramped black void. I saw the canteen on Sundial's floor pass by...but it just kept going! I heard screams and bellows for the guards...for the other Masters. My back and my rump screamed in agony, as did I in a more literal sense. The chain rattled madly and raked against me as I fell gradually before *finally* dropping and impacting upon the bottom floor. I didn't waste time...pulling myself free to find a darkly lit worker rest area and desperately tried to combat the maddened coughing fit that all the dust kicked up in my face had started.

Tables and empty chairs lay strewn in a much larger area with multiple fridges and windows looking right out to the shop floor! This was my only chance...I hoped they didn't know what floor I'd gone to, as I heard their hooves clattering away upstairs. Somewhere, somepony let out a whistle to alert others. I wanted to run...but first I had to get these chains off. Drawing the boltcutters as close as I dared to my neck...I leaned my entire weight upon the handles, feeling them close...bend...groan...cut and then finally...

Clunk! I fell over them, the sudden cut as they snapped a joint making me fall on my front. I coughed as my stomach hit the ground...and when I got up I saw blood. I just hoped that was from my cheek wound...but the metallic tang in my throat told otherwise. The scant lights above seemed to glare terribly in my eyes...before I blinked and tried to reassert myself. Had...had that whole kitchen been radioactive? No time to think...I...I had to go...

Staggering, limping and whimpering on every step of my back hooves I fled into the shop floor, carrying the boltcutters in my mouth. (They'd be handy for our escape!) Above me, I heard the thunder of hooves on catwalks. I didn't dare look, instead diving between rows of automated workbenches bearing unfinished and blank shoulder plates of Ranger armour. They seemed strange without their decoration and symbols. But my eye was drawn to the far end, where I could see the dull red haze of Fillydelphia's exterior through a gigantic door. A way out!

Around me, across the catwalks, a half dozen slavers began to filter down, the ones who had been closest enough to the abandoned shop floor to respond to the call for searching. Three of them, masked guards, carried firearms...the others holding wrenches or bats in their telekinesis. I shrank into the shadows below an old lathe as I saw them immediately head to cut off the exit and stand guard. Above...the sounds of larger ponies, the masters...they would come here soon and clear it bit by bit until they found me!

I looked around to gauge my options, seeing monorails above my head that would carry large slabs of metal to cutting machines on an automated track system. The offices Sundial had worked in looked down upon this place where they had manufactured the armour once...but so much of it seemed ruined with the irreplaceable precision tools destroyed by times long gone by. Hoof-making workbenches filled the far side near large cages of materials...generators were behind still sparking fences on the other side. In the middle with me, underneath the offices, were the toolstations. Lathes...drills...cabinets...this place was a veritable maze that must have been a nexus of activity back in the day with the larger cutting machines operating and so many ponies creating such intricate technology with their own hooves.

Plenty of hiding spots...just not many ways *out*.

“The shaft went down again! He'll be on the shop floor! Get down now!”

Grindstone's voice was followed by a deafening roar. With horror...I realised they'd set the *minotaur* on my tail. Fear led to adrenaline...with a quick glance around me, I made a decision and just *hoped* that it wouldn't backfire like so many of my plans. I wished I had a smart pony like Glimmer or Protégé to tell me what the best idea was...somepony to just tell me what to do so I could follow and do what they-

...said. My mind stalled a little, before I shook my head and grabbed a bag of nails. This had to work.

Behind me...the brutal sound of a double door being ripped off its hinges by something far stronger than even Brimstone Blitz himself was enough of a motivation to *get moving*.

* * *

Breathing was getting more difficult...but I managed to take one big breath before I leapt out into clear view, turned, saw the slavers...and screamed in fear.

All six of them turned immediately, spotting me emerge into the primary path through the manufactory. They started galloping before even shouting.

“That's him! Go! GO!”

“Stay there, little guy!”

Skittering on the smooth stone floor, I turned and galloped for all my own little worth back the way I had emerged into a small maze of high powered band-saws and lathes. They each had huge clear perspex cubes surrounding them for safety, creating a very cuboid little cramped area to run through. Weaving left and right around them...an almost inefficient route away from them...I came to the far end and turned back...freezing on the spot with my limbs locked as I saw them galloping madly up the main route...a scoped carbine was pointed directly at me.

“That's it! Stay right there! Don't move or I'll-ARGH! ARGH ARGH ARRRGGGH!”

“FUUUUCK!”

“The hell is-YARGH!”

The six of them collapsed, rolling and screaming as they'd ran directly over my little minefield of spilled nails. Their heavy heads had made them all roll nicely to have the point right in the air, just one more example of something the ponies of old not thinking designs through very well...this was probably the same company that didn't think safety rails were a *good thing*.

I cringed a little as I saw them fall and spike their sides through the leather armour...not to mention the ones embedded in their hooves. The slavers just shivered...the guns falling from a lack of focus on their magic, hollering into the echoing chamber. Turning, I ran, picking up the boltcutters from where I'd left them.

“What the hell was that? *Where are you all, you blithering idiots?*” Grindstone's voice cut down from above. Glancing upward, I saw him standing at the edge of a catwalk with no railings (*I knew it!*) and pointing a hoof to somepony I couldn't see. But I could sure hear their hooves on the floor.

Along with some rather...bigger...hooves. Galloping back to the main concourse, I headed right for the huge exit. Outside lay the ranks of old vehicles, I could lose them in there! Two shots whined above my head, too high to be anything but warning shots...but the sound still made my heart skip a beat. I stumbled...looking behind me to see a dozen ponies, including the minotaur at the back and My Master leading the way. They were *all* coming for me.

“**I command you to stop, slave!**”

Come on, Murky...prove it...*prove you can still defy them.*

“**Stop right THERE, Number Seven!**”

Glimmer was waiting...as was Sunny and Unity...Brimstone and Coral Eve...I had so much work to do still and if I lost Glimmer so much of it would fall apart.

“**Your Master demands you STOP!**”

I couldn't stop now...dare, Murky, DARE! DARE TO DEFY AND RUN!

Crying out in sheer effort, I pushed my skeletal legs as hard as they would go, tearing out to the exterior. The heat trapped below the stormclouds hit me like a wet cloth to the face from humidity. My hooves sunk into the soft yellowed gravel and kicked it all up behind me in little spurts as I made my beeline. Glancing over my shoulder saw the usual situation, everypony else gradually catching up to my slow long distance galloping. My lungs seared, my throat burned...I couldn't keep this pace up. I...I had to lose them somehow!

My route went right between two large weapons with massive barrels pointed to the sky on their backs.

Ducking between and through their six reigns needed to pull the weight, I navigated and pushed myself further into the crudely organised mass of war machines. A feeling all too similar to the first time I had run at the Wall came over me. If...if I failed, the consequences would be dire. But I wouldn't let him be My Master! He wasn't mine! Not My Master...not my f-fa...

The words died in my mind as I tripped, landing in the harsh gravel. Hearing them tear the reigns aside for their larger bodies to fit through. The sound of that dread cyborg *abomination* assaulted my ears, the bovine roar as I felt it tear at the vehicles throwing the Steel Rangers in my memory far FAR down the 'Murky list of metallic horrors.' At *least* twelve inches between them and this on a piece of paper and *why was I thinking about this!?*

Slipping and sliding along the gravel, I rushed for the closest wall, hoping they'd be delayed long enough to let me get a proper head start this time! Such big ponies as them couldn't move too fine here! Slipping underneath a sky chariot, I pulled myself to the opposite side.

“Where did he go?”

Yes!

“His tracks in the gravel, there! **Move you imbeciles!**”

No!

I curved right...then left...then right again. But every time I heard their hooves closing in at the same turns! They were just following the soft indents of the gravel I was leaving! Ahead of me, a winding group of more chariots blown away from their original ordered ranks formed a straight run for the wall. A large puddle had formed in the crater around where it had once stood, now a curved breach upon the manufactory's old defences. I could just-

But...no...no I couldn't...

“Follow the tracks! Get him!”

There was no way I could outrun them...I was beginning to flag, my hooves sliding and making huge marks in the gravel. I couldn't...couldn't get the oxygen. I was using too much energy just to keep *breathing*.

I stopped, leaning against a large ammo crate. Hyperventilating, my head twisting back and forth till my sweaty and straggled mane drooped and flew. I began pacing on the spot, my hooves coming down into the same indents of the gravel each time in sheer panic and-

Ah...aha...

I drew breath, steeling myself as much as I could (so...sort of a bendy copper) as the air drew over my throat, feeling like I was swallowing glass. Sprinting forward, I stomped all over the ground in one big line until I reached the puddle...then began trotting backwards, keeping my hooves carefully inside the imprints I'd just made. I'd...I'd go back to that ammo box and hide, hopefully they'd think I had kept running on! Nerves fraying...feeling like they'd come around the corner any second...I had to balance speed with precision. My vision wavered, pants becoming coughs. Whimpering and whinnying between them, I kept hesitantly stepping backwards.

“He's just around here! Go, go! The tracks you idiots, the tracks!” A slaver was screaming, I couldn't hear the minotaur...it couldn't fit through here. Had they called it off? Where were My Master's stomps? I didn't want to look backwards...I didn't want to turn around and see...and see...

Nothing. He wasn't there, my heart tightened as I began pulling myself up and into the ammo box, checking to make sure none of my false tracks had shown my backward rush. No sooner had I pulled myself in and bit my lip till it *bled* to stifle the scream as I landed on my rump did I hear slavers charge past. I couldn't close the lid...I hadn't had time, I just had to pray they didn't look in.

“Up ahead, he tried to use the puddle! Go, over the wall!” One of the mares screeched, before hooves throwing up the filthy water became all too obvious.

“Spread out! Check all the buildings!”

I gently lowered myself down...my breath coming in ragged gasps. In the distance I heard Grindstone shouting for his bodyguard to follow. Closer by I heard-

Stomping. Oh...oh *no*...he was coming around the corner, slowly...like he *knew*. I lay still, trying not to shiver and rustle the metal box atop inert shells for the massive barrelled wagons. My eyes were *fixed* on the opening as My Master moved up to it...any second...his head would just look in...

I heard him stop...listening. Every skill, ever little shred of talent I'd come to cherish to stay hidden I put into action. Holding my breath, tensing my chest to prevent coughing, hugging myself to not shake so much...

He trotted on...oh thank you Goddesses...you haven't forgotten me after all.

I'd escaped pursuit, if briefly...but now I had a greater task to achieve. RadPurge. Glimmerlight. Hearts and Hooves. The hospital would be easy, I knew a half dozen ways to sneak into it now, but the Mall would be more difficult. Ect route to reach Glimmerlight would normally have to be through the plaza cage door, given I couldn't pull open our 'secret' doorway alone...not that I expected it to still be available after My Master found it. But I knew *one* other way...

I'd just have to push myself to the limits of returning somewhere I had felt more terrified than in my entire life to get it.

H-hold on Glimmerlight...just a little while longer. Please be alive...please. Our escape will come yet, even if you don't want me around after it.

Just...just as soon as I had a moment to catch my breath...

* * *

Flowerpot was screaming the entire basement down at my intrusion. I galloped as fast as my rapidly weakening body could carry me, virtually falling into Weathervane's office and knocking his wheeled stretcher across the room amidst a fall from a wracking cough. The room spun and I fell, crying out.

“Weathervane! *Weathervane!*”

The basement was, other than the pus choked howls of Doctor Flowerpot, absolutely silent. The dim lights the ghoul used were out. He had to have been on a shift. Left alone amongst the grim jars and confusingly arranged test tubes and apparatus, I knocked the stretcher even further from me with a bark of frustration.

“Oh come ON!” Baring my teeth, I limped around. I'd have to find it for myself! If he even had any...

It was becoming a little worrying how many times I found myself trotting along worktops, in this case having to carefully avoid the bubbling little flames hung below steaming jars. I could have sworn I saw something...fleshy...in one. Plenty of the fluid he used to *make* more supplies for the drastically in need hospital, but I had no idea how to mix them! Syringes of Med-Yes were kept in a highly locked cabinet like I'd seen in the Ministry of Arcane Whatssits. If but for one of them to rid myself of the pain in my back and rump. They were still thumping away...draining my stamina far faster than normal as movement became a continual pain. I'd get used to it...before an odd movement would just flare it up all over again.

The centre worktable was empty, other than the memory projection orb of Twilight Sparkle. I hoped it had helped him...

But...urgh...I was getting nowhere!

Doctor Flowerpot offered his help. Unfortunately, his help amounted to a throaty roar through the wall with a slamming that made the shelves shake.

“Oh...just...just be quiet you stupid...f-f-f...” I felt so much frustration build up, ready to explode verbally, “...*fingerpuppet!*” Yeah...that'd tell him!

Almost to my amazement, Flowerpot went back to a gentle growling. It occurred to me how strangely routine his noises in the locked room had become over my time spent dying or healing in this place. But amongst the horrors and pain, I found a chance to sigh and try to smile again. Hah! Weathervane wasn't the

only one who could swear up a storm!

Taking what chance I could, I hopped back to the ground to search his desk instead. Yes...that's right Murky, keep smiling, like you did with Glimmerlight. I pushed it onto my face, feeling my cheek sting as the movement shifted the scabbing over cut from earlier. I tried to ignore it, push away the fact that I was feeling shivery...even though my body was and face was warm. Just...smile. You're going to get her back...so smile, Murky.

Tink! I leapt into the air, squeaking and spinning to face the door. I screamed, seeing two light green eyes staring back at me from the darkness. Falling backward against Weathervane's desk, I raised my hooves.

“No! NO! Master...please, let me get it to...to...”

In the door, bulbous and bobbing through the air, I saw one of those weird Sprite-Bots staring in at me, two little green lights blinking on its carapace. It glanced to the side at the mop it had knocked over with a careless wing flutter, before seeing to look surprised that I'd spotted it. Without a sound...it turned and fluttered off, leaving me standing rather surprised with that smile plastered on my face more out of forgetting to show any other emotion right now. My mind wanted to ask the obvious question. What in the Goddesses name had it been doing down here?! I made to follow it, to bark a question...but it had already disappeared into the radioactive basement. I didn't imagine going there any more than I absolutely *had* to would really help.

Besides, I was on a schedule and for a second I'd...I'd thought...no. Just, just put him out of your mind.

Turning back to his desk, I began rifling through the drawers, feeling only *slightly* guilty. (He got to ruffle my feathers, only fair.) Theory books, one of those freezing cold things doctors held to your chest, various quills...

I tugged open the first drawer on the other side, finding it empty. I moved to the lowly humming fridge at the back. I'd only seen him store confusing looking things in here before, or bottles. Not any RadAway from his previous huge stash. But the freezing air was a wash of pure delight against the musty air down here. Pity that my body was shivering from fever too much to enjoy it for long...

But there, between two beakers...the dull grey sachet...

A single RadPurge...like he'd been saving it. That thought alone made me hesitate. What if this was like last time and somepony else needed it? No...that time I'd *known*. This time I...I only had one confirmed pony needing it, I couldn't risk not taking it! Without much hesitation, I bit the cold edge and turned to grab a bag from the hooks where Weathervane's spare medical coats hung. Finding one in my size took a little work, but I eventually settled on a foal's medical drapes tied into a little bag and tied around me with some linen.

Gritting my teeth as I pulled it tight over my back and slid the boltcutters through to stop me needing to carry the filthy metal things in my mouth...I knew I'd have to spend time apologising later. I hoped he would understand...Weathervane was angry but he...he did care so much for everypony...

I passed the desk again on my way out...stopping only briefly to see the photoframes. But then I turned, finding there was more than the one I'd seen.

A healthy Weathervane...with a tiny looking Sundial, short stubby legs and puppydog-like eyes sparkling with gentle wonder as his father held him up to feed a monkey on a tree. The little Sundial, grinning wildly, none-the-less held a hoof to the monkey's head as it fed from some dried fruit in his other hoof. So caring...careful of hoof and focussed on it...

Just like his father was with his patients...the similarities between the two, even from stallion to colt, were so striking. From the eyes, their build and even the soft way they each held the thing they cared for in their hooves...

Biting my lip...finding the oddly hard impulse to cry wavering at its peak, I couldn't help but feel an intense...*longing*, in my heart. I had to go, I had to move, but for a second I couldn't deny the sudden feeling. The stallion that came to mind wasn't mine and it didn't make full sense and...and I knew he wouldn't think it

too b-but...I...

Finally, a couple of tears dripped from my eyes.

I really missed having Brimstone around...

* * *

Three slavers marched somepony past in chains, dragging them hard enough that their shackled up hooves could barely trot fast enough or long enough to keep up. Behind them, two griffins swished through the low embankment surrounding the old park near the Mall at high speed, blowing up arcs of ash and dust behind them. Aside from them...it was almost clear.

Almost.

I'd been approaching the Mall from the side of the Ministry of Arcane Sanitis-thingsys. The giant high rise that had collapsed across the park formed a colossal barrier past where I'd just seen a few griffins soar. My hiding place within an oddly intact little kennel of a neighbouring workers habitat gave me a fairly good view through a missing plank in its rear to watch the few guards that stood over scavengers. I'd been waiting for a moment of free space to gallop through...

I'd just seen it.

Shaking my head to clear the fuzziness, fighting temptation to just take a sip of the RadPurge to see myself a little better...I moved out. Dropping into the embankment to avoid their glances, I pushed onward and toward the Mall itself. I no longer had my grapple-gun saddle, but on the way I had dreamt up a little plan to get over that fence. Rough living in Fillydelphia over the months had given me a certain method of appreciating finding uses for what few items I could muster...

As I dropped to a canter, feeling the stress of a full gallop quickly depleting my stamina, I took a second to catch my breath and let the warm dizziness pass. My chest felt immeasurably tight...I could feel a second pulse like...like something else was throbbing right in there. It made me sick to think of that growth on my lungs pulsating and slowly choking the life out of me. That was it...first...first thing after Glimmer was...RadAway...I'd go and raid somewhere or...something...

Slapping a hoof to my own face, my staggering stopped. Snapping back to reality, I found I'd wandered, sore, miserable and sick to almost fall against the slope of the embankment. Looking around to check no-pony still saw me, I saw the Ministry in the background. Aurora Star's office window was all too easy to spot. Part of me almost wished I'd had more time in there...thinking of Mister Peace sitting alone...

Maybe I could sneak in after this and try to help him out? He'd keep me safe if I could find someplace for both of us...

The Mall was visible ahead, just down the street from the Ministry. Tired, fighting a headache and worrying for just how long I had with the accelerating disease, I wandered around to the back, finding an unguarded stretch of the low, but razor-wired wall. Unpacking my boltcutters and the linen sling, I opened the cutters to their full length and wedged it with a stone between the scissor handles to make sure it couldn't close. With the boltcutters looking like something close to a right angle, I tied the linen around the centrepoint. A makeshift grappling hook...

Throwing the RadPurge over first, I took the boltcutters in my mouth and hurled them toward the top. It took many tries, my accuracy being as horrendous as ever...not helped by the times I spent tripping or spending a minute at a time hacking up dark stains upon the rocks. Please...just a bit longer...no...no coughing fit.

Please.

It caught! The angle of the cutters handle slipped through the mesh fencing, catching and forming a rough little linen rope to the top of the fence. Using my teeth, wrapping my hooves around the linen and all the strength I could muster I began to pull myself up it. I could hear slavers nearby...but I couldn't turn my head. Just...just don't look here! Nearing the top, I wound the linen around my hooves tightly and began to use my mouth to push the linen all over the barbed wire to let me roll over the top and drop down. If I hadn't been feeling as fevered as I was and enduring the burn and ache from every joint or the dull ache along my

back...I might have felt proud of myself. Finally...I dropped down, dragging the boltcutters clear with my teeth. I hoped no-pony would bother with figuring out why the linen was caught on the fence.

Again, sounds! The slavers were coming! Around the corner...if I focussed my hearing I could make out the sound of hooves wading through the thick goopy mud the storm had left! Picking up the RadPurge and cutters...I wasted no time in rushing forward and hiding behind the Mall's old power boxes near the wall, shimmying myself into the small gap. Sure enough...a couple of mares trotted by, exchanging hushed conversation on their clearly boring shift. Lucky for some...

Stopping to pull at my collar, the heated stinging of its chaffing on the sores upon my neck not helping my throat at all, I could feel the red marks and scars below it already forming. I...I needed to get this done quickly, before all the sickness kicked in bad.

Now just to get in...

I'd been deliberately ignoring this part. Meekly, tripodding my way forward with one hoof clutched to my painfully convulsing chest, I wandered past where Flippy Bit had met his untimely door-related demise and unsteadily made my way to the fire escape, feeling ready to faint at any moment.

There was just one way in I knew...

* * *

Three...two...one and a...a half...one and a qu-qu-quarter...one...a bit less than one...

Forget it...GO!

I heaved and pulled the stiff doorway open, throwing myself inside before I had time to think about the *mind numbingly stupid thing I'd just done*. The dusty room's murk blew into my clogged nose, made me squint my eyes and blew outward into the city as I simply galloped inside and for the vent before it woke up!

I slipped and stumbled over the masses of used food packets and cans upon the floor, that small vent all too promising in my vision. I didn't dare even *look*...but I heard it. Like an exhale of dead air, dry and throaty...building to a distended mouth's horrid howl...

I leapt for the vent, my hind legs kicking madly as I tried to pull myself up and into it. A look over my shoulder saw the ghoul janitor throw its rotten legs below it, scrambling and pulling the ruined body toward me from beside the door where it had lain to rest since my last departure. I screamed, screamed and screamed again as I failed to lift my own weight. C-come on! Couldn't I even do a single pull up!?

My leg found a box to the side, leaning over to help push myself up, tugging myself into the vent even as I felt it gnash at my tail. Still crying out with every short stammered breath, I kept dragging myself inside until I was clean away from the entrance. The mouth leapt toward the vent entrance, snapping in again and again, all the more frenziedly the further I pulled myself back with its rotten hooves clawing and thumping away. The sight made me freeze on the spot...before the coughing fit finally came. I matched its spasm-like movements, convulsing as pain racked every side of my body and blew small wisps of blood onto the duct's inside. Unable to help it...I blacked out for a few seconds, feeling my body literally dying on me. H-how...I...I wasn't in radiation and...oh Goddesses...it's getting worse, isn't it? I'm...I'm dying faster than ever...

Slowly...not helped by the howling of the beast screaming in at me...it passed. Breathless and sweat stained, I shivered and felt even my abused back and rump simmer down in comparison. I just needed a second...

A horrible sound. One of the most, in context, terrifying ones I'd ever heard began to make itself known.

That of the duct thumping a lot closer. Wide eyed, I curled around to look down the duct...and shrieked. My Master was staring right in at me...reaching...clawing and stretching to drag me back down toward him where he'd been waiting! Curling up, I closed my eyes. But an unbidden command forced me to open and look again.

Somehow...I didn't even know *how*...the ghoul had gotten into the duct and was slithering...gasping and howling for me...pulling itself in the cramped confines toward me. What...oh Goddesses, what was wrong with me!?

“NO! GO BACK!” It didn't listen, I'd screamed out of fear, nothing else. My hooves kicked into action, pulling myself back and away much slower than I'd have liked. Desperately, I began pulling and frantically crawling backward away from it. Gurgling, the janitor didn't give up the chase, staying pace with the sickened weak pony it so desperately wanted. I reached a two way junction, before panicking. Which way had I come the first time? What...oh Goddesses what if there was a dead end?! But I had no luxury of time...I just picked via my best instinct and kept crawling. A glance back saw that horrible hanging broken jaw and distended tongue swing and sway below it to turn and face me before tugging itself ever closer, its eyes glowing slightly green with balefire like hues. How was it moving so fast now?! This was a nightmare, trapped in an almost pitch dark claustrophobic duct with a zombie ghoul!

I was so intent on the beast that I almost dropped into the same pitfall I had last time. My rump almost disappeared below me before I caught myself and tugged my frail body over the hole of the downward facing duct. Twisting painfully, dragging my back against the wall, I saw the ghoul move closer...stretching out to grab me and clamber past it. Why couldn't they be stupid and just fall in?! I lashed a hoof out as its own neared my leg, cracking its already broken nose. I kicked again and again...watching it lose balance and struggling to not let it grab my tail or hind leg when it...when it...

One more bucking kick, normally reserved for the nether regions, made it slip. The howl of hungry rage as it descended into the darkness below made me shiver. That had almost been me...

I wanted another minute to pant and recover. But I didn't have enough time, not to mention the screaming of the trapped ghoul was only making me feel worse. Clambering on...I knew I had at least one more ordeal before I finally...*finally* got to Glimmer. Feeling my wing, wincing to the touch, I at least knew my drawing was there...pathetic and insultingly bad as I knew it was, it was all I had.

* * *

I was, however, pausing now.

I knew this hole. The grate through which I could drop...I knew it, because I could still see my blood spilled upon a floor I had only a few hours ago made my front legs hurt cleaning.

His office. My prison.

He wasn't home. But I knew my luck. If my cutie mark and its foul destiny willed it, he'd be ready to come out of the wall or something the moment I dropped down there.

Already, throughout the Mall I could hear screams and shouts. The horrid thing was I couldn't tell the difference between the slavers taking orders to watch out for me and the slavers taking advantage of the slaves they now had under their absolute will in My Master's foul version of this place. It all just...meshed together, a chorus of Fillydelphia. But at least my route would avoid them for all but the absolute last moments.

Carefully, I dropped down. The landing...could have been more careful. Although I landed on his bed, the shock through my legs buckled my back, widening a newly acquired scar and splitting the clotted blood all over again near the centre of my spine. Crying out, I dropped to my side upon the bloodied floor, only adding to it all the more. My voice turned hoarse, croaking painfully when I placed a hoof behind me and held a scrap of linen against the wound. I could feel how...bumpy...my back seemed. The feeling revolted me, enough to almost make the rushing fever and running nose feel inconsequential.

A moment of silence as I bit my sore lip and listened carefully. I expected it any second...the sound that would imply he was approaching to force me to rush. It *always* happened...this had been too easy thus far. (If I forgot the ghoul, which I was very keen to.) But there was nothing. Standing weak, with my lashed back and rump, bleeding cheek, swollen brow and a headcold with my sickness getting worse every few minutes...I just had to keep pushing. All my things were still here, to which I gratefully pulled my fleece and saddle on. It stung...but the soft material just made me *feel* better to cover up my wings again. No-pony had to see them...I'd been lucky thus far with them on show. Everything else I hid in my saddlebag, slipping the boltcutters through the fastenings of my battle saddle opposite the grappling hook.

I touched Unity's statuette of LittlePip for luck, seeking any form of belief I could hold on to. I wasn't going

to waste time and...and...

Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself fixing his bed after I had landed on it. Afterwards, I would tell myself it was to try and cover my tracks. But even I knew there were no illusions who would have taken my things.

As I shot the hook back into the ducts again, I screwed up my eyes and tried to pretend I'd just made a mistake about that...to pretend it hadn't been for the...the *other* reason.

Last bit...last bit and I was *gone*. 'You've come this far, Murky', I told myself. Just a...little...further...

* * *

This part was not going to be easy.

The plaza was *heaving*. Slaves were being brought in, vast quantities of them. I wondered if their 'Mountain Task Group' was gathering here before their request was put in...for as I stared out of the air duct Brimstone had lifted me into days ago, I could see no real way through.

A column was being marched past my hiding spot, upstairs toward the higher levels. Many of them carried that sooty looking residue, as though they'd been working in the rest of Fillydelphia's mines before being brought here. My Master was really calling in all his favours over the slavers to amass so many. Already, I dreaded how many were being sent to the unending underground hell of the metro. Behind them, I saw cages filled with more ponies than I'd ever seen in this place, no doubt to impress upon Red Eye that they could resume more important missions. I could only guess to get the choicest loot for their little 'group' before any other slaver. They really were making a big move...getting rid of Protégé through false info leaks and betrayals had only been the beginning...

Red Eye's potential for a greater military force had astounded me. But now I found myself in stark astonishment at the sheer ambition My Master was clearly holding to seek favour from Red Eye for power...

Glimmer's shop cell was in the main ground floor. If I dropped out now I only had to go down half a flight of stairs, get to the bars, pass my apology through...say...say whatever needed said...and go. Straight back. Once in the ducts I'd be safe...er.

But there was only one way through here...I'd have to try and blend in.

Because that had *always* worked out in the past...

Awaiting the column to consist entirely of slaves and not slavers...or at least till the procession blocked sight, I hopped out of the duct and walked morosely downstairs with my head hung like all the others. Some of the slaves looked up at me...but simply seeing another little pony who had been battered around, they didn't pay me any heed. Thank the Goddesses I'd thought to get my fleece on!

"Hey, watch it, runt!" A hoof shoved me against the wall, staggering on my exhausted legs, I slipped down and covered my head. The movement felt far too natural. Sadly...that sort of thing was fairly common in my life. But it let me creep away faster with a valid reason to do so, cantering down the rest of the stairs into the main plaza. It had changed even more in the few hours. Scrap build scaffolding had formed bridges from one balcony to another on the higher levels, which were gated on either side and held long rifle armed unicorns who swept their barrel around far too readily. The incinerator had really got going, belching its smoke in thick clouds to the wired cage roof while I could see slaves being forced to work away on stone chipping, sewing or other small tasks even in their rest periods.

The bustle gave me a good shot to stay hidden. Falling in amongst a group beside an elderly earth pony (How had they ended up in here?) I matched their pace as it slid along the wall, passing shop cell after shop cell. The heat in here from that incinerator wasn't helping my dizziness. Twice, I stumbled. More times, I coughed. But I swallowed the bitter air and kept going. So...close...

"You all! Halt!"

My hooves froze. It was My Master's assistant, what was he called? Wormtail? I saw him march across the ground, before turning to an entirely different group. I was about to feel a little happier until I saw who was

with him. *Wildcard*. My Master was obviously moving him into a role that Barb had once had until he likely had become too much of a threat. At least you would see (or hear) *Wildcard* coming. Even now he was whistling as though nothing in the world was wrong around him. What was that tune? Four short whistles then a long one? The same again...then four long ones.

Forcing myself to ignore it...I made the last short hop and pressed my face to the bars.

“Glimmer!”

My hopes fell. There was nothing...no-pony. The cell door sat open, not needed while they had been taken to a shift. My heart felt like it had been...been *crushed*. Sliding down the bars, I lay on the floor before it for a few seconds. No...she...she should have been here! I needed this! *She* needed this!

Slowly, I drew out my package for her, wrapped in linen. Wishing I could sob, I brought out my drawing carefully and slid the edge into a fold of linen. She...she would find it...she'd know it was from me...

Wandering inside the cell, I moved into the back and set it down on her side of the couch. She'd find it. I stared for a long time at the drawing...just hoping she'd come in behind me and be surprised...but I only heard more cries of those thrown into the yet unknown pits outside. The door out back had been blocked up. I just held the picture and stared...

It was meant to be Glimmerlight and...and Brimstone and Coral and...and what I remembered Coral's son to be like from the memory. Caduceus too...Leafshine like she'd asked me and...and even what I imagined her parents were like. Strong and tough Steel Rangers but still caring for their daughter.

But I'd messed up so much...her mother and father were in the wrong jobs, I'd done her father as the paladin and her mother as the scribe. Caduceus' little glasses looked weird and messed up his eyes. Brimstone was *freakishly* huge, even more than he should be. None of them scaled right...I could see curves wrong or...or how I'd made Coral's son look too fat and...and...

The three words stared up at me. Those three words I'd hoped would mean it.

I'm sorry, sis...!

They had once been an apology for...for not realising and saying the wrong things.

Now they were simply an apology for making everyone she ever loved look *stupid* on this drawing.

I turned and left.

I still wished I could cry again.

Trotting back out, I made to sneak back to the duct and slink off into the night. I'd try and hang around the Mall...see if I could spot her looking healthier. But with such a pathetic apology...she'd likely not care to see me. Even after what Coral Eve said.

Depression was hitting hard...but even it wasn't enough to stop all the pain, sickness and hardship not disappear in a burst of adrenaline at the sight I saw the moment I exited the shop cell. A new wave of slaves had been brought in, thin and hungry. They were sat around the fountain...awaiting to be told where to go.

We just stared at each other.

Sunny.

The decision was reached in my head before my hooves even started moving. I didn't head for the duct...I went forward, weaving around the confinement pits. There was a silver lining...I could turn this into something good! Hope flared up in my heart, I could check one thing off my grand objectives!

“Sunny!” I whispered as loud as I dared. She was staring at me, but didn't reply immediately. Her mouth gaped, moved and finally seemed to break through into speech again.

“M-Murk...why are...are you...”

Dropping down beside her, curling up like any of the others, I made sure my grapple saddle was hidden. I

couldn't stop myself, I hugged her. But the shiver and mild jump she made gave reason for me to quickly let go. By the Goddesses eternal mercies...what had they done to her?

“L-listen...I'm not meant to be here but...we can go! Me and you...like we...we planned.”

“G-go where...?”

My eyes were starting to cast around. We didn't have the time to discuss it...already I could see Wormtail and Wildcard coming far too close for comfort. Was that raider being a bodyguard or just enjoying the sights from that mad half twisted smirk? I lightly tugged her arm, almost feeling sick at how thin she was so quickly. I'd been born to it...she'd been a healthy wasteland *veteran* a few days back.

“Out of here! Hide! Escape! Come on, Sunny, we can sneak out in the ducts now you're so...so thin...”

She might have made a little joke about that, I was trying to give her reason to quip or snap at me a little. But the almost blank look she gave me simply broke my heart for the poor mare. I *really* wanted to give Doc Minstrel a good square buck between the legs for leading her to this.

“O...okay...” Her voice was soft, before she gritted her teeth. “I need out...get...get my gun and...and shoot that...that...”

Yes! That was the attitude! I nodded furiously, before wincing in pain and confusion at the world blurring before my eyes. “Follow me...we'll go get your gun, Sunny.”

I hoped I could find one. But that wasn't important. What was important was how she reacted stronger, standing up warily beside me. Cautiously, we began to retrace my steps as a sense of growing momentum began to overtake me. We would do this! With somepony else I...I could talk to and find the way to help with Glimmer. I'd be taking Sunny away from My Master too, both defying him! We sped up, trotting around a group of slaves being pulled from their shop cell. I kept my grapple gun facing away. Please don't see them...

“Everypony halt!”

Wormtail's annoyingly nasal voice snailed out and was noticed only through how downright *insipid* it was compared to having any real power. It took everypony a few seconds to obey...compared to the freeze frame on life My Master could pull off with a shout. I sense Sunny stopping behind me. Turning, I shared a look with the dusty coloured mare. Standing up, her splinted leg and burned cutie mark only were more visible. Only now that I got a chance to look, her brow bore the horrid scar of a lash wound, much like my back. I could only imagine who from.

“We're one short! One shooort! That's one less for you idiots! Where are they?”

Oh *shit!* I permitted myself to blaspheme in my own mind (Blaspheme in my mother's far off eyes anyway) as the stunned look we shared made it all too obvious who he meant.

“Come on! Oooown up! Where are they? I know numbers and I know how to count! This is...this is *highly dis-satisfactory!*”

Oh was he serious? I could even see a *slaver* slap his gas mask with a hoof above us. Wormtail began to move around the middle group, asking them who had gone. We...we didn't have much of a chance...

I glanced to either side of the plaza. The duct was only about twenty feet away, but if we moved we'd be spotted. If we didn't we would be too...

Only one way. *Dare.*

“Sunny...y...you ready?”

“I'd rather be shot than continue this, Murk...” Her voice sounded so fragile now, like she was terrified of having been brought to that point.

Staring into each others worn and red tinged eyes...we turned and galloped for the duct.

“THERE THEY ARE!” The new bridge guards had us in a second, screaming out to the rest.

My legs ached, I could see Sunny tearing up at the pain in her splint leg as she fought to push forward. We dashed around slaves, leapt over those lying down and Sunny even barged a slaver out of the way! Go Sunny Days! Ten feet! Just up the stairs now!

“Block them in! BLOCK THEM!” Wormtail screeched over the commotion. The slavers above held fire, likely from the mass of targets their Master wanted kept alive too well. But ahead of us, we almost ran directly into a block of heavily armoured slavers rushing to guard the stairwell. The duct was blocked!

To my credit, my panic was now only *five* seconds long instead of ten. Reaching out to grab Sunny, I pointed to the opposite and unguarded stairwell. One slaver leapt a pack of slaves with his back hoof catching one in the face to stop us. Yelling in pain from the action, I dived to half slide and half roll underneath him. Sunny took advantage of his stumbling over me to shove him into a mass of weary looking bucks who'd grouped together. The slaves simply stared in astonishment. Go go go!

Reaching the stairs, we found even more slavers rushing down. Screeching to a halt, surrounded, I looked up and again while trying not to keel over and give up. But my eyes found the balconies...

“Sunny, grab hold!”

She stared at me for a second, before doing as I said. “I *really* hope you know what you're...you're doing, Murk...”

“So do I...” I murmured, hopping up to point toward the balcony, flipping out my mouthpiece and firing the hook to catch on the scaffold bridge. Biting hard upon the trigger as soon as I saw it wrap around...the tension strength almost surprised me as both our wasted bodies flew upward, tugging hard on my back. I couldn't scream...I had to keep my mouth shut over it! Together, we flew up above the slavers and wound quickly onto the bridge. One slaver tried to catch us...but just received two ponies in the face for his troubles. Sunny held him down while I clambered over the edge and got untangled from the scaffold with panicked hooves...then we galloped on.

We'd run to where I'd fought Barb near the roof and use my grapple to pull us out through the hole! That cage wire couldn't be *too* tough and I wanted to bet that Barb's knife was still up there from stabbing Protégé to cut with! Glancing back, I saw slavers fighting through the slaves to chase us with clubs, whips and (making me shiver) *chains*. Briefly, I saw Wildcard running up the opposite stairs we'd tried for. Well...all right then, whatever floats his boat...

We passed a cart of pipes for constructing the scaffold bridges, one that we spun and, as one, bucked down the stairs. An almighty clatter that assaulted even my ears rung out as dozens of heavy pipes thundered into the chasing slavers. We went higher, entering that darker stage of the enclosed stairwell. Behind us, I could hear more of the slavers beginning to cluster on the balcony and be shouted at to give chase. But the pipes had slowed them, hurt them. Every single item we found, either Sunny or I turned to hurl at the individual pursuers. The door was just up ahead, but a faster unicorn tossed the projectiles out the way with his magic and began to catch up with us, charging up the stairs. Squeaking as he went for *me* I pulled my mouthpiece trigger again to fire the hook into his chest before retracting it. The air pressured projectile blew him off his hooves to crash into two more behind him. I glanced at my grapple as it retracted.

“W-wow...gotta remember that idea...”

I felt Sunny pulling me as we pelted into the darkened room, she slammed the door shut before we worked together, our frail bodies offering just enough to push a work cabinet in front of it.

“What's the plan, Murk? You...you do have a plan?”

“Y-yes...kinda...make s-sure it stays shut, I need to hunt around.”

Hearing the slavers beating on it harshly, I turned back to the nightmarish generator room. It still haunted me...being chased by somepony in the dark...hearing Protégé scream in pain like that...

Now, to find that damn knife! It had to be here some-

“Surprise, motherfuckers!”

I ran directly into a hoof. My head stayed where it was as my body kept running beneath it...bending me back to twist over and collapse to the ground with a bloody nose. Another stomped down into my gut, driving what little air I could manage right out of me along with a spray of misty blood. Through my darkening vision...I saw a multicoloured mane and mismatched eyes erupt from behind a generator and surge right toward Sunny.

The mare spun, instincts no slavery could kill driving her into the counterattack from a life on the harsh roads of Equestria. Her hooves flew out, but were simply batted aside like any child's before one of Wildcard's front hooves slapped across her face, throwing her to the ground. He began kicking lightly at her.

“Get up! C'moon! Get up! Get up get up get up! Come on, gimme a good performance! Be a star, get up and fight!”

I saw her in danger...I'd handled Barb...I could...I could push myself to help a friend from *this* nutjob! Lifting at least my front half up, I bit hard on the mouthpiece, firing the hook directly for him. Feeling the jolt of firing, the hook soared forward like a long range punch...before curving away in a glow of magic. Wildcard's horn sparked, my own hook soaring around to come right back at me, spin around and around to wrap up my legs, lift up and drop me on my back...hogtied. Gasping in the pain of the drop, I fell to the side...seeing him just laughing.

“Unicorn brawlers, huh? Pretty fun things, see...somepony told me a unicorn couldn't be that, so I tore his throat out with my horn. Then I realised that was a pretty bad move...couldn't tell me he was wrong!”

His magic surged, flaring brightly with that vomit yellow colour to slam me into the generator before arcing across to grab Sunny's backward double buck by her hooves and lift them from the floor. His own counter buck spun and slammed into her chest. I heard something crack...but I couldn't even scream myself as the impact to my head only felt heavier and more painful...

I didn't even see the end of the fight. I passed out far too early...the last sight of a unicorn combining his telekinesis and earth pony like brawling into one hurricane of brutality. The powerful demonstration making me realise that it'd be a long while before I was truly free of Brimstone's past still hurting the present...

* * *

Consciousness brought only a deathly feeling.

Even before my vision came back...I could feel my throat gurgling and full. My chest was convulsing like I'd swallowed a parasprite. A windpipe that seared and burned inside me along with a head that felt like it had been split open. I was cold...shivering. Everything felt wet...I'd been stripped again...

Sunny...I...had to go get...

My limbs felt restricted...they couldn't move far from below me. Was that...mud? Damp? Stinging...the rain? Where...where was...

“Wakey wakey, Number Seven...”

No...no...don't be awake! Faint, faint Murky! Fall into the black and just don't wake up!

“I said...**wake up!**”

A hoof hooked around my forehead, tugging it up and back. There was no hiding it as I groaned loudly at the rather large swelling on my forehead being handled roughly. I didn't want to open my eyes...but I had no choice. The groaning turned to a horrid cough...I was...was *very* sick...like before in the crater. I could feel it bubbling in my throat...feel the loss of breath and heady fever taking grip. I...I didn't have long...

My Master was staring down at me. From underneath a sheltered umbrella upon a stand in the ground, he was backlit by the flare of sheet lightning above us every few seconds. But those green eyes...they were never-ending.

“There we go...”

“Pl...please...”

He grunted, dropping my head to flop back down into the mud, my mane lying soaked around me.

“Don't even start, slave. Now before I begin to say anything, I advise you look around you...”

Almost not wanting to...I did look around, moaning from a stiff neck and the dizziness from just looking. There was...

Nothing.

We were alone. I didn't even recognise this place. A large expanse of barren wastes in a clearing between abandoned buildings. Thick mud gooped beneath me and him, water slid off the nearby rooftops like waterfalls. The umbrella was keeping it from falling, but already there were many large puddles formed around us...some of which seeped underneath me and stung horribly. But to my horror...I saw that I was chained to the ground by every limb and once again attached by the collar to My Master.

Even with just shifting my weight, the pressure of the collar gave rise to a horrid spontaneous amount of choking and coughing when my chest spasmed. Eyes rolling over, curling up as best I could from being staked down...I whined and cried for help from my sickness...I cried for Weathervane. I needed...needed RadAway...*now!*

Then I saw it...right beside him. Right within my reach was an orange sachet. Still hacking and dry heaving, I began to pull myself toward it, please, Master I needed it!

Chuckling, his hoof slowly pushed it back out of the way...out of my reach.

“Oh no...disobedient slaves don't get treats, Number Seven...”

“I...” My sentence was cut short by another cough. “I...I *need* it, M-Master...to liiive, please...”

My head was grabbed, forced to look up at him.

“You disobey me! You run from me! You try to take another of my slaves and now you say you want more? Are you so greedy, Number Seven? She was sent to the metro for her punishment. You are here as *your* punishment! My punishment of you...and oh...you will not be getting away so easily this time! NOW BE QUIET AND LISTEN!”

Holding my ears, shivering and whining as he bellowed into them, I was cowed into shrinking back from the needed medicine. I heard My Master chuckle at the submissive reaction, before patting me on the head.

“I figured you might try something like this, Number Seven...I figured. It's why I offered a little insurance policy...”

“W-Wildcard, Master?”

He sneered. “Oh...oh no, he was useful, yes. But in the end you would never have gotten far. You must be wondering why you kept slowing down...getting sick...always worse and worse despite your own medicine. Well...*that* was my assurance that you need me. A RadAway a day...the doctor's told me. Easy to find for a determined pony. But a three RadAways a day? Oh...much *much* harder...”

“Th-three...Master?” I wanted to cry, feeling my chest rise and fall and swell and hurt and...and... “Wh-what have you d-done to me...?”

That *sick* cackle and sneer, my head was lifted, before I felt his hoof tapping something.

My collar.

“It's a wonder of what you can find in an old contaminated prison right beside the crater, Number Seven. A collar irradiated enough to keep slowly killing you...over and over and never ceasing its work to end your *life*. Not enough to harm those around you but just enough to make that growth of yours *much* worse...hehehe. Just enough that you need somepony who can get anything he requires to keep his *favourite* little slave alive...”

I wanted to be...to be sick. Not just from the disease but...

My hooves touched the collar, trying to pull it off. My eyes stung...I felt hollow inside. All...all this time

he'd been...been making it worse. He'd locked me into a killing collar! I fell to the side, screwing up my eyes and *trying* to cry as best I could...but I only spluttered and spat. I could subconsciously imagine it...magical radiation particles eating away at me...slipping into my throat every second. The red sores and rashes all around my throat made so much more painful sense now...

Oh...*Goddesses* please...*somepony!* Lift me out of here...I didn't want this anymore! *Please!*

“Please...Master I...I'm dying...*now!* Please, can I...” The words felt foul in my mouth, but already my vision was fading. I didn't have a *choice*. “Please...can you...you give me some RadAway...”

That mocking chuckle made every inch of me crawl in disgust. I felt him pat my head again, like I was some sort of little child.

“Oh we will...we shall ensure you will be kept alive so long as you obey. But first there is your punishment for all you've done, my boy.”

My mind rebelled. Do *not* call me that.

“I told you, I'm not a torturer, Number Seven. I don't sadistically harm ponies for my amusement. Control them? Oh yes...I do love my little subjects...but I don't aim to hurt them. Many just...heh...can't handle the job. No...your punishment is not to be harmed.”

My body kept shifting, convulsing and tugging against the bars which he'd chained my limbs to. Then why...why outside and chained into the mud so alone? But then I saw his eyes narrow, before reaching into his own armour's pockets to pull something out and drop it before me.

My journal.

“Oh no...you won't be punished with whips or beatings, slave. I am a merciful Master sometimes...I only ask that to save your life into my service you cement it.”

He leaned down, those yellowed rotting teeth inches from my face and staring intently at me as I writhed in the mud, caked and soaked amongst it.

“...you will draw me.”

The journal was pushed forward. I recoiled, trying to force myself away from it. No! NO! Drawing was...was my only real freedom! *NO!* I wouldn't...*I couldn't!*

“Please...Master, s-something else...I'll do more shifts!” I turned, begging to him and trying to ignore that knowing smile that he had me in a figurative corner.

The wind blew the sheet rain in under his shelter, soaking me from the side all over again and stinging my wounds badly. But he only kept smiling.

“No...you will draw.”

“I can't anymo-”

The thunder rolled above me, but as quickly as it went...he was on me. Screaming, I felt the rain wash over me as I was pushed out from under the shelter into the *torrent* of lightly burning rain upon my back. Thrown side to side, roughly handled and aggressively controlled, I was pressed to the ground...a brown muddle went before my eyes...before my head was pushed forcefully into it. Mud sloshed across my face, blocking all air as the liquid flowed into my nose and mouth. I flailed, panicking and trying to move. But his hoof stamped down...pressing my face into the water as it bubbled and splashed around me. I...I couldn't breathe! Mud went down my throat...I coughed and swallowed the dirty water...I...he was drowning me! Smothering my face to-

Air! The pressure released, I choked and spat, falling to the side. Groaning and hacking up wads of wet mud...I felt myself sink slightly as the rain kept pouring down into the recess I'd made in my frantic kicking. My entire body was quaking...all too ready to expire. Then I saw the journal slide before me again...that umbrella following it.

“You will **draw** or you will **die**, Number Seven! **This** is your punishment! To prove to me that you are willing to be my slave! That you submit to your life here by using your freedom to choose this drawing...to complete me in your life!”

His behemoth like stature flared and silhouetted in the lightning. I could see his giant weight actually sunk a little into the mud. My chains slid and turned brown under it all as I just looked up and tried to shake my head.

“But...I...I lost the ability. I can't draw any more...”

He didn't even reply. I just felt him reach for my head and move toward the puddle again. Screaming, I wasn't even given a chance to close my mouth before my face was splashed into it again. It lasted longer, all thoughts blurring into a vague nothing...my thinking slowing and turning more to almost hallucinogenic colours and silver shapes that spun and twinkled even through closed eyes.

Then suddenly...the sky. I hadn't even realised he had pulled me out from the torture again (Damn whatever he said about it!) and laid me on my back. Again...the journal was pressed near.

I couldn't take another drowning...I actually couldn't. I could feel my life hanging by one fraying thread...awaiting the unconsciousness before I would drown not of mud but of my own blood that even now I could feel clogging my lungs from the swelling taint growth. Shivering...I looked from my chains...to my journal...to My Master...to the sky and to my own cutie mark.

I thought of all the others. What would they will me to do? To do *this*? But I had to live...for them. Please...please let me...let me see past this...

Slowly, I reached for the provided charcoal and moved to a clean page...

“Good, Number Seven...”

Ignore him! I shook...the charcoal rolling against my loose tooth before I gently bent down and...and began to...

...draw.

L-l-lines...corrupted lines I never wanted to do became...they became c-c-curves and...

They grew bigger, stronger. Outlines taking more prominent priority and then whispering inward with quick flicks. I had to pick up the charcoal as I kept coughing...but always came back to it...feeling his hoof stroking almost lovingly over my mane.

Curves grew and joined up to...to make the next bit...the same mantra, the ongoing routine I'd always held and used. The one that had been broken now came back. They became shapes...

The little details flushed, glaring up at me. My eyes burned with the effort to cry...but his orders somehow stopped me doing so. Terror flowed through me. For my life...for my freedom and will to be my own pony. I didn't want to do this! But the mud trickling from my face and mane that dripped over the paper only reminded me of what awaited...as if drowning in my own blood wasn't bad enough.

The shapes they...horribly...slowly and maliciously...

They came to life.

I sat back, shaking more than any point in my life as I saw My Master examine it. My breath was shallow...fast...please, I've done what you want, give me the RadAway please!

The journal was lifted...and I could see what my own subconscious had done.

I'd drawn. Properly and with all the old talent I had...but now used only for drawing the things I was commanded. Was...was that it? I had lost my own freedom of mind? That I could only draw what I was *told*?

For before me...I saw My Master upon my own journal. Now immortalised and carved in my mind's eye. Huge, authoritative and a presence beyond scale upon my life. He stood protectively there, grinning

that grin. His eyes all too familiar and his own scar identical to...to...

The pony I'd shown eternally attached to him...

My Master stood protectively above me...his one large hoof wrapped over the little slave I'd drawn, keeping him close. The way a father would do for his...s-s...

...son.

I didn't say a word. Neither did My Master. He simply looked to the drawing...before grinning...turning to a large smile. Slowly, he hoofed across the RadAway that I took and bit away the seal of to hold my life in the balance. It'd take a few minutes to work...I still felt weak as I felt him stroking my mane while I drunk.

“There, there...now you're learning...let's go back home, shall we? Your time has only just *begun* Number Seven...you have yet to begin **true** slavery under me. But I'll be nice before you start...I'll even let you into the plaza where you can tell your friends, because you've done *so...well...*”

The chains were released...all but two. The one around my neck and...

...and the one around my soul.

* * *

Coral Eve tried her best. She really did. But as we lay together in her cell, I just couldn't do much but cling to her and shiver. In her motherly embrace, she cooed and softly whispered, sensing a buck in need even if he wasn't a child anymore. She had cleaned me of the mud, helping to wash away some of the physical stains and help my back.

But after I had told her, I think even she knew that it would take a lot more than a little hug to really help how I was feeling.

My ear twitched...I'd heard something. A little *tap* upon the bars. Not like the batons like somepony might knock on a door.

I looked up, attracting Coral Eve's attention.

“What is it?” Her voice betrayed worry for the two of us, having found ourselves in a mutual state of simply needing anypony else who could be there for them.

I didn't speak...I simply got up and began to trot out the room. Her two cellmates glared at me...but wisely kept their distance. Coral Eve held some real fear factor over them. But my eyes only saw what awaited.

Near the bars, I could see a small package with a sheet of paper sticking out of it. I trotted carefully over...slowly unpacking it to find two bottles of water and a little of the preserved soup from long ago. With baited breath, I opened up the paper...I recognised it...I knew it...

The drawing of...of all of us. Terrible as ever and bearing all the mistakes. She'd...she'd *returned* it...

But it held something new.

Amongst it all, between her and Brimstone, in somepony else's style of rough scratchings more used to diagrams than real drawing...I saw...myself. I had been added to it all right beside her. I felt my eyes go wide...surprise...

Below it were two words I couldn't read, below the three I had on it.

Coral came out behind me, looking over my shoulder in surprise, a hoof resting carefully on my neck.

“W-what does it s-say?” I stammered...

“It says-” but she stopped. Looking up.

Before us, emerging from the shadows of the plaza...weary...hungry looking and barely recovered from sickness. She wore her torn red robes, her pink mane fallen around her head and before sullen eyes that already held tears.

“It says...‘me too’, Murky.”

My hooves shook, dropping the drawing to push forward as we met at the bars, nuzzling and reaching through in the best approximation of a hug we could manage.

“I’m so sorry!” I squeaked, finally feeling relieved tears begin to fall from my eyes. *Finally*. “For...for it all and...and sorry the picture was so bad! I got it all wrong and I hoped and...”

Her hoof touched my mouth, stopping me. Her tired but oh-so-trying to be happy eyes glared to mine with the best smile she could manage.

“Murky, dear...I don’t care how good or bad you think it was. I care that you *did* it. That you took the time to do this for me. That’s all that matters...”

Behind me, I felt Coral move up to be beside both of us...animosity briefly forgotten for this one moment at least. Glimmerlight looked to her.

“Thank you, Coral...for taking care of him.”

Coral Eve merely nodded, her hoof resting on me as I held my friend.

We had a lot to talk about...to work out. Things wouldn’t be perfect immediately between us all and...and I knew I definitely wasn’t the same...I’d lost so much to the world around me. I knew I’d been knocked back...devoid of what my friends had given me and my growing personality.

But for now...I had a sister again. The family I had chosen for myself.

* * *

Perk lost...

Confidence Boost – Something has damaged your belief in yourself. Your friends may be there...but you can’t help feeling that you’ve lost something inside that may very well take time to get back. The dark days are upon you...ones you’ll need your friends all the more to help you get by. You have lost one point of charisma.

Chapter 16: The Only Way Out

* * *

“Will I lose my dignity? Will somepony care? Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?”

“What is it like to be without hope?”

Do you know that feeling? Like, when you're about to have something done to you that you can't possibly hope to change and there's that one horrible moment of clarity when you realise 'this is really happening and I can't stop it?' As though you're strapped into a...a...rollercoaster about to go over a dip you don't want to go on but you can't get out? But worse because you know it's going to be something terrible.

“Not to sound like I'm trying to lessen what you're saying but...yes. I do.”

Then you know what I mean. The first time I ever felt it was years ago as a foal, when three slaves held down my legs and pulled my wing across the cold metal of an anvil. Time froze for one horrible second when I saw him raise the hammer and an icy inevitability ran right through me when I realised that hammer was going to fall and something you never think will happen to you is suddenly beyond your will to stop. Then it happens and you just want to wake up from the nightmare that you know is all too real.

It's the knowledge that you no longer have any say in your life at that very moment. That something else is driving you and forcing something to happen and no amount of begging or wishing is going to stop it. Being under him and being his...his pet. It's like that every second of the day...

He was right, it was only just beginning. My Master had broken me in, demanded every facet of my life accept him until I was even bearing him in my journal. Now I was to begin my 'new life' as his, simply accepting what I was told was all I was meant for. To work for his benefit, to be his own slave and to have no choice of my own that was not pre-decided by him. He...he lashed me for waking up too early! I had my food taken away for not eating it in the right order! Shift after shift, unending and in the worst of positions under overseers he knew wanted to make me work...his way to instruct my life. Make every moment of it into a living model of obedience. To push me past my limits then order me to go further, just to see me manage it and shock myself that I could so easily become what I was before the Pit all over again.

Rarely was I given any rest. He'd only throw me into that tiny cell in his office that was my true home in his eyes. Leaving me alone in the dark. For me to be cold, wet, sick and on a rough concrete floor all through the periods I was ordered to try and sleep.

I just couldn't handle it, my life was swinging out of control! I made attempts to escape, but he knew where I would be every time. He'd...he'd even let me get away from the Mall sometimes! But he'd always be there allowing me to think I'd gotten away before the chain would snap tight and I'd be halted. I made one last attempt before he began telling me to grow up and accept life as his s-s-son.

Always always always ramming it into my head to accept him as a father and...and g-g-grow...

...oh no, it...it was that...

“...was what? Hey, hey what's wrong?”

I didn't remember, I don't want to but I can't...can't forget it and it's just there and what he...he made me do and what I did...why did he do that?

Oh Goddesses! I don't want to remember! But it's always there and it always will be! I just...

No, no no, it wasn't fair...why then?

I...please I...oh Goddesses why...

“Murky? Murky, what happened? What's wrong? Hey, hey come here...”

Just, I...I...I can't help it, s-sorry...

He didn't give me a choice! I...only had one choice left.

One choice...one way out...

“Murky...?”

...I had to.

“Murky! What did he do?!”

* * *

The bar locked shut through the handles of the trap door. I knew it wouldn't hold them long.

A violent thumping on the weak wooden and iron cast door signalled that my pursuers rather agreed. They screamed, ordering me to stop and blasted chunks from it with roaring shots of those snout nosed shotguns many slavers carried. Buckshot flew through the air, pinged into the empty studio I'd ran to. I ducked back and galloped away from the lethal swarm of pellets.

Sweat flowed, my brow and muzzle stung as it reached the cracked skin of my radsors. Every leg thumped, aching to be rested, like a thousand needles were being jabbed into every one of them on my inner thighs. I could feel my mane plastered to my head and the searing pain in my eyes from when I had ran fearfully through a chemical smog cloud belching from the factory next door.

But I still ran.

Floorboards snapped, creaked and splintered beneath me as I galloped for the windows, the only way out of this room. I knew that for sure, for I'd tried this route twice already. I only hoped the slavers behind me hadn't been on those shifts to know too.

Crack! The trapdoor sprung open! Glancing back at the dark forms rushing through, I turned and redoubled my efforts with the long chain hanging from my collar dragging and making all a manner of clatter behind me. Sprinting through the building with thick wads of bloody pain in my lungs and throat, I dove through the broken window. I knew what was outside it, a corrugated metal overhang like a ramp. Landing with a clatter, I slid onto my side, skidded down it and leapt from near the bottom. The jump sent me passing over a three storey drop to crash through the scattered glass of the adjoining factory. Shouts of frustration as I heard the overhang collapse and fall behind me almost lifted my spirits enough to ignore the harsh slap of a hard metal floor meeting me belly first.

Screaming, I curled up, clutching my bruised stomach. The bruises hadn't formed from the drop. They were old, ones I couldn't even remember how long ago I'd received them. Hours had become like days. I didn't know how much time it had been since the first broadcast about Arbu anymore. No, these blackened shades of skin beneath my patchy and in some places non-existent coat were from when I had taken the liberty of assuming he'd wanted his bed made. The imagery of a wooden cane whipping again and again before a horrid stamping of a hoof so hard a rib had snapped like a thin twig. I did still remember the shocked silence between us before my mind realised what he'd done and

simply screamed in complete shock.

He'd gotten a doctor just to heal me enough that he could finish the thirty lashes of the cane.

Yet, even after landing on my abused underbelly I could not cry. Some things just ran that deep these days.

I reached for the railings of the metal catwalk I'd landed on, almost falling right over the side into a tanning vat beneath as I found no such rails there. (Some things never changed) Beneath me, slaves were still cringing from the shower of glass I'd sent into their workplace among the mill's vats, the falling shards plinking into the thick fatty mixtures. Pulling up my legs, them crooked and shaking beneath me, I stood up to continue my escape. I...I had to keep going, I'd gotten further than last time! My Master had missed me when he'd tried to do his whole 'appear and trap' routine! This was a proper escape now!

My head glanced from side to side, looking at the floor beneath me. The rows of vats underneath the catwalk I was on emanated foul fumes up toward me, but closer to the exit I could see a massive conveyor bringing in carcasses and lengths of leather that cut right from wall to wall. It was blocking all routes to the exit on the far side from me. Two scaffold bridges crossed over it on either side of the room, I'd need to get over one of them to reach the way out!

The stairs shook over a foot from side to side on crude fixtures as I descended to the tanning mill's work floor. Slaves backed away from me, I could see their overseers beginning to shift through the crowd I was so desperately trying to merge into, but they all saw my wings. None of them would let me near. They all knew the standing orders about 'the pegasus.'

I had to...to run. It was the only way out! Just run!

Crying out in pain as I forced my body to go one more time, the collar and chain feeling heavier by the second, I fled. Galloping across the floor, around ponies and ignoring the shouts of the slavers knocking slaves aside behind me. I'd heard too many cries to stop to tell them apart now, only one voice mattered to avoid.

I galloped for the closest bridge, but seeing two slavers throwing a mare aside to rush down the aisle between vats toward me, I doubled back. They were already on that one! I...I had to get to the other one! The foul stench of tanning liquid spilled from buckets knocked over in my passing, giving them a horrid slippery surface to catch up.

A slaver mare, as deep red as Brimstone and a gas mask swinging below her snarling face shoved her way past two bucks, leaping between the vats to get me and block the way to the other bridge! With the two behind me, they had either side of the aisle blocked! I couldn't go over! I was too short! But if I went under I'd be too slow to crawl on tired limbs!

I was caught with no way out of the factory!

Casting my head side to side wildly and whimpering, I spotted a wheeled slab of metal for letting repair-ponies slide under the conveyor belts. Rushing forward, I started pushing it toward the conveyors between the vats, desperately trying to get ahead of them closing in on either side. At the last moment I jumped toward the trolley, landing atop it and rolling underneath the conveyor belts at speed with the rusty clanking of the rollers passing inches above my head.

Behind me, the slavers from either side dove to try and grab my tail. Mercifully, for once, their hooves caught nothing. The trolley sailed on past the other side of the conveyor, hitting the loading ramp leading out of the factory and began picking up speed. I flew from the factory on my makeshift transport, rolling onto the granite courtyard ground and whizzing by the guards that seemed more

surprised at the sight to realise they should have stopped it. My chain trailing behind whipped around one's ankles, tripping him on the spot.

I had to admit, even under the panic and desperation a little satisfaction crept into my heart at the sight.

Hitting the edge of the concrete pathway with a jolt, I was catapulted to land in the muck from the last shower of rain. Cast out into the dark street under the black clouds and swirling smoke of Fillydelphia I fought to get the air in my complaining lungs and keep putting one hoof in front of the other. The familiar tone of enraged Fillydelphian slavers emanated from the factory behind me, the situation all too memorable by now, I could hear their hooves stamping and galloping onto the hard ground. I just had to go a bit further! Trial and error had got me this far! The sewage outlet was near, one I knew was hidden. Not the closest, not the furthest. It was picked at random from me choosing the first number I'd heard from somepony else around me to ensure he couldn't predict me.

Slavers burst from the tanning mill, following the trailing grind of my chain upon the ground. Panicking, I kicked my legs into a mad dash over the road to slip and stumble down the steep embankment that led down to the overflow sewer drains. I fell, rolled, screamed and pushed my hooves beneath me again even as the motley assortment of leather and metal clad slavers appeared at the top behind me. I was so close! He wasn't even close to me, I'd have heard his thick stomping! I just had to avoid this bunch of-

The slurping sound of someone stumbling in mud was my only warning. Leaping to the side, a murky green slaver fell down past where I'd been, his clumsy hooves sending him tumbling down the slope. Swearing, holding his horn where it had struck a rock, I saw eyes promising imminent pain if he caught me. Unsteadily descending to the ground myself, we began a slow and slippery chase in which our hooves sank almost half a foot into the ground on every step. Behind him the others slid and wallowed, that red mare trying to hop between rocks to catch up before falling on her side, coating her long trailing coat in goopy greenish mud. Panting, feeling my vision go blurry and my throat swell under the radioactive collar...I knew that this was a death sentence if I couldn't infiltrate back to Weathervane soon after this. But I'd be away!

Just escape. That was all that mattered. It was the only way out. The only thing worth keeping in mind...there was something out there beyond the Wall. Remember it and push on!

Dragging my chain, trying to keep it ahead of the unicorn. I felt glad the fall had at least damaged the telekinesis he seemed to be trying to use. His horn sparked like Coral's before fading out. But he was gaining. Long legs were so much handier for this terrain! I could see the passage ahead, but it wasn't the one I wanted, it was the false one! I'd done this before in my food run just after the Arbu broadcast, so I had to be sneaky. The one My Master would think I was going for was the closest one! But my real one was around the corner, the one to fool his tricks!

Just a...bit...further...

My chain went taut. The sudden stop made my hooves slip and sending me collapsing into the sloppy ground. The unicorn had caught up to me! Reeling me in...coming closer.

“Hah! Gotcha now, kid! Now let's find who you belong to, huh?”

He bent over me, front hooves reaching under to lift me up. Slurping, pushing my hind leg out from under the mud, I shot a back hoof behind me at speed, crashing into his nether regions. The legs around me went limp, a horrid squeal of pain and disbelief hurting my sensitive ears as he fell to the side, squirming and holding himself between the back legs. I winced myself, the strike had felt that much more of a crunch that time.

He kept writhing, screaming in horror. But I kept dragging myself onward. Slavers were catching up

from being more cautious on the hill. From all sides they rushed. I saw whips, nets and canes. My body ached at the thought (and ached for the same reasons in a more practical manner too) even as I kept going. I just had to make it to the sewers! It was the only way out! The only way to be free!

“He's going for the sewers! Stop him! STOP HIM!”

I had to! Sliding on a shallower section of ground, I began to pull the lichen covered nets that had once acted as filters away from the opening. The slimy substance coated my front hooves...even my mouth as I disgustingly bit and ripped away at it with everything I could. Beyond it...the gaping hole with an open cage door lay before me.

I'd made it.

I hazarded a look back before the warm fuzzy joy of relief flowed through me. They were still miles away! Pushing through, tumbling as I got in, I struggled with the caged hatch to close it. Through the bars I saw them approaching, first four, then ten and then twenty. A whole crowd of slavers seeking to keep me enslaved. Not anymore!

With them still ten metres away the door slammed shut. I slammed the bolt and clicked the padlock I'd stolen from my last shift in place before trotting backward when they crashed into the bars. They tried to pry it off to no avail. The lead slaver, a huge brute with pitch black coat and mane stared at me with hazy eyes and unspoken threats. Feeling my chest quiver with fear, I turned to gallop into the darkness....

...and ran straight into his embrace.

Tiny wails from my tortured throat barely had time to echo before they were clenched and half choked as one gigantic hoof held me to his stinking and sweat soaked leather barded chest. From the corner of my eye I saw the lanky grey mane, the thick brown coat, yellowed teeth and my own eyes looking down to me from the darkness.

My Master only grinned, leaning down close to my ear as he sat back and stroked my forehead with his own hoof, tracing across my scar. Our scar. I just stared away as best I could, feeling sick. How...how?! I'd been so close.

It was like he read my mind, whispering gently even as I saw him.

“A random direction...surprising routes...deliberately taking the harder paths and yet still you come to me all over again just when you'd thought you were free, eh? Come back to complete your punishment shifts? There's lots of overseers want to see you in their workplaces these days.”

He slowly clicked the chain into place again. I struggled, but without even a word he hurled me into the side of the sewer, striking me across the mouth repeatedly until a wet line of blood trickled from my lip. I begged, but he only brought his hoof down one more crushing time. Under it, I heard a crack. Howling, feeling my eyes water from physical injury than from choosing to cry I fell back. My...my snout moved under my hooves! I howled again and again through my hooves, a muffled scream that led to me falling forward toward him. I hugged his nearest hoof, nursing my broken nose and pleading that I was sorry. He simply stood above me and began to drag me by my chain toward the exit and the grinning slavers.

“By this point, son, after so many tries you really should be asking yourself if you aren't finding your way back to me all on your own without even realising it.”

* * *

“Murk? Murky Number Seven? Where have you got to? Hey, Murk, get those skinny hooves trotting and get out here!”

I was leaning against my workbench, my hooves idly tracing across multiple large brass casings for anti-machine rounds to fit them into the heavy metal boxes for transport. Clicking the last one into its slot...I groaned as my aching neck took the strain and lifted the box in my mouth by a strap to carry.

“Where in the blithering hell are you, Murk?! I said get over here!”

One of my legs wasn't working right...my nose felt stuffy and swollen. Shifting a few inches at a time, I wearily carried the box to a large crate, feeling my teeth throb with pain at the weight in my mouth. But I worked on, passing through a roiling cloud of dark red ashy smog that blew through the factory. Chemical burning tinged in my half open mouth, burning my nose and stinging my eyes. Coughing and choking, I dropped the case of ammunition to the floor and fell upon my side.

No-pony working at their own benches around me paid any heed to the little pegasus, naked and bearing his broken wings at their hooves as they morosely trotted to and fro like little cogs in the great war machine of the factory. Just like me. Groaning, I dragged the ammo box the last few feet, pushing in alongside a mare with little coat left and choking up yellowed spit as she placed her own box in. I'd have complained about the chemicals saturating the air, but the truth was the ambience in Fillydelphia alone was toxic to the core. Even outside, you could still taste the rusty tang at the back of your throat on each strained breath.

“There you are! Murk, why didn't you respond?”

Whimpering at the effort, pushing my tired hooves up I slotted the ammo box into the last remaining space before the guards began to close it up and mark it for delivery. Finally, my ears picked up on the words. Other ponies...they were becoming distant compared to the only voice that mattered. Slumping against the crate, my mouth hanging open in the far stages of exhaustion I saw the overseer coming through the steam clouds wafting from the forge and acid wash machines with a cloth tied around his mouth.

“So...sorry. Didn't hear...” My voice was quiet, little more than a whisper interrupted by a harsh hacking. My body was weary beyond measure...a dozen crates of a dozen ammo boxes each filled with a dozen heavy rounds for hours upon end in the sweltering heat of a forge had drove me to the edge of stamina. I didn't even feel my movements...I just slaved away until it had all become a blur...

The overseer...he was the one I'd worked under before, a scrawny earth pony who had given me the forge socks that were now our waterskins in waiting. He wasn't so bad if you did the work right. He trotted over to where I could more properly see him and his cutie mark of a candlestick with multiple wicks either side. Casting careful eyes at the finished crates he turned and nodded approvingly.

“Good work, Murk. Now come on and get, your shift ended ten minutes ago. Time for you to go back to the Mall, it's your rest period.”

Horror struck through me. No...no not yet. Please not yet! I abased myself before him, shivering and only adding to his confusion.

“M-Master, pl-please can I work one more shift? Just one more! I...I don't want to go back there! I want to keep working...”

The overseer sighed, looking away. “You've worked four shifts in a row here already Murk, well beyond what I allow ponies to do before the chems start to kill them. You can't spend all day here. We've been through this three times already and I don't think he'll-”

“Please!” I begged, moving forward, my front hooves resting on his. “I want to keep working here! A...away from-”

“Me, Number Seven?”

Even in the stuffy atmosphere of this factory, I felt my blood run cold. Through the smoke I could see his gigantic silhouette looming there. Every slave scurrying around him with their heads lowered, afraid to accidentally make eye contact with him. Shifting and coiling around him, the smoke drifted past to reveal My Master. Standing amongst the other slaves, he had already seemed to exude authority and become the very nexus of this workplace regardless of whether it was his or not. The overseer beside me gulped, trotting forward.

“M-Master Shackles. Murk has offered to work another shift here, he is doing good work once you find something he can manage. If you would loan his services to me for just one more shift. Just one more-”

“Silence your weakness of care, List Seeker. Don't think I can't see what you do. Trying to find and take in slaves to just 'get by' and 'meet the quota.' Finding those who could perhaps survive in your factory in their time here. I've humoured your requests for Number Seven purely as a means of allowing him to find his own realisation that wanting to work is the mindset of a true slave. Isn't that right?”

His eyes glared down at me, almost hidden behind List Seeker (had I only just got his name?) and shivering. Please...please just go and let me get back to my work. Let me work away in peace...

The overseer took a second to consider his options. But really, with My Master above even his gangly height he had no choice. My squeak of horror as he sadly trotted to the side was only matched by the one I made as my chain was removed from the bar I'd been attached to at my workplace. A hard tug and once more I was tied to My Master's harness. Exhausted, with every joint aching and stiff I found myself dragged up to his side again with my head hung low. I...I wanted my workbench! I could lie on it while I worked. Just cease to exist for another few hours, please!

But as I was dragged away, my brief hope that Glimmer or Coral Eve might be back from their shifts on my rest period was shattered when I was pulled in the opposite direction of the exit leading to the Mall. Looking stern, Overseer List Seeker turned to look at us departing through his arms manufactory.

“Hey, the Mall's in that direction, back there!” He pointed a hoof.

My Master simply cackled and patted my head.

“Number Seven asked for another shift. I'm giving him what he wants. Just not under you.”

Limping and staggering out into the surging wind of the ever present dark storm above us, I could only see List Seeker's concerned look turn to a dejected sigh as he turned back to his own factory and the workers inside. The crashing sound of machinery faded away as I limped in step beside My Master, the ground turning from smoothed stone to gravel below me. Light rain misted all around, giving rise to the sense that this storm that had wracked Fillydelphia ever since Barb's riot was not going away any time soon. A darker Fillydelphia for darker days.

But for all its changing atmosphere I quickly realised where I was being led. Right into the past.

* * *

“Well would you look what got dragged before me.”

I sat before a desk, sniffing from the damp rainwater dripping off me and stinging my burns and radsores. A miserable little sight in the eyes of the pony who sat looking over her desk. Not that she would ever need any reason to hate me.

Wicked Slit moved from her chair, trotting around the desk with her eyes never leaving me. But I could only try to keep watch on her knife while it flicked around and rubbed against the floor near

me. I could still hear My Master moving away down the catwalks outside her raised office in the foundry after he had simply thrown me in the door and left. Now I was trapped with the most neurotic slaver in Fillydelphia all over again, just like old times, just like-WHA!

I was being dragged. My chain was still attached and Slit had grabbed it in her magic to pull me to my hooves and out the door.

“One shift, Murk. I'm not going to let you waste seconds of time you could be failing to meet quotas sitting here looking sorry for yourself! You brought all this on you the moment you made a run for that wall. This is far too long overdue. Move!”

Her hooves lashed out, striking me on the side, flanks and face. Anywhere possible, really, as she began forcing me from her office. I couldn't even reply to her or say any words in return as she began slapping and striking me onto the catwalk. I tried to move ahead of her, but my legs felt triple jointed and mixed up. I reached the stairs and tried to move...

“I said get moving!”

Her magically enhanced voice stunned me before the vicious full buck caught my shoulder. Sharp pain flared and I was sent tumbling down the catwalk stairway to land on a searing hot concrete floor covered in still sparking fragments of metal. Howling and squealing, I pulled myself up and began backing away from her while trying to pat down my smouldering coat and the pain of the small burns.

“Please, Ma...I mean, sir I...I mean Ma'am! I'll work! I'll woork!” The last word stammered and warbled from my mouth like a long plead. The resistance had been battered from me. I was too tired and sore to properly think and...and just let me do something I can switch off for...

She dragged me by knife point toward the yard of her foundry along rows of the all too familiar carts. Of course she'd want me to work on them. I was shoved, shrieking as her knife prodded my hind quarters toward one, I began the soul crushing task of chaining and locking myself into the harness of the item that had defined my life, feeling the familiar weight of a cart resting ready to be lowered onto my back.

“You probably think you're lucky. I made a few threats last time, little Murk.” She trotted around me, pacing back and forth. “Told you what I'd do to you if I caught you. Well, Shackles wants you working, so I'll put you to work. But don't think you're getting away without a little something from me!”

I stood stock still, now locked in place by the harness. Oh Goddesses! She could do anything and I couldn't run or dodge anymore. The sweat trickled from my face. I saw slaves watching, grinning. A bit of free entertainment in their ongoing slow days. What was she going to d-do? I'd seen her kill ponies without meaning to when she got lost in the frenzy of anger.

Wicked Slit backed off, suddenly grinning through her long and sweaty red mane. Then she began to chuckle, then laugh and then howl like the banshee she was at the sight of me held in place by an as of yet locked in place cart.

“Oh just something to make you remember. To make you regret daring to run from me! To kick me there. You had your fun hitting on me.”

I saw the slaves glances to one another, a mixture of confusion and dark humour leading them to be unsure if they should laugh or look afraid. Wicked Slit turned side on, stamping a hind leg.

“That hurt you little fucking weasel! That little sharp hoof of yours down there. Thinking you could do that and you wouldn't pay?”

Slit began to trot toward me, her knife moving in to my cheek and sliding across it just enough to

lightly break the skin. I whimpered, trying not to notice some of the slaves chuckling. At her words and misinterpreting it all or simply at me I didn't know. But I felt her knife slid back over my neck, heading down my body. No...please no...

“Eye for a fucking eye, Murk. You buck me there, I'll leave you legless.”

I felt a crunch, the impact of her knife's blunt hilt being propelled by her strong magic. A few moments of quiet, cold pain...before I yelled at the feeling. Falling, clutching myself from the blunt trauma that my shrill voice carried across the courtyard. They...they laughed! Laughed as tears streamed from my eyes and laughed as I felt the blade rest on my back, feeling the whip scars that were still healing...

“You better fucking remember why you once feared me so much you'd come in crying and begging for me not to kill you every single day you were assigned here. You better remember what it was like to be the slave who would gallop on a sprained hind leg to finish in time so that I wouldn't remove his leg. You better remember, runt...just what you are to us. You aren't some fucking hero who's going to escape. You aren't somepony different from all those other slaves in my factory. Now you're going to remember it every step you take for the next few hours.”

White hot pain slid across my back, I screeched and writhed as I felt hot blood trickle down my sides. She...she'd slit open one of my whip scars! She-

I howled again and then a third time, her knife opening three wounds all over again before slamming the harness down on my back. Coming close to my ear with her psychotic voice dropping, I couldn't cry to let out the fear but I could cry in pain, moaning and choking in equal measure.

“You're a slave, Murk. His slave. But for the next few hours you're my fucking slave. Now Mistress Slit says...gallop. Gallop...so that you'll feel every tug, pull and shift upon the back you are to spend your whole life breaking for us.” She paused. “For Red Eye.”

There was no choice, no argument. I simply had to weep and gallop even as my back stung and bled behind me under the harness. Gallop, be loaded up and then gallop again. Always galloping even when it hurt too much to carry on. She or somepony else would always be there to push me onward. Even if it fell to exhausted tearless sobs, I didn't stop crying the entire way. Journey after journey, load after load. Every time returning to be met by her gleeful and satisfied stare at the pony who'd dared to defy her. Filled with scrap, cut metal or discarded refuse, I was sent on my way. Trips to the Ironshod Outlet, to List Seeker's munitions depot (Seeing the tired overseer watch on with almost pity) and even back to the Wartime Ministry Hub.

Until finally, as some sort of twisted mercy, My Master was there waiting at the end. Collapsing, my back crusting over and my chest pitifully trying to raise and lower for breath, I fell at his hooves. My throat was swollen. My disease catching up from the workload and my collar steadily pushing my life's countdown onward...

Please...RadAway...now...I...I couldn't take much more...

He only grinned that one grin at me, and slowly spoke.

“Get up. Time for your next shift.”

* * *

The crate behind me finally slid the last few inches, pulling it into place.

“Good, laddie! Very good!”

My 'overseer' clapped his hooves in delight at my first job completed for him, grinning to a pony he was bartering with. Sooty's desk lay near the front door, behind us two huge curved staircases ran to

the upper level on either side of an inside fountain beneath a recently repaired chandelier.

“Just my new little worker, my friend. Now, what shall it be? A quick fix? The whole experience?”

I fell against the crate, seeing through unfocused eyes the shape of that most hated trader laughing with the sick minded client. Around us lay a nexus of debauchery. An abandoned mansion in the residential district hastily converted to operate this newer venture. Sooty's new trade in ponies and in selling time with different acts involving them to the slavers (and sometimes slaves) who could pay for the opportunity.

Across the hallway, there were various bucks and mares, slaves all, chained to the wall with a crude board above detailing their costs. I was somewhat glad I couldn't read the various crude lists of 'tiered' acts each was expected to market. But not one of them had anything approaching any will in their often blackened eyes. Some were crying, realising they were consigned to this as their life from now on.

I had long since forced myself to ignore the sad sounds from the closed rooms upstairs...

My Master had dropped me here to work as Sooty's assistant. My crates were heavysset, but empty. Designed to accommodate the varied manners of payment Sooty's 'clients' brought with them. Anything from spare clothing to weapon parts was exchanged after a brief hagggle with Sooty Morass himself to attain their 'credit.' I'd seen him sell a pony for an hour in return for a good set of cooking pans he'd wanted. Is that what a pony's dignity was worth to him?

I felt sick. Even beyond my current heightening disease that saw me blacking out for a few seconds every couple of minutes.

The trader trotted toward me, tapping the crate with a hoof before grinning down to me, those little braids bearing my feathers swinging to the right of his face.

“Now might I ask what ye are doin' resting, lad?”

“I...I...why...”

The trader seemed to sigh a little, patting me on the head in that far too friendly manner.

“Ye know, laddie. Here's a generous wee gift of info. In this world, you use everything you can get to find a way by. Me? I just do it better than anypony else. Ye think I care what I sell or who I exploit if it helps me make me way through life? Just accept it, lad. The ones who know what to do to survive succeed in this world while the ones who don't, like you? Nothing more than a means to an end. Ol' Red Eye gets it, I get it, Shackles gets it. It's not personal, just business.”

How could that be how my world had to work? I'd seen Equestria, seen the green fields and beautiful colours.

But back in the real world, my captor simply sighed at my lack of agreement and spun away.

“Come on! Get the back to work or Shackles will no doubt be interested to hear about you taking unordered breaks. Shift yer arse and get the rest!”

A command.

I obeyed.

The rest ended up being twelve. Every time dragging them upstairs from the basement, inch by painstaking inch that ground on my teeth from the bit or tugged upon my scar from Barb. I passed slavers taking poor ponies upstairs to an assigned room. Some fought and were dragged while some simply morosely trotted with a resigned depressed look. Every time I came in, he lorded over me,

taking the chance to abuse this moment of power with an 'assistant' from My Master being sent to him. Finally, as the last crate was shoved into position and I leaned back against it to try and dig a large splinter from my right fetlock, Sooty Morass trotted over. With all clients satisfied and left to make their 'choices' behind him, he had a few spare minutes for me.

“Does good to repay your debts right, doesn't it? For all yer scamperin' around ye still come back to be here with me. Coulda saved yerself a lot of trouble by just taking up my offer back at the skyport, huh?”

I couldn't muster much of a response, simply looking back up at him with a quivering jaw. Seeing his hoof reach out, I shrank back against the crate, unable to hide a little shrill squeak of fear.

His face lit up as he heard it.

“Oh...oh now that, that's just...”

The smile turned to a deadly fiendish grin.

“...marketable.”

I'd felt the sensation many times but never had it been more true now as my blood turned to ice. Hearing the arrogant little chuckle as Sooty saw the look in my eyes, I just shook my head.

“Oh don't give me that, little laddie. Don't ye remember I asked ye before? I'm sure something as, heh, exotic as you...”

I felt him stroke my feathers poking out from my bandage. I...I wanted to throw up.

“...would attract quite the attention.”

His voice was different. This was no longer the carefree and arrogant marketeer. He smelled money from me and the greed and ambition to grow and prosper was all too visible. Tugging me away from the crate to the centre of the giant entranceway, he stood me upon a large fragmented mosaic beneath the domed roof and chandelier before beginning to trot around me. I kept my eyes front, trying not to whimper too loudly at the clacking hooves and beady eyes on all sides.

“Good and small. Not many bucks your size. Lots of interest for that from the male persuasion...”

No...

“Bit sick looking, but we could help that with a lil'RadAway. We'd still make a profi..”

No...no...no...

I felt a tug on my tail. Yelping, I scampered forward, falling over myself in exhaustion to land upon my side on the mosaic, turning back to see Sooty laughing and stomping a hoof upon the once beautiful mosaic. I curled up, trying to keep every inch of myself protected. He'd...he'd lifted my tail!

“Haha! Oh, they'll love that attitude.” He trotted forward again. “A high earner for sure!”

Leaning down over me, a hoof tapped the side of my hips. I bit my lip at the greedy look of the potential income in his eyes.

“Perhaps a little small framed to really do anything with you in the hind quarters, so don't worry lil'Murky...we won't have ye doin' that.”

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. I...I wanted to wake up. Please, let this just be a nightmare.

“But I'm sure we could still find a use for you. Put some other little things of yours to good use in my 'lower expense' range, hmm?”

He lifted my front hooves, tapping them before raising his other hoof under my jaw and gently patting the side of my mouth with a knowing grin. I knew what he meant, I just didn't want to think about it. All I could do was squeak and hide under my own front hooves to quiver on the floor even as the thick stomping from the main door started.

He'd come back.

Sooty turned, laughing as he stood up away from my huddled body.

“Master Shackles! Your timing as ever is perfect, he was just finished his work!”

The mosaic's broken tiles jittered loosely and trembled out of their sockets as My Master strode into Sooty's sick business. I could see him smiling at the sight of it. Slavery within slavery. No wonder he liked it.

But he represented, for once, a way out of here. I scrambled across to cling to his hoof. He hadn't even spoken a word yet but Sooty only laughed at me moving so quickly.

“Was just discussing a business deal with the little pegasus here. Me doors are always open if you ever want him to grow up a little. Got more than enough clients who'd pay a good amount for a little submissive pegasus like him.”

My Master cackled. My heart skipped a beat. Was he? Was...

But as I looked up, he only shook his head.

“Get up. Next shift.”

* * *

“Ready up! Cycle's coming again!”

Nostalgia. Horrible, horrible nostalgia. To be forced into work at the very places I had once gathered my items to escape from. My life told in reverse. To be back the threshing mill amongst the small ponies forced under its whirling blades.

“Go!”

A sore body, a near delusional mind...I saw only the lint and frayed threads ahead of me...the scything machine just beyond. I charged, scooped and then fled the impending doom. My back was a mess. The little strands were catching in my scabbing wounds from Wicked Slit's tasks, my leg still didn't feel right...

“Ready up! Cycle's coming again!”

Dropping what I had I felt the light cane whip over my ears, as it did every slave. Their new theory. We could never get enough. We would always be pressed for more. Till our very blood became the price they paid for the small scraps of thread. It...it didn't make any sense...

“Go!”

I dove in. I cried out...snatching what I could and scuffled with another slave who tried to take my quota. We retreated, feeling the hiss of cold metal at our tails. Falling out I felt the cane whip over my ears...then the next...and the next...

“Ready up! Cycle's coming again!”

This was so pointless! Why didn't they just use unicorns?! Why us?!

“Go!”

Why us?! WHY ME?!

Again and again..unceasing. Bearing new slashed cuts on my hind legs, as shallow as they were, but still another addition to my gradually breaking body over this day of hell.

Lying amongst the thread, choking and spraying my lifeblood across what I had gathered from my mouth, I simply let my consciousness begin to slip. My throat was thumping, my lungs were tightening...but I looked up to see him there...

“R-RadAway...M-Master please...”

He grinned.

“Get up. Next shift.”

* * *

Sliding...galloping...screaming...I clambered from cart to cart, terror forcing me to make one last effort despite my injuries and despite every inch of my body saying no. I wouldn't let them eat me.

My leather suit had come undone from an auto-axe cutting the threads, I could have sworn on purpose. Now I fled through the underground nightmare that was Hive's pits. They swarmed around me. Beasts in multicoloured winged form that fought and rushed and pushed, all trying to get in through the hole in my chest. My goggles were steaming up! I couldn't see! I couldn't breathe through the mask! I fell...

Dusty rock met me on the way down. I beat my hooves, feeling their scrambling bodies around the hole. Then a horrid stinging pain as I felt tiny teeth rip a small half inch chunk from my chest and gnash in again and again. Its comrades joined it, shoving to get into my breast. Crawling and likely invisible under the swarm I felt my chain catch on something, jarring me to a stop. I...where was the exit?! Where did I go?!

My body failed me. I fell. The spasm came, my chest convulsed. The coughing fit hit me like a sledgehammer to the ribcage. Swelling over my collar, the painful seared skin of my throat from such constant radiation rubbed and chaffed on every wheezing kick of my body. Blood splattered from my mouth, coating the inside of my hood and vision slits, blinding me. I felt a sting on my chest, a nibbling before I rolled over to put the hole to the ground and ride out the sickness.

I lay there a long time, hearing the sound of the parasprite pits around me. Eventually the little demons left me be, sensing their hole was covered. But I didn't move. Blind inside the foul armour, exhausted beyond motion I simply lay. I...I might have passed out, I didn't know. Every so often I tried to move a hoof, only to feel the muscles complain and respond slower than they should. Inch...by...pain...staking...inch...I...pulled...myself...toward...yes!

Reaching up, I felt the handle of the locker room, used by those who needed a quick repair. Pushing the first door open to the area, I slipped inside and fell upon the floor, finally tugging my hood off.

I couldn't move. My legs were...were gone. I couldn't feel my body. I was spent...

I knew he was there, watching me from across the locker room. I knew he would be. He'd have known when to return. Looking up, opening my eyes, seeing through a fine red haze (Oh Goddesses...I'd turned bloodshot in my sickness...) I coughed up another thick wad and shivered, pleading with my eyes...please let that be enough...

“P-p-pl...” I couldn't even finish the word, my throat was...was dying...

He only shook his head.

“Get up. Next shift.”

* * *

Helping repair the Mall. Kept away from the cells and my friends amongst the higher levels to sledgehammer a wall down. I didn't even know why. Just an old back room of a shop they wanted connected to the corridors. I didn't know what shop.

I could barely tell who was around me, but the buck to my left was crying openly. He had made the mistake of trying to beg the overseer. One of My Master's most brutal. An obese and slimy wretch of a stallion that kept his saliva smeared clothing on only through crudely tied rope. But the slave beside me? He had begged, saying this wasn't what he was meant to be doing, that his life was being ruined from the slavery.

They'd taken him and...and...

Oh Goddesses preserve him, they'd cut his cutie marks off. Just held him down and ignored the pitiful, humiliating screams that stripped his pride and strength as the serrated knife dug and slit. The overseer's way of showing him that he wasn't meant for anything anymore. They'd caught me looking and...

I was just lucky they hadn't done the same.

It was just one faded blurry mess. Like I'd scrubbed a hoof over fresh charcoaled drawings and ruined all the clean definition. In the same way I could no longer draw, I could no longer see my own life. No longer feel the clarity I'd spent so long honing and achieving through hardship and the joy of friendship.

Just one exhausted, painful and useless tap of a hammer after another...

I'd be knocked on my side if I dropped it. Every single time. I was useless! I had no idea how long I'd been here but I'd managed only six strikes that didn't even chip the wall. My rump was red raw from the whips meant to motivate me. Nearer the end I couldn't even shriek in pain.

I was dying, but something made me keep moving...

Again...

“Get up. Next shift.”

* * *

Taking his clothing to be cleaned by my own hooves, feeling the stinging chemicals burning my hooves and making my muzzle's radsores swell with the toxins emanating from the tub. Of me being found lying on my side simply moving my hooves with not enough energy to move the rest of me...

And again...

“Get up. Next shift.”

* * *

Carting refinery fuel, somehow trotting still because I was told to...

Past every limit I should have stopped at...

“Get up. Next shift.”

* * *

Cutting scrap in the junkyards...

What he commanded, my body obeyed...

“Get up...”

I couldn't...I looked up...this was it for me, I knew it. Blood dribbled from my lips, I bled from my back...pain covered every aspect of me. Every place, every intimacy and crevice of my frail and mortally sick body. I had...had given more than I knew I had...give, give, give...now with nothing left but my life that he owned.

The orange sachet appeared before me. A sudden last lifeline. Getting up, I suckled on its tear off straw even while feeling his hoof stroking my mane gently.

“...good boy.”

* * *

The door had slammed shut, locking me in the shop cell. I hadn't trotted in, I'd been carried 'home' on a slaver's back after being dragged by My Master back to the Mall.

Now I lay on my side, wheezing as my skeletal little chest fluttered and tried to raise as best it could. I lay in the one stream of light that entered through the cage from the Mall outside. In the diagonal rays filled with dusty air broken only by the shadows of harsh faced slavers trotting on patrol outside.

But she was there.

Coral Eve had been waiting. She always did when I was out on shift. Every chance she had she was here waiting and hoping that I'd be returned before her own shift came up again. The mare was limping from a savage cane lash to her front left leg and hazy eyed from a fever brought on by chemicals ingested in her own shifts...but she still did what she always had in these last few desperate times. Without words passed between us, I felt her gentle touch lift me onto her back and begin to trot into the back room. Purely by instinct, I found myself clinging around her neck along the way until I was lowered onto the mattress and covered with a ragged blanket for what rest I could hope for until it all began again.

* * *

The orb shone, glittering brightly and illuminating the room as it hung in the air before Glimmerlight's horn. With a splash of radiance, it split apart and the shards of sparkling magic wrapped around her horn.

“Alright, Murky, just lie there. You know this doesn't hurt.”

I had little choice, my failing leg had, well, failed. All while my snout and chest ached to even move. But Glimmer's sole remaining healing orb she had stolen back during the riots was our last possession to keep me going, working its powers as she traced her horn an inch from my body. Up and down, the gentle and easing warmth spreading through my body to restore strength and vanquish pain.

It said a lot that Glimmer was using this on me. Her face bore numerous new bruises. Without Brimstone around she'd had to fight off the attentions of those who saw her as 'vulnerable' now and had tried to take her food. At least that's what she told me they'd been trying. Thankfully, she'd stayed as safe as could be despite the injuries earned in her own defence, I knew she could take care of herself. But for her to endure an infected cheek wound to instead heal me, I was so lucky to have her.

Glimmerlight had joined us more properly earlier, somehow wangling her way to a cell transfer. I'd managed to push out a wheezy question of how. It seemed that we still had at least one friendly face in here as Blunderbuck, the junior armoury assistant, had been ordered to take away her scrap pile to the armoury and new workshops of the Mall then evict her from our old cell. He'd managed to get her in

with Coral to be closer to me.

It was perhaps the only piece of good news all day.

I groaned on the spot, feeling the painless but nonetheless uncomfortable sensation of tendons re-knitting inside my leg as the tension of muscle power returned. Glimmer's hoof reached over to gently stroke my mane, calming me.

“Not far now, Murky. It won't do it all but it'll help you rest better and let you move again. The better you move, the less they'll hit you. Don't worry, help's coming, I heard somepony talking about the punishment detail returning later today. Brim'll be back! It'll get better with him here. Promise.”

There was a little snort from Coral's direction before the grey mare stood and trotted over while Glimmer finished up, the spell fading from her horn.

“Th-thanks, sis...” I stammered, still wary of the term even after the apology. We really needed a chance to talk about it, I could see it in her eyes. The brahmin in the room, the 'talk' we'd need to have sometime soon about...about what happened. But not now...things were too bad right now and we both knew it. We'd both been angry, both been hurt...but right now we needed every bit of strength we could muster between us.

Shifting up, I still hurt, but the sharper cuts, burns and strains were gone and replaced by a dull ache that accompanied most muscle movements. That and my tooth still felt loose even as my hoof felt the raw skin around my neck. Always related...

“I mean, thank you. I...I hope he's back soon.”

“You're telling me, sooner he's here, the sooner he can bully some slave into getting his own shop cell back and the sooner he can buck that welded door clean off its hinges and get you out of here away from him. Heck, we'll all go, I thought we could tough it till Protégé got back but...”

There was an odd silence, broken only by a light and dry attempted sob from me. I'd seen him stable in the Fun Barn, but the sight of that black dagger piercing out through his neck and chest still horrified me.

“But I don't think he'll be coming back.” Glimmerlight finished quietly while Coral nodded lightly, reaching out to incline Glimmer away from me.

“I don't want that beast anywhere near me, but if his strength to knock a door loose can get Murk away I'm not turning it down. Now let him rest, it can't be too long till they'll come again.”

I bit my lip nervously. Coral and Glimmer always seemed on the cusp of a debate or argument, but I only saw Glimmer nod, clearly not wanting to do anything right now that might invoke harsher emotions.

“It's...it's alright. I'm just tired...” I muttered, trying to smile at Glimmer, probably failing, “I just need to get my head down. I'm...I'm used to this life...”

It was a terrible lie and perhaps the worst attempt to reassure someone not to worry about me I'd ever made. But the fact that Glimmer seemed to know that and still run with it to hug me close meant the world to me. She was putting on her best, comforting me all she could while clearly keeping her eyes averted from the bruised eyes, hastily bandaged wings and marked body I had before her. She simply looked at me. Into my own eyes, reminding me that she saw a pony, not a simply physical tool.

That alone reminded me that I wasn't lost yet. I may have been broken around My Master but...but with my friends I could manage.

...barely.

She clearly had noticed the weakness though, biting her lip even as Coral coughed politely for her to give me space to try and sleep. Her hooves seemed a little slow on wanting to leave me, nor mine from her. Finally, I saw the sudden horror of her stifling a sob behind a smile, leaning her forehead on mine and speaking so quietly. I knew it was just for us.

“I'm sorry this happened, Murky...”

“I know...”

“We'll live. I swear to you we'll live. Someday...someday soon, we'll make a home for ourselves, far from anypony and just live how we want. Please...please keep believing in that. No matter what happened to...to my parents, or your Stable Dweller. We matter, Murky, don't let them take that away from you, please. You've worked so hard to become who you are.”

“I'm trying. I...I still want to get out, promise.”

She ruffled my mane, choking a little smile out.

“Go dream of that mare y'want, lil'bro. They can't take your dreams. I'll be just outside.”

We parted, Glimmerlight reluctantly leaving me to finally rest while trying to dream the dreams that would see my life better.

Somehow, it didn't quite feel so different from a single night in a pigsty once so long ago.

* * *

“What's that?”

“Huh?”

“What is...what were you going to do?!”

I shifted in the blanket, my body feeling crashed out from the healing and exhaustion. Sleep had come when I least expected to feel it, a slow and creeping relief after the comfort of knowing I'd at least been left with my friends. But my ears picking up the sounds drove me to crawl through the blanket and lean up, the shallow snooze leaving me groggy eyed and disoriented as the sudden shouts rippled through the cell.

“I...I was just-”

“You were going to do it again, weren't you?! I can't believe you! All of this and that's what you fall back on? How many?”

No reply.

“How many?”

“Four...” A sniff. “My shifts. To try and stay happy, for him.”

“Now a fifth? When does it end, Glimmer? Let go of it, give it to me. Put that blasted thing down now!”

Coral. It was Coral shouting, arguing with Glimmer. I heard a brief scuffle, before something clearly fell, pinging off the ground and bouncing away from them. My eyes finally adjusting, I saw something roll into the back room with me.

An empty memory orb.

“What were you going to get rid of, huh? Caduceus? Forget what he tried to do for you all just to rest easy not seeing what happened? Today's shift? A bad screw with that mare in the other cell? What

will it take to get through to you!?”

“It wasn't that!” Glimmer shouted back at last, silencing the air between them. I'd heard them argue many times since Glimmer had 'moved in' to our cell. The two of them in close proximity was just drama waiting to happen but they'd at least found some semblance of order in taking care of me.

Somehow, I felt a little guilty about that.

“I...I was going to...to strip away what his radio told me. About my parents...”

I could just imagine the look of fury building on Coral's face, unable to properly express the anger as I heard her voice low and unerringly steady.

“You were going to forget your own parents' deaths? Just throw away that they died because you couldn't handle thinking about it like anyone else has to in this hell we call a world?”

A hoof stomped at Glimmer's voice rising. She was crying. I could hear it.

“Not for me! I swear it! It...it was for Murky...”

“What?”

“I thought that, if I didn't remember it for now we could get on just fine like before, none of this awkward tension where we both know we see different things right now. He needs solidity, Coral, now more than ever with that monster killing him day by day! I just want to help him! Be the the big sister he needs, the best friend who isn't constantly worried about wanting to tell him off for believing in the mare who killed my damn parents, Coral!”

There was a brief silence, interrupted only by Glimmer's occasional sniffs. I wanted to desperately gallop out, grab her and tell her...tell her...

I didn't know, what was I meant to say about her mom and dad?

Coral replied for me.

“Do you know why Shackles is letting him stay with us, Glimmerlight? Have you thought why he's permitting him to not be kept in a tiny cold cell on his own?”

“I...”

“It's because putting him here with us makes it worse, Glimmer. He's out there every time breaking him to the point of death before healing him just enough to rest up until the next day. He's putting him with us because he knows we'll comfort him. We'll take care of Murk and treat him well all so Shackles gets to drag him away from us every single time to break him all over again.”

I gripped the blanket, cuddling it tightly as I listened. I'd...I'd begun to suspect it but...

Oh Goddesses. He was using me to hurt them...

“We're his counter, Glimmer. Part of his sick little game as much as those slavers are whether we want it or not. If he left Murk alone without us, he'd break and likely die in a day. You and I both know it. By caring for him...we're making it hurt longer but he knows we won't be able to just let him go. It's unfair and cruel beyond measure and you know what? We don't have a choice. There's no victory to be had here in trying to make it all seem 'alright' every time he comes here with some stupid 'consistency' because there's no end out there.”

“Please...Coral.” I'd never heard Glimmer's voice so weak. “I...I don't think I can cope...it's like going cold turkey on an addiction! I keep wanting to just get rid of something to make it hurt less so...so I can be happier for him and for you. But for all I keep telling myself we're working toward something I

just don't see it. We've only become further from escape than ever.”

Coral Eve stomped a hoof, snorting.

“If you want to do anything for him, Glimmer, you need to stop trying to pretend it's all fine and that you can just forget the bad things. I want out too, I want my son but just wishing for some impossible heroic race outside the walls isn't going to work. Maybe...maybe something will happen. Maybe your raider 'friend' can do something, maybe Protégé will come back who's easier to get away from.”

Her hard tone eased...I heard her sigh.

“But if you want to help him now give him something to hold onto. A hope no-one can take away no matter how many times they try. I've had to see the faces of my friends and family screaming and begging as they were humiliated and torn apart before my eyes every night that I sleep. I see my son alone wanting his mother. You are...you used to be stronger than I was. If I could manage it, so can you...”

Gripping my blanket like a foal with his stuffed toy, I leaned back on the mattress, surprised by the sudden change of tone. She sounded like she had in Glimmer's memory orb...

“Swallow your grieving, Glimmer. If you want to help him, talk to him about what he believes. What matters to him. Go on, there's not much time before they come again. If you want to talk to him do it now.”

There was silence between them. I only heard the outside Mall...of the crying, banging and moaning that perpetually filled the air of sick and weary slaves. But then slowly...the sound of somepony getting up and trotting toward me. I threw myself under the blanket again, pretending I was asleep. Only after I heard the hooves entering the back room did I allow my eyes to open...as though her trotting had woken me.

Glimmerlight was in a real state.

Her eyes looked sunken and red sore from crying, far more than I'd obviously heard. Her mane straggled about her head, caked in grease and mud soaked down by the rain from wherever they had her working. Seeing me looking up from the bed, my big sis only gave a sad smile as she wandered over to lie on the bed beside me.

“Hey there, Murky. Sorry to wake you...”

“S'ok...” I muttered quietly, rubbing my eyes. But somehow I got the sense she knew I'd been pretending, she had that look in her eyes that told me she could tell.

“Listen, I...” She paused, her eyes flicking to the door, as though trying to think what to say from Coral's words. “I just wanna' say something and I don't know if it'll come out right. I'm sorta' making this up as I go along.”

Truth be told, I wasn't sure what she was going to say either, but I could understand that fear. I felt it in every conversation.

“It's okay. I...I don't mind that. I'm no better, right?” I tried to smile, tried to forget what every shift meant, tried to forget the demeaning life as a 'pet.' Right now I was simply her friend, shifting across to lean my head against her shoulder. Slowly, moving away the blankets in the hazy darkness of the cell I felt her hoof wind around me.

“I just wanted to say...it doesn't matter what you heard Littlepip's done out there.”

She must have felt me jump. For the last day all contact had been harsh and unfriendly, despite hugs earlier I still flinched. But she seemed to guess what was going on. It was partly anger, partly a void of

sadness and misery at everything involving Littlepip, because she held me tightly and stifled my protest.

“Don't say it, Murky! Please, hear me out! It doesn't matter what she's done out there, why did she inspire you?”

“B-because she was...was free and good and...and...really strong to d-defy slavery and...and escape...”

Glimmer nodded, biting her lip. Where was she going with this? I didn't want to have her tell me to just accept the truth again, that wouldn't help! I...I needed the real truth, that this was all some lie...

“Because you saw her escape to be free. That's what I mean, Murky.”

She turned, her hooves on my shoulders.

“It doesn't matter what she did or didn't do out there! You have all the proof that she got there. She inspired you because she escaped, never ever forget that! That's the important thing! No matter how bad it is, no matter how much we hurt or argue or...or lose. She's done what she needed. Proved to us that it's possible. For now, that's enough to give us hope to hang in here.”

That was true...

That was so true.

I sat there, her hooves resting on me, just staring and thinking. Every aspect of this nightmare of my hero becoming something I refused to believe was ignoring the biggest thing.

She had already escaped.

Glimmerlight smiled, seeing the look on my face as my eyes widened and mouth clearly gaped open a little, knowing she'd stumbled onto at least one way to find some form of compromise between us.

“We'll talk it all over later, Murky. I promise. But for now this has to be enough for both of us. No matter what she is, what she did or what's true or false she gave us hope of potential. Now we just need to hang on, Murky! Brimstone's coming back, Protégé will recover eventually, we...we have Coral with us now and I still managed to hide our stuff in the wall cavity before Blunderbuck came!”

She wiped my sweaty and drooping mane from my eyes, seeing my own terrified gaze behind it.

“We can still do this, Murky. Just don't let them beat you. You're strong, lil'bro. You've so much more than you think. Now please, please hear me when I say this. No matter what's happened between us or...or them, don't let them win. They can't break who you are because somepony's already proven it's possible from in here! Don't let them ruin who you became since I met you. Just don't...”

I felt a twinge in my eyes, the feeling so familiar I never even noticed it. Part of my mind rebelled, I hadn't been told I was allowed to cry! I hadn't been told!

But I dared to rebel a little.

I cried with my sis as we held one another.

“Just a little longer, Murky. I know you're feeling weak right now, vulnerable. I know what he's doing to you but please just hold on. I...I couldn't bear to see you go back to what you were, you're such a beautiful little pony that I don't want to lose! No...no matter who you want to believe in, I'll still love you, lil'bro...”

The tears properly came at last, shift after shift of them held back released by the care of Glimmer.

“I love you too, sis... I...I won't. It just hurts so much...”

“I know, Murky, I'm sorry.”

“But I...I'll try and hold on for that better day when we can all leave together. All of us, Littlepip got out, she...she did it. They can't take that away from me! N-no matter what they do to me there...there's still that hope, right?”

She smiled, ruffling my mane. “There always is.”

We both jolted upright as we heard the cage door lock slammed open and the door wrenched across the ground, creaking and scraping as it went.

“Murky Number Seven! Next shift! Come on, Shackles is waiting!”

I couldn't help the little whine escaping me. It...it was starting again! But Glimmerlight pulled me tightly to her.

“Just hold on, you've got that little core of hope. They can't take that away from you, you always have that over him, just stay yourself. Don't turn back to the slave. You're more than a number.”

A harsh trotting step gave way to a slaver barging into our back room, invading our safe haven of peace. I didn't even pay attention to his shouting as he took my collar and chain, dragging me away from Glimmerlight. She followed as far as she could to the door of the back room where all the other slaves in with us were instructed to stay. A couple were grabbed too, a cull for the workforce. I was simply dragged away from her.

“Hey, you too! Get over here, mare!”

I looked up, seeing the masked slaver pointing with an armoured hoof at Coral Eve, sitting morosely against the wall. With a brief glance to me...she didn't take more than a second to get up and join the movement, giving Glimmer a brief look. I could see the unspoken words.

'I'll take care of him.'

Even as I was brought outside. Even as the chain was taken up by My Master with a sick grin and an all too intimate stroke of his hoof across my face at seeing me somewhat recovered I knew she was there. No matter what hellhole they had planned for us, at least I wouldn't be alone this time.

* * *

The scream cut the air around the Mall with such a sudden cold shock that I almost joined it.

The thud that followed however only took whatever fear I had and converted it to a sudden and hollow kick to the gut.

We had just left the Mall when the sound had made almost everypony spin to look as we all saw the shape fall from the roof and crash into the hard gravel path around the Mall. Just out of nowhere. Now everypony was silent, gradually moving closer. I couldn't see anypony on the roof, had somepony pushed him? Was it an...an accident?

My Master strode through the crowd, me being pulled in tow. With slaves parting ahead of us...we saw the reality of what had happened.

Before me lay a young buck with his cutie marks sliced off.

...I...

I didn't...

A single moment on a control tower long ago was in my mind, one inch away from leaning too far off the edge on purpose while scared and hurting...

My Master snorted, ordering a couple of slaves to dispose of the body. I remembered he'd told me this

long ago, that slaves used the roof of the high Mall to end it when they saw no other way to escape the pain. No other way out.

He was just like me. But he hadn't the same hope. The same sight that I'd seen that there was a way out from inside the city. That somepony had managed it. Without that he'd...he'd...

“Do not cry.” My Master did not shout. He simply spoke firmly, simply turned and dragged me away as I saw the lifeless body dumped into a cart.

Nothing more than a means to an end.

Sooty Morass' observation on life of the enslaved in our world bit deep as I saw one more unknown and lonely soul disposed of as a simply tool that had reached its final use before breaking.

Meanwhile all around, the slavery went on.

* * *

At the very least, it wasn't raining.

Sore of hoof and stiff of body, I trotted behind him with my head low at the front of the process of two dozen slaves. We had all been quiet. Whether in simple submission or out of emotion for the poor buck we had all seen I did not know, but My Master seemed content with it as he led us. We had left the Mall headed in the opposite direction from Hearts and Hooves Hospital, toward the Ministry of Arcane Science and eventually taking a turn that led us somewhere else entirely.

I'd never been to this area of Fillydelphia before...

It felt isolated, barely used by Red Eye's empire from a lack of the colossal factories around. Instead it was populated by cold grey homes of hewn rock and thick pillars. Lining the streets past soggy dead gardens they seemed silent and untouched. There couldn't have been many resources to be gained from out here but I still saw some individual ponies sifting through them with maps hanging around their necks. I knew that job, they were slaves pushed into exploring the city to find potential areas that could be stripped of anything useful and help prioritise the places effort was made to salvage properly.

This must have been the only significant area left within the Wall these days so untouched.

Large tenement buildings, single floor shops and abandoned diners passed by us on either side. This had once been a crowded neighbourhood. We had to sometimes weave around crashed and ruined chariots or wagons. The entire place looked bustling but none of it particularly wealthy. Likely the reason why Red Eye hadn't dealt with it other than to wall it off for eventual expansion into. I had to give him credit, that sure was thinking ahead for the long game.

Curiously, many of the buildings had large unfinished upper floors that seemed to jut out of already existing rooftops. Had they been trying to expand the housing around here vertically? Much of the work in progress had been decimated by the Balefire to leave girders and long poles of metal hanging or having tumbled into alleyways or over the road. But many still bore wooden platforms up high. Desperate building for cheaper expansion when the funds were going to the war effort, I supposed.

“We're here, get in the gates you wretches! Move!”

My Master stamped and pointed to the next building at a cross junction. Surrounded by high metal fences, what looked like an old school or mansion seemed to jut out from within. Most of the fence was melted, fallen upon its side from the heat that had warped the shape or bent it toward the ground. Crunchy dead grass went underhoof as I trotted into its grounds.

Behind me, Coral stopped briefly and turned her head. To our right there was a sign, leading me to

simply glance at her for the literary aid.

“Cross Street Orphanage...” Coral didn't dare speak too loudly, you never knew when The Master was ready for any excuse.

We were led up before the pillared entranceway. Casting my head up, doing my best to stay as far from My Master as my chain allowed without pulling, I got a good look at the building. Above the way in I saw an old mural of the Goddesses. Twisting around one another.

Protégé's cutie mark. The symbol of peacetime Equestria. Only at the centre of this one lay a small sleeping foal protected by the will of the Goddesses either side. The dream of better days for sure.

Going higher, I saw high angled terracotta tiles on the roof punctuated by musty windows. But above that again was another of the girder and wooden panel extensions intended to add another half floor to the already tall building. They hadn't even gotten around to cutting through the roof before everything ended.

I could see several slavers waiting around and inside the main oaken doors. Thick and reinforced, they must have been a real security barrier along with the iron bars across every one of the tall windows. They looked tacked on, wartime paranoia affecting a once idealistic building. Trotting in behind My Master, we were brought to a halt in the dark reception. A huge staircase swept up before us covered in a thick blue fabric that ran down into a muddy carpet of very old hoofprints. Old furniture bearing brass decoration and edges flanked us, the sort of thing I'd once seen in stuffier rooms within Manehattan.

“Your task, slaves, is twofold.” My Master looked around, before staring across every slave in turn. “Red Eye wants the girders from the roof, they're of a rarer alloy metal to melt down that they need for special factory components. After that you are to search the entire orphanage, Red Eye wants, hrm...toys, for the foals.”

The slaves distinctly seemed to contain their relief. This was an easy task as far as things usually went. The chance to spend a little time hunting toys in an enclosed building for a little? Even with the girder job this was a...relief.

Part of me couldn't quite shake the horror that any form of slavery felt like a relief. But even as I kept my head low, hearing the slavers start organising the rest into teams to complete the job on the roof first, I felt a tug on my chain, pulling my head up to look at him.

“All ready to begin again, Number Seven?”

I cringed, feeling myself lean against Coral to my side even as he stared down. Those light green eyes, my eyes, glinted with joy at a job for his little pet.

But I had a little more strength. Glimmer was right, just look forward and keep going. N-nothing he could d-do would stop me believing. J-just be s-strong and...and be yourself. So looked up, trying to see his big sweaty brown coated shape before me with anything but fear. We could beat this, we could beat him and-

My chain tugged, pulling me from my hooves to lie on the sappy wet carpet trodden by so many hundreds coming in from the mud and rain. A hoof stepped on me, pressing down and holding me to the floor.

“Do not dare look upon me with that kind of face, Number Seven! You look to me only as your Master and nothing else!”

I tried to move, but his weight pressed down. That huge body exerting just enough to give my imagination a thought about what would happen if he leaned his weight upon me properly. I cried out,

my ribs on fire from the one was still healing since the last time he'd snapped it! My bruised underbelly felt like it was swelling!

“I-I...auuurgh! I'm sorry, Master!”

I choked, my chain lifting me up by the neck, his voice roaring and drawing back a large bony hoof.

“I did not tell you to speak, slave!”

Surging, driven by his huge body, the hoof crashed across my snout, swinging me like a piñata on my collar while held up. The pain of my recently reset snout sending a lance of agony through my skull and down the back of my neck to the choking burn of the collar holding me.

“He was just apologising! Leave him alone!” Coral rushed forward, before being thrown back with the flick of that same abusive hoof that had so recently struck me. Struggling to keep my eyes open, clutching at my collar to keep myself breathing, I saw her knocked back into the rest of the terrified slaves. Their Master's fury was not one they wanted to be caught up in.

“You do not dare believe you have the freedom to speak, Number Seven...now get back in line and don't ever look upon me with those rebellious eyes again!”

I couldn't breathe! The blood from my snout was running down the back of my nose into my constricted throat, drowning in my own fluids! I couldn't even nod!

The hoof struck one more, propelling me into the crowd of cowed slaves. The example before them of what happened to slaves who 'resisted' bring them to huddle and cluster away from me. All except a black eyed Coral Eve,

Whining, I nodded rapidly to My Master after keeping my mouth shut. He...he hadn't asked a question, I wasn't to respond. It wasn't my place, I was just a slave, what had I been thinking?!

I wasn't free to think. I'd forgotten that.

“Good! You're learning...”

Standing in the light of the exit, the darkened red haze of Fillydelphia casting a blood red glint to his eyes through the many doors, My Master instructed the slavers (who seemed more than hesitant to speak themselves) to get us onto the roof. Reaching down, he detached my chain from my collar before chuckling and turning. Walking toward the outside world away from our task, I could only presume he was to wait outside or deal with something else in the meantime.

“Come on, Murk, I'm here, my dear.” Coral whispered, her hooves around me. She tore a section of her shredded blouse to hold against my snout. The light blue fabric dulled and turned a harsh darker red as my bleeding nose seeped into it. I...I wanted to cry. To cling to her, pretend she was my mother and just let it all out.

But the command was still standing, he'd reminded me to follow it again.

“You will not even cry.”

“It's okay...” She coddled me, stroking my mane as each slave was raised by the slavers for the journey upstairs onto the roof. “It's okay, you'll be fine...”

I wouldn't be. This was too much, every time I healed I...I got this treatment. My snout was broken again, I could feel the bones shifting. My ribs hurt, my neck burned, my cold stifled my thinking and hurt my head. My lungs were...were...swelling and burning like my throat...

Too much...

Just too much...

* * *

This was a lot higher than it had looked.

The top of the orphanage's floor expansion project was utterly exposed to the hot winds of Fillydelphia. Breaths of air that stung your eyes and sent the bitter poison of the air swirling into your mouth. Most of the slaves who had any thick fabric had wrapped something around their mouths. We weren't so lucky.

But the full extent of the project was clear. They had been building three extra floors as wide as the orphanage again onto this wing of the large building. One side of the old walls below us had been sheared away completely, exposing every one of the three existing floors to the wind as well. I didn't know anything about architecture other than that the world needed more safety railings installed but my best guess was that it was to rebuild the support walls into the new floors on top.

Honestly, the whole thing was just silly.

Oh...and of course we were tasked to strip girders from this whole ramshackle deal...

Hooking another bag of screws, nails and tools onto the harness across my back, I began the journey back up. Carefully limping across wooden planks and trying to avoid going near the edges, I ascended the three rickety floors set between the two dozen loosening girders. My snout had swollen up, blocking my nose with dried blood and giving me a distinctly silly look. Slaves and slavers alike had already renamed me 'Red Nose.'

That wasn't what I needed right now.

“Hey, Red Nose! Black sheep of the Red family?”

I closed my eyes, pushing onward to the top level. Ignore them...ignore them...

“Your big brother Red Eye get all the favour?”

I wanted them to stop, but I dared not speak. My nose throbbed as though in response, tickling inside like I was about to...

Oh no.

I sneezed. My cold catching up with me in the choking air up here. Writhing pain speared down the fractured bones of my snouted. A sharp shriek from me alerted most ponies around as I fell to the ground, clutching myself and trying to not let my other illness spark up too. One hoof pulled the collar as far from my neck as I could, like it'd do anything.

They snorted, turning back to their work and ignoring the little filly sized buck lying clutching his nose as more of my lifeblood trickled out of it. I actually felt light headed. I hadn't had any serious cuts but all these little injuries were adding up, I was just one small pony! One little being who couldn't take this any more.

Yet I got up and moved on. I had my commands and a good slave didn't disobey, even if it hurt to do so. Gingerly I picked up the bags again and continued moving, trying to let my hazy vision stay focussed on the thin planks that formed ramps up between each level. Eventually the relief of the third and top floor lay before me as I offloaded the goods for the slaves and rejoined Coral to work on the long rusted screws that held the scaffold to these girders atop the entire stack.

She'd seen me coming, extending a hoof for a gentle hold even as I approached. I knew it couldn't last, we had a quota to meet.

“Still hanging in there, Murk?” Her voice was soft and very quiet, I wondered if Glimmer had told her I liked knowing someone was speaking so that only I with my sensitive hearing would hear.

“Mhm.” I wasn't up to many words right now, so I just nodded as I picked up the heavy wrench I'd been allotted and started the long and hard grind of pushing my whole body weight onto it. We used the screws as temporary holders to stop the entire thing collapsing once we removed the long jammed ones. Some more 'skilled' workers would come later on today and actually do the deconstruction. Our purpose was just to make the job easier for them by replacing the hard to remove nuts and screws with easily workable ones.

The entire thing was just so menial, so pointless. I could think of a dozen better ways to do this. But it wasn't my duty to think, just be a little cog.

My wrench scraped and ground as it tried to find purchase. Working my hooves around it, I fell into the work again, starting the weary process of spending minutes at a time trying to make it move that one slow inch to the left or right. Somepony had told me which way they came off but I couldn't remember.

Just put your head down and work, Murky Number Seven. Do what you always did your whole life to get by.

And so my head was lowered as I leaned forward into the work. It couldn't stop the pain in my body, it couldn't stop the longing and wishing to be able to just spend hours cuddled up to somepony to relax and pretend life was good. I barely cared whom Coral, Glimmer, Unity...the Stable Dweller. But it could make time blur and let shifts flow by, that I knew.

Coral beside me worked as hard as she needed, cautiously watching for when a slaver was nearby. We had to speed up then, look like we were striving our utmost. They listened for us talking, so I simply took comfort in the occasional tap of her hoof on mine. Just to remind me somepony kind was there.

The nut in front of me jammed even tighter. I'd been moving it the wrong way for the last...however long! My legs shivered as the frustration built up higher still. I...I wanted to just hit it with the wrench! Hit it again and again until all this somehow went away...

I'd never make my quota now, because of one stupid little thing.

I was going to be whipped. I just knew it.

Thumping a hoof down, I leaned my forehead against the girder, feeling the sway of the platforms below me and slowly casting my eyes up to look out over the red-lit vista of Fillydelphia. In the distance, I could see the sun just poking over the edge of the Wall. Its hazy light through the cloud cover ever-taunting and full of unfulfilled wishes. Once I'd dreamed of what was out there to find for myself...but now I couldn't think much further than that Wall. Even the little I'd seen outside it recently felt so far away from this.

Looking down, over the chimney stacks and collapsed roofs I saw this dead city leading back into the more bustling industrial sector. I could see the Mall, the helter-skelter, the Wartime Factory Hub and the Ministry of Arcane Science. Lower down still I could see the slaves tramping about just like me. Day after day. I saw one fall and be kicked to the roadside, one more who'd reached the end.

I couldn't escape, not this.

My eyes travelled further down, seeing a few prospectors in the next streets then further down still till I was looking over the edge.

I could see the gravel surrounding the building, between the walls and the half melted fence. Blinking to clear my eyes I could fancy I saw the dead plants among the little trails of gravel. I leaned out a

little, peering toward it.

Would...would it hurt? S-six floors, would that do it? Would let me escape?

Eyes wide, I couldn't help but just...think...

Maybe...maybe I-

“MURKY, NO!”

A magic field slapped me back, hurling me away from the edge where I'd been hanging over about to fall without even realising it. I tumbled back, thrown into her where I felt hooves wrap around me and tug me safely away. I...I...what had I been doing?!

Coral pulled me further back, my nose hurt terribly from her using her telekinetic wave to force me back, but I was in more shock than pain, my wide eyes staring at the edge I'd been slowly tipping over even as she held me.

“What were you doing? No, Murk! You don't have to do that! Oh it's that poor little stallion from before putting ideas in your head, that's not the answer!”

Her hooves stroked my mane, keeping me close, ignoring the shouts of the slaver as he heard the commotion. But she was wrong, that stallion jumping hadn't put the idea in my head.

He'd only reminded me of it.

But feeling her there, the realisation only began to slap home of how close I'd been again.

“I'm...oh Goddesses, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!”

My eyes felt wet, not on command, but I looked up at her face, both stern and caring. I could see her horn crackling, it must have hurt her to do what she did to save my life! I just kept apologising again and again.

“I...I didn't meant to! I promise! I just...just felt...I can't do this, I thought I'd escape! I thought I'd be free so long ago!” Sniffing, I put my head to her shoulder. “I can't do this under him...I want the pain to end...”

“It will! Remember what Glimmer said, Murk. Remember what your, hm...'sister' said. It will, someday. We're with you, we all are. Even if we're not all around you, I'm sure they're thinking about you. Even that nice mare you told me about...Unity was it? We'll all be together someday.”

She was struggling. Coral I knew was one of the most hurt of all of us with her son out there somewhere. I could hear her fighting to even believe herself, but it was obvious, she was saying it for me. Simply nodding, I clung to her and tried to forget the horrible sensation of my body's balance tipping and moving toward the point of no return.

“What's all this racket?! Get back to work you fucks! You two!”

We looked up, a masked slaver brandishing a shock rod in his magic had ascended to check on progress. I could just imagine the face snarling beneath it.

“Get back on the line before I-”

He was drowned out. At first I thought, in horror, that Coral had unleashed her magic out of protective anger from the great rock of thunder the shook the entire building. The clouds about broiled and twisted, the flash we had missed the first time flaring once again before the scaffold and girders rocked and swung from the concussive force of thunder above.

Then slowly, we began to feel the drips.

Every slave knew the routine. You got into cover. Coral held me safe through the rush as we all fled to the building below. Slavers allowed it, for slaves losing their skin or getting horrendous infections from prolonged rain exposure were no good to anypony.

The door slammed behind us all in the upper pantry of the building, two dozen slaves cramming into one small area hurriedly. The slaver drew his mask off and spat upon the floor.

“Well, guess the toy collection starts early.” He turned, spotting us as I felt Coral tighten her grip on my weak body at his lowering of eyebrows. “Well? Get going!”

She helped me up, I saw the others shaking off wet coats with towels stolen from the pantry before beginning their own trudge to search the orphanage. My own wing bandages were sodden already.

“Come on, Murk. Come on. Let's get your mind off such things.”

I squeaked, looking away, feeling ashamed to have had her see that.

“I'm sorry...I...I didn't...I don't...I...”

Out of the door, she stopped for a second, kneeling down to be more on a level with me, placing a hoof gently on my battered face.

“You're scared and losing hope. I know how it feels, Murk. But please, don't do that to yourself. Don't do it to us. Please promise me you won't ever think of that option. You're one of us, Murk, you mean a lot to us.”

Almost hyperventilating, trying to get the breath, I only attempted a shaky nod after four attempts to find the words.

“I...I p-promise...”

One last hug and she looked to the hallway. An old wooden construction with dull carpeted floors and old thick doors leading away from this area at the top of the staircase. The bannisters decorated with a long faded antique finish.

“Come on, let's get some toys for the foals. Something even we can feel a little better doing. You just take it easy and I'll search, okay? Find something to distract yourself with, don't think about it...”

* * *

The doll stared back at me disapprovingly.

I sat on my rump before it, watching it as it sat atop an old pile of towels, perhaps having been cleaned with them before it all happened.

The whole thing was blackened, twisted and bug eaten. But it was the only one we'd found nearby the laundry room. I'd made to pick it up until I'd seen that look in its little plastic eyes, sat there staring back with all four hooves on the ground. I had recoiled a little before glaring at it myself as though in some sort of effort to assert that I had confidence in some ways. Even if it was over a foal's toy. (I had to start somewhere!) Without quite knowing why, it had become a contest between myself and the doll for who would look away or blink first.

A contest I wasn't sure I was winning.

“Y...you won't win!” I boasted, stomping a hoof on the ground as my eyes itched.

The doll remained quietly confident.

My eyes narrowed, feeling the strain. It would fall over any time now! That stomping of my hoof on the stone floor totally wasn't to try and make it do it. No, that was just...a...a warstomp! To psych

myself up!

It moved not even an inch. Those glinting eyes staring back as I leaned in closer and closer. My cheek bones raised up, trying to push myself, I could push myself to win sometimes! I wouldn't...I wouldn't...

I blinked.

Suddenly, somehow, the doll looked rather smug.

“ARGH!” I picked it up, turned and dumped it on the floor, throwing a towel over it and then an upside down basket over that...followed by jumping on it to sit and weight it down.

Just to be safe.

Crossing my front hooves with a snort I allowed myself a raised chin of achievement. That'd show it! Smug little thing thought it was so much better than me! Well, who was the pony on top now?

Looking at the quiet room around me, it did occur that I was perhaps trying too hard to distract myself from what I'd been thinking about up on the roof.

Coral Eve returned from the dryer closet carrying a few layers of cloth on her back with perfect balance normally only seen in earth ponies. With a small smile to me, she began to tear it and work with a little needle and thread we'd found for laundry repairs. Her eyes went to my makeshift stool before

“I see your contest ended?” A sly smirk. “It win?”

I baulked, looking down below me for a second.

“N-no!”

“Of course, dear.”

All I could do was blush. “How did y-you know I was, um, doing that?”

“Mothers know these things. Like how I knew you weren't actually sleeping earlier when I sent Glimmer into you. We've got eyes everywhere, Murk!” She looked up, tapping the side of her head. I blinked a few times, blushing rather widely until Coral patted my head and went back to her sewing.

Slowly, I climbed down from the toy's prison and picked up a needle myself to help her. Looking almost surprised that I knew how before we both fell into the brief process of creation. I looped and joined fabric while she shaped and sewed it into a shape and form. Just a few minutes of calm doing something we both wanted to do. We made a saddlebag for the toys! She kept working though, so I kept helping her. It wasn't drawing but it gave me something to focus on. I found myself hoping to maybe sew more things with her.

We'd avoided the topic of what had happened, instead looking to try and use this easier job to give me downtime and a chance to let the scared little buck inside me calm down. But I knew it was all façade, we were just trying to pretend there was anything but the nightmare of My Master to return to the moment this work ended.

All the same I...I appreciated it.

“There we go! It's rough, but it'll help if that rain's still on when we make the journey back.” Coral held up our creation. A multicoloured and rather garish looking patchwork of various bits of fabric she had found. Tying it around my torso, I felt the gentle comfort of some form of cover for my wings once again.

“Thanks, Coral...”

“You need something in your life right now. But we should get moving, we've got your one toy yet

somehow I think they'll be expecting a bit more. Where are the others?"

Shifting about till my bandaged wings were safe and secure under the makeshift cover, I sat and closed my eyes, allowing my ears to do all the work. Slowly, I tried to tune out the throbbing of my own irregular heart and ignore the stinging pain all along my muzzle to simply...hear.

The stomping of hooves...upstairs, to the right...the far wing.

A shout from the front door...the common room.

The crashing of pans...pantry.

Nothing to the left...

"The left wing's not been touched much yet."

I opened my eyes, seeing Coral taking the toy out from under the basket to throw in the crude saddlebag. (I saw that little 'better than you' look there, toy!) Joining me near the door we rejoined the hunt. The others hadn't had much luck...mostly on account of them all rushing the common room first and fighting over the more obvious ones that had been left. We'd stuck to the outside areas...figuring we'd pick up what was ignored in less obvious areas.

Partially, I began to think it was also Coral not wanting me involved with any physical shoving with my broken snout. I could still see her glancing at it every minute or so.

We trotted the abandoned halls. Behind us, the shouts of slaves fighting over toy trains in the common room to add to their quota sounded all too appropriately childish. No, we'd made a good decision to come the quieter path inside the surprisingly large building. The walls were decked with old crayon drawings here, sunny rays beaming down on crude trees and stick figure ponies.

"Orphanages are such sad places." Coral let her hoof drift along the crayon. "In wartime, it wouldn't just be those who never had a mother or father, would it?"

"No..." I bit my lip, feeling the sudden realisation of what she meant come all too close to home for me.

They went below internal windows that looked upon rooms that had the roof collapse down into them. I followed the drawings, before we turned the corner and came to a large wall that had perhaps once been blank.

It wasn't after somepony had had their way with it.

As high as a small foal could reach with a stool, it was covered in crayon. Held in stark relief from the thin red light entering through the musty windows, it stood out in the dingy abandoned corridors like a great flare of happiness. Drawings, words I couldn't read, ponies and places all in a grand vista. I saw Canterlot Castle, rising high in thick white chalk upon the once beige wall. Dozens of ponies played, foals mostly. They were defined only by the colour of what the stick body was and some clumpy manes. Some sort of huge garden party under massive streams of thick yellow drawn sunlight that arced down through the drawing.

Everypony seemed so happy.

"Wow, this is some serious dedication from a foal." Coral cast her eyes around it.

I had to agree, they had clearly been young, however they really had made this something special for a child to keep adding to. I could even see how some of the chalk was older than the rest, more dry on it.

But then I stopped thinking...and started looking. My hoof drifted on the crayon for a few seconds, before my heart nearly skipped a beat with a sharp thought. (For once...)

“C-Coral?”

“Yes, Murk?”

“If these were wartime, why is the crayon over the top of the dirt and dust?”

She blinked, before reaching forward to wipe at one section with a hoof. The pink chalk of a brightly smiling poofy maned pony looking at me with surprise off the wall smudged off. I could swear she was looking with shock at exactly where Coral had smudged her.

The long maned unicorn beside me took a step back, wiping her hoof on the floor.

“Let's...just keep going, shall we?”

I could hear the sudden uneasiness in her voice. My hooves hesitated, but hearing her trot much more cautiously away, I couldn't help but follow. Glancing back, the pink pony drawing-

It was waving at me.

Hadn't it just been...

But...

I wanted to snort, but it would have hurt too much. Instead I simply turned and stomped as best little hooves could away. I really hated pink ponies.

We passed various doors. A simple cleaning cupboard, a staff room for those who ran the orphanage and even a brief first aid station. We hunted for any RadAway...but we found nothing of value. Anything was either long gone or simply had been beyond this orphanage's budget. At most there were some dirty needles from some long forgotten vaccine and a roll of bandage. We paused briefly as Coral tried to clean my snout a little.

For the next ten minutes, anypony might have wondered what all the squeaking from the first aid room was all about. Flinching, trying not to pull away too much, she did her best to clean it out of any infection from the smog filled air. We sat, still alone in the whole wing of the orphanage.

Eventually, I couldn't bear the silence.

“Coral?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Do...do you think she'd take me back?”

I yelped again as my nose stung, Coral Eve gently holding me still as she kept up what work she could, before settling back.

“Glimmer? She already-”

“No...” I fixed her with a slightly pleading look. “My...my mom?”

Her eyes went wider, sitting the bloody bandages to one side before setting her hooves on my shoulders.

“Of course she would! No mother would ever want to have their foal anywhere else in the world.”

I looked to the side, out into the corridor. Through the station's internal windows I could see the crayon, the foals all happily smiling beside one another. No adults.

“They weren't wanted...”

“Murk, dear, you told me she was nice to you from what you do remember. That she offered herself to

the slavers in an attempt to make them let you stay? Doesn't that say something?"

Coral brought my head back around.

"She clearly loved you from what I hear. Any mother who wanted a child would want to see them again."

"But it's...it's been so long and...and I was..."

"Was what?"

Plink!

We both startled, hopping to all fours. My head whipped to the side, spotting a thin grate near the floor. The source of the noise!

"What is it? What do you hear, Murk?"

I listened, hearing a small pitter as something moved away down the vent behind it. Lowering myself down, I tried to see but my eyes couldn't see into it even after I let them adjust to the darkness.

"We're not alone."

"Probably a radroach. Come on, let's get going, Murk."

She moved to the doorway, but I stared again into the grate. I could still hear a sound moving further and further away. Standing up, I made to follow Coral, before remembering my unfinished sentence. Nervous and unsure, I ended up just blurting it out.

"I...I wasn't wanted." She stopped, hearing my weak little squeaky voice utter it. "I was an accident..."

Coral's eyes closed as she sighed sadly, holding the door open into the musty carpeted corridor again.

"Many of us in this world are, Murk...but it's not how it happens, it's what you do after it that matters. You're a good little pony below all that dirt, blood and toil, Murk. After all this life you're still so innocent with a beautiful big smile when you really let go, so I hear. If I want that, I'm sure your mother would too. Just keep dreaming about her, dear."

I tried to look up and smile, I really did...but I couldn't seem to make both sides cooperate very well. It was enough for Coral, it seemed, as she smiled back, using a hoof to usher me back out into the orphanage.

"Now, we need to make tracks, the dormitories are down here, I think. They'd keep them near the first aid station."

Closing the door behind us, I couldn't help but glance at that grate once more. But my mind was more firmly on Coral's assurance. Would she still truly want me? Her little colt who didn't even remember her, what if she'd forgotten me too? I was the seventh, maybe there were others since. Maybe she liked them more...

No! No, keep dreaming, she was out there! She was still a goal. Something to dream about. One more thing to stop my mind going to the edge. It was possible

"I'll do my best, thank you, Coral." I spoke as we trotted toward the corner.

"Just remember she loves you. We love you. We don't want to lose you."

"I'm sorry..."

She only glanced down. "Just don't go off alone if we can help it, okay? Stick where we can see you."

Nodding along a little meekly, wanting to assure I'd be fine, I instead just kept my mouth shut. I could

see we were at the front of the building through the windows, the ruined garden behind the fence drooping out below me. Light from the crater washed through the darker twilight of today, casting a glow through the half broken windows. Glass crunched beneath Coral's hooves that I found myself naturally avoiding. I couldn't help but let my ears stay pricked and ready...eyes wary of every single vent. The slaves were still making a huge commotion as they gutted the place from the other end.

We had to step around various items...I saw an old laundry trolley. It had been left when its owner had no doubt fled at the sound of sirens. Tipped on its side, dirty bedsheets had long been eaten by insects, leaving only tattered and stringy remains to identify them.

“Bedsheets, the dormitories must just be down the hall.” I muttered to Coral, before looking up, squinting my eyes and gasping. “A toy!”

Outside a doorway ahead of us, I saw a little toy train lying on the floor, strings for the pulling ponies lying loose in front of it. That had to be where the foals had slept! I galloped forward, sliding up to it and picking it up with accomplishment in my eyes, feeling the cheap plastic creak a little. Coral only chuckled, patting me lightly on the head as she trotted on past, laying a hoof to the door to pull the handle down. I could see a few faded flowers embossed on the door alongside a fancy type of writing.

“Looks like the foals liked to keep their toys near where they slept. Well, let's have a look in-”

Her scream as she looked inside was cut short in sheer shock, to instead stand and merely shiver at some sight, tears began forming in her eyes. Through the half open door red light streamed from windows across her suddenly aghast face. Her whole body froze, leading to a trembling and the hoof on the doorway struggling to hold it. I moved forward, but her hoof pushed me back, before Coral immediately recoiled and slamming the door shut before having to steady herself on the wall. Caught by surprise, I had hopped back from her hoof...but now I moved closer, looking up at the older mare.

“C-Coral? What's wrong? What's in there? Was it...the...the...”

She didn't respond, eyes tightly held shut as she pulled me into a tight embrace...for her benefit no doubt. What...what was...

“There was a fire.”

That was all she would say as she led us away from the dormitory, one I now remembered faced the crater from its windows.

* * *

Coral was silent for some time. Trotting behind her, I could hear her trying to conceal occasional sobs. Twice, she had stopped to rest against the wall when we had found any remnants. A little blanket or a bathroom with so many tiny toothbrushes along the line of sinks...

Normally, I was the one who reacted worst to these ruins of the past, but Coral Eve's maternal instinct was not enjoying this place. I couldn't imagine what I'd have done if I'd seen what she did.

We moved further down the wing toward the back end of the orphanage, away from the dorms. A wide canteen had been long stripped of food by those long ago more caring for survival than catering for foals. The mess they'd made so long untouched since that it was already covered in deep dust when I smoothed my hoof along a table. I wondered if they were ghouls before the Stables had opened or just those lucky to survive the blasts.

Tnk tnk.

I swung, hopping up onto one of the low foal-friendly tables to look around. Coral spun too, trying to spot any vents. But the sound had stopped, even after a minute of only hearing two slaves crashing into

the same dorm we'd passed there was nothing more. All that I saw was a small bowl spinning from where it had dropped, near the corner of the tiled canteen. At least two doors led away from it.

“Still think it's just radroaches?”

Coral breathed out, placing her two front hooves on the table I'd leapt onto. “I just think I want out of here. Come on, let's check the kitchen. Even if we don't find toys I think they'll appreciate any tools. Hopefully.”

She turned toward the canteen's work tables near the back. I still stood on the thin metal table...watching the doors with narrowed eyes. I'd been in too many places with hidden secrets by now to believe in simple radroaches. Slowly, watching the doors, I trotted over to them and pushed one aside.

Behind lay a musky room, dust falling from a hole in the ceiling through to the attic. Two slabs of wood had crashed down here and destroyed a terminal that was embedded into the desk itself, like they'd been built together. Some form of small office...maybe the cook's? Or somepony who helped organise the orphanage? One large poster hung on the wall beside a rewritable board that bore scrawled writing. The poster held the yellow Ministry Mare, Flutter...shine, was it? Yeah, Fluttershine. She was proudly waving to a little cartoon foal being led away by two wonderful looking ponies, one stallion and one mare. Behind Fluttershine many other foals were waving goodbye from a building's windows. Even I could guess this was advertising some sort of adoption service even without reading the little speech bubble coming from the child. Those lucky foals.

I hoofed through the small shelves of books and folders, seeing a lot of carefully written script and graphs. They had to have been a unicorn to be this neat. I sighed and replaced it carefully before turning back to look at the drawers upon a filing cabinet.

They held little, just a few inkwells and a calculator alongside an empty bottle of alcohol. But I did notice a few rolling bullets bear the back, big and thick ones that I'd never have been able to shoot. Hoofing one out, I wondered where the weapon was. Probably taken whenever this pony abandoned their workplace in the sirens.

My eyes fell to the ruined desk, finding something much more valuable. Another audio diary! Without so much as waiting, I hoofed the play button I'd long come to recognise by shape alone and sat holding it.

Click.

No...oh no, this wasn't going to be happy.

For the first sound I heard was that of distant sirens and the shouting of adults over scared children. But then the stallion's voice, mature and of good birth cut through, speaking close to the microphone.

I knew I should have pressed stop.

“I failed! I...I failed! Miss Fluttershy, I'm so sorry! Please, forgive me!”

Huh? Even as I shivered, hearing Coral Eve poke her head out of the kitchen to check if I was alright, I simply watched the turning tapes inside the recorder. I heard someone hammer on the door, screaming for them to 'get their butt out and help', but the voice overrode it.

“I'M SORRY! You asked me to find them parents that could afford the tickets but I couldn't do it! They're just so rare in these war strapped times and I turned away so many good parents because they would never have afforded the Stable tickets! I thought I could save the foals but now they're all still here! I told you that you could count on me, I'm so sorry...”

Sundial wasn't the only one trying...the idea of just how hard his task to acquire a ticket must have been cut hard. If an orphanage couldn't get ones for foals that they had to selectively pick rich families...

In the background, the siren kept droning. Somepony swore and galloped away, presumably from the door. Turning, I could see how it had only opened for me to pass because the falling wood had broken the lock.

“I didn't deserve your trust, there's no way out. Only one. I'm sorry, Miss Fluttershy, you should have chosen better. They're all still here, the four minute warning went out. Oh Celestia and Luna, how disappointed they must be, I swore to protect the foals. I swore!”

A brief pause.

“I won't hurt them anymore.”

I pulled away as the sound of a gunshot blasted through the microphone. It fell, clanging on to the desk before the sound of somepony slumping to the ground played out just before the device clicked to a halt, spinning on a broken wind of tape.

I knew I shouldn't look. I knew I shouldn't, but heart in mouth, I bent over to see behind the desk before twisting and falling with my back to it, head in hooves. Yes, that was where the weapon had been. I just shook my head, feeling for all the world how it hadn't even been the balefire that had been the start of this world falling apart. Twilight had been right.

Coral Eve found me there, casting a brief glance to the decayed skeletal remains before laying one of the lengths of blanket over it.

“Come on, Murk. There's nothing we can do for this place now.”

“They just wanted a mom or dad...”

“I know, dear...I know.” She helped me up, turning to the poster at the same time as I did. “I'm sure at least some of them found what they wanted.”

“What does it say?”

Looking at me almost in surprise, she raised her hoof to the words, letting me follow it as she read.

“It's 'The Ministry of Peace Orphan Adoption Service'. Then the foal is saying...heh, cute. It says 'I was lonely, but Miss Fluttershy's ponies helped me find my Forever Mommy.' I'm sure many did. Now come on, Murk, I found something.”

We left the office, leaving the blanket covering the poor orphanage head's remains. I made sure to close the door behind me. Breathing deeply, trying to force myself to take heed in that at least that pony hadn't suffered in the balefire, I followed Coral as she led me through the canteen toward a far set of double doors that had half fallen from their hinges. Smiling to me, she pressed open the doors.

Before me lay all the toys.

They'd been gathered here, what seemed to be a playroom they could come to after getting their dinner in the canteen! I saw a few low foal size tables with stuffed toys and little plastic figures. A desk for a supervisor sat near the window, bearing little excerpts of crayon art all over it on paper. Near the fireplace some socks were hung up, while the floor had play mats and board game strewn around, still set up to play.

“Jackpot.” Coral smiled to me, before setting down the saddlebag to start taking what we needed. “This should see us a comfortable way back for tonight.”

I nodded, still looking around at it. Normally, I would have been struck by all this being abandoned,

imagining foals laughing and playing. While I did imagine it, the sight wasn't sad because of the past...
...it was sad because I'd never gotten anything like this.

I felt selfish, these foals had been killed by the balefire and here I was jealous of them having a fun playroom to grow up in and ponies who took care of them, not force them to work! I felt terrible for thinking it, but it just didn't feel fair. Morosely, I passed Coral to see if there were any drawing supplies on the desk. The same stick figure styled covered all of them many of them with Fluttershy. (Shy, not Shine...urgh) But I found the desktop itself to be a little bare other than one last thing.

Not an audio recorder, but it was a link to the past.

One of Aurora Star's special memory orbs.

I reached forward, picking it up along with the stand I knew activated them. The larger than normal orb held under one leg, I hobbled to the centre of the room.

“Coral! Look! I...I've seen one of these before, it makes a pony appear and...and they talk and it's the Ministry Mares and-”

“Woah, woah...” Coral held up a hoof, somehow silencing me with a look, darn mother abilities. “It makes a pony appear?”

I was already drawing out the space to use it. Setting the stand down, I held the orb above it, feeling a slight pulse of magic in the air as it neared.

“Just watch!”

Slowly and ever so carefully, I lowered the orb. Clinking like glass into place before the magical snap flickered around the point of contact, making my ears pop and Coral's eyes go wide. I hurried back, almost clinging to her leg as I felt even a little nervousness creep in. I hadn't even thought of who it might be in this one! A growing swell of energy within the orb coiled and swum before shooting outward, little glittering gems of light that flew and circled in the air in all directions around the orb. More and more, before they arced inward, passing by one another and joining, gaining strands of light that grew into lines and then curves that bent into shapes that joined and grew and grew and grew...

Coral's eyes widened alongside my own. For before us, translucent and twinkling like a star shape in the night sky full of an almost golden yellow and soft pink stood Fluttershy, the Ministry Mare of Peace itself.

“Oh...I do hope Aurora doesn't mind me using it for this, but I couldn't leave without saying this to you, little...is this working? Oh my, it is?! I'm so sorry, can I start again? I can't? Oh dear...”

She crossed her front hooves, that still longer pink mane in her more mature body still floating down to cover one eye.

“I...I'm so sorry I couldn't come see you, Lilac but they absolutely needed me in Canterlot so very soon! But I couldn't leave without being able to say this to you, you poor thing, I really hope Aurora isn't angry I used her super special few-of-a-kind memory orb to send one message but I couldn't bear to go without making up on my promise. I hope you don't mind this...please, come and stand in front, so it'll be like I'm actually looking at you? Can you do that, please?”

To my surprise, I felt a hoof nudging me. Coral was smiling, pushing me forward.

“Coral?”

“Go on, Murk.”

She nodded to the briefly paused and thinly smiling form of Fluttershy, trotting forward till her eyes were looking directly at me. Apparently I was small enough.

Somehow, I found myself trembling as though she could actually see me.

“Now, I've left this with the orphanage master, okay? He'll let you have it whenever you want to listen to this as many times as you want, Lilac. Mister Ferrous is very sweet, he'll take care of you and find you a family.”

Her face changed, becoming harder, like this wasn't easy for her to say.

“I wanted to help you settle in myself. No little filly has to go through what you are, but you aren't alone. Many of the foals here had mothers or fathers that went to serve their country too. When I heard they'd both been...I...the chances of it were just...I just couldn't help but come out myself and see you, you poor poor thing. I know your daddy wasn't in the army but a zebra spy was caught at the war factory trying to sell plans to them and...and some zebras tried to help him escape. One of them had a gun and...”

She paused, looking up, as though hearing somepony else talking. I could only imagine saying that a filly didn't need to hear this much.

“You're a strong filly, Lilac Rose. I remember when I found you and you just asked if you had to step in and do your daddy's job because he couldn't anymore. But you just need to play with the fillies and colts here now till somepony comes along to see you safe. You can do that, can't you?”

She smiled at me, turning her head that the mane fell away and let me see two big and innocent eyes. She had me totally outclassed in that department. But then they closed as she knelt down, coming onto my level.

“I know you're sad. I know this must all feel like life has spun out of control and there is no way to fix it. I'm so so sorry this happened to you, but there's always somepony out there who'll care for you. Don't give up, dear...this'll all be over someday and it won't hurt anymore. You'll be cared for and grow up into a wonderful pony yourself. Such a sweet little innocent mind is just what this world needs right now and I promise it'll all be okay...it will be okay. You've got your friends here with you, stay close to them okay? They all worry for you too but they understand what you're going through.”

I hadn't even realised when it had changed, but I wasn't looking at Fluttershy talking to a filly anymore...

She was talking to...to me.

“You were kind and gentle even when your world got turned upside down. Don't lose that side of you, because you're a brave little pony more than you probably feel. You shared what you needed to get by with others and even drew your little pictures for them. That's why I know you're a wonderful pony who I'll bet the ones around you love dearly. Not because they pity you, but because you helped them even after all you'd lost.”

Those eyes glittered, they were wet and the little sparkles making up her body twinkled to show it...

“Your mother would be so proud of you...”

She...she...

That line did it. I felt the tears flowing over my cheeks as I looked into her eyes, before the entire image of Fluttershy shifted, bending forward...and hugging me. She couldn't touch me, but the sparkling form wrapped around me, her hooves holding just over my back as she leaned down to

embrace a foal sized pony she'd asked to stand before her.

“You'll get there, my little pony. Just keep looking forward. There's always a way through. Other ponies have shown you that, right? Trust in that.”

“I will!” My voice cracked, but I didn't care how embarrassing my shrill little voice sounded. “She did show it was possible! I'll...I'll not give up so long as I know that!”

Fluttershy leaned back and let off a beautiful smile full of innocent and almost naïve hope for the kind of world she'd existed in.

“I'll always be around, wishing the best for you, all of you, no matter where I am, alright? I just want the best for all of you sweet little things. Now on you go and keep that little chin high.”

A transparent hoof partially passed through my mane, before her form became vague...fading as the little blinks of light gently shifted...swirled and clustered together back into the orb before fading entirely. I simply stood still, one hoof on my own somewhat heaving chest. I...I knew it wasn't for me, that she had given up a priceless orb just so she could help a little filly feel nice. But the sheer kindness of the act, for somepony else or not, simply wouldn't leave my heart of what the message truly was.

So long as there's a shred of hope, you can't ever give up.

Coral moved across, her hoof laying across the back of my neck to avoid my tender back. No doubt she had some kind words or follow up to what we had just seen, but my ears twitched.

Tnk! A toy being knocked over.

I took off, scampering across the floor and leaping the toys toward one of the larger couches for the foals. Throwing my pained body over it, I landed in front of the vent even as the small figure crashed into me, screaming and flailing. I knew I'd been hearing something! Radroaches didn't make such noises! But I felt tiny legs kicking at me, struggling and wailing in a rough high pitched voice. We rolled out from the couch before we separated. Her leg caught my nose, leaving me to fall back with a cry and the figure to scramble back into a pile of toys.

“D-d-don't hurt me! Please! I wasn't spying! I wasn't!”

Wet eyes from as much the strike on my broken nose as any heartfelt message from the past, I forced myself to sit up and look.

Before me lay a quivering little earth pony filly. A ghoul. Dressed in an often repaired uniform and with a coat that was still surprisingly intact, at a distance you might still have thought she were a normal foal but for the horrid rings of broken skin around her eyes and mouth. She was visibly terrified of me, twitching every time I moved. I...how, but I wasn't going to hurt her! What did I do with a little filly to tell her not to be afraid?

The answer was, I wouldn't. The expert was in the room and it wasn't me.

“Ssh...sshh, it's alright my dear, we're not going to hurt you, we were just scared too.” Coral Eve trotted across the moth eaten carpet, holding up a hoof passively before sitting nearby. “Are you alright?”

The shivering ghoul looked from me to Coral, large eyes bearing small pupils and a yellowed complexion. Quickly, she nodded. “I...I'm fine, miss! I'm sorry about your nose too, miss...”

Wait, but she hadn't hit Coral's...

...oh come on!

“He'll be fine, dear, he's a tough little pony. Tougher than he knows, like you to be out here as well. Are you all by yourself?”

“Mhm...” The foal nodded, fiddling with her uniform. Her stranded light purple mane bobbing about over a coat that had clearly once been a brighter yellow. “I...I live here. I got scared by all the ponies so I did what I always do, I hide in the little places and watch them to see when they go home. But...but then I heard you talking to Miss Fluttershy so...so I came to see if you were going to take her away.”

Coral and I shared a glance to one another, my friend leaning forward to the foal.

“Hun, what's your name?”

She bit her lip, sitting up and looking a little bashful.

“L-Lilac Rose...”

There was a brief moment of silence...before Coral simply surged forward and swept the poor filly up into a tight embrace, ghoul or not.

“I'm so sorry. Oh by all the gods and goddesses of this damned world, you poor thing...”

* * *

I kept watch. Or rather, I kept an ear out for anypony approaching by sitting near the double doors. I'd closed them over to give us a little more cover from anypony who wandered into the canteen. Coral meanwhile sat beside the couch, the little filly right beside her as we tried to piece together the story behind this long lost orphan.

“I went outside a few times, Miss Coral. But it's all nasty and the ponies shouted a lot so I just galloped back here and hid. I felt safer here with Miss Fluttershy.” Lilac's tiny rasping voice made me wince from the absolute crime such a thing to happen to a foal was.

Coral, if she felt the same, didn't show it. A different side of her, gentler and offering more smiles than I'd ever seen from the often pained mare.

“So you just made this your little hidey hole, huh? Did you do all those amazing drawings on the walls?”

“Uh-huh. I was afraid Master Ferrous would come tell me off, but it was getting so dark and dirty and it made me feel sad and I haven't seen him in a long time...so I made it happier!” Her voice pipped up, squeaking through that worn throat. “So that any ponies who come here later will feel happy too! Look, I even put stickers on the fireplace to make it pretty!”

Her tiny hoof waved excitedly up at the small flowers and suns that were scattered all over the marble sides of the fire. I couldn't help a little smile myself. Coral stroked the back of Lilac's mane, bending down with a great big smile I'd never thought I'd see on her face.

“Those are so pretty, dear! Aww, we loved the crayon drawings, didn't we Murk?”

I could see that look in her eyes. 'Disagreement will bring harsh words later on.' But I just chuckled and nodded, they had been nice to see a little more innocence in an unforgiving world. Even if she did make silly pink ponies.

Lilac Rose seemed delighted by the response though, her eyes beaming almost as wide as the smile. She immediately started picking pieces of paper up to show to Coral.

“I've got lots more! This is my old house! And this is my mom and dad! And this one? That's Mister Ferrous, he was really nice to me but he was very strict! This is the cat that sometimes came in the garden, she was smelly but I fed her the bits I didn't like eating. I've done lots of Fluttershy but I just use the ball she gave me if I want to see her. And this one?”

She had a wealth of pictures, so much so I saw Coral struggling to keep up with them but giving the foal abject attention she had clearly been needing for a long time. Something was bothering me though, she was so childlike still. No, she was a child.

“L-Lilac? Can I ask you something?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Do you know how long it's been since the bale...I mean, the big boom?”

Coral's eyes flickered for a moment, before she caught on and realised the same thing. This child was over two hundred years old, anypony should mature in that time frame, even allowing for a lack of adults around to aid them.

Lilac bit her lip and looked in deep thought, before shrugging. “I dunno. I don't really remember it much. I...I heard the nasty alarm in the city and then the matron started screaming. But then there was a really big green flash and I felt really sick, but I hid and didn't come out for a really long time.”

Coral's hoof drew her in a little. “It's alright, dear, you don't need to remember all that. What did you do after it?”

“I...I think I fell asleep for a long time, because it was snowing when I woke up. I was afraid I'd get shouted at for not waking up so I got out but everything was like this. Some ponies chased me when I went outside. There was green flames like, huge ones! I couldn't see the sky and I didn't recognise anywhere so I came back here to wait for Miss Fluttershy to come pick me up again like last time. But I think I fell asleep again...”

The filly toyed with her front hooves, looking up at Coral.

“Do you know where she is?”

“I'm sorry, dear. I don't. It's...it's been a long time.”

She was clearly trying to keep her own tears in for Lilac's benefit. It made a little more sense, the feral zombie ghoul janitor had seemed to almost sleep until my presence had woken him up. It stood to reason that other ghouls might be capable of the same long drawn out sleeps too. In Lilac Rose's case for so long that she hadn't aged mentally in the time she'd been alive nor physically from the effects of the balefire.

It didn't take much time of letting all this sink in before Coral once again let Lilac snuggle up beside her. My friend's limbs wrapped around the fragile little pony protectively, as though by some manner of sheer will and wishing she could hold this one poor filly safe from the world she'd been cast into.

“Did anything hurt you? You were safe in here, Lilac?”

“Uh-huh. I didn't go outside much. I had a sore tummy so I didn't really eat but lots of ponies came here shouting to find food. Some of them didn't say words, they just shouted a lot and looked really slimy. They didn't take food either. I hid from all of them in the little places, but even when one trotted by me they didn't seem to care about me. And this one time not long ago? I heard a lot of ponies shouting for help and galloping away. I went to look but this really icky smell was coming from outside like mint, so I ran away...”

“Good girl. You've been so brave, you know that?”

“But they scared me. There was this beeping and-”

“Hush, dear...” Coral stroked her mane. “Being brave isn't about not being scared, it's being scared and still doing the right thing.”

I saw Coral's little wink at me. Despite myself, I actually blushed a little.

“But the scary monsters are gone now. It's alright, I'm here.”

Lilac seemed to fall all too naturally into Coral's embrace, the little orphan seeking comfort and reassurance from the older mare. As though looking for any maternal and caring mare to be their...

It seemed all too quick and simple a solution that I found myself not quite believing it. It couldn't happen, we were slaves, foal's couldn't stay with us. If My Master saw her he'd-

Oh no...

“Coral, can I talk a bit? Y'know, just us?”

She looked up, hearing me from her whispered soothing calms to Lilac as the filly told her about how she'd been lonely. I could see Coral didn't want to move away from the filly, but seeing the look in my eyes, she calmly let her down.

“Do you think you could make me a crayon drawing, Lilac?”

“Sure!” She bounded away to the paper, taking up her worn crayons as Coral and I met nearer couch.

“What's wrong, Murk?”

Scuffing the floor with my hoof, I didn't really know how to break this. But swallowing the lump in my throat, I looked out the window at the girders in the rain above.

“She can't stay here. The slavers are going to tear this whole place down for resources eventually. In a day? In a week? If...if it's him who has this job now, who's to say he won't be on the job when they find her? You know he will.”

The realisation on Coral's eyes hurt me to the very core. I saw her look at the humming foal, happily scratching away with crayons across the room.

“We can't just throw her out into Fillydelphia, Murk. She wouldn't last a day! We have to take care of her.” Her words cut hard. I didn't like confrontation, but I didn't like the thought of My Master getting another ghoul to throw in his mines. Foal or not. I remembered him saying how valuable they were to him.

“What about Weathervane? He's got a hidden basement and he was a father!”

Coral's face twisted. “A dank basement she can't ever leave is no place for a child to be raised, never mind that Weathervane is close enough to turning feral as it is.”

“She might help him hold on to life...”

“No, Murk.” Her words were stern, silencing me. “Lilac needs somepony to take care of her, to help her adjust to this world. Do you really think being cooped up in a scary basement with a zombie pony who swears more than the rest of the wasteland combined is a good place for such a sweet filly?”

This was heading toward the only other option I knew, the one I knew she wouldn't like even more.

“Well, then...” I cast my eyes to Lilac Rose, talking almost to herself about which colours to use. “There's only one place in Fillydelphia that takes care of foals.”

I could see it sinking in. See the rage of a tragedy still all too soon before building inside her. She outright scowled, a hoof stomping with the authority of, well, a mother.

“No! I will not let that monster take her. After taking my son away from me? You can't seriously say-”

“Where else can she go, Coral?!” I surprised myself with the interruption. “I don't want her to live the life I did! If she stays here then she'll be tied to a chain gang in a tunnel till she's rotten and falling apart! I've seen it! I've already seen somepony I want to save taken there, seen Weathervane's friends from the world before hurt every day. They won't last long. I don't want that to happen to her and it will if we don't find her someplace safer, the one place that's safer.”

I wiped my mane from my eyes.

“Look I know it isn't the best but she'll have other foals, an education and proper care. Yes, I know they are taught under Master Red Eye but I don't know what else to do! I'm sorry, I know you hate what they did but I don't see anything else for Lilac.”

Coral seemed as taken aback by my outburst as I was, simply lowering her head. I stepped forward.

“Protégé visits the foals. He told me they're safe and happy. There's even another ghoul there, Lilac and her could help one another. They...they couldn't even maybe tell your-”

“Stop.”

Her hoof raised, the bottom held toward me. I could see the tears drip from her eyes. This was such a harsh decision for her, more than anypony I knew.

“We'll...we'll do that. But promise me, Murk. Promise me when the time comes for you and Glimmer to try your plan. We won't forget them. I will not attempt any escape unless I know my son and Lilac will be safe.”

“I promise.” I said the words, but I had no idea how to make it happen. We had to get into the metro for ourselves, find Unity before that and then get Sunny out of the mines down there en-route. But we had a mission to rescue the foals, at least her son and Lilac now too.

It seemed impossible. But part of me held that hope. Two rescues...at least Sunny was already in the metro. We could do this. Once Brim was back, we could make a try.

Escape was possible. We'd make it happen.

Drawing me from my thoughts, my ears twitched, sounds!

I spun away from Coral, surprising the upset mare as I looked at the door just in time for it to slam open. Two slaves, scuffling over a teddy bear, fell into the room. Lilac screamed, pushing herself back against the wall. The pair of bucks heard her and looked up and around.

They saw all the toys and then they saw Lilac and us.

“Shit! Shit, dude!”

“Yeah, shit! We hit the mother load! And a foal!”

Coral was between them and the filly before I could so much as move, stomping her hooves with her horn sparking.

“The mother is going to make you into a red smear on the wall if you come any closer to her! GET OUT!”

A wave of overpressure blew much of Lilac's paper drawings up as she let her magic rip. Ocean blue flickered from the telekinetic wave surged into them. The pair didn't even get a chance to respond before they were blasted backward into the canteen, spiralling end over end before smashing through the flimsy rusted tables and out the far door into the hallway followed closely by the doors that had been blown clean off their hinges.

Staring with wide eyes at the power that had sent two fully grown bucks over twenty feet, I took a careful mental note. Never treat a foal with anything but abject respect when Coral Eve was in the area.

Horn sparking, eyes watering from the pain her fault magic inflicted for using such a strong spell, Coral staggered for a few seconds before righting herself to look for Lilac Rose. The filly had dove behind the desk and was peering out with wide eyes at Coral defending her.

I glanced out the door, hearing the slaves pick themselves up and gallop dizzily, calling for My Master. Oh crap.

“Coral, we've got to get her out of here. Now.” I looked around, but clearly this room had been chosen precisely because it only had one way in or out to watch the foals more carefully. I even checked the fireplace, but it only went from this floor to the roof. There were two storeys below us to the ground.

The grey unicorn was already whispering to Lilac.

“Listen, Lilac dear. There's some very bad ponies coming to here. We're going to take you someplace that's like an orphanage, alright? They will be lots of other foals to play with and...and...” I heard the hesitation, “nice ponies to take care of you. But you've got to be brave, alright?”

The filly was clearly terrified, holding onto Coral's leg and shivering. “Y-yes, Miss Coral. I'll try...”

“Good. You'll be fine, I promise. Is there any other way out of here?”

“Yes!” Lilac perked up, letting go and running behind the couch to reach up and pull a bit of the wall out and away, a hidden door! Behind it lay a thin staircase. “Sometimes the helpers used this...they said it was an old...old..um, servants way! That was it!”

“Good girl, Lilac!” Coral cast her head down it before nodding. “This will do, now quick, grab a couple things and lets get going!”

I had already fetched the Fluttershy orb, holding it ready for the filly. She gasped and pulled it into a little foal sized saddlebag, hugging me for the help. A feeling a little too natural kicked in to gently hug her back. It was rare I ever was the one doing the comforting. After that, I helped her grab a few of her drawings and a very muggy looking soft toy pony doll before we met Coral on the stairs.

They were a bit of a squeeze, filled with cobwebs and shockingly steep. But Lilac Rose tore down them with practised ease while Coral and I blundered about behind her. Passing two doors we kept moving to the basement and carefully edged out into a somewhat less fancy kitchen than the pantry we'd been in before. This must have been where the servants of whoever owned the mansion before it became an orphanage cooked meals that weren't for special occasions.

Briefly, I felt struck by the odd nature that some ponies would willingly choose to be slaves to rich masters in such a time of apparent freedoms and light.

All the same, it was empty. Perfect! At the far side, past a bank of ceramic stoves and long emptied fridges we found an entrance they must have brought in the food by once, a trap door that opened outward. Already above us I could hear a horrid stomping sound that could belong to only one pony. Others scampered around, before muffled bellows as they no doubt discovered an empty room started to sound out. We had a head start, we had to move!

The dark sky met us when climbing out, Lilac sticking close to Coral as she felt the outside world's air on her body. The rain that fell through the trapdoor the moment we opened it made her recoil a little. The filly might not have left this place for a long time.

“Ssh, it's okay, dear. Stick beside me and we'll keep you nice and safe, alright? It's just a lot of

galloping and it'll all be fine.”

“Y-yes, Fillydelphia's scary now...”

“I know...I know, just stay with us, you don't need to look at anything. Here, I'll carry you.”

We had finally all climbed out, me first then reaching back to lift the tiny ghoul out from Coral raising her up. Lastly, Coral herself joined us and we began to canter over the dead grass. This place had a huge garden with branches from old bushes still showing the form it had once taken. Across the back past the ruined fence lay the fouled back ends and delivery doors of old shops. Perfect cover. The rain that fell lightly, a mercy from the thunderstorm earlier, stung and burned at my wounds. But Coral's newly sewed cover would be invaluable now, for keeping the worst off me. I tried to let my mane fall to cover my eyes, noticing that at least Coral still had some of her own ruined blouse. Lilac didn't seem to notice any pain. Probably a ghoul thing.

I led the way, using what sneaky instincts I'd been honing to find a way back. If we stuck to the back streets in this lonely part of Fillydelphia, we could throw them off then sneak through the shift changes to get to the Alpha-Omega Hotel where the foals were kept!

“Move!” I whispered. We broke into a gallop, Lilac on Coral's back. We had to move fast! Get away from the orphanage as quick as we could! Get to cover, out of sight before-

It was then I heard the window smashed open from behind us.

“Stop right there, slaves!”

Coral kept galloping through the slick ground, but I felt my hooves jar and deaden beneath me, almost tripping into the mud. I turned, looking back and seeing My Master staring down at me with furious eyes, his huge bulk having broken the entire thick window upstairs. Behind him I could hear the slavers rushing to the stairwell, aiming to catch me. My Master snarled, a look of displeased anger the likes of which I wanted to cower from passing across him toward his pet out in the rain against all orders.

“I demanded you bring anything you find to me, Number Seven. You disobey even now. Stay where you are.”

My legs trembled horribly. My mind in two directions. My...My Master was commanding me...

I turned, looking as I saw Coral and even Lilac eager beckoning me to get moving! I...had...to...obey...My...

Very slowly...one hoof moved.

Away from Chainlink Shackles.

“I COMMAND YOU TO COME HERE, SLAVE!”

The voice tore at my ears, harsh and sudden the moment he had seen that tiny glint in my eye. Seeing the brief inch my hoof had moved. I could feel his slaver's instinct washing over every aspect of my existence, seeing the rebellion and the conflict inside. But gritting my teeth I looked back up. Glimmer...Coral...Fluttershy...they'd all been telling me the same thing. Look to the one hope, so long as I had that I could keep going! For my freedom, for a foal's safety and life and for my friends.

I could...resist.

“COME TO YOUR MASTER, NOW!”

Sucking air through my teeth, I looked up. The rain pattered either side, hurting my ears and I felt every drip of blood from my nose...but I was focussed, drawing all that hate and will to be free up

through my body and through my sick throat, before uttering perhaps the most important word in my entire life.

“No.”

My heart lifted, my mind came back to me. Remembering the soaring of the Stable Dweller as she did the same, I turned and galloped away, seeing just for a second the surprise on his face. Before the fury settled in. Terrified, feeling I was doing wrong, but resisting all the same with every hoofstep on the rotten ground, I felt his words slap at my mind and pull on every little twitching nerve I had to shut down and ignore.

“YOUR MASTER COMMANDS YOU STOP, NUMBER SEVEN!”

Not a chance, not now! I fled with Coral and Lilac, splashing up puddles as I went and trying to not listen to the individual words beckoning my name, my status as a slave or appealing to the part of me that wanted to obey. I would pay for this, I knew it. Terror lurked in my mind of my punishment for doing this. But it had to be done! I wouldn't let this foal be dragged into the nightmare of the Fillydelphia metro mines.

I caught Coral's eye as we bounded into the alleyways between the large shops. She saw the fear in my eye but her look said it all. Or rather, repeated what she'd said before. Bravery wasn't about not being afraid.

It was about doing the right thing, no matter how scared you were.

Looking into the shivering little filly's eyes as her tiny enclosed world spiralled out of control. I knew I was doing just that.

The hard concrete brought us into a large courtyard of old benches, food shops and collapsed decorative trees. An old foal's playground lay nearby half collapsed into the ground but I could see the gaps between buildings ahead of us...just the thing to use to get away! Whipping my soaked mane from side to side, I checked the flanks of the courtyard before moving out.

“This way!” I swerved, passing beneath an old gazebo in the centre for even a momentary relief from the downpour. My hooves were searing as they went through puddles and splashed the acidic water up onto my fetlocks. But we made it to the thin street, populated either side by kiosks and high rise tenements above the shops. Behind us, I could hear the slavers spread out. Goddesses, how many times had I been in this position of fleeing?

The trouble was we weren't moving fast enough. I'd been in enough desperate chases by now to notice our progress. Or lack of. I was limping and staggering every time my barely healed ribs were jolted or stressed upon. Coral was bearing the weight of a foal on her own frail body. Her route was swaying...that fever she had wouldn't be making it easy under the hot rain and stuffy atmosphere. This wasn't working...no sooner had we gone twenty feet down the thin street did I hear slavers charging into the courtyard behind us. If we could speed up I...I...

My vision swam, my legs deadening a little. I could feel the exertion catching up to us...there was no way I could make a sudden sprint. I'd just been beaten and abused too much. This short run was draining on my body and the adrenaline from resisting him was wearing off fast. Before I even knew it I tripped onto the cobbles, rolling on my sides and crying out from my wings and battered body striking the hard rocks. I staggered and pushed myself up, seeing Coral stop to move back for me.

“In here!” I spun, pulling at Coral and trying to hop over a kiosk's blown in window, my back legs dangling as I kicked at the air and pushed my short frame up. “We can't outrun them.”

Seconds later, I felt Coral simply push me in and climb over herself. Landing inside the dusty outlet on

several empty tins and crushing them below us, we pressed against the back of the serving window's ledge and all huddled close. I could feel Lilac Rose gripping one of my legs incredibly tightly, her tiny heart thumping fast. My own heart instead felt like it stopped as eight sets of hooves tore by the kiosk window less than a couple of feet from us with such aggressive force in their pursuit that the ground shook.

Then the horrid thicker hoofsteps I knew all too well.

“I know you're hiding, Number Seven.” His voice seethed out, barely restrained anger. I could almost imagine his smile, the smile of somepony beyond fury. “You couldn't gallop too far. There's a shout going out. They'll find you.”

Feeling exhausted and dizzy, I still clung to Coral as much as Lilac clung to me. I...I could resist! Just don't cough by 'accident' to lead him to you, it doesn't work that way! Don't...don't...he'd never find you in this mass of hiding spots!

“You'll be back with me before the day's out, little slave! I know you can hear me! You'll come back when that collar starts to drag the life from you...start to get the blood and taint within you forcing you to return to your birthright! You can't escape, slave!”

My neck stung. I could feel the heavy collar rubbing my blistered and cracking skin in a ring around my neck. The stomping on the cobbles continued.

“You've got no place to go you won't be seen, don't think I don't know what you're doing with that foal...”

He stopped again, ten feet down the lane.

“I'll see you there to reclaim you.”

Then he was gone. The sounds faded. I knew I could evade a cordon in such a maze of alleyways as this but the fear had settled in now. He was right, but all that mattered was this one proof that I could resist and take the punishment, prove to him that I was a free pony who believed in escape.

Lilac Rose was my challenge to prove it now. Between me and the hotel lay a network of alerted slavers waiting to keep her from Red Eye's more protective gaze.

Please be proud of me, Littlepip. No matter what happened to you out there. I'll do what you did.

I didn't even know when I passed out against Coral, falling against her side from the spotted darkness in my vision and the pain of exerted ribs clouding my mind. The exertion of the run too much for my weakened body as I fell into a troubled unconsciousness of lonely foals and eternal chains against the sunset itself.

* * *

The trek across the quieter areas of Fillydelphia was not difficult. We had to have that rest, but before long I had been gently woken by Coral and bid that we continue. Groggy eyed, my hooves feeling like lead weights, I'd nodded and glumly set out for the efforts ahead.

I'd expected it to be grand, adrenaline rushing and heroic. It would likely still be, but the first hour for us to return to the busier areas while aiming for the hotel was mostly quiet. Occasionally, we'd had to shelter again. Either to rest and catch our breath or to dodge patrols and slave columns.

Coral had taken care of Lilac Rose en-route. Whispering between them, asking her what her favourite colour was (Red) or what age she thought she was (Nine and three quarters) to help the filly relax. She even played a little hoof clapping game accompanied by a quiet little sing-song in time to the claps once with a delighted smile on her own face. So strange that both Coral and a two hundred year old

filly knew the same rhyme. Some things never changed, I supposed. Here I was, seeing Coral Eve as the mother she'd always wanted to be, the one thing she loved being that had been taken away from her. But now we'd come to the stretch that mattered.

About three hundred metres away from us as the bloodwing flew, the Alpha-Omega Hotel cast its lights into the dark haze of Fillydelphia. Protected by magically charged fencing and a newly dug ditch, it was also guarded by far more soldiers than I normally would have expected to see any time I'd passed by it. This was near the FunFarm after all.

I knew why. Many of those slavers and soldiers were...his. My mind was caught between names, what to call him? But I knew that they wouldn't hesitate to drag us off to the mines and back to him. We couldn't trust anypony to simply throw Lilac at them and hope they would recognise she should be in the hotel and not simply take her back to him.

No, we'd have to deliver her ourselves.

But between it and us there lay other obstacles nearly blocking the view. We'd had to approach from the more clustered areas among abandoned buildings that were taking the slaves years to dismantle. Lacking the massive equipment of the past, these firmly constructed places were proving a nightmare to bring down. I knew. I'd tried. Eventually, we'd been told to leave them alone and been sent to other more important jobs. They would return once excavation equipment or more surplus supplies of explosives were made available to finish the job. For now they were our hiding spot and our route among the variety of structures. Other competing hotels mostly, there were a square of them around one courtyard. The Alpha-Omega Hotel lay beyond this square.

Three hundred metres. Five buildings in a square. Lots of guards. A ditch. A fence.

And somewhere out there, he lurked.

To deliver her into safety, we'd have to overcome all of that. After that it didn't matter how we were caught.

Very briefly, it occurred to me neither of us had told Lilac Rose that we wouldn't be joining her in there. I'd decided to leave it to Coral Eve, she knew what she was doing on what to say and what to keep quiet. Lilac had spent much of the way staring wistfully back toward her orphanage or around her at the suffering ponies in abject confusion. Between her long sleeps and the bewilderment of anything outside her orphanage in a city she no longer realised I could see the underlying terror in the filly's eyes. Yet she just kept moving with us.

Fluttershy was right. This was one brave little pony to take all this in and not break.

"Do you think you can sneak us toward the gate, Murk?" Coral whispered beside me. We'd been poking over a low window from the farthest away building to judge our route in.

I glanced forward again. Two buildings, one on either side, formed the closest ones of the square courtyard beyond. Behind them the other two at the far side. I concentrated on the farthest one, closest to the hotel.

A tall building of thick pillars and overhung windows was being dismantled by a swarm of slaves with grapple hook harnesses to hold them up. A pang of loss for my own saddle struck through me at the sight. They must have been just told to take anything from the rooms and rooftops that were salvageable. To strip out the places before leaving the undefeated foundations for later. Slaves might be a handy group to merge with.

Before that though, we had to get up to those two front buildings, we'd have to sneak through them first. I could see the patrols in the courtyard guiding slaves or watching the surrounding area. Huge

piles of rubble offered some cover alongside a crashed skywagon nearer to us. If we could bunny hop from cover to cover and stay quiet...

"I think so. But this could turn nasty. R-real quick..." I stammered, mostly from my throat. I'd had to swallow thick wads of metallic tasting bloody spit to clear it. I hadn't wanted to spit in front of Lilac.

"Nervous?" Coral cast a look of concern to me.

"Terrified."

"Glad you were the first one to say it, you know we're likely not getting away from this one, right?"

"Y-yes..." I nodded. "But it's worth it..."

Coral lay a hoof over my shoulders. "I heard what you told him. That's more important than anything that happens now. We should get going. They're going to patrol back here sooner or later and she needs to be safe."

I nodded, hearing her turn back toward Lilac as I studied the layout of the rubble ahead. Once that patrol moved past...we could make it to the skywagon...then that pile of broken up chairs behind...then the rubble...then the building...

"Ready to go, my dear?" I heard her speaking to Lilac.

"Uh-huh, is that light over there the place for colts and fillies?" Her voice was tired, the journey hadn't been easy for her.

Coral stroked her mane away, nuzzling the little pony with a grin. "They're all just waiting for you, but there's some bad ponies in between us and them. So stay quiet okay? Murk's going to lead us past them. Just stay behind him, I'll be right behind you. No-pony's going to hurt you. I promise."

The patrol moved away. I spun back to them again and nodded firmly.

"Alright, dear. Go!"

We burst from our hiding place, one by one galloping as quietly as we could around the edge. Under the red sky again, we rushed for the skywagon, twenty feet away. The patrol had just moved past our building but we still had to stay low. Any over the rubble ahead could spot us if they turned-

I saw one mare move her head and leapt behind the wagon. Lilac galloped into me and Coral rolled herself in beside us. I clutched myself and curled up tight to hide. Had they spotted us?

Horribly exposed from almost every angle, we waited, uncomfortable and fidgeting to move.

Nothing.

I took out my one trump card. A shard of a smashed mirror in the building we'd just passed, using it to check around the side of the wagon, waiting for the chance to gallop forward another set of cover. We only had to get close...close enough for one mad gallop to the fence gates. The guards inside the gates had to be safe to give her to.

Squinting, rubbing the dusty mirror clear of muck, I watched and waited. There were three groups of them. One on a balcony, one at the gap between the buildings and one I knew was out of sight but lying down against the back of the rubble. Had to wait for the first two groups to look aw-

Now!

I hissed to the other two, springing out low and rushing around the wagon. I watched their heads, listening to somepony shouting in the courtyard about their shift times. We made it in plenty of time, pressing in behind the stack of broken and discarded chairs. I had to take a second, get my breath

back. My lungs felt tight, leading to me sucking air in with my front hooves low on the ground. Sweat poured from my body at the exertion, I couldn't go much longer. The only thing keeping me going was that one little fact, one little knowledge that escape was coming eventually.

The mirror went out again. Coral held Lilac Rose protectively close to her own underbelly. The filly was shivering despite the heat. She was so scared. I knew the feeling.

Angling the mirror, I watched the two groups I could see. We had one more rubble pile to get to and we could get around the back of the building before getting inside. If they saw us they'd cut us off long before we got there. Thankfully, they were all still listening to the voice.

“Way's clear, go.” I whispered in Coral's ear before creeping out. We had to go slower and quieter. Low to the ground in single file, we made the achingly slow journey in plain sight behind them. Yes...we'd done it. The first wave was-

My entire hoof found no ground to stand on. My front right leg disappeared, falling down a hole I hadn't seen! I bit my lip hard to quell the shriek as I looked down. A drain! My hoof had fallen down a drain while I'd been looking up at the guards! I tugged at it, but the muck and dirt had fallen in with me, jamming the hole smaller than before. Oh no! No! NO!

Coral bent over me, her much stronger limbs wrapping around my leg. Even Lilac put her tiny hooves on mine as we pulled and pulled and pulled. The pain from being dragged up through the tiny hole made me grit my teeth, squeeze my eyes shut. I couldn't scream! Don't let that tickle in your throat make you cough! Not now! Not now!

Suddenly, a release. My hoof popped out and we fell back. I clung it close to me, favouring the scrapped skin. Looking up, I saw the guards still looking away. Coral put a hoof to my cheek, her face bearing concern, mouthing the word. 'Broken?' I shook my head and we got up to creep the remainder, thank the Goddesses.

Thinking the word 'crap' earlier must have displeased them, however.

The drain cap slid, came loose...and fell. Clanging, a full two foot square of metal crashing and tumbling down and around as it broke up from the rust that we had loosened getting me out. Hearing the noise only grow and echo, I looked up with horrified eyes.

That same mare from before was looking right back at me. We met eyes for four long seconds before I saw the scowl growing into the scream of alert.

“RUN!” Coral shouted! We took off, heading for the building! Around me, I heard slavers shouting for confirmation, the mare shrieking and pointing. The third group came into view, immediately galloping forward.

This was it. One last rush to get her there before we were caught.

Coral swept up Lilac again as I tried to keep up. Hooves pounding on the soft ground we tore for the back of the building, we could find a ditch! Lose them and go around!

To my horror, I saw a fourth group emerge from behind the very place we were trying to go from the far end of the building. If we went around, they'd just double back and catch us! I stopped, pacing, probably praying, looking around. There had to be somewhere!

Coral thought faster than I did, stopping and looking at the half crumbled walls of the building bearing some old wooden stopgap over the concrete.

“Into the building, we'll lose them in there!”

“How?!”

She answered with her magic. With a great WHOOM of sound that blasted back off the building wall and flared my mane back, Coral blasted the crude makeshift wall into the room it had once protected. Splinters flew inside, shattering old paintings and remnants of windows like shrapnel as my ears rung terribly. When she was pushed, Coral's magic was terrifying. I briefly underlined that mental note to never anger her. Just for extra emphasis.

She and Lilac were first in, with me following. Breaking into the corridor beyond the front room we'd smashed our way through. I could see Coral swaying, that spell having taken a lot out of her. Even through the shouts from outside, I heard her whimper. That faulty horn of hers sparking and bleeding magical energy in a method even a non-unicorn could imagine the pain of. We didn't even look at what our path was like, we simply chose random doors in the effort to lose them. A set of double doors to a restaurant...another kitchen...a freezer with a broken wall to a bedroom...back to the corridors until we found the front door.

There we stopped. Slavers were swarming the building after us, seeming far more efficient than I had ever wanted them to be as they spread out to cover every eventual direction we could have taken. That wasn't fair!

Even worse, the front door I could see was being watched if I poked my mirror around it. I ran to the only closed door not leading backwards. It lay beside the reception's thick glass window with only one small area to hand money through. Wishing hard, I pulled on it. Locked! NO!

Slamming my hooves against it, Coral shoulder barged the heavy wooden doorway, but only bounced.

"It's a staff door! The keys could be anywhere! Where are-"

Before she could even finish, I saw her eyes go wide. Spinning myself, I saw Lilac's tail disappear through the reception money slot. Ten seconds later, the door clicked and it swung open to a shaking but smiling filly.

"Is...is this better?" Her voice sounded painfully innocent given our situation.

"Good girl!" Coral beamed, sweeping her up. "Such a quick thinking clever filly! Now come on!"

I locked the door again behind us as we entered the office. A face appeared at the reception window, then a gun muzzle through the hole!

"Down!"

Buckshot tore into the office, blowing old papers off a desk and shattering the screen of a terminal. Coral had fallen. My terror of her being hit was relieved only when I saw her gallop on. There were three doors in here. We tried the first to find a dead end office with two clutching skeletons draped over the desk. Recoiling, before screaming from the buckshot that tore into the room again and shattered the far window, I almost fell through the second. There had to be a way out!

Behind us, a second weapon fired on the door but missed the lock. They wouldn't be held long.

Looking up from falling, I pushed the second door open while Lilac and Coral took cover behind a further back desk. I made to run inside before finding it to only be an identical office. Oh come on!

Another sharp rifle blast blew splinters from the locked door. They wouldn't miss again.

Almost crying out in frustration, I bucked the third one open. We all dived into it without even looking as the main door burst open and the slavers rushed through. We scavenged, not seeing anything other than a desk that we threw against the new blocked doorway. I knew it wouldn't hold, it was too light.

And this room had no way out.

Not even a window.

It was another identical private office.

I stomped, bucking the wall and screaming at the door. Frustration, anger, terror and adrenaline all fighting for attention in my head. Lilac hugged close to Coral, who simply looked around and bit her lip. I saw the same realisation. We were trapped.

As if to merely remind us the door was rammed, already starting to list on its hinges.

“Get out here!”

“Master wants you!”

They were his.

“Murk? I...I don't see a way out. Any ideas?” I couldn't imagine how hard it was for her to admit that around Lilac Rose, but I only shook my head while stepping back into my natural spot. The corner.

“I...I'm sorry! I...I thought there'd be a way.”

I stopped, an unusual feeling on my hind leg. Why was my leg feeling a breeze?

Looking down, twisting back on my body to the point my ribs protested the movement, I saw one little hope. Emphasis on little. A tiny vent. One I could barely squeeze through if I had to. Bending down, hearing Coral questioning me and Lilac pushing her nose beside mine (I might have found it cute any other time) I cast my gaze through it and saw the outside world.

“Wait, there's a vent, it goes outside! But it's tiny...”

I had never saw Coral as anything but strong, but the speed with which she made the decision reminded me more than any other moment I'd known her in till now just how strong a pony she was inside.

The unicorn gently pulled me aside, smashing it with her hooves to get a purchase...and began to pull the vent upwards and off. Even as she pulled, I felt and heard the slavers push on the door. One hinge fell off.

“Coral! What are-”

“Shh, dear.” She put a hoof to my mouth carefully. “This is as far as I go. I don't regret it.”

“They...they might h-hurt you bad...” I stammered, my mind only now catching up to the horrible realisation of what she was asking of us.

“I know, dear. I know. But you said it yourself.” She nodded toward the quickly confused filly, wondering why I was looking sad. “For the life of a child it's worth it. Lilac, honey?”

Coral turned, her hooves resting on the filly's shoulders.

“M-Miss Coral? Why aren't we g-going? You should go first! Your leg's hurt and...and...”

“I'm sorry, my dear. But you're going to have to keep going. Murky will get you to the safe place, alright? You stay with him.” Lilac opened her mouth to protest, but Coral cut her off. “I know we only just met, but you're one of the sweetest, bravest and wonderful fillies I've ever met to have done all that you have. We'll see each other again, I promise.”

Lilac's eyes went very wide, throwing her little hooves to Coral's shoulders.

“B-but I l-like you, Miss Coral! Y-you're nice! I've not met anypony nice for...for really long!” I felt my own eyes dampen...seeing the filly shed her own tears.

Coral simply hugged her close. I could hear the door breaking in but I couldn't break them. The look

in Coral's eyes showed conflict though, as though she was trying to decide on something. Eventually, she let Lilac go, but held their heads close to one another.

“When you get there, Lilac. If...if you meet a little colt...”

I saw her glance at me. I only nodded. This was hard beyond words for her, the closest she'd ever come to her son knowing she was only bringing another foal to the same fate.

“A little colt called Chirpy Sum. Tell him his mommy loves him very very much, can you do that for me? Please?”

Her voice cracked on the last word, but the filly only nodded, grabbing the older mare again. I shoved the desk back against the door once more. We didn't have long!

“Coral!” I shouted to her, holding the vent open for the filly. She nodded...gently pulling Lilac from her to go to the vent.

“I will! I promise I will! You're really nice, Miss! I'll do it. I've not met anypony nice for a long time and I've been really lonely...”

“I know, dear.”

Lilac seemed to look hesitant, before biting her lip. “They told me they'd find me a nice mom to take care of me but they never did. M-Miss Coral, when you come to...to pick us up? C-can...”

Her tear struck eyes looked into my almost grieving friend's.

“Can you t-take me with you? To...to be my Forever Mommy?”

For just a few seconds, even the banging at the door seemed silent and pointless in comparison to the wonder that was the expression upon Coral's face as a little orphaned filly asked that one question. As though nothing else mattered in the world to her but the plight of one child.

Matting down Lilac's mane, hooves seeking to find all the ways she wished she could comfort the poor filly, Coral simply leaned over to kiss her forehead and held her tight to her breast, Lilac gripping around her neck with those tiny little forelegs.

“Yes, my dear. Yes, I'll do that for you.”

A hoof crashed through the breaking door. I hated leaving her but we'd both known this would happen in some form or another, I just had a bit to go first. I let go of the desk, galloping to the vent. Seeing them coming, clearly not wanting to let go, Lilac had to be gently pushed off by Coral. With one last hopeful glance she disappeared through the vent. I started crawling through, turning back only briefly.

“I'll get her there.”

She smiled, the door falling to pieces behind her.

“I know. That message orb she carries, you understand it means a lot to you as well, right? Don't forget that.”

“I won't. G-good luck.”

Even as I pulled myself through, I saw the door crash, either side of Coral I witnessed the slavers rush into the room. The last sight of her before I pulled my head free was her horn lighting and her face hardening, aiming to give us as much time to move as we could. Ignoring the pain on my back, I let Lilac ride me as I tore off away from the building, hearing the furious pressurised slams of Coral's magic and the cries of slavers caught in it.

Lilac's hooves hung around my neck tightly. Burying her face into my mane as we ran. We'd come out

the opposite side of the building. There was one more building ahead, the huge tall one with the slaves all over it in grapple saddles. Just past that one and I could make a mad sprint to the gates! Somehow, anyway. Just...just somehow. I had to get her there! I'd promised!

“There they are!”

How many guards were there sent by The Master?! Glancing toward the shout, another group of four were rushing across the courtyard from where they'd been waiting to guard the front door. I couldn't out sprint somepony that far!

“Mister Murky!” A hoof above my head pointed to the tall building, seeing one door ajar as a slave limped out on a bad leg to see what all the noise was about.

“Good girl!” I changed direction, dodging and hopping over the rubble. Two slavers were in the way, but in all the mud and in their vision restricting gas masks I could weave around their stumbling efforts. Was this how Littlepip felt? Free to escape and go and dodge and not care about what they shouted!

The slave leapt aside as we went in. In one end, out the other! I arced around the old food trolleys in the hotel's main route and sent a few slavers to the ground from bumping past them. Not too far! There were slavers behind me, slavers either side in the common rooms that tried to leap through doors! I managed to keep away! We were getting there!

Up ahead the far side's door opened. A bulky soldier stepping up with a full battle saddle primed. I could see the radio on his helmeted head, he'd been told to cut me off! Feeling Lilac grip tighter as we skidded to a halt, I spun on the spot. Exhausted slavers in air restricting masks lashed their whips behind me. The big brown and dark blue soldier grinned, knowing he'd been the one to trap me. Either side, the slavers watched their own flocks, casting me foul glances.

“Come on, now slave. Give up the ghoul.”

I could feel those terrified limbs around me. No...no I couldn't let her go to those pits. Not turn into one of the unfortunates like Weathervane's friends. Falling apart with broken bodies...

“Sh-she's not going with you!” I tried to sound brave, I really did. But they just laughed. I kept looking my eyes around, but the only way was upstairs and there was no other stairways down I could see! If only I had my...

Oh yes.

I gave them no warning or one liner, I simply bolted upstairs. They were slow about pursuing, presumably knowing I had no way out. But I went up floor by floor, tramping the thick carpet until I found what I wanted. A whole ton of slaves around their equipment stash. I grappled one of their grapple saddles and kept running upstairs.

“Where are we going, Mister?”

“S-safety!” Was all I could think to say. Opening a door on the top floor, we were at what I'd hoped...an open walled room, blasted by balefire or torn down long ago I didn't know. But ahead of us, only thirty feet away I could see the illuminated Alpha-Omega Hotel. Its thick and protected windows well lit from powered interiors while I could see the air conditioners on the top even functioning properly! On this side I could even smell the food, good warm and healthy food...

But I had no time to savour it, taking every piece of furniture I could, I started barricading the door behind me as thumping hooves neared our room. Shoving a desk, a chair and with far too much straining an empty chest of drawers against it I bought us a little time. I even had to grin as I saw Lilac grunt and lift a tiny desk lamp onto the pile to weight it down a little more.

“Is that the place that's safe?”

“Yes it is!” I looked over it. Partially, it occurred to me that had I been brought to Fillydelphia a few years earlier I might have been eligible for its comforts and an educated life. “That's where you'll be fine.”

Sitting on the bed, startling and squeaking just as much as Lilac, I heard the door thump behind me. Picking up the grapple gun I aimed as best I could with this larger model at the Hotel near to the ground. I had to make sure this was just right, too high would be a disaster and I only had one shot.

Careful...careful...

“Mister Murky! They're getting in!” The furniture was jumping, being pushed back.

Now!

I pulled the saddle firing mechanism with my hoof, knocking me on my rump as the grapple sprung off from compressed air and shot right across the fence. It struck the wall about seven feet from the ground...and stuck. Yes!

I wished I had time to answer Lilac's questions, but I quickly pulled the gun apart to get at the remaining wire before tying it around a segment of rubble. Behind me, slavers swore and were chanting numbers to time their smashes on the door.

“Lilac! Come here.” My words were not the carefully chosen ones of an experienced mother, but she approached me as I started fiddling with the saddle itself, beginning to tie it around her.

“I...I kinda didn't tell you before but...if I go over there, they'll kill me. Th-that's what they do to slaves who try and break in...”

“Slaves?” She looked at me even as I fastened the saddle to accommodate her smaller frame.

“You...you don't know what a slave is?”

She shook her head, looking perfectly innocent. I just stood and blinked.

“A...a slave is...me. Like...somepony like me.”

“You just look like a normal pony to me.”

Somehow, those words meant more to me than I could conceive right now.

“Thank you. You've been more than I could ever tell you in the time we have. Helping me to realise a few things. But I'm sorry, Lilac, this is where you go on yourself. They'll kill me if I go there, it's only for foals.”

The door pushed another few inches in, they were screaming at me. Screaming my name. Lilac looked horrified, shaking her head and clinging to me. But I held her back to finish my work.

“Listen, Lilac, this is very important! There's another pony you have to look for too, when you get in! She's called Starshine Melody and she'll tell them that you're supposed to be there, alright?”

“But she doesn't know me!”

I pulled the last fastener taught, eliciting a yelp from the foal, but I wouldn't have her slipping.

“Just tell her the little pony sent you.” I tried to smile. “She'll keep you right. Keep Fluttershy hidden from them though, okay?”

“Uh-huh...” She looked at me, before her lip quivered and she leaned in to hug me tightly. “Why can't I stay with you and Miss Coral?! Why? I don't want to leave you!”

Feeling the cold wetness on my cheeks, I held her back, as comforting as I could be.

“I know this must feel like your whole life's just went upside down, Lilac. But we live in a very bad place. The world isn't what you knew it was. We just need to keep you safe right now, Lilac. Somepony like you doesn't deserve what's out here. I know it's confusing and even I don't understand it all! But you can go to a good place till we can come and take you to a better place. We will come, escape from this darn city is possible. Because somepony's shown me it...because I know they can, I know we can and that's what keeps me going. So don't worry, we'll get you back to Coral. Now come on, you have to go now!”

She didn't understand. She just didn't understand, but the world of post-balefire Equestria simply couldn't be explained in such a way so quickly. I helped her up, hooking the back of the saddle onto the wire.

“Gallop around to the front and they'll let you in, foals always get in. Stay safe, Lilac...”

“Bye-bye, Mister Murky...” We touched hooves...before I let her go, the filly building momentum and sliding down and away from me to safety. Just as I'd promised Coral.

The door broke in behind me. I saw Lilac's horrified look, but I simply waved to her, tried to comfort her that I'd be alright. But the slavers were not kind. They threw me, struck me...dragged me away. But I simply watched as I saw one foal saved. One who didn't have to ever become a born slave like me.

Like me or somepony else I knew...

Manacles slammed shut, a chain went onto my collar...and I was dragged away.

* * *

My tender underbelly slapped onto the drying muck, tripping over my chains when pushed. Groaning, I rolled to my side, clutching my own chest before finally opening my eyes.

A thick pair of huge hooves stood just before me. He was here.

I'd been tugged outside and thrown before him in the courtyard. Surrounded by slavers in weather that looked ready to unleash another downpour any second, I was one lonely little slave looking up at his Master come to reclaim him.

“I told you I'd be waiting, Number Seven, yet you came anyway. Galloping right into the trap I'd told you was here.” His voice was quieter than normal, calm and arrogant. “I told you that you'd always find yourself galloping back to me no matter what.”

“I...I didn't come here for you. For...for her, to get her safe.”

I screamed, thrown five feet at his hoof lifted me up and hurled me. My nose stung and bled.

“You forget your place, slave! You will call me 'Master!'”

I should have been scared...I should have been begging. But after all this, after turning my back on him before and after knowing what I knew in my heart, I could not. My delay led to another fierce yank on my chain, flipping me over. I heard slaver's laughing at one little pony bearing the attentions of such a huge leader in their chain of command. Whether at me or simply the appearance of it I didn't know.

But I wasn't going to call him that.

“Not...not going to be here.”

“What was that, slave?”

“I said...I'm...not going to be here forever!”

The chain pulled, I lifted from the ground, swung another ten feet to crash through a bench, impacting on a pavement's concrete. I was sure I'd heard a slaver cry out 'Look, he can fly!' before more laughter kicked in. Just the sort of mindless kind he attracted.

The skies broiled, wind blew. Looking up from the ground, my body hammered and exhausted, I could see the clouds. They didn't look quite so dark anymore, the storm was almost over. Then his face appeared above me, furious. I took heart. It angered him to see me resist, to realise I wasn't going to be in these chains as long as he'd like!

“Oh, I'm afraid you will be, Number Seven. You need only look to your own skinny rump to know that.”

“I'm not going to be your slave forever!” I choked the words out, rolling to my hooves. It hurt...ooooh it hurt, but I stood on my own power, looking him in the eye. “You won't own me!”

A silence. The slavers cut their laughter. No-pony had ever talked to the Master this way. His anger was still visible, but he only glared back, daring me to go on, daring me to do this now.

“You...you want me as your pet! Like some slave that never ends! Well it won't last!” My throat felt raw, but I cried out with all the volume I had, stomping a hoof before the colossal pony. “You won't own me forever!”

The chain clanked as I kicked it aside.

“You can punish me! And hurt me! Shout at me and chain me up and put me on enough shifts to almost kill me but you won't ever make me feel like I'm going to be your slave anymore! You hear me!? Not anymore! I'm going to...to get over that Wall! I'm going to live my life how I want to with...with all my friends and find my mom and strut into that radio pony's studio and tell everypony how I escaped you!”

Tears were in my eyes and my mind whirled in terror. Every instinct I had being fought against. I was riding the knife edge here, but as I looked at those lowered eyes...that simmering look upon his face...I knew I couldn't stop.

“You...you know why?! Because I know I can get out! I've seen somepony do it! I've seen somepony tell Red Eye that he wasn't going to own her! It doesn't matter what I've heard out there because that one sight is all I needed, that proof to always give me that one hope that no punishment you could ever dream would make me forget! This is where you lose! Because...I...I won't lose that!”

Turning, I looked to the nearby Wall, the same section I'd once run at...

“I'm going to be free and you'll never win because all I need to do is keep in mind what I saw and I'll know that there's a way out. One hope, even if it's the only way out, I'll nurture it. I'll dream and wish and hope. But someday, someday...I'll dare! Maybe not make it...maybe I'll need to be hurt and cry and need picking back up again and again and again but I will do what she did!”

I took a rasping breath, screaming with all my life's hurt and desperation into his face.

“I WILL BE FREE!”

I collapsed, chest burning and trying to keep the hacking and coughing as small as I could, lying on my side. The effort had taken what remained of my physical strength. I couldn't move...but I...I had won.

The Master furrowed his brows, looking down at me. I anticipated the scream, the shout. The hoof to crush my head and sentence me to unending shifts.

I didn't expect him to smile.

“You really believe that, slave?”

Hesitantly, my head juddered to nod. He only laughed, shaking his head as though it were some half-joke shared over a drink.

“You really do...well, well.” He barely muttered, turning behind him to nod and then incline with his head. Through the smog, a couple of his aids drew something up, big and bulbous with fluttering wings.

A sprite-bot, one of those strange ones with a screen on the front. The master tapped it with one hoof.

“These things, they see everything, you know? The Ministry Mares did their work all right, they still work. They still respond to the same triggers to watch for ponies talking and then observe what they're saying. The eyes and ears of the Ministry of Morale...such a wonderful tool. I had a feeling this one would come in handy today after you said 'no' for once.”

Turning back to me, his face hardened.

“Now you resist and tell me that you'll always want to be free? Because you saw her escape? Perhaps you should see something.”

A tap and a spark, a few buttons beneath a hatch pressed made the sprite-bot jump and flicker, that screen springing to life and turning to static multiple times before stabilising. Black and white by appearance, it began to show moving images at last. Confused and wary, I watched it with wide eyes.

A rooftop, wait, I knew that one! It was the Ministry of Morale! The FunBarn!

Amongst the flickering bars, I saw figures run out onto it, two of them. Leaning closer, I squinted before feeling my heart beat faster.

It was her.

Unmistakable, surging out onto the roof with that zebra in tow, Littlepip looked quickly around her...judging her location. Wait...I knew this, I'd seen the balefire phoenix fly to there! This must have been when it happened!

Sure enough, even as I saw Red Eye's cybernetic terror dog, Winter, creep out of the door after them I saw the glare on the screen. The light approaching as that colossal flying beast came to play its part in her escape!

Flaring to and fro, catching glimpses of it as the sprite-bot watched the encounter, it burned the balloons trapping her! Sending them crashing to the ground with immolating fire that I remembered all too well, I had been lying just below it all in the mud! This was it, I'd see her when she escaped! That dog even fled!

She simply stood there, looking around, scowling.

Was she just gathering her energy? When was she going to move on? What was it she was waiting for? A gap in the pursuers? To let the zebra get her breath back?

I felt my hooves quiver, I leaned closer, wide eyed as I saw her just stand there. Guards ran out of the stairwell and guns pointed. Come on, Pip! Take them out! When was she going to do it?! Do the...the thing that let her...

At gunpoint she was led away.

The screen began to flicker again, turning back to static. Beside me, I felt My Master lean down, a

hoof across the back of my neck, speaking almost oddly calmly A voice I'd never heard.

“You really thought she escaped, didn't you, Murky?” I didn't turn to look at him. “Right to your little core. But the truth is, no-pony escapes from in here. Her capture was as ignominious as it was inevitable.”

No...my mind seemed to slow, become clouded and fuzzy and hard to process anything. I just kept staring into the screen as the shiver spread over my body. No...no no no...

He reached out, tapping another button. The picture changed, highlighting another scene...that of the main gates of Fillydelphia from the outside. Hovering about, the black and white recording paused and turned to face a gathering of ponies as I saw her led out under guard to the drawbridge and two waiting ponies, one a Ranger and the other a lithe mare. I saw Red Eye himself behind Littlepip, smiling calmly from behind an alicorn shield.

“She didn't escape. She became just another agent of Red Eye, little Number Seven. She joined him in doing work for him.”

The recording let out a buzz of noise, the sprite-bot's sensitive spy microphones picking up one line through the haze as I saw him lean down to her, whispering in her ear.

“Remember my offer, Littlepip...”

I closed my eyes, shaking my head to clear the well of tears building in them. I heard the machine click and turn off. With a little hoof bump to its chassis, it beeped and continued on its merry musical way.

I had no words. All the courage, the belief...the proof and faith in my heart...it simply died. The energy to speak up and know I was going to be alright just flowed right out of me. Suddenly, I realised just how small and vulnerable a pony I really was amongst the strong and intelligent slavers.

My Master sat down, patting my back.

“You really thought you were something special, didn't you? The next in line to be like her? The slave who would break free? But the truth is you're just a pony. She was a legend, Number Seven and she didn't even come close to a way out. But don't worry, this isn't something unusual.”

From my hooves over my face, I peered up to him, his light green eyes staring into my own. He stroked our mutual scar.

“Every slave rebels at some point. Every slave comes to that point when they fight back and make a try to be free...they either die or they get over it. It's like a form of adolescence, a rebellious stage. I've seen it happen to hundreds over the years...you're no different from them. But it's over now. You can go back to the life you know.”

Around us, I saw columns of slaves forming, being led to various places. I recognised a few, ones from the Mall. Within them, I saw the battered body of Coral Eve being thrown in, barely able to stand. But there in the line I caught the wonderful azure eyes of Glimmerlight watching me. A slaver was having to repeatedly push her back in. I saw Sunny Days too...

All of us slaves.

“This is just how it goes for ponies like you, Number Seven.” My Master stood up, pulling the chain. “There is no way out. No grand escape. Fillydelphia is your home and your place is by my side.”

His voice was returning to its strength.

“Now you know it, she was caught and joined us as much as any other pony. She is out there working for Red Eye now.”

Arbu...Bucklynn Cross...it made so much sense, he...he was right...

“So now we'll simply see about returning you to a crash course in handing away control. You are a slave, Number Seven. It's time you remembered that. Your punishment will teach you this more than you would ever need to have us direct your life from now on. Wormtail!”

The retched aid of My Master crept over. He cast me a smug little grin as I sat shivering...wide eyed and barely thinking. No...I...I was thinking, just not what I wanted to think and see and...oh Goddesses. I'd been believing in a lie all this time...

There was no way out.

“Take this disobedient slave for his punishment before returning him. He'll work a shift somewhere to help him get rid of feeling like he's anypony that matters. Perhaps at the old merchant's new place...”

“At once, Maste-”

“NO!”

The scream wasn't mine, I turned to see a slaver simply belted across the face onto his rump with his nose bleeding, before Glimmerlight galloped out of the line of slaves and skidded to between me and My Master.

“Can't you see you're breaking him enough already! You don't need to do that!”

He snarled, raising a hoof. “Get out of my way, slave!”

She did not. “Please! He's barely hanging in as it is! Don't do this to him! You...you can...”

Her body quaked, but I saw her raise a hoof, resting it on her own chest.

“...you can take me instead...punish me at that horrible place...not him! I filled his head with all this, helped turn him to making attempts! Please, just let him go back to the Mall with Coral and take me for this punishment. I won't fight...”

There was a silence, My Master bearing down, staring into her eyes from far above her height. Behind her, I simply gazed on in amazement...my head hurting, the scar thumped and my cutie marks itched...the feeling of the chains shutting all too clear. But to see her do this...offer this in my defence...

“WHORE!” Without warning, he raised up and crashed his buck to her face, knocking Glimmer clear to one side into the mud. I saw blood streaming from her burst cheek. Striding over, he kicked her.

“You have no say! If I wanted you to be there to be punished, you would be! You have no bartering chips! No say in matters! You are a slave like he is and you will not attempt to ever believe you can change my mind!”

He turned, twisting back to me.

“Take him back to the Mall and throw him in the cells until I arrange his presence for Morass. He'll want to get the customers lined up. It shall become his new place of work after my shifts for him are done. After today he will be split from other slaves entirely. You will learn what control is by the hoof of those that could seek it over you, Number Seven. You will serve their pleasures as the obedient slave you always were.”

Slavers grabbed my legs and chain, dragging me through the mud and over concrete. Glimmer struggled from the ground, trying to move toward me but being held harshly in line, kept away from me

as we were dragged and returned to the Mall. A journey that I spent quaking and crying as Wormtail spoke of how I was but a slave, a crude imitation of his own Master.

Of how I was about to be a slave to every pony that could afford the meagre caps or trade to do as they willed with the one innocence I had left in this world.

* * *

“Oh...oh Murky, they weren't going to...”

They were. Like he'd said before he...he took the chance to 'market' me. To remind me that I was the bottom of the pile and always had been no matter what I'd believed before I was shown the truth.

I'd been thrown to rock bottom. Hitting the floor hard and being cast into a grey neutral world in my head that just didn't make any sense anymore. Like I'd gone back to sleep even as the word went out to prepare for me. To teach me how to be below everypony else like I should have been.

“I'm so so sorry...”

I didn't even feel anything...just...just...

* * *

Numb.

I lay in Glimmerlight's gentle grasp, feeling my shoulder wet from her own tears. I hadn't cried since we got back. I simply couldn't bring myself to. I just lay still and gazed at the wall, at the markings of generations of slaves beforehand and feeling nothing at all.

I didn't know what exactly was going to happen any more. But I didn't need to for it to make me feel sick. Sick and worthless.

They'd taken everything away from me. My hopes, my dreams, the mare I'd so shamelessly admitted I'd had a stupid crush on and now for them to be taking my dignity itself just to remind me of my place. Sooty's words cackled in my head, the worst ones that made my future all too clear..

“A high earner for sure!”

My Master had seen the potential Sooty offered with me. I was to go back again. And again. And again until I no longer could. Feeling me tighten and whine, Glimmer tightened her grasp, whispering that it'd be okay, choking on her words as she looked into my vacant eyes. I didn't really see her. I simply looked through her, feeling my body settle into its old routine and tell me 'I told you so.'

I was dormant, awaiting my next order...or client.

“We'll sort this, Murky...s-somehow...we always do...” Glimmer muttered again, she'd said it a dozen times. “Brim's coming back soon, hun, he's going to be at the next shift, we'll see him there, okay? M-maybe he can get to you in time or...oh Murky, I'm so sorry.”

Why did that matter? Even he couldn't fight all of Fillydelphia.

Even with him, there was no way out. Protégé hadn't offered me one. Red Eye hadn't given me one. Littlepip's way out had closed. The plans wouldn't work...you couldn't escape this city as a slave, not from behind the Walls. Not even from outside them for me.

My life was here now. No way out. No way out at all.

I could see Coral sitting quietly against the wall, her head buried in her hooves and looking shaky from that fever I knew was burning strong inside her. Glimmer's usually so attractive looking face even through the grime was covered in dried blood. We were failing, we couldn't manage it.

No, my life wasn't here...it was in the hooves of My Master. He owned my life.

They were going to take me away. Drag me to where some sweaty stallion or harsh mare would pull me crying to a small room and lock themselves in with me. They would hurt me. Make me cry. Humiliate me like I'd never been before. Hold me down, strip my clothes and...and...and then they w-would...

I couldn't bring myself to say the word.

That one baleful word that was going to happen to me over and over. Even when I juddered and whimpered, terrified and praying under my breath I felt Glimmerlight hold me as though she could somehow stop them from doing it.

This was it. The moment my life hit rock bottom.

It was going to happen. But I couldn't even muster the energy to fight back, what was the point now? No-pony could escape slavery...

But there was one little thought in me, one last little glitter that refused to go out. One train of thought. One desperate realisation.

There was one way out.

Half an hour later, our shift began. All of us were marched from the cell by the slavers, out of the Mall. It was there I took the chance, slipping away from the line like a ghost before we reached the place I'd be split off for Sooty's. Only one pony saw me go, the pony who had been holding onto me and felt me leave.

Even as I sneaked away, blank faced and grey of mind toward the one avenue of escape left to me I heard Coral Eve shout, scream and beg as she tried to make me hear her...she'd seen the look in my eyes. But she was dragged back in, chained down along with Glimmer and taken toward their shift, unable to follow me. Unable to do anything but try to make the slavers hear her pleas to catch me.

* * *

“Generous souls of Fillydelphia, I thank you. I thank you for your sacrifices. That day after day you place your own lives down to help prepare this world for a better generation. Further from our next scheduled event in the Pit I offer a day of rest very soon that I would see you understand my gratitude for this effort. Even now, as I hear the reports of progress on all fronts, I feel indebted to the work you as better ponies have done.”

Hoof before hoof, I trotted my way through Fillydelphia, taking the route I now knew. Down toward the Ministry of Arcane Science. Master Red Eye's voice boomed from the speakers lashed to signposts and lamps all over the city.

“Let it never be known that there is not good in the world. By being here, in Fillydelphia, you are doing a greater good than has been done in two hundred years of fruitlessly wandering the wastes outside. This great spectacle, the majesty of your blood, sweat and tears...it shall be your monument to the future, the one place when you found your purpose.”

I turned off the street...headed to the quieter areas of Fillydelphia. The voice faded as I moved away from his infrastructure, coming into the silent grey streets.

“Yes, some may ask me, 'Why? Why do you keep us here?' Because this is the only place that anypony need be. There is nothing outside these walls but misery, spite, betrayal and pain to be found. Only in the future, through your sacrifice of time and energy, will we make...”

It became a mumbling, passing beyond the distance I could discern individual words. I stepped onto

the one particular street before one building.

Cross Street Orphanage.

The doors creaked, an entirely empty interior meeting me with nothing but dark shapes and grey dust floating in the heavy warm air. What passed for twilight in Fillydelphia streamed through windows, tinted grey by the muck sapping colour from its strands. With each hoof making naught but a tiny click, I began to trot through it. My body felt so weak, my broken nose, diseased lungs, head cold, bloodshot eyes and so many whips, scars and lesions along my body that I felt like a ghoul. Every step was shaky. My mouth hung open and my vision swam. Anypony could take me and have their way with me. They were going to. No freedom...with no dreams to dream in any cold cell that would warm my broken heart.

Almost a ghost of what a pony should be, trotting alone in the abandoned halls of the past.

I lifted my PipBuck. Reacquiring it and my journal hadn't been hard, I knew the way to sneak into his room now. I wanted them with me for this moment. They had to be with me. Clicking through channels, I set it to the only one I cared about.

“-far be it for me to guess, my ponies of the Wastes, but I'm afraid I cannot say that we can expect any information readily any time soon. The warning stays on the airwaves. Just avoid the Stable Dweller until we know for sure that this travesty is nothing but a falsity.”

I'd seen the proof myself, I knew that there would be no truthful information coming.

Stepping my limping way through the halls, I passed crayon drawings of a world I'd never see. Happy smiling stick figure ponies laughing and sharing time together in fields, slowly darkening off to a ruined wall where balefire had scorched the pictures clean. The good had been purged from Equestria long ago.

“It hurts me more than I can say that our hope is faltering, wastelanders. Just...just wait, please hold on a little longer and-”

Click.

I turned it off. That was all I needed to hear.

I reached the stairs, moving up flight by flight, steadily approaching the way out to the new floors of girders that had still been left unbroken. Covered in damp puddles, the sheet metal and sodden wood creaked and plopped beneath my hooves.

Shaking, I began the ascent in the suddenly cold wind above the Orphanage. They...they wouldn't get me. I was going to escape. They weren't getting my life. Not to abuse and...and send me back to that place again to be broken into and violated! The thought of what I had fearfully imagined. Of a life consisting of sweaty bodies, seething pained gasps and controlling hooves forcing me to do things. Of what I'd be every single day from here on if...if they got me.

My heart thumped hard, my head aching and my teeth chattering, I reached the top of the unsteady construction. The nut I'd been trying to remove was still there. Sitting my ragged, untidy and damp self down beside it, I sat and waited with my journal. There was...was just one last thing to...to maybe help me. While I sat quivering...crying...I tried to draw.

A shaky line...led to a wobbly curve...and a stupid shape.

I hit my journal with a hoof, leaning my head down. I tried again. Raggedy figures and terrible sketches that made no sense and had no direction, I almost drew things by accident. The only times my subconscious led me to draw was when it was something about him.

Wanting to scream, I very nearly threw the journal from the top. Instead I just clutched it close and tucked it into my saddlebag.

Beep!

I almost screamed in fright, I was so on edge. My limp mane, still so sore and messed from just...just earlier when somepony had...had done something I didn't remember and...oh Goddesses why me...

Beep!

I'd been jumping from the very thing I'd waited for...please, Sundial...please.

Click.

“I...I...oh no, I don't have long!”

I could hear shouting, a fumbling with the PipBuck and a desperation born of exhaustion in his voice. It sounded...wrong. Sundial was in a better world! He wasn't meant to sound like this!

“They got me! I was going back to my desk and they were waiting! With their cuffs and their batons and...oh help me somepony, they're going to take me away as soon as they get through this door! I'm so sorry, Equestria! I...I just wanted to protect her!”

I clutched the PipBuck close, feeling my own tears double up for him. No..oh Sundial no...why now, why you? I wanted him to get by and be happy and have a family before the end!

“So please, if you find this, please tell her I love her! Skydancer, she's the best thing that ever happened to me! Please! I'm so sorry Mom...Dad...I just don't know what's going to happen to me now! I'm-”

A crashing sound!

“Suspect, come here!”

“I'M SORRY!”

“Get down of the ground now! NOW! Get down or I'll-”

Click.

I simply sat and held the PipBuck. It had been the first thing I'd found that really became, well, mine, in this city. The first thing in here that mattered to me. It had always been there for me, but that was it. Just...done.

There was no happy ending...not for Sundial...not for Littlepip...not for me.

Rock still, I began to shake, worse this time. Not from the cold...but from conflict. Fear of...of what lay ahead.

Slowly...I stood up, trotting forward. They...they wanted to hurt me every day, I wouldn't let them...

My front hooves stopped at the edge. Before me, the sunset...it must have been the risen earlier then. Casting my quivering head down I saw the same hard gravel and thickened mud below.

I was alone atop the only world I was ever going to be allowed to see...alone, cold, wet and scared. I turned, looking behind me as if to expect to see somepony rush up to stop me, but I knew no-pony was there. No-pony would be there for me now that I'd come out here. I was just the lonely pegasus as I'd always been...some may want to help me, but they couldn't save me.

No-pony could.

Slowly, I closed my eyes, entering into my own mind and my imagination. I heard every thump of my

heart, a thick and deep sound in my ears. I had only one thing left to do. Please, Goddesses, answer my prayers and deliver me unto a better place than this. Please take me away from the hell I was born to. Because I simply couldn't take it anymore. It was too bad...too without hope...

Please...make it not hurt...

Hesitation...fear...

But one little realisation, a memory that pipped up. P-Pinkie had told me about this, hadn't she? In the creepy letter...

“When the time comes to make a choice, whether to leap or not...you'll know what to do.”

The time was here...I knew what I had to do to protect myself.

I felt myself edge forward, the tips of my front hooves rested over the edge. I couldn't look down. I just clenched my eyes shut, shaking...crying, whimpering and trying with all my might to think of all the pain that would end. They wanted me to be taken into that place and...and abused by stallion after mare after slave after slaver...then put on shifts to bring me to death only to keep me alive for his amusement...I didn't want all that!

They had taken my freedom.

They had crushed my dreams.

I'm...I'm sorry, Glimmer...Brim...Coral...Protégé...Unity...I'm so sorry...

I...

I...

I didn't even feel myself lean forward past the point of no return.

Simply a motion, a whisper of wind against my body and the loss of all solid ground as I fell.

There was no dramatic last thoughts as it happened. I simply...went.

My little body left the rooftop, not even turning as it plunged, one last escape from the nightmare. No-pony to witness me or find me. I would just disappear with as little celebration as I had been born.

Nothing but a Number.

The speed picked up, every minor detail somehow finding its way to my mind in the short seconds of my fall.

My eyes saw the ground move, tumble and spin, a whimper growing to a scream...a scream for all of my pain.

From being torn from my mother, to the horrid anvil and hammer, through every lash, cane, slap and stomp...to the carts, back breaking work and shock rods. Through every single insult, push, attack, bite and drop of blood spilled in each cut and burn. From the unfair punishments to the gunshots stopping me being free, knives piercing my body to the horrible and sick brutality bore upon my body. Remembering every hope being stripped from my mind after any moment of clarity and into the condemning reality of what my life was to merely consist of from now on. For my whole life...I screamed.

A simple and anguished long cry of sadness that grew and grew as I saw the end and the harsh ground of Fillydelphia again and again as I spun and tumbled, those broken wings plastered to my sides.

It would all be over! One little pain I'd had the courage to face! My only way out of this city to be with the Goddesses at last to await my friends in their merciful embrace!

But the scream grew, beyond what I could. A roar...a brutal cry as something exploded and shards of wood and brick flew all around me. My vision clouded with red and my body slapping into something I felt hooves grasp me in midair, crushing me against a huge chest...

Brimstone Blitz caught me. Diving through the wall of the orphanage, he had thrown himself with that mighty cry, hooves out to catch me. Thrown off course, we tumbled. A slam and shock of pain as we hit the adjoining building, crashing through flights of scaffold and bouncing from loose brick we fell together, over and over...

Before crashing to the ground. Pain overcame me...and my vision turned to black.

But the pain didn't end.

Slowly...growing, that spark of life led my eyes to open. He was there, lying still and breathing light as his hooves held me against him tightly...stopping me escaping...stopping me crying out and running away from what he'd done.

Even as we were surrounded by the slavers that had chased him, he held me tightly. I struggled, beating at him with my hooves and crying aloud for stopping me! I wanted out! Why, Brim?! Why?! There's nothing left for me! Nothing fucking left! I don't want to live anymore! I DON'T WANT TO LI-

"No!" He hissed, a more emotional tone than I knew he possessed when he saw the struggle in my eyes to run away from the slavers, to try again! It was the only way out!

Cradling my head and shivering as I broke down crying and hollering in his hooves, I was completely stopped from moving, restrained even from choosing my own end.

"It's not that bad...it's never that bad..."

His eyes shifted up, to the slavers.

"This will end for you. I'll see it."

A low and ebbing growl emanated from his chest.

"There will be a reckoning for whatever or whoever made you come to this..."

* * *

Footnote: Perk Lost...

Lucky Break – Sometimes a break only lasts so long. Whatever item gave you that luck to just scrape by time and time again has lost its meaning now. Your Luck characteristic has been reduced by one. Guess you're just an unlucky number...

Chapter 17: Rage of the Warlord

* * *

“Don't bother with the white flag for that brute's clan, my little ponies. They'll only strangle you with it.”

“What was it like? That is, realising how much he'd broken you?”

I didn't realise it, that was the problem.

From the moment he'd...he'd shown me that sprite-bot's truths, that everything I believed in had been a lie, what did I have left to believe in? I'd believed I could escape, but I had failed. I'd believed that I needed to become like Littlepip and be brave with my friends to escape like she did, but then Arbu happened. I'd taken my last solace in that she had *done* it, that no matter what I'd be able to somehow do it if only I was determined enough...

Then I found out that she hadn't even come close. I'd simply been telling myself what I wanted to hear all along from the very start in the Pit. Just a delusional little slave who thought he was more important than he actually was.

His methods to remind me of my place, that I had no dignity, hope or control...to intend to force me through that one h-horrible shift under Sooty. It was like I was back under that anvil, feeling it coming but being unable to stop it no matter what I tried. It took all that spunk and inner strength and corrupted it...made me feel like a worthless pony at the hands of every grinning pony Sooty would direct toward me standing there with my little board and a *price!*

I'd needed something to believe in...a way out. I didn't throw myself from that rooftop because I was broken...I did it because I thought I was escaping. You don't do these things to yourself knowing that you're racing to your death. You do it to get *away* from what's hurting you and save that one thing I *wouldn't* give them! Every avenue I could have believed in had closed, directing me down the only path that my mind felt made any sense just to make the pain *stop*.

“But you'd come so far...”

I know! My friends knew too and it still stabs at my heart knowing how much I hurt them by doing what I did. They never said anything about it but I could see it in their eyes. Even before I'd met any of them properly I'd at least been able to maybe quip off inside my own head or...or after I'd met them I'd laughed and joked! They'd made me happy and for the first time in my life, be it while being teased or feeling joyful that they were proud of me for the things I'd done. But after it all started to go

downhill, I was turning into the slave I'd been before Fillydelphia all over again! I just couldn't handle that, to be given such a glimpse of the pony I *could* be only for it all to be ripped away moment by moment again and *again!* From losing Unity to the broadcast about Arbu; making things worse for Sunny to the second news report about Bucklynn Cross for poor Glimmer's parents and then to find out my idol meant nothing? That she had failed in everything I'd dreamed of and *joined* Red Eye on a mission for *him!*

Could I really be blamed for thinking there was no other way to escape slavery? I'd been deluding myself the entire time that there was a way out of Fillydelphia. That city, it's impossible. Slaves have a saying, you know? That once Filly gets a hold of you, then you'll only ever get out if you lose something, be it a life or a soul.

“But Brimstone saved you, didn't that help remind you how important you were in the lives of others?”

Yes...

Sorry, I don't mean to cry...

“It's alright.”

Thank you, but no. It *should* have but I just couldn't shake that numbness. I'd been saved, but for what? All I could see was another slaver coming to take me for to a shift with somepony looking for his way to *get off!* I couldn't live like that and so I simply retreated. I ran away from life itself into my own mind, desperate to make it all just blur past until the day I staggered...tripped...and just fell over to be swept away by time.

Really, though? I wasn't the real problem.

“Excuse me?”

A reckoning, he'd said. Vengeance. A fury drawn deep in a pony that fought his own battle against the born life he could never quite escape.

Even as I found The Master's ownership breaking me into the slave I had been born as, the first of my allies was finding our treatment bringing his own past to the surface of his mind.

“Oh no...”

For a long time, the Great Warlord had been dormant.

No more.

* * *

I spent that night in My Master's tiny office cell, hunched and shivering within its cold confines and trying to pretend that those crawling sensations over my body were just my imagination in the pitch black. My back stung, for the cost of my survival had brought with it further punishment for disobedience. A burn on my side spread into an aching across my ribs and surrounding joints. That shock rod he carried had been the newest implement to try and 'bring me in line.'

I'd been thrown in. Ordered not to sleep but to think on my place in life.

Life...

Did I even have one? Could I even have one?

Front hooves resting over my muzzle and coughing every few minutes as the collar worked its sick purpose I felt the tight swelling in my breast remind me that no, I couldn't. Outside the Wall was no paradise, no place of health and relief from what life had 'blessed' me with inside, either in my mind or body. My Master was right...

Sniffing, I couldn't help but feel upset that Brimstone had saved me. I knew why he had. I'd have done the same. But from my perspective, all it meant was I had more of the pain to go yet. I couldn't escape Fillydelphia and I couldn't escape my life. No matter how much I wanted to. Knowing that deep down hurt more than anything, the thought that I had *wanted* that escape.

Really, for the past few hours I'd done nothing but keep thinking over all these things.

I'd been ordered to.

My head perked up, ears twitching as I heard the door to My Master's office being flung open. A heavy tread...it was him! Quickly, grunting and moaning in pain, I stood up in the cramped space as best I could to turn and face the doorway with my head lowered and ready.

"Time's up, little slave!" He called from outside even while I heard the keys jangle and turn in the thick locks. "I hope you've been doing as ordered this time!"

Grinding and screeching as the metal door dragged across the hard floor, I squinted against even the office's vague light. That light soon turned to shadow when My Master stepped forward, stroking the thick coat on his muzzle with a hoof and leering down at me. My eyes tried to stay low, but I couldn't help but see the heavy whip and inactive shock rod sitting on those leather bandoleers...or the loop of chain around his neck. Suppressing the squeak of fear, I simply abased myself.

“Y...yes Master. I have.”

“Gooood...and?” One of his hooves rested on the door. No doubt to slam it shut if I said wrong.

“L...” I sniffed. “I don't choose w-when to stop my work and d-die, only when My Master chooses for me...”

“Very good.” I felt the cloven hoof on the door move down to pat my head gently. “Anything else?”

“I d-don't think so-”

“Oh but there **is**.” My Master stepped back, I saw him reach for the whip!

Yelping, I staggered back into the cell while shaking my head rapidly, my whole body trembling. Oh please, don't! Not more! *Think, Murky, think!*

“Yes!” I shouted the word oddly out of place, seeing him hesitate and raise one eyebrow above those beady eyes. “Th-there...there isn't anything for me out there anyway. No heroes, no better life. Nothing I'd understand how to deal with or live in. I...I realised where I belong...”

There was a silence in the dingy office. I knew what he was doing...he was letting it sink in. But I couldn't take him just watching as if wanting more.

“I realised there's no way out, you are who you were born to be and...and there's nothing else after that. I was born a slave...”

Finally, My Master nodded.

“Seems we've finally gotten through to you, Number Seven. Don't you worry, every slave rebels at some point, it's all natural. Now you can go back to a life you **understand**. **You are a slave**. That's all you are **meant** to be and you've just had a little period of adjustment in your adolescence. You'll settle in eventually like they all do, just another number.”

I hated his voice. I almost wished he'd shout. This 'day by day' tone that simply talked of experience and expectation *terrified* me with the thoughts of that this was *my life*.

It was.

“Now, we have a *lot* of work for you, little runt. Get your chain on and follow me closely. You are to be left in the plaza until arrangements have been made for your schedule. An event in the Pit is scheduled later today accompanied by one of Red Eye's, hmm...*break* days. So not many shifts are

going into the latter half of the day, but don't you worry, slave! We'll make sure you get the chance at something, Sooty is *eager* to have you, you know?"

The moment he'd told me to get the chain on I was already pulling it around my collar and falling into step beside him to begin the journey. But that last line had drawn a shiver from me and made a sickness rise in my throat. I wanted to scream, to beg and plead with him not to send me there again.

He chuckled when we left the office, hearing no complaint from me.

"Very good, Number Seven...no words means you're remembering how to act. Now come on, you'll get to meet your little friends again. You'll like that, eh? The two mares will be back soon and the raider seems, heh...eager to meet you. I'm sure they'll be *excited* to see the real you. Show them who you *really* are, Number Seven."

There was no choice in it, I had stay silent and obey.

Simply had to do what I did before.

Don't think.

Don't feel.

Don't wish.

Don't dream...

* * *

"All right, wretches! Roll call is over, now get back to your holes until we require you!"

Dozens of slaves began to limp away from the redesigned plaza, passing around the smokestacks, incinerator and the strange solitary confinement holes. As they left, slavers trotted behind them and slammed the cage doors shut. There was no such thing as the freedom they had once to wander the plaza had under Protégé's rule.

I had stood alone during the entire event as I always was instructed to. The only pegasus in a group of his own, still chained to My Master. Glimmerlight and Coral Eve were still out on work, but Brimstone stood above the crowd, glaring at My Master with death in his eyes.

"Red Eye's rest day will begin in six hours, until then you will all produce a full day's worth of smaller tasks in your cells to make up for that lost time! As by his orders you will be

permitted to leave the Mall to attend the Pit by your own choosing. However! You will *all* be back before noon the next day, slaves not returning will be subject to punishment duties."

He stood near the old fountain, as though taunting me with the temptation to drink from its muddy waters. My throat was *burning*, dry as the ashen ground of Fillydelphia while the ground below me held a few spats of blood from my coughing. I'd seen Brimstone glance over every time I'd convulsed. N-not long n-now...please forget to give me the RadAway! Just let it *end*, Master, *please*...

"And you..."

He turned to me, unclasping the chain from my collar.

"You will remain here while I arrange your next shift."

"His shift *where*?"

The entire plaza seemed to stop moving, ponies both slave and slaver alike turned back from the movement.

Brimstone Blitz stood, having not moved at all from where he'd watched over the roll call. Standing straight on with My Master, he had his chin lowered, eyebrows narrow and eyes hard. I heard My Master chuckle and turn with a shake of his mane.

"Of no concern to you, *slave*. His shifts are-"

"Well overworked. He's done more shifts in the past day than any slave is meant to in three. You think somepony wouldn't notice? By Red Eye's rules he's earned a day of rest for extra-effort and activity. He will have **no** shifts today."

There were gasps. *No-pony* disagreed with My Master these days, but they all remembered the hoof-wrestling match. They knew the bad blood between these two. I shivered, feeling far too close to the two largest ponies around here. Please...please Brim, don't do this.

My Master grinned, arrogant and sure of his position. His authority was absolute here, turning his head to me with no chain to my collar.

"Red Eye has his rules, yes. But I didn't say that his shifts were *from* Red Eye. They are **my** request to him. **My** order. From Master to slave. Number Seven is my personal little pet slave now, so why don't you ask **him** whether he wishes to obey my personal requests? He accepted this position after all and Red Eye does permit a slaver to hold a personal *assistant* if the slave agrees to it and wishes to work for them. Well, Number Seven? You don't *have* to do work...but I've *ordered* you anyway, what do you say to all this?"

The shivering turned to a quaking. Front hooves pacing on the ground, eyes stung wet and mind racing I turned back and forth between the two. My Master only stood confidently, that knowing look. Brimstone finally turned his head and I could see his eyes pleading. In the scant minutes before they'd tore me away from him I'd seen how much he had come to care for me as well.

I wanted to go to him., My Master said I could if I chose to.

Feeling my bandaged wings dampen with the sweat of a blistering indoors and the pressure of fighting choice and chains...I tried to fight both sides of it. My...My Master might...might do things if...if I didn't...

“Murk? What's wrong, he can't do anything but ask you! Come on!”

I looked up, seeing Brim looking almost impatient in his stoic fury, clearly my situation was all that was keeping him from launching forward.

“Just **walk away**, Murk!”

“From your life, Number Seven?” My Master's voice cooed behind me, just quiet enough for me alone to hear. “Defying your born Master? Chained to me by fate since before you were even born...you can't defy that which owns your very mark's meaning.”

Brimstone stamped hard enough to crush a small piece of rubble on the ground.

“What are you waiting for?! This sick **bastard** can't force you to do any more today!”

We had tried to escape together more than once. Escape...no, it couldn't happen. I...I couldn't. Some things were too important.

“I'm s-sorry, Brim. B-born a slave...”

Slowly, my head lowered and mumbled the last few words as I trotted back to My Master's side. A low growl from Brimstone was all I heard while My Master's hoof stroked my mane and effectively pulled me in against his repulsive sweaty body.

“**What?**”

“See, raider? Number Seven knows his place in life at last. You are what you're born as...he's not the only one either, looking at you ready to frenzy up. **Now!** All of you! Back to your cages while I set the planning out and meet with the merchant. Come when I call, Number Seven. I hear he's got a few ponies lined up for you.”

Setting me down, I simply nodded and lowered my head in submission. Trotting away, I made a slow pace for the cell we all used before with the sofa in it out of habit.

Brimstone Blitz glared at My Master as he left, before whirling around, picking me up and stopping just short of slamming me into the wall. I screamed, covering my face with my hooves, before feeling him put me down...realising what he was doing. Making a short snort, he bent down.

“Why did you agree?! You don't have to listen to what he says! What's this merchant lining up ponies piss-talk? You've worked enough to not need it you stupid-” He cut off, stamping a hoof to curb his anger, I knew it wasn't really at me. “Why, Murk?”

“I'm a slave...I obey...”

I simply trotted on by him into the cell, hearing him turn to watch me go into the back room, aiming for a corner.

“Goddesses above, what has he **done** to you while I was away?”

* * *

“**HE'S GOING TO MAKE HIM DO *WHAT?!?***”

I winced, my ears *aching* along with the very cell shaking at Brimstone's roar from the front of shop. Accompanying it was a heavy slam. A part of the wall bulged inward into the back room where I lay curled on the couch in a blanket. Pieces of degrading plaster flew off and fell across me.

Glimmerlight had returned earlier, staggering her way in with her initiate robes ripped on the back from a whip. She hadn't shown what injuries lay below...but even I could see the effort it took to keep the pain from her face. She and Brimstone were in the front shop now where I had heard her telling him what I was being pushed into doing.

Now I only heard her seem to suddenly panic.

“*Brim!* No! He's scared, he needs space!”

The floor quaking beneath me, the giant form of the raider stormed through into the back. A full shelving unit flung aside for him to take a more direct path crashed across the ground before the huge earth pony almost seemed to snarl *at* me. Yelping, I withdrew to the corner of the sofa, curling up...my eyes open wide. Teeth bared, muscles twitching and bulging...a great raider bore down above me demanding my answer. I...I was scared of him. I hadn't been *scared* of him in so long!

“Is this true?”

Squealing, I covered my ears and shrunk away, pulling my blanket over me. I heard Glimmerlight gallop in behind him, shouting for him to back off. But my safe little world beneath the blanket was torn away, pulled clean off me.

“Is. This. True?”

I knew he wasn't going to hurt me! But a look of anger and rage just terrified me! At feeling him bearing over me, lighting up every imagined horror awaiting and of every huge Master I'd ever had.

Screaming, I found myself scampering off the sofa and diving into the darkness.

“YES!” I cried as I went, feeling the tears flow and the horrible hurt of knowing what had become of my life being admitted in my own voice before it fell to a choked and diseased gasp. Looking back at the huge pony standing there and finding Glimmerlight rush in to stand between him and I. But I could only nod gently and fearfully from behind her.

“...y-yes.”

There was a pause. A silent pause as the heavy and scarred figure simply stared at me. Filled with anger...but in those eyes I saw care. I saw a protectiveness that now felt it had failed. Only now did I really see how much I meant to the big pony, how small and innocent I must have seemed to him.

Now to those same eyes, through violence, oppression and intended violation, that same innocence was being stripped away.

“He has gone too far this time.” Brim's voice was dark. Without any hint of the stoic demeanour I had known him for. “Every day I watch him hurt ponies, abuse them and destroy their lives and free wills.”

A bucket unfortunate enough to be close by to him was flattened, bucked across the room.

“I see him throw you to raiders for your wings to be *torn off* and find him working with them to try and kill the one slaver who actually had a heart in this fucking Mall!”

The sofa flipped, spiralling and crashing to the floor

“He strikes Glim and leaves her a malnourished wreck bit by bit after sending me from her. Now this? NOW THIS?!”

A full shelving unit was picked up, hurled into the wall where it shattered into its component parts. Boxes once arrayed on it spread everywhere as Brimstone snorted and stamped.

“This has gone on long enough. He has hurt *too* many ponies. He thinks he is some kind of sadistic slaver god, he does not *know* the meaning of rage and darkness in the hearts of the raider clan of old! Enough is enough.”

It built slowly. A tremble of his front hooves. A snort. A closing of the eyes. Grinding of the teeth and a slow rise to his full height as that *immense* muscled body struggled to contain the absolute and unbridled *rage* that was seeking to explode.

Yet explode it did. A bestial *howl* of anger and fury echoed around the room so hard that even Glimmerlight fell to her haunches and covered her ears. My head turned into splitting agony from the sound in my sensitive ears. But before me came a whirlwind of violence, a desk picked up like it were a *toy* and smashed against the far floor. The very concrete of the walls cracked under a ferocious buck.

Before a very sudden and very deliberate turn toward the door.

Glimmerlight spotted it before I did, galloping forward in front of him.

“Brim! NO! That's what he wa-*ARGH!*”

My jaw dropped in shock as I saw Brimstone knock her aside like anypony else.

Brimstone. Had struck. Glimmerlight.

The sight seemed impossible, but all the same I saw her thrown backwards to scatter on the floor. Unhurt but roughly treated to be removed from his path as Brimstone moved through the door. She simply lay back, eyes wide in shock more than anything. Helping her up, we both ran out as we heard the cell door completely fail in its purpose to stop anypony exiting the cell just in time for it to be slammed back and jammed shut in our faces from a hind leg buck.

He was in the plaza.

Still trotting slowly, deliberately, he moved to near the fountain and turned his head to the balcony above the main door out before taking a deep breath.

“**SHAAAACKLES!**”

Ten seconds passed before another great bellow of the name, he shouted again and then a fourth time. Every time sending the name echoing all over the Plaza and throughout the entire Mall enough that I heard the few remaining panes of glass *shake*. Glimmerlight was fighting with the door, trying to

get it open from its wrecked but jammed lock. I simply stood back from it, staring through the bars with wide eyes.

“SHAAAACKLES!”

Slaves were gathering at their cell doors. Some slavers, the easier going assistants who kept an eye on us and brought us food *very* wisely decided not to approach him if they were already inside the Plaza. They weren't particularly nasty ponies, often long term slaves themselves who had simply found a menial role in Red Eye's workforce as a way to escape true servitude. All the same, they did not want to risk garnering his attention at all. But after that last shout...he appeared. The *true* slaver in here. Atop the balcony above, that leering and grinning face. As though he had expected this reaction...as though he had been *expecting* it. Placing me in here just so Brimstone could find out from *me*.

“Well...if it isn't our little captive raider who wants atten-”

“Shut up and get down here NOW you pathetic sack of worthless flesh! Stand before me!”

A hoof slammed into the ground before him, making a slab of concrete snap in two with one side popping up from the ground level to fall at the side. I was not witnessing my friend Brim...this was the Great Warlord Brimstone Blitz. His voice *rung* with authority and power, completely eclipsing that of My Master.

“You forget your place, *slave!*” My Master cackled, glancing to either side at all the cells...his eyes found me. “You have **no say** here, raider! You are no warlord. No king of raiders any more! You are *nothing* but my slave. You shall remain there to simmer down.”

If Brimstone Blitz showed any sign of caring for My Master's orders, he didn't show it. A violent snarl through almost foaming teeth led to a blurringly fast swivel and a hurling of the slab of concrete at the balcony. Flying upward, it crashed into the softer brickwork and smashed one section of the balcony around where My Master stood. I saw him have to flinch to the side to avoid the shrapnel.

“You will stand before me and answer for this or I will destroy this petty prison to find you! I am the Great Warlord of the Bloodletter Clan! The Scourge of Ponyville! I will rip your skull from your very living body to wear as my talisman! GET! DOWN! HERE! FACE ME, COWARD!”

My Master lowered his hoof from covering his face against the rocks that now fell and tumbled down back into the Plaza. *That* grin persisting...*enjoying* seeing Brimstone trapped in the Plaza and raging for an order he would never have followed. With a cackle, he simply turned and left.

I thought that would be it. That Brimstone's anger would explode in violence against the guards

who were *very* hastily retreating into one of the cells to hide.

However I had never seen the Warlord at work when his ire was truly raised.

Roaring after My Master, rearing up and bellowing his protest at somepony turning their back on him, I saw Brimstone instead cast an eye to the new thick door that protected the way out. No doubt specifically reinforced *just* for him. But I saw his eyes then turn to the slavers watching above with rifles. He knew it as well as I did. That if he took time to destroy the door, he'd be gunned down.

When I had first met Brimstone Blitz, it had been his cold and calculated practicality that had terrified me beyond anything else. That capability for intelligence through the frenzy. To think, plan and execute even while throwing all control to the wind to brutalise that which stood in his way. Here again I saw that. His eyes found something else as he travelled to the side, viewing a cell full of ponies.

Glimmerlight saw it too. Banging her hooves on the cell, crying her eyes out as she screamed and begged him from afar. To no avail, I saw him turn to the cell, slowly trotting toward the place all those slaver assistants had tried to hide in. The place they had *trapped* themselves in.

“Brim! BRIM! Don't! PLEASE! You're better than this! You're BETTER!”

He didn't hear...or he didn't care. Even as the guards above finally realised his plan, it was too late to aim and fire before he charged. Braying his war cry, the raider warlord disappeared into the cell before the horrified screams started. I couldn't even see it, but I could hear all too clearly the crunch of bones, wet splats of blood and every body aching crash amidst the whirling movements in the dark around a dark red behemoth that began to systematically and mercilessly *slaughter* the assistants.

One even managed to get past him, bearing a crushed cheekbone and staggering out on three legs, his fourth was...

Oh Goddesses.

I had to turn to throw up even as the assistant collapsed in a red pool, squealing for the help that would never arrive in time to save his life. I heard Glimmerlight sink down at the bars, wailing as loud as she could for him to stop.

Up above, panic reigned. They saw a large portion of their workforce being massacred and struggled to bring their weapons to bear. Slavers ran all across the upper level, none daring enter the Plaza to reach its new built bridges. But Brimstone had chosen his plan well and the inside of the cell was hid so tightly away from the balcony that they could never reach him. Eventually, perhaps in desperation, I heard the order shouted. 'Get in there!'

Hooves clattered down stairs. I heard rifles cocked and shotguns racked. I wanted to warn him, to shout out and tell him to stop! But I could only sit back, witnessing powers and authorities *far* beyond that of my place in the world act out unstoppably before me.

The main Plaza door swung open and Brimstone was there to meet it. Blood splattered across his body, pupils dilated from the adrenaline and thundering forward he rushed for the doorway. Two slavers who galloped in were simply crushed below his hooves. Ribcages snapped as Brimstone simply ran over them as the third tried to retreat and close the door. With one mighty swing, Brimstone slammed it shut himself and crushed the pony in the door frame. Retching as he screamed, the slaver became a door block to all his colleagues trying to pull him inside and seal it.

No chance.

He tore it from their hooves, swinging it open and disappearing through it. I heard everything. Gunshots went off, slavers shouted for reinforcements and to *'Just fucking shoot him!'* Flares of gunfire lit the area just outside the door and the smell of gunpowder reached my nostrils. But the violence only kept going on, slavers ran back into the Plaza pulling their brutalised comrades to escape the carnage that went on behind those doors. I heard the sound change, moving further away...higher up. Crashes, raging cries and sounds of walls and all furniture being absolutely destroyed in his path simply went higher and higher...he'd found the stairs!

Glimmerlight pulled aside one of the broken bars, bucking the doorway over and over as it taunted and teased her with only *just* not opening. I was frozen, listening to Brimstone fulfilling his very promise by sound alone in the distance. No, wait! Not further! They were-

A squeal of terror sharply cut the Plaza as a slaver crashed down from the balcony before going utterly silent in a crumpled heap. Even *my* recent mind couldn't think too deeply as my eyes were drawn upwards to see the sudden light of gunshots and debris of battle combined upon the balcony. Slavers appeared now and again, dozens of voices! Brimstone was taking on the *entire Mall alone!*

But there was another voice, I only heard it for a few seconds in the distance. Swearing and accompanying a titanic crash of two huge ponies wrestling back and forth. I saw My Master back toward the balcony! Then Brimstone's head briefly appeared before they both disappeared again!

What was-

All my thoughts ceased at the sight that occurred. Charging forward, ramming My Master ahead of him in a crushing tackle, Brimstone Blitz screamed bloody murder and came *rushing* off the edge, My Master below him as the pair flew into thin air! Hanging for a second before my wide eyes, surrounded by the broken remnants of the balcony's marble barrier, the two biggest ponies in my life arced and fell from Brimstone's rampage down multiple storeys. Tumbling, spinning...My Master was on the bottom as they landed, obliterating the surrounding wall of the fountain and sending a thud

through the ground so hard I felt my insides *judder*.

Water poured out, washing through the rock dust that had kicked up around them that cleared to the sight of the most ferocious raider in perhaps Equestrian history unleashing all that anger upon one pony. Guttural shouts and curses on every movement, Brimstone beat My Master into the *ground*, grabbing his head and slamming it repeatedly off the fountain's remaining structure. Only pausing to slap aside any attempt to fight back, I saw that my thought of them as huge equals was not even close. Brimstone was straight up *destroying* him! Blood poured from both My Master's head and Brimstone's mouth, whether from injuries or ripping attacks before or simply from biting himself in the frenzy!

Slavers *swarmed*. From all sides, they leapt upon him. Whips, clubs, shock rods and even *buckshot* flew into Brimstone's body without any apparent effect! Three slavers were grabbed and hurled across the Plaza from straying too close. One of the heftier raiders was dropped with a solid butt from Brim's skull before throwing himself back at My Master. Taking note of the water he shoved the Slave Master's head beneath it, aiming simply to drown the slaver!

“COWARDLY BASTARD!”

Dragging him out, Brimstone slammed a hoof into his chest and threw him right back underwater, hooves cutting into his throat!

“I WILL MAKE YOU SUFFER, YOU FUCKING SADIST!”

Hooves slammed down again and again even as he held the struggling slaver's face below water. My Master's hooves battered at Brimstone, cutting him on his hoof's edge, bruising with his own huge strength but ultimately not doing anything to penetrate the blood rage that had overtaken my friend.

The slavers finally got their act together. Glimmer cried out as she saw three high powered rifles brought to bear.

“Fire! Fire!”

“BRIM!” Glimmer bucked *hard* upon the cage, jarring it, but not quite getting it open!

He paid no heed, veins standing out and shaking his victim beneath him.

“YOU ARE NOTHING YOU-”

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

The raider was flung to the side, struck three times along his torso with enough force to make him buckle, stagger and fall. Collapsing into the pouring water out of the fountain that was washing

over and mixing with the blood spilled all around, Brimstone dropped.

With a clang, *finally* the cell door sprung open! Glimmer galloped out and...not knowing what I was doing, I followed. I saw her make a beeline for Brimstone, putting herself between him and the slavers. I only got a few feet before I felt somepony grab me from behind.

“Come here, runt! We'll need a little insurance!” A whiny and nasal voice...Wormtail!

I felt a barrel pressed against the side of my head...and I went very still.

Brimstone was getting to his hooves again, *somehow*. He was clearly hurt and bleeding profusely but still limping forward to continue.

“Stop! Raider! You don't want him hurt? Well, how about this?” Wormtail cried out, pressing the muzzle harshly into my ear, making me whine.

Across the crowded Plaza, past the battered and exhausted slavers, the barely moving heap of My Master in the fountain and the tear stained Glimmerlight pleading for Brimstone to stop...I saw him finally give pause.

There was a silence between them, the gurgling of water as it flowed around the unmoving and brutalised form of My Master, drawing his lifeblood with it. Limbs flopped, his messed mane floated over the fountain's surface. He had just been absolutely torn into, an example of Brimstone's capability when truly angered.

Growling lowly however, Brimstone stood his ground from my situation.

“Let...him...go...”

“So you can break me? Hah! Move one hoof forward and your little stunt earlier won't mean *anything!*”

I simply stared at Brimstone, seeing the willpower it took him to resist the urge inside driving him to keep fighting. He didn't take one step forward...but did move backward, turning to put a dent in a cell before using it to lean on.

“Sick bastards...he is *innocent!*”

No, no Brimstone. I'm not innocent, I'm a *slave*. Please understand, doing what they want is what I was *meant* to be doing. I don't want it but I'm not worth ruining things fighting over. I only wished I could dare speak out of turn to tell him.

Wormtail didn't have to answer...for in a splutter of water and thick blood My Master rose from the fountain before falling back in...his body failing him to land spread eagled and coughing thick wads of bloody spit up all too similar to me. Yet even on his back, strewn in injured ruin...he *laughed*. He laughed *long* and he laughed *loud*. Arrogant, *triumphant* and utterly satisfied.

“*I told you! HAHAAAAA!*” He turned to my friends, twisting shattered teeth through a sick grin. I saw Brimstone's pain in his eyes mixed with the anger, dearly wanting to cave the slaver's skull in.

“I told you! Told you I'd find a way to *hurt you! BAAAHAA!* You remember? You said there was *no way*, raider! But there was! That runt fucking *pegasus* got into your big 'tough' heart, raider and I have him set to be *ravaged* just to show you that there's no beating your Master! He will *always* find a way to punish you for trying to act high and bloody mighty before him like you have a choice!”

He coughed, falling out of the fountain and beating slavers away as he came to his hooves and clearly struggled to get up.

“Now you'll get to die knowing just *who* controls who hurts and who lives around here, raider!”

“**You...fucking...monster!**”

Brimstone clearly made to charge, but my throat constricted from the hoof around it to the point I shrieked at hearing the trigger mechanism of the pistol against my head tighten. The massive earth pony ceased, growling lowly.

He...he did it all *just* to get at Brimstone.

He *used* me like his personal weapon to hurt my friend. Just some tool, some *belonging* My Master possessed to use however he wanted for whatever end!

Just like I was being *used* now like the pathetic and incapable slave I was to keep Brimstone in check. The horrible thing was part of my mind was only telling me this was supposed to be my role. Just a slave. A slave who strayed too far from his purpose.

“Heh...you just **stay there, raider!** Slavers! Restrain him and find him some healing potions, he'll need them.” My Master limped toward the door before turning back and speaking loudly after spitting upon the floor. “For the disobedient *slave* Brimstone Blitz will be sent to die in *the Pit* later today for your amusement and to show that you do *not* disobey in *my Mall!* Get him in the strong cell till it's time, go!”

That was that. Even as Brimstone, Glimmerlight and I found each other's faces I just couldn't keep up with the conflicting emotions of anger, guilt, pain and despair between the three of us.

All I knew was that I just wished I had fell from that control tower long ago and maybe none of this would have happened.

* * *

Even the day was dark. Some slaves that had returned from trawling the hillsides outside Fillydelphia for scavenged materials were claiming they could see the end of the storm coming near in the great blanket of clouds above. But for now Fillydelphia was still firmly locked in its embrace. Beneath the rain, pools of water formed in the Plaza under a harsh battering on the metal roof above us.

Thankfully, this darkness only aided me.

The lock hadn't been repaired on our cell yet. Awaiting a chance, I had sneaked out to try and find him. It wasn't hard, most slavers had retreated from the Plaza to treat the wounds or say a goodbye to their comrades who had not survived Brimstone's onslaught. Frankly, I thought, the fact that they'd not simply killed him on the spot was a miracle in itself. Presumably My Master wanted the drawn out nature of the Pit.

The huge bars just ahead marked where they'd taken him. Slowly, creeping hoof by hoof...I shifted up to them while trying to ignore the fear of being within reach of him. Oh come on, Murky, I chided myself. That's stupid to think! He's your friend! Your...friend.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness well, seeing the massive shape of him near the back of the cell. Sitting down and hunched over, completely unmoving. His head turned when I tapped lightly on a metal bar with a hoof. The sound was tinny and weak, nothing compared to the thick sound of him rising to approach the front with those immensely thick shackles around his hooves dragging under him.

“Murk.” A simple and rather curt greeting. “You should be in your cell with Glim.”

Shuffling on my hooves, I glanced back at the cell I'd left, before shaking my head.

“She's re-watching one of the orbs from before that we looked at. Trying to distract herself I think.”

“All the same you need your rest more than ever right now. I don't need the rot to tell me how sick you look. It's like you've just switched off upstairs a bit, lad.”

No...no I'm fine. This is just how you're *meant* to see me, tired and blurring life by...nothing but a slave.

“I'm fine...”

He snorted, the rush of air blowing my mane to one side.

“Your very coat is falling out in places, Murk. I can *see* how pale you are beneath it. The bones on your legs are visible with malnutrition. You are **not** fine after what they put you through just to get at me.”

A low growl accompanied the words, gritting his teeth before the big raider slumped down...anger extinguished to simmer below the surface. Looking at my legs, trying to keep my mind from thinking about the conditions of me inside, I leaned on the bars.

“My Master would probably have done it anyway. I...I think. It's horrible...but he asks and I have to obey. J-just how it is for a born slave.”

I felt myself welt up a little. Brimstone only snorted again, blowing my mane in the other direction even after I'd fixed it.

“I just don't get why you want to let him control you. I don't get it at all. Maybe it's just what we're born as. Slave and raider. But I won't see you just giving yourself up to all that. To him or to life. Just...just fucked up. With my life, that's saying something. At least I chose to do all I did.”

“Sorry...”

His head turned sharply, before just sighing and shaking his head. I really was sorry though! Sorry that he didn't understand. Maybe because he'd actually had a life. Tasted what freedom was even if what he'd chose to do with it wasn't right. Perhaps that's why he didn't understand why the only choice any slave ever had was when it should end.

But I had to ask the question that had been on my mind.

“Will you, um, be okay in the Pit? It's like before, I'm scared Brimstone.”

He gently lay against the bars, as though sitting beside me.

“Just been sitting here thinking the same. Maybe once I could say for sure, but this body's getting on a bit, Murk. Shackles won't make it easy, probably round up what's left of the Big Four. You've seen Barb, he was my *lesser* in a Clan that rewarded brutality and bloody spectacle but you saw how dangerous he was. The others are here too.”

“I...I've met Wildcard.”

Brimstone's head whipped around to me, eyes containing a concern and a fury. I hopped back from the bars like I'd suddenly seen Barb appear behind him, the anger catching me off guard. My nervous feelings flying up. Shivering and feeling so weak, I tried to force myself to sit down again.

“**Wildcard?** That maniac? You are lucky to be alive, where?”

I told him, explaining the incident with the meeting and later on with Sunny, my tone low and without much spark in it, something I knew Brim spotted. But his eyes narrowed as he heard how Wildcard was working with My Master to some extent too. Clearly the notion that the “Big Four” and the slavers were further in league was not a happy one to him.

“He is one of the more dangerous, as much as Barb could be for sure. I don't know how Shackles managed to secure him to do anything. Took me beating his face into a rock eight times over two months before he finally saw me as leader and did what he was told. Nasty sod. The power of a combat unicorn with the body of an earth pony and one fucked up mind that didn't give two flying shits about pain or danger. You *avoid* him, Murk. Don't ever try to predict him or trick him.”

“D-do you think he'll be in the Pit?” Quaking, I rubbed one leg with my hoof.

“Almost certainly. If he knows I'm in...he'll be there. This is still a fight, aye, but Shackles will try to make it an execution.”

I hesitated a second, but part of me was curious. Raising my voice up, tiny in front of his deeper tone.

“Who were the others? The Big Four, I mean?”

As though realising he was resigned to not much but me to talk to about his past, Brimstone rolled out his neck and settled back, looking rather grim.

“Barb was the youngest of them...but he had his uses in ways I'm sure you know well enough. Wildcard was too damn dangerous to not let be in charge, he'd been a warband chieftain long before I took them over with his own drugged up crazy lot. The others?”

He scratched his chin with a hoof, the chains clanking.

“Well, not all were ponies. Had a great big minotaur. Big Brutus, we called him. Wandered into the camp one day and challenged me. Tough fucking fight. Couldn't make him anything but one of the four after that.”

Big Brutus?!

“I...I met him too!”

The look on Brimstone's face was almost funny in its sudden look of surprise.

“M-Master Grindstone has a minotaur called that! His bodyguard! He even chased me once...he was at that meeting too all um...cy...cyba...cybamentinic! Like, robot arms!”

I waved my front legs about a little, as though trying to demonstrate what I meant, before realising how silly that seemed from the lack of any change on Brim's face and pulling myself back in. A little slave instinct told me to quit drawing attention to myself. Gutted inside, I couldn't quite beat it back down.

“Bionics? Sounds like him. Always was pretty determined to find a way to make himself stronger than me. Wildcard may have challenged more times but that was just for fun to him. Brutus was the *real* leadership challenger. Following Grindstone though? That doesn't make any sense...Big Brutus *hated* being led. Those enhancements must have done something to his brain.”

Brimstone snorted again, flipping my mane backwards to expose my forehead and that accursed scar. I tried to snort back when I corrected it, but simply sounded akin to a filly's sneeze.

“Probably a good thing, he's better off not being ambitious anyway. But he was already a nightmare for those before him, with bionics he would be a fell foe indeed.”

“So, who was the last?”

An odd look came about him.

“The last...now there was an interesting pony. Not a straight up fighter, but he was the one who kept us all going. Clan that big? Needs somepony who can know where to get the food, the kit and where's good to go and chib when we needed something. Fancy thinking stallion called Rough Diamond who dealt with all that and who got what. Well, once me and the others got their choices from any loot anyway. Even raiders have a bit of organisation, but he was the one who did it.”

I was sat suddenly wide eyed. Glimmer's memory ha-had had a stallion she'd called “Diamond” in the time before the raider's attacked!

Oh no...*oh no*...

“Basically, Diamond would go out, find out what he could as a trader and then bring us in when he felt the time was right. Sometimes even open a gate from inside if Barb wasn't around to do it. No-pony fucked with him even if he was a piss poor little wee thing for fighting by raider standards. Cos' if you did, you had me to break your skull. He was too valuable, intelligent minds don't often find

raider clans.”

Do I tell him? Do I ask? He hadn't mentioned Glimmer, he'd said he wasn't involved in Creaky Hollow's destruction when they destroyed Coral's home! Oh, I didn't know. I had to be vague, find out more before I risk causing another incident here.

“Is...is he at the Pit?”

Brimstone shook his head.

“Nah. He's long dead now. When I got to Creaky Hollow I found him among the bodies. Happens sometimes, got a new raider up soon after but we were caught by Red Eye within days so it doesn't matter. Always was an odd stallion, Diamond. Never quite fitted in with us, little sassnach I used to call him.”

“...a what?”

Brimstone blinked, before chuckling in that gravelly deep voice.

“Lowland born. Wee of body and flighty of tone. Quiet and not like us, he'd sit off or go elsewhere when the brutal shit started. Probably why he often got trusted by settlements more than any of us with that silver tongue of his. Got on well with him, probably the only one I didn't expect to backstab me. Made me wonder what his game was being in a raider clan sometimes.”

Brimstone rubbed his chin.

“Whatever, he's maggot food now. The Goddesses can judge him for the liar he was. Right now I only need to think on what they will think of me. *That's* what I've really been thinking on. Whatever happens tomorrow, if I were to die in a Pit of rage and violence in front of ponies who would see my life end as justice. Is that enough for the Goddesses above?”

There it was. What sounded like curiosity I could hear the tone of fear underneath. Not a fear of anything bad or scary, but a fear of himself and with what the Goddesses would see in this brutal figure for his life. But that was a lot to think on. Rough Diamond was one of the Big Four! It was starting to come together, or was it? I hardly knew the full tale.

Looking up, seeing Brimstone, I had enough things to concentrate on right now rather than something I couldn't change as he spoke.

“I cannot ever allow the rage to take me again, no matter what happens. I have done enough damage by letting the Dragon roam free. Even if it robs me of my fighting spirit I will *not* fall to that ever again.”

“The Goddesses are kind, Brim. You helped me and-”

“Is it enough? Go to the wastes and watch every fucking settlement be afraid of me. Look at the fifty plus years of killing, torturing, looting, raping and burning that I caused upon hundreds of lives. At all the slaves in here because *I sold them in*. That's all I wonder, when is it enough? At what point will I be forgiven and at what point I could forgive *myself* for what I am? Just a rage filled old pony with a life of death behind him.”

Brimstone sighed.

“I cannot allow that rage to control me again...not for anything. For fighting or for anger...never again.”

Once more, we went a little silent as I curled up near the bars to stay in the shadows. I never knew the words to say that would help things...so the most I could do was simply be there to listen to him. However Brimstone turned to look down and toward me, softening his face.

“Murk, you grew up with the Goddesses in your belief, didn't you?”

“Y-yes. My mother taught me it. S-she said that where she grew up they all believed it.”

“What...” He paused. “What do they do after you die, Murk? On the eve of a great challenge, from the scant knowledge I have has to ask. What does this faith of yours tell is judged for a pony when they fall?”

Shifting to sit up, I blinked a few times and rambled through my patchy memory to try and recall it. I remembered the prayers through repetition and desperation but what happened after death wasn't something I'd thought on in a long *long* time.

“Well, m-my mother told me that it was like a rush? A release?” Taking a breath, I felt a few memories pick up, words of wisdom on the mercy of the Goddesses. “That as it happens...as life ends and the darkness comes to your vision, it will flow around your senses and leave you as you were dying, awaiting the peace to sooth any pain.”

My voice began drifting, closing my eyes. Imagination of it all beginning to soar and truly remember my mother's teachings.

“A moment of calm to reflect on that it has happened alone. You will be left to your dying moment for reflection before the Goddesses above, mighty Celestia and watchful Luna will come from on above to stand by you. As the world recedes like a silver fading veil they will be there to comfort and ease your passing when they carry you into the great sky as mercy for your lived hardship.”

The world had faded to just Brimstone and myself. His presence was easy to hear with my eyes closed, clearly sitting and thinking on it.

“There, when they have arrived where the sun and the moon spiral eternally...they will turn to you and...either one or the other will speak. Asking you about the life you have led and you will answer truthfully...for they know lies from honesty. It takes as long as it takes, until they have heard all. It is not judgement but simply a process before they will lead you to a new place in peace. What you tell of your own life will no doubt make you think and change before you are left under their watchful rule in a new world.”

I sniffed, wiping an eye.

“Some place out of reach from all chains of birth, far beyond the stars in a place not so different to the world you know. You might see the same lands or maybe your home, but it is where past and present might be reunited through a new journey you shall take to find the friends and family you left behind within a better world than what you left. To seek them out and be together again after your escape. That's what she told me, I mean, I...I think...”

Bowing my head, I leaned on the bars, hearing Brimstone shift. Softly, one of his giant limbs reached through to settle around me. The moment it touched me, I couldn't help but flinch and jump. Gritting my teeth and feeling guilty, I fought past the my shattered nerves to not pull away. A friend, Murky...a *friend*.

“Aye, then they shall hear my life and look sternly upon my brow, but I shan't hide from them. Thank you, Murk. No matter what tomorrow brings, if it has to happen I will gladly tell my life at their behest.”

Without much indication, he reached over the drew a small bowl of the rank food they'd handed him. Too small for his needs, but he slipped it through to me.

“You need this more than I do. Go on.”

Looking up at the big raider with wide eyes, I pushed myself into his awkward embrace through the bars. Under the quiet time of rest in this early morning amongst the Mall, interrupted only by the sobs and moans from various cells, I just lay shivering beside him at the bars and finishing the food he had given up for me.

“I don't want anything to happen to you in there, Brim...”

“What happens, happens. Glimmerlight will always be there for you. If it's time for me to meet the Goddesses then I shall still look upon you all from on high. Now go, Murk. Glim needs you just as

much as you need her.”

I didn't go immediately, but spent time shivering and trying to wish I could rest there without being eventually spotted. Only when the clatter of keys in locks signalled a slaver patrol coming near was I finally forced to break away and creep back to my own cell.

Behind me, lowly from the cell, I could almost have sworn I heard that deep voice of his murmuring unsure words.

A prayer.

* * *

“This has all happened before, Murky. Don't you worry.”

Glimmer reached across and gently ruffled my mane with a thin smile. We were sitting in the back of our cell. My belongings had been left here. Allegedly Blunderbuck had retrieved them from storage when My Master had rid his office of them. My journal, Pipbuck, saddlebag and the statuette Unity had given me at least anyway. Anything else was either in the armoury or storage chambers. My fleece, I had heard, was beyond repair after being used as a cleaning rag by My Master. The sting of loss for that warm companion I'd had to hide my pitiful wings since my first attempt ran deep.

The statuette I hadn't dared look at. I'd simply stored it in my saddlebag. It didn't truly mean what it used to anymore.

As such, possessing my journal again, I'd sat staring at a blank page, not sure what to draw. Or even if I could.

Truth was, I was being quiet and still. So much so I was sure Glimmerlight was rather concerned at my mental state. I didn't blame her, seeing the slave instead of the pony, the slave who'd sought the only choice he could ever make not a few hours ago.

“R-really?”

“Oh yes.” She nodded. “Brimstone's been through the Pit three times now. Four if you include where you met him. Every time he had to fight. Every time he completely destroyed them. Brim'll be...okay.”

I heard a hesitation, it was fairly obvious what it was. Brimstone had faltered, fallen back into the murderous pony he'd been once more. Biting my lip, I sat up and turned away from my journal to more properly face her.

“Are, um, you okay, though?” My voice sounded raspy. Truth be told I was feeling quite weak of limb and dizzy. Only scant thought to not make things worse than I had already was keeping me from trying to show how badly I could feel that...*thing*, swelling in my lungs.

Glimmerlight kept smiling, but only with her mouth. Eventually, seeing me looking up, her ears drooped and her head dipped. Like a mask falling off, I saw just how hurt she was from what had happened.

“He...he hit me. Just to get me out of the way. It didn't hurt, not like a strike but he just threw me aside. He's *never* done that. I haven't seen him like *that* since...well, y'know?”

Her hoof lazily gestured to her small bag of memory orbs before she lay back against the sofa, hissing in pain from her whipped back before settling on her haunches.

“Brim *killed* all those ponies, Murky. Just slaughtered them, defenceless and just trying to stay out the way. Not *every* pony in here is evil! They didn't deserve that, I knew a few of them by *name* from bringing us food! Ponies like Blunderbuck could have been in there...folks like him are just good ponies in a bad place with no way out the same as us. I...”

She sniffed, wiping her eyes.

“I want to forgive him but it's just turning into an urge. To reach for an orb and just...let it go. Go back to only remembering him as he was. Emotions clashing with temptation. An addiction of sorts making me weak. Sorry, I've not been as happy as I like to be lately.”

Picking up my blanket, I huddled up beside her, placing it over her back as much as my own. Brimstone had told me to be there for her and though I would have done it even without his wishes...I wasn't about to let him down. All the same, Rough Diamond was a harsh topic, one I didn't want to bring up lightly, yet one that bore down upon me. The stallion who she thought she'd loved was nothing more than Brimstone's raider spy taking advantage of Glimmer's casual nature. No wonder Coral Eve was angry.

But I had to believe for Glimmer, believe that she could come past this, find the truth and put an end to that chapter of her life. It was for those reasons I picked up her bag of orbs before sitting beside her too.

“If...if you're feeling bad about wanting to use orbs and get rid of things, maybe do the opposite? M-maybe trying to find out more will h-help you distract yourself and...and come closer to working through it?”

She looked weakly at me, then at the orbs piled in her bag. Then she giggled and laughed, trying to force it through the hurt on her face.

“So if this one's another tonsil tennis session, you'd be alright? You seemed a little flustered last time, maybe if it was a certain unicorn we know...”

I simply sat quietly, before I realised that was humour. Goddesses! I just felt *numb* to the core that I couldn't even take in a tease from Glimmer! Letting her words run through my head again, seeing her concern, I felt the harsh pang of reality hit home. I doubted I'd ever think of her the same way again.

“Oh...um...I don't think she'd ever-”

“Pfft, who said *she*?” Glimmerlight pushed a grin through a split dry lip that had long gone without enough moisture. Looking up, she saw me blink and only get it after a few seconds before giving a knowing wink as I baulked.

“I...I...uh, um...mares!”

“Sure, lil'bro, sure...”

Leaving me to have my mind racing on the words to tell her that I liked mares (Honest! Really!), I saw her digging around the little glowing spheres. How she told the difference between orbs was beyond me, I just saw colours. But then it was her talent after all. Laughing as I blushed and hugging me tight with a kiss to the forehead I could do little but appreciate the kind gesture. It reminded me of better things about contact between two ponies when my mind was fighting the hateful imagination of something much more vile.

“Th-thanks...” My voice felt weak while she dug out an orb.

“Hey, I may be the gal who is more than happy to tease the clothes off somepony...but even I know when you're hurting, Murky. Just...just try to not think about it, I'm so sorry it happened.” She lifted the orb in her magic, a pale pink sparkling one. “Let's just drift away for a bit, alright? Go someplace else...fight another battle to find out what really happened. Forget about the one we're losing in here. That sound better?”

Gently, feeling my emotions on a knife edge as they were right now, I nodded. It did sound good, being able to see another life and pretend I wasn't a pet slave for a while...

Settling down beside me, keeping the blanket over us, Glimmerlight brought the orb to between us before her horn's light from telekinesis shimmered and grew.

“Just let go for a while, you need the break, Murky...”

oooOOooo

Things didn't change much.

In the world I'd left I was snuggled under a blanket with my sis', but the feeling didn't disappear as I felt myself enter a larger and stronger body than my own. Somepony was still snuggled into me.

Murmuring happily, Glimmer opened her eyes to find she was huddled up under a blanket outdoors under the night sky. Well the dark clouds in calm weather anyway. The light wind with the night's chill was positively *refreshing* after the stuffy and furnace like atmosphere of Fillydelphia, the clean air filling my lungs as she breathed gently.

Huddled up with her was an earth pony, Rough Diamond.

A strange sensation, for sure. I wanted to tense up yet she only relaxed further. He lifted drowsy eyes in return and offered a warm smile.

“Hey there, my pink dream.” His informal and smooth voice cooed out, stroking her side. “We've got hours yet till dawn, y'can sleep if y'want...”

“Nah,” Glimmer rubbed her eyes with a hoof, before toying with his thick brown mane and giggling, “I'm happy just here...never was one for lying around. Better to be up and active. Fixing something, doing one of a dozen little things I know. Jack of all trades I can be when I want to. Just get bored easily.”

“What like?”

“Oh *everything*, helping with the crops, prospecting the hills, learning to shoot with my mouth, how to cook or even just playing with all sorts of technology. Oh, and massage, can't forget massages, I know that too.”

I felt her eyebrows wiggle, making Diamond laugh.

“I'll have to remember that one someday! Be more comfortable on a bed though, such a pity you're not allowed to take me there. I'd love to see this peaceful place you talk highly of. Maybe meet your friends, Coral Eve and her son? They sound lovely.”

Glimmerlight lightly tapped him on the head with her hoof.

“You know fine I can't until I bring them around to you, hun. I could say the same in return for your caravan.”

Diamond rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes. But really, that's not a good idea. They don't like folks seeing their full stock, you know? We have to maintain some degree of our secrecy. Plus, the boss is...well, to put it simply, I'm the good guy while he's the one who hashes out the *really* tough deals, let's just say. Doesn't take no for an answer.”

“Sounds like a swell stallion.” Glimmer muttered sarcastically, stretching as she got up. I could see her eyes dart towards somewhere for only a second while Diamond's back was turned, probably the location of Creaky Hollow...but the thick woods even when dead hid the dull spotlights they used to see. “You traders should be careful though, our scouts spotted a *huge* raider warband in the area yesterday. They say that it might be him. The Dragon.”

Rough Diamond got up, walking to the edge of the hill they'd chosen to lie upon and placing a hoof over her shoulder.

“Don't y'worry about me and the boys, love. We know how to avoid them, good caravan drivers can outrun anypony on foot if we've got a mind to and we've got enough firepower to see them off. Like my trusty little piece over there.”

He nodded toward his pack, where a bolt-action rifle lay propped against a tree. Even I with all my unknowing of weapons and specifics could see it was very well maintained, despite clearly being remade a few times from various woods and metal pieces. The stock of the gun bore a chipped in symbol of his cutie mark. Presumably just to identify it as his. Glimmerlight's eyes ran all the way from one end to the other and I could feel the approval on her face at the fine piece.

“I had noticed, I'd ask to take a few shots, but the timberwolves go after sound around these woods. Still, you should let me toy with her. Take her home for a bit and I'll give her a work over and upgrade for you in exchange for some orbs, maybe?”

Diamond laughed, pulling his mouth closer to her ear and whispering, “Not a chance, she's the other love of my life and I don't think she likes threesomes or swings the same way you do.”

Glimmer snorted and laughed, playfully pushing his head away with a hoof.

“Aah, ya silly buck. Keep her all to yourself then, just wait till she desperately needs to go to some war and you'll wish your pal Glim had given her the once over with Steel Ranger trained techniques! Give me a good platform and I'll make her something incredible. But really...take it safe out there. Those raiders were *awful* close to the main roads out of here. You get that boss of yours to stay clear of them and stick to the hills, it's safer there.”

Diamond nodded a few times as she spoke. “Don't worry, he listens to me. I've...well, I've been trying to talk him into a few things lately. Honestly, he's big and nasty but sometimes I feel there's something else in there. He's a pony you could trust to do something. I dunno...no-one else seems to

see it but I keep thinking he's got another side under all the anger that makes him deal so harshly. Heck, he took me in and the trade caravans are usually all about the stern merciless dealers, y'know?"

Glimmer nodded, leaning forward to kiss him on the cheek. "I don't imagine you get to be in charge if you can't recognise somepony's worth. Like, gauge them at a glance. Hell, I do that too! Just instead of gauging the size of your capability I gauge the size of your pe--"

"Heeey!" A smirk as he playfully butted in.

"Whaaaat? I was gonna say personality." An innocent look.

"Sure." A deadpan stare.

"Honest!" A bright smile.

"P' and 'e' don't even sound the same for 'personality' compared t'what *you* said." A rise of his eyebrows as he leaned in.

A few seconds passed of them looking at one another, before I felt Glimmer's mouth unable to avoid jerking and giggling...before both just burst into laughter.

"Ah, Glim. Hahaha! You know, I've been to a dozen villages over the years, met a good few mares along the way, I admit. Not that you're one to talk."

She seemed to shake out her mane proudly. No shame at all.

"Good fun with many but I don't think I've met any as downright *fun* or interesting as you. I admit, I look forward to coming here every time. I don't mind admitting that I wouldn't perhaps overlook asking that when the trades are done if you could see about me coming to live, y'know...permanently? Part of me wants out of this trade, find someplace quiet to get away from the harsh life it entails. Things you see...I think I'm just wanting out of it."

Glimmer seemed a little taken aback...I felt her front hooves trying to hide the little nervous pacing they made.

"Well, I'm not going beat about the bush here, Diamond. I'm not a mare who's used to the whole 'settling' with one person, y'know? At least yet! I'm young, free and I left that stuffy bunker to just go out and do what I wanted until the time came to think about anything more. But, it'd be nice to have you around, y'know? Besides, beds are comfier right?"

She smirked. Truth be told, I had to feel even a *little* happy to see the playful teases until I remembered who this was she was speaking to. That Diamond was seeking any way he could to get

that village location out of her! He really was a master at this, his face looked *genuine!*

“I'd love that. Now, I've got to go in a few hours, so let's get something to eat and see about making a trade for some of those orbs, huh?”

Glimmer nodded, trotting toward their discarded packs for the brief meeting in the woods.

“Yeah, I've been running low lately, lots of things to get out! Better out than in, right? But here, first? I got you something...”

She began to rummage in her pack, watching Diamond for a second to take in the shocked surprise at this gift. Slowly, she drew out a long bullet. The tip of it glowed light blue from a soldered and filed down rough join. It reminded me of the things she'd stuck on the end of her rifle during the battles against Barb's raiders but in a much more condensed form to be fired from the gun instead.

“Glimmer...what is this? It'll fit in my rifle, I know...”

“My own personal little creation! Learned how to do so from my father, it's a small magic charge stored in the tip of a bullet drawn from a targeting talisman on a high powered energy rifle. I found one scraped around and that was all I could get. Basically, using spark connectors to channel the magic energy from it into a new small talisman that I then solder to the end of a bullet casing. Simply put, it's your wonderbullet!”

She floated it over to him with her magic, Rough Diamond taking it in his hooves.

“Glim...this, I mean...you're giving me it?”

She laughed, bopping him on the head.

“Course I am, you silly thing! Now it's channelled with the power and accuracy of a high intensity energy weapon's targeting system spell, so it'll fly truer than any bullet you've got and detonate on striking. They're impractical as hell because the stuff they come from is so rare and often put to better use elsewhere. So if you ever fight anything too tough to kill, anything that's got you on the ropes and about to stop you coming back to give me a welcome home buck in the woods? This'll bring you back to me safe the one time it matters.”

It wasn't often I heard Glimmerlight being truly sentimental and heartfelt about even a loose relationship, but even I felt moved by this. Her way of showing that even if she was never going to properly settle right now she wanted him to stay safe to return to her. He simply stared at it for a few seconds.

“That's...a first. Somepony giving me something. You never see that with the boys...”

Glimmerlight grinned brightly, rubbing her nose against his. Heehee! That tickled! Stop it sis, come ooon!

“Just come back safe and I'll have a chat with Coral about seeing what I can do for when you decide to come join us and disappear from the world for a while.”

Leaning inward, I felt her lips graze his.

“I'll make it happen, you deserve a break. Trust me, it'll be absolutely stormin'!”

Her mouth pressed in further, working hard with her lips as they fell to the floor and snuggled, the blanket being drawn over even as I felt myself begin to leave her body, life and memory...

So this was confirming it. He was finding a way to get himself into the village in order to know its location for Brimstone's clan. What a *weasel!*

With the thought of what he would do to her eventually in these orbs, I could feel my heart break even now for my poor friend.

OooOOOooo

The feeling of being snuggled was still there even as I came to with Glimmer, even tighter than I remembered. Warmer...closer...rougher coat...

Wait...what?

“Morning, sunshine!” Wildcard singsonged.

There was a half second pause...before both Glimmer and I screamed in shock at the large raider snuggled in between us under the blanket. What...what I...*WHAT?!* Glimmer fell off her side of the sofa, thumping against the floor while I somehow found the body energy to propel myself up and over the back of the sofa, my kicking legs disappearing to fall in a heap upon the other side.

I heard Wildcard lounge back and yawn, had he been *sleeping* there?!

“Aah they always do that, so come on! Today's the day! It's today!”

Glimmer and I found each other around the side of the sofa, her covering me against him while the crazed raider shifted and turned to sit up on the sofa, stretching. Mid yawn, I saw those scars on his face twist and do strange things to the shape of his mouth and snout. Running his cracked hooves through his multicoloured mane he got to his hooves.

“It's early evening.” Glimmerlight muttered to him, slowly trying to back up toward the way to the front door.

Wildcard cocked his head.

“How do you know that?”

“What? It was late morning earlier and we weren't out for long in that orb so-”

“Do you *know* you were only out for a little time? What if it was...ooh!” He gasped, a hoof to his mouth. “What if it was a year? How do you *know* with nothing to prove it? Perhaps it was two days? Huh? Huh? Only makes sense right?”

He hesitated, before narrowing his eyes and trotting forward. Backed against the wall, too weak to do anything, we simply had to shiver and wait as he came right up close, looking directly at Glimmerlight. Suddenly, he sniffed sharply...then took a long sniff along her mane. I felt Glimmer *aching* to hit him before she jumped when he let his tongue lap out and lick up her cheek.

“Ahaaa!” Licking his lips as though tasting something, Wildcard leaned back and clapped his hooves. “I *thought* it was you! I remember you little missy...just needed to get the tongue going to remember!”

“Of course, you're the bastard that burned our village!” Her muscles tensed. I could feel how hard she wanted to attack him, but he was far beyond either of us.

His eyes glinted, face twisting into a more predatory glee. “Aw, c'mon I can't take all the blame. That's arrogant you know? You being a yesman-pony-mare-thing? I don't *like yesmen!* But you got in on the action too, I knooooow...it was fun wasn't it? The houses screamed! I hadn't known a house could scream, I thought they were just a house...”

“Those were my *friends!* You locked them inside to burn!”

Wildcard paused for a second, before laughing outrageously and slapping her clean from her hooves. I went with her, Glimmer's hooves around me meaning I fell upon her chest. Before I knew it, Wildcard was leaning over us, going from laughing to snarling with drool leaking through his broken lips.

“I was having fun *remembering it*, you bitch! The HOUSES screamed! I didn't want it *spoiled* that it wasn't the *houses!* FUCK YOU!”

His horn glowed, one of those brutal machetes sliding from his side sheaths. Frozen in fear, I

just clutched Glimmer whom I felt tensing, somewhere between anger and terror.

“I swear, every *time* you folks just think you know better that you gotta go ruin a pony's *dreams*, huh?! You get off on it or somethin'? Can you scream like a house? I want to hear the scream the houses made!”

He got off us, spinning the machete before immediately hacking into one arm of the sofa, sending stuffing flying everywhere. Screaming his head off, laughing and then wailing again. Finally, when the arm of the chair had been destroyed under the torrent of slices, he turned to us and grinned.

“You hear it? Did you *hear* that? That was *so cool!*”

Glimmerlight almost seemed to growl lowly.

“You're insane...what do you even *want?!?*”

“Hey, hey!” He trotted up, pointing a hoof. “You think you can order me around like some fucking slave, huh? You think you got something that says you get to order me to answer? Cos' this is my world...”

His eyes opened, going wide and letting his mouth hang open...looking down at me before letting his muzzle glance upwards toward Glimmerlight, viewing every side of her head.

“Cos' I remember *your* scream. I don't cut it out of my head, no...”

There was a chill to his words, a deliberate choice. I felt for Glimmer, I really did. What I'd been through at the hands of Barb's portion of the raider clan couldn't have been anything to what the raiders likely did to her. How did Coral even stay *sane* without stripping memories?

“What do you even *want*, Wildcard?” Glimmerlight spat the words back, I could feel she was fighting not to hit him. I wasn't surprised. But Wildcard blinked a few times and sat back.

“Oh, now you ask politely. Well why didn't you say so? It's cool, I'll forgive you, big pot of forgiveness I am! I'm just here to be nice and give you a little heads up spoiler for my Pit.” He nodded frantically. “Oh yes...just to tell you, the big red guy isn't gonna come back, y'know? Oh he's in for a good fiiiight...Shackles and I had like, this bonding session over all the fighters! He's got goood taste.”

He winked at us.

“Besides, I've got my own little surprise even he doesn't know. A Wildcard, get it? Haha! Bet you can't guess who it is!”

“I wonder.” Glimmerlight glanced to the door, lightly bumping me toward it. I'd been sat silent, simply listening and shivering quietly. Something about him felt more unsettling than normal, like some part of me was repulsed by him being even *near* me. I simply retreated into my own blank slave mentality. Just don't notice me, please.

“Well, don't guess cos' I won't tell! HAH! Anyway, go go go! They're coming to take him there and you don't wanna miss it do ya, little squealer?”

Looking down at me, I yelped and hid behind Glimmer. Wildcard just laughed, trotting away to the door. Waiting a few seconds, Glimmer followed with me in tow. Taking a few seconds to check I was all right, she just found me as I was. Numb and scared. A hoof on my shoulder, she turned to check for Wildcard through the door. Nothing. Good, I hated that pony. I just didn't know when he might decide it was fun to gut me!

“We'll be alright. He's gone now, we can-YARGH!”

Her words were cut off, Wildcard's machete coming streaking through the door in his magic to leave a ghastly slice over her shoulder. Screaming, falling to the ground and clutching the wound, both she and I turned to see him pop his head back in.

“See? You *can* scream like a house! HAAAAH!”

With that, he turned and pranced away. Leaping up to click his hooves together as he left the cell. Pulling all the rags I could off the shelves and helping her to the front of the store, we sat by the door to await the Pit convoy while tying up her shoulder. It wasn't terribly serious...by Fillydelphia standards anyway. All the same, I kept adding rags until I could stop seeing red seeping through. Shivering, sweating...Glimmerlight ruffled my mane.

“I...I think that's enough, Murky...” She breathed out and hissed in pain while I tied a knot in the bandage with my mouth and hooves, feeling my 'slave tooth' as I'd come to know it aching all the more and wobbling in its socket painfully.

Taking a few breaths, she tried to offer a smile.

“I'll be fine. He's crazy. Didn't know what he'd do. Least I can still move it...just hope I can get a potion so it doesn't scar. I don't think the Brim look suits me, huh?”

I sat quietly, nodding. Only after a few seconds did I realise she was being light hearted and tried to force a smile.

“A-are you okay? You know? Like the o-orb?”

Glimmerlight seemed to think for a second, looking across as we saw slavers start to enter. It was time.

“We've got enough worries right now for Brim, Murky. But yes...I'm alright. Just sickened that I slept with and gifted a damned *raider*. I think it's obvious to see how this is going to end. But...thanks for helping me, Murky. I couldn't do it without you being there?”

“H-huh?” I didn't understand.

“For sharing the journey like you, argh!” She adjusted her bandages, before trying to smile to me. “Like you promised. They've hurt you bad but you're still the pony I know deep down who doesn't forget the promises he makes. Without somepony there I, well, I think I'd not do another one.”

“I'm so sorry it's bad, sis'.”

“Me too, Murky.” She sat back silently, before her unhurt front leg went to her forehead. “I just feel like such a *fool*, so concerned about my own pleasure and fun that I didn't even see what was right in front of my eyes. I watch these memories and I just want to...to-fucking *hell* why can't I *ever* learn?”

As sudden as that, it was like a tidal wave of emotion coming from her.

“I wanted so *bad* just to live this free life of loving who I wanted and going where I wanted! But there's always somepony going to take advantage of it and now it's landed me in this fucking city! All because I didn't realise he was a damn raider! Coral even *warned* me and I...I just kept it up. Oh, Murky. We need to get out, I don't think I can live here forever knowing what it was I did that brought so many ponies in to die here! It's the curse of memory. Forget your mistakes and you're always doomed to make them again.”

“I, um, I...it might not be all that? M-maybe there's something else? Maybe you did figure him out but they stumbled upon it anyway! Maybe, uh, you just removed it to forget that he'd fooled you at all before?”

I was grasping at straws, I knew. She was in some state, so the best I could do was simply trot forward and put my hooves around my big sister best friend forever and remind her that she wasn't alone.

Not that we had much time for a moment of bonding.

“Right, slaves! This wretched break day is here as declared by Red Eye in his eternal 'wisdom'. You will all be back before noon tomorrow.”

My Master limped in. He was still caked in his own blood, limping with one leg in a splint while covered in bandages around his head. A huge rib compression vest was around his body. Brimstone had *really* gone to town, but My Master, like his chain, was eternal. He would always manage to find the way to get back to command. Seeing us leave our cell, he only grinned at us.

“Don't think you're getting off to visit that Pit, you've still got a shift left to run!”

Glimmerlight stepped before me, wiping her eyes and stepping up in my defence. As I'd learned lately, hurt ponies that cared were more willing than any.

“No he doesn't! Red Eye has declared a break and all up to date slaves can take it!”

“I wasn't talking to him, whore! I was ordering *you!*” He roared, striding forward and knocking me aside to shove her toward a group the slavers were organising. **“You've been sick too many times to avoid shifts that you've quite the backlog to make up for. If you wanted to watch your raider 'friend' then *perhaps* you should have thought about that!”**

“H-HEY!” She shouted, trying to move past him before being blocked off by the slavers, Wormtail included with his smug grin. “Murky! Don't go to the Pit! Not alone! *Don't go off alone, please!*”

I knew why she didn't want me going alone.

I knew why *all* of my friends thought that. That thought stung me hard, like they weren't trusting me. With good reason, I concluded.

But I felt a hoof on my shoulder, soft and gentle.

“I'll take him.”

Bruised, swollen of lip and beaten badly, Coral Eve had limped beside me, returning from her own wearying shift. I saw Glimmer look somewhat between surprised and grateful.

“You? Why? To watch Brimstone have to go through it? To watch how they try to kill-”

“I'm not going for that *beast*, Glimmer! Don't put words in my mouth. I'm going for Murk. The raider can die for all I care after what he did...but I'm not after vengeance. No, I won't let Murk wander off to think bad thoughts.” She leaned down, turning away from a somewhat shocked Glimmer. “We love you, Murk. But we're worried about you, please understand we can't take chances, for our own sanities from fretting about what you're doing out there?”

I looked to Glimmer...I looked to Coral...before I finally nodded, trying to fight back a couple of

tears. She was right. I felt so hollow, abused and violated that the thought of where I'd be taken at noon tomorrow was still scarcely sinking in.

“O...okay.”

“Good, my dear.” She looked back to Glimmerlight, receiving at least a thankful and forgiving slow nod. At least when it came to me, they could for once agree.

Behind us, I heard a great commotion. Shouting, orders and shock rods sparking I saw them dragging and leading Brimstone Blitz from his own cell, ready for the Pit. His hooves were shackled thickly with massive weights while the burliest slaves grasped him tightly. The chains were so tight that he could not do anything more than simply hobble and shift inch by inch. Clearly even at the risk of a slow and impatient journey, they were not taking *any* risks.

While My Master set to ordering the slaves yet to finish their shifts, I saw Wormtail sneer and begin to trot up to Brimstone.

“Sooo, the big nasty tough warlord, stripped of his dignity, eh?”

It was a pale imitation of My Master, the scrawny and weasel like buck simply being a cocky little shi...um...yes, that word. Brimstone merely stayed silent, lowering his eyebrows at the irritating aid before him.

“Thought you were so big to go on a rampage? Well who was it that stopped you, eh? Me! You know why? Cos' you're just soft now. The Dragon's been de-clawed that one little stupid buck is enough to make him start caring! Now look at you aaaall in chains...”

He edged close, leering.

“I'll bet you wanna hit me, don't ya? Well get used to this, because you're our slave. Get used to not doing anything! You can look down and act all tough but you're trapped! Your hooves are chained on the floor, go on and move em! Try it! You can't hurt me, I'm one of your masters now! You can't do any-”

Brimstone headbutted him.

Slowly, the slavers looked to one another, to Brimstone and then to the groaning figure of Wormtail, before simply shrugging and leading Brim away without a single punishment.

Okay. Even in these dark days, that made me laugh inside.

* * *

The fanfare and explosive sound of the Pit was like an old hated fear coming far too cleanly back to my mind.

In a convoy, we had been marched toward it through the dense smog of the city cooling off its infernos for a day of rest. The toxic stink was heightened, steam gushing from holes in the ground around us to mark the extinguished furnaces and forges. Marching past the FunFarm gates, I had seen that hateful Pinkie Pie cut out still waving with that creaky hoof perpetually. It seemed to be welcoming me home. Past the Petting Zoo and rollercoaster toward the colossal ice rink we were split up into various queues.

A building of wood and concrete, gaudy pink paint peeling from all sides and hung with long dead party lights. It rose tall, with massive gated entrances for the crowds and smaller ones on either side for, presumably, staff back in the old Equestrian times. The light from within lit the clouds above as huge floodlights aimed both in and out of the open topped roof.

Around me, relieved and excited slaves met apprehension with bloodthirsty anticipation. Cheers, whoops and great roars from those already inside being worked up by an announcer boomed across the FunFarm and hurt my ears enough that I clung to Coral while we limped inside. Slavers met us...far more than had been here last time. The tall sides for the stands were littered with makeshift guard posts bearing long rifle equipped guards watching every area of the crowd. Red Eye was taking no chances of another riot after last time, preferring to shove and push us onward to specified places rather than allow us free reign to choose our own entrance.

Even as we were thrown and forced into the tall gateway...I felt my body clench with familiar fear. Last time I'd been in chains to be sent to my death. The sweaty and filthy bodies pressed around us only kept me uncomfortable and feeling much the same way. A hoof knocking into my side, somepony's flank brushing mine or a bump from their torso was enough to set every recently imagined discomfort at somepony's proximity off that I could only whimper and press onward.

“Once you are past the gates you *will not leave* until the event is finished! All slaves are to remain within the Pit's grounds until *we* move you out!”

Calls and instructions were shouted from above, over the entrance tunnel I saw a unicorn with a loudspeaker standing upon an old security balcony.

“There is a shoot to kill policy in effect for any misbehaviour by the order of Red Eye himself!”

The entranceway widened, brightening up as the interior lights flickered over the inside ringed corridor that ran under the stands and around the entire Pit. Old stands of confectionery, fast food and souvenirs littered every side beside symbols for toilets and foal changing facilities. But most surprising of all to me? It was all *in use*.

Slavers and even slaves had taken them over to offer their wares and acquired foods or goods from their own stocks. The toilets apparently worked while the Roamer slaver bar had brought a portion of its drinks for purchase from those lucky enough to still own any caps. Slaves flocked around me, watched from above by griffins amongst the rafters that held up the stands, buying and selling frantically in a whirlwind of excitement before the event. Above me in the stands, I could hear ponies stamping their hooves and crying out in time with the counts of the announcer. The entire ring of the corridor around the Pit was a flurry of activity.

Amongst it all, I felt very small indeed.

Already, I could feel my chest tighten. This thick air inside wasn't helping me at all. My Master had given me a portion of RadAway before locking me in his office cell to ward off the rising effects from my collar but under so much stress I was sure that the effects were accelerating every time. Oh Goddesses, please don't say it's getting worse!

We didn't talk. Coral and I could barely hear each other amongst all the haggling and cheering. I was sure Sooty would be around here *somewhere*. But our attention was drawn to the biggest stand, a huge twenty foot wide raised platform bearing six ponies that were frantically taking money and only giving pieces of paper in return.

“What is that?” I muttered the words, inaudible to people, but Coral must have seen my curious glance before bending down to my ear.

“It's the betting stand!” Even for my hearing, she had to shout. “That big chalkboard behind them is all the names of ponies involved today. There's two sets of games to come because Red Eye's here to view it and the last one didn't finish!”

Even the reminder of the last one made me shiver when I looked at the chalkboard. My name had been on there once, probably with the lowest odds in Pit history. Ponies had bet *caps* on the assurance of my death.

Oh Goddesses...I wanted to be sick again.

“They're still adding the name for the second bout, Murk!” Coral shouted again, looking up at it. “But Brimstone is number three on the first set of six. The odds against him are pretty high, word must have got out that Shackles and Wildcard want him dead for sure in there!”

“Hey! Get out my fucking way, you two!”

A heavy set mare was walking right toward us, carrying a betting ticket and placing a heavy bag of caps back on her harness. She shoved right by, knocking both of us apart and sending me to the

floor.

“Watch yourself!” Coral cried out after her, receiving nothing but a rude shake of the mane when the mare deliberately ignored her. “You alright, Murky? Sorry, it's so busy in here...”

Getting back to my hooves, I coughed through closed teeth, the reason for that being all too clear when I looked up at Coral and saw her look of shock and sudden smile at what I held there.

The mare's entire bag of caps.

“S-sorry, it's, um, habit?”

“Well, well, well. Good to see you've still got it in you, Murk.” She glanced up at the betting board. “Go on then, I know you'll want to.”

They laughed when, nervous and stammering, I finally got the proper words out to be heard after waving my little hoof up at the betting platform. I was shoved from the side and make fun of for betting on the 'chosen death' by the 'big guys', but I just used all the slave mentality I could to tune it all out. Something felt wrong about betting on the deaths of others, but if brim won then it would make life a lot easier to buy supplies for our escape!

At least one pony would be supporting him in the Pit.

That was what friends did? Right?

* * *

If the ring corridor beneath was busy and loud...boy I hadn't prepared myself to remember what the stands were like.

I almost fled instantly. The second I saw that cage before me flaring memories of wailing and begging not to die beside a metal gateway came back all too strong. No longer was her escape from the Pit that hopeful memory and all that was left in my mind was that crippling terror.

This was where ponies died.

This was where I'd been sent to die.

The colossal stands rose to the edge of the ice rink stadium near the roof, open to the cloudy sky above. They were almost completely filled with ponies crammed into a small space for their numbers. Below me, floorboards creaked at the weight when we were shoved and corralled by slavers into a

specified area a few rows back from the cage itself. Ponies shunted me from either side until we sat down...even then trapped amongst a sea of bodies that stomped in time, crying illegible chants as one.

A converted ice rink, solid and grey with the ice long gone within the heat of Fillydelphia. Around it lay the cage that ensured combatants could not escape their fate of fighting to the death before ponies in the old stands.

Red Eye had been doing some upping of security, that much was obvious. The cage was repaired since last time, no longer with a roof access as last time. Griffin snipers were more prevalent, nestled in the scaffold framework holding up the roof above us while guards patrolled up and down the stairways of the stands. Above us, every so often, a Pinkie Balloon reared its freakish watchful face in the gap above as they watched the surroundings. Occasionally, a griffin would swoop overhead and make me flinch. To one side I noticed Red Eye's chair awaiting him upon a raised balcony, already packed with his inner circle. Old Grizzly was visible, the rest being a motley collection of thick and thin, tall and short. One bore what looked like a bird of prey upon his back chained to his raggedy armour that bore feathers all over it as decoration from a dozen different birds. Another elderly looking pony was actually blind by a rag around his eyes, navigating simply by touch. A couple were immaculate, decked in what looked like pre-war military dress uniform with greased manes and shining newly made rifles at their sides. All curious ponies no doubt acquired for selective skills to Red Eye's usage being treated to this day at the Pit.

I strained to see if I could spot Protégé among them, praying he was recovered. For a moment I thought I saw a black unicorn, but it was a mare bearing a cybernetic jawline and an armoured Stable jumpsuit.

But before me...the Pit.

Stained in blood till its concrete surface was varied in shades of red and grey all over, it lay behind the metal cage with the scars of past battles. Chips from gunshots, tears I recognised as auto-axe swipes and even a few bones shoved into the corners out of the way marked it. Above, twelve barrels were suspended containing weapons or hazards and linked to pressure plates beneath them.

“This is horrible...” I muttered to Coral. “Why are so many ponies here just to watch us all kill one another? I don't get it.”

Coral had actually been looking around us to the crowds.

“Well, we're here. I don't imagine some of these ponies are looking to be here for their friends too. But yes, this is a disgusting monument to Red Eye's madness. I can't take his words seriously while this place exists.”

Hearing her words, I looked at the crowd near us. There were many grinning and cheering for

the fights to begin soon. But every so often I saw some clenched in fear, holding another pony sometimes. My heart went out to them, their friends were in there as well. No matter who survived today, there would be tragedy.

“Workers of Fillydelphia! Upon this day of rest given by our leader, Red Eye, we bring to you a double helping of this popular event!”

Stern's voiced boomed across the sound system even as the crowd shouted their enthusiastic approval of this. How? How could they be so miserable and yet immediately find entertainment by this brutality? I wished I could think why, but I just hunkered down on the bench, covering my ears and leaning against Coral. I didn't like this. Too cramped. Too crowded. I needed space. Everything stank of the watered down alcohol the Roamer had brought over and of unwashed ponies crammed in while excited and active.

“But first will you welcome your master himself. The one who makes this utopia of generosity exist to further our world...Red Eye!”

One shout by Stern and there he was, walking calmly to the balcony watching over the cage. Flanked by two of the mighty green alicorns, his inner circle backed off to allow him room for his seat. By his side I saw that hateful mutt, Winter. Motioning to Stern, he took the microphone.

“My wondrous workers, it is rare I have a chance to address you all so directly, face to face rather than through the impersonal medium of a PA system. I say 'thank you' so many times, but it never quite feels the same. And thus...thank you, for your sacrifice and your willing hearts.”

Yeah...right. Even I could make a raggedy little snort about that line. Even if I had to clutch my throat and choke madly afterwards.

“I bring to you a chance for relaxation and for your own entertainment. The Pit is brutal and often tragic, but never forget its purpose as a choice for those who will it and as a punishment for those who seek to undermine your efforts. Yes, workers. There are those in this world who would take what you have shed blood and sweat for and selfishly destroy it. Let their efforts before you today act as their will to survive and once again prove themselves in your eyes, not mine. With that said, I see no reason to hold your event any longer...”

There was a huge chorus of cheering to his words. Red Eye stood, raising a hoof and seeing to look past all our eyes one by one with a carefully calculated sweep of his head around the audience. Feeling that baleful gaze come upon me, I shrank back. He was my master too. He wanted this to happen, felt it was best to raise his army and punish slaves who got out of line. That made sense, right? He was the one in charge, the one ordering my life from afar, he wouldn't be a master if he didn't know best, right?

My head hurt. I buried it in my hooves even as Coral snorted up at Red Eye and wrapped a hoof around me. Why did free will have to be so complicated? I hated Red Eye but I felt indentured to abide by his reality inside. Had I fallen so far?

Stern took up the microphone.

“As Red Eye commands, it shall be! Let the Pit event...BEGIN!”

The floor *shook*. Ponies stomped until my shaky slave tooth was wobbling and my bones seemed to rattle inside my thin chest.

“Our first contender! Hailing from Friendship City we have Top Quartz! Is she harder than her name's crystal implies? We'll have to find out! Bring her in!”

The gate at the far end of the Pit clanked and slit open to reveal the dark behind. Squinting, I could see various dark shapes behind the scared little mare being shoved out. With the door slamming behind her, I could see the visible terror on her face. She didn't want to be here. Oh Goddesses protect her.

But to get out she'd have to kill six ponies. Looking at the white and grey earth pony below, I could tell she didn't have the heart at all.

“Her opponent, all too appropriately is from that same statue of the old world! From Friendship City as well we have one disobedient slave that tried to steal food from all of you! This is Toolkit!”

The second gate slid up, a young buck hurled through it after clearly been having fighting to get away from the door. But landing on the concrete with the door closing he was trapped. Shivering, he stood and looked across to his opponent.

Then the true horror sank in. I could see it in their eyes.

They *knew* each other.

Trotting forward hesitantly, I could see their mouths moving. This close to the front, I strained my ears to block out the crowd as they shouted over the sound.

“Toolkit! No! I...I thought we'd be put on the same team!”

“I don't know! I just don't know, Tops!”

They were *friends*. Already, I shivered, my mouth hanging open and trying to form the words

to express the evil of this situation. They didn't want to fight, meeting near to the middle, they just looked from side to side, hearing the jeers and demands that they battle to the death. They were looking for a way out, a method to end this without killing the other!

The thunderous boom of an anti-machine rifle echoed around the ice rink, blowing a chunk of concrete near them apart so hard that the shrapnel made them both cry out and wince back.

“Enough delaying. Two will become one for the survival in this arena, the crowd has an expectation! If a combatant is not dead within the allotted time limit then both shall die regardless!”

No! Top Quartz and Toolkit stood around one another, beginning to panic. I couldn't hear them talking, the shakes of their heads. Toolkit began to cry. The crowd brayed for blood from the two who had no wishes to draw any from their old friend.

Gradually, I saw them begin to realise the reality of their situation. After one more warning shot, I saw Top Quartz shouting an apology as she moved forward in a terrified and unwilling charge. It began hesitantly, worriedly, but for every small attempted strike the panic grew and the other began to hit back. Survival slowly overcame friendship as a strike became a grapple and a grapple became a savage fight. Rolling upon the floor, both screaming and lashing out with little skill I felt my stomach turn.

Neither was a fighter. Neither had any idea how to kill quickly or efficiently. It would be feral, brutal and slow. One second Toolkit was on top, banging Quartz's head across the concrete. Then she recovered, swinging him over even as her vision was blocked by blood. Hoof after hoof fell, crying and screaming in equal measure.

Toolkit blocked some, lashing out with a snapping sharp hoof that knocked Top Quartz off him. He rolled off, looking at his friend streaming blood from her nose and forehead and clearly hesitating. In that moment, she was back on him, driven wild by need to live that she simply bowled over the scrawny stallion and continued her unskilled gradual killing with beating hooves.

Tears dripped from my own eyes as I heard the distinctive crack of a skull. Toolkit went limp and hazy with blood pooling beneath his head, but powered by a crazed and harshly torn mindset...Quartz only kept hitting again and again until Toolkit lay very still.

Only then did she fall backward, breathing hard...and screamed.

Against her wail of anguish at the sight of her beaten friend by her hooves before her, the crowd picked up in delight. Some threw tickets to the floor while others leapt and whooped! I heard Coral swear beside me, an unusual sound from her. This was so wrong!

“Our first victor! Survival of the fittest in this Pit, workers! Top Quartz shows her will to

survive was greater than that of Toolkit! On to round TWO!"

This was *sick*. I'd been down there but I'd never seen an actual event in this way. There were ponies *enjoying this!* I wanted to just scream out, tell them all how horrible this was!

"This time we've got Friendship City's rival Manehattan bringing us a contender! Years of working as a guard in Tenpony Tower led him to venture for a more exciting life in the wastes! Well he found it with Fillydelphia quite by accident! This is Shovels!"

The gate opened, releasing number two. Another stallion, tall and lanky with a filthy dark brown mane. A unicorn this time, he regarded the mourning mare before him with hesitation. Quartz lay over the body of her friend, as though she could bring him back to life by her light sways of his form and tears alone. I sent her and Toolkit's soul every prayer I could remember. Please, Goddesses, descend from on high and put a stop to this madness!

Coral wasn't even looking, averting her eyes in disgust.

Shovels was clearly more willing, as much as he looked aghast at this. The crowd chanted, '*KILL! KILL! KILL!*' when they saw Quartz had her back to him, making me wish I could somehow tell them I wasn't with them! I had no wish to be associated with this! If not for Brim...

Using the time, Shovels edged toward a pressure plate, pressed it and immediately leapt clear. A drawn breath amongst the atmosphere while the barrel opened...and revealed a long knife falling to bounce off the concrete and drop to the ground. The sound made Quartz turn, blood soaked face looking on with terror while Shovels picked up the knife in his green magic. Slowly, he shook his head. He was out to live, even if he frowned at how it had to happen. I saw his mouth form the quietly spoken word, too quiet for me to hear. 'I'm sorry.'

It began again, with not a shred of dignity given to Toolkit's bleeding corpse upon the ground. Shovels charged, the knife at the limits of his magic's range while Quartz only waved her hooves in desperation, pleading and screaming for him not to! Before my eyes, no quarter was given, the knife whirled forward and slashed across her chest, drawing a thick bloody stream and an agonised squeal from the mare. A buck beside me screamed almost in my ear, '*GUT HER!*'

I squeezed away from him until I was holding Coral tightly. Nearby, I saw two ponies holding each other in tears. No doubt other friends of Toolkit's.

Quartz was not going down without a fight though. Inexperienced as she was, the mare had the (still intact) guts to rush forward and catch the unicorn off guard. Running past the knife, she went for him until both of them stumbled backwards in a rough wrestling bout. The knife fell nearby as they fell to the ground, Quartz' blood blinding her opponent. Better fighter or not, he couldn't hit back blind!

Furious and desperate, he rolled her again and again. I saw them nearby to a pressure plate before their next roll carried them right over it. With a clang, the lock on the barrel opened and spilled its contents. I gasped, the bright green radioactive goo (Chemical or tainted? I had no way to tell!) erupted forth and led to both fighters diving away to avoid the grim death such a spill would allow. Scrambling away from the fluid gushing over the ground, I saw Shovels take a spill on his hind right leg and *scream*. Before my eyes, his skin melted away until the clean white of bone was visible even at this distance. His screams only went on and on, clutching at his leg with wide eyes, like he could somehow fix it.

Quartz made use of the time, taking up the knife and limping back to him. Looking upward to her, he lifted his hooves before she descended. Without elegance, she jabbed her mouth holding it in again and again, each stab puncturing his coat and drawing a yell. Ten or more times in rapid succession she did so against her helpless foe before one scream turned to rage. Grabbing her in desperation, a vicious headbutt dropped the knife into his magic, turning it on the spot to fire right into her throat until it pierced the spine and extended from the back of her neck.

The poor mare fell, dropping to the side with twitchy spasms in death. Beside her, Shovels tried to stand before almost looking down to realise how much blood was flowing from him. Pale and weak, he only managed a few trots forward before collapsing and dying as well.

The crowd was more than happy with this brutal performance. No, no more. I wasn't watching this! Even before me I saw how the pit was filling up with bodies. Untreated and without being carried away they leaked blood and left corpses around the area. By the end of both sets of six this place would be a carnal pit!

Before me, one of the two ponies clutching one another wailed loudly, clutching his female companion tightly for comfort all too similar to me. My eyes were burning, my throat and lungs too. I needed air before I passed out.

“What an upset! A double way kill in this very Pit!” Stern's voice offended me by making a game out of this nightmare, every pony that died in there I knew the fear of! *“The betting stand will collect for the first death, so supporters of Shovels you are in luck! Thus we move on with our next two contestants!”*

She left a dramatic pause in a place I highly disagreed with, allowing the crowd to simmer and sort their tickets. Suddenly, I felt very guilty about my own bet for Brimstone. But it had to be done, that money could buy us some desperately needed things on the slave markets.

“First up! All the way from Hoofington we have an ex-gang member! By his own claims he left the Hoof because it was 'too easy' and he wanted a greater challenge! Let's see him in, this is Roaring Tiger!”

The gate opened and 'Roaring Tiger' came speeding out. An earth pony, skinny and somewhat muscular, he darted across the concrete floor before leaping and spinning in the air to land dramatically. Taking a fighting pose, he raised a hoof and cried out.

“Let whoever faces me beware, the Tiger's strength *flows* in my veins!”

The crowd liked that one, finally somepony eager to fight! Something about his nature felt off to me though, I'd seen Barb and Wildcard up close and the look in his eyes held none of the same weathered resolve. He thrust his hooves up even as Stern continued. The other team had lost two members now...I knew who that meant.

“His opponent! Second only to Xenith in Pit events won, we have the Dragon himself to face the Tiger! The Great Warlord of the Bloodletters! The Scourge of Ponyville! The largest pony you'll ever see! This is...Brim! Stone! Blitz!”

I expected a cheer. It never came.

The crowd *booed*. Even as the gate raised, as I saw my friend slowly stomp his way onto the concrete with little fear in his eyes, they jeered and spat. I heard ponies decrying him and shouting for loved ones long gone. Others seething about him being why they were here. I'd never thought of how those outside the Mall thought of him, but now I was seeing it.

The wasteland saw him as nothing but a monster and a beast. If it affected him, he didn't show it, simply moving forward to the centre with his eyes only on his opponent.

“An unpopular pony for sure, workers. But! If he is to win this set of six, he will equal Xenith's record! So there's a lot at stake here as our current highest rated fighter enters the arena! Can he still do what he once did? Or has the Great Warlord long gone past his prime? Let the next fight...begin!”

Roaring Tiger was bouncing from hoof to hoof, having gone a little quiet until now. He shouted across even as Brimstone advanced slowly.

“Get ready for the storm, raider! Hoofington gang gonna wreck you right here!”

Brimstone stopped and snorted. But his voice was low, simply and direct. Others might not spot it but on hearing his bass filled voice over the sound I recognised regret and an unwilling tone.

“Enough boasting. Lie down and I will ensure it does not hurt.”

“Y-you kidding?” Roaring Tiger seemed to look around, before snarling. “You better lie down, cos' this gang's going to wreck you!”

He began to cartwheel and leap around the sides of the arena.

“You ain't got a clue how hard we got it in the Hoof, you're all soft out here!”

Landing on all fours, Tiger grinned.

“So get ready, the storm is *coming!* Better just give up and lie down yourself now! It'll be easier!”

“So come do it then.” Brimstone hadn't even moved.

“Oh I will, better start running!”

“I'm right here.”

Roaring Tiger growled, whether or not it was like a tiger I didn't know. But he scrapped a hoof on the ground.

“here it goes! Get ready, here I come! YAAAAH!”

He galloped forward, leapt and span before landing on his front hooves and flipping forward with a flashy and dynamic spinning kick! High in the air from an impressive jump, he came down to impact on Brim's side at high speed and moving his leg faster than my eyes could follow!

I heard a crunch.

Brimstone didn't even move an inch as Roaring Tiger's hoof struck and sent Tiger falling backwards, dropping him as though he'd leapt directly into a brick wall. Brim hadn't even flinched.

Yelping out loud, clutching his hoof, Tiger looked up to see Brimstone stare down.

“I know all the gangs in Equestria, you are not of the Hoof. I detest those who boast to cover for their weakness. Now stay still.”

Roaring Tiger didn't even get to finish the scream as Brim's hoof descended in one fatal snap of the neck.

The crowd went silent, murmuring to one another. That hadn't exactly been the fight they'd been expecting. I heard sighs and distasteful curses from those who'd lost bets on a cool sounding name. Others simply bemoaned that there hadn't been any 'real' violence.

“Well, that wasn't quite all it was made out to be, Brimstone Blitz is our winner! Can he last

the four more fights to a record equalling victory? Bring on our next challenger! Number three from the opposing team, this is Long Trot! A caravanner and prospector that has weathered raiders, gangs and beasts all over Equestria! Some say that he was also a hired assassin...but who knows for sure? Let's find out!"

Stern was clearly moving it quickly along past that unexpected 'disappointment' of a fight. The crowd had lost much of its bluster, but was beginning to pick up the pace again as the door slid open.

From within came running a tall and well built earth pony. Dark grey with a light brown mane, he lowered his head and sprinted before any comment to even begin had started! From here, I had to squint to try and see his cutie mark, was it a wagon wheel?

Even if I couldn't tell what it was, I could certainly still tell the direction he was headed! He was making for the corpses of Top Quartz and Shovels, going for the knife! Brimstone clearly saw it too, realising he was much further away. Looking for a weapon of his own, Brim reached to the side and stamped upon a pressure plate. The barrel creaked and jarred open, before dropping a pile of a dozen little objects!

Brimstone leapt away, landing and rolling over his side to get as far away from them as possible. Little beeping plates of metal with blinking red lights fell and scattered across a section of floor.

"Looks like the Warlord doesn't have the same luck! Anti-personnel proximity mines, workers! Anyone gets too close and you're in for a light show!"

The crowd loved that one, Brimstone having to dive away led many to cheers of laughter, stomping their hooves in approval as Long Trot yanked the knife from Quartz's neck with a horrid spray of blood. Between the green spillage of chemicals, the mines, blood and corpses, the Pit was already beginning to gain its hazards quickly. Shifting closer to one another, I saw Long Trot take a cautious and stalker like stance. Hearing the calls to knife Brim, I couldn't help but feel a pulsing will inside to want to shout back in support of him!

But something didn't make sense? Brim wasn't rushing in to attack. Why not?

Long Trot took the offensive, darting forward and feinting to one side before making a vicious slash at Brim. The larger pony had his eyes fixed on that knife, hunched ready to move. Seeing the attack, he shifted backward, then to the side to avoid a follow up attack. Grimacing, Brim swept forward and threw a hoof toward his opponent, but the tall earth pony leapt out of reach.

"That's not right." Coral muttered beside me. I nodded.

"Brim's much faster than that, I-I've seen him take on ponies with weapons and just stomp over

them!”

“That's what I meant. I don't know what's with the raider, but for his sake he better clear it up. They will have worse planned for him, every wound will count, he's still got three more if he wins this one.”

“He will.” I whimpered it, clinging to Coral's front leg. “He will. Please, Brim...”

Long Trot cautiously moved around with intent focus, keeping his front to any hazards in the area. This pony knew what he was doing all right. Brimstone snorted, charging forward and jumping all four hooves off the ground, one swinging for Trot's head. Clearly surprised that such a big pony could move as quickly, Trot had to frantically dive away from Brim's crushing slam and pace a hasty retreat to avoid a huge buck that followed it. Landing on his back hooves, Trot ran up and leapt forward, making me scream when I saw that knife connect to the recovering Brimstone, drawing a gash along his side. The pony moved fast, darting in and out with the ease of somepony used to making those cheap dirty shots count.

The big raider roared in anger, drawing a cheer at the sight of blood from the crowd. Aiming another slash, Trot had to drop and roll away before it landed, seeing Brimstone's hoof swing around. For a second, I saw Trot's shocked face at the nearby mines when his evasive dives carried him a little too close for comfort!

My friend charged, hoof after hoof swinging and sending Long Trot into a very suddenly panicked retreat! This was more the Brim I knew! Rushing, whirling and unstoppably piling into Long Trot, one strike drew a bloody spray from Trot's mouth and sent the knife spiralling through the air. Long Trot thudded to the ground, dizzied. Above him, Brim reared up, one hoof readying to slam down and end it!

Then I saw it...he was trying to end this as painlessly as possible. He wasn't allowing the savage rage to take over.

Unfortunately, this holding back was slowing him, losing the aggressive violence that gave him that frenzied speed and inner rage to become a god of battle on those who stood in his way. Even as the hoof took careful aim for the neck, Long Trot threw one hoof to the side and slapped it near an anti-personnel mine! The beeping sped up even as Trot rolled out of the way of the descending hoof and sprinted. Brimstone was trying to not be a raider down there...and it was costing him.

“Have some of the wonders of high explosive, raider!” Trot's voice shouted even as he moved.

Brim saw the mine, but with two hooves off the ground, he didn't have time to land and move before it blew. I yelped and covered my ears from the sharp crack even as Brimstone stumbled back and roared in both pain and fury. Shrapnel dug into his side, legs and neck. It wasn't anywhere enough

to bring him down, but I could see that slight limp on him turning back to find his opponent.

I knew he wouldn't lose this fight. Long Trot was outclassed in speed and strength, but this was all about how many wounds Brimstone had to take before the *tough* fights with the likes of Wildcard began. What was he *doing*? Were it not my fear of those around me attacking for supporting the 'hated raider' I would have cried out to him, told him to please just live! Do whatever it took!

Shaking his head, clearly thinking the same thing that this had gone on too long for a fighter of his calibre.

“Right, that's enough...” Only I likely heard him speak lowly, the deep tones passing to my ears even amongst the sounds of the crowd.

Brimstone put his head down and charged. Long Trot was stumbling for the knife again, but in full gallop Brimstone was so much faster on every stride. With a crash, the huge pony slammed into Trot, rolling over and throwing him a few feet away. Landing heavily, Trot barely got up and grabbed the knife before rushing at Brimstone! Dodging around one another, they clashed. Brimstone using his thick hooves to block the edge while Trot ducked and weaved. This should have been over ages ago! Brim, what's *wrong* with you?

All the same, Brimstone was far from useless. Simply diving onto Trot, he turned it into a grapple, throwing the knife away. In here, Brimstone simply overpowered him. The crowd, sensing the end, cried for blood! They wanted him to throw Trot into the chemicals or drop him on a mine! Instead...he simply began pressing away Trot's waving limbs until he got a grip around his neck.

Then, he *squeezed*. Long Trot fought, kicked and struggled, but in that choke hold there was no escape against somepony so strong. Gradually, Long Trot slowed and ceased to move other than a few spasmodic jerks of his hind legs. Laying his opponent down, Brimstone stood...and stumbled.

The wounds on his side only kept seeping blood that dripped off his belly or down his legs. Ignoring the crowd's boos at the raider winning again with a simple and (comparatively to the poor ponies forces in before) painless execution, I saw him testing the movement in his body with a grimace. Some shrapnel had clearly gone deep.

Now Long Trot's body formed another pile alongside the other ignored corpses that would lie there until both bouts were done.

“BOO! WE WANT PROPER FIGHTS!” That same buck beside me cried.

“YEAH! THIS SUCKS! MORE LIKE THE FIRST ONE!” Screamed another.

The crowd was turning against this, two fights with nothing but 'boring' deaths and little real

violence was leading the bloodthirsty audience to protest and scream their displeasure. Up on the balcony, I saw little change in Red Eye's watchful gaze, stroking Winter with one hoof. But I saw him finally turn his head to Stern and mutter but a few words in her ear. She looked to him, then at the Pit, then back again before nodding. Taking up the microphone, she held up a talon for silence.

"You want a proper fight?"

"YEEEEAH!" They chorused.

"Then you shall have a spectacle! The next bout shall be two on one! Numbers four and five from the opposing team will enter the Pit together to bring low this beast who has hurt so many of you!"

NO! What?! The crowd went *mad*, chanting and approving of this idea! This wasn't fair! Something was wrong with Brimstone and they were throwing two ponies at once against him?

I saw Brimstone stand up again from testing his leg and throw his head toward the opening gate. This...*this* is where it would really begin.

"Now there's some history here, workers! These two ponies were once of this beast's very warband! But he betrayed them! Turned away from the group and started killing them when paths crossed in Fillydelphia! Welcome...Scar Tissue and Pitfall!"

Now the crowd got really going, two ferocious raiders charged into the arena howling and whooping as they came. Both unicorn stallions, their filthy black coats were twisted and dyed with red and yellow symbols of atrocity adorning both. One bore a cutie mark of a trident with a waxed up brown mohawk mane while the other had a set of upward facing stakes and a similarly coloured mane shorn off one side entirely to only leave one half on his right side left. The latter I guessed was Pitfall from the mark, making the mohawk Scar Tissue. They looked like brothers!

Brimstone clearly recognised them. Pulling his leg off the ground, he snarled and stomped.

"I thought you two had been killed off long ago in here!"

Scar Tissue snapped at the mouth almost like a dog. "We ain't dying till we got a shot at you, betrayer! You any idea how many of our kin you killed in that Mall business?"

Pitfall chimed in, his voice a rasping sound of somepony who smoked far too much. "Clan sticks together, forever and always! You turned your back on it! Now we're gonna put you down, old worn out stallion taken out in place of the new!"

They both broke off to either side of their half in the Pit, cast a knowing glance to one another

and stamped on pressure plates simultaneously. Holding their hooves up with expectancy, the barrels opened and dropped their contents. To Scar Tissue, a trident with wickedly barbed points that was at least ten feet long. To Pitfall, a net covered in small fish hooks and a set of hoof-blades. Catching them in their hooves or magic, the pair armed up.

This was wrong, they *knew* where their signature weapons were. The fact they even *had* weapons for themselves was ridiculous! Somepony was playing with the rules fast and loose here behind the scenes. I shivered, praying under my breath.

“Please, Goddesses, forgive him and let him live. Please...”

The pair hoof bumped with a sadistic grin, turning back to Brimstone.

“Ready, 'Chief?’”

Brimstone only lowered his front half down, scuffing at the dirt and growling.

“Come on then, upstarts.”

They didn't need any further incentive. Screaming their own battle cry, the pair surged forward, crossing over each other's path with fluid grace, and flanking around Brimstone in the centre of the Pit. My friend surged forward against Scar Tissue, aiming to divide and conquer. But even as he ran, the net whirled out, projected over a long distance by Pitfall's magic and slashed at his back leg. With a great cry at the hooks tearing skin and dragging his leg out, Brimstone stumbled and twisted, trying to free himself. One hoof sliced backward and using the hard edge against the hooks simply tore it off. Face twisting in anger, he stamped it down and away from Pitfall's magic, only for that huge trident to come piercing in from the side. Dropping and rolling to avoid it, Brim grunted at the pain before coming back to his feet a good bit slower than I'd known him normally to.

Even by the time he was there, Pitfall had darted away, the net taken with him. Covering his retreat with that trident, floating and watching Brim should he try to launch at Pitfall recovering his weapon.

These two fought as one. Twins. Circling Brimstone, two ponies and two floating weapons, they surrounded him with a precision.

“Time was you two were just runts born into the clan.” Brimstone muttered to himself, favouring his injured legs and body.

“Times change, chief! The old get slow, the dynamic young take over! After all, isn't that how you got in charge when your old dad got too slow to stop you?” Scar Tissue spat, before his trident flew in. Spotting it easily, Brimstone backed off to deflect it with his hooves. I tried to scream a warning,

but behind him the net floated in and caught his back legs again to prevent his retreat.

Then I *did* scream as the trident's points dug into his shoulder.

Bellowing at the stab, much to the enjoyment of the crowd, Brimstone thrashed and whirled, sending the trident flying across the arena while stamping the net into the ground. He bled from dozens of small cuts now of shrapnel and stabs. Every time he went for one, the other would surge in!

Brimstone wasn't going to give up that easily. Even as the pair moved to recover their weapons, he took the chance to run to another pressure plate. Almost breaking it with his hoof, he had to swear colourfully and loudly (Luna's almighty *what?*) when the sight forced him to leap aside again. A strange long and thick bar shape dropped heavily before slapping onto the ground hard.

“Brimstone Blitz just has no luck today! For those who don't know, that is a bar mine! An anti-machine and wagon mine that only goes off when something of enough weight presses down on it, shooting upwards on its detonation with enough explosives to take out a sentinel robot!”

This was *ridiculous!* Now a mine that would only be set off by somepony as big as Brim was in the arena?! Why wasn't Red Eye stopping this? Looking up, I saw him only watching my friend with careful eyes, that cybernetic one blinking occasionally. Surely somepony as intelligent as him saw what was going on?

Scar and Pitfall had gotten their weapons back, advancing upon Brimstone again. They were much faster than him, wiry and lithe with a thin and tense strength. Wildcard was keeping his remnant portion of the warband well exercised even in Fillydelphia, that was for sure. Once again making a flanking move, they rushed for Brimstone. Between them Scar Tissue was clearly the faster, making a sprint to reach behind Brimstone. To my surprise, Brim simply turned and ran.

They didn't seem to expect it either, but they bounded forward. The crowd jeered at the warlord's 'craven cowardice' but after a second it all became clear. Leaping clean over the chemical spill with a grunt on landing upon wounded legs, Brimstone made his way to the far side of the Pit and backed himself against the corner. I was no fighter, I couldn't grasp why. But soon enough, it became clear.

As they caught up, they couldn't surround him in the same way. It was risky though, Brimstone had nowhere to run now as he gambled that against making sure he could see them both at all times.

“Trapped now, chief.” Scar Tissue licked his lips.

“Trapped in the *pit*.” Pitfall chimed in, making at least a few ponies in the crowd groan.

“Then come get me.” Brimstone settled ready.

Scar obliged first, that huge trident using its ten foot range to let him thrust from well out with his own magic's range if he only used his telekinesis on the end of it for quick thrusts. Blocking and using his hooves as shields, Brimstone smacked it aside time and again. What was he trying? They could just keep stabbing until they got him! Pitfall sent his net surging in to wrap around Brim's front hooves, trapping them together! I saw the pain on his face as those fish hooks dug under his skin and his front body collapsed down.

“Bad plan, big guy. Goodbye!” Scar laughed and lunged with the trident.

Brim's plan came into play. Launching up with his hind legs, he twisted and grabbed the trident's shaft in his mouth tightly. I saw the telekinesis fight against it, Scar Tissue moving in closer to try and pull harder! Brimstone had both their main weapons locked on him now!

Even when Scar Tissue fought magic against mouth, Brimstone let go. The trident *flew* out of his mouth from the straining telekinesis and slapped right into Scar's face. Taking the opportunity, Brimstone launched off his hind legs toward the unsuspecting Pitfall. Landing awkwardly, he still managed to lift his tied front hooves and deliver a double hoofed hammerblow across his face.

The raider fell back, face gushing from fish hook lacerations. I thought Brim was going in for the kill, but instead I saw him use the dazed and helpless raider's hoof claws to cut the net off his own!

He didn't. I saw the look, the mindset saying 'kill', but looking at a helpless pony before him, Brimstone backed off.

Behind him, the trident speared into his flesh once again. The raiders had no such qualms about attacking somepony like that. Brimstone howled aloud as they sunk *deep* into his side. Tearing out with those barbs, I saw a nasty wound opened. Brimstone stumbled, staggered and leaned against the thick concrete wall just below where the cage started.

“What's this? The big nasty warlord's lost his edge? Lost that raider feel? Well that's just gonna treat you rough then isn't it?”

Scar looked at his brother upon the floor, now unconscious and clearly out of the game here. Grimacing, Scar Tissue shook his mohawk bearing head.

“Seems he's out of it anyway, oh well!”

He bore a sick grin, before the trident flashed and went spearing into his own brother's neck! He didn't even look bothered! Drawing it and leaving yet another body to the mercy of the Pit's cold and increasingly stained floor, he turned back to Brimstone.

“That's how raiders act, chief! Do what it takes. They were going to make us fight after we killed you anyway! But you'll never not be one! No, now you're just a *bad* one! I guess I get *all* the glory then to bring you down! Always did want to challenge you when you got old and *slow*. Here's my chance!”

His magic lit up, drawing his brother's hoof claws to himself and wearing them, the long trident flicking back to keep Brim at a distance. I could see my friend stumbling. The wounds were beginning to tell. He still had two to beat and this one was already looking dodgy. Scar was unhurt!

“You want a shot at your old warlord?” Brimstone snorted, hardening his face. “Perhaps he's still got a couple fights left in him!”

It began. Brimstone charged, hooves sparking on the concrete floor he tore toward Scar. The smaller raider crouched, narrowed his eyes and flung the trident forward. Lancing ahead, it jerked to the side when Brimstone deflected it with a hoof and leapt to swing a mighty hoof for Scar's head. Dropping and rolling to the side, Scar Tissue leapt to his hooves again and threw a slash with those hoofblades, missing Brimstone as he hopped backward and reared up to deliver a double hoofed slam that only barely missed his elusive opponent.

Every impact brought a scream of delight from somepony around us, Scar's frantic running to retrieve his trident prompting many to urge him on! Internally, feeling nervous about supporting these pit fights, I still cheered for Brimstone. But I just couldn't help shake the sense that something was terribly wrong. He couldn't face being a raider, so he was turning away from it to his own suffering by not getting into that properly rage filled mindset to unleash his real physical power.

Was I any different? Why didn't anypony understand I just wanted to leave as painlessly as possible? I was just running away all the same.

The trident spun wildly in the air, landing to point at Scar's opponent while they circled. Grimacing, both leapt forward. A clashing meet of trident, blades and thick hooves mixed with narrow dodges and small clips that sent either fighter back a foot to regain their stance. I saw Brimstone's hoof catch Scar's shoulder and throw him almost right over. A hoofblade opened a thin slit along Brim's left foreleg. A dent in the trident from a particularly harsh block.

The two whirled away, breathing deeply. The crowd *ecstatic* at the tough fought battle.

Scar Tissue was good. Very good. Even without his brother, he had a lot of speed and a reaction time I hadn't seen since Barb. He maintained a youthful grin and bouncy stance upon his hooves while Brimstone was slowing, breathing hard and dripping blood everywhere he went. One serious injury more could be enough to tip that into a truly wounded position, the mine and bladed attacks had really taken their toll.

Frankly, I had a whole new respect for Brimstone's constitution to take as many slices and tears and still be capable.

“Giving up, old chief?”

“Not while I'm alive!” Brimstone spun, bucking full force toward his opponent. Scar, however, grinned and dove forward to roll beneath it, slicing upward. Noticing him almost too late to avoid being gutted, Brimstone threw himself to the side and swung to deliver a punishing blow I'd seen catch many an opponent out with its speed.

Scar simply ducked it.

“Is that it? I've seen you do that a thousand times in my life, chief! You know what they say about old dogs...”

The trident came flying down vertically from above. Catching Brim's knife wound from Long Trot, it dragged at the slit and reopened what had been slowly beginning to thicken. Brim looked more surprised than pained, having to quickly shift and move awkwardly to the side when the trident kept stabbing down again and again. I saw what Scar was doing, a pony couldn't properly defend *upwards* like a griffin or hellhound could!

“How'd you like some new tricks? Picked up from the griffins in here that Wildcard brought into the clan!”

Brimstone strained to keep an eye on the trident, dodging frantically, I heard him cry out in shock as he had to leap over that damn bar mine. Backing off, seeing it coming, he hopped up and over onto his back, catching the trident head between his hooves. Without any fancy thought, he simply drew it in close and smashed the offending weapon into splinters, bending the tips.

“All flair and no reliability.” Brimstone muttered while he turned back and slammed his hooves together. In a moment of horror, I saw even the strong gesture make him wince and stumble on his front legs. All his limbs had taken horrific punishment, one back leg was bent and clearly not taking any weight.

“Hah, you think that's all I got?” Scar grinned back, his horn still glowing. Slowly, it built up and began to crackle.

My ears popped, a flash of light and an after image of a stream of light, like lightning! All the way from his horn to Brimstone, where I cried out loud to see him half collapsed and clutching his chest. Only after a few seconds did I realise I'd lost my hearing completely. All around, ponies rubbed their ears while the slow rumble of the crowd began to grow again. A splitting headache began to form while my hearing returned. Curse my tainted birth...

“-new tricks, huh?” Scar's voice cut back in. “Little thing Wildcard taught me! See, we the young don't like to just do what *you* taught us. All brawn and never looking at what we can *really* do with magic!”

Brimstone pushed one hoof to the ground, trying to close the distance. But Scar Tissue only trotted backward.

“Ah. Ah. Aaaah! Face it, chief. You're *obsolete* to the new clan! Where magic and strength goes together! You-HAH!”

My ears erupted in pain again, Brimstone had tried to leap suddenly forward, but the same spell sent him collapsing to his side. Eyes watering from my own pain, I watched him breathing heavily.

“Interrupting me, I said you're past your time! A good magical shock does wonders against those getting a bit on in life...what are you, sixty something now? How's that heart doing after all this time in Filly?”

Tapping his hoofblades together, he began to wander across, waving one in the air to announce the upcoming kill to the crowd.

“Just lie there, chief. I'll make it a raider's death. Nice and bloody...going down in a blaze of violence. Isn't that how you always said we should go? Pity you didn't move with the times, just sticking with that tired old *raaaah-raaaah I'm a big raider shtick?*”

He began to charge, the hoofblades tip-tapping as they went. I saw Brimstone roll onto his front, facing away from Scar...gritted teeth in great pain.

“Well it's over now! Some way to go, being the old arrogant big guy! Have you even learned *one thing* from the ponies around you? No? Now you'll pay for that!”

Scar rushed forward, leapt into the air, raising his claws high and screamed a guttural howl of death! I squeezed Coral's foreleg so hard I feared I'd break it. Brim!

His eyes opened.

“You could say I've learned *one* little fighting trick from a *good friend*...”

His whole body surged. From his shoulders to his rear hooves I saw muscles ripple and power that colossal body up to lean on his front hooves. As Brimstone Blitz unleashed the sharpest and biggest most powerful straight up *buck* I'd ever seen toward Scar Tissue even as he descended. A surprise attack with his *full strength* that collided with earth shattering force...into Scar Tissue's groin.

There was a *crunch*.

Simultaneously, myself and every single buck (along with a good portion of the mares) in the stadium made an '*Ooooooh!*' sound and clutched themselves, rear legs crossing over protectively.

I even saw *Red Eye* wince and scrunch up half of his face, that cyber-eye blinking at a rapid pace while one hind leg pulled just a little closer.

Beside him I saw his dog, Winter, whine and cover his face with a paw.

The entire fight had seemed to stop dead. Frozen in time at that moment of impact before Scar slowly fell to the ground. Eyes so wide they almost seemed to pop out of his skull he just lay quivering with an open mouth making little squeaky noises the likes of which even my filly-like voice couldn't match.

Brimstone grunted, limped and stood above him.

“A raider's death? Bloody and violent? Consider that the violence. But you will have no blood, the Goddesses watch for those unwilling to follow that path any more...even if it renders them unable.”

A hoof raised, I saw Scar Tissue's eyes follow it as he was unable to move his body.

His neck snapped like dry bark under the stamp. The life in his eyes disappearing seconds later.

Regardless of the lack of blood, the crowd shouted their approval once many of them had been done recovering and making sure certain things were still there. (Alright, alright, maybe I had too...just to be sure.) I still heard boos, but that fight had pleased them.

“The Dragon wins once again! We are only one fight away from equalling the Pit all time record! Proving his worth against two at once!”

Finally, I allowed myself to breathe. Or at least, begin desperately sucking warm air through a cramped throat. My hoof toyed with the collar, feeling it chafing my burns and rad-sores developing all around my neck.

My body couldn't take this pressure. Already my chest was thumping hard and I could taste the rancid bile and tinge of metal in my throat. I needed RadAway the moment this was done. Maybe I could go to the hospital and trade with the caps from my bet? I didn't want to go to Sooty...no...no no no *no*.

Brimstone knelt down in the centre, taking his breath. Coral narrowed her eyes.

“I can't say I feel sorry for him. But if the next fight is anything like that then I can't see him getting by.”

Horrified, I turned to her for saying such a thing! But those bitter eyes only narrowed and turned away from me. I couldn't say anything, the history between them was just too dire.

“Well, workers...we come to it at last! The final bout of this first set of six! The Great Warlord is hurting, clearly not as fit as he once was-”

No! He was fit! He just...just wasn't fighting right!

Biting my lip, I saw Brim glancing around the crowd. He was looking for us! Without thinking, I simply stood up on the bench. Around me, some ponies hissed and swore at the sight of my wings. But stern glances from Coral kept them back. She had sat quietly and sometimes I swore almost *enjoyed* seeing what she would see as justice done to Brimstone...but she wouldn't let them hurt me.

More visible, his eyes found me. We couldn't say anything, but I knew that look in his eye. Somewhere between apology and gratitude.

Now I realised fully what it was. Earlier today when he had sworn not to let the frenzy take over. It wasn't that he couldn't fight without it, it was that he couldn't risk a fight getting so intense that it would draw it out of him by his very habit.

Please, Brim...just come out.

“So now we move to our final challenger! So without further talk...let us allow the final to begin! Bring them in!”

The gate slid up. Within the dark void I saw a shape and two eyes marching forward. Here they were...

But then my heart skipped a beat.

History was repeating itself.

Before me in that pit was not a pony.

Thick and stomping, strong and bestial. Barely fitting out the gate, he came. Larger even than Brimstone and not at all what I had expected to see for a final.

He was a raider yes.

But he was a buffalo.

* * *

My heart sank.

Huge in body, possessing massive horns and cloven hooves, the buffalo stomped forward under the screams of the crowd. Dyed hair on either side depicting the same raider symbols as Brimstone himself alongside foul abstract pieces of art I wish my mind could already forget. A thick spur of bone between his nostrils while his horns were carved, painted and tipped with bronze.

“A brand new addition to our rosters! The final opponent is for a grudge match! Yet another of Brimstone's own warband come back to seek revenge! Stronger than any pony and so crazed we've had to keep him locked in magic enchanted chains as a secret weapon of war since he was brought here! But now he wants a piece of his old Warlord! For his feats, he was named 'Breaks Many Foes' but in the Pit, we simply call him...BOOOONECRUUUSHER!”

The colossal figure reared up, so huge in size that he almost came to the height of the minotaur I'd seen! But *far* heavier. Opening his mouth, Bonecrusher emitted a throaty whooping cry before slamming his hooves down so hard I felt it even up here.

“This old leader shall fall before me for his betrayal of us all! Raiders do not forgive! For blood! For revenge of our fallen in the Mall! His broken body shall be cast **down!**”

The crowd were up on their hooves, stomping and yelling. I saw so many of them fighting with the guards to get back to the betting stands. Many were swapping out tickets up here in the stands!

Below, Brimstone Blitz lethargically pushed himself up and flicked blood from his limbs and body with a shake.

“I expected Wildcard...not you.” He growled at Bonecrusher, keeping himself held ready for anything.

“Wildcard gave me this chance!” Bonecrusher snorted in response and scrapped ready to charge. “We drew for it and I got number six! One of your own Big Four will destroy you in turn!”

Wait, one of the Big Four? But Brimstone hadn't mentioned him...

“You are not one of them.” Brimstone's words set a furious look on the buffalo. “Rough

Diamond died, you didn't get to the initiation before we were brought here.”

“**You know I'd have passed!**” Bonecrusher shouted in that voice, like stones crumbling together. “I was always just waiting for the chance! You know I'd have made it to be one! I was the replacement! It's always the way when one dies! Ever since Wildcard killed that wimp Diamond you know it was my place to step in for him!”

Wildcard killed...*huh?* I perked up, seeing the look of surprise on Brimstone's face as well. That threw everything I knew for a loop. Internal raider grudges? Fighting over loot? But Brim clearly didn't have time for over thinking right now, steeling his face.

“Keep dreaming. You were nothing but an idiot, Foes! You could never lead.”

There was a brief silence.

“Fighting is all that matters to a raider and I could **FIGHT!**” The roar came just short of the almost overdue charge. Lowering his head and shaking the very foundations, Bonecrusher rushed forward faster than I'd ever have wanted to see. Those horns gleamed and pointed right for Brimstone's breast.

My friend dove to one side, scrambling madly as he landed near the hissing chemical pile that was starting to eat into the surface of the Pit. Seeing near to Top Quartz's corpse I could see it eating and melting away one of her hooves. The Pit was cramped now with dangers and bodies! Stumbling over the obstacles, Brimstone got back to his feet even as Bonecrusher skidded to a halt and turned to snarl back.

Brimstone didn't let him charge again. Screaming his own cry, he pushed the pain away and ran directly for the lumbering beast before another charge could be built up. Surging in with one, two and then *three* solid slams to the face, Brimstone unleashed what he had upon the buffalo. I heard every mighty *thump* of hoof on forehead, before Bonecrusher twisted and threw Brimstone a good ten feet away. Landing, a sudden beeping gave rise to a quick slap of Brim's hoof throwing a mine in between the two. The resulting detonation so close to the edge caught three slaves in the crowd with shrapnel and threw up a smokescreen to dodge the follow up goring from the buffalo. The tempo was on, neither was messing around here!

Scraping his horn along the edge of the Pit from being blinded, Bonecrusher left a long scar in the wall before sliding to a halt and spinning to find Brimstone launching back onto him. They tussled for a few seconds, but to my horror I saw the reality. For once, Brimstone was well and truly outmatched in terms of sheer strength.

Bonecrusher threw down Brim's attacks, raising his hooves up to grab and slam my friend into the arena wall. Braying loudly, he lowered his head and charged, butting Brim in the stomach and

crushing him a second time before throwing him away. Arcing over, Brimstone landed in a heap, just pushing himself up to deflect a horn. The resulting charge still flung him another ten feet away to land near Long Trot's body.

Slamming the ground with his hoof, I saw the restrained fury in his eyes. He *wanted* to unleash the beast inside, the Dragon. But he was holding it back, shaking his head.

“You've lost the raider in you, Brimstone Blitz!” Bonecrusher stalked near him. “Time was you could stop a charge of mine. Now look at you!”

He surged forwards, drawing a cry of pain when one of those horns pierced Brim's thick skin and carried him across the arena to spin and slam down. I could see Brimstone holding a hoof to the wound.

No...no! Brimstone couldn't defeat him like this! He just couldn't! I remembered all too clearly what he said, that no matter what he wouldn't give in to the raider inside! It...it was his way to go out if he had to but show everypony he was different! The only way out! *His* only choice.

Just like mine. Why couldn't he have understood that?

“Murk?”

Why not?

“*Murk!*”

I blinked, realising I'd been crying, sitting hunched back in the seat amongst a sea of crying spectators. Coral Eve was looking me in the eye, shaking me a little.

I didn't say anything, but she saw the horrified look in my eye. She felt nothing for Brimstone, I could see that. She was almost calm, maybe even feeling he deserved this. I felt her shake me again, but I just trembled. What could I say? This was exactly the same thing, only now I was seeing it happen to somepony else!

Another horrid gore before he even got up. The concrete floor was leaving a trail wherever Brimstone was thrown and tossed. Rolling beneath Bonecrusher, barely avoiding the stamps, Brimstone limped and almost fell upon a pressure plate, seeking *something* he could use.

The barrel almost jammed, something *huge* inside it jerking and then falling with a heavy clang.

A helmet made of bronze and steel in the crude shape of a dragon bearing two great horns.

Brimstone's helmet.

Wildcard or Shackles, whoever it was behind the scenes doing this was taunting him now. Teasing him with the temptation.

I saw him look to it with side eyes, almost frozen. To one side, Bonecrusher noticed it and laughed.

“You've lost who you are, Brimstone! No longer the raider, but you're nothing without that rage burning to drive you! A spent flame in the night. You know what you need to do to ever hope to fight me...but you won't.”

He was right, kicking it to the side, Brimstone slid around and charged directly into the side of Bonecrusher. Roaring aloud, hoof after hoof fell into the buffalo, throwing everything he had to throw. The buffalo staggered back under the witheringly harsh hail. Almost to the wall, before the old clan member struck back. Launching forward, he simply headbutted Brimstone, stunning my friend before picking him up and body slamming him into the floor. Raising him again, rising to two hooves, the buffalo presented my friend in his dazed state to the crowd, screaming his victory!

No! Brim! Please, no! Don't let him win!

Spinning and swinging, Bonecrusher hurled him with terrible force into the wall right below us. Even on our side, the concrete bulged in and cracked enough to send fragments all over us in the crowd. Behind him, Bonecrusher turned to the crowd and raised his hooves, chanting old raider verses and oaths.

Quaking, crying and terrified, I saw Brimstone slump down...still breathing, but terribly injured.

“Murk, snap out of it!”

Coral's hooves shook me, I realised I was hyperventilating badly, my illness kicking up and making my vision go hazy. This was all it came down to. Death or pain! For all of us born something we hated!

She shook me so hard my neck almost got whiplash.

“Don't get to thinking what I know you're thinking! That isn't the way! Not for you...”

Frozen with fear for my friend and feeling like I just wanted to slink off and...and do something...I simply turned and stared wide eyed and blank to the older mare. Her eyes narrowed while looking at me.

“...not for him either. Everypony, *get out of my way!*”

She stood in the seats, forcing the jubilant slaves around us to the sides. Coral strode down the benches, over slaves even, until she was ringside.

“*Get up, you beast!*” She screamed at Brimstone from right beside him. Shaking, he looked up, as though surprised to see her. “*You get up and do your job!*”

His face was swollen, in visible agony and close to some horrible mortal failure.

“I am.” He rumbled, speaking from half of his split mouth. “I will not live a raider any more. Crushes Many Foes, he was one of the most brutal fighters lacking only in leadership. If I must fall to him to prove that I will *not* turn to the raider to have forgiveness...then I will. I'm not like you or Murk or Glimmerlight who finds their strength from the goodness in your hearts. I will not turn back to the Dragon before all these ponies just to win.”

I could see Coral's ire rising as he spoke, her horn sparked and grew in flashing light every time he spoke a word. Eventually, she screamed aloud and emitted a sharp pressure blast into the arena. It slapped right across Brimstone's face and staggered him to the side.

“Now you listen to me, *brute!*” She snapped, scowling at him. “You want to be forgiven by everypony for the things you did? You keep wondering about what it'll take? Well I'm going to tell you right now what you can do to fix it!”

Coral leaned close to the cage.

“*Nothing!*”

Shaking and feeling my chest tight and my head weary from lack of air on my rapid breathing, I widened my eyes at the look Brimstone gave her. Somewhere between crushing emotion and anger.

“You can do *nothing* because no matter what you do, no matter what you live like or who you help and save there is one pony who will never *ever* forgive you. Me! Consider me bitter and angry against somepony like you who assisted in saving my life from Barb, but you know what? I don't care! Oooh, consider that bad if you want and I'll probably *agree* that it's not my best trait that I hold grudges and never forgive easily...but at least I *accept* it!”

Slaves around us seemed to back away from her and Brimstone.

“You're a raider, monster. You were *born* one and from that one earlier I heard how you killed your own father to be the best one! Now you want to turn around and pretend you aren't one to the point that you die to that beast over there?”

She pointed a hoof through the cage, Bonecrusher was raising cheers from the crowd on the far side, teasing them with what to use for 'the kill' from all the lethal areas of the arena. Brimstone turned and looked, oddly silent before returning to her eyes.

“You want to die? Fine, I'll probably smile rather than mourn for *you*. But I'm not letting you die like *this*. Not running away from who you are. For me? Oooh...hell no. For *him!*”

She reached through, grabbing his head and pointing it up at me. I locked eyes with him, seeing the look of shock. Likely seeing me so small, so afraid and vulnerable. It was taking all I had to stay there and not shrink away.

“That little buck tried to throw himself off a roof because he couldn't see any way to escape being what he was born as! So if you think I'm going to let you, somepony he for *some reason* truly cares for, throw your life away trying to run from the very same thing and prove his hurt little mind right then you are *seriously wrong, Brimstone Blitz!*”

Pulling his face back around, she stood up on her hind legs to get to his height, staring her family's killer right in the eye from inches away through the bars without fear.

“I care for him. So even if it hurts me to ever *help* you I'm going to tell you right now. You will not die like this. If you can't beat him...then fine. But do *not* go out being a weak coward only running away from what he is. You're a *raider*, Brimstone Blitz. You'll never make the world ever think of you well again and you better get used to remembering that. So *get over yourself*, turn around and be the pony you *are*. Prove to that little pegasus behind us that you don't just give up because you can't handle what you were born as!”

Her eyes narrowed.

“So you go out there and you show him what learning to try again no matter what *anypony* thinks of you really means. You'll never earn my forgiveness, Brimstone. You'll never not be that Dragon inside. But you are not going to die and prove everything that is wrong with this right to the one innocent slave I've met in this damn city!”

Behind them, Bonecrusher roared, turning. Brimstone didn't even pay him heed. He looked up to me and, I thought, seemed to have something change in his look. He looked around at the ponies chanting for his death, chanting for revenge for all he'd done. Eventually, looking to Coral.

“I do not know that I can beat him...not now.” He spoke slowly as he stepped back. “But if I must die proving a point then that must be all that I can do. Murk?”

I gasped, surprised to hear him shout to me. He looked down and picked up the Dragon helmet.

“Coral is right. We can't change what you or I were born as. But we *can* always push for more, no matter what they say. Not any crowd and not any sick bastard with a collar.”

He looked to the helmet, hooves trembling at the baleful carved eyes and blood painted markings.

“If Glimmerlight was the point I turned...let this be the moment I never looked back.”

The helmet was thrown on, standing tall and swinging to face his opponent, I saw him clip it around his neck and wring out his neck. His wounds poured still, but yet I saw Brimstone allow himself to push past it with a growl.

Bonecrusher grinned at the sight, clearly relishing more fight. Coral Eve stood watching sternly. I simply sat in amazement.

“Come back for more, huh?” Bonecrusher chuckled.

“You going to talk like Scar over there or fight?” Brimstone snarled, lowering his own horned helmet.

Seeing the sign, so did Bonecrusher. The way between them was clear of all obstacle.

“**Let the Dragon die!**” To a great cheer of the crowd, Bonecrusher shifted that massive frame and charged.

“**Then come face the *true* dragonfire inside!**” Brimstone roared in return, charging forward with a renewed strength. The two thundered toward each other, pounding the ground and building speed at a frightening pace.

I'd seen him fight a Steel Ranger and considered it the most brutal conflict in my life to witness.

I'd seen *nothing*.

The two leapt from the ground and simply *collided*, head to head with their horns interlocking in a crash that made the corpses and mines *jump* on the floor. Ramming, snarling and twisting the pair fell, got up, rammed again and flung hooves and horns at one another. Every strike a colossal *thump* that reverberated in my breast. There was no blocking, no dodging. They simply laid into one another like possessed demons of battle. Blood flew, sparks of metal on bone lit their faces and each gave ground only to push back. Bonecrusher reeled, surprised. But I saw that grin as he flung his massive size around and collided with Brimstone to fling him away. Tumbling head over hoof, he slammed into the ground and rolled to his hooves.

Pausing, I saw the blood leak from his helmet. There was a shake of his body, before he raised both hooves to the sky and *screamed* an unearthly war cry carrying the rage of sixty years under the brutality of a raider clan. The hooves slammed down and drew into a charge back to his opponent and meeting the approaching buffalo halfway. Throwing himself up, Brim got him around his neck and dragged the huge beast to the ground. Wrestling and slamming Bonecrusher's head into the floor, he was smashed aside by his opponent like a rag doll. Time after time he flung back on and stopped the larger opponent from getting up until eventually their horns locked again.

Ponies screamed themselves hoarse around me, Many were on their hooves still, waving and leaping at the *brutal* conflict before them. Two immense creatures leathering each other for all their worth. I saw horns stab on both sides, until Brimstone gored the buffalo upon the chest. Driving him back for the first time, Bonecrusher hit the wall and bellowed in pain when Brim's helmet pierced deep. Raising both hooves, he crashed them down upon Brimstone's back twice to stun him. Catching the buffalo's stamp, Brimstone swept around and forced his opponent into the wall, slamming their head over and over, only harder each time until the concrete began to splinter.

Faltering and stumbling, Bonecrusher tripped and almost fell, stunned. But with a surge of his body, swung Brimstone right off the ground and horizontally swung him into the wall, right off the ground. Leaning down, he tossed and tried to gore my friend all over again, throwing him *over* the personnel mines. Landing, Brimstone kicked two of them with great speed toward Bonecrusher's face, exploding right on top of him and following it up with a charging hoof strike that sent both of them to the ground again.

This was simply a blur of motion. Hits arriving and being countered before either could register the pain. Berserk meeting frenzy. Bonecrusher's constitution was *immense*, streaming blood from his face, he was still up even before Brimstone! The shrapnel had chipped his horns and tore one brass tip free but even with a face full of metal, he moved to stamp again and again on his downed opponent. Crying with tears of stress and fear I watched my friend beaten into the ground with impacts that would have killed me from barely *one* strike. Then a rise of the head and Bonecrusher found a hoof impaled upon one of Brimstone's horns. The bestial scream sent shivers through me.

Brim struggled to his hooves, he was weak, but in those eyes I saw little but sheer rage and unleashed anger that had been held down all competition.

Was...was this really the way? To have to go through with it and always just strive on no matter how you feel inside or how it makes you feel?

Brimstone leapt forward, a hoof surging out to stagger his opponent.

I'd been trying *so hard* so many times but I only kept failing by stint of what I was, a slave!

Bonecrusher caught the next attack, dishing out a vicious headbutt in return.

But Brim had been dying before me and still fought.

Spinning, he bucked the buffalo hard in the side to the crack of ribs, Bonecrusher didn't care, rushing forward and tackling Brimstone down to crush Brim with his weight!

Was it right to avoid the pain and hatred around you to just let it all end? To keep going?

Even before me, Brimstone struggled and lifted the colossal beast from him, grimacing and throwing himself out from under.

I saw Coral looking to me. She saw my wider eyes and seemed to almost smile.

“The road's tough. We've all suffered from where we began. Even with hope you might not make it in the end, we might not get out.” Her eyes turned back to the Pit. “But it's always worth trying, Murk. That's what he's showing to you.”

A great cry drew my attention back to the Pit. Both of them, reared up were throwing huge strikes at the other. A devastating right hook from Brimstone that *broke* one of Bonecrusher's horns, a hideously powerful slam of a hoof from the buffalo that tore the right side of Brimstone's helmet clean away along with a good portion of the skin that tore below it. One after another, throwing their whole exhausted bodies into it. They just kept hitting, the crowd chanting numbers to the strikes. But gradually, I saw Brimstone's attacks lessen as he took more damage.

“**The Dragon is over!**” Bonecrusher screamed, raising both hooves.

“Maybe it is!” Brimstone roared back, striking Bonecrusher in the gut and leaping up to grab him around the neck. “But if he's going...”

Ever so suddenly, I saw one eye match mine.

“**...then he's going out trying for the impossible!**”

Pulling his opponent down, I saw Brimstone glance to me just for one half second, before beginning to fight the strength of the struggling buffalo. Slowly, he began to pull. Tugging, swinging, fighting and bellowing every oath he knew he began to overcome the buffalo's strength with what he had left. His injuries bled more as muscles worked and moved, His eyes turned red from bloodshot. Veins stood out. Then he began to roar with one last almighty effort against something almost twice the size of himself.

Slowly, I heard the entire crowd go quiet other than an open mouthed gasp as Brimstone spun

and spun until the momentum built and through his scream of unthinkable effort *lifted the entire buffalo*. He spun around without letting go as for one unbelievable moment, I saw a pony propel a whole larger beast above himself by the neck and body slam him right over the top to land-

I saw the bar mine.

No! NO! I ran forward! Like a pane of glass shattering my head cleared and realised the danger! Galloping to the cage side past Coral even as the buffalo descended, followed by the howling rage of Brimstone Blitz drowning out a shriek from the untouched freedom of my mind that cared for somepony else who had helped me come as far as I had!

“*BRIIIIM!*”

Bonecrusher landed with a slam that lifted everything in the pit a full foot from the ground...right on the bar mine.

My vision went white and I felt my body along with everypony else in the front row *blown* away from the cage as the full construct *shattered* and leapt free of its housings. Dust and smoke whirled free and coated everypony as they covered themselves. Bits of concrete and earth rained from above and pattered from the decimated cage that was dangerously leaning ready to fall. Griffins caught themselves in the air from the disturbances and landed quickly to point rifles at the cage itself.

My vision only saw that much, bleary with shock and blinking from the flare that had gone off right before me. Ears ringing, I pulled myself out from below Coral Eve and struggled to the edge of the cage. Pulling myself up to look in, barely able to keep myself upright in grief, I squinted through the smoke.

Nothing...just nothing.

The crowd began to get up behind me.

Then they began to cheer.

“*What a match!*” Stern's announcing rung across the area from mostly broken speakers. “*A true epic!*”

No...no this wasn't right! How could they *cheer?!?*

Through the smoke, I saw the huge pile in the middle. A buffalo sized one with no sign of Brimstone at all. They screamed with cries of 'Did you see that?' and 'That was awesome!' But I only fell to the lip of the wall surrounding the cage, crying and feeling part of me torn *clean* out.

“A second double kill in the ring with the almighty bar mine! What an...wait!”

I gasped, but as I watched...I saw movement.

Bonecrusher began to stand up.

My heart felt hollow. No, that wasn't *fair!* *Please, Goddesses in your mercy don't do this! NO!*

The crowd had gone *wild* in their rush to get to the betting stands and scream their delight at the turn of events for their favourite! They started to chant for him..

...before it fell aside to reveal Brimstone Blitz beneath it, having shoved the heavy corpse off of himself.

The smoke clearing around us at last through the open roof above now thick with curious griffins, my friend, Brimstone Blitz unsteadily pulled himself up.

I could not possibly describe for the rest of my life the feeling inside me.

He looked like he should have been dead. One full half of his body burned almost completely off in a way I knew no potions or medicine would ever heal. The eye on that side was missing entirely along with his ear. His jawline didn't look quite affixed right either, being slumped to one side in a way jaws shouldn't be. Meanwhile, I was sure I could see *bone* under the blasted side of his torso. Never had I seen him look so weak to take even one horribly limping step and drop the mangled helmet from his head...before crushing it with one last gasp of strength.

You could have heard a parasprite's wing flutter.

I simply almost collapsed, breathing hard when I saw him turn his one remaining eye and mangled face toward me. I couldn't help but smile and feel ready to cheer, before the silence was broken by one lonely sound of hooves tapping together in applause.

One pair, high up.

“Congratulations, Brimstone Blitz.”

Red Eye. He lounged back in his chair upon the balcony as though nothing had happened. His voice carried easily and smoothly across the devastated arena below him.

“Congratulations on your victory against all the odds. Indeed, *against* the odds, if my observations and judgements are not mistaken. I may have to have words with some of the Pit organisers after this is done. But even with this, I was curious to see how you would do. It seems my

investment in you was not without true purpose.”

He got up, trotting to the edge of the balcony and staring down toward Brimstone. My friend stood shaking on his hooves, not having said a word yet and stared back.

“It cost me many lives to bring you in, but when I heard of your renewed purpose below the Initiate's protection I remember feeling only justified in the decision. You have changed, Warlord. Now before me in this Pit and before the eyes of Fillydelphia's loyal workers...you have shown me at least that there is another pony standing before me today after that little 'moment' at ringside. One who might finally perhaps see a way to offer more to Equestria than as a beast of burden in mines and factories.”

W-what? I sat cowed beneath my master's voice, looking from him to Brimstone in equal measure.

Red Eye smiled, reaching down to take up a small trinket and throwing it down into the cage. Glinting in the light, it landed amongst the broken rubble with pinpoint accuracy before Brimstone. Squinting my eyes, I could see it was his symbol, the same as Protégé's cutie mark!

“I offer you more, Brimstone Blitz. Normally six victories are required, but under such circumstances as that you have proven with a tampered event I feel it only right to offer you this. To leave your slavery behind. To become a better pony as part of my forces. But not as some lowly grunt...no. You are a Warlord in spirit, Brimstone. I offer you *command* of a section of my army. These wastes are tainted by raiders the likes of which you know more than I ever will. Not all can be brought to the workforce.”

Brimstone looked down to the symbol, a rank offered. Above him, Red Eye smiled.

“After healing, I can have you in the Cathedral within days, ready to make your ongoing crusade to purge this world. You have done such evil, let us not mess words here. But I offer you a chance to lead an army again to rid Equestria of those who would do nothing but harm and misery unto others. A true course of redemption under my flag that ponies all around Equestria would come to see you in name as a saviour!”

Red Eye seemed to expect Brimstone to say something. But my friend looked only from the badge to me...then back to Red Eye.

“Great Warlord, you need not toil in penance no more. You have done your time in hell.”

My master smiled, genuine and knowingly.

Brimstone trotted forward, toward the badge. Wincing and grunting at his failing body, he

leaned down to pick it up. Almost falling, he brought it to his eye to look at. His eye looked to myself and Coral Eve, the mare's expression unidentifiable as she stared back. But he held my gaze for a long time. Then one bloodshot eye turned back to Red Eye.

Before he grimaced and spat a wad of blood upon it. Casting the badge down, I saw Red Eye's hoof have to reach out and stop Stern's huge rifle coming to bear.

“Very well, Warlord.” Red Eye uttered, his voice calm but for a slight disappointment even as Brimstone turned back to his waiting gate where I already saw healers waiting with potions. “Very well.”

With a flick of his Stable cloak, Red Eye turned, passing from the event along with many of his congregation.

Left in the devastation of the Pit, I saw workers rushing out to repair it in time for the next bout, leaving the corpses and hazards behind. Around us a great commotion kicked up of slaves talking and slavers shouting. I felt ready to sleep for days...

“All slaves with betting tickets have five minutes to collect their winnings! Only the slave with a ticket may go! They must go alone!”

The call went out, starting a mass exodus of slaves rushing to collect their earnings from the winners. Watching Brimstone disappear, I let my thoughts drift. All the odds had been against him. He couldn't turn from what he was yet still he powered through and even in the end stood tall to stick with those he wanted to for a better life. Even as I turned back to Coral Eve, she softened and placed a hoof on my shoulder.

“If he ever does one thing I'll be glad he did, it's this, Murk.”

“Y-yes...I've got, um, winnings?” I held up the ticket, possibly the highest earning one in the entire stadium. “But, um...”

“But you need to go alone.”

I nodded. “D-do you trust me to go off alone even for a bit?”

Coral smiled and kissed my forehead. “After today, after you seeing that, let's see how you do just this once, Murk. I trust you.”

I managed a little smile back. I knew it would be a long time before I felt the temptations leave...the moment this break day was over I would be back in the grind. But for now...after all that, I could let it go for an hour or so and not see every ledge as an opportunity in the recesses of my mind.

Yes...just forget about it for now. I was about to be richer than I'd ever been in my little life, after all.

However I didn't thank him for that. If anything, I thanked him for maybe putting me on the road to saving my own life a second time.

* * *

“While the betters for the last bout collect their earnings, let us continue for those of you waiting for the second bout! We shall see if such a sight can be beaten!”

I ducked and weaved my way through the thick crowds, hopping away from stamping hooves and even scurrying below various ponies between their legs to make my way unseen through them. Ahead lay the betting stand, being flooded by a great many ponies. Taking a second to allow the crush to pass by, I sat on the stairs that would normally lead me out of the ice rink's main entranceway. The guards cast me a glance at my proximity, but I just offered a nervous smile and patted the seat. I was just sitting here waiting! Honest!

Grunting, they turned away.

“Let us bring in the first contestant, our Number Seven for the first team of this event! Growing up way in the north's frozen tundras where your very blood turns to ice...this is Windchill! Let's hope she's stronger than that nervous face looks folks, for she is against one of our most popular fighters. Here is Number Seven for the other team as well! He's unpredictable, he is bloody in his execution and he has given us all such entertainment! It's Wildcard!”

The crowd cheered above, the noise filtering and echoing down into these tunnels I waited within. Well, they had said they drew straws for who fought Brim, didn't they? Wildcard must have lost out. What a ridiculous and terrifying pony...his surprise 'wildcard' entry being a *buffalo*...

I spotted a gap at the betting stand. Time to go claim my prize and then run as fast as I could back to Coral to wait it out and close my eyes to any further horror. No-pony could see how much I was about to earn for my friends to use even if I-

No! No Murky...bad thoughts...bad thoughts...

Trotting over, I heard a sudden shriek above from the Pit and an approving stomp of hooves from the crowd. Stern made the announcement. Wildcard had made his kill brutally and quickly. That poor mare...

Squeezing through, I tried to hold up my ticket. Wouldn't everypony please let the little skinny

pegasus through please? One snorted at me and pushed me behind him. Come on! Just because I had wings...

“Well that was fast, workers! Let's move right along! Our next match will be team one's Wildcard against team two's Number Seven!”

I paused for a second, then laughed and shook my head. Oh come on, Stern. *Everypony* knew that Number *Eight* came after Number Seven, right? Windchill had been number seven! Pfft...even I could count to seven. Hell, it was in my...

I froze rock solid.

...name.

“Come on, Number Seven! Get in here!”

No...no there was no way. She was just making a mistake.

A hoof lay on my shoulder. From out of the shadows and gaps between ponies, three lithe and dark coloured raiders emerged and grabbed me even when I tried to run. Shades! Barb's Shades!

“Oh you're not going anywhere, little pony!” One of them sneered at me even when I cried out and struggled, but no-pony paid any heed. “Wildcard told you, didn't he? You'd *never* guess his surprise entry from behind the scenes...”

I screamed. I screamed for Coral, for Brimstone. For *Red Eye* even to hear me and stop them. But telekinesis and ropes grabbed me, dragging and pulling me through the crowds toward the stairs leading down, the ones I'd been meekly guided through what felt like so long ago. No! Please *no!*

My hooves beat at them, but their indistinct forms twisted and scuffled back until I felt a hoof crash into my face. My nose, still fragile and hurt after My Master's beating send a wash of pain through my head and dizzied my vision. Cowed, I slumped and held it while they pulled me down into the fighting pits, whimpering helplessly.

“Wildcard was kind enough to give us a home, you really think some of us wouldn't just slip out of that Mall? That's what we *do*. When we heard he wanted somepony to fetch you for this place, we were all too happy to oblige. The Clan avenges its own!”

“Please...not the Pit, I-I can't fight...” They hurled me upon a dark stone floor around various other fearful looking ponies.

They just scoffed, grins showing through the darkness. I knew this place, it was the waiting

rooms before a match! Rotten benches and small cells to hold troublesome slaves lined the walls while the bloodily stained ramp that led to the main Pit gate was at the far side. I heard trotting coming down it.

“Isn't that the point? We're raiders, kiddo. Don't expect mercy or any sort of begging to work. You killed our Clan leader...this is revenge. Nothing heroic, just a simply reworking of the roster behind the scenes and then throwing you in with the boss...”

“Please...” They were fading away even while a gruff slaver came looking around the slaves, trying to find me and presuming I'd just hid away.

“Bye bye, feathers!” Their laughter only echoed lightly and faded away when they melted into the shadows. Even from beyond the grave, Barb's influence was against me.

“There you are!”

A hoof fell on my shoulder. I pleaded, begged him to check with Red Eye even! But a crop raised and fell before I was dragged between his assistants. Every terror, mind numbing horror from before was coming back. There was no Littlepip to interrupt this time! Coral was stuck in the stands! Brimstone could barely even move after his runs! There was *no-pony* to help me this time! Struggling, I beat at them, fighting...but again and again they fought me off and carted me up before throwing me into the light.

I heard a gate slam...and a crowd roar so loud I almost screamed at the thudding headache.

Behind me, a maniacal giggle when I dared open my eyes.

I was in the Pit...and Wildcard was my opponent.

* * *

It felt like my life had come full circle.

She hadn't saved me. She had become something false to what I had believed.

Of course it would be the Pit to have it happen. That was why I'd not succeeded. My destiny would not let me die in a false belief. I could almost feel my cutie mark jangling and laughing through those gnashing shackles.

“Oooohohohohoho! Look who thinks he can take me on, huh? You a big tough stallion now? Are ya?”

Wildcard pranced and trotted in equal measure around the corpses and chemical spills that now crowded the floor of the Pit toward me. Down here in the middle of it, I had to fight to not breathe through my nose, it was a *carnal pit* now. My hooves felt damp from stepping in blood, the flies had descended and even at a distance I could feel my chest thumping hard and driving my windpipe shut from that radioactive green sludge.

“No! No, I don't! I'm not meant to be in here! I...I give up! You win!” I backed away into the gate. Ahead of me, Wildcard laughed and leapt atop the huge corpse of Bonecrusher, his two machete's (from a barrel, presumably) held in his telekinesis either side casting thin shadows from the massive floodlights centred on him right in the middle.

“Aw, you want out, poor little pony! HAHAHA! NO CHANCE!” His face twisted from mock care to fury so quickly, before seething and stalking toward me. “You come into *my* ring, insult *my* skill by declaring you can beat me by coming here and then you have the balls to say you were just *wasting my time?*” One eye twitched. “*You little shithead!* C'mere, c'mere-c'mere-c'mere!”

He started galloping forward. Shrieking, I ran around the edge. Sprinting and crying all at once I put my head down and tried to stay away from him as best I could. The crowd laughed and stomped their pleasure, but I was more concerned with the tap-tap-tapping of machete blades on the ground as he taunted me while chasing.

Taptaptap!

“Come here little Murky!”

Taptaptap!

“Wildy's comin' to geeet yaaaa!”

I looked back to see him leisurely playing up his chase, acting to the crowd and with his tongue hanging out in delight. I screamed when I felt myself trip, then again as I saw it had been over Roaring Tiger's broken neck. The corpse fell to the side and swung lifeless eyes toward me. Scrambling back, I tried to climb the cage, but a slaver's baton only knocked me back in. No! No let me out! Not like this! It would hurt! *I didn't want to die like this!*

Then the pain began, I felt a horrid tear upon my flank. Falling backwards, squealing aloud I tried to clutch myself and only sat still with wide shocked eyes at the immense rip in my skin that bled upon the floor. I...I couldn't scream more, I just stared in disbelief when the pain crawled and spread. Instead, a low and fearful moan escaped my mouth toward Wildcard. The maniacal raider stood back, licking my blood from his giant blade and shivering in delight.

“P-please...don't do this!” I begged him, gritting my teeth. It hurt *so much!*

“Not when you taste like this! Oh it's good! Want some?”

The machete extended, while I crawled and pulled myself away. Ahead of me, through the cage I could see slavers throwing themselves upon a commotion. Coral blasted at least two away, running and trying to tear open a section of the damaged cage. I heard her screaming my name, but they just kept coming. A baton swung. She fell.

“You turning down my offers again? It's cool, man, it's cool...acquired taste and all. Coulda said 'No, thanks' though...” Wildcard wandered off to the side, giggling and keeping an eye on me even while I pulled myself past Top Quartz and Shovels. My leg leaked a trail behind me, every movement sending flares of sharp pain across my body. Yelping and crying aloud, the crowd seemed to enjoy the sight.

Please *somepony* help me...Glimmer! Glimmerlight, please sis' do something to...to cut the power and make it dark! Or...or Protégé come back and stop the event! Mister Peace! He could destroy the entire Pit!

But there was no sign of any of them. I was alone. Truly alone.

My leg was going numb from blood loss. Worse, I could feel myself breathing in less each time. Coughing and spluttering, I tried to suck in more oxygen to keep myself going. In the middle of the arena, they were treated to a little pegasus struggling to even breathe properly.

“I thought you'd like my surprise, I did *tell* you I had a wildcard entry, kid!” He grinned, looking around at the crowd. “They like it...*everypony* likes seeing pegasi get cut up. Something about the way you flop...oooh, it's *artistic!*”

The machete dropped in front of where I tried to limp to. Squeaking, I turned the other way only for the second to block me off again. Oh Goddesses, please lift me free of this! Not like this! I turned and galloped, crying out at the pain of even moving my cut leg and falling across myself. That cry turned to a higher pitch when something dug into my flesh and pulled *hard*. Twisting I saw a large slender hook dug through my other flank, sunk in and pulling so hard my body's flesh was shifting *off* my figure! The feeling as my flesh *lifted* and pulled the rest of me back, the hook tearing at it inside! I wanted to flail, but the movements hurt do much! My hooves struggled, trying to pull at it while the string attached tugged me slowly across the floor, screaming as I went. It hurt so bad...why...why in here? Please let me go!

“No trying to run! I got a lot more for you!” Wildcard's magic drew the hook out of me, squirting blood as its barb on the tip ripped my flesh.

A horrible sensation took over, my back legs...I...I couldn't feel them! I'd lost so much blood

from my little body that I couldn't properly feel them I...I...I...

I coughed, it grew into a hacking convulsion. The stress and lack of air from proper measured breathing was getting too much. In front of everypony I flopped and vomited blood, clutching my chest and my pupils shrinking. A feeling like thick liquid in my throat as it started all over again...my illness had gone unnoticed for far too long and now it was doing its job. Seething through my scabbed neck it was killing me as much as Wildcard.

“Oooh...radiation is it? Well now, that gives me an idea! The crowd'll like this one! HAH!”

I was being dragged across the pit, trailing blood and unable to even properly breathe. Juddering and coughing up wads to try and get my windpipe clear I felt my vision go hazy. M-maybe if I could d-drown in it it'd be less p-painful...

Goddesses, why have you abandoned me? I was so scared, in so much pain...

I wished Brimstone had never saved me. It hurt so much now in front of the hundreds who cheered for my death like they would have weeks ago.

He dumped me beside the chemical pile, within feet of the hissing liquid. I squirmed, seeing the steaming liquid pop and fly nearby. A hoof struck my face and I went still, but I didn't want to die in it! No! No no no! Please! I remembered Shovels' hoof all too well, please don't throw me in it!

One of my hooves struck his jawline before he began talking. His eyes went wide as the movement made him bite his tongue *hard*. Wandering back, clutching his mouth, I saw his eyes fill with *rage* of that unleashed insanity lurking inside him.

“Ooh...y-you little brat! My tongue! I *taste* with that tongue! I don't have a *spare*! You're going in that fucking goo! Right in! Hooves first so you *feel it the entire way*! *Fuck you!*”

He charged forward, both machete's lifting from the ground! I felt the chemical pile right behind me. I'd...I'd only get one chance at this! He was running so fast, heedless and right at me! My lungs contracting, jawline covered in red from leakage out of my mouth, I swung up to get my hooves facing him!

He stopped.

Then he laughed. Stomping his hooves and even dropping his weapons, he laughed as much as the crowd and rolled onto his back howling with mirth.

“You...you actually thought I'd fall for that! HAHHAHA! That's brilliant! Oh you *actually* thought you could survive this!”

Rolling back up, wiping his eyes, Wildcard sauntered nearby, before dragging me away from the chemicals with his magic.

“You never even think, after me there's *five* others? You wanna know why you wouldn't beat me? Because *fuck you* that's why!”

His hoof struck my face, dizzying me. I felt myself lifted up, before the whole crowd. Telekinesis caught my upper body and lifted my beaten, bleeding and dying sick body before them. I felt ready to pass out, my mind reeling.

“You insulted me by thinking you could win! But hey? It's cool man, I'm cool with it! It's like...philosophy of entertainment, right? You make the crowd think I was gonna fail! Cool man! I like it! Really!”

There was a pain. A pain like no other. I'd been stabbed before, but this was so much more. A piercing feeling, a push and bulging like I'd eaten too much before it emerged. Under the approving crowd, I looked down from hanging in his magic to see his machete blade protruding from my stomach.

He'd...he'd impaled me.

I couldn't even scream through my throat, just a low and painful moan at the three foot of cold metal right through me. I felt him close to my ear, whispering.

“You probably thought this little part of your adventure was over, right? That you'd hear the moral of the story and that'd be it for another while?”

“P-p-plea...”

“Well, I don't play by the rules of drama, kid. There's no hero to save you. You likely had it in your head, 'Oh, I almost died last time from falling, there won't be any big scare again for a while, right?' Cos' stories work like that...preservation of impact, right?”

I felt a cold touch on my neck, the second one. The crowd was chanting, but everything fallen away. There was just me and him...and I was fading quickly, mortally wounded. I felt the pain begin to kick in, spreading and clenching over my whole torso as everything inside me rebelled at the blade pushing through them.

“But you see, I never did like that. Gotta *innovate*, y'know? So here's a curveball for you. What if you died *now*? How would the little story in your head like that?”

“N-no...”

“Yeeees...they're all watching you. Some might want this, sick bastards they are like me. But most might be screaming at me right now to let you go. Only no matter how loud they swear and scream, I'll never hear them. Why don't you scream for them all right now? One last scream before I pull?”

Before me, through the cloudy eyesight, past the dulled sounds of everyone watching me in this Pit, I saw Coral slamming on the cage, pulled down by slavers as she tried her all to no avail.

Brimstone's words were the ones in my head though. His first ever words to me.

“Put on a braver face there, don't let them have the pleasure.”

My mouth stammered, wanting to scream for help. But I knew I was alone.

“Come on...do it!”

I could feel my body failing, everything going numb. The blade right through me throbbing and hurting so so much...I cried openly, shivering and moaning.

“DO IT!”

I couldn't hold it back...so much pain! Please, don't let me be another corpse left to rot in here in view of my friend until the end! I opened my mouth and-

“Oops!”

The machete blade drew, I felt my neck open and something leak over my chest. A horrible gurgling...a numb feeling of falling to the ground. Quivering, in enough pain that my mind simply reeled and looked to the sky with strange clarity...I couldn't even raise a hoof to try and wish for her to please...please just save me.

She didn't save you.

* * *

All perks lost...

Chapter 18: Killing the Slave

* * *

“Game's over, my little pony! You didn't find your precious freedom.”

“If you don't mind, what was it like?”

Y-you mean?

“To die...”

* * *

I did not fall.

That caught me by surprise, I simply...was. Hanging, drifting without moving anywhere. What had happened? I remembered pain, blood...lying on a hard floor amongst bodies of ponies and trying to move my hooves. I...I'd wanted to catch the blood, try to put it back in!

What had happened since then? I couldn't see anything! It felt like there were two unexplainable forces in my head, tugging me one way or the other. But I didn't move, was there anything to move? I couldn't see or hear myself. No weight...

Something tugged one way, then the other. I saw patterns without eyes, inconceivable and impossible shapes that bore my journey to everywhere. But still those forces, was it my soul? Every inch of my non-existent body was shivering, how did that make sense? My mind reeled, my perceptions experiencing claustrophobia, vertigo and loss of balance all at once while I was hurled and thrown by forces I would never understand or truly be able to describe in words that did any justice.

A painful light, the one thing I could see. Burning hard and bright like metal being welded, radiating waves of aching reality above an encompassing dark void of calm. Both sucked at me, tearing me across distances until I was nothing but a thinly-spread and ruined shell unable to truly grasp the events affecting him.

Slowly, the pain grew all too much. It hurt me. It hurt so bad.

I hadn't even realised I'd been hanging onto any sort of ledge when I let go and whirled my way into the void below.

I fell. No, I didn't fall. I travelled. No up or down or point of reference. I simply moved. Something taking me somewhere, a force I couldn't fight.

Time passed. Minutes, hours...days. I had nothing to think about, simply so long within this place that would occasionally shift me into another plane of the same darkness. I learned the colours of nothing and I saw the unthinkable distances of shadows. Where had I come from? A city...a painful

city of chains. I was not chained any longer, that I knew. But why was I here?

A whipping sense of turbulent nature grasped me. A leering face and a thick blood stained blade. He'd killed me! That was right! Was this what happened?

Was I to meet with the Goddesses? I could not comprehend the form of their afterlife!

Time...time passed. Nothing changed. Nothing other than the one sense I had left of a distance so unimaginably large from the world I'd known only growing bigger and bigger until I could no longer even remember how far I had travelled away from the harsh light.

A solidity was approaching...something *else*. My mind focussed on it, having spent the last vast stretches of eternity simply praying and hoping it was over. It grew bigger, more forceful. A thicker harshness in the void.

Even while I was sped toward it. I looked back to see the harsh light.

It was impossible to see, the eons of life so distant to me.

Washing over me, I realised I no longer remembered why I was here all over again.

* * *

My ears pricked and twitched. I heard a light whisper of wind and the hiss of drifting ash. Almost to my own shock, I heard myself groan. A smell entered my nostrils, dry and sandy. An aching glare began to show through the cracks of...of...my eyes?

Slowly, gasping and twisting, I found myself lying on my side and rolled onto my back. A sensation of movement! Of presence! I...I was somewhere!

Through my ears, I heard a whispering. On the wind, a voice carried.

"...tle ponies..."

Was somepony there? I sat up and groaned when my eyes shot open to meet the sun's radiance. Down from above, even sheltered by the clouded sky it hurt and stung so much that I squinted and brought a hoof up to cover them while sitting up. Below me my hooves staggered and reacted sluggishly like a drunkard. I expected to be in pain, but there was nothing.

Just a numbness.

Then even before I was able to see where I was, I realised the truth.

I couldn't feel *anything*.

No, that wasn't right. I felt pain in my eyes from the light and a dull sensation of touch, but my nerves were numbed and without proper textile feel. When I rubbed my own face I couldn't feel it! Staggering, yelping out loud I fell even while trying to stand up quickly in shock. I didn't even fully feel anything but the light pain of falling upon my chest. I tried to gasp, but no air entered my lungs. *I*

wasn't breathing! I *could* breathe by habit, but there was no air to take in...but I was still alive!

Twisting, shivering and scared, I finally got my eyes open to look around me. Please, somepony tell me where I was! Why was I even here? What brought me here?

The sight would have stolen any breath I had away. Around me, expanding and disappearing to the horizon I saw freedom itself.

The Equestrian Wasteland.

Rolling dusty hills of drifting sand and dead vegetation over rotten expanses of fields and plains. High cliffs far in the distance rose high and bore the scars of balefire. Down from above, a brighter sun than I ever remembered cast jagged shadows from every outcrop, ditch and dry riverbed in a world with all colours stolen from it, left with but an earthy dry tone from ground to cloud.

Wisps of wind carried little cyclones of dust across the wastes, raking dead leaves or setting dry twigs rocking in the breeze. Around me it was the only true motion other than the lethargic clouds above. No matter where I looked, I saw nothing but everlasting wastes from the hillside I had woken up on.

Hesitantly and shakily I began to stand up. Having to visually watch my hooves and ensure they were as they should be I got to my hooves and cast my head around. I could see for at least a few miles in every direction, to each cliff, hill, field and forest. There were no settlements or indications of life. Not even a brahmin.

“...fallen, no news, wastelan...”

Was that my imagination? The wind? What I'd thought were words disappeared on the light wind, barely audible.

“Hello?”

The words were spoken loudly, having to push my nerves to shout against the quiet expanse. But the world ate them, allowing only an almost silent echo.

“Hello? *Is anypony there?*”

Louder. I shouted, turning this way and that.

Absolutely nothing. My words were lost to the wind.

A strange sense filled me. This was *freedom*. I wasn't in Fillydelphia anymore! I was in the wastes! *I was free!* Free to go anywhere! Do anything! There were no chains, my body felt fine and no-pony nearby to take me in! My chest no longer felt tight, the swelling in my breast having subsided in this cleaner air while every injury seemed to have gone. My nose felt straight again! My radsors were gone!

A quick glance over showed me my wildest dreams. My fleece was repaired! The whip marks and scars were all gone! My wings still didn't move, but the pain had stopped. I just felt normal. Free

of pain.

Free!

Wasn't this what I had always wanted?

If so...why did I just feel lonely?

Staggering to start with, I began to trot. I didn't choose a direction, I just went forward. Maybe once I got over the next hill and stood atop those far off cliffs I might be able to see some sort of settlement.

My hooves sunk slightly in the dust as I moved downhill. My ears remained perked up and listening for anything in the distance. But nothing other than the thin blows of wind and my own light trotting met them. Moving from dust to rock, I stopped only briefly to check the position of the sun, I needed shelter before dark!

Thankfully, it was just before mid-day. I had plenty of time yet.

I climbed another hill, descending it quickly before tackling the next one. Every so often I trotted over to some rock formations or a lonely dead tree. Trotting around them, seeing the crispy blackened tree bark or hunting for any signs of somepony's old camp I always found nothing. I climbed a rock once, struggling against my numbed sense of touch until I stood atop it. Even looking around, I saw little other than distant peaks of some huge mountain range bereft of the snow I had always imagined. This land was sick, but in the absence of anything else living it simply seemed dead. Like I was wandering over a grave of nature itself. There weren't even any signs of ruined houses or farms.

My journey continued. I didn't feel tired, just scared. Nothing happened, but the lack of event was chilling. A fifth hill passed, then a tenth. Before long, I had counted twenty long ascents and stumbling trips downhill. I kept trotting for hours to reach the higher cliffs and only then began the steep ascent. I thought as I travelled, thought of this new life and what I would make of it. I needed to find somepony and figure out my way to someplace safe! Or the way to Shattered Hoof and see if my mother was still there! Was Shattered Hoof even nearby? What if I was on the other side of the planet?

How had I even got here? The last thing I remembered was...was pain, so much pain. A desire for peace and then a terror so great as to make me shiver. Wait...I had died! Oh Goddesses, he'd killed me!

I froze, fighting between the lack of air assaulting every instinctive habit I had and the subconscious need to hyperventilate! He'd killed me! I died! I'd been sent to the afterlife, hadn't I! It was an eternity!

Tears welled up in my eyes while I stood upon the sharp cliff-side. Pacing in place, I looked back across the ten miles or so I'd trotted and shivered badly. Was this a punishment?! But I was free? I didn't understand! What was going on?

Turning, I galloped up the cliff. I needed to know! Please, somepony be out there for me to spot! It would get dark soon! The sun was just nearing the edge before it would get dark! I had maybe

an hour at most, I *had* to find something from here! Skidding and slipping, I rushed to the edge of the cliff, high up enough that my mane blew and my ears had to drop down to protect themselves from the whipping gales.

Panicking, I turned my head in every direction.

Nothing.

I saw a massive cluster of boulders in to one side, about twenty miles away and so thick they looked like a rock forest. A dry seabed lay just beside it before meeting more rolling hills with sharp rocky outlets if I kept my head turning. They gave way to a dead forest of sharp branches and a drop below sea level beyond that. To the other side lay nothing but plains expanding until the hazy heat of the wasteland warped my vision. The same mountains I'd seen before covered the rest of this massive vista across the wastes. I was surrounded by a varied and incredible terrain scaled in ways I never had dreamed of or noticed during my time as a slave in the wastes and yet I saw *nothing*.

Not a single smokestack or empty house. No wildlife, horrid beasts or any ponies of any sort.

“Hello! Please, if anypony's there, help me!” I screamed from the cliff until I choked and gasped, drawing air that wasn't there. The feeling was becoming increasingly unsettling the longer it went on. I could feel *wind* but there was no *oxygen*. Why wasn't I choking?

My worries, however, lay with the prospect of being left alone in a pitch dark wasteland all night. Who knew what came out of its lurking holes then? Thoughts of being chased by feral zombie ghouls when I couldn't see were mixed with lurking eyes watching from the distance in my imagination. The sun was descending!

I had to make a choice. I chose the forest. Coral and Glimmer's village had been hidden in one, maybe I'd find one too!

Turning, I cantered downhill. I wanted to gallop, but I couldn't exhaust myself. I'd cover more ground at a canter.

I just couldn't stop shivering! A desperation was overtaking me, a lonely ache in my heart filled with the paranoia that I was simply all alone forever! I didn't even know this place! Why was I even here? What happened? The last thing I remembered was just a lot of pain and fear! Sweating, I thought hard. I'd tried to kill myself, but Brimstone had saved me! What had happened after that?

I just didn't know...it all turned blurry and then I was here. I just couldn't remember. Had I died in my sleep? Just passed away like many slaves did?

The thought terrified me in its sheer simple logic.

Reaching the bottom of the slope I set out across the bumpy fields, weaving between wild clumps of hedge and bracken. My mind twisted, hurting inside. Wait...there was terror! Had somepony kill-

He...he'd killed me! Oh Goddesses, he had!

How could I forget that? He'd killed me and now I was gone!

Sweating, I kept my head looking around. Passing across a dry riverbed, I clawed and struggled at the crumbling sides until the harder rock let me pull myself out and continue my journey toward that silent forest. I wasn't going to make it, the sun was-

Looking up and blinking, I saw the sun was resting just before midday.

Hadn't it just been about to set? What was going on?! I turned my head, looked to the place I had just seen it. But every time I blinked it seemed unmoving...as though it were resetting forever. An eternal daytime.

Staggering, trotting away from it like I could somehow escape the sun itself I just shook my head. I had to look back at the ground and try to ignore it. Stumbling over every rock I couldn't feel with my dead nerves it took me guiding every hoof by sight to keep going over this rockier field.

Up ahead, the forest loomed, high trees arching over one another with empty branches rustling lightly. Splintering cracks at the wind bending their decaying trunks gave off unearthly sounds that broke the wind drawn silence of before.

It took me many hours to reach the forest. The distance was deceptive and the way was slow. But I didn't feel tired, just scared. Scared of being alone in a world with no-pony else to see.

What was going on?

I c-couldn't remember why I was even here. What had happened again? I remembered being in Fillydelphia...but then nothing.

What had happened that brought me here, again?

* * *

The twig snapped under my hoof. Freezing on the spot out of sheer habit, I glanced around to see if anypony had heard or spotted me.

Nothing. Just empty shells of trees clustering around me thickly over a dark brown earth. The light from above sent spidery webs of light through the thick branches, even through the clouds it seemed to light up clearings and pathways for me with the dust spiralling into the dull beams.

I'd wandered the forest for so long now. Three times I'd sworn I saw the sun about to set and pulled myself into the bracken to try and hide before sleep. I hadn't gotten any. Every time my eyes had closed, I'd opened them simply to see the angle of the sun was constant, waiting for me to get back up. No tiredness or drowsy feelings fell across my mind no matter how many cycles I saw.

So I simply trotted onward, my quest to find something to make sense of all this. Many times I had stopped to press my eyes shut and try to remember everything or simply to cry. It was pathetic, but it had been so long without anypony around me. I'd *never* been truly alone in my life! Never been without order or direction. I...I didn't like this!

Sometimes I would gallop for hours until I fell over my own dulled hooves. Pain penetrated the numbness, I had discovered.

Typical.

My ears perked up, a breeze of wind carrying through the trees. I'd heard words now and again, unnerving me with a single hint of presence in this dead world. I was truly alone...yet something was *out there*.

The thought scared me as much as it reassured me.

“...sacre...rbu...rry...”

Looking around at this ongoing forest, I tried to make any sense of it or locate some sort of pony-made path. But there were no tracks. Not even any animal routes. Even the trees seemed to lack nests or old holes for birds! Not a single piece of living wildlife had appeared. Not even a skeleton! Just trees. Ever thickening trees. Trees that shifted and brushed, growing closer and closer until I was having to squeeze between them over rotten and muddy swampland to proceed. Soon I was having to pull myself up and over or clamber under huge roots that arced up taller than a pony around trees thicker than the giant stone pillars in Fillydelphia.

Was this all freedom was?

I wasn't sure that I enjoyed it as much as I'd dreamed. I just felt beyond the reach of anypony. Was I supposed to be enjoying this feeling?

What if it really was like this?! Oh Goddesses! Please, no!

Panicking, pacing on the spot, I made a gallop forward. There had to be something! The forest would end soon! Somepony would be up ahead in a settlement or cave or *something!* Pulling through twigs and bucking dead wood to the ground I clawed and tugged my way through. All the way my mind fretted. Slavery was so much pain but this was beyond sanity! There had to be somepony! My friends! Glimmer! Brimstone! *Anypony!*

Up ahead, I saw some light through the closing squeeze of trees and swampland. Yes! Light! That meant something causing it!

My back legs kicked, I threw mud up and tugged long dry vines out of my way. I felt my body crushed between trunks as I slipped and fell between them. Crying out and flipping over, I let my frail body roll out to the dry ground. Gallop, Murky! Gallop! Light! Somepony was out there!

I broke the edge of the woods, landing with a dull *whud* on the dusty plains of the Wasteland once again. Pushing through the ache I looked up with a smile!

Before me, the endless plains of the wasteland greeted me, the horizon ringed with high mountains and forested hills. The sun shone just enough through a crack in the cloud cover that it had sent the light I had seen.

“No. No! Please, come on!”

Cantering forward, looking desperately from left to right, I saw the forest I had just left arcing down to the edge of the sea. All the water was gone, replaced by a horribly endless dry flat land.

There was nothing.

I fell to the ground, hopeless as every muscle in my body sank.

“...*dead...ope los...*”

The words sent shivers across my body. The world itself was taunting me! The Wasteland in its horrid glory torturing the only pony left in it with the sounds of a hopeless dream to meet somepony out here!

My memory reeled, how long had I been here? How far had I trotted? Oh Goddesses...had it been a *week*?

“*Somepony!*” I cried it, galloping forward. I fell, got back up with great effort through the numbness. “*Anypony! HELP!*”

The wind carried nothing, no voices. I galloped forward into the plains, cresting small hills, a desperate charge in any direction! I travelled still, counting down miles as I screamed and begged somepony to just be there!

“*PLEASE!*” I looked behind rocks, climbed trees as best I could, hunted in a cave and even moved into the mountains before the heights forced me to turn back with a storm of wind. I found myself amid the plains, alone and not tired in the slightest. Set to wander eternally through this featureless land of no memories.

“Somepony please *help me!*” Atop a hill, I spun, shouting in all directions. “*Is anypony out there?! I don't know what's going on!*”

“...*pony who...ir drea...fell to wastes...*”

My head shot up, screaming after the wind as it whirled away with a voice.

“I don't know! I don't know what happened! Why am I here?! I don't want to be *alone!*”

Frantic, trying to reach out and grab the wind, as stupid as it was, I fell. Falling, rolling down the low embankment in a spray of dust I coughed and curled up to wait. To wait for eternity as I saw the sun once again reset and refuse to allow me the sleep that would remove the waiting.

“Lost?”

My eyes shot open. Lifting my head, I looked around rapidly. I couldn't see anypony.

“Wh-who's there?” I felt my words stammer and tumble badly. Every feeling I'd gotten of meeting somepony for the first time and being shy heightened to an unimaginable degree after this isolation. How long had it been? A full day? No, longer...I couldn't remember! It felt so short.

That voice though, wasn't it...

Only when I stopped looking did I hear them again.

“Behind you, Murky Number Seven.”

The voice didn't sound strong, but even its presence frightened me. Spinning around, I saw him and almost screamed, falling backward into the wastes and numbly scrambling away! A small pony standing before me, having sneaked up!

He was a wretched shell of a pony. Tiny, frail and with legs so thin I could see the edges of bone even while they shivered at the effort of simply keeping his body up. A ruined black fleece was draped across him, stained and doing nothing to hide severe injuries. Whip marks adorned his back. I could see dripping blood from them. His face held huge radsors that seemed to swell out of the skin with soaked up radiation and weeping pus. Behind them I saw sunken bloodshot eyes that had known no sleep.

A horrid ruin of a pony, mistreated and hurt...yet it advanced on me! Rolling over, I tried to run and fell on my own face. Why had I lost feeling? I simply crawled low, scurrying to roll over the lip of the hill.

“Come back!” That rasping voice from a bloody and thickened throat!

“S-stay away!”

Bandaged wings fell limply by his torso, leading to burns and parts of his filthy dark green coat falling out to reveal bruised skin.

Then it hit me, where I knew that voice.

It was me.

It was me right before I'd come here. Broken, battered and edging so close to death. I could even see a trickle of red from the edge of his mouth.

“*Stay away!*” I simply cried out and backed off, this broken form of me advancing with hazy eyes. Was I really that bad? Had they hurt me so much? It looked like a moving corpse that dripped blood from its very neck and stumbled on stick-like legs.

“I'm you, it's all right...”

“What's going on?” I shouted back, holding out a hoof, moving backward every time it came closer. What was this place? Why was I here? I didn't understand anything! Goddesses save me from this nightmare!

“You came.” This ruin of a pony limped forward, trotting unevenly as he circled my own numbed but otherwise cleaner and uninjured body. I felt unable to move, just following 'him' with my head as best I could, realising I could not escape him. Despite that limping, every time I blinked he

was closer, always moving just enough to keep up.

“I thought I'd never find you, thought you hadn't come at all. I was getting worried.”

My own voice from that mouth sounded raspy and thick with gurgling bile. A hoof went to my chest, that disease had hurt so much, I was finally *seeing* it in myself here. Yet 'he' sounded uncaring and settled, as though speaking from experience or sudden relief.

“Welcome, though. I'm so glad you followed 'us' here, albeit accidentally. I don't understand that...”

“A-accidentally? I don't know what you mean!” I shook and took a step back as I saw those lifeless eyes with pinprick pupils.

“By choosing to come here into the peaceful reward for slaves, of course. You act like you're lost and scared, but isn't this what you wanted? No-pony will ever hurt you again. Never hurt *us*. There's no orders, no slavery. No cold nights or great hunger. No-pony will ever tell us what to do ever again. I...we...you...it's finally over.”

My eyes went wide, falling to my haunches.

“Y-you mean?” I bit my lip. “No, no this has to be some sort of...fever dream! Like this is what I'm seeing while fighting to survive a horrible injury! I can't be-”

The slave before me shook his head before nodding at the last words. My hooves went to my face. This couldn't be true. Not just like that!

“Yes, you are.” He moved a hoof to his chest, sitting down. “You died. Wildcard killed you and now it's all over at last. It has ended. It hurt...but no-pony can hurt you ever again! You have peace at last.”

I could only feel my eyes tear up again. This wasn't what I imagined...

“But it's what you want.” The form before me smiled, knowing what I was thinking. “Look me in the eyes...isn't this what we always wanted? Who better than yourself to remind you? I'm a part of you, I know it's what you wanted, seeking an end to the pain. They won't take our dignity.”

Nodding my head, I sniffed. “Y-yes...w-will there be any more?”

“No!” The ruined pony shook his...my...head and smiled. “It might not be your fantasy, but this is freedom.”

“It's not how I wanted it...my fri-”

The Ruin (I couldn't help but give it some title) interrupted me sharply, standing up.

“You don't *know* what freedom is, Murk! You wanted to taste it, that's what your Master told us long ago, remember? After his griffin stopped you? He told you that you needed to taste freedom! Well here it is!”

He swung a hoof around. I could see that passion even without pupils, the same I'd once shown and the delight to have anything for myself. I didn't recognise myself...but I saw me in him.

“This waste, it's one of the ways you can face where we go now. But this is dying a slave, eternally wandering without orders. What kind of pony needs to be shown the truth by himself? You're just confused, a lost part of me and us that doesn't quite know how to properly die. Listen...right now this is not on the cusp between life and death. There is no life to go back to. This is simply between peace and pain.”

His tone had taken a dark turn, moving closer across the dusty hill to stand before me.

“Have you really locked all those wishes away so much in your terror that you cannot even remember them when they are shown to you? We can take our freedom right *now*, Murk! *He* can't catch us this time! Be lost to the open eternity away from pain and torment. I'm so sorry it wasn't how you wanted...but it's finally here in some way. Peace or pain, Murk. This is it...the time to make the choice.”

“T-to live or die?” I stammered back, sweating.

“To die a slave or die peacefully, Murk. It's the only choice left. We can't go back to the light of life any more. It became too much. Our body simply passed on.” The Ruin lost its smile, sidling up beside me. “Now, to simply lie down and take the horror of this barren emptiness of purpose...or follow me, the part of you that knows the pain like no other and take the peace by a simple jump...”

Soundlessly, the dust before me yawned out and parted. Yelping, I fell back as ledges formed and dust swirled into the void opening up. So deep that the edges of stone simply disappeared into a misty nothing below! It wasn't solid black, instead a hazy tone of the horizon reflected closer than the eye should ever be able to comprehend. True eternity below me.

Then I noticed the Ruin hadn't moved. He simply seemed to rest in the air above the hole as though walking on solid ground. That battered head of mine turned back at me.

“Do you want to die a slave? This is the way to escape...giving yourself to the peace and allowing yourself to fall as far from the painful light as you can. Take the chance and make that one choice to throw yourself into that place you want to feel no more pain. Somewhere their chains will never find you and you can finally know rest.”

Every joint ached as I shivered and sweated under stress. This was all too much for me to take in or to understand. What kind of decision was this? For peace? I wanted peace...if I was dead, I didn't want to die in pain and remembering all the hurt...

“You can forget all that.” Its eyes narrows, knowing me. “If you remain here, you will spend eternity a slave. You noticed that in the forest. That panic without anypony around to give you an order? You're *still a slave* here, Murk. But fall...leap to the void and we will escape those bonds at last. To a place our cutie mark can no longer even tell us our destiny. No matter what it tells us at all.”

I moved closer, looking down to the contrasting warp of colour and form that betrayed a fall long beyond measure.

“It's not empty, it is a place of peace. You need only make the journey to the place we *truly* want, further down. Further away. You tried before, remember?”

The colours shifted, becoming that of gravel under fresh rain. My face twisted, tears dripping free into the pit.

“Just lean forward and it all ends forever. The story of the born slave who escaped to a peaceful afterlife, Murk. Tragedy turned to albeit only bittersweet freedom, but it is the best we can have.”

I stepped back, trotting away from it to lie on the ground and face away from the gaping hole. Pulling my hooves above my head, I shook it again and again.

“I don't know! I just don't know! I'm sorry...I'm so scared and I...this is all...”

The Ruin of my own body at the hands of My Masters trotted over. I felt his wasted hooves beside me before one settled across my back.

“It's alright...it's okay to be scared. I'm you, remember? I'm scared too, but I'm the part of us that felt so much of it. Please...”

The hoof lifted my head up, trying to smile through cracked and dry lips.

“...an end to a life of abuse and pain. All with but one fall...”

I glanced back, before turning to him. This was all so much. I needed to know.

“What will I find down there?”

The Ruin paused, then patted my shoulder.

“The beauty of this being our own spirit and soul around here? I can show you. You can show yourself.”

The entire world shifted. Like somepony unravelling paper from a foal's model the surface of what I saw around me peeled and faded. Staring in wide eyed wonder, I saw mountains lift and silently breeze into the sky while rocks folded and surged. The ground slid from beneath my feet and left me standing over *nothing* without falling. A sense of weightlessness overcame me while reality as I knew it hid and reshaped, sliding silently into a new form in the moments that I blinked. By the time I'd rubbed my eyes to even check if I were seeing this right, I was no longer in the Wastes.

Around me, lush green grass slid against my unfeeling legs. The sky above shone bright through patchy white clouds cleaner than I had ever known! I slid, almost falling before I realised we were on a sharp incline.

This was the world in my dreams...Equestria of old.

From tall mountains, marble white structures hung. Colossal and distant, they gave way to spiralling towers topped with purple and gold. The glint of clean unbroken glass shimmered like the

sea's surface across the cities upon mountains like the one I'd seen in the pictures in Stable Ninety Three! Ponds and rivers flowed gently around open forests. Near us, small homes sent thin streaks of smoke into the sky through cream brick chimneys, each with space of its own upon the high hills that made up the mid ground between wondrous snowy peaks and deep valleys of a colourful world. Rainbows shimmered above waterfalls while I saw natural built fences leading the way along gravel paths to every incredible corner or home below the mountain cities!

A world of unparalleled artistic beauty and peace. The sound of wind, water and brushing vegetation crafting a deliciously calming melody into the air.

The Ruin stood beside me just behind a rock, smiling thinly through that battered face. A broken nose reacted oddly to the movement, before casting a hoof outward.

“The peace we can take, Murk. That you can live in forever. Safe and secure to do as you will.”

“This is incredible...”

“This is the reward, for when a slave has finished his or her toil, their death is but their contract finally breaking and permitting them their freedom. Most find it naturally and happily. You...I...we're not like that. Born slaves who sometimes need a little push more. That feeling holding you from falling, that is the slave in your mind, Murk. But from what we saw, dreams can show us the way to here.”

I almost didn't listen. My eyes simply travelled around at this world of colour and beauty.

“All this?”

“All this. That could be your home there if you wanted. Go! Take a look, see for yourself what awaits.”

That was an offer I couldn't turn down. My numb body shifted and staggered but I found my way to the indicated living area. Just a little cottage surrounded by a low river built of light coloured wood. Nervous, I passed through the open door to find my dream home.

One whole room, a thick bed near a small fireplace right next to soft cushions upon the floor to relax upon. Woodwork furniture surrounding the carpeted floor in patterns that astounded every artistic part of my mind! Frames set upon the walls bore my most treasured drawings and a cabinet housed all of my belongings to tell my tale. Warm food sat ready on a table by the window while large windows let light stream upon my home. What took my attention more than anything was the back that opened onto a fantastic view of the valleys. An open balcony sitting waiting for me to spend my days sitting in peace drawing this beauty for eternity! There was even my journal waiting...

“All it takes is one word, one agreement...and it's all yours for real, Murk.”

The Ruin trotted in behind me, every step breaking the illusion to a dark rot beneath his hooves. The hideous brutality done to my body that he now displayed clearly overruled even this illusionary visit to paradise.

“Forever...” I muttered to myself, moving onto the balcony. Pausing, I closed my eyes and simply took in the serenity and relief. My body felt at peace, there was nothing to worry about in this world. Absolutely nothing. I could just sit here and draw my thoughts and feelings forever with no pony ever wanting to hurt me ever again.

The thought was *so* tempting.

Allowing myself to smile toward my ruined body staring back at me, I leaned down to pick up my journal. Maybe just one drawing...

I squeaked out loud, almost crying out in terror as it simply broke apart in my hooves.

Hopping back, I put a hoof to the wall to steady myself, finding it tearing apart and bending like a fragile and damp piece of paper!

“What's going on?!” Staggering back again, I placed my hooves to the chair, the fence...all were broken under the lightest of touches!

“Nothing is wrong, Murk!” The Ruin trotted up quickly, his *deathly* cold touch pushing me back from the walls. “You don't need to notice this...this is peaceful, right? Fragile or not, this is *peace* for you where you might do as you will!”

“B-but I c-can't...this isn't right! It's just pretend, like a model!”

“Peace or pain! What is an illusion to an eternity of enslavement in your own death, Murk? It's better than nothing!”

I crossed my hooves, biting my lip and looking around. A tightness in my chest born of stress grew and grew. How could I trust him? But he was me! Was this right? I didn't know! I just didn't understand any of this!

“You cannot be free *and* live with your mind seeing all, Murk!” The Ruin insisted, his hooves on my shoulders and that stinking mangy blood coated body of mine closer than I found comfortable. “This is all we have! The peace of eternity in our own make believe dreams or the pain of always feeling alone and without direction without your master to guide you! We have to choose how our soul dies, surely you can see this is the better option! Please! For *our* sake!”

He was pleading me! *I* was pleading me! Was this really all I had? I...I...

Something was missing, something huge.

Sniffing, wiping an eye I sat back and covered my face. An ebbing feeling in the back of my head, like I was on the cusp of remembering something important kept slipping just away from my tongue. I could be here! Safe! Blissful peace to draw and rest forever without *anypony* around.

Without *anypony*...

That was it.

“I can't...” I saw the Ruin's eyes widen as I looked up. “I want my friends.”

Something caught my eye. Without even waiting for a reply, I glanced around him to see a trickle of liquid on the wall from behind one picture. Accelerating as it descended, more followed with drips and slick oil coating the wall like paint thinner drooling and sapping the colour into a hazed light grey.

Only now did I see truly how this world lacked true colour. Spread outward, the liquid bubbled and dropped the picture from the wall, one that held me standing alone in the bottom left with my wings outstretched, looking blank. Behind it I saw a shining surface, like a mirror forming from liquid metal that was spreading the colour sapping wetness all over the wall onto the ceiling and floor.

The Ruin grabbed my head, turning it away from the sight that transfixed and confused me in equal measure..

“Don't look! Don't look at it!”

A scream echoed across the valleys. The oozing liquid that consumed the entire wall and sought to sap all vibrancy from an already distorted world pulsed and shook with a low aching groan. But I knew the scream, that long drawn out howl of a whole life's agony! Trying to force my head past, I almost fought with the Ruin. Let me see!

“*Don't look, Murk!*” He screamed to me. “It will only hurt you! You don't need to see it! That is your memory trying to infect and hurt you by showing you the pain surrounding them in Fillydelphia! You can escape it! Please, come with *me*, don't give it the chance to enslave you!”

“*I want my friends!*”

“They're *lost* to you, Murk! Let go, life is *over!*”

There was a wet crunch. I heard blood dribble. Unable to pull my eyes away, I forced past the skeletal form of the Ruin to look into the strange shimmering apparition that had spread from where an entire home wall once was.

Now there was but a framework, a dripping wasteland style ruin coated in writhing colourless liquid filled with a malign life! Within it though, I saw something. Me.

Lying cast upon gravel under a storm of rain, I saw the picture of myself broken and lifeless. My limbs hung like a castaway rag doll. Yes, I had known that scream! The one that had burst from my lungs against all the pain and abuse of my life when I had fallen! Now I looked upon the result. I saw my death. My...my self inflicted escape from the pain. If I could feel my own body, I might have felt sick at the very sight of terrified eyes wide open even in death, showing the very last frightened stare that had led me to jump. Wildcard had been the one to kill me in the end, but that didn't hide that I had chosen to *fall* by my own admission.

“See, Murk? It is only the painful memories! Even if that wasn't how it happened, it was in your mind still! Such thoughts don't disappear just because you failed once and everypony was sad! They linger, they hurt you forever. It's what has brought us to this choice. I beg you, Murk, turn and come with me now before it hurts you with what is to come! Do what you wanted, run away and we

can rest as one forever unto eternity alone and safe.”

“I...I can't, this is me and...”

“*We* are you, Murk!” The Ruin pulled at me. “We can still save ourself. Leave before the pain comes, your memory trying to reach you and find you no matter how deep I take you! Only by jumping once more can it truly be escaped! This world could be beautiful and yours again, for all its fragility, but you have to go *now!* Just one word, Murk, one agreement and it's all over.”

I saw large bubbles surge across the surface of the liquid images, it began to spread, seeking me. My hooves remained still, I couldn't take my eyes from my own crushed body.

“Come on! Before-”

Another scream burst from the images. Somepony else, who was that? I knew it! It was female! Locking my eyes on as I saw motion come across my own corpse in the rain, I found myself ignoring the frantic pleas of the Ruin even while the void emanating from the wall sucked around us. The air chilled, the harmonic hums deadened.

The scream came again as somepony galloped and almost fell when she skidded to a halt beside me. A mournful howl of loss bursting from her mouth. Gentle white and two tone pink, who was she?

A sharp pain burst in my mind. Something tore free as I felt my peripheral vision go black. All I could see was this mare. No, not just some mare! *Glimmerlight!*

She picked me up, holding my small body that limply drooped by its neck and limbs in her own front hooves. Her mouth seemed to simply stay open in shock and motion to cry and scream over and over as though in denial and horror. An outpouring of emotion the likes I'd never seen from her as though everything had just fallen and destroyed something she held so dear. Pressing her muzzle to my neck, she rocked my broken body as though by some miracle of wishful thinking I might return to life.

“There's nothing but pain in watching this, Murk! Don't do this to yourself! Your memories are trying to make you feel guilt and keep you where you were, remembering what you were in Fillydelphia!”

I heard the Ruin, he was right beside me but his voice was far off. Nothing made sense! I couldn't feel anything amidst the horror overtaking me and showing the result of my mindset as it brought me to this choice. Beside Glimmerlight, others emerged.

A huge figure, rippling until he was visible. Brimstone! He simply stood watching Glimmer's anguish, unknowing of how to react to this. His head bowed low, his shoulders slumped. I saw Coral Eve knelt beside Glimmerlight. She reached over to draw my eyes closed even as her other hoof wiped the tears from her own eyes. Three ghouls, two little fillies who stared in confused worry nearby to a shivering bearded figure of Weathervane gritting his teeth and shaking horribly as though some inner rage was ready to snap.

Then off to one side, just scarcely visible I saw the blinking red light of an eyepiece removed and dropped to the floor, before a young black and red unicorn dropped onto his knees in despair at the sight before his eyes.

Hooves grasped at my neck, pulling and struggling. My eyes felt locked, I couldn't move at the sight! Was this what I'd done to them? But why? I was...I wasn't anypony! Just a little slave who didn't do anything! I wasn't important! Don't mourn over me! Slaves just go, it's how it works!

A grasping, invasive and unpleasant feeling washed over me, the growing sickness sinking through my skin out of the visions and images that became more real as though I could reach out and touch them the more I watched. I tried to lay a hoof on Glimmer's shoulder but no matter how far I stretched my hoof, they always seemed so far away.

They all bore that same look, like they'd lost something important. What? It couldn't be me! What had they lost?

It took seeing them turn and leave one by one in differing directions for me to truly realise.

They'd lost hope.

Only then did I see one more figure starting to appear who stood over my body and cried their heart out. One who had been missing, who was-

“Murk!”

My head was turned. The entire world of Equestria I had seen, this paradise was a chaotic mess of wet glistening madness enveloping it and crushing the paper mountains from their fragile state. The Ruin held my face. I wanted to turn! Who was it back there! Who? I knew them, but I'd forgotten!

“*MURK!*” The Ruin screamed in my face. “You have to make a choice now! The pain is pulling you back into a personal hell of slavery! You can't go forever like that! We wanted away from the pain! That's why you jumped! If you keep trying to remember, even the empty wasteland before will give way to something much *much* worse!”

My mouth hung open, looking everywhere. Reality was bending, chains forming around the world and a searing pain on my cutie mark beginning to tell. Wincing, I tried to turn back but everypony was gone from the window into unreality.

“I don't know! M-my friends! Where are my friends?!” I screamed out, begging him to tell me!

“They're gone, Murk...I'm so sorry! I know you wanted to be free with them but it's impossible now!”

He paused, coughing harshly. I realised this horror was catching up to him as well. Of course, he *was* me.

“It's impossible. There's only one choice left to us, Murk. Fall into peace! Make the choice! For your own sake please do it, Murk! Just tell me you will and this will all stop, you are the only thing keeping us here, the only part of your mind that sticks and stays when it should move on! One word...”

Everything tore at me, even while every thought made me want to cry I strove to just

understand. All of this was sanity crushing, impossible choices that determined my *afterlife* and what it would be! Choosing to forget everypony forever to make the pain stop and just say goodbye or to face being a slave forever with an incomplete memory of tragedy and heartbreak? I felt too small to decide! I...I wanted somepony to decide for me! A friend to talk to and get advice! Just run away and-

“No!” I screamed it to be heard, stomping a hoof. “I don't want to forget them! They made me who I was for the first time, taught me how to laugh!”

Somehow, without turning I knew. Their faces fading on by around me. Those smiles, those harsh times when we had saved one another or been there when another needed us.

“What you're offering isn't enough...I'm sorry.”

He shoved me away. The Ruin snarled and knocked me clean onto my back, his wiry form showing a brief surge of strength before staggering and coughing badly. If this were not the warped world it was...he looked like he should be dead. Did I *really* look like that?

“If you won't choose because I'm showing you what you can *have*, Murk...”

The world began peeling again, a sensation of falling further! Screaming, I dropped over the edge of a hole in the ground into pitch darkness. A burning sensation tore at my body even as I reached out to grab the ledge before I fell, like a fire was sucking me in! My hind section was tugged, pulled and yanked at harshly like some supernatural force had grabbed me! Crying out in shock, I gripped as hard as I could!

“...then I'll show you what you'll get if you *don't!*”

The Ruin's face distorted into a mix of rage and terror, rearing up to stamp both hooves upon one of mine. Crying out, I let go with one, my mind struggling to comprehend all this! Pain soared through me, a void below and a twisting darkness over an idyllic world all around me! Sensory overload made me wince and close my eyes, pleading with him.

“I just need time! Don't let me fall! *Don't!*”

“Your whole life is down there, Murk! Every painful memory and horror inflicted upon you! If you fall to there, you will *never* get back out again unless you choose to let everything go for the one refuge a slave ever gets! It's our reward for service, don't throw it away! By forcing you. The *one* part of us, of *me*, that doesn't want to rest now to feel our lifelong pain then maybe you'll finally see why it's our time to let go!”

“*DON'T!*”

“Every one of those ponies you called friends were going to die! That's what slaves do! Holding onto them now is just hurting you more! It's pointless and painful! Don't you remember how every one of them was falling? To rage? To regret? To a feral state? They were all falling the same as you! You can forget them and clear it all from your mind! You'll be happy!”

His face *pleaded*, begging me as he leaned over. Holding onto the one hoof that was keeping me from above this new pit, I felt his hoof begin to let go! I saw no eternity below, only raging fire and

the sound of clanking chains. My face screwed up, he was asking me to forget my friends! To go to this eternal peace meant losing everything I'd found from them!

“No! I won't!” I screamed up at him. “I want peace, I *really* do! But not now! Not until I know they're safe! Not till I somehow help them from how I hurt them! Please, give me a chance to somehow *reach* them just long enough to help them!”

Behind the Ruin, I saw the colossal city on the mountain falling, shaking the very land as it crashed through the thin earth and plummeted into a void. Everything was coming apart from that shimmering liquid that flowed and closed in on us as much as it did upon every aspect of Equestria. The paradise was falling from the painful memories tearing at this pretend world.

“*You can't! You're dead!* Please, decide so I can pull you back up and we can go together into one peaceful state at last! It doesn't have to hurt any more! Why let the tragic tale of Murky Number Seven go on? Why more pain? Why more slavery and illness after beating and loss? Fighting it will only show you horrors that will torment you forever onward! Let them go!”

“I can do something! Somehow! I believed once, I want to believe again! *Let me try!*”

Thrusting my own hoof to him, asking him to take it, I saw the Ruin glance at it. Yes! *See* the little bravery in my eyes! I'm thinking the same! I can face a bit more pain, just till I see that my friends were safe and got out! Maybe not with me, but I couldn't go not knowing! I could endure until I saw them escape!

He saw my thoughts. I saw that hesitation, that moment that another part of what clearly was my unconscious mind think about it. In the whirling decimation of reality, he closed his eyes.

“They were good friends...” He muttered quietly.

“The first we had, we can't let them go.”

His eyes squinted, before hardening. I saw fear in his eyes, a terror that I felt all too often that had scared me into running away. That had scared me into trying to take my own life. He was afraid, he wanted a simple relief.

“No.”

What? *What?* No, please!

“No? Why! I just...but I just told you! We can do this! *Why?!*”

My brutalised self took hold of my one hoof. The pain increased, tugging me, I felt chains creeping over my back legs. My throat tightened from the feeling of a collar.

“Why?!”

He shook his head.

“Because I have to prove to you why we are forever damned and should take solace where we

can. I know you Murk, I know more about you than you yourself know. I am you. I am the you that forever remembers...that cannot forget. Unlike you, I know the full truth. The things you have forgotten in your efforts to make it easier.”

I jerked, falling backward, he made no effort to hang on very hard at all. He was going to let me go! *No! Please no! Don't make me experience it all again!*

“You've done this before, forgotten all just to relieve you of the hardship. It is a painful burden, but I will remind you if I have to why you have always chosen to forget and let memories blur to nothing. Why this is what you should do once more, here at the end of all things.”

He let go.

Falling. Truly falling at last. I reached for him, but I saw only his sad face watching me go. Witnessing my fall into the chains of my mind that coiled and bound around my life and memories. Screaming, howling for it not to happen I was pulled and dragged into the very darkest recesses of my life and the agony filled oblivion that awaited me.

* * *

"Remember the life that you hate...the life that you led...and the place in life you were given. It even started this way! You've forgotten those who mattered before!"

* * *

The wagon bumped and rattled, jolting us all inside it about hard. We might have been hurt from it all, had we not been as tightly packed as we were within the damp wooden passenger hold.

Scared and whimpering at the flares of lightning through the small holes that dropped freezing rain through them, I felt her hold me tighter. I didn't like this, it scared me. It scared me a lot! So she just held me close.

My mother.

“Ssh, dear. It's all right, the storm can't get you in here.”

Her voice, rhythmic and calm was all that stopped me from crying aloud. Hugging close to her chest I buried my head in her shoulder. I didn't like travelling. It took ages and was scary when it wasn't boring or smelly. But her hooves wrapped around me and hummed gently in my ears to calm me. I liked it when she made music like that, just for me when no-pony else could hear it.

“Where are we going, mom?”

The wagon lurched again. It was a flying wagon, pulled by *huge* griffins that looked really nasty. All the slaves had been pushed into it for us to be taken somewhere. I didn't know where, the masters never told us.

“They're taking us to another place for work. There were too many of us back at Shattered Hoof.”

“Will it be a nicer place?”

She was silent, instead just smiling down to me and stroking my mane carefully around a big bump on my head. I felt her pull my little jerkin down, hiding my wings.

“Why do I have to hide them?”

“Because other ponies get jealous of your wonderful little gift, my dear.” I felt a kiss on my nose. “Someday you're going to fly away from all of this to somewhere better, my dear Murky.”

“I don't understand...”

A squeeze. I liked squeezes! They were soft and warm! Nuzzling in, I forgot all about what she'd even been saying just to rest here snuggled up to my mom. Life wasn't good and sometimes she cried for reasons I didn't know. My mom confused me though sometimes, she'd look really really hungry even though she always had food to give to me.

“Just remember that you're different and special. You're not like them and they will hate you for it because you've got something they all want.”

I nodded a little, before yelping and grasping around her tightly when the wagon slammed and almost rolled. Ponies swore and the rumbling of us back on solid ground rattled beneath us. Slowly, the wagon rolled to a halt and hoofsteps above us dropped wood splinters atop our cramped heads.

“Everypony out! Come on, move it! Time's wasting, we're paying for the wagon by the day!”

A door on the side of the wagon was torn open after the unlocking of a thick set of bars. Dull brown light drafted in alongside a surge of icy wind and rain. Slaves around my mother and I groaned and shifted, pushing against one another to stand. Why did they put so many ponies in one wagon? It wasn't nice...

We were told to go outside. Trotting beside my mom I obeyed quickly and quietly even when the *really really* cold outside evening met me. Slaves were being told to stand in a line across a muddy field in the lashing rain, the little foals like me hiding beside the ponies that took care of them. Our master had an umbrella magically held above his head while the slavers wore thick leather covers or goggles. I wanted a pair of them, they looked cool!

I didn't know this place, so I just pulled myself against my mom's leg and shivered. I could see dark shapes of big steep hills surrounding this place, a wall surrounded it made of black wood and there were rocks. Lots and lots of rocks! If I squinted real hard against all the water dripping in my eyes I could see a large barn and small wooden house with the glow of a fire within it.

Looking that way let me see the pony striding toward us, the one who my master was meeting.

“Got the lineup all as you wanted, my good sir!”

“Good nuthin', you're late!” The new pony, an older stallion with a long grey beard spat and didn't seem to care about the rain. “Expected you here three days ago.”

“Now now, sir. You know the wastes and what they're like. Bloodwings en-route!”

No there hadn't been...

“Whatever, they're here so what you chargin'?”

Our master strode back, leading this new pony toward us and trying to avoid the muddy puddles from his white suit. The scruffy looking stallion just snorted and almost seemed to purposefully stomp in them as he went, he cast his eyes over us with distaste.

I pulled myself closer to my mom, feeling her hoof wrap around me.

“I'm scared, mom...”

“It'll be alright, dear. Just stay quiet.”

Now closer, our master swung his hoof over the line.

“Well, five hundred for the stallions and mares, three hundred if they're older than forty. Pretty good prices, I hear that Appleloosa's selling them for over seven-”

“How much for the kids? Rock farmin' don't take much strength bar the few and I gots them already covered.”

Blinking and casting an eye back to us, the suited stallion cleared his throat and motioned hastily to his slaver crew to back off a little.

“Well, a parent and foal discount I could surely-”

“Fuck the parents, don't need 'em. Just the little ones for the little rocks.”

My mother's hoof pulled me right under her, clutching tightly as I saw most of the foals look a little unsure to their unsettled parents or guardians. Some tried to protest, before the sharp crack of a whip sounded out.

“Havin' trouble keepin' em in line? Though you was 'fessional.”

“You mean professional?”

“Yup, 'fessional. How much?”

“Well...” This wasn't how deals had gone before, I could see him look unsure. Please don't pick me, please don't pick me! “I'd say perhaps two hundred seventy five, you're investing after all, right?”

“Two hundred.”

“They've been kept with their parents, grown better cos of it, so there *has* to be a premium, I can go to two sixty?”

“Two hundred.”

“Well, how many do you intend to buy?”

“All of em.”

A ripple of panic spread across the entire line. Slavers moved in, whips flying and mouths cursing when hooves beat us into submission. I felt my mother jerk, even though she'd been silent.

“Don't worry, Murky...don't worry...it'll be okay. I'll sort this.”

“I don't wanna go, he's nasty!”

“Well, sir...” Our master coughed into a hoof, before noting just how mucky is was and grimacing. “Given you are purchasing so many I can afford to lower my prices. Two twenty five, no lower.”

“Done.”

The suited stallion held out a hand to the farmer, receiving only a little harsh look before retracting it. Money began to change hooves. Then it started.

Slavers moved forward, prying foals from parents' grasps and throwing guardians aside. The sound of children wailing mixed with grown ponies begging and screaming that it would be okay filled the air. Even the rampant shouts could not silence it. A shadow fell over us, I heard my mother plea before magic grasped me and whisked me from under her. Immediately, my mother grabbed me, holding onto me even as they struck her and tried to pull her away. Crying, wailing and keeping a hold of her, I tried not to go! I didn't want to go! Why wouldn't they let me stay? *I didn't understand!*

Two others joined the slaver, my hooves slipping and lashing out with my little strength. One hit a mare's eye and sent her staggering back cursing words I had never heard before! Galloping forward, I leapt into my mother's hooves once more.

“What's all the fuss?!” The farmer wandered toward us all slipping in the mud and trying to stay together. “This what you call a foal?”

“Well, Murk has yet to have his growth spurt and-”

“Not payin' two twenty five for him. Hundred, max. Looks ready to die.”

“NO!”

Even when the slavers closed in to push us apart, my mother surged past them, holding me to her side and falling before the farmer.

“Please, sir! He's too young for this! You can clearly see how weak he is! Buy me too!”

“Don't need a mare, get off him, belongs to me now.”

"I beg of you! He's my son! I...I'll be whatever you want! You can have me for any kind of slave that you require, no matter how bad the job! Y-you don't need to feed me! If there's anything-"

"ENOUGH!"

A magical telekinetic slap threw my mother down. Screaming, I tried to run to her side until a rough coated leg caught me around the waist. The farmer lifted me up even while our master strode to my mother after striking her.

"You don't get to make demands here! You're nothing but a slave! Just like he is! You're merchandise. You don't get a say, if I say he goes without you, he goes! You don't get to offer yourself, not your services and not your body. If we wanted that from you, we'd take it. A slave has no bargaining chips in this world. Take her into the wagon, the good sir has made his purchases, one hundred shall do to just be rid of that runt."

Even while the slavers grabbed her, dragging my thrashing mother away, I fought myself against the heavy weathered muscles holding me off the ground. I begged him, hit his face with my little hooves and tried to squeeze free. They were taking her away! I wanted her! I wanted my mom!
Let go!

"MOM!" I simply screamed, pushing out my hooves toward her.

"You're different, my little Murky! You're different! Mommy loves you! It'll be all right!"

I couldn't do anything but cry and repeatedly shout for her, even as she was carried inside the wagon. The sight was replaced by that of our master, bringing the change for me to the farmer. Finally shaking hooves, he leaned down to me.

"Don't you worry, little foal. It's just business, nothing personal. She's right though, a born slave? I'm sure you'll get along just fine here. Juuust fine. Let's go lads!"

Sweeping up and away, he climbed atop the wagon. Surging their huge wings out, the griffins began to trot. I couldn't see inside the wagon, but I could *feel* her in there. Whining, struggling, I kept screaming to the sky even as the wagon lifted up into the low clouds of the thunderstorm and carried her away from me. Further and further away...

"Pipe down, you. Now let's get you to work..."

"I want my mom!"

"You'll get your job! You're a slave, nothing else!"

He simply threw me, threw me toward the ground. Curling up in fear I simply saw the rocks I'd spend my childhood days pushing from now on.

I tried to stand, I really did! Tried to stand and will my wings to flap! I'd chase after her! Find her! Getting up, I tried to climb up a rock to get a better start!

His hoof simply threw me down. I landed...

* * *

...on a wooden floor.

Scorching heat flowed over me, like the furnaces of Slit's factory. I had to blink and choke on toxic fumes before opening my stinging eyes to see the dark red wood rotted below me. Something was tight around my chest...what was?

I looked up, finding myself amidst a thick hewn cave of dull metal seams and dark timber blocks holding it all up. The walls were filthy with blood and sticky moisture. Warped torches flicked in unreal ways at the edges around a huge opening that looked out into an immense quarry. What was that around my chest?

A harness. I was harnessed to something!

A sudden weight began to pull, a massive draw on my harness that tugged me downhill. Scrambling, I felt my entire torso *stretch* from this impossible weight tugging me inch by inch. I looked behind me, panting hard as I saw a colossal iron cast cart filled to the brim with gem encrusted rocks. It must have weighed ten tons!

What scared me more was what was behind it. This shallow incline it was pulling me down led to a sharp drop into the quarry! I could hear echoing sounds of mining and slavery all the way down! I'd fall!

“Scary, isn't it?”

He stood before me, the Ruin. Trotting slowly alongside me as I was slowly pulled downward and gasping in pain when the harness bit into my flesh and torso.

“Get me out of this! Please! It's going to pull me over!”

“Down there's eternal slavery, Murk. It won't kill you, but it'll ruin you forever! That word is literal, now! Remember what even your mother told you, you're *different*. Other slaves might escape to a peaceful afterlife but you won't, you don't know any different!”

Straining, clenching my teeth and squeezing my eyes shut I grabbed a rock and *pulled*. The cart slowed, the strain on my frail body pulling like a torture rack if I left it any longer!

“I...want...out!”

“What you *want* isn't right! How can you die in your own mind and let your soul go to the Goddesses to create your paradise without knowing what freedom is, Murk?! Look at what you were just shown! All the times you've forgotten all but the vague details of! You are different, even our mother told you that!”

“ARGH!” I simply screamed as I slipped, the cart dragging me metres at a time until I dug my hooves in and fought back. I could smell the fire from the quarry, like My Master's metro hell below

ground made into an unreal unending nightmare! “But my friends-”

“Your friends matter nothing! They didn't save you, just like *she* didn't! Has that not taught you anything? What if Brimstone got so angry he hurt one of you? What if Weathervane turned feral and killed Coral? What if Glimmerlight chose to *forget* you? Littlepip only showed you the truth! Nothing changes! You were only *different* in that you saw it all happen from a false hope by a grieving mother!”

“Just let me try...I want to remember them! Live with my dreams!”

He leaned down, that broken nose leaking blood before me. My hooves slipped and ground across the floor as the weight only seemed to increase. It was going to pull me in!

“Dreams? Dreams of what? Some freedom from a destiny to escape? You *know* what your destiny is!”

He turned. I saw my own flank and the shackles set there.

“Don't you even remember *why* you got it? The same pattern you've been repeating day after day your whole life? The first time you first had your hope *broken* to remind you that these things seal the deal. Slave for life. Remember?”

* * *

“Hey, get out of the way, squirt!”

I staggered from the sudden shove upon my flank, squeaking and yelping when I clattered and fell. The bowl I carried dropped and clattered loudly on the ceramic tiled floor of the farmhouse, rolling away on its side beneath the tables.

Rubbing my tiny hind sections and wincing in pain, I stood up quickly from the damp floor and swung back at the queue. I'd been first here! I felt my tiny wings flare out in anger and frustration quite without my decision.

Looking back at me and lowering their eyebrows the bigger slave foals just grinned. Threatening me to dare making a scene of out this. Seeing them backing one another up, I let them win. The bigger slaves always won. They'd been bigger when we were brought here and in the years since they had grown much faster than I did. But they had taken my spot and skipped ahead to get food first! I'd finished my work earlier to get here on time!

“You gonna try something, Murk? Gonna cry or fight? We all saw we were here first!” Rock Hard, the colt who'd found his cutie mark actually doing rock farming here as a slave sneered at me.

“You weren't...” I pleaded while picking up the bowl and shaking the dog hairs from it. The master's hounds had more freedom than we did and left their hairs everywhere! Sometimes they stole the small bed of hay I had in the barn.

“Master doesn't believe you. He says pegasi lie! So pegasi get to go last all the time. That's the rules now!”

“He never said that!”

“Uh huh, he said it once before!”

“When?”

“When you weren't there!”

They were making it up, I *knew*. But they were right that he disliked pegasi. Everypony seemed to. Dejected and under their triumphant laughter, I wandered to the back of the queue to wait.

By the time it was my turn, I got some thin watery soup with a couple of bits (I had never dared ask what those bits exactly were) in it left over with no heat in it at all. Sighing as I found a corner to hunch down on, I saw the two seats taken by Rock Hard and his friend, the other slaves milling around on the floor like me.

Not that I really got a chance to eat.

“Where is 'e?”

Every slave jumped up when our master, ageing and grim from his mane turning grey, surged into the room from the back door, letting the cold wind in as he came. His twisted face glared around at us all.

“Where's that useless little runt?”

They would have pointed me out anyway. Setting my bowl down with a sigh, I trotted out with my head lowered. I could hear the other slaves 'Ooooooh'ing under their breath. They knew I'd hear the humiliation.

“Here Mas-yargh!”

Barely able to finish my sentence a hoof struck me across my big ear. Stinging pain sent me to the ground; whimpering and holding myself away from him.

“What kind of pegasus doesn't even know his damned compass points? I told you t'move them there rocks to the *south* field! You've moved 'em to the ruddy *west*.”

“B-but Master, no-one's ever taught me what's south or west and y-you p-pointed and-”

“Just shut up! Get out there an' fix it! I don' care if it takes you till mornin'!”

I saw Rock Hard taking my meagre meal right before my master dropped me upon the hard earth outside and slammed the door shut.

Bemoaning the loss of my daily meal, I let my head droop. Now I wouldn't get anything till tomorrow unless I tried to steal anything again. Maybe I could get some of the dog's when it was sleeping, that hadn't been so bad last time...

With a sigh, I took a breath and turned. I'd done wrong and my master wanted it corrected, nothing for it but to simply obey. Making off at the trot toward the west field I simply tried to ignore my protesting stomach.

Evening was setting down, an orange glow coming over the big wall that surrounded the rock farm that cast long shadows behind each of the bigger boulders the older slaves worked on and spikes of darkness after each of the rocks we moved. Up high in the hills near Whitetail Woods, the wind came all the time, over the wall and right over all of us. Sometimes so strong it blew me over. Really it had nowhere to go, the farm was set back against tall hills with sheer edges with only one pathway really leading away from it down the valley, so it just got trapped and sucked everypony all around. It made rock farming hard, as it would tonight. Strong winds hardly helped when you had to push a rock *into* the wind after all.

Aside from the farmhouse and the barn, there were only a few huts for tools or the dogs. An old collapsed windmill lay nearby as a source of firewood or repairs to the master's wall. That defence was too tall for us. Glancing at it while weaving around the rocks and deciding where to start, it was nothing but a perpetual reminder of how I couldn't leave.

Looking down, I came to the first rock I'd moved earlier. Best get started...

My hooves already hurt from doing it earlier. My back ached and really I knew this was going to take even longer. The south field was uphill (Was it south? He hadn't told me again...) from here so rolling was going to take *forever*. But I put my head down and got going.

Slowly, I began to stop thinking. Just head down and get by the shift, that's what mom had told me. Let it blur or you'll go mad waiting for every shift to end. But I couldn't exactly *not* worry. It was getting dark now as the sun went down! Darkness in the wasteland was scary! Last time I'd been out here a really scary bat thing had chased me all across the fields until the master had shot it! Then he'd made me stay out to finish the job even longer!

This just wasn't fair! I wanted to be inside! I wanted food! I wanted my mom...

But slaves didn't get to have anything.

The rock shifted, rolled and began its journey before my pushing hooves. Slipping on the cracked ground occasionally, I made the slow way across the farm to the south field. It took a good ten minutes to get it there, ten minutes of sweat and grunting behind the smaller rock, even with trying to buzz my wings for extra push behind me! Finally setting it down, I fell back and sat for a few seconds to get my breath back.

Ahead of me lay another eighty or so rocks to do.

Simply groaning, I let my head fall into my hooves. This was so unfair! Why did it have to be me?

For the next half hour I shifted rocks, managing two larger rocks in the time period to get them out of the way first before I was too tired. The smaller ones would come later that I could fetch a saddlebag from a hut and simply carry. Nosing myself in behind probably the largest of the ones I'd

have to move...I strained. Every muscle pushed, my rumbling tummy protesting the extra work on no food. Feeling it move, I let it fall before pushing back in again, seeking to flip it once again. Turn by turn, I began to get it up the slope. I could hear the slaves chattering in the barn while the master spoke with his wife inside, surrounded by those mad dogs he kept. I was just all alone out here with this huge boulder.

It fell again, I moved to shift it again.

It fell again, I moved to shift it...and felt something else shift the other way. Oh no!

The entire rock had hit another one I couldn't see! The entire weight fell back toward me, almost crushing my hooves before I jerked away and flung myself to the side! The rock cracked down on the pebbles below, sending them shooting off to ping from other rocks. Then it began to tumble.

Panicked, I rushed to catch it! It'd take forever to get it back up if it fell all the way down! Please don't rock! Please! Pretty please! I'll stroke you nice as I push you please don't-

It did.

Rocking over, it fell downhill. Bouncing and spinning wildly, it struck other rocks and flew into the air before landing hard to kick up the dirt. I chased it, galloping downhill as though I could actually do anything! To my relief I saw it strike one of the biggest rocks in the entire farm with a sound almost akin to a gunshot, stopping on the spot as it fell, breaking in half.

Breathing out slowly, trying to get my heart to stop beating madly, I almost smiled. Halves were easier to push.

Then the bigger rock started to shift, dislodged from its odd position and I felt my heart instead sink entirely.

“No! Don't!”

As though it would actually listen. The rock fell, rocking and finally beginning its thunderous journey downhill! I felt the ground actually shake as it clattered and picked up speed with unstoppable force! Outpacing my attempts to chase it, the boulder rumbled, bounced and finally *slammed* against the master's wall, tearing the wooden construction apart and sending splinters flying high into the air! Undeterred, the boulder made good on its quick getaway over the ledge of the valley, disappearing into the huge depths below. I heard it crash again and again on the cliff-side, echoing all over the hills.

A warmth washed over me, stunning me on the spot to forget about the rock. Standing still in the rock farm's field, I simply gazed forward.

Before me, through the gap in the wall meant to keep me in...was a way out.

Through that hole I saw the setting sun, escaping itself across the horizon while casting that heat across the land. It may have been dulled by clouds to a vague shape, but I could see it clearly enough! It lit the path, the remnants of light in the dull daytime of the wasteland caught in the long valley that led away into the distance.

I was alone...with one way out before me.

My mom was out there somewhere. *Freedom* was out there! No more rocks. No more beatings and nasty dogs. Food of all types! The kinds I dreamed about eating someday! It couldn't be that simple could it? Didn't I need to ask permission first? Could I really just...trot forward and that would be it?

The setting sun hung there, slowly sending its light to disappear, as though Goddess Celestia herself was calling to me, drawing me forward. I could go unseen, slip away before they came to check! I could hide in the valley and then keep galloping!

I could...

I *could*.

One leg began to step forward. Then another. Then a trot began. It grew to a canter. Drawn toward this new feeling, toward something I could feel I *wanted* more than anything else in the world. The warmth of the remaining sunlight spreading over my tired body seeming to ease my muscles into a *gallop* for the way out!

Behind me, I heard the farmhouse door burst open. Don't look back, Murky! You can go for the sunset! Jumping rocks, I sprinted for the hole in the wall even while cursing and shouting followed me. I heard somepony chase me, but I had to keep going! This new feeling drew me in irresistibly! Even past the tiredness mixed with panic and hope, I felt a strange tingling...like a sparkling somewhere.

There was a *huge* world out there! Crossing to the wall, I clambered and pulled myself through the wreckage before setting hoof outside it for the first time in years! Behind me the thumping of a galloping pony grew nearer, I had to get away! How?

The thought of the boulder going over the edge came to me. The winds were strong, maybe if...if I could...

I galloped with my head down, letting my wings spread. Then with all the might I could gather I started to flap them, swishing up and down as fast as I could make them go! The feeling was all too natural, I knew what I was doing with them! I could leap off and no-one would catch me! Come on, fly! FLY!

I hopped, bounced and tried to launch myself a few times. Lifting a foot from the ground, I dropped again and stumbled. The chasing pony, my master, got nearer! I could hear him shout, but I kept going, rising a little higher each time before falling back. Just one good gust of wind, please! I could-

Every hoof seemed to jam together, something catching them and tying them up on the spot. The crash of thick spheres into my forelegs made me squeal while I fell and slammed into the hard gravel road. Looking down, I saw a set of bolas my master had thrown wrapped around my legs. Please! Please, Goddesses help me lift up! I tried to rise again, my wings fluttering with all the strength I could, gritting my teeth as I began to move up...up...

Down. He caught me, dragging me to the floor harshly and knocking me on my back.

“Get off! I want to be free! I want out of-”

“*SHUT UP! JUS' SHUT UP!* Get back inside you lil' useless runt! Never 'oughta bought you! Nothin' but useless!”

Dragged by the bolas around my legs, I squirmed and fought, but a few clips around the ear calmed me. Looking back, I saw the sunset disappear over the horizon, feeling every *inch* of disappointment while I was dragged away from it. Dragged back inside. My wings kept trying to fly, buzzing and flapping to struggle against being pulled back. I couldn't help them!

Growing tired of the resistance, my master turned back, using the bolas cord to throw me to the ground again.

“You ain't never getting out! Think I'm gonna let you just leave now? You're stayin' here whether you like it or not till I either sell you to somepony else or let you just die! You're a slave! Get it now? Slaves don't escape! Slaves stay here!”

“I...I...want to be free...”

He slapped me across the mouth. Other slaves were gathering around me, his wife with the hounds made herself known too. They all watched as he struck again and again.

“You are not free! Say it! You are not free!”

“I...I'm not...” I faltered

“And the last word!”

“...free.”

He leaned back, shoving my head to the ground and casting his head down my body to my wings with disdain.

“Fuggin' things...ought to-hm?”

His eyes shifted with surprise, further down my body. Shaking and allowing my eyes to come out from behind my sheltering hooves, I looked back myself as everyone else wandered to look too.

Upon my flank, still shining a little, my cutie mark had appeared at last.

The disappointment that surged through me was unbearable.

A set of shackles, gnashing and laughing at my pitiful attempt.

“Hah! Now there, don' you see? A set of manacles for you. You get caught, you get brought 'ere and reminded...now yer own body's tellin' you that too! Cos' you were caught, see? Because you're realisin' it! You're a slave forever.”

I felt tears draw down, I rubbed at it, pleaded in my mind with it. Please go away! I didn't want it!

Was I really meant to be one forever?

I'd been caught and gained my cutie mark the moment I'd realised I was going to be in chains till I died. Oh no...oh no...it wasn't fair...

Snorting above me, my master turned to the slaves.

“Right enough bandin' about. Them wing things are gonna be a problem someday or 'nuther. Rock Hard, you an' yer frien' drag the runt to the barn. I'm going to go get my tools. Not having a hundred caps just fly away, useless or not. Rest of you fix that damn fence, watch em with the dogs while they work, love.

The last words were clipped off to his wife. Ponies moved into action, but only when the two slaves grab me did I really wake and realise what was happening. What did he mean my wings were a problem! What was he doing? I fought back, but they handled me roughly and dragged me up the hill toward the barn. My master was waiting in there with a bag of tools, no emotion on his face, just a blank look of doing the job.

I pleaded, struggled as I saw an anvil waiting there and heard the command to grab a wing. I saw a hammer! No! Please Goddesses NO NO NO! Screaming and wildly thrashing, it took them some time to push me down. High pitched and terrified, I simply kept begging. Rock Hard hit my head but I didn't stop. I tried to pull my wing away as I felt it rest on cold metal from one pony holding it over with his weight. Exposed and vulnerable, I saw my master come closer. Every prayer I knew screamed from my mouth, but Rock Hard dropped his weight and held me there. Alone in a dark barn with three ponies seeking to break my wings! Tears fell and my head writhed, but my body was held still.

I felt a hoof press down on my wing, holding one portion of the thin hollow bones still. Get off! GET OFF! DON'T DO THIS!

The hammer raised. I realised that I couldn't escape. *This was happening.*

“DON'T! PLEASE DON'T!”

“Shut up, slave.”

He grunted and swung, I-

* * *

-launched to the side with a scream so shrill and pained that I hurt my *own* ears. Rolling and yelling again I threw my hooves to my sides to find my larger body and its ruined wings already there, albeit unfeeling all over again.

Then the weight of the cart caught me and sent me scraping further down the mineshaft. The

cave was widening as I neared the quarry edge, the rock taking on the shape of chains and manacles carved into the very walls and roof around me. The sound of clanking manacles and surging fires of industrial slavery met my ears louder than ever.

Fighting for purchase, numb after the memory and crying out as the weighty cart tore at my back muscles from the unmanageable weight I managed to stop it for just a few seconds at a time, straining with all my worth. My flanks felt heavy, until I realised it was my cutie marks seeming to pull with a weight of their own!

“You've *always* simply been a slave, Murk!”

The Ruin trotted back and forth in front of me, grabbing my numbed and aching head to look at my own cutie mark upon his devastated and bleeding body.

“This told you so long ago! Think about it! You've only repeated this pattern every time!”

Images flared into my vision along the walls of the cave, forming in fire and washing into the next ones. Myself pausing as Brimstone ran off under gunfire...Ragini taking aim at a fleeing slave...Protégé tearfully having to pull a trigger...myself and Unity surrounded by slavers in an alicorn shield...Wildcard pouncing Sunny and I...me running right into My Master's embrace...

“So many times, Murk. So! Many! Times! Hope has risen and fallen time and again all the way from the beginning!”

“I...wanted *out!*” I strained and tugged, feeling the minecart lean out over the edge of the hellish quarry.

“You can't have freedom! The moment you went through those gates you entered the climax of your life! Your choice, Murk! *Your choice!* Now you won't make the one choice to save yourself! Master Protégé had to make one for you to try and give you freedom! Every time he asked, you jumped! Succeeding in surviving the parasprites to get back to him because *he asked you to*. Infiltrating a full Ministry slave house to get a sanitiser because *he asked you to*. Taking on a full gang of raiders and fighting at his side because *he expected it of you!* You've *always* followed your master, no matter what you think!”

“B-but that's not true...no! H-he was a way to maybe get out! To learn from!”

“You're deluding yourself! You are the *only* part of the being that is Murky Number Seven that doesn't want to simply rest into the peace we seek! The *only* bit that hangs on! Say the one word, agree and we can die peacefully and end this! You were always the little voice inside me, Murk. The one little hope that refused to be snuffed out. But look at me...look at the wounds and the sickness! *I'm* the pony that saw Fillydelphia! I'm the one who threw himself from that roof! I'm the one who is glad we're finally dying into peace! Let hope die...”

The Ruin staggered forward.

“Those gates marked the end...there never was any hope after them.”

* * *

Tall, ringed with razor wire and guarded by magically charged fences, I saw the gates unto the last place of my life.

One of a lacklustre haul inside the caged wagon, I curled up behind the rotten hay and tried to keep the jerkin I'd acquired pulled over my wings. They did *not* have to know here!

“Shipment incoming!”

“Pass on by! Shit lot...”

“Shut your face and just get out the way...”

The wagon began to move again, pulling itself into the heat of Fillydelphia. So Master Red Eye had bought me, finally brought me to the huge slave city I had heard about many times in hushed whispers between slaves. Some said it was a paradise where you could earn your freedom and got to participate in sports and see events while drinking alcohol!

Other said it was a living hell in true existence.

Now that I saw what lay before me past those gates and the *gigantic* wall, I truly realised which was true.

Columns of slaves with numbers greater than that of the largest slave camps I'd been to moved around as *small* teams amongst the industrial nightmare. Massive factories or wire pits in the ground spilled heavy smoke that clogged the streets. Masked ponies with long rifles stalked overhead gantries between the ruined shells of homes while the noise of machines and forges rung or roared in the thick and hot air. Streets fell away into long hills within the wall that went to lower concourses or rose up to old parks, a full city of rises and falls on varied levels of urban building inside one almighty prison of slavery!

Pressing myself as far into the hay as I could, fearfully looking at the boils and welts of long term slaves here. They coughed and staggered on wasted limbs around, looking all ready to collapse and spasm until death. I realised this was bad. *Very* bad.

“Come on! Get them out, Stern will be here soon to give them the talk!”

Doors clanged open. Stun rods threatened those who were slow and I had no wish for them to uncover my wings by accident, so I rushed out first to stand where we were told. Upon a long bloodstained clearing of concrete we were lined up, sweating and nervous. Everypony among our group looked around with worry.

“Stand upright, big ear!”

A baton smacked into my rump, sending me bolt upright in an instant. I withheld my words, they hadn't asked me to speak! A good slave didn't talk.

Then we waited. Minutes passed. I could see the slavers getting impatient.

“Where the fuck's the griffin?”

A sudden trotting perked my ears, leading me to cast my eyes to the side where a frantically galloping pony moved up to the slavers. Unable to avoid it...I may have eavesdropped.

“Stern won't be here for awhile, them bloody Rangers are at it again. Old Grizzly just says put them to work someplace for now and bring them back out later.”

“Son of a...right, fine. Master Grindstone's lot are shifting stuff in that factory over there, send them in and I'll come pick them up when the big bird's back.”

They agreed, before turning to us. Hastily we were coerced, pushed and struck until we got properly moving. My first experience of true slavery. Of being made to break your body to the limit under a hateful glare of Master Grindstone. Of feeling the burns as forges spewed molten metal out. Within ten minutes I was crying and hurt, unused to the conditions and unable to have acquired any protective gear yet.

We were taken back and forth around the factory to jobs as needed. Pushing massive molten crucibles or sorting the cast nuts and bolts for manufacturing. Slaves shoved me around, nothing unusual at all but altogether unhelpful in this. A true trial by fire into life in Fillydelphia when I felt my head spin at the fumes.

I fell back...overwhelmed. They could whip me...I just couldn't take it. This was too much!

Hooves wrapped around me. I expected pain, but instead I felt somepony lifting me back up gently albeit urgently. Eyes closed, I sought to open them, but everything seemed to warp and slow down. I still felt somepony shifting me, but it all began to blur into itself until I was standing back outside in a line. The feeling of somepony lifting me lingered, but quickly faded.

I must have fallen unconscious and been dragged out. My body certainly hurt enough for it...

“My name is Stern!” Before us, a tall griffin strode. She carried a massive rifle that swung on a strap every time she spun to us. “And this is *my* town. You are workers, you work toward the building of a brighter tomorrow for all ponies in Equestria. A *New* Equestria to be populated by Unity. Your gift to the world shall be the sacrifice that gives it that chance. You can choose to, or Red Eye can give it for you.”

This sounded rehearsed, at least partially. But I kept my eyes low, avoiding Stern's, well, stern eyes.

“But most of you don't really care about the future, do you? I see it in your eyes...you don't give a crap. You just want your 'freedom' don't you?”

I remembered a sunset, but nothing else. Maybe once I had...

“Listen closely, then, because I'm going to tell you how to free yourself. You earn it! It's your choice, you can toil in our mills and factories or remain in the workhouses until you die a slave's death! Or...you can volunteer for more dangerous jobs. There are rewards for such things, Red Eye is nothing but generous! As such, you have three options!”

Three talons were raised, one dropped. “Stable Recovery, many Stables remain around here and we require ponies to seek their resources and riches. They have security teams or dangers of their own, often unique and unpredictable...not to mention those Steel Rangers who seek them too. Don't get ideas of asking them for help, they would slaughter you just as easily as they would a Stable Dweller.”

She looked along our line, seeking to meet eyes. A few granted it, but I whined and hid away.

“Two years. Two years of work with that and Red Eye promises your freedom along with a tag to know you will never be brought back in.” The second claw dipped. “Or you can work in our crater! Radioactive metals and materials are always in demand. Six months of full days and we shall provide radiation treatment before allowing you, once again, your freedom.”

The third claw dropped. “The last option, fight in our Pit. The arena of combat where if you survive six events, usually about six weeks in total...you shall be granted a place of honour within our growing army! Such choices I am honour-bound to give, these are your only choices! They are lethal, dangerous and often painful but such is sacrifice for Equestria! You may of course join *Unity* at any time, to lay your hooves at the feet of the Goddess upon Equestria, not to a false deity I know *some* might believe in.”

Celestia and Luna strike her feathers *down* for such heresy! But every one of those choices sounded nothing but terrifying. I'd never manage it, they all needed strong ponies! What to do...

“Aside from that...there is no way out. Get used to it. Aside from death, of course. But there are few methods of death in here that do not involve a horrible end. Don't try to rebel. Don't try to run. Workers remain here to pay their due to Equestria. That is *all* you have now.”

She snapped around, as though to attention. I noticed her armour was covered in muck and blood, fresh from battle. Stern must have come here right from the fight earlier. Standing in the line, I shivered, but I knew this was all I could expect. Ponies like me were never granted anything easily.

Slavers began to move along the line. Stern meanwhile watched them progressing with distaste. Some ponies were taking *forever* to choose. Most chose Stable Recovery...a few cringed and tearfully agreed to the shorter crater work. One stamped and demanded they show him to the Pit.

“What about you, little one?”

Squeaking, I looked up. Stern herself had advanced forward to speed the process. She glared down at me, easily many times my size.

“What is your choice?”

“I...I...” Stammering, tears coming to my eyes at her intimidating presence and the stink of blood from her body. “I'm t-too weak for all of them! I'll...I'll just work in the city, mills or factories or...or workhouses. I'm used to it...”

Stern angled her head, as though not expecting me to answer as such, griffins had such a strange method of looking at you sideways. Struggling to get breath, I found I was the last to pick, even other slaves seemed a little surprised. They all looked like weathered wastelanders though! I wasn't like

that.

“I was b-born a slave, Ma'am! My cutie mark tells me I'm to d-die one too as my destiny. But I don't want to die in pain! I want my freedom, but I'm too scared...too weak. I just want to stay safe. I'll...I'll take the normal work, p-please...”

“You choose to be a slave forever in Fillydelphia? To give your life to Red Eye's work for a New Equestria and Unity?” Stern's voice was curt and simple.

“I will work with Unity, yes.” I said. I didn't need to lie to her...it was just the truth. I was Red Eye's now. “For now...I am nothing but a slave to Fillydelphia.”

There was a brief silence of speech as the ambience of the city hammered on around us. Eventually, the big griffin nodded.

“Send him back to Grindstone. They need the extra workers anyway.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

That was that...a simple tug on my neck to lead the way back to that factory.

That one pull to begin the end of my slave life in Fillydelphia forever.

There was a flicker, as though the entire world had just blinked. Even while the slaver pulled me, the feeling vanished and all the aches and pains faded away to numbness. I was still in Fillydelphia, but everything had just...stopped. Ahead of me, the masked slaver hung on two legs, mid pull. I saw Stern with her arm cast in an order, the slaves moping toward their destinations and still clouds of smoke in the air.

An eerie silence came over it all. The world had frozen, all but for me.

“This is it.”

The Ruin's voice echoed around me, before I saw him trot over the concrete ground. Moving between slavers, he came to me and kept trotting around me.

“You made the choice. 'For now I am nothing but a slave to Fillydelphia.' You accepted it, Murk.”

I had...

I *had*.

I couldn't stand, I simply fell down as the numbness crept more and more over me. To every side, the world shifted and tore. Factories became taller, the slavers turned to darkness and glowing eyes of malice. The great Wall of Fillydelphia shot up into the clouds, higher than any perception could imagine. Fires grew and expanded to spill across the streets and turn Fillydelphia to an inferno.

“This is the hell you chose, Murk. That I, in my terror chose for myself!”

Everything began moving again, but abstract and demonic. Screams warped and curved like the wind around buildings while factories moved in circles, creating materials only to melt them down and create them all over again.

“You left your mother, you gained your cutie mark of slavery and then you found your destiny here. What kind of life is this? Now it's over! I am sorry I had to show you these, but now you have the one choice Murk. It must be now! You teeter on the edge of eternal damnation to a conscious soul that believes only in Master and Slave! Say it...please...”

Shivering, hearing slavery become an undying cycle around me that would continue for eternity...I fought between two terrors. My friends or my own life for slavery. How could I choose? I couldn't just forget them all!

“But you can!”

“All my life...”

“Yes, all your life. Just a slave...all you've ever been and all it seems you ever will be! *Why will you not choose, Murk?* Why can't you see! You're nothing but a servant to everypony else!”

To my eyes, I saw every slave shift and change. They were me! All of them me! A host of Murky Number Sevens being whipped, pulled and abused at the hands of brutal tasks. All my life summed up into one hell.

“Now given the one last choice and you still don't know how to choose for yourself...you've condemned us all, Murk. You've condemned *yourself!* There is no life to go back to, I've told you this! Now you are going to *fall!*”

A sudden weight clasped around me. I sought to move, but with my body numb I couldn't do anything! The ground yawning open below me, I fell farther below the surface of the hellish Fillydelphia! Down into the pits, past caves and huge machines carving into the earth! I saw thousands of ponies, all looking like me in some state of horror that I had once endured every day! They toiled endlessly at walls that regenerated when not being hewn at! I fell...fell away from the Ruin who had given me the last choice I could never make. I never *had* made choices! Not about my cutie mark...not about my road to freedom in Fillydelphia...

...not to save my soul.

Faster and faster I tumbled, drawn by the weight of the mine cart. I hadn't even seen myself reattached! Farther down than Fillydelphia had ever gone, it dragged me into the black.

The impact splintered my senses beyond reality. To the bottom of the quarry as that immense mine cart bearing the weight of my own world crashed to the floor and left me alone at the bottom of eternity. Lying there, looking up I could see nothing. No light, no life and no hope. This was my reward...

Alone and scared, I lay there.

Curling up, I heard the slavery continue...and continue...and continue. I shouted, I cried and I wished I could find the choice to dream. This was the end, the *true* end for me..and I could do nothing to change it.

I did not know how long I stayed still before I realised it wasn't going to change or end. The fear truly began to see in. This was the end of the line.

No power to change. Nothing alone anyway. I had *nothing!* If...if only I'd had something, anything to help me like I had when in the end portions of my life!

I j-just needed s-something...anything...couldn't there be *one thing?* Had I really found nothing in my life to hold onto? If only there'd been just...one...thing...

Please...one thing, hasn't there been anything?

Without a warning, the first thing to remove me from my nightmares, I felt my eyes begin to squint, as though a bright light were trying to break through their tightly closed eyelids. Gasping, choking on having no air, I opened them to see myself still in the pit of slavery...but ahead of me there was something amiss.

One pillar of bright whiteness, beaming across the floor to me as something shifted in it that tore through the darkness around it. A form...slowly trotting toward me filled with a radiance I hadn't seen since coming here.

Then a voice...familiar and daring.

“How about a glimmer of hope?”

She was there. Stepping forward slowly, drowning out the chains and pickaxes to a dull noise behind the angelic calm injected into my afterlife. Slender legs to a figured body bearing a long two-tone pink mane. Perfectly white and clean with bright azure eyes and a comforting smile upon her face.

My mouth gaped, shivering in disbelief, I watched as my...my *friend* came toward me. Seeming to almost glow where she was, looking like she had before Fillydelphia had hurt her too, Glimmerlight offered a smile and extended a hoof. This was how she saw *herself* from the form she had once had.

As though in awe of one of the Goddesses themselves, I lay and stared upward without a word while she came closer. Was it taunting me? Teasing me what what I had lost forever? Shivering and scared, I curled up even when I felt her kneel down beside me. Her horn glowed before the absolute proof of her existence beside me was given.

Her hoof reached out and ruffled my mane.

“You've held on, Murky. You did it.”

“I...I fell! Everything! I couldn't choose...so I'm d-damned and-”

“Sssh...” She leaned forward, kissing my forehead and gently leaning against me. The shock of

feeling somepony else touch me penetrated the numbness around me. A warmth spread, vanquishing some of the ruin from my body.

“You're the one part of yourself that refused to give in and accept that you couldn't be free, Murky. I know your memory, I've read it. You amongst all these forms of yourself, you are the *one* part of your soul that always came back to the surface time and again to try and make a bid for true freedom.”

“But I'm *not!*”

I writhed away, almost startling her. Hopping up and staggering to my hooves, I waved one around me.

“Every time! Every single time I thought I had something I was only deluding myself! My own mother being taken! Choosing to slave forever in Filly! *My cutie mark!* I've seen the truth, Glimmer! This was a contract to my life the moment it appeared on my flank! This is just the end of it! I always *hated* it! Hated what it represented...I almost hated *you* when you said it looked beautiful...”

I slumped down, facing away from her. To my surprise, I heard a short laugh and a sound of her mane whipping back and forth as she trotted forward. Glimmerlight was shaking her head.

“You've never seen?”

“Seen *what?*”

She lay a hoof on my shoulder, pushing me to my hooves.

Then she pushed my own head to look at my flank, pointing with a hoof.

“This *is* a beautiful cutie mark.”

“It's shackles of my *life!*” I turned back to her. Please, Glimmer, stop making me look at it!

Glimmerlight only pressed my head right back and pointed again.

“Have you never noticed the one detail that matters? The one thing that changes everything about your life? That those shackles...are open?”

Simply staring toward my own mark, that hated symbol of slavery...there were a few moments of silence. Everything dulled...nothing but me and that icon before me.

The shackles...were *open*.

Open.

Twinkling, like the light of a small star, something stirred within me. Sparks flew, a light that had long gone out relit and a pushing realisation grew and grew as I looked at it properly for the *very first time*. Like a foal the moment they get one and feeling everything just click into place with

wondrous joy and a *purpose fulfilled*.

The revelation hit me like a tidal wave, sucking me up and hurling me into my own life and every single moment. Glimmerlight's voice rung in my ears, her horn searing its light to throw me into my own memories.

“Remember everything, Murky. See your life the way you've never seen it before!”

A thunderstorm! A muddy farm and being torn from the grasp of my mother. *Every other foal* had gone along with it but for one that needed to be grabbed and pulled away many times. He had defied the instruction his masters had given to seek the pony he wanted to be with!

“You've been resisting ever since you were a foal.”

A little hoof struck an eye, the foal galloping away from what was wished for him back into her embrace. Even with failing, his mother's words made so much more sense. That he *was* different!

“She told you that you were different, special! That you were going to do something they were all jealous of, she knew that someday you would grow to fly away from all this! To fly after that wagon taking her away!”

A rock crashed down the valley, striking a wall and smashing it to tinder. Behind it, a young slave stood and stared toward the world suddenly open before him. Lit from the sunset, the warmth and hazy orange carried him forward without permission to seek that which he wanted.

“You didn't get your cutie mark because you were caught, Murky...”

The sight of a young foal galloping with a *smile* I never even knew I'd been wearing that day! Galloping and hopping, little wings buzzing and trying to lift him higher! Every effort thrown toward an escape that he was throwing everything into!

“You got it because it was the very first time you had tried to escape! Your mark is not for slavery, Murky. It's for freedom! To break the chains!”

Fillydelphia loomed, the sunset's orange become a thick red. Slaves were lined up before a bloodstained griffin. Each slave, in fear, sought the methods of freedom through service and slavery to a grim contract. But as that griffin approached the smallest, he looked up and he spoke to her.

“Stern was surprised at you, remember? Thousands had chosen that out of fear, but despite the shaky voice, she saw the look in your eyes!”

He spoke up, scared and whimpering. But in his eyes I could see a glint, something unknown to me from inside! His mouth moved, but it spoke a different tone than what the Ruin had repeated back to me.

“Just listen, Murky...”

My own voice...

“For now...I am nothing but a slave to Fillydelphia.”

Then I heard it, what was different.

'For now.'

I'd *always* known.

“You always had that will to escape, Murky! You did it before you even had us around! Before I even set eyes on you, you proved to yourself that you're ready...”

I saw myself atop a helter-skelter gazing toward the wall...standing before a mirror decked out in my escape gear! Then I saw that sight it had shown me long ago!

A little foal pegasus, me as a colt, standing with innocent little wide eyes filled with tears, my two stubby little wings flapping. It had been that very first escape from the rock farm!

“Ready? Ready for what?”

Glimmerlight was still there, right beside me and guiding me through more recent times, the flow of memory and dreamlike stars carrying those images around me. Her voice flowed toward my ears, gentle and like music...

“You've come such a long, long way...”

A little slave who meekly obeyed everything even a normal slaver ordered him to do, who ran away from mere gang members. When faced with merely having to steal his own journal back he simply lay down and cried.

“And I've watched you from our very first day...”

That same little slave, battered but standing sat before a sick unicorn upon a couch. She had heard them, what he intended to do to help her. Then, inside a bunker, he fought off ghouls to rescue a small filly from imprisonment, to *free* her! A daring escape into the crater to carry home the items he needed to save the mare's life.

“To see how you might grow. To see what you might do...”

He sat between a giant stallion and the rescued mare. They teased him as he drew, making him blush and yet laugh. Then the dark of a Stable. Even under the waves of battle and danger, the moment his eyes saw the light pouring in the doorway from up ahead he zoned out...trotting forward toward it with dreams and aspirations overcoming the terror inside him from that horrid place!

“To see what you've been through...”

Atop a rooftop, a black and red unicorn and the little slave faced each other, an aimed gun and a pleading to not move or the gun would fire. Heedless, he charged forward for that zipline with no hope at all! Galloping directly into a bullet just to try and get there! Crashing into his small body and sending him reeling to the floor, I saw the unicorn rush to catch him and try to save his life.

“...and all the ways you've made me proud of you!”

It began to speed up. Image after image. From the pits of slavery amongst parasprites where he volunteered himself to save a young couple. From where he took upon a mission to acquire a sanitiser for better aiding those who needed it. Right into trying to help free those trapped by raiders amongst a brutal firefight inside a mall, taking on their leader himself!

“It's time now for a new change to come. You've grown up to see a new life has begun.”

From escaping his Master time and again to freeing that one mysterious mare from incoming danger! Escape after escape while on the run, constant efforts to get away from his Master even under the darkest days of his life. A mindset that never gave up and always found *some* little hope to hold onto!

“To go where you will go. To see what you will see...”

Against whizzing images, so fast I could not see them but every single one of them a whirling mass of escape, chase and a decision to defy! Every theft, solution or evasion he'd made by himself slowly fading to show me that one moment of him looking up at *his master* and telling him **no!** Of my tirade against him after saving Lilac, the words that had rung true to my mind whether I had an icon or not!

“To know you will be free!”

One blurring surge of memories, escape attempt after escape attempt. Every time coming closer and closer from a desperate charge out of a rock farm to a prepared plan away from the FunFarm right to a war torn rush away from a Stable! Always toward the sunset! Always toward that one symbol of freedom that I saw in every image of running, evading and smiling as I was surrounded by those I would make my new life with! More and more flying by of each moment that *mattered* fading toward that one symbol before my eyes that defined my life!

“For it's time for you to fulfil your destiny!”

A pair of shackles, *broken open*.

A symbol I'd always carried and never realised shining with purpose and potential right before my eyes! I was back in the pit, but standing taller. My body was somewhat numb, but I could feel the ground below me. My eyes firmly centred on that mark that now meant something entirely different amid the light of Glimmer's magic and fading memory spells. She stood there, smiling at the shocked look upon my face.

“I...I never knew...”

Glimmerlight trotted forward, resting a hoof over my shoulders. Glancing to myself, I saw the blackened ruin that had spread over my body throughout the bad memories gone, I was just the normal pony as I always was, cleaner and healed in his own stitched woollen fleece.

“You gave us hope as much as we gave you help, Murky. Don't ever think that you were just a burden or a tag along. A little symbol of innocence and purpose toward freedom like you was just what

Brim and I needed to get going. I'd never have tried to reconcile with Coral without you around to help me. Did you really think we would leave you alone to this?"

"But I...I'm dead...all this time I never realised what it meant and only *now* see but I'm already...g-gone..."

Glimmerlight shook me a little, leaning closer.

"Listen, Murky. It doesn't matter when you realised this. It *always* matters even if it's to go into the great beyond. Where you've come from doesn't change anything...it's where you want to go that matters. What you do now is the deciding factor...will you use what you know to save yourself? To escape these chains on your soul from a mistaken destiny forever?"

Looking up, past the whirling circles of slavery to the red glow of Fillydelphia far above us...I bit my lip and shivered.

"I...I d-don't know if I can. This is all so...oh my. I mean, my cutie mark means freedom! It's so much to take in and...I don't know if I can do it or...or feel it as I should now and...I'm so weak..."

"You don't have to do this alone, Murky." She rocked me with that hoof and squeezed her cheek against mine. "You've got me with you. *Always*. When I said best friend *forever*, you better bet your skinny little cute rump I *meant* it. The others all feel the same. No-pony wants to see you die."

My eyes bolted open, a surge of will to seek freedom anew picking up by that last word.

"Y-you mean?"

"Yes, Murky." She grinned and looked skyward, up the immense trial before us. "Up there is the light beyond the slavery, beyond the darkness of all your memories and hardships. Past all that which pulled you down you can find the way to your own choice...a way out of this nightmare. We're all doing what we can...it won't be easy but you can bet the others will help."

She took my hoof.

"So let's get you out. Let's escape the wilful death that so much of you wants and bring the *real* Murky to life once and for all. Let's escape the slavery that's bound you so long inside!"

A resurgence of courage, yes *courage*, spiked up in me. There *was* a way. A journey to the freedom of my soul, to life or salvation I did not care! But I had my best friend with me...I would make it!

"Yes...lets!"

Cast into the pit of despair, farther than ever before from what I craved, I now knew that it was not the end. Glimmerlight and I. Me and my chosen sister. Two simple ponies with nowhere to go but *up*. Around us, every single form of myself that worked the walls turned and squinted through sunken hopeless eyes to the *one* part of me that hadn't yet given up. Cast in Glimmerlight's glow, we were one small aura of light in the darkness.

This was the moment I took back my life and become the pony I was meant to be. The moment I would throw off the chains for *good* inside myself.

“No matter what happens, sis? Thanks...for everything.”

“Pfft, you sound like I'm not going to drag you out if I have to. I haven't finished hooking you up with a buck yet.”

She winked at me. Despite a blush, I smiled.

Then we took off. A gallop toward one of the cave entrances surrounding us. All around us, the staring slaves looked shocked. A sight they had never expected to see, something that scared them, terrified them into dropping all their tools.

As we ran across the long flat quarry bottom, I saw that fear turn to shock as they realised what we planned to do. Within seconds, it became an anger...a desperate fury as every other part of me wished to remain in death. A clatter of chains and tiny hooves, they leapt forward and charged for us from all sides!

Glimmer's horn flared, casting light further out. The wrecks and failed hopes of me winced and stumbled, crying out as they covered their eyes or shrank back as though burned.

“This won't hold them too long! The parts of you that still believe you want to die are strong, Murky! It's deep rooted, not something that just disappears...you have to make it happen and get out of here!”

The cave was just up ahead. I ducked around blindly flailing limbs that rose from the darkness alongside radsore bearing faces of torment. They clawed into Glimmer's aura, looking to grab a hoof or a tail.

“Get out *where*? Where do we go?”

“Towards the light! Always towards the light, you'll know where!”

Passing by the entrance, the crowd of slaves poured in after us. The cave circled around the edges of the quarry, rising with every metre. It was time to begin the ascent out of this nightmare once and for all. Struggling to keep up with Glimmer's longer strides I felt one bite at my tail. Squeaking, I pulled it away just before the jaws snapped shut. Were they *me*? A savage and dark part of my mind that sought to pull me into this sort of thing?

Toward the light...where was the light? *What* was the light?

From everything I'd seen the answer wasn't long in coming. Diving through the cave and beginning to climb upwards in a ring I shouted to Glimmer.

“The sun! The source of all light! The thing I first chased! That's what I need to go to! To see!”

“Sounds like-argh!” Glimmer cut her words, diving forward when a tiny crevice unleashed a

tide of slaves. Pouring forth like black liquid they slipped through the dark shadows of the slick cave and launched at her. Spinning, casting her horn toward them, they fell back with a growl. I pulled at her, helping my sister up to keep moving!

They were coming from *everywhere*. In some unreal way I recognised them all as each day of slavery I had done, each a unique pain or memory of a thousand tasks. A tide came from behind us, clawing over one another in their fear to stop me. Every time I looked away, more appeared.

“They're going to close us in!”

Glimmer threw one off, pulling me now into a side cave with a rising floor. We had to keep going up, the only direction that mattered! Around us, the cave darkened until we could no longer see the walls but merely hear the rush of slaves chasing us.

Then, like running out of a black cloud, we found ourselves in a wide void filled with mesh flooring and cage-like corridors held up by thick clanking chains. Around us, a view to eternity around us from within this metal maze that displayed blurry images of my life through hazy colours shifting and turning through mists.

“Your subconscious is one messed up place, Murky!”

“Tell me about it!”

The entire construction swung as we entered on it. This made no sense, we'd been in a cave, but the moment we'd entered this side passage it had disappeared. We climbed cage like stairs, dove under chains that hung or barred the way and always kept moving *up*. Slaves clung to the outsides, hooves pushing through toward us. Some battered the metal, trying to break into it. The entire construction swung from the chase across it, arcing back and forward to throw off our balance. Sometimes I could have sworn we were now on what was once the wall.

Eventually we came to a blank area, a crossroads with nowhere to go. Slaves poured through gaps in the corridors surrounding it, trapping us in the junction! I could hear their cries, somewhere between a scream of agony and fear driven rage. Every so often, a blood chilling plead or beg would come through the sound.

“Um...any ideas, sis? We're trapped!”

“Look up!”

Casting my eyes skywards, I saw the light above, like a small trapdoor!

“I can't fly!”

“No, but this is your mind, Murky! *Your* memories! Isn't there something that would work here you loved very much? Something you yearned for years after?”

Shivering, terrified by the new rush of emotions and the thrill of escape I looked into her eyes and saw that knowing. She *knew* I had a way out of this...I just had to know it.

Something I knew would work...

I closed my eyes, remembering every little delight of acquiring it. Bouncing happily around another room full of cages and locks with a buck so enthusiastic he had seemed to almost *sing* his delight at making it up for me! One I'd gotten rather caught up in myself.

Thank you, Blunderbuck...

Opening my eyes, I reared up, angling my back and kicked out my front leg. With a whirr and snap, the mouthpiece whipped in front of my face! Glimmer grabbed me, holding tightly when I bit down, feeling the satisfying *whoosh* of the air-powered grapple rocket off my side and snake its way into the light. I didn't need to hear a click to know it would find its target. Yanking back on the mouthpiece, I sent Glimmer and I soaring upwards even as the slaves clustered below. I'd have laughed if I could! Now we were moving! Up and into the light faster and faster! Far quicker than my grapple gun had ever moved me! My mane whipped, Glimmer dug her head into my shoulder from the surging wind passing over us while we left the dark quarry behind for good!

The light grew before us, larger...larger...encompassing us until it gave way to a flickering reality! We passed through it, moving to somewhere else...

* * *

All upward motion ceased, both of us being dumped down where we were. Falling on top of Glimmerlight I still made a grunt of surprise and pain from the short fall. We'd landed upon a hard concrete floor in darkness.

“Good job, lil'bro. Knew you had it in you, but where are we?”

Helping her up, I had to squint as her horn lit again. The light didn't go too far, casting only about ten feet either side to no avail. I saw only a chipped and stained concrete floor before the ambience of darkness took over once more. Backing against one another, I gulped as I saw what the stain *was*.

“I th-think I know where we are, Glimmer...”

“This will take you past the trials of your life, Murky. You're trying to escape the memories that hurt you and the things you fear. Where is it?”

I didn't have to answer, he did for me.

“Welcome back, Murk! I didn't expect a rematch so soon!”

The floodlights blasted into life, blinding me on the spot. Crying out loud and covering my eyes, I slowly let them refocus to what I had feared. Around me was a huge concrete arena topped with spiked metal and darkened stands where shadows warped and moved in a mocking form of an audience. The entire roof was enclosed within the quarry's caves while the stains around me were blood. *My* blood.

He stood before us. My killer. Wildcard stood atop a pile of corpses, all the ponies (and

buffalo) I'd seen die in the Pit across both times I had been there. The huge form of Bonecrusher surrounded by Top Quartz, Shovels and the rest. I even saw Blood and Daff.

"I've never got to kill somepony *twice* before! You know they say the sequels are always worse, right? Wonder if the same is true with murder, what do you think, huh?"

He slid down the corpse pile as though it were a child's slide, skidding at the bottom across the thick blood seeping away from it and rolling to his hooves with a bow. My body began to freeze, he'd...he'd killed me! I couldn't fight him!

"You can do this, Murky. It's not about combat! It's about overcoming what scares you!"

"He killed me, Glimmer! He...he made me scream and hurt me before-"

"Listen to me! You *can* do this! You're braver than you-ARGH!"

My mind reeled as I saw the blood leap up, snaking around her legs as though it were *alive* and drag Glimmerlight far from me! Throwing her into the wall, it surged off the ground and formed a sort of blood cage around her. Slowly, it began to steam, growing boiling hot that scalded her everytime she tried to push by.

"Hush hush, girl!" Wildcard skipped through the arena, grinning to her. "Let the little buck talk, it's rude to interrupt! You don't get to play any part in this! Now c'mere little guy!"

I stepped backward, my mind was still reeling at the sight of blood coming to life. Below my hooves I felt its sticky pools squirming like living water...

"I said *come here!*" Fury crossed his face the moment my hoof moved backward. "You not doing what I'm telling you? I own your life cos I killed it! Get back here!"

Shaking my head, I turned to run. I could hear Glimmer screaming for me to just see through how he scared me into wanting to fall again but he just overwhelmed me. Anywhere I galloped to, he was there, defying reality to be just outside my peripheral vision every time!

"Over here!"

I dove away.

"I meant here!"

Rolling away, one machete drove into the concrete.

"Or here!"

A hoof flashed out at me. Scampering away from it, I bit down hard on my grapple gun, trying to smack him in the chest with it, but knocking me back onto my rump with the recoil it only soared past him. Lightning sparked from his horn, striking the ground beside me. Crying out, I froze at the sight of him waving a hoof happily from nearby. His horn was lit, ready to aim properly this time.

“P-please, let me go! I just want to live!”

“Aww...ain't that cute?” Wildcard trotted forward, shaking out that multicoloured mane. “Usually they tell me they don't want to die rather than they want to live. Somethin' different, huh? Share it with uncle Wildcard, c'mon!”

“I want to *live!* J-just let me go! I don't want to fight...”

There was one difference between then and now...I didn't feel tears in my eyes.

“You only kill! Just treat it like a game! Why can't I just have a *life?* Away from ponies like *you!*”

Wildcard stopped trying to work something out of his teeth with the machete and blinked at me. Then he began to advance, his voice low.

“Like me? You thinking I'm something bad? That there's something wrong with me? Fuck this, I'm gonna stick you right now, little pig. *You saying I'm crazy?! Ain't no water below the bridge that isn't gonna be your fucking blood, kid!*”

He charged, raising the machete before sending it crashing down. I screamed, covering my eyes.

Red clouded my vision. The colour of blood and the sound of something hacking through flesh met my ears. He'd done it again. He'd...he'd...

There was no pain. Cautiously, I moved my hooves away.

Before me, having dove in front to take the strike to his own body, Brimstone Blitz stood between Wildcard and I. The machete had sunk into his shoulder, streaming blood terribly. But his cold eyes met Wildcard's from mere inches away. The crazed raider seemed, for once, stunned.

“I was like you once, Wildcard. Not any more. If I need to sacrifice my own body to prove something or to protect somepony...I'll do it.”

“You old dog, nothing you do can save him from the place he's in! Best just accept the crazy, embrace it or *die!*”

They collided in a sudden and mutual blur of motion. But so close, with his weapon stuck *on* Brimstone, Wildcard had no chance. Hurling the smaller raider away, Brimstone charged and leapt upon him, pinning the raider down. He seemed stronger than ever, his mane greater in colour and his body more lean and muscular than I'd ever seen it. Like he was somehow younger...

“I'm not going to let age take me until I know I've done what I need to, Wildcard!”

“Get off m-”

“Shut up! I let you get to him once before, *never again!* He doesn't *ever* have to fear you again, know why? Because he has others willing to stand beside him who won't let him pass into the darkness

so easily! But there's one much *bigger* reason that matters to you right now.”

Brimstone turned back to me.

“It's that he's got **me** and even way down here I'm not going to let you get *anywhere near him again!*”

One of those colossal hooves rose, Wildcard struggled and squirmed, but beneath the full might of a warlord in his prime he had no chance! With a roar, the final blow descended, shattering Wildcard to splinters of ebbing black that flew in all directions before melting to the floor. Along with the blood...it sunk out of the arena.

The flood lights dimmed, the crowd falling silent and lurking away as the light began to draw down again, one only remaining in the far gate...the one I'd once watched what I thought was a legend from.

Slowly, under the sudden silence, I trotted toward Brimstone Blitz. His wound seemed to have disappeared. Toward the side, Glimmer began to gallop over, the steaming blood cage falling away to the drains like all the rest.

“Brim...” I held a breathless wonder in my voice, speeding up to stand before him with a smile. I was *so glad* he was here. Our guardian, the huge pony I realised for all his fury I did at my core feel safe around. I couldn't help it...I ran up and hugged him.

Or...well, hugged his *leg* anyway.

All the same, I felt the other giant hoof curl around me.

“I promised you long ago, that you were one of us and by my own life I would see you free, Murk. Be it to a new life or as a release from an untimely death I won't turn back on that. Back in the clan we took oaths like that seriously.”

I felt his head look up, to Glimmer.

“If there's anything I've learned lately it's that we can't change how we began...we can only make what we will of it for our future. I almost threw my soul away in years past to the rage, but you two...you've brought it back. Given me a reason to learn what caring is again. If only by memory here, I will *always* protect you.”

“Thank you...” Glimmerlight wiped a little tear from her eye. I felt Brimstone motion me to get off his leg with a rare smirk.

“We should go, there is far yet to travel, more trials await! Wildcard was the fear of your death, Murk...they all will mean something to you. I am with you however, from now on until the end.”

How typical of me...I couldn't help the crying from happening. Only this time of joy and absolute delight to know they were with me.

“Then what are we waiting for?!” Glimmerlight beamed, pointing toward the gate. “Let's do

this!”

“YEAH!” I leapt up and cried out, punching a hoof in the air. Then hesitated, blushing at the 'trying not to laugh' look they both gave me. Glimmer ruffled my mane with at most a snicker.

“That's the spirit, lil'bro. Come on!”

All three of us galloped onward toward the gate. The arena faded around us as we went, the light remaining the only indicator of our path! The ground began to rise, sending us galloping uphill, every inch a satisfying rise from darkness! I could do this! I could escape the slave in my mind! Passing through the gate, the momentum built, my friends at my back and the light before me atop the stairs growing into the black void below us!

We ran into the light.

Then the light went out.

* * *

I stumbled and almost fell. Had I gone deaf? I couldn't hear the others! Turning from side to side, I tried to run into them! To find them! But there was nothing!

Had it all been a tease? To think I was succeeding?

“Glimmer!”

I ran another way.

“Brimstone!”

We had just been running up! I couldn't even see my hoof in front of my face now! Terror began to build under such enthusiasm, a low worry of things crushing down all over again like they *always* had.

Then I felt a motion pass right by me. Squeaking, I leapt after it, trying to catch it! But the feeling wormed away, floating into the darkness as though it were always a part of it.

“Scared?”

The voice seemed to come from nowhere. Turning from side to side, I wished my eyes could see properly, but what night vision I usually had was gone!

I felt a brush against my flank. Leaping *away* from it this time in fear, I almost tripped over something I couldn't see! Right...two could play at this game, I hunched down low, treading lightly.

“Oh, don't even *try*...you never could beat me at this.”

Wait...

Oh *no*.

As though sensing my own realisation...a single eye opened before me, predatory and followed by a mad shining white grin in the darkness.

“Hello again...filly.”

I fell, back-peddalling frantically away from the sight. My hoof went to my shoulder, which suddenly ached with the hot pain of a knife blade searing right through it. There was nothing there, but I still felt it as I had before! Twisting the cold metal against my bone and muscle!

Through the darkness, he advanced, warping and twisting through all the shadows I now saw in his wake. Long straight hair that sent wavy distortions around him and seemed to gel with the magic bleeding from that dark horn made it impossible to really see any outline of the raider that still made me fear the dark!

Barb.

“You don't know how wonderful it is to see you down here. You thought you were such a hotshot pulling one trick and quipping off, huh? Ooh, we don't like that in the Clan. We don't like little pipsqueak fillies thinking that can act bigger than us! Especially me...”

I felt something under my hoof, like a rock! I threw it! The object seemed to simply vanish through him. Barb slid past my vision, appearing right beside me as what I *thought* was him simply faded into nothing.

“Ooh? Not got any fancy tricks left? Fool me once, little kid. I hope you know what gutting involves now, because I'll show you *how* for what you did the moment you truly realise how screwed you really are! Don't think the whore or the traitor will come for you, they're wandering themselves miles from here, each thinking they're chasing me.”

He winked.

“Unicorn shadow magic...it's a *wonderful* thing, bless Luna, eh? Face it, your friends are *dead* the moment I decide it down here. I *am* the darkness, filly and in your mind the darkness is everything! Now gallop...gallop and scream because I'm going to be coming for you and I want to hear you *beg* as you flee the inevitable!”

A knife pressed against my shoulder! *That* shoulder! I had no choice...I had to go, it was run or be impaled! Taking breaths with no air entering my body, I stood and sprinted away while trying to avoid tripping over every desk and door frame! I fell into the corridor, struggling to see and wishing I could maybe find Brim or Glim in this maze! Was this Stable Ninety Three? I thought it was!

Laughter sounded behind me, the stalking hunt was on! Trying to control myself from screaming, I crept as best I could down random corridors, trying to always get away from him! I heard things, buckets being knocked over or doors sliding open and closing! I could track him by the doors, right?

Ahead of me, a door opened. He must be up there!

Turning, I ran right into a sweeping wave of darkness that curled along the wall and ceiling, as though he was running *off the ground* within the shadows themselves!

“All the shadows are mine, filly! You can't trust any of your precious sounds now!”

This time, I screamed, the glint of black metal caught my eye while I turned and galloped away. He moved slowly, savouring the hunt. It gave me time to rush up some stairs. Up! Always up! I'd have to find the way out of the Stable, right? Was that the game? I needed to fool him...get him to move away, use every ounce of hiding I could!

Watching either side of me, I stepped back into the thickest shadow I could and lay down quietly. Nearby, I could hear his laughter down the hallway. Curling up, I hugged myself and tried to staunch the pain of my shoulder. It was *agonising* now!

Then I felt the shadow hug *back*.

“Throwing my voice isn't *that* hard! Two tries down...next time it's the blade in the back for you!”

He threw me out, surging around me, I never once saw his actual physical form! Just eyes or a wisp of hair trailing in the shadows themselves! Every corridor I looked at seemed to have something! The entire *Stable* was Barb!

“Oh, now you're getting it!”

No matter where I went, he could always see me...always catch me...

I started to fall to the floor, holding my shoulder as it began to bleed all on its own. Some wounds, some fears never died...

“All you can do is wait until I have my fun...it's not nice being *smaller* is it?”

His voice rang around me, echoing off walls and reverberating from every corridor at different times. I couldn't locate him! I couldn't escape him! He was my absolute peer!

I was just too small, too weak at anything to win...

“No you're not!”

My eyes bolted open, I felt someone else gallop up to me, sliding to catch me before I fell in hopeless loss. A buck's voice, I felt firm but gentle hooves hold me up and cradle my shoulder.

“Even those who didn't know you long were those you made an impact on, Murk.”

Through the darkness, I tried to squint until he finally came into view. I felt a cooling water poured over my shoulder and the tingling magic of a healing potion applied. Then I finally saw, the light of the magic working upon me making his glasses sparkle before optimistic and calming eyes.

“Doctor Weathervane bid me take that oath to help others, Murk,” said Caduceus, “I’m not going to go back on it. Especially not for those in dire need.”

If I had any air in my lungs I would have been breathless. Sitting right before me was a buck I’d barely known, but had felt such a connection with as a friend before Barb stole him from *all* of us.

“He hurt you, Murk. Some wounds go long after the pain has faded from the body, but we can’t let them dominate us! If in life I fixed your body, in memory I shall help fix your fear. The fear of those stronger than you, that’s what he represents to you now!”

Behind him, I saw another shadow swish past, laughing while it circled us. A predator waiting to strike. Caduceus held my shoulder strong, the pain dying off, before laying his other hoof to the side of my face.

“You were a wonderful little buck, somepony I was happy to die fighting alongside for the rescue of those in need. You gave me the courage, because I could look at you and see that even the weakest of us was still standing up to do it. I went for Glimmer...but I stayed because of *your* inspiration to stick by your friends! You *are* a brave pony, Murk!”

We stood together. Then he simply hugged me. Falling into the embrace, I couldn’t do anything but simply say the words I never got the chance to.

“Thank you...”

“You’re very welcome, I’m sorry I couldn’t say goodbye, but there are more important things than that now. Murk, listen carefully, he-”

“Is more than he’ll ever amount to!”

Barb’s voice bounced from the walls. I could feel him coming closer, sense his strike was nearing. I began to shiver, but Caduceus shook me gently.

“He is nothing but your fear of those better than you! But what have you to fear from him? *You beat him!* In the end it was *you* who ended his reign of terror in that Mall! You who saved Protégé’s life and the lives of many others by throwing yourself against him!”

“Nothing but luck! Now both of you, nothing but *unlucky* bucks! I hope you’re ready!”

The darkness swelled, I saw only briefly a glint of a dozen knives in the darkness, all closing upon us. We had to move, but Caduceus only held me still!

“*All he has is fear, Murk!*”

My eyes closed tightly, but the words reminded me of that horrifying moment as I saw him strike down a pony I sought to protect! Of how I had run forward *without fear* to launch onto him! Of outwitting him in the end! I had *won*.

I had won and he was gone, he was no threat to me anymore!

I was not afraid!

I opened my eyes even as I felt the knives all land and sink into both of us. The darkness penetrating and surging inward for the killing blow in a nightmare of gore and pain...

Nothing landed.

As my eyes opened again, I was standing with Caduceus, holding one another tightly in support of the fear we'd both *had* of this ghostly pony. But now, aching my eyes a little were the panel lights above that had come on. The entire Stable was bathed in light, revealing to me nothing but a pathetic sight.

A tiny form of Barb, skinnier than even me. Without gore, but as though he had been blown into fragments and only the barest form of a pony remained. Unable to move, cast upon the floor, I saw eyes showing fear himself looking up at me...before what shadow remained slipped away beneath the metal plates of the Stable's floor, disappearing forever.

“Thank you, Caduceus. I'm...I'm sorry we couldn't-

He stepped back from me, breathing out with relief. But he shook his head.

“It's all right, Murk. I knew the dangers when I went in and I don't regret doing it. But right now it's you that we have to help. I'll follow you along with Brimstone and Glimmer to aid you.”

A thick galloping from around the Stable corridor's corner gave way to just those two ponies rushing forward, hearing our voices. There was a silence, Glimmer simply stopping on the spot as her eyes found Caduceus standing beside me, a hoof on my back protectively.

The joy I felt as I saw her rush over and dive onto him so hard he was blown over to the floor was more than I had known in so long. Even Brimstone couldn't help but crack his stern face into a little smile at the sight of those two laughing and holding one another tightly. A miracle to meet just once more.

“Caddy!” Glimmer almost squealed the name, rubbing her cheek against his. I could see little sparkling tears around her eyes whenever that huge mane of hers was out of the way. Giggling from her attentions, Caduceus had to properly fight to keep his glasses on and get to his hooves.

“Oh, Glimmerlight! Your mane!”

“Oh I *know*, welcome to how I should look you lucky buck. Thank you for being here, for helping him! Thank you...”

They shared one more tender embrace, one that I felt Glimmer's magic dragging me into. The type of moment we never had been able to have in real life.

Brimstone made a small sound of approval, clearly not willing to join a group hug, before casting his eyes down the corridor. A stream of light began to show.

“The Stable door, right there with the light. We should get moving, the shadows and

nightmare's seeking to stop him won't rest long. I can sense it...the surface isn't far away now to get back into Fillydelphia and out of this underground world.”

Separating, sticking close, we each nodded and began the journey again. With my friends by my side, I felt spurred on! I could properly do this! Rounding the corner we saw the door, casting white light into the dark Stable that the ageing panels above simply could not give. A natural light, one of *life*.

Our group galloped forward, me in front of them all as we dove through it like we had once before on the hills outside Fillydelphia.

* * *

For once, the light did not go out. Instead it shifted and became a harsh orange glow. A wave of heat struck me as we passed through, a familiar one.

Blinking to clear the glare, I almost gagged on a poisonous tang to the...well it wasn't air, I still couldn't feel myself breathing. But a thick smoggy cloud rolled across the area, blocking all sight and burning my throat and eyes.

It was a feeling all too familiar, I knew exactly where I was.

The smog lifted, revealing the industry of Fillydelphia, a massive below ground chamber of impossible heights and scale between thick pillars and bearing unending machinery that whirred and ground all around us. A vast mechanism of unknown purpose and incredible complexity. It rose up the pillars and spread under the metal grating of the floor.

But the *noise*...

My ears flattened. I dropped to cover them, noticing even my three companions wince when the slams, grinds and screeches of metal washed across us. Beneath the sights, smells and sounds of Fillydelphia's industry we were stricken, given only to a slow crawl through this mechanical maze of lethal squirting steam and shifting pistons.

“Keep moving!” I heard Brimstone shout above it. I could but nod and try! Pushing ahead, filled with a purpose to overcome all these trials I cantered forward even while I felt my eyes turn wet from the pain in my head.

Through each corridor we turned, the noise only growing. Small oddities in it perked my interest, however. Every so often there was another tone to it, something else that didn't sound quite mechanical. Turning my head to the side, I looked at the nearest machine, staring deep into its complex workings.

Then I screamed.

Within it, growing from a spinning cog, I saw a pony's face twisted in pain upon the very metal. On each squealing turn, I heard a cry of pain and suffering. Noticing one, I heard the others, upon so many surfaces they were melded into the very workings of this vast room! Shifting faces and hooves between tearing metals and white hot welds that bore an unending existence as part of the machine

itself!

Around me, my companions saw it too. Glimmerlight looked beyond horrified, stepping back against a furious Brimstone.

“There has to be an end! Push through! Don't let it distract you!”

Caduceus rested a hoof on the metal, I could see the carer in him aghast.

“But we-”

“Get **moving!**” Brimstone pulled him away, pushed us all on! I galloped myself, only now beginning to realise how familiar that voice was, I knew *who* it was. Veering around whirring spindles I saw a long straight corridor lined with lathe machines that cracked with a sound of bone while they worked. Under this chorus of metal agony I ran, knowing they were right behind me. Find a way up! Always up!

The noise peaked, a grinding howled into the air before I felt a huge slam behind me. The impact threw me from my hooves, dumping me upon the ground before I could look back. A huge slab of metal had crashed down from a lifting arm above us! The centre of it was filled with mesh wire, separating me from my friends! I ran back to it, hopping up to try and press through the mesh, but it was far too small! Brimstone began slamming against it, while Caduceus tried helping me...before opening his eyes wide.

“Behind you!”

Feeling a cold sweat under the blistering heat, I spun.

Before me, forms of ponies were dredging themselves from the floors and machines. Dozens of them, all rising and shaking themselves off. Formed of metal and flesh upon their bodies, they were simply part of the great machine themselves. Necks cracked on spindles and blinking red and yellow eyes turned to look at me before I finally recognised them. Every one of them.

Every slaver I knew.

Wicked Slit gnashed her serrated mouth to lock the jaw in place as she fell from between two cogs with a tinny clatter. Whiplash juddered and let his glinting eyes fall upon me, a length of industrial wire in his mouth's flesh that had been wrapped over a rounded pipe. The rock farmer, one I'd never even known the name of, slid forward on rusting plated legs. Hive, Wormtail, Mosin, Sooty, Grindstone...

They *all* were there.

Then they spoke, as one. A combined voice echoed and funnelled by the whirling machinery into a voice for the entire *room*.

“Welcome home, slave.”

Glimmerlight pressed her face up against the wire.

“Don't listen to them! It's just the next trial, Murky!”

The metal began to move, forcing my friends backwards, further from me! I tried to chase them, but it only moved faster as I ran between the pillars and leapt molten metal to catch them!

“You're alone! We're here to bring you back...welcome you as what you should be all over again, just another little cog in the machine!”

Slit shivered forward, her mouth moving in perfect sync with every other slaver. Spreading out, they began to circle me.

“We're where you belong, Murk...”

“With us, the ponies who own you!”

Whiplash began to trot forward faster. I leapt back, what was I meant to think? What did I do to win here?! I didn't know! Hooves tried to grab me, rising from the machine! The slavers from the Mill! I felt myself being dragged! Weighed down as they closed in, a mass of master after master who had owned my life seeking to drown me into the very spinning wheels behind me!

“DON'T! I'm free! I should be free!”

“You should be here!”

Wicked Slit grabbed my leg, pulling me! Then I felt Mosin clamp a wrench ended hoof over my tail. They began tugging me toward an opening in the machine that seemed designed just to perfectly fit me! I struggled, knocking nuts or bolts from their faces, but the pieces flowed and travelled back to where they should. An unending machine I couldn't change!

“Yes, here!”

“We're your real family, Murk...”

I screamed, covering my face as they descended. But I felt a pressure build, a feeling like my ears had to pop. Growing and thickening the air with the sound of sparking a sudden wind blew over me and heralded a fierce shockwave ripping across the machines, tearing parts free and throwing the slavers back, some shattered into parts or got caught in the cogs and pistons of the machines around us!

Stunned, lying upon the ground, I looked up to see the sparking emerging from a horn glowing brighter than any I'd seen since the Pit.

Coral Eve stood atop one machine, her face bearing a mask of anger and determination. Her mane braided in intricate wooden clasps I'd never seen her own outside Glimmer's memories.

“You all know *nothing* of what the word 'family' truly means!”

A clipped electronic scream belched into the air. Slit, Hive and a half dozen others got back up as their bodies reknitted and reformed, charging forward. With a toss of her head and a cry of exertion,

Coral sent them blasting back across the foundry floor to slam into the wall blocking the others! Suddenly, a crash as Brimstone broke the barrier down and dropped it upon all the slavers! The impact lifted dust from the ground before he, Glimmer and Caduceus charged toward me as well. Coral landed beside me, helping me up.

“A family isn't what you're told to accept, it's what you choose for yourself! A bond between ponies no matter their origin or how they met that matters more to how they decide it than anything they are *told*.”

She looked down to me, even as the others approached, that fury settling to a smile.

“To help fill the gaps in each other's life.”

I couldn't help it, even in danger, I leaned forward to hug her tightly, feeling her return it and wrap her hooves around me tightly.

“I knew you'd be here too, Coral...”

“I know, my dear. I know.”

Surrounded by my friends, my *family* I'd chosen for myself, the mechanical slavers paused and retreated, even falling apart. Slowly, the noise began to fade, the machines shutting down. Glimmerlight moved closer to me, exchanging a knowing glance with Coral, before stroking my mane and pointing. Up ahead, I could see a great set of stairs leading to the surface! There was maybe just one more room to go through! Fillydelphia's top level was almost near! From the bottom of that dark quarry to here, such a rushed journey.

We were so close, but we couldn't be stopped! Every task my friends had helped me overcome, now that they were all here...

My gaze lifted up the stairs as we neared them. I placed one hoof upon the steps and felt a chill run right through me.

“It's all right, Murky. We're here with you.” Glimmerlight nudged my side.

“You've stormed past all this! I dare say, this will be easy.” Caduceus smiled to me.

Only...I was shivering. I had looked upwards to the great doorway out of the foundry ahead. Tall and made of concrete, they bore a symbol at the top. The one that mattered most, the hardest one to get around.

A single loop. The eternal chain.

“H-he's...in there...” My hooves felt frozen to the spot, oh Goddesses, give me strength! I'd never truly beaten him! H-how was I...what if he...oh no...

“Murk, hun...” Coral passed a hoof over me, pulling my eyes to hers. “I *saw* you stand up to him. We all did, but I saw you say that one word, just remember it. Remember the one that matters! If you can say that, then you can win. You knew you'd have to come to face him eventually...”

“I...I know! But he's...he might be my-”

“No!” Coral's voice snapped out, almost reprimanding me on the spot. I blinked, looking up at her. “Remember what I just said..family is who you choose. Whether or not he was responsible to begin with, what matters is who *you* choose. We're all here for you now, all your friends. We won't leave you to yourself. But he might separate us, he may force you to do this alone...we'll all be rooting for you, even if you can't hear us.”

“Damn fuckin' right...” Brimstone muttered, earning him a little glance from Coral.

“Language, big guy.”

He smirked, holding up a hoof. “As if Murk would ever be able to repeat it anyway.”

A little laugh passed around the group, I allowed myself a chuckle.

They had carried me this far, we couldn't stop now. I had faced the trials of my own fears, of my death, of those stronger than I, of the life that was expected of me but now I knew it was for the greatest of them all.

To face My Master. The true symbol of everything that had held me down. Master and Slave.

“Thank you, all of you...I-let's go.”

We ran up the stairs. They went on for a long time, the huge door only getting bigger as we ascended from the pit of machinery, heading for the surface! Every step forward I felt the fear grow, I knew I would likely be terrified, cry and struggle but I had to try! He would always stand in my way before any escape!

We never even stopped for the door, high above the ground, we pushed right through it and into his lair within my mind.

* * *

What struck me was the silence.

After the deafening machines, the moment I passed through that door there was nothing but a still silence amongst a dark chamber. Fans above turned lethargically, beaming dull red light into the room that chopped and cut every time a fan blade shifted past. Almost like the ruins of an ancient castle or cathedral, the pillars continued to rise into a dark abyss above us.

Out of that darkness hung chains.

Everywhere, like rainfall held still, they hung filled with hooks or collars from the ceiling to become almost like a forest suspended five feet from the floor. They swayed gently, clinking against one another or upon the ruined marble pillars and (for those that reached further down) floor.

A strange little sound made my ears prick up. I'd heard it long ago...what was it?

“...ews...derly stal...uth...”

I glanced around, looking down and to my right, it seemed loudest there, what was that?

We stood as one group, waiting. Shaking my head to clear these odd distractions, I held close to Glimmerlight, casting my eyes to every shadow that might hold something. Through murky windows I could see the hazed light of Fillydelphia's outside world. We were on the surface! At the far end, I could see a doorway that led out to it, we were so close!

I knew it would be more than simply running over there though...

It wasn't.

“Num...ber...Seven...”

Every few letters were pronounced harshly, mockingly. The voice emanated from all around, rattling the chains as they surged and quivered in response to the sickly voice creeping through them.

“Little...Number...Seven...”

Slowly, the dark ambience began to lift as a cloud above cleared and let more of the washing light pour through the windows. A set of steps to a plinth lit up, shining from polished stone leading all the way to a throne. A shifting mass below it, I gaped in horror as I saw myself. Many forms of myself all broken and laid low below the throne itself! Carrying it aloft upon their barely living bodies, My Master was sitting atop my own suffering, carried forward into the light by slaves below! Made of ringed chain cast into the design, the throne curled round, rising to his own symbol above.

Within it he lounged, adorned in dark armour made of Ranger plate fragments and milled steel, a lordship of slavery at the height of power. Chains led from many hooks on it to the slaves bearing my face below his throne, ones he would pull or tug to get to them to move!

“Fillydelphia...the city of slavery. Look to the places you have come from, this is not just your fears, little Number Seven, but the *legend* that is this place! Red Eye was not the first to make something of this place...”

Of course, I knew that from what I'd heard, that meant *he* knew it. I heard Brimstone snarl behind me, saw Coral's horn light in sparks. They were ready for a fight, but he only grinned at them, rotten teeth showing around disgustingly wet and cracked lips.

“Slavery is my destiny, you worms. I take what I own...and **I own you!**”

“N-no!”

I stepped forward, Coral was right, I had to tell him and show myself that I could overcome him! His eyes glared to me, uncannily familiar eyes reflected by every version of myself I saw groaning and crying below him.

“Not any more! I...I'm leaving! Escaping you!” Trotting forward, I stood before his throne,

throat tight and shivering but standing tall! “Just like I told you, but now I realise that my hope didn't have to come from anypony else but myself! From my friends!”

I'd told him! I'd told him *no!* We would pass this!

He only smiled and gestured. A rattle was our only warning, as every chain in the area writhed like a snake, collars gnashed and hooks scythed. A cry of warning was all I could offer before they hurtled down, surging around my friends! Surging around me! Brimstone fought at them, while I dove over the group, rolling on the ground to escape them! Coral's magic exploded forth as the battle against his chains began!

Caduceus and Glimmerlight were back to back, tossing them down or grabbing them in Glimmer's magic. Nearby, Brimstone tore them from the roof, finding them coiling like living creatures even afterwards! More dropped, collars grabbed Coral's hooves and she shattered them upon the floor! Ducking, diving and dodging I felt a hook nearly sink into my leg, deflected painfully from one of my little hooves! Grabbing one, I swung from it a short distance before running around a pillar, I could trap one!

My head turned away, hearing something again.

“...landers! ...he bloody mass...ealed at...st”

Distracted, a collar snapped shut around my back leg. Pulled out, I tried to grasp it and pull it off, but even when Glimmerlight ran to aid me I saw her wrapped around the waist by multiple strings and lifted high. Brimstone was covered in them, tearing and smashing but being slowed and weighed down. One by one we began to get caught and distracted. Caduceus cried out and thrashed ten feet off the ground while Coral's horn made a flare and burned out on the spot!

Finally, My Master moved. Pulling a chain, with a long wail my slave forms shifted forward, bearing his throne toward us.

“This is the reality of my legacy, Number Seven! Slavery is not something you *choose* to leave. **You are here forever! You do not leave till I tell you...and I never will.**”

“Murky! This is just him trying to tell you who you are, but he doesn't choose!”

“**Of course I do, little mare! I am his Master! His bloodline, slavery is in us, Number Seven!**”

He advanced, the chains dragging me across. I felt a collar shut around my throat tight enough to hurt! I didn't need to breathe...but my windpipe was still crushed.

“**You can delude yourself as much as you want, but I am the Lord and Master of Slavery. Fillydelphia is *mine* at its core, you know what I'm meaning...you came here to come home, Number Seven! To find me!**”

His words seared into my mind, like they were not even simply being heard. Everything left a burning *mark* upon my thoughts! Struggling, I felt every limb clamped down! We were so close, it was just out there! He climbed out of his throne, stomping over to me down the steps.

“I...I want *out!* I don't accept you!”

“**Too bad.**”

I heard a scream of pain behind me, Coral's horn had flared even brighter, trying to attack him. But hooks dug in and the magic imploded upon herself. Brimstone roared even as they cut at him and held him immobile. My friends were going to be torn apart by the chains!

“**Face it, Number Seven. The only thing you can do to save them is to accept me. You've never been able to beat me. Every time the circle has simply completed itself and you have been returned worse than ever, isn't that how it's gone? The Eternal Chain, you've seen the pattern again and again and *again*. It's all one loop and it's gone on since the start.**”

His hoof lifted my head up. Glimmerlight's cry of pain sent my eyes watering, the chains condensing around her.

“You can-ARRRGH! You can fight him, Murky! YAAAARRRGH! This is what you came here for!”

“**How can you fight what you cannot take away? You know I'm telling the truth, that in the beginning, I gave you life.**”

“Lying or not, it *doesn't matter!*” Coral screamed from behind me. I stared forward into my own eyes upon his face, that same scar aching and bleeding as I felt it form upon my previously clear forehead.

“**There is nothing better for you out there, born a slave and meant to be a slave whether or not you have some little mark that promises you anything more!**”

“What you were born as doesn't change what you try to be!” Brimstone roared, striking down a chain even as more grasped hold. My neck tightened again, stopping me speaking. His hoof stroked my chin.

“**You *want out*, but you don't know how to do it! You don't know how to go up to your Master and make it happen more than a rebellious adolescent spat to say no! You think one word does it? You haven't a clue what freedom is, now you will be cast down! Down and away that I might have you in the eternity of the afterlife because there is **NO-PONY IN THIS WORLD WHO CAN TRULY HELP YOU KNOW WHAT FREEDOM IS!****”

I screamed! Every chain digging into me, unable to speak, feeling him stop me doing so by the command of the chains that my own mind conjured! I screamed because he was right! I...I didn't know and there was no-pony-

“*Wrong, Shackles.*”

A red glow erupted out and around us. The chains in the air recoiled, hissing as they moved and steamed. Forced back, they let go of me. Around me, I heard the metal shriek and jolt away from the magic surging forth.

With those two words spiking through my brain with enough hope and sudden feeling of safety the collar snapped right off! I fell, rolling down the stairs away from him in his angered bewilderment at who distracted him! My friends dropped to the floor, each casting off what chains had been seeking to crush them.

Pained, shaking...I looked up. We all did.

Standing before me, I saw one little glint of red in the darkness that trotted forward. Dark coat emerging from within it to stand before me with his horn glowing a bright red that shielded and protected us.

“He has *me*,” said Protégé, “somepony *you* have no power over! You might try to cast your chains around him and his friends, but you cannot cast them around me!”

Lying upon the floor, looking up at him, I saw the one eye on his right look down to me with a small comforting smile. I wanted to throw myself at him, seeing him alive and well here after so much worry!

“Th-thank you for coming...”

Protégé offered only a gentle nod, before his gaze turned to before us, where the black form of The Master stood in a wide stance, his chains surging and twisting around the entire room, just waiting for a chance.

“Oh...*you*. The upstart himself, the little colt-cuddling wretch who thinks he can do so much 'more' for Fillydelphia. Don't think you being here makes any difference. You can protect him, but you cannot make him free, if you even know how.”

He trailed a hoof over the shield, leaning in close to it, closer to Protégé's face.

“Don't forget...there was a time when you called me **Master**.”

“A time long past, Shackles!” Protégé bit back. “If I proved anything it's that a pony can escape you! It took two years, but I won't let another pony be drawn into your nightmare ever again! I will have you cast from this city if I can, to forever remove your stain of evil from a place that might be better! A place free of the hell you created before Master Red Eye dethroned you!”

Each of my friends were moving up beside him, I got back to my feet to stand directly beside him, feeling Glimmerlight on my other side.

“A time yet to come *again*, upstart!” He slammed upon the shield, a deep thump surging around it with more power than seemed natural. Protégé winced as The Master leaned in. “You're still within these walls, within Number Seven's slave mind, if but in here you will be **mine** again. **Just as he always will be! You can be slaves together!**”

The shield shimmered back, growing and forcing The Master back. As one, my friends stepped forward, all but me. They sheltered me, standing with Protégé as they fully stood up to him.

“If I need to nurture and protect him until another two years pass, I will, Shackles! He is strong, stronger than perhaps I was at his time and definitely more than you will ever believe! In here, in his mind, I believe in his ability to make it happen.”

Protégé turned to me.

“He's proven everyone wrong about what his limits were, to come from nothing to do the things he's done. To save my life when he doesn't owe anything to me for what I've put him through...that's the mark of a real pony under all the tears and terror. Something *you* would never understand or be able to spot, Shackles!”

Every day I would never truly understand everything that drove the only friendly 'master' I'd ever had...but right now I was simply glad he was here, no matter what the circumstances between us were.

“Damn right! Now he's not alone either!” Glimmer almost grinned as she said it, seemingly tired of waiting her turn to pipe up! I could see her magic joining Protégé's, expanding the shield and mixing the red with her own azure gem blue!

“We didn't bring him this far just to cast him back down to your sadistic ways!” Coral's horn lit, a thick ocean blue that seemed to gel all too well with Glimmer's and wrapping across the shield.

It wasn't just them, I could see an unearthly glow around Brimstone and Caduceus as well! Adding their own power to the growing area around us, forcing the chains back, making The Master have to retreat closer to his throne!

“By their doing or mine, he shall not be yours!” Protégé stepped forward, advancing and drawing that which linked us all with him. “There is nothing you can do to that will stop what we believe he will someday do, Shackles! Such a pony deserves to be free, his own destiny tells that and by all the power I hold in this city *I will see it happen!*”

I felt a rumbling, a sudden surge of power from each of them in my breast. They all stood, protecting me through their somewhat metaphoric shield from the chains that sought to take me from him! They all *believed* in my destiny, one even I had forgotten!

A destiny that awaited me...but one I had to take for myself!

I ran forward, moving past Glimmerlight and Protégé to be before him! Facing up to him alone wasn't the way, there was no shame in saying what had to be said under the protection of my friends. That was what they were *for!* Travelling up the steps, always upwards! Toward him and rising all the time, I brought myself to before him and took a breath.

“*I will be free!* You can say what you want...but I've got enough good ponies, good *friends* who care and help me to be able to say to you what I need to in order to make it happen!”

My body shuddered, I could feel the slaves on his throne shaking their heads, the Ruin somewhere in the shadows begging me not to. But everything I had worked for and strived to reach all my life led me to have to say this to the one pony that it truly mattered!

"I've got my whole life left to live and I won't live it in chains! I guess what I'm trying to say is...is..."

I took one glance, to see Glimmer and Protégé both smile and nod...before taking that one momentous breath.

"You are not my master any more, Chainlink Shackles!"

Even aside from the sudden look of shock for *once* upon his face sending a swirling vortex of joy, hope and relief through my heart, I felt the floor shake and the glow from each of my friends condense and brighten as it all fell into me! A tingling all over as the shield faded from red to blue to a light green and kept pushing further and further! With a snap, it broke and shattered outwards, severing the chains for all directions and casting Shackles back into his throne as it collapsed and dissolved below him! The windows of his slavery worshipping cathedral blew out and brought the sunlight into it, a strong orange that drove away shadows and brought life to this place of misery!

Under the twinkling of falling stained glass and the rays of sunshine, I stood encircled by the broken chains along the floor. I *stood* while he *fell*. Something had broken inside me, some restriction.

Then, even as this moment of wondrous calm came about and we began to come together, I heard it again, that voice on the wind, near my foreleg, what was it?

"...the trut...real tr...she is sti...tore hope..."

"Murky...you did it!" Glimmerlight interrupted my thoughts, galloping up to me and tightly hugging me, breathless and stunned, I grabbed back.

I felt Coral's hoof stroke my mane, felt Protégé rest one hoof on my shoulder proudly and after letting go of Glimmer was immediately taken in by Caduceus for another tight hug. Brimstone caught my eye, smirking as though knowing how silly a hug would be. He offered a respectful nod, a lot from the big earth pony.

"Now, Murk..." Protégé moved before me when I let Caduceus go, "now we have to get you out of here, back to the life you have and to strive to make it better. We have to get you to the sunset, over that wall so I believe."

"Thank you...just...just thank you!"

He smiled gently, turning me to face the cathedral doors. Through them I could see the long road to the wall and the glow of the sunset coming from above it through the shattered windows.

Then the doors slammed shut.

A fierce rumbling across the ground shook the debris of chains and glass, so much so that we fought to keep our footing! I even felt myself grab hold of Coral to keep my little hooves standing!

"You think it's that easy?"

The voice was everywhere, all around us. Shackles' fallen form shook, jerked and began to lift,

simply floating up and turning.

“You think that Fillydelphia is but one pony's vision or dwelling? That it is simply a place by which they make their own rules? You poor naïve fools...”

The rumbling turned to a full earthquake. I heard walls cracking, felt every bone shaking terribly and felt the crash of a huge pillar collapsing. We ran, no-pony even had to say to go, but we rushed for a hole in the cracking wall at the top of the stairs that once led to Shackles' throne.

From below us, the chains flew up, surging like flying snakes in the air as they tore through walls and pulled window frames apart.

“Even before I made it into the greatest it ever had been, Fillydelphia was a city of slaves! I was not the first and I will not be the last! Generations of Master and Slave time and again throughout history in this one shell of Equestrian life. Forced into their factories and drafted to war, the ponies here knew slavery before they even understood the word! No-pony ever escapes it.”

I screamed as a massive pillar slammed between us, separating Coral and I from the rest of my friends! A full wall began to crumble, revealing the outside of Fillydelphia in all its hellish glory! Wall by wall the entire building came apart, lifting Shackles' body past it, wrapped in writhing chains that flew out and began to tear into nearby factories and buildings!

It carried him up amongst them as I saw the huge industrial cranes turn and take on a life of their own, swinging around upon their weights to bring beams of iron crossing over one another. Around us, the entire city of Fillydelphia itself was a living, breathing machine casting its metal and winding machines upward around the cranes, extending across their great arms to lock and slot into place. It was building something between them!

“Beating or escaping a Master is but one thing! Being able to take that freedom from the city that had always enslaved is another! You do not face merely Chainlink Shackles! You face slavery itself by coming here, the slave city! Fillydelphia itself is not somewhere any of you, no upstart, no destined pony and no well wishing friends can simply do! The city and its Wall...”

In the distance, I saw the great wall shift and rise, nearly blotting out the sun itself, while the factories roared and swelled as though in anger at anypony daring to escape.

“The willing masses...”

From every crevice, I heard them before I saw them. Even as we regrouped away from the collapsing cathedral I saw thousands of slaves, all bearing my face crawling from the ruins and machines to appear before us.

“The Master.”

The monstrous moving nightmare before us did not create a shape so much as an icon. A great monument before us. A visual pattern of slavery in one condensed mass with a single hole at the top between the crane heads where the sunset showed...a sunset that turned to blood red through a filter of cracking energy.

Before us, immense and stretching hundreds of feet above our heads, the very personification of slavery around Shackles' body and Fillydelphia's very industry beamed down upon us. The smog from factories turned in mid-air, flowing down into the streets and igniting upon furnaces to set everything ablaze! On either side of the street there was no other way out now as the fire streaked through the clouds to surround the cathedral, barring all ways out other than directly toward the new structure forming above us. The smoke whipped up, travelling to the sky and forming around it to allow that baleful red energy to highlight itself.

A single great eye of crimson, staring down upon us.

“Red Eye may be different, he may have plans greater than the slavery that has defined this city since the raging balefire but he is the one that brought forth its potential to entrap. It is *his* Fillydelphia that will hold you in behind *his* wall under *his* authority! You cannot beat that...”

The immense eye seemed to turn, a beam of red glaring down upon us and drawing upon our muscles like weights.

Protégé saw us fall, collapsing as though all the weight of industry and authority had fallen on our backs. He turned to move, but that red glare fell upon him.

“Not even you, little 'prodigy.'”

I heard even Protégé cry out, falling to the floor as the slaves surrounded us. Even Protégé couldn't say anything against Red Eye's authority! My mind was reeling, the weight dragging me down for all my will to stand!

I felt a force grab me, lifting me up high. Even briefly, I heard a scramble of electronic noise near my right foreleg, what was it?! I couldn't think much for now, as I was lifted high into the air, brought before the eye itself, so bright and crackling with energy of the surrounding machinery in this colossal scrap built icon that my eyes stung and my skin seemed to burn!

“You, little slave, you are nothing! Wishes and crying will get you nowhere from Fillydelphia!”

“NO!” I screamed back even as I felt my body crushed in its telekinetic like grip. I wouldn't be a slave!

“Will or not, you are trapped in this city! Beneath the power of Red Eye himself and all the obstacles that brings!”

That electronic sound screeched again, louder and forming words that I couldn't understand, like it were trying to get my attention! But opening my eyes to see Shackles' leering face within that red glow, slavers both even if history saw them enemies drew a chill across me. How could I compete with an army of slavers and a fortress?!

“You can want out all you want, but it is nothing but pain that awaits you back in life, you will be a slaver's plaything no matter where you go! Better to die, hm? You are not allowed to die. You have no choice! There *is* no choice! Not for you! Not any more!”

“I...want...out!” I struggled, trying to find some way to free myself before outright howling in pain when my body felt crushed! I knew what would happen if I were 'killed' here, I would be sent right into the oblivion awaiting below all over again! My ears screamed in pain atop my head, a rush of static refusing to go away. I heard words...a familiar voice, I just couldn't...make it...out...

“You have lost, slave! You can't fight the chains in your mind! There's no-pony left to save you now! Your little 'sister' is lying down there screaming! Your surrogate mother caught beside her! That guardian brute cannot move! The dead one is far from you! Even your preferred 'master' cannot save you against the authority of Fillydelphia itself! There isn't anypony left to call, little slave and your words can do nothing!”

Suddenly...clarity. I heard...words even as its tirade continued.

“...landers...truth...ealed about Ar...”

“No-pony to stand against Red Eye's authority! No-pony can change the wastes, slave! Not one!”

The static and words reached a peak, drowning out even him as I struggled and cried out, feeling my vision going dark. But those words I had heard, I knew them! Yes, they mattered!

My eyes shot open, the pain fading for just a moment, as I drew my right foreleg close.

“No...”

My hoof fell upon the broadcast button. The Pipbuck had always been with me...but now it meant something to be *there* to be touched! The static washed through the air, expanding and growing to an almost deafening volume, my faith pushed all into it!

Then the voice finally broke through the static and breaking up signals, that one voice I *needed* to hear!

“GOOD EVENING, WASTELANDERS! This is DJ Pon3, and have I got news for you! Major update on the situation at Arbu and Bucklyn Cross! First and foremost, let me say hallelujah! Sounds like our Wasteland Saviour hasn't fallen to the darkness after all!”

Narrowing my eyes, I looked into the red glow and Shackles dead on. The broadcast continued, on how the truth came out. It washed across me, rekindling a faith that had been lost! Days of aching and worry over losing her legend coming back to me! But that grip held tight, crushing me tighter and tighter, I heard a voice saying that it didn't matter! Striving, I finally shouted the rest of what I had tried to say...

“...there is *one* who can!”

Exploding into rage it simply and ferociously clung to me in my defiance!

BLAM!

The red glow shattered, bleeding light at odd angles as a full crack came across it. A metallic scream as I felt the grip on me lesson threatened to burst my eardrums. Another shot, **BLAM!** Then another and another, six in total smashed into it and broke me free. All holding sensations gone, I fell. Tumbling, seeing the inferno of Fillydelphia below me, I shut my eyes in vertigo inducing terror.

Something caught me, gently and with expert control I felt my fall slow and then cease...instead gently lifting me to the ground in the middle of a glow. A colour I would never forget. A colour I had once seen long ago at the very beginning of my waking eyes.

Then I felt my whole body tense as it laid me to the ground.

There, before my friends who groggily got to their feet.

She was there.

Standing amongst an aura of magic, lifting the dust around her from the effort of lowering me her horn gradually dimmed its glow. Dirt settled back to the ground in the wake of such magic, before I felt a cold chill of disbelief when her eyes turned to look at *me*.

She was just how I imagined, how I remembered and how I'd heard. That revolver she carried that I'd heard of, so iconic to her as a hero, was floating at her side. Her shining new Pipbuck on her right hoof just like mine.

Perhaps five seconds had passed of me just standing in disbelief, staring as though everything that had just transpired was gone and there was but us alone. Yet it felt so long, my stomach turning between the relief of the radio message and the betrayal I had been made so clear of. What was I supposed to say? Was this her? Truly? How?

“I'm s-s-sorry...”

It was the only words I could think, as I staggered toward her while afraid that every step would somehow be wrong.

“I d-doubted you, but I heard so many things and...and they said what you did or were working for Red, um, Red Eye and...and...”

Stopping, my hooves crossed, I lowered my head and averted my gaze.

“...and I thought you w-were gone and, I don't understand and why and how...”

My words fell over themselves. Blushing, I tapped my own forehead and shook my mane out. She stood patiently, her mane falling and lightly drifting in the winds from fires all around us.

“You were my hero.” Finally, I found my stride. “You were my *icon*, the pony I put faith in to give me purpose! You sh-showed me what it meant to defy! But they took that away from me, all those bad things and I *believed* them...I doubted you when you needed the belief in you the most to see it all through. I'm so sorry...I...I'm not good with words and I think I'm repeating but...”

I dropped back onto my rump, my head lowered. This was all wrong, this wasn't how I wanted

to first see her! If this was her, my head didn't make any sense before her!

“I just needed somepony to believe in...that's you. You saved me in the Pit, you inspired me and you got me by tough times. When I lost that belief I just...let go...”

Oh no...no no no...eyes, listen to me, do *not* cry now for the *love of the everlasting Goddesses do not cry now*.

I felt a hoof on my shoulder. Almost flinching, shocked that she had even moved closer to pay attention to me let alone *touch* me, I saw her looking directly to me. In this frozen time, she spoke only a few words gently to me.

“*You don't need to believe in me, Murky.*”

A small smile.

“*You only need to believe in something better.*”

My mouth gaped open, staring back. Those were words from her mouth, the first I'd ever truly heard in a voice I had to imagine for myself. Those were words from *her* to *me*. Don't believe in a single pony, believe in what she sought! Something I could make for myself, help her quest by simply believing in a better world!

It all made sense, everything DJ Pon3 had told us!

I would have wanted to lunge forward and hug her, but such a thing was far from my confidence.

“Pointless sentiment amongst a pre-decided fate!”

A surge of red washed over us, bringing me back from that one gentle moment to the inferno surrounding us and the machination of industry looming before us below a damaged red gaze. Dust blew around us seven ponies as I saw even my hero turn her head with a stern look to that which opposed her.

“You really seek to escape to the sunset? Back to a life of slavery eternal instead of your infinite destiny?”

The words hurt my ears, but as we turned, atop the wreckage of the Cathedral and standing before upturned brick walls, we saw our final challenge ahead. Fillydelphia in all its living mechanical glory with sparks flying from raging furnaces that cried with pony voices. A huge street that ran away through the wreckage toward a colossal wall miles high on the horizon, abstract from the reality and blown to its mythical way in which my own mind saw them!

Above us, between scaffold and factory roofing lay the scrapheap baleful gaze itself that focussed directly upon the seven standing before its defences and a growing mass of slaves willing to try and stop the one part of them that wasn't quite ready to give up yet!

“You have no hope to pass, to make it over the wall, Number Seven...turn back...”

“It doesn't matter!”

I galloped up to the top of a piece of scrap, standing before it all.

“I'm going, whether I have to gallop without any hope but the one I believe in!”

Beside me, my hero stood and magically sent six large bullets spinning into her revolver, her eyes clenched ready with all the adventurous spirit that carried her!

Behind her, Brimstone Blitz stomped through the smoke, bearing his armour across his body and the great horned helmet offering but a wink from the barely visible eyes.

To my left, Glimmerlight hooked something onto my battle saddle for me, before picking up her own long rifle and grinning to me. I turned to see *Rarity's Grace* sitting ready upon my side.

Beyond her, Caduceus bore a wealth of potions and the same sub-machine gun he had used to try and save lives in the Mall.

Coral Eve's horn sparked and lit the air with a hiss of ozone and burned air. A gentle nod gave me all the reassurance I needed that she'd hold it up as long as need be.

Protégé shifted to beside me, his own design of revolver swinging up ready. He shared a knowing look with me.

“A foolish band of mistaken ponies! The weight of an entire life's worth of misery and slavery cannot be stopped by one wishful gesture from within! You may try-”

I interrupted him.

“I *will*.”

Immediately, I took off, leaping from the scrap to charge directly forward into the cauldron of hell awaiting us that would try to prevent our escape! Behind me, between a mix of encouragement and war cries, my friends followed! For *once* I felt no fear! Only a determination, backed by my friends, those I trusted and those that inspired me both in dream or reality! A light went with us, passing around us!

Ahead, under the bellowed command of their master in the sky, shadowed slaves rushed forward in their masses. Driven before their masters and the authority above them that clamoured and sought to stop us!

Brimstone Blitz picked up a pace, his armour rattling madly as he tore in front of me, lowering his horns. With a sickening crash he impacted into the slave crowd like a battering ram, sending dark forms flying in all directions to explode into a black mist. Tossing his head from one side to the other, he broke their charge before the rest of us hit.

I heard the rattle of gunfire and the surge of magic around me, dark forms rose and were slapped down. Protégé fought by my side, picking off those who tried to block my path, keeping me

moving forward toward the sunset!

“Keep pushing, Murk! We'll protect you all the way there!” He cried out, slapping a slave from his back and spinning to throw them within his magic into another. Then he pointed ahead, “Coral, clear them!”

Wind almost blew me off course as her powerful magic crashed upon their line and threw ten or so of them far away! I ran for the gap, seeing Brimstone amongst the main mass of slaves taking their attention and crushing them with a cold fury of controlled anger!

We seven ponies held back a tide of my inner dark thoughts, each of them showing the strength that kept me going even now! I felt Caduceus rush up beside me, bearing a potion to help my ailing pains and bring life to my numb body to keep going! I yelped when a ruined form of myself grasped my leg, diving from the crowd. Caduceus threw himself at it, wrestling it off me.

“Keep going, Murk!” I saw two others leap upon him until Coral's magic again sent them flying from the studious earth pony! Taking a potion for herself and her likely splitting headache from all this use, she was being covered by my hero standing there atop a splinter of upturned wreckage!

She fought...oh *Goddesses* how she fought!

Horn flaring, her revolver fired and reloaded with blinding speed, punching through two or three even in one shot! Boulders and scrap whirled about her powerful magic, crushing or slamming them back. Her eyes lit with the confidence of a legend!

“Come on, Murky! Stop studying those flanks for your drawings, we gotta move, hun!”

I gaped a little as Glimmerlight pulled me along while Brimstone hurled an overturned wagon and cleared the next portion of street! Staggering backwards, my eyes on the Dweller herself until I simply had to turn away, I saw her look to me for just a second with a small smile.

Galloping beside Glimmerlight, her rifle knocked a slave from leaping through a window as she took us around a line of carts to hide from the majority of the slaves. I fired as well, Rarity's Grace missed, but my grapple hook slapped into one slave in the chest, crushing that one day it represented in my mind!

“You have no way out, you know this, the great wall stands before you!”

The red eye above us kept its focus on me, drawing all the slaves of my mind toward me! Brimstone fought at the front, backed up and kept going by Caduceus and Coral. Protégé ducked down behind the carts with me and Glimmerlight, looking around.

“It's right, we'll just hit the bottom of the wall if we keep going, for all the effort!”

He reached out, snapping off three shots and hitting two slave forms that rushed for us. Glimmerlight's rifle cracked and struck a third, before she looked up.

“Up...yes! Murky, the buildings!”

Having been watching my hero fight further off (*Just* her fighting, honest!) I turned to look to what Glimmerlight now pointed at.

There was one way, a way born of hope.

The buildings rose toward the wall's brink, towers and scaffold linked by scrap, like it should have been there all along, the way out I'd dreamed might exist when I first ran for it!

“Can you make it up there?” Protégé looked warily at it.

There was no other answer worth saying.

“Yes.”

Both of them nodded, Glimmer smiling and hugging me to hear such positivity for once. Behind us, I heard a cry of pain, Coral's magic overloading again. Caduceus ran to her, dragging her into cover with us. The Dweller herself was nearby, holding off the great mass alongside Brimstone, our two best warriors here.

If I had to go any time...I had to go now. Take the chance.

Dare to dream.

I nodded to Glimmerlight, hooking up my grapple again, I'd need it from now on. I knew they couldn't come with me, but I knew where they'd be waiting for me...most of them.

My eyes fell to Caduceus, helping Coral to take a potion. He caught the gaze and after a quick glance up...he saw the reality too.

Shifting closer, I felt us simply hug closely once more.

“Thank you, C-Caduceus...”

“I'll always be in here, Murk. For you and Glimmer and all the others...we didn't have long but it was enough. No regrets. Take care of Weathervane for me, huh?”

Sniffing, I nodded into his shoulder.

“I w-will...”

Each of my friends backed up a little. Brimstone and my hero came closer, backing off to use the thinner area between carts in the street against the overwhelming numbers. I went around each one of them, to Coral, to Brimstone and lastly to Glimmer. Each of them I thanked, each of them I hugged tightly. Turning, I saw that little mare standing just nearby.

She smiled at me with pride.

That meant more than any dream of her I'd ever had.

“Come on, Murky.” Glimmer nudged me and whispered, “Doesn't Protégé get a hug too?”

How...how could she still be joking that at a time like this! But yet he was standing there, watching the wary slaves approaching. Soon they would need to fight again, I had to go now!

“You've come far, Murk. I hope I've done at least something to help you, that I have been more than but a master to be hated for sending you against your will...”

Long had I looked to him with a kind of trust, feeling safe around him or knowing that he would not harm me like all the other masters had. I knew what he was...just like me.

Hell with it. Glimmer could laugh if she wants.

I simply moved forward and wrapped my hooves around him.

“Thank you...just...just thank you! Please be okay, I...I tried to stop Barb and...”

“It's all right, Murk.” He surprised me, returning the gesture. “Let's just get you out of here. You need to go now. I became free years ago, now I want to see you do it for yourself. Throw off that which keeps you a born slave forever! Go to the sunset! Make that last gasp and rise to see the world through different eyes!”

Letting go, I saw them all there, before flipping my mouthpiece around to fire.

“Thank you...all of you.”

I turned, hearing the voice of slavery sounding their last charge to reclaim me...and I fired my grapple. I had no wings to fly, but I would still rise! Rise to the sun ahead of me! I would fly without wings!

With a jolt, it shot up, spiralling true to latch upon a building. Behind me, the cry of battle joined as they guarded my back with all they had! Zipping upward, feeling the rush of air as I bit the button to pull me in I soared skyward!

Higher and higher...before I came to the top of the building, clambering over the lip. A red glare fell upon me, that hideous icon watching me.

“Pointless!”

Shadows warped, slaves grew and chased me! I tore off across the rooftops, leaping vents and sliding down air ducts to keep moving. Leaping between the buildings and always going *up*. I climbed fire escapes, leapt onto scaffold metres away and travelled through ramp after ramp! The ground fell away, higher than any building in reality as I neared that huge wall!

Above it, just poking over, I could see the lip of the sunset appearing...

“Accept your slavery!”

Nothing but empty threats and a life I wouldn't accept! I wasn't going to listen, no matter what

voice it was! Sprinting over a jury rigged extra floor like at the orphanage I fired my grapple while on the move, pulling me onto the next tower! Then the next! After that I leapt to large hanging girder from a crane, galloping up it! I felt a sensation all over...a warmth as though feeling was returning to my body once again!

I was above the red eye itself now, it couldn't look up any more! Behind me, the rooftops were crowded with every day of slavery in my life chasing me! Thousands of pained faces determined to keep me from the life they wanted away from! The wind picked up, but I kept my footing and rushed straight up! Almost there! I could see one more jump! The wall filled my vision, I just had to get up there! Spinning around, I started to climb across a fallen tower's roof over a narrow stretch of metal, it led right to the edge of the wall!

Something crashed into me upon the thin metal pathway I ran upon! Falling, a weight landed on my back. Scrambling, pulling me to the edge, I turned to see the Ruin fighting with me.

“Don't go! Please Murk! Don't go! Don't take us back to the pain! No more!”

Yelping, I fought its wiry strength born of frenzy! But it clung onto my back, raking at my mane, trying to pull me over! I saw his eyes, pinpricked and desperate, the last gasp of a fractured mind trying to pull me back in, reduced to pleading and begging in its fear of me succeeding.

Something I'd always done...

“PLEASE!” The terror in his voice...my voice...was all too apparent. “It hurts so much, there will be more pain! I don't want it! Not any more! It can't be escaped!”

He threw his full strength to simply try and pull me from the precarious area, knocking us nearby to the edge.

“You can't dream, it won't let you!”

“Then...”

I gritted my teeth, trying to knock him off me.

“I *dare to!*”

My back hoof *shot* back, crunching him between the legs. With a hideous cry, the Ruin staggered away and fell screaming into the fires below. Exhausted, I tried to pull myself back up proper.

Having just bucked my own subconscious in the nethers, I *really* hoped that it wasn't a metaphor for something.

But the way was clear! I stood, staggering in the wind and heat that was beginning to harm and sting my body as feeling returned. Crying out at the pains in my hooves and legs...I staggered forward. Then trotted...then cantered...then galloped! Up...up! UP! It was so close! The sun filling the sky with its heat and the light of life just above the lip of the wall! One! Jump! Away!

Screaming as loud as I could, remembering every single lesson I had learned from my friends and every time I had *done* something, I rushed forward and leapt...

Stretching my hooves out...I saw the lip. So close...so very close! Aching my joints, I reached for it! Just grab it and I'd be over! So high...just desperate shot!

I saw my hoof pass by it...missing by over a foot.

Then I felt the gravity of all the pain below begin to pick up.

Pulling me...seeing my failure to make it.

No...no...

Then a shape before me, a figure suddenly stretching down toward me from on top of the wall! A hoof reached out, grabbing around mine as her face became clear amongst the burning hot sun behind her!

“Come on, Murky!”

Unity cried out the words as she pulled me over, straining her all and yanking me toward the sun, pushing me onward with no time to say anything more but to smile and give me the last energy I needed to push that last distance! I saw her disappear as she always had, but always being there for that little bit of support whenever I needed it most...

Over the wall, flying onward, I soared into the sun itself born upon the wind that flowed with me, pushing me toward life. The feeling in my body seared, pains all across flowing down veins and muscles! I felt the burning of radsors and the thickening within my lungs and throat! Lash scars and knife wounds upon the bruised and battered body I possessed! A feeling in my gut and neck like hot metal!

Then air, actual air flowed into my breathless body, forcing me to take that first gasp before a long scream as the pain flowed over and over, taking me back away from the limbo itself! The light getting brighter, turning to white and sending me shooting forward, all the way back the journey I had fallen in darkness! I juddered, squirmed and burst-

* * *

-upright screaming as oxygen poured down my neck and my eyes shot open. My back arched, lifting me from the firm bed, crying out in shock and pain. Above me, a spinning silver orb shone and cast sparkles all over my body. It whined and flared before making a snapping noise and dropping out of view.

I flew upright, my scream ending in a choking cough...

...as I fell right into Glimmer's embrace.

“Murky! Oh, yes, MURKY!”

I felt the tears running onto my shoulder from her, as I blinked and tried to get my bearings. My body hurt so much, I could feel bandages wrapped around a lot of me along with tubes poking out of my front legs, but blinking my eyes...I finally saw where I was.

Around me, I could see the familiar wards of Hearts and Hooves Hospital. Glimmer held tightly onto me, short maned and bruised all over...but her in the flesh. She cried and stroked my mane over and over. Behind her, I could see a damp eyed Coral, her horn still glowing. Come to think of it, so was Glimmer's! To the other side of the bed, I could see the ghastly figure of Doctor Weathervane looking almost stunned and relieved all at once, before hastily reasserting himself with a smile. His horn too, glowed.

Behind him, Brimstone Blitz stood further from my bed, his body a mess of scar tissue and bearing only one eye. He had barely healed, but apparently enough that he wasn't going to lie down when I was...here...

“Murky, you're alive...oh gods and goddesses you're *alive*. Thank you...thank you, Weathervane!”

Glimmer was lauding, completely lacking any of her spunk or normal wittiness as she kept hugging me and shaking. She looked a mess, as though she had been brought from a brink of loss and despair.

“I thought...I thought you were just gone, oh Murky...”

She just kept holding onto me...and I onto her. My own eyes teared up, wrapping my bound legs around her and swaying gently.

They'd brought me back...

I was...alive.

“Thank you!” I tried to hug them all at once, failing utterly...but I had to say it, had to try.

They'd helped free me. Below me, I saw my cutie mark sparkle a little.

The broken chains.

* * *

“See, we told you it would work!”

“*Piss anchors!*” Weathervane snapped. “It *shouldn't* have worked! I only agreed to it because even half dead your big 'guardian' promised to snap me in half if we didn't try!”

I lay back, Glimmerlight sitting on the bed beside me and holding my hoof. I was exhausted more than any time before, my throat was dry and my head spinning from medicine I'd been given after waking. But the argument had gone on for a few minutes now ever since Weathervane had retrieved the now dead orb.

They had used the healing megaspell Brim and I had recovered from the ghoulish cultists. Its massive power seeking out the one spark of life left in me to hold onto and give me a chance to save myself. It alone had not saved me, even if it had healed my body. It had simply held me in there long enough to give me a sliver of a chance. One I could scarcely believe I'd had the strength to pull off...

Not that the megaspell had been the only thing that saved my life. Allegedly, the moment my 'corpse' had been tugged from the Pit Brimstone had rather caused a stir in the Pit's under levels, taking the potions he'd been given and pouring them down my throat. Whether they helped or not was unknown, but he'd taken my body to Hearts and Hooves afterwards, Coral and Glimmerlight finding him soon after they heard the bodies were taken there.

I couldn't imagine how they must have felt...

The entire time, they had spent their rest day with me. Glimmer had gotten my Pipbuck and sat it playing the radio near me the entire time, trying to spot any life of memory inside me. I owed her more than I knew.

"I fucking *told* you lot! The spell requires four unicorns to work!" Weathervane was casting a horn over me even as he argued. "It's that simple!"

"Apparently not." Glimmer smirked. "Maybe it just took three who genuinely cared? You *did* care didn't you? You know what they say magic *is* after all..."

"Fuckbuttering dinglecunts, I've *told* you a dozen shitting times! It's not about the power! If it were I coulda' done it on my own! It's about unique magical signatures! It requires four to work! It...hm?"

There was a pause as he looked over me. I felt everypony in the room freeze a second. Glimmer must have felt me grip her hoof a bit tighter. What was...

"Well..." Weathervane stroked his ruined beard. "Murk, would you sit up, please?"

Glancing from Glimmer to the ghoulish and back again, I shakily started to move. Lying here with them, I'd been trying to grasp the new feeling of being awake and...free. But now I strained my body upright. I felt different all over, more well adjusted even through the pain. No longer a tug toward the ground or my hooves from the chains weighing on my soul.

Sitting up, I felt very strange. Oddly...balanced.

"Well, would you look at that..." Weathervane peered at me, but everypony else before me just looked to him. I felt a creeping horror, oh no...no not now...please...

"This might prick a little."

What?

His horn zapped, I felt an electric shock run right through me, squeaking out loud and grabbing Glimmerlight, I made a long gasp and turned to look at Weathervane in anger, wings flaring out in anger as my face screwed-

...wait.

Before me, Glimmer's face lit up and her mouth went wide. Coral's eyebrows shot up while even Brimstone's remaining eye seemed shocked. Beside me, Weathervane grinned and lifted the bandages away before offering a mirror held in his magic.

Spread to either side of me. My...my *wings!* They were out! Standing on their own! I simply opened and closed my mouth, making squeaky little noises and trying to turn in my bed until Weathervane had to hold me from hurting myself around my bandages! My wings! *My wings!* I could move them, even if it hurt a little and...and they were slow but... *I could move my wings!*

“Seems the megaspell sort of overdid it, very sorry. If you want me to return them I'll-”

“NO!” I screamed, not even getting the joke amongst my excitement. I grabbed the mirror holding them to look at the little things as I sat up properly and let them *flourish*. Either side of me, they spread their dirtied and uneven feathers.

Jittering when I flexed them slowly, not quite flaring fully or clasping properly yet but I saw the delight on my face, a look I hadn't imagined I'd ever show again. My mouth only kept growing and growing into a massive smile that burst out into a laugh. I had *wings!*

“They're beautiful...” Glimmer breathed out, I knew they weren't really, but she clearly hadn't actually seen another pegasus before. “Aww...they suit you like it was always meant to be, Murky!”

Coral smiled, moving behind to look.

“Because they were. Our little Murk's a new pony now for sure. Now isn't the time to fall, my dear.” She smiled. “It's to soar. This marks a change. You hit the bottom but now you've bounced and you'll come back strong. I know it.”

Weathervane tapped the edge of the bed.

“Well, yes...it's pretty fuckin' great but he needs his rest now. They won't fly, sorry to break the moment...but he'll be able to work on moving them now. Now come on you lot, shoo...patient time is now, he's got a lot of fluids to take in before I'll let him out of here.”

They began to troop out. Brimstone stopped by the bed, lifting a hoof. Smirking back, I tapped his with mine. Coral kissed my forehead as she went, before handing me my saddlebag filled with my journal and other things. Weathervane offered a rare smile to me alone as he went with them to collect some materials.

Glimmerlight was left with me alone as I pulled out my journal. I had a lot of drawing to do...somehow I knew I would be able to now. Watching me, my sis' just smiled and ruffled my mane before turning to leave.

I felt something near the bottom of the saddlebag...

A statuette of Littlepip, made of scrap metal bent into place and bearing the words below it.

“Wait! Glimmer!”

“Yes, Murky?”

I held it up in my hooves carefully, seeing my *hero* who had so fought to save me standing upon it.

“What...what does this say?”

Her magic reached out, lifting it from my hooves as she moved back into the ward briefly. With a little glance to it, she smiled and returned it to me, her magic tossing my mane with a smirk.

“Be Somepony Better.”

Glimmerlight left me looking at the little bronze item with a mixture of a gape and smile upon my face. I heard Weathervane again arguing with Coral outside about the damn megaspell. 'It needs four, not three!' I heard again.

I felt my wings flutter a little behind me, stiff and sore, barely responsive...but they were there! Then I simply hugged the statue close.

“Thank you...”

* * *

Footnote: Perks *Upgraded!*

'Lucky Break' becomes '*Signature Item*' – While once it may have been a little charm for good fortune, on true realisation it has always been something that matters all along to you. Something that truly belongs with you. You regain your +1 to Luck and now also acquire +1 DT whilst bearing your item.

'Confidence Boost' becomes '*Freedom of Will*' – You took refuge in your friends before, but now you see yourself for the pony you truly are inside! While their support will always be with you...you can now stand on your own. You gain +2 Charisma.

'Path of the Lightbringer' becomes '*Virtue of Hope*' – You merely followed before...but you have been helped to see that the true strength isn't in those you are inspired by, but rather how it helped you remember the real virtue lying in your heart. One that had always been there. You regain the small boost to health when reduced to 10% or lower once per encounter, but now you also receive +1 to *all* SPECIAL statistics while below 20% maximum health.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Pegasi Balance – Finally, your life has come full circle to once again bear the wings that made you what you were at birth. No longer are you as clumsy and off balance without their natural weight and movement to keep you steady on your hooves. You gain +1 Agility to your

statistics.

Footnote: Perks Reacquired!

Low Hoof (Rank 1) – Additional unarmed first strike critical damage

Runt of the Litter – Resistance vs unarmed non-critical attacks

Shadow Canter (Rank 2) - +20 to Sneak, thefts 2x success rate and +10% boost to sneak speed

Luna's Moonlight – Night Vision

Sleight of Hoof (Rank 2) – May steal while detected and bonus to reverse pickpocket

Galloping with Ghosts – Reduced chance to be correctly detected

Skittish at the Bit - +2 to Perception when standing still

Organiser – All items weight 2 or less are halved in weight

A Very Little Dash - +10% boost to speed with light or no armour on

Mad Gallop – Less chance to be hit with ranged attacks while galloping

Chapter 19: Somepony Old, Somepony New

* * *

“Don't you know you get presents on your birthday?”

“What's it like to be given a second chance at life?”

Honestly? I didn't see it like that. A second chance implies I was just starting from square one again, like a...a...resoo...resurip...

“Resurrection?”

Yeah, one of those! This was different, it felt more like something had unlocked inside me and a new wave of thinking had come over me. Everything that had happened while I'd been fighting for my own soul and life amongst the dark hallucinations of my mind just seemed to blur. It became hard to remember the specifics, like a dream.

I didn't need it though, on my back I bore a symbol of what had changed. This wasn't starting again, this was reclaiming the pony I was supposed to be. The wings I'd hated and the cutie mark I'd once contemplated paying to have burnt off now sat on my body like patient reminders. I'd hated them, but they hadn't abandoned me all this time even if I hadn't seen them for what they were.

Now I knew.

This was the point of change. The part of my life when I lay in a hospital bed and began to dream freely again. I'd taken on the slave in my mind. Beating it back and bringing that part of me to the surface that truly wanted freedom. Now nothing was going to force it back down ever again. We'd stalled, we'd struggled and we'd suffered greatly, but with my revival a clarity of purpose came over all my companions as well in their relief. As though their hope had been rekindled at the sight of my own breaking of the chains. Glimmer talked more of the things we'd gathered, how we could convert empty bullet casings I brought into small explosive lockpicks. That sort of thing. We knew that the escape was back on.

“What about, y'know...him?”

Chainlink Shackles?

“Oh, you can say his name?”

Yes...that was the breakthrough. The moment I looked at him and saw a pony, not simply a

master. Don't get me wrong, Shackles terrified me to my core and I knew given half a chance he would seek to break me all over again. But I could look him in the eye and defy now, I could be honest and truthful when I said that I was going to escape. That I had found the purpose that drove me, to forever hope for a better life out of this slavery hell we were all trapped in.

Of course...that hardly meant that the trials were over for any of us.

“Hmm?”

Even as I woke filled with hope and found my friends spurring their relief into an energy for an escape plan. Even as we began to gather tools in secret or work out routes in our heads...there was something else coming to the fore in Fillydelphia. I had once seen slavers as a great singular force, but events of not too long ago had shown me different. Times were changing.

Their great game of intrigue and politics was emerging. That which was old was to be given new purpose as I found my life mirroring that of a certain somepony once again. A revelation that brought their internal struggle closer to me than I might have ever realised.

Even as my friends and I took refuge in Red Eye's day of rest, the past was about to make its intentions very clear.

* * *

A blank page sat before me.

The charcoal tasted foul in my mouth, as ever, but it was the fear underneath my skin that really affected me. What if I couldn't do this still? What if I made a horrible block pony? I'd spent a lot of time in recovery trying to work up the courage to try this and yet I still couldn't bring myself to put charcoal to paper.

Curling my thin blanket around me, feeling my body ache and sting under bandages, I rolled out my neck and felt a couple of stiff movements on my back. It still hurt to move them for my muscles hadn't been used there in many years. The sensation was somewhere between relief and a long strain every time they shifted, the sort of thing you'd feel after a long exercise.

Yet still, the knowledge they were there gave me a little hope. Taking a deep breath, I leaned forward. The charcoal shook, unsteady and nervous. Could I do this? Really, could I?

A hoof wiped the worried sweat from my brow. I had to try sometime. He wasn't going to beat me forever! Not after all I'd been through. I was going to take back what was mine!

Leaning down and bringing the charcoal tip to the centre of the page I hesitated to draw one

more breath...and drew a *line*.

Shaking, yet straight, it lightly scrawled upon the paper, gaining ease with every inch until I let it flick up at the end, becoming a *curve*.

I almost dropped the charcoal from the squeak of delight!

Leaning back down, I caught the end of the curve and wrapped it around. Winding and lightly whipping off here and there it became a more knowing *shape*. Yes, yes this could work!

I fell away into the moment. Free from their confines, my wings habitually spread out a little unsteadily to balance me. Wincing on one side of my face, I leaned down to keep drawing. Black shapes formed and gelled together. A strong 'almost circle' there, with concurrent lines drawing back for a perspective, yes! At the end I started adding the detail with little flicks for the mane and then filled it in with shading! Big long lines around the edges for the light glowing from behind them and then come back in to add that glint to their eyes with tiny circles to show light!

Eventually, I realised it had all formed into something that became *life*.

Feeling oddly exhausted, I sat back. Before me lay the proof of my release and if anything the one image I remembered from that dream above any. The one sight that had saved me at the very last moment.

Before me I had drawn Unity reaching out toward me off the page, her hoof outstretched to try and grab mine. Biting my lip, I lightly touched my own hoof to the drawing.

“Thank you...”

“Hmm?”

The deep and rumbling voice made me jolt upright and turn. Across the ward, near the door, Brimstone Blitz looked up toward me. I still wasn't quite used to his scarring. I kept wanting to somehow wish he could regain that lost eye or made his body less warped and burned on the same side. Almost out of sick humour, the blast had taken off his ear that *wasn't* scarred.

“You say something, Murk?”

“Oh, um...no. Just muttering to myself.”

I rubbed my hooves together awkwardly and felt my ears droop back. Feeling my wings mimic the movement, I realised they were going to be an expressive side of me that was going to take a whole new world of getting used to. Getting them to fold completely down wasn't so hard, but getting them

back out from being folded back was occasionally a nightmare of little strains and pains. I hadn't been able to fully outstretch them yet either. Weathervane had promised that would come in time, instructing both Glimmerlight and Coral on how to help them exercise by gently aiding their movement with hooves.

Brimstone glanced across for a few more seconds before returning his gaze to the corridor outside. He hadn't left my ward since I'd woken, remaining permanently on guard against anypony coming this way. I didn't want to imagine what he'd do if anypony he didn't like came to try and visit.

Not that it mattered. Fears and horrors could wait, I could *draw again!* The more I stared at Unity's caring eyes upon the page the more I began to be delighted that I could do it! My mind was doing backflips with ideas and concepts. What to do first? What best represented how I felt? Something big? Doodle madly on a page? There were so many I had to get out of my system! I even thought about asking Brimstone, but I didn't imagine the stoic earth pony would have much to say.

Oh wait...

I began flipping back through page after page. Masses of drawings flew by until I came to the one I wanted.

Before me, I saw myself standing happily with my wings outstretched. Just to my right, Glimmerlight stood mischievously and playful with Caduceus politely smiling from beside her. A drawing I had started long ago and had somepony well overdue to add in...

Behind myself and Glimmerlight and toward the left of the picture I began to sketch. Little faint lines to get my bearings first. They became more frantic, more emotionally driven. Their size seemed to tower over myself, almost like a colossal shield around us. Ripples across the shape of a pony to draw it out and give the form definition took shape. Having to be quick, I only glanced up a few times to check before putting my head down to work all the more.

I had to erase a few lines, rub them out with the edge of my looser bandages and redo them, but that didn't matter! My mind fell away into the drawing, my greatest release and calming activity as I started to solidify the lines. The outer shape I made really thick, trying to get the right impact of presence. Even just seeing them made me feel as safe as I was with...

...with him here watching over me.

Upon my drawing that I was quickly thinking of as a family photo, our great guardian now resided just behind us. Brimstone Blitz stood with us. Tall, heavy and stern, his eyes nonetheless held a spark of intelligence and knowing. Even without a smile, I could tell he was at better peace with us than anywhere else.

My eyes looked up from my page, seeing him sitting at the ward's door perpetually terrifying every nurse that happened to wander in without noticing him.

I could see the same look.

The guardian had found his calling at last, just as I had found mine.

* * *

I screamed in pain.

“Oh, hold still!”

“I-yargh! Ow! OW!”

“Come on! I've got to learn to help you with this as well.”

My wing twitched and stung, my back and side muscles twitching and making spasms. Glimmerlight's hooves gradually let the wing sink back down again without allowing it to snap back onto my side. Eyes watering from the effort, I sank down on my front and relaxed to allow it to droop off to the side. Then yelped and squeaked as Glimmer began to knead around the base and stretch out the length of my wing.

“Just think of the end result, when you can swish these babies out and woo every pony you want. Now, try to lift them. Come on, you've got to start doing this more naturally yourself.”

Lying on the hospital bed, I sighed and closed my eyes. The muscles felt distant and dull. Sometimes my wings followed emotive response but manual decided movement just wasn't as easy. Glimmer had been helping me try to get them to flare right out and up but the process was slow.

Seeing my little wings making tiny flaps and not quite coming to their full expansion, Brimstone grinned and chuckled to himself.

“Anypony got a photo of that little Stable Dweller? Pretty sure that'll get those wee things *right* up.”

My eyes bolted open as I felt a blush form. I hadn't even thought about that...uh...'problem.' Oh dear...Glimmer was going to have a field day sometime in the near future...

Now however, she just laughed and patted my back before helping my wings to ease back to my sides. I may have been embarrassed, but I was enjoying these hours of rest and recuperation with my friends. They had been permitted to stay due to Red Eye's rest day and so far as the rest of Fillydelphia

knew, I was dead. No slavers would come hunting for me and Weathervane had provided me a secluded room. I knew we could trust his staff, all of them were fiercely loyal to Weathervane above anypony else.

Really, I'd spent the majority of my time trying to work up the courage to do those drawings. Sitting listening to the DJ talking of Littlepip going 'off the map' on some legendary quest had set my imagination alight. So much so, I'd perhaps even drawn her a few times battling dragons or finding some huge artefact that could cure tainted lungs. I'd have liked that...

As though on cue, I coughed.

“Looks like its time for your medicine, then.” Glimmerlight ceased her chuckling to lift a measured portion of RadAway to me from across the room. I knocked back the small amount, a specific level of it the nurses had set out for me to avoid wasting some if it wasn't needed. At least in here they could keep an eye on me and give me just as much as I needed to preserve stocks. I hoped I could get some to take away.

Taking the cup from me, Glimmerlight glanced again to my wings. She'd been the most fascinated and delighted by them (bar myself, of course) of all my friends. While I thought it was simple happiness for me, many times she'd mentioned that she wished she had them. Briefly, I had wondered what that really said about Glimmerlight.

I felt her hooves sorting my feathers and trying to help it all move better, muttering away as she did so.

“Leastways I know to get you a feather comb for your birthday now.” She paused, blinking a few times. “That's a point, when *is* your birthday anyway?”

“I...I don't know...” Biting my lip, I felt my wings drawn in, nervous. “No-pony ever told me really.”

“You don't...I mean...huh?” Glimmerlight looked up at me, then to Brim, then to me again. “Are you seriously telling me you have never had a birthday in your life?”

Shifting, I sat up and rolled my neck.

“What do you mean? Of course I have, I just don't know when it is but it happens each year. Isn't that what you mean?”

“Murky...” Glimmerlight moved around, looking me in the eye. “You do know that ponies have, y'know, parties for birthdays, right?”

They did? Aren't birthdays just like a day that denotes the precise time of birth each year? Glimmerlight clearly saw the confusion on my face for she only shook her head and took a deep breath through her nose.

“Well!” Her hooves grabbed my shoulders. “If you don't know...then why not make it today? Your first day of being awake to who you really are! What better to choose if there's no other choice?”

“You can do that?”

“Sure! Who says not to? I had my birthday a week early last year because I couldn't be assed waiting! So welcome to your first known birthday, Murky!”

I just sat and blinked. Was...was this allowed? Did the Goddesses mind? Glimmerlight only laughed and hugged me gently.

“Just you wait, lil'bro. I'll show you what a birthday's meant to be to welcome you to the day we head back up. I did a little inventory in the Mall earlier. We've got a little food, some stored rainwater, a few large shells, makeshift mining tools and after a little persuasion we even got your battle saddle back off Blunderbuck...minus pistol I'm afraid. The moment you're better we are back in the game!”

She ruffled my mane, seeing the hopeful smile. I couldn't wait, I loved that feeling of checking things off my lists and seeing our little escape armoury grow!

“Him being better shouldn't be a real problem by the end of today.”

The rough voice from the doorway caught our attention. Doctor Weathervane trotted in, bearing a small medical saddlebag no doubt intended for me. Lifting it onto my bed, the ghoul began to wave his glowing horn across me.

“The megaspell did its work pretty damn well, better than I could have hoped. Back when I spent days on those pissing annoying intricacies I always figured it'd fuck up somehow.”

“I...I never said thank you, for using it to save me...” I could feel Glimmer's hoof around my shoulders, my near death had hit her hardest of all. “S-sorry it had to be it, your life's work and all...”

“My life's work is to be a healer, kid.” His horn travelled to my back. “I'd be a pretty fucking awful doctor if I let a pony die just because a spell was a one use only. Who am I going to wait to use it on? Just didn't think it would work at first, was all.”

His horn changed its glow a little, picking a few potions and tablets from his saddlebag. I recognised the foul purple potion he'd given me a lot of already. Seeing my look of disgust, he

chuckled.

“The worse it tastes, the better it is for you, get it down that throat. Now, most of the superficial damage is healed. The cut on your flank and the piercing on your leg have pretty much healed bar some soreness. I'd keep the bandages over your midriff and neck for the time being though, those were the worst wounds. They've closed and so far as I can see the internal bleeding around your abdomen has ceased but I don't want to take any chances with removing the healing bandages yet.”

I snuggled a little closer to Glimmerlight. I didn't want to think about those injuries...I could feel the cold metal all over again.

“Your wings have come along nicely. The real problem is in your scapulars, marginal coverts and alulas. Very fragile things, pegasus wings...capable of the most furious of movements and immense wind stresses yet so very light and easy to harm. I had to lecture the Wonderbolts back in the day to stop those hotrod sods trying to showboat the day before their events. One scapular strain or pinched alula and the whole thing shuts down. So keep on gently stretching them out.”

Biting my lip, I nodded. I had no idea what all these fancy words meant but I decided it probably meant 'the bits that hurt'.

“So don't strain them and you should see a gradual healing take place. I think I already told you not to expect any flight ever to come of it?”

“Y-yes...” I turned away slightly. For the briefest of moments, I had entertained the hope after waking up.

“Mm...that is unfortunate, I know. Your growth development is likely already finished, Murk. So the muscles around your scapulars near your body don't have any significant expansion left ahead of them. Just keep working at them and we'll see what happens. Now, I should think it best you get out of bed for a while...”

“H-huh? You mean...leave?”

“Yes. Leave the hospital.” He began setting out a small series of potions. “Pegasi have a certain trot to them, their wings are not simply tacked onto any other pony body. Remember how I knew what you were the second I saw you wander that skinny arse into my lab? You've got to get a trot going as part of your recovery, it'll help the muscles. If I still had the physio pool I'd have thrown you in it, but it's pretty fuckin' irradiated these days.”

He looked as though he was unsure about adding something else.

“Well...that and the slaver inspection's soon. Always complaining about me using too much to

save a life as though they fucking know how. Moronic cock-guzzling dildochickens that they are. You don't want to be here when they arrive and I don't want to risk Murky in the radiation below to hide in the basement. You're best to leave while the route outside is clear.”

“Then I'm going with him.” Brimstone immediately spoke up, having been on his silent vigil.

“Me too.” Glimmerlight nudged my side lightly. I couldn't help but smile. Much as I liked being in here away from Fillydelphia in my mind...a trot with my friends would be good. The industry was quiet today anyway. Coral Eve had returned to the Mall to rest, her injuries from trying to save me at the Pit were still hurting. She had brought the news that Shackles seemed oddly absent and the doors were wide open to come and go as you pleased.

“Good, just make sure he trots right. None of this head down bullshit I've seen him doing, a pegasus should stand with their head *tall* to have the optimum muscular layout. Why do you think the Wonderbolts had that big proud stance? It's a pegasus thing. So you two keep him doing it or I'll make every fucking medicine taste worse than brahmin shit every time you come here, got it?”

I had to laugh, for I'd spotted the grin on Weathervane's face. For all his bedside manner, I could see he was happy to have gotten back to his speciality with pegasi. I could only hope it helped him against the growing anger and flickering light of sanity inside. He left me with a small amount of healing potions that Glimmerlight made sure I took. The tingling in my belly, back and neck from their effects healed up a little more of the horrific wounds as they took effect. They had already closed over but there was much damage to repair before I felt fine.

Then I had a realisation, something I had forgotten. I shouted out to Weathervane. He turned at the door.

“Hmm?”

“I...I met some ponies. Friends of yours!”

“Friends?”

“From before...um...ghouls! N-Nurses Splint and Bedlay Bloom with um..um...Windtail Breeze and Baton...Baton...”

“Baton Round?” Weathervane's voice lifted a little, a genuine unknowing in his eyes lighting up. “They're all still alive?”

“Yes! I found them as slaves. I just thought you'd w-want to know...they're still alive. In the metro, I mean. Splint's keeping them going, they're on the route we're taking to get out.”

Weathervane looked genuinely stunned. As did Glimmer and Brim, they'd never heard me talk of these ghouls. The ghoul turned in the door, leaning on the frame for a second.

"I thought they died decades ago...if they're still alive then..." He looked up. "The metro is Shackles' personal nightmare, Murk. If they're down there they can't last long."

"No...they didn't look in a good way..."

"Slaving motherfucker..." Weathervane muttered to himself, following it up with a curse so foul I saw even Brim wince. "I will have to get to them, they were good friends...thank you, Murk. I will see what I can do. If it's the last thing I do I will save them, such good ponies do not deserve that. By what remains of my life as a healer I *will* save them."

"We'll help them if we can, Doctor." Glimmerlight nodded to him. "We owe you more than life itself for what you've done for us."

"Sounds like you're heading that way anyway...not that I could talk you out of that stupid fuckin' plan...but thanks."

He trotted off. I guessed he wasn't one much for optimistic moments. I wished he'd just believe someday that he *could* take another life for himself out there. Right now, however, we had to get moving.

But I had one more thing to do before we left.

Glimmerlight had brought me my fleece from the Mall, expecting me to wear it. Picking it up from my little pile of belongings on the side table and offering a little smile to my statuette as I did so, I brought out my thread and needle along with a small pair of scissors nearby we'd used for my bandages.

"Murky? What are you doing?"

Glimmerlight watched intently. Even Brimstone cast a glance now and again. Lifting my fleece, I held it to my side before going to work with the scissors and needle. Strengthening areas, repairing the collar and legs of it and patching any holes with black thread I made it anew. But then I took to the sides, digging in and scything chunks of wool out from it. A new sense of self confidence came over me, a declaration of who I was as I slipped it on carefully and let my wings spread through the holes.

Glimmerlight smiled brightly as I turned to her with a little grin, strapping on my Pipbuck by the whipcord and slotting my goggles onto my head. My saddlebag went over, neatly fitting over my wings with the straps.

“I'm not going to hide who I am any more, sis.” I spoke more proudly of myself than I ever had, swishing my wings a little stiffly until they settled in. “Sha...Shackles tried to m-make me resent the kind of pony I am, I w-want to show myself that he was wrong...”

Glimmer helped me off the bed, taking my weight as I unsteadily trotted a few steps forward before finding my balance properly.

“I'm glad you finally see that, Murky. They're a part of you and I can't imagine you without them.”

Joining Brimstone, we set out. Glimmer giggled, bumped my shoulder and continued.

“Besides, just imagine what it'll be like to show a certain red maned unicorn when he sees them...”

“Glimmer!”

* * *

We hadn't gone too far from the hospital. With me trotting slowly and Brimstone still noticeably favouring his injured side our walkabout wasn't exactly what you might call fast. But the chance to simply wander and talk with my friends on a rest day was something I'd dearly needed. It gave me time to voice my feelings and concerns to them or get a reassuring hug when I needed it over what happened in the Pit and afterwards. Not to mention telling Glimmer of my dreams and thank her over and over again.

Fillydelphia itself had come out of the storm. The ground was damp, but above us the dark clouds had parted to bring sickly yellow tinged with Filly's red haze. In comparison, it felt almost as close as this city could get to a sunny day. With the forges silent and the slavers mostly indifferent to those who wandered free, there was a strange peace I'd never truly known from this place.

Of course, we weren't going to pass up this chance.

Open to explore, we headed toward the emergency exit from the metro I had climbed out of once before. Climbing through the rubble to find the ruined staircase, I pointed into the darkness with a hoof.

“This is it. The ghouls, Weathervane's friends, they showed this to me. It'll let us get into the metro quietly with a few ponies along with us.”

Brimstone cast a dubious glance to the dark hole and its crumbling spiral staircase riddled with

holes.

“Doesn't look steady. If we've got us three, Coral, two foals and those two other mares you know the last thing we need is it to collapse.”

“Um...y-yeah...”

“Doesn't matter.” Glimmerlight lit her horn to look down herself and dropped a stone in. Numerous seconds passed before I heard it hit the bottom and nodded to let them know. Glimmerlight pointed to a big stone pillar beside us from the old building that housed this part of the metro. “We'll send Murky down first, he'll fire that hook of his back up and we'll tie it up here to lower everypony down one by one in a harness. They sent me to work in the place they make their battle saddles once. I think I could maybe get their stronger ones to sustain even Brim's size. If they can support ranger armour I'm pretty sure they'll support you.”

“Good. You get that then.” Brimstone nodded in approval, before waving us away. Last thing we needed was to be spotted here. “Just keep in mind we'll need to bring all our kit with us as well, that's one more lift. Now let's get out of here, we don't need to attract any attention.”

I went back out first. The building the emergency staircase was sat in was an absolute wreck, not unidentifiable at all other than perhaps as some sort of construction for the metro system intended for staff only. Just down the road I could see the much larger public metro station on the surface. Shackles' guards hung around the top of it. Even the memory of what lay down there frightened me...

We'd have to go in there at least once. Sunny was trapped in that mining hell down there and I was not leaving without her. Not her or Unity. There had to be a way to find her. I wasn't abandoning her after what she'd done for me. The moment I was better, I'd see about sneaking into the metro to evacuate Sunny through this hole. Shackles wasn't going to bash me into submission now, I had *wings!*

We decided that we should head back to the Mall. Shackles wasn't there for sure and I knew a way to sneak out now anyway. We'd go there, collect our inventory of things and work out what we exactly needed. I couldn't wait...the escape was back on! We'd head back, count out all the cool stuff, get to hear Glimmer talk about the cool things she would make and then I'd get to...oooh yes...I'd get to *check things off the checklist! Eee!*

Glimmer chuckled, seeing the light bounce to my trot. Ruffling my mane, she leaned down to me.

“I'm glad to see you smile, Murky. Keep that hope alive, you smiling makes *all* of us want to.”

“I will. I mean, I'll t-try...” I offered a grin to seal the deal. Glimmerlight nodded curtly and resumed looking ahead. We weren't being bothered and Brim's presence made anypony who looked at

my (proudly) displayed wings with distaste think twice before causing a problem. All the same, we tried to avoid attention. We had enough enemies in this city.

To avoid just that, we took the other way home, passing around near the old pegasus skyport and sticking to the smaller streets. I trotted behind them, with Brim leading the way. All the while, I simply tried not to look at the control tower. I didn't need to remember that now...

Beep!

My eyes jolted open further, stopping on the spot. Raising my Pipbuck to my eyes, I glanced at it. Didn't it only go off at heights?

Beep! Beep!

The sound was quiet. Likely only I heard it. Ahead of me, Glimmer and Brimstone moved out of the building. Glimmer was chatting about something to him, but I didn't pay any attention...just something about what we needed.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The sound picked up, before my Pipbuck's screen seemed to flare, spark and struggle to display something. Wincing away as a part of exposed circuitry popped, I worried if it was breaking. Oh no! Don't take it from me!

Instead, it only flickered more. Squinting and looking close, I saw something appear upon it. A set of words at the top scrolled by quickly. Then below it a symbol began flashing. The smashed screen flickered a lot, but it looked like a set of three party balloons.

A little chill passed through my body. I knew what they were. No...nooooo no no *no!* That creepy ever watching pink *demon* could stay out of my Pipbuck! Just because they got Sundial doesn't mean they'll get me!

The balloons warped and disappeared, being replaced by what looked like an arrow.

I looked up, but it only pointed to a blank wall.

Glimmerlight really needed to have a look at this thing. Some circuit probably blew out. I'd never been to this area of Fillydelphia before, maybe its map systems were freaking out from some old Pinkie related broadcast in the air. Best just to ignore it.

Not so easy. As I trotted to catch up, I saw the arrow changing and constantly pointing backward in one direction. It occurred to me that perhaps it had been pointing to something on the

other side of these houses we trotted among...

Carefully, bending low and sneaking forward, I poked my head out into the road. A few slavers half drunkenly staggered down it and the occasional converted home into a small slave den cast light onto the tarmac...but otherwise nothing. Looking down, the arrow pointed across the street and down the road a little. Then I saw it.

Standing taller than the rest, there was some form of government building. It held the same strength I'd seen on many of the Ministry related constructions, with thick corners and sometimes even unbroken windows. Yet it was not a Ministry Hub, for I could see a large sign on the outside bearing a book. It was a library.

The arrow on my Pipbuck pointed relentlessly toward it, no matter which way I held it. I just didn't get it. I wondered if I should get Glimmer and Brim, investigate what this was to-

A sudden shout disturbed my thinking.

“You! Get away from us!”

Glimmer!

I didn't even think, I simply turned back into the alley and galloped toward my friends. I heard a group of voices all shout out. Weapon safeties clicked and hooves stomped. I heard Brim snort and grind his hooves upon the ground in warning.

Then I burst out of the alley into an almost completely destroyed warehouse. The roof had flown off long ago in some balefire driven shockwave, leaving it a featureless skeleton of gantries and girders where the flimsy walls had once been.

Within it I saw Glimmer and Brimstone surrounded in a half circle by slavers. At their centre stood an altogether annoyingly familiar figure. Wormtail.

“It's not exactly hard to track two slaves when one is about four times the size of anypony else then-” He stopped, looking over toward me. “Oh hello...what have we here?”

Skidding to a halt, I found Glimmerlight quickly blocking the way between me and him.

“You're *not* having him!”

“I don't think you all have much a choice. See, my own master tasked me to find you two. He wasn't particularly pleased with the result in the Pit. Seems he wants you eliminated, but now I see a much *better* prize we all thought gone to bring home to master...”

He leered at me. I shook, the thought disgusting and terrifying me. I wouldn't...I wouldn't!

“As if you can just take him while I'm here.” Brimstone snarled at the scrawny figure of Wormtail, who only seemed to fake a pout and make a snorting laugh.

“You can try.”

A dozen large rifles and even a double shotgun battle saddle spun his way. Brimstone's eyebrows narrowed.

“You think you can wander? Oh sure the normal slavers might not go for you, but I come from a much higher authority. One who can get a griffin to spot you from the air. One that wants his pet back. Now come on, little runt. Daddy's waiting.”

“N-no!” I stomped one hoof, before squeaking in fright as my saddle's mouthpiece whipped out accidentally from the movement. The slavers laughed, but Glimmerlight had my back.

“He's not going back to him. Not after what's happened! Murky's no slave any more. Don't bring this to violence because I promise even if you kill us all I'll make sure I get you *somehow* before it goes down.”

“Of course you will, my dear. But you see I have twelve heavily armed allies at least twenty feet away with their tongues on the triggers and you have a half dead raider with no weapons. Hand him over, I'll maybe see that you at least find a home, my dear.”

“Not a chance.”

“You don't have much a choice, you know! Hah!”

“Want him, you gotta take him.” Brim lowered himself down. “If Glim doesn't get you, *I* will.”

“Yes, yes, of course...but hooves don't do well against *guns*. Do learn how fighting works, big boy, before you try and act like you understand it.”

For a second, I thought Brimstone was going to simply charge for that one remark. However much it straight up annoyed me from his condescending attitude he was right. We didn't even have space to retreat.

Stalemate...only they could end the stalemate with a victory whenever they wanted!

So...not a stalemate at all then.

Oh dear...why did this have to happen? We'd only just got out! I'd just realised this! I didn't want to go back!

“Come on, little slave. Maybe I'll even let your friends live if you come here. I'm sure The Master wouldn't mind that once he saw he was getting you back. Come on...just trot over.”

I looked around. Anything to grapple? Just old bars...nothing above them. Nothing they couldn't shoot me long before I managed to tug anyway!

“I said come on! Just obey and trot forward. Do I have to shoot one of them to get it through to you? Do I?”

I paced on the spot. I tried to think, my wings shaking a little by my side. The same look was on Glimmer's face.

“He is *not* going back to him!” She grit her teeth. “He's realised who he is and he is not that monster's pet slave!”

“Oh for crying out loud, must you make this so tiring? Blockhead, shoot the mare.”

“Yis, boss.”

The rifle came up. I saw Brimstone look to dive, his instinct to protect Glimmerlight kicking in. I think I screamed. I knew he was too far away. Why did it always have to go wrong? *WHY!?*

The gunshot snapped out.

The rifle seemed to flare, but not from the barrel. A bright spark from the stock nearer the slaver's face sent the weapon spinning away. My ears stung from the sound, but even while recovering I began to hear where it had come from. Behind and above us.

“Stand down, *all of you!*”

Glimmerlight had winced back, expecting the pain. We met eyes in disbelief, before both turning.

Behind us, atop a set of gantry stairs from a far entrance, we saw him. His revolver floated just near a blinking red eyepiece to aim down its scope, his red mane blowing in the light breeze around his head. Just as he had done in my dream, he had protected us from the harsher brutality of slavery.

Protégé trotted forward down the stairs. He kept his revolver trained on the group of slavers.

He wasn't wearing his armour, just the scholarly vest and day clothes. As he passed, I saw his eye briefly turn to me and acknowledge my presence before returning to Wormtail. The weasel-like aid to Shackles had clenched away from the disarmed slaver on the gunshot and now strove to keep his presence up.

“Wormtail, you don't have authority to go around shooting workers. Especially not valued ones of specialist tasks.”

Wormtail merely snickered, wringing out his neck.

“I'd heard you were back on your hooves. Looking to make up for how you failed at the Mall, eh? Trying to make up for all your bad planning by acting hard pointing a gun at another slaver?”

“You know as well as I what transpired there. Just as you know why I keep this drawn.”

I saw some of the slavers actually grin. Suddenly, I got a sense that something bigger had suddenly transpired in the background. Protégé wasn't paying us much attention despite saving Glimmer's life. Ahead of us, Wormtail calmed a little, shaking out his neck again.

“Well I'm afraid this is a stupid little move for you again. See...Chainlink Shackles doesn't like you and you've just revealed yourself away from all eyes on your own with only five shots in your revolver. I'm sure no-pony would be able to find you after you mysteriously disappeared...”

“Not going to happen. Murk and his friends are coming with me. You know I've been put back in charge of the Mall, they will be protected.”

What?! *YES!*

“*Only* until Chainlink is healthy again since that brute got near him! You've got a day at most before you'll be kicked out all over again! The slave council isn't too happy with you. Not that it matters, didn't you hear me? You aren't leaving here alive! Shackles told me you were back on the trot, aiming to save your little favourite runt.”

His eyes narrowed.

“He also told me if I got the chance to simply kill you and dump your body in the taint. See? That's why it's good to have allies, something you don't know. To have friends in high places.”

The weapons aimed again. They were all Shackles' lackeys, I knew it! Protégé what were you doing? He had to know he couldn't win!

“Hm, funny.” Protégé smiled. “I happen to have a friend in a very high place too.”

There was an odd silence. No-pony really got what he meant. I saw it first, a small red dot creeping over Wormtail's face. Reaching his eye...he saw it too after a squint.

“There's a helpfulness to having a sworn griffin bodyguard who's a handy sharpshooter too, you know? You give one order, she'll pull the trigger. Murk here can attest to her accuracy on the move, never mind your big head standing still.”

The atmosphere seemed to change. Wormtail looked a lot less confident all of a sudden. Glancing from side to side, now he was the one having to really try and think.

“You...you...”

“Goodbye, Wormtail. I'll no doubt enjoy your presence again later.”

“Insufferable...everypony, let's go. Shackles will want to know the runt's alive! You didn't save him, upstart! You *can't* save him! You're alone in Fillydelphia now, Protégé! Just a slave playing at slaver! Just you wait!”

He turned, trotting away. Almost disappointed, the slavers obediently left. Only then did I notice how much I was shaking. Thank the Goddesses for his return! Trotting over, I saw Protégé let out a relieved breath of his own.

“Thank you, ma...” I coughed a little over my word. No...no using that any more. Even if he is the only one I ever perhaps respected back. “Thanks.”

He turned back to me. Out of the moment, I began to see how rough he really was. His normally pony-tailed mane was loose and his clothes loosely fitted from a significantly loss in weight. I presumed it was from the treatments to cure Barb's poison.

“Wormtail is a coward. If he thinks his own skin's in danger he'll always back off. He relies on hiding behind Shackles' power. I'm just glad you had that Pipbuck on you to track once I got out.”

I could see a heavy swathe of bandage over his neck just like mine. Seeing my own, Protégé's face turned from relief to concern.

“Murk, I heard about the Pit. They said that 'the pegasus' had been in there and it's all they talked about. Even Master Red Eye was rather perplexed by it. I am most grateful to see you're alive, for the longest time I...I thought...”

“As did we.” Glimmerlight cast a hoof around my neck. “A few miracles and a lot of self discovery involved perhaps, but he's still here trotting with us. Thank you, Protégé. You mentioned

you were back in charge of the Mall?”

He nodded curtly, then winced from the motion shifting his bandage. Of course, he hadn't had a megaspell to help it.

“A temporary judgement. I know the Mall so I've been assigned to merely care for it until Shackles is healed himself. Not very long at all. Grindstone has convinced the council that the riot and its outcome was my doing. He and Shackles played their cards well. Make no mistake, there is a great game of intrigue and politics coming to light now, something I know of but cannot prove beyond my own words.”

He cast a glance to Brimstone.

“It seems you did more than you may have thought. Allegedly, once he got back to his office after your attack he collapsed. He must have just been trying not to let it happen in front of the slaves.”

I couldn't help but see a satisfied little smirk across Brim's face.

“He will return as walking wounded in a day, Shackles is no weak pony. Until then I have overseer duty similar to Shackles' own limbo period before he was handed power over the Mall. Somewhere I advise we return to now rather than be exposed.”

“No argument from me.” Glimmerlight nodded. I could sense how relieved she really was.

“Good, then let us make swift pace. I have no wish to meet another group of those loyal to Shackles and Grindstone.”

Behind us, Ragini bounded across the remains of the warehouse. A gut wrenching feeling hit me as I saw her broken wings clasped to her side. She was ground ridden. There was a brief moment as she saw my wings half spread where I saw confusion and shock in her eyes. Before I could think of any words, she hid it under a veil of professional blankness.

With her there, we began to move off. Falling back in pace with me, Protégé glanced over and saw my wings. I noticed he kept his voice low, respectful of Ragini's presence.

“I'm glad to see that the ghoulish doctor's treatments are helping, Murk. Please, would you do me a favour and attend my office upon your return?”

“Um...y-yes?”

He looked surprised, as though expecting a 'Master' on the response.

“Good.” He picked up his pace, trotting ahead to lead the way naturally. “I have missed our talks...”

* * *

The mall was bustling. Ponies were coming and going in a constant stream with hazy eyes. Shackles' influence finally been lifted was like a brief haven for them, even if just for one day. Most took the chance to grasp what little freedom to wander as they could, enjoying a day free of toil to get some food or simply a change of scenery.

Protégé cast a disapproving eye upon the quality of the slaves. Most regarded him with something of a curious glance, some asking if he was back forever. I saw one slave plead that he be with them again. Red Eye's apprentice could only offer that he would do what he could within one day.

When he saw the plaza, I almost felt like he was going to break the stoicism he bore to look upon what had changed in horror.

“This isn't what I wanted...”

Likely only I heard it, the pain in his voice. With a deep sigh, he turned to me as he moved to the stairs back to his office.

“Please, do come visit. I want to hear in your words what has happened. I'll give you a few seconds to settle.”

He spoke quickly and curtly, before swinging to leave. I was left with Glimmerlight and Brimstone, both rather quiet at first. Naturally, it would fall to Glimmer to break the silence a little.

“Well? Let's get in there and get to work. Got a lot of planning to do.”

We trotted into the plaza more fully. Cells were laid open with a skeleton crew of slavers waiting around, however the main draw was a series of tables set up around the area manned by slaves themselves. The slave market had come to visit the beleaguered residents of the Mall, seeking to gain from their wish to escape harsh control. Trinkets, foods, purified water and clothing were all laid out and being furiously haggled over. Sooty wasn't to be seen...I presumed he was above this now.

We returned to our cell, finding Coral waiting for us. But even as they trotted in, I looked to the balcony above, seeing a brief glance of Protégé passing by it to his office. Something felt different about him...he was quieter, less poetic and optimistic of purpose.

I felt a hoof on my shoulder. Glimmer.

“You go see him, Murky.”

I turned to her with an aim to cut the joke short but saw only a calm seriousness.

“We can handle checking all we have ourselves. Go see how he is, that pony saved our lives as much as you saved his. I know you'll want to catch up, but could you just leave your Pipbuck here a moment? I want to try and see if I can't load a stored map from Aurora's files onto it.”

Biting my lip, I looked back up for a second before nodding.

“Thanks, sis...”

Feeling her pat my neck comfortingly I hoofed over my Pipbuck and left them to it, trotting toward the stairs. I knew the way just fine, but even so I felt an odd nervousness of confronting him once again. As though I didn't know quite what to say or where to start. Things had changed and it had been so long, I wasn't the same pony he once knew...would he be the one I knew?

* * *

Carefully cresting the stairs and poking my head out to watch the corridor (too near *his* office for my liking...) I began to trot toward the office door. Ragini stood on watch outside it. I didn't imagine Protégé was taking any chances with another attempt on his life. She regarded me as finely as ever. (By which I mean as though I were something she'd accidentally stepped on.)

“Want in?” Her voice cut into the air, as though trying to use as little syllables possible.

“Y-yes please...” I nodded, stepping forward as she nodded to the presumably unlocked door. As I passed her, I saw the ruin of her wings by her sides and knew from horrible experience the true meaning of it.

“I'm...I'm sorry for what happened to you, Ragini.” I looked up at the huge griffin. “I know what it feels li-yargh!”

She grabbed me by the collar, pulling me right up to her beak with *fury* in her eyes.

“No you *don't*, flightless! Don't you dare tell me you know how it feels to lose your wings! You've never tasted the air above the clouds, never felt the rush through your body in a straight dive or the satisfying ache the day after a challenging flight! Those feathers of yours do not *know* what it is to be a flyer! So don't you come here with your magically healed little shaking wings by your side and have the *nerve* to say you know how I feel!”

She dropped me. Landing on my rump with a yelp, I cowered away from the furious griffin, her

face screwed into anger alone.

“So answer me two questions, flightless. Could what you got for your wings work for me?”

Shivering, I shook my head.

“Then fuck off with your concern. I'm one of the Talons. We don't want sympathy. Second question...”

She bent right over me, turning her head to the side that her eye could better stare at me.

“Did any of those motherfuckers that did this get away?”

“Y-yes...”

There was a pause, then she seemed to smile. It was not a nice smile.

“They had their little revenge pacts. The Talons don't let this sort of thing go unanswered either. Eye for an eye. Thank you for telling me this, flightless...”

Her back leg knocked the door open rather too sharply before harshly inclining with her head.

“Now get your scrawny ass in there.”

Afraid to even voice any further words I darted inside and closed the door readily, taking a second to breath on the other side.

“I see Ragini still adores you, Murk.”

The moment the door closed, he spoke from across the room. I turned a little too sharply to see him amidst a state of devastation. Protégé held many books in his telekinesis, trying to sort out the mess that Shackles' slavers had made of his office. Bookshelves were tumbled over, papers spread out of cabinets and all his furniture shifted around. I even saw one row of books simply thrown across the floor.

Oh wait...that bit had been me...

...oops?

“It's, um...all right. I guess I'm sort of used to it now.” I trotted forward, allowing my eyes to fall instead to him.

“She has a lot of anger to get out, don't take it to heart. Anyone not in her contract has been getting it from her lately.”

Protégé turned back to me, setting a dozen books on his desk. I couldn't help but be struck by how little energy he really gave off. Every time before I had seen him, Protégé had a certain presence, a spark within him that had controlled any given encounter that was now utterly lacking. He moved slower, favouring his neck with any movements around the tightly wrapped clean bandages. His eyes looked tired and his mouth seemed to fight to not allow for a frown to come over him. I almost wanted to just start telling him it would all be all right somehow...

“I suppose I should thank you personally, Murk.” He sat atop a stool nearby, indicating another across the room if I wanted it. “There's no other way to put it. You saved my life by taking on Barb. I heard what you did to him and all I can say is...I believe I was right about you. There is certainly more to you as a pony than many saw.”

Taking a careful seat, I toyed with a small book that had been in the way.

“I just got lucky...”

“Nonsense, Murk. That took bravery. Even now I look upon you and I see a different pony than the one that I last saw calling me 'master.' Something has changed you, I don't need to see your wings recovering to know that. There's one crucial difference I spotted the moment I first saw you again.”

“H-huh?”

“Yes, Murk.” Protégé allowed a small smile to cross his face. “You turned to me and you looked me in the *eye*. You've never done that before, not like that. Please, tell me. What changed?”

I nodded, placing the book down. “Yes, yes I have changed. There's a...a...l-lot...”

I felt a pressure behind my eyes. What I'd been through. Of being broken, forced into work, held down and made to call Shackles 'Master' again and again...it all flooded back in one tidal wave. Clenching my eyes shut, I wiped away the little dampness that had come forth. I heard Protégé shift, leaning forward in concern.

“I told you once before that I was willing to hear you out, Murk. That offer still stands.”

Looking up, I tried to hide the wetness in my eyes with a hoof. I was stronger now, I could see I was not meant to be a slave. I could see I was meant to be free. But that didn't mean it all didn't still hurt terribly. Sniffing, I began to tell him everything from the start. Since the moment he had been crippled and I held none of it back. He was a very good listener. I might have sniffled a few times, or

stumbled and repeated myself...but he was patient and only interrupted me to clarify some things or to ask interested questions.

Eventually I spoke of the mostly faded nightmares and dreams I had travelled in my near death. Protégé leaned forward, closely interested as he heard me talk of my past with my mother and of how I gained my cutie mark.

“That's what changed, it all stemmed from this one thing.” I wiped my eyes and looked across the room, turning slightly that he could see my cutie mark. “It means to be free. My life isn't to be in slavery, it's to escape from it! Coming to Fillydelphia was nothing more than me reaching the end of the line, the place I would escape from and begin my life for real! The friends I've met here were what I was to truly find. A family I chose for myself. I want to be free, I've said it so many times but only now do I really...well, *understand* it. I *have* to be free.”

There was an odd silence, before Protégé nodded slowly.

“I see. Believe that by my power I would want it for you, Murk. I gained my freedom to choose my path, so I can but say I wish the same for you in return. However, Shackles will not want it of you. What you have been through under him...”

He looked away.

“I know what it's like. Perhaps not to the same malicious extent to focus on you above all but I know the weight of his authority upon my shoulders and now he seeks to do it again.” He slowly drew himself up, opening his eyes. “You can gain your freedom in Fillydelphia, Murk. So long as we can keep you from him then I believe you can last the two years to-”

“I will not wait *two years* more to lose my life, Protégé!”

I snapped up, standing and facing him.

“Don't come back and tell me that I am just to go back to slavery!”

“I cannot simply release you, Murk. You know this.”

“I've seen what I need to do in my life now! How can you stand there and tell me that I've gut Stables and risk my life for years to 'earn' my freedom that I need to seek for myself! After all this, after all *you've* been through how can you tell that it's right?”

“Master Red Eye offers these options, Murk! I can help you-”

I stomped a hoof hard. “Not for two years of this, I won't last two years! I thought you were

better than this when we last talked! That you wanted something better that wasn't going to be pain and misery simply to get what I have always been denied! You can-”

“Enough!”

Protégé snapped at me, his eyebrows lowered.

“I said I could help you. But you didn't let me speak. I spent a long time recovering, Murk. A long time to think, to read and to speak with those I could. Old Grizzly predominantly visited in lieu of my master from his attentions to the final preparations for the cathedral and Unity. I would have spoke with him, told him all of what happened but there are greater plans at stake now.”

He trotted closer to me.

“I have a way I can help you, Murk. To make this journey easier to bear. If you will but listen?”

I was breathing hard. The emotions of slavery in the past few days had wrung me hard and I felt ready to burst out at anything. But I nodded and sat again. Protégé sat upon the floor near his desk, lifting the eyepiece from his face.

“There is something happening in Fillydelphia, Murk. Something you saw an example of when Shackles betrayed us both and from what Wormtail was saying. It is being called the great game by some, a power struggle as they sense Master Red Eye's final victory drawing near. Every member of his staff seeks to be in the most advantageous position to reap the rewards or bask in the power that it shall bring.”

“I...I know. I've seen Shackles' meetings, he made me serve for them...”

“Then you know what kind of seriousness they give to this, Murk. Intrigue and hidden politics are crossing over into a mess of loyalties and back room activities. I shan't drown you in the specifics, but due to my position of favour beside Master Red Eye they see me as a threat. I have precious few allies left yet many seek to discredit me. My time is rushed and I am fighting a losing battle to keep my own interests solid while maintaining my responsibilities.”

He spoke even as he wandered the room. His magic began to lift more books, replacing them on shelves before leaning down with a painful grunt to try and lift a bookcase. Without thinking, I went over to help him.

“What...ergh...what *are* your responsibilities now?”

“Logistics.” The bookcase snapped upright. “I am to help direct Master Red Eye's material

supply and personnel reserves as his supervisor. It is...without recognition. A demotion for sure..."

We both leaned back on the bookcase. Glancing over, I could hear the disappointment in his voice. Here was been the pony I knew once dreamed of making something better out of all this...now denied that link to the very ponies he sought to help. Even if I didn't exactly like that 'help' by concept...

"I don't understand. You said you could help me, what does this have to do with their arguments?"

Having trotted back to the desk to begin picking up his notes, Protégé turned back to me.

"As I said, I had a great amount of time to think, read and talk. Hearing of what Chainlink Shackles did to you, forcing you to admit his ownership of you made me realise and see the way out for you."

He turned, trotting right up to me, placing a hoof on my shoulder.

"I can offer you a new task in Fillydelphia...by my side."

My eyes shot open wider. "Wh-what?"

"Murk, the ponies who control things in here are often not nice people at all. Yet if one requests a pony join them as a personnel liaison and assistant it is up to the *slave* to decide. It never gets brought up much because no slave would want to go with it. Shackles trapped you in it, but you hold the power to choose to accept *me* as your new immediate..." He paused, clearly not sure about the word. "...master..."

My mind reeled somewhat. Was it really that simple? I knew I could say yes, avoid Shackles forever now! He held no chains over me to stop me simply agreeing!

Yet something stopped me. I could tell how much Protégé saw this as something only for good but there was one thing that mattered before I simply agreed.

"My friends can come too, right?"

There was an uneasy silence. The look on his face said it all, the look that wished I hadn't asked that. Protégé didn't need to say a word.

"You want me to come with you and you alone? To abandon my friends to Chainlink Shackles?"

“I know, Murk...”

“You want me to just...to just go from one master to another! To ask me to be *your* slave-”

Protégé looked up quickly. “An assistant.”

“A slave is a slave!”

My outburst seemed to have surprised him. I knew I could say it now, my mind felt more free! All the things I wished I could stick up for and say suddenly felt able to be said!

“How can you expect me to leave behind my friends? Can't they come? Please...tell me they can come somehow! Be...be your team! We can all help you!”

“I'm afraid that's not possible, Murk. I can't simply take such a chunk of his workforce away, the rules of Master Red Eye's organisation do not allow it. I am sorry, Murk. I know this is harsh. But I'm sure they would want this for you. When he returns, Chainlink Shackles will destroy you. Think of what you told me...what he wanted Sooty Morass' despicable outlet to have you for.”

That struck deep. I trotted back from him, any exultation and bravery replaced with fear. This was toying with my mind, giving me choices I wished I didn't have to make. H-he was right...I didn't want to go there. I'd come to realise so much but it all felt so fragile. If he got a hold of me again...

I sank down onto my haunches.

“Murk, you don't have to decide now.”

Protégé moved forward again and sat before me. His eyes showed genuine care as he set a hoof on each of my shoulders.

“This is all I can offer with what I have now. You have so much to offer and I could help you find it. You would be more independent and active with me than you would be ruining your body in some mill or factory. You will still be able to participate in the salvage programs to earn your freedom...but you will be away from his ownership. Safe with me. Please, I only ask that you think it over before he returns and I am forced away from the Mall.”

“I...I will...”

“Thank you, Murk.” He closed his eyes briefly. “If it's worth anything...I am so sorry for what happened. I wish I could have been there to help you.”

He got up to trot back to his desk. Behind him, I let my head droop. Every bit of logic said I

should agree, but leaving my friends behind to serve a new master...even if that master was Protégé? To help Red Eye's efforts still? Wasn't this just what I'd been seeking to get away from?

Unless...

“You could come with us...”

My voice was barely a whisper, just enough that I saw him stop.

“Murk?”

I got up, moving one step closer.

“Come with us. Join *us*. Protégé, you're too smart a pony to not have noticed what we're trying to do. You have to have known that we're trying to escape someday. Look at what's happening. The ponies after your life? Being put into organising what spare parts go where? All instead of what you wanted.”

I moved a little closer, this time resting my hoof on his shoulder instead of his on mine. He didn't move, simply staring ahead.

“You're a better pony than anypony else working for Red Eye...you can come with us. They...they would allow it, I'm sure they-”

“Stop, Murk.”

His voice cut in sharply before mine, tapering to a gentle tone.

“Please, Protégé. If you're free with us you could do something better out there! With your help we could-”

“I said *stop*.” He trotted forward, the eyepiece floating up to his face as he made for his desk. “I have a path I chose for myself. The day I ceased to be a slave I chose to stay and share in his dream. My place is here in Fillydelphia. By his side.”

“Even while he promotes slavers like Shackles above you to do what they do to us?”

I stood before his desk as I saw that quill and parchment roll out, no doubt a message. He hesitated and looked up only briefly.

“Master...Master Red Eye sees fit to choose these. I...trust him. It's his decision.”

Biting my lip, I watched him begin to write. I saw the weakness in his eyes, the tiredness and the harm across his body. I remembered the scars.

My voice was quiet, fragile in its hushed tone to ask.

“Are you really sure you stopped being a slave?”

The quill stopped, but he did not look up.

“...good day, Murk. Enjoy your time of rest.”

That was that. He went back to his message, leaving me nothing but to turn and leave his office.

* * *

I trotted a little morosely down the stairs. Heading back to the plaza, I was a little surprised to see Glimmerlight, Brim and Coral Eve coming the opposite way. Behind them I saw Blunderbuck in tow.

“H-huh? What's g-going on?”

“Turn around, lil'bro! We're going out!”

I didn't have much choice. Her magic picked me up mid trot and spun me 180 to follow their direction. In my confusion, I didn't even stop trotting the entire time.

“G-going out? Where? Glimmer what's going on?”

She just ruffled my mane, glancing to the smiling faces of Blunderbuck and Leafshine. Even Coral Eve held a little rare grin.

“Red Eye's day of rest, remember? You *really* think I'm going to miss a chance to attend the Roamer Bar when it gets opened to slaves? I'd got a date with some *serious* ethanol!”

“Ethawhat?”

Her eyes glinted as we passed out the front of the Mall. Only now did I notice that she carried a new saddlebag filled with unknown items.

“Liquid fun, Murky. *Liquid fun*. Besides, we've got something to celebrate...”

* * *

Glimmerlight seemed rather lighter of heart than I'd ever seen her lately. Even with her bruised body and great deal of exhaustion, she somehow found the energy to make a flighty trot toward the Roamer ahead of our group. Sometimes she would skip in circles until we caught up.

“Been so long since I've had a proper booze up! Wonder if I can still down it with the best of them?”

She chirped and hummed all the way there across the gravel fields of what was once Fillydelphia's main park. Up ahead I could hear a crowd of voices, scratching music and the clank of ceramic objects fairly repeatedly. The Roamer sounded busy, but only after we rounded a large dead bush and saw its light across an empty pond did it truly sink in.

“Behold, Murk!” Blunderbuck wrapped a hoof around my neck and swept the other one out toward the bar. “Fillydelphia's prime establishment of alcohol, drunken hijinks and absolute fun!”

It was much bigger than I had expected! The only bar I'd ever seen was just a small tavern a slave caravan carrying me had once stopped at. But this was a full converted building! I saw two floors lit up over the old cobbled road with crude letters made of all materials bolted onto the abandoned third floor. They flickered with Hearths Warming lights wrapped around them and dropped a rather garish mixture of colours mixed in with the warm light exuding from the building. Outside, everything had spilled out to accommodate the slaves taking the time to visit. Benches and makeshift tables spread almost across the road, filled with riotous ponies gulping drinks and laughing amongst themselves.

I just gulped. It looked pretty crowded in there with numerous ponies already showing the effects of the drink as they staggered around.

“Aw yeeeah!” Glimmer shouted and hopped up onto a bench to gaze down at the Roamer. “Now that's what I'm talking about! That, my friends, is where you can really feel alive and free.”

Coral Eve just shook her head and muttered something about certain ponies never growing past their teens. The others trotted forward toward Glimmer. Brimstone actually seemed to be grinning a little himself.

“Aye, can't deny it'll be welcome. Even if it is that water they call ale.”

“Seemed to get me plastered just fine last time.” Glimmerlight pouted up at the big pony, who simply shrugged.

“Then what does that say about you, Glim?” Brimstone didn't even turn his head as he trotted

off, still limping on the one horribly scarred side of his body.

I had to stifle my laugh into my hoof at the sudden look of having trotted right into that one on Glimmerlight's face, before she stomped a hoof and stuck out her tongue at Brimstone's back. Then she turned back to me as Blunderbuck moved forward, carrying another of those saddlebags.

“Hey, Murky? Wait out here with Coral, she'll bring you in soon.”

“H-huh? Why?”

“Can't tell!” She grinned brightly, patted the saddlebag and galloped off while shouting over her shoulder. “It's a surprise!”

I exchanged a look with Coral, who simply nodded to me. I opened my mouth, but she cut in before me.

“Not. Saying. A word.” She pronounced it all cheerily and patted my head. “Just wait a few minutes, Murk. Then we'll go in and meet them.”

Confused, I looked to my other friends disappearing into the Roamer. The crowds parted before Brimstone while Glimmer and Blunderbuck waded in behind him. Away from the noisy crowds and clank of tankards Coral and I stood waiting patiently. In the dark of the evening, I saw her eyes perpetually cast off across the city.

“What is it?”

Coral kept looking. Only after a few seconds did I realise it was toward the direction of the Alpha-Omega Hotel. Coral sighed briefly and patted a hoof on the ground.

“Just...just hard to ever stop thinking. You see them lying in a cot so vulnerable and you promise to yourself that you'll take care of them forever. Not a minute goes by I don't wonder what he's doing. If he ever looks out a window and wonders the same.”

“We'll...um, do it? Right? The, uh, escape thing.” Why did sounding inspired have to be so wordy and hard? How did Unity do it so easily? “And, uh...uh...we'll get them all out. You and your son, Lilac and Unity and...and Sunny! We'll all go out of here, yeah?”

Coral Eve chuckled at my awkward little speech.

“You've been nattering on about escape ever since you woke up. It's adorable.”

I didn't have any say in the matter as she rubbed my cheek and stood up.

“But it's just the sort of thing we love you for, Murk. You're the dreamer. The one who wants it harder than any of us. Now come on, I'm sure they're done. There's a time and a place for emotional little moments, but now isn't it.”

Coral trotted away and I rushed to keep up. I felt my wings ache slightly as they half fluttered in excitement.

“Done? Done what?”

Coral just smiled as we entered the throng of ponies. She led the way, pushing a path through them and checking back to ensure I was following her. Truth be told, aside from being nervous around such cramped and smelly slaves (not that I was exactly anything but the same) it wasn't so hard to navigate. I could just move through all the little spaces! Soon enough, we entered the doorway and I felt a wave of heat slap me in the face. A mixture of sweet alcohol, body odour and old oak drove through the room to the doorway by the fumes of a roaring fire against the far wall. Unable to see much over the ponies shouting, singing, drinking and flirting all around me I strained to figure out where I was! The biggest crowd was around the makeshift bar while others clustered in small seating booths at the edges. Where were we-

“Murky! Coral! Over here!”

My ears perked up, pulling Coral toward where Glimmer had seen us, this was crazy! What were they up to before I came...in...oh my Goddesses...

The crowd had parted just enough as Coral and I moved toward Glimmer's voice on the edge of the room and I witnessed what awaited. The sound seemed to fall away as I just stood and gaped. Many other slaves around were watching with bemusement as well. Before me stood a sight I didn't quite understand but felt such a connection to...

They had gotten one of the side tables to themselves. Hung between the wooden poles either side I saw a little half ripped string of multi coloured flags and below that a bright red cover draped across the table itself. A few small boxes sat there wrapped in rough coarse rope over different colours of plastic bags that shielded my eyes from whatever they were. But in the centre there sat something I'd never seen before me like this. A *cake!* Small and likely looking as though it were made from condensed oatmeal with only a single candle but still! A...a cake!

Blunderbuck lounged back with a great big grin as he pulled a string on a little device.

With a sharp crack that sent a few squeals around the room (not in the least mine) he shot a few strings of multi colored paper into the air. After a few awkward moments of detaching myself from Coral, she chuckled and nudged me toward the table. Glimmerlight stood before it, lavishly indicating

it all with her hooves like a salespony and wearing a ridiculous sparkly pointed hat tied with a string under her chin. Come to think of it...so was Blunderbuck.

“Wh-what is this? Glimmer? Coral? What's going on?”

“Welcome, Murky!” Glimmerlight trotted up quickly and pulled me toward it. “I told you that you could choose today as your official birthday from now on...every birthday needs a *party!*”

I just kept blinking. A...birthday party? Such a thing existed? For me? I couldn't stop staring around all the individual paper hangings and balloons tied to the table. No-pony had ever given me a party for me before.

“While it may be informal, it's all you deserve after everything lately. Come on, my dear, sit down.” Coral Eve nudged me forward again, her and Glimmer having to direct me through my wide eyed shock.

“Yeah! We got presents, a hat for you to wear...then the *drinks*...oooooh yes! Brim had a few words with the bartender to get the reserve seat. He can be *very* persuasive.” Glimmerlight flung herself into the recessed seats and tapped beside her for me to move to.

I couldn't believe it. I just *couldn't!* A birthday party for me! My first one *ever!* I...I loved my friends so much!

Only thing was I had stopped and stared again...before being unable to stop myself seeing what sat there and attempt to stifle a laugh. My eyes had turned across the table once again...where they had found Brimstone Blitz sitting at the back dwarfing it all. He sat hunched over in the room, face as twisted and scarred around his one eye as ever...and bore another of those tiny ridiculous hats on his head.

Seeing the sight, no doubt Glimmer's doing...I couldn't help but chuckle. She joined me, winking up to the big pony. Brimstone just let out a long and deep breath.

“Kids...”

* * *

Somewhere in the bar, somepony had gotten an old jukebox working. Mixed under a cheer the happy bopping music spread into the room. It was an upbeat and relaxed tone, one that set everypony to more smiles and laughing than I had known slaves capable of. This one chance to just let loose and forget the bad for one night!

I had been pushed in beside Glimmerlight at the back of the recess, furthest from anypony else

and surrounded by my friends, while Coral had shifted opposite me closer to Blunderbuck. It wasn't difficult to notice she had chosen the chair furthest from Brimstone, but the mere fact she was willing to put that aside to be here for this spoke volumes of where her real loyalties lay with us. If I hadn't already done so, I'd have let my respect for her become boundless.

Despite the seediness of the Roamer and the gradual decline in sober ponies in the room, I could help but feel a cosy warmth in this place. The oak décor and hanging lanterns before the big fireplace set a quaint tone.

“Hey, so...gonna open these babies any time soon, Murky?” Glimmer nudged my side and nodded toward the boxes on the table. We'd just been chatting about the bar and stuff lightly while I had pondered what they were.

“Oh? Sorry!” I bit my lip. “I didn't know I was meant to! Sorry...”

A hoof ruffled my mane fiercely. “Aww! Don't you know these are for you? You get presents on your birthday, Murky! Now come on! Those pressies won't open themselves! Dig in!”

“Aye, you get started on them and I'll fetch the drinks.” Brimstone pulled himself up and stomped off with a thin smile to the bar. I couldn't help but notice him removing the hat the moment he left.

“Typical Brim...” Glimmerlight muttered with a shake of her head. “Just as little idea about parties as you. Now let's get started!”

Feeling oddly unsure if I was doing everything right, I pulled the nearest one toward me. I was quite surprised at the size of it, so much so that it rather hid me behind it when I pulled its weight across the table toward me!

“Going for the biggest first? I *like* your style, Murk!” Blunderbuck grinned madly at me with a rub of his hooves.

Blushing, seeing the others smiling (Blunderbuck most so, why was that?) I pulled it onto the wide seat beside me and started to tear at the coverings. My hooves ripped a couple pieces off, before a new feeling I'd never known started surging through me. Sheer *satisfaction* at tearing open the covers of the present! Oooh, I liked this feeling! The paper and plastic bag coverings ripped and pulled off to reveal a thick cardboard box beneath it. Excitedly I threw it open...to find a smaller box inside.

H-huh?

Tearing this one out, I opened the lid and found another box below that. Then another. Then another! Again and again until a thin wooden case rested in my hooves after at least eight boxes that

now littered the floor under our table. The others were laughing. In the past, I might have seen this as a joke at my expense but I just giggled on each box and relished the opportunity to rip into each new one! Only now I sat with this small wooden case that I slid the top from.

Ooooh...

“I can install it for you when we get back to the Mall, Murk!” Blunderbuck beamed brightly across the table at me. “Too short notice to put it on before we had to leave for here but I figured I'd use the big box anyway!”

In my hooves rested a little spur of metal with a few tiny pistons and a ring on the end. I knew what this was! It was an Ironshod battle saddle aiming reticule mark four! I'd *adored* these things ever since I saw my first one on a slaver's saddle!

“Thank you, Blunderbuck!” I laughed madly, hugging the little piece for my treasured saddle. It'd look *so cool* flipping out with the mouthpiece to flick in front of my eye for aiming properly! Sure it was only a couple of little metal pointers in a thin circle but it'd let me aim that grapple hook so much easier now rather than just hoping! *Ee!*

I wasted no time on grabbing the next present. It was thinner and surprisingly weighty but shockingly well wrapped. This one seemed to have been done by an expert, my hooves struggled to find purchase! Across the table, I saw Coral throw me a sly smirk. Oh...she knew her business with presents.

Even so, I finally found an edge and dug in with my teeth to get the string off. Bit by bit it came apart to reveal...

...a book?

It bore upon the cover a huge map of Equestria under some massive letters and a *gigantic* word that made my mind spin. I didn't understand.

“But I...I can't read...”

“Try opening it.” Coral gestured patiently with her hoof and I did as asked.

Wooah! Pictures! So many pictures! Photographs of animals before they'd become mutated! Huge vistas of Canterlot Castle and that idealistic little country town I'd seen in the Stable! There were images of earth ponies, unicorns and pegasi in depth along with flowers, insects and even types of buildings! I kept flicking from page to page, staring in wonder at the pre-war...well...wonders!

“This is an encyclopedia, Murk.” Coral leaned around the table and pulled me closer to plant a

kiss on my cheek. "It will let you see the happier times and give you plenty of ideas on what to draw."

"Thanks, Coral."

"You're welcome, my dear." She sat back again, clearly finding the sight of me flicking through every page rather satisfying. There was a bird and then a few pages more a huge picture of the Goddesses themselves descended upon Equestria! I couldn't wait to look at more of this!

Brimstone returned, carrying a tray of drinks and mugs filled with very strong smelling liquid. Setting it down at the edge of the table, he took a seat again but did not pass any out. I presumed the drinks were for after the presents. However seeing what ones had been opened, the big raider grinned and tossed a package toward me.

"Catch, kid!"

Yelping and swinging my hooves up, I barely managed to grab it. Clearly Brimstone had never been an expert at wrapping for it felt loose around whatever was inside. The package wasn't huge but I could feel something sloshing around like liquid. With a brief glance at Brim's encouraging face I began to pull the packaging from it with little trouble.

Below it, I felt hard leather and saw a stitched brown design with a waxed screw cap. A real proper wasteland wanderer's canteen! Eagerly, I unscrewed the top to see what he'd put inside it. With one sniff I knew precisely what...that one substance I needed almost as much as water these days.

"That RadAway you need should stay safe, Murk." Brimstone voice's rumbled over the table with a slight slur from his partially disfigured muzzle. "Keep that topped up when you can and it'll let you take some when you need to without anypony knowing you even have it on you."

I...I...

I couldn't help it, I felt a few bits of damp tears in my eyes. My illness was still with me and I knew it would likely get me some day...the constant fight to keep up RadAway was a nightmare. Now he was helping me to make it easier. Letting me feel more normal to just swig from a canteen.

"Th...thank you, Brim..." I wiped my eyes even as I smiled and saw him turning his head a little more to let that one eye see me.

"Heeeey, c'mon!" Glimmerlight patted my back. "No need to get all tear filled yet! There's still one present to go!"

Indeed, there was one left. I sat the canteen down beside me on the seat to pull it across. It wasn't large or heavy but the look in Glimmer's eye led me to really see her eager for me to open it.

Taking one breath, I pulled the paper free and yanked open the old faded box she had no doubt scavenged to put the gift in.

Within it lay my Pipbuck.

“I...h-huh?” I blinked a few times, before Glimmer's magic lifted the Pipbuck free of the box for me.

Only then did I see the changes. The whipcord had been replaced with actual buckles taken from clothing and fed through the metal holes to let it hold to my hoof without needing to retie it all the time while the top looked a little more clean. I could still see the destroyed edges, no-pony would ever make this Pipbuck look like anything but a ruined chunk of technology ever again but Glimmer had done her best. She had even been filing off the sharper edges and procured a button from somewhere to replace a missing one!

“The trademark once-over by your good friend, Glimmerlight.” She winked at me, knowing where I'd once heard of the concept before. “Go on, turn it on!”

I was already delighted and ready to thank her immensely, but the instruction led me to stare down and hoof the big button I knew would normally activate the device. A little hum and a flicker of dark green gave way to the main screen springing to life. Immediately, I saw what was different. Less of the screen was damaged, and it was almost even in brightness now! Before the picture had faded in and out, not that I'd ever even really looked!

“I gave it a good fix up with some of our spark battery and talisman stuff we stole for the escape. I've fixed the geographic locator spell talisman too, so now that the map function actually works that we can use underground in the metro. Tried to make the light stop going on and off but couldn't quite manage it. The screen diodes were just too worn.”

“W-wow...”

“That's not all! I've fixed the rad-counter inside it, so that will now let you know when you're in a bad spot. Oh and one other thing...”

Her telekinesis flipped over the Pipbuck to see the worn back that would normally hold against my hoof. The sole smooth part of the entire half destroyed mess.

“I felt this only right.”

On the bottom, I saw that she had somehow engraved a little set of drawings upon it. A set of open shackles with...oh my Goddesses...

Upon the Pipbuck's back there lay a rough image of a sundial inside the curve of the shackles. One mark for both of us. I knew the others may not have understood Sundial like Glimmer did...but it hardly mattered.

This was a true gift. I actually managed to make Glimmerlight gasp for air with the tightness of the hug I gave her.

“Thank you thank you thank you! You're the best sister *ever!*”

“Woah! Y-you're welcome! Hehehe! You deserve it. Old and new. Matters to both. Happy Birthday, lil'bro.”

There was a moment, out of the corner of my eye, that I saw a strange look on Coral's face at the sight of us before her. It looked almost...relieved.

“Thank you...thank you all...I...I...this is...I just...”

My chest heaved a little, looking at the assembled items and finding the feeling indescribable. They had gotten them for me, all because they cared, wanted me to see better things or help keep me going. I kept smiling even while crying right in front of them, holding onto Glimmerlight and just rocking back and forth.

Across the table, I saw Blunderbuck sigh and dump a few caps into Brimstone's waiting hoof.

“Told you he would.” Brimstone winked at me (or was that a blink now?) with a little chuckle even as he spoke to Blunderbuck. They had been betting on whether I'd cry? Oh come on...

All the same, it let me keep smiling, wipe my eyes and sit upright again. Glimmerlight's eyes were fixed on that tray of drinks with a predatory glee.

“Now...methinks it's time for-”

“Hold on!” Coral's hoof shot out and almost playfully slapped Glimmer's away. “Aren't you going to get him to blow out his candle and make a wish first?”

You did that? I got to make a wish? Glimmerlight seemed to think so, grinning across the table as Coral slid the cake to me gently. This close, I could see it for what it really was...condensed oatmeal coated in a thin layer of hastily melted chocolate. I could tell baking wasn't any of my companions' talents...but that didn't matter. I had a *birthday cake!*

The single candle on top wafted to and fro. Okay, let's do this! I knew just what to wish for.

“Hey, Murky?” Glimmerlight edged closer, whispering to me. “I think any Goddesses you believe in both know you want out of here.”

“Um..yeah?”

“Well then, make that wish something special and close to you. Make it shameless or selfish if you want. Doesn't matter. This is *your* little moment and think to wish for and you don't need to tell *anypony* what it was. Just have fun.”

Ruffling my mane, she leaned back again and left me to the candle. I could see faces watching us now and again with confusion or rolling their eyes in the crowds...but who cared? Right now it was just me and this candle and one little wish in my mind. My hoof rested upon that little statuette as I took a short breath and blew the candle out.

Glimmerlight and Blunderbuck cheered, all of them clapping hooves as I looked up and grinned. Blunderbuck produced a knife to cut it while Glimmerlight eagerly began to spread out the drinks. Brimstone's mug frothed over at the top, containing something he grinned and almost completely downed right away. The others seemed more than content for the fiery liquid that no doubt was contained in their glasses and mugs of no uniform design.

Much to my surprise, Glimmer's magic passed one in front of me.

“Um...”

“Hmm?” Glimmerlight looked down from eagerly taking a first long swig out of her glass and sighing with satisfaction. “What's wrong?”

“Th-this is...um...alcohol?”

“Fillydelphia's finest fire water, Murky!”

“But...uh...” I looked from person to person. Even Coral sipped hers with a thin smile. Gradually they all stared back. Oh dear. “You see, I...I've never had any before...”

There was an odd and somewhat shocked silence.

Then Glimmer grinned with that unmistakable mischievous look.

“A small bodied and hollow boned pegasus just coming off a medical flushing out who's never touched a drop of alcohol in his life before?”

Her gaze turned to the others as the mug before me lifted itself in her magic's glow to my

hooves.

“Oh, this is going to be *good*.”

* * *

Mugs clanked across the table.

“Cheers!”

We all drank. The fiery liquid stung my throat and made my eyes go wide. The first time I'd tried it I'd nearly spluttered it everywhere from the coughing. But as I kept trying more it became oddly easier. With each sip the drink went down with less worry.

The cake was cut by Blunderbuck and passed out. Even a small coating of thin chocolate was enough to make it feel special and sugary in my mouth. I'd never had chocolate before either! Turned out all this had been bought with Brim's arena winnings. Technically it was *my* bet...but given I'd stolen the caps anyway I could hardly complain. Especially not when it bought all this!

“You know...heh...you know what I'm going to do when we get out?” Glimmerlight leaned back in the chair, slouched as she began on her second drink of the night. “I am absolutely going to finally go to that spa in Tenpony. And *you*...”

Her hoof nudged my shoulder.

“*You* are coming with me. Get you a proper day of relaxation the likes of which you'll have never known!”

Coral chuckled across the table. Even her bitterness seemed to have filtered away but for one night. “I may have to do the same. I heard once they did wonderful hot spas taken from the powered boilers in Tenpony. Definitely have to get one of them.”

I nodded furiously. That sounded lovely!

“Hah! Can even see if we can't get Murky a wing preening if they're up for it!”

“Oooh!” I grinned widely. “I'd like that!”

I felt Glimmerlight's front leg tap my side. “Might have a nice happy ending, that one!”

“Yeah, I think so. That sounds great!” I smiled widely...then wondered why everyone at the table burst out laughing. What? Had I made a joke? Hehe! I must have!

Blunderbuck seemed to have a strangely specific taste in drinks, only downing some of the grape coloured stuff from glasses. Rolling the glass around between his hooves, he cast a glance over the table at me.

“You know, I was just thinking. Murky Number Seven's the full name isn't it? You still gonna wander around out there calling yourself that? Number Seven?”

There was a brief silence as they looked at me. Well, as silent as a bustling loud bar could get as the slaves around us steadily got more drunk. Eventually I shrugged and sipped the oh-so-wonderful drink again! Hey...since when was there so little left...

“I...uh...dunno?”

“You could choose anything you wanted, Murky!” Glimmerlight dropped down her empty mug, lifting another across to her. “Got any ideas? What about something like your hero? How about Littlemurk?”

The joke was awful, but I laughed anyway. My cheeks felt rather flushed. Why did I find that so funny? I felt like I was blinking a lot too, getting ready to think of a name idea when Brimstone leaned across the table over the large number of empty tankards before him already.

“Aye, I dunno about that. If Murk gets the wish I'm betting he made on that cake there'll be a few 'little Murks' galloping around before long!”

“Hey, how did you-” I shut up *quick*. Why had I said that? Oh dear...my mouth was betraying me. It had just slipped out!

Even Coral allowed herself a giggle from it, Glimmer laughed loud enough that I saw numerous other ponies glance at our table. I just sat and blushed deeply, hiding it as I lifted the big tankard suddenly before me with both hooves.

Across from us in another recess, I heard a raucous song start up. Much of the bar began to listen in as the group of miners kicked up.

Drinking drinking drinking!
Drinking till we're drunk!
Standing up, falling down!
Getting in a fight!

Bucking someone's lights out!
Falling on the floor!

Waking up next morning...

They stood, waving their hooves and rose their mugs.

*Then getting drunk some **more!***

The mugs clashed together, spilling ale everywhere as they cheered. Ponies clapped and took up the song themselves, repeating it louder and with greatly less consistency in the lyrics. I waved my hooves and shouted along with Glimmer and Blunderbuck as the song picked up amongst the bar.

Falling back into my seat, I stumbled a little on the way down. Wow...this...this, what did they call it? *Alcohol!* Yes, alcohol! Wow...

I fell against Glimmerlight to get a sense of balance and comfortingly rubbed my head against her shoulder.

“You're all the beest friends I ever had. Do you know you're all my very *best* friends?”

Glimmerlight looked as though she was fighting to not laugh madly. Come to think of it, so was the rest of the table. I'd told another joke! Ha!

“We know, my dear.” Coral chuckled into her hoof, sipping further on her drink.

More songs broke out, mostly tales of screwing over the slavers accompanied by much stomping of hooves and banging of cups on the heavy tables. The noise was giving me a headache but with every sip and gulp the pain faded away. I clambered over the chair toward Coral and with great effort convinced her to do the little hoof clapping game I'd seen her do with Lilac. We shared tales of times past and spoke of how awesome life would be outside the walls. If Blunderbuck in his position as an actual worker amongst Red Eye's city seemed to care...he didn't show it.

Eventually, the drinks Brim had brought ran a little dry and Glimmerlight and I took our turn to fetch some. This was awesome! Ponies seemed to love my wings and more than a few mares even gave them a stroke as I wandered past. Why weren't ponies like this more? I flared them out and waggled them a little, hopping from hoof to hoof as I went past, leaving them laughing behind me. Glimmerlight brought down a small tray for me to carry, fighting through the crush at the bar herself via her own rather unmistakable means. Leaving her to get the rest, I made my way back to the table.

“Oi! Watch it, short stuff!”

A hoof clipped my ear. It took all my serving skill I'd learned as a slave to not drop the tray as I stumbled away from the buck and plopped it upon the table before...oh, hello floor...how are you?

“Fuckin' lightweight ass, I'm trotting here!” The buck shook his hoof at me and stormed off to the bar. “Stupid winged rat.”

I lay against the table a little stunned, clutching my ear. Glimmerlight watched him go.

Then Brimstone got up. Glimmer briefly moved before him.

“Oooh...oh no! Brim! Down boy! Leave it!”

He wandered right past. “Just getting' a drink...”

“But I got the...drinks...”

The huge earth pony wandered past us, still rock solid as ever without any hint of the drinks effects. Momentarily broken from my haze, I watched Brim move without any trouble to the bar itself and sit alongside the same buck who'd struck me. I was the only one who might be able to pick out their conversation as the others set about organising the new drinks Glimmer had brought.

Apparently, the buck hadn't noticed Brim was with us when he'd passed. He instead leered at the mare next to him, putting his hoof on her shoulder a lot and giggling at everything she said before he slid a drink toward her. They chatted for a few moments before she left to rejoin her own friends.

“Good catch.” Brim grunted to him, apparently an offhoofed comment.

“Oh, fuck yeah! Thinkin' I might get lucky tonight! Hey, mate...mate...you drinkin'? Or are you *drinkin'*?”

“Do I look like a softy?” Brimstone grinned at him, before tapping the bar (and upturning a few drinks in the process) to attract the rushed ponies serving us all. “Bottle of the hard stuff, few shot glasses. My new friend and I have some more serious drinking to do.”

Both Brim and the buck laid down their caps and a large bottle of orange liquid was placed before them along with a bunch of tiny glasses. Why so small?

“Your accent, mate. Northern? Fuck, wish I had that, get the mares that much easier!”

“Aye, it used to.” Brimstone began to pour a couple of glasses and the pair downed them in one quick gulp.

“Ah well! Least I know I got that piece of hot flanking waiting for me...she's still looking over.”

To my surprise, Brimstone laughed. Something was wrong with it, I knew he was faking, Brimstone never laughed out loud like that. His hoof went to his new 'friend's' opposite shoulder and patted him.

“Aye...aye...”

Then he pulled, the buck hadn't a chance to struggle as Brim got him around the neck. Still sitting up, Brimstone didn't even look away from his drink. The buck choked out loud as his throat clamped shut.

“...and if you've any interest in being conscious to let that happen you'll listen to me. That little pegasus you knocked over? Sure, he can be a little ear-sore at times but this is his first and knowing this damn city possibly *only* little party. If you come near him again I shall eject you from this place without using the door. If you make him cry, and trust me that isn't hard, then I will remove your ability to perform for a mare ever again. Do we understand one another?”

The buck made a noise.

“Good.”

Brimstone dropped him, allowing the buck to clatter to the floor and choke, grasping his neck. Leaving him to lie, Brimstone took all the drinks (including those that the buck paid for, I noticed) and returned to us, giving me a little wink with that one eye as he sat down again. Glimmerlight, having been chatting to Blunderbuck, turned and marvelled at the bottle now present at the table.

“Oooh! Brim! How did you get all that?”

Brimstone just grinned. “A new friend's gift to Murk. Pity he won't be joining us, couldn't hold his drink.”

Glimmer's magic excitedly began pouring the warm coloured drink into the shot glasses, pushing a couple in front of each of us. Coral, however, gently refused hers.

“I think, if that's the direction this night is going, I shall take my leave.”

“Aww, c'mon!” I patted my hoof on her shoulder. Hey, I only missed once!

Her hoof patted my cheek. “Darling, given what you're like after only a portion of one pint, I believe the night will be a little wild for a pony such as me. *Somepony* has to be together enough in the morning to get you all up. You just have your fun.”

Glimmerlight nodded a few times. I saw her cheeks were bright red and not from a blush either.

Before her lay at least twice as many drinks as I'd had...what she said about her drinking wasn't kidding...

“Not a problem, Evey! We'll look after 'em!”

Something in Coral's eyes twitched at the name before relaxing.

“Good night, all. Enjoy your birthday, Murk.”

Coral took my presents with her, just to keep them safe and gave me one more hug before she left.

“Never was a heavy drinker, our Coral.” Glimmerlight rested her head on a hoof. “Now...let's get down to the more proper birthday style drinking!”

Blinking rapidly, I gazed at the little shot glass before me. The...the ale wasn't the real stuff? Then why did I already feel all happy inside?

“Let us see if it makes you as wild as this whiskey claims you ponies can be. To Murky!”

“To Murky!” Brimstone and Blunderbuck repeated it...as did I before I took it in a single gulp just as they did.

Oh...my...

When I had finished squirming, blinking and opening and shutting my mouth like I'd just swallowed a hot coal...I found the glass already refilled. My head went all fuzzy. Woo...another!

“To freedom!”

“To freedom!”

...

“To better days!”

“To better days!”

...

“To...um...something else!”

* * *

I wasn't quite sure how it all happened after that. Who were these other ponies that joined us? Glimmerlight had brought some 'new friends' she'd met who now crowded around the table with us.

“...and then I threw my tongue down 'is throat until he filled that damn bowl with every bit of gruel he could!”

The table cheered and I threw my hooves up at the old tale of Glimmerlight and the food vendor in the Mall. Her speech was slurring a little, giggling madly as she fell against the buck beside her for a little support. I couldn't help but see that her hoof was lightly stroking his chest as she did so.

Things all got blurry again for a while. Glimmerlight, Blunderbuck and I were...wait what was I doing?

“Glimmerlight, what am I doing?”

“This is called *dancing*, Murky! Shake dat flank!”

Oh...oh yes! *Music!* That was it! The ponies all leaping from side to side and stomping upon the floor knocked me from side to side without really meaning to. Quite easily the centre of attention on the Roamer's main floor, Glimmerlight stopped dancing just long enough to lift me up with her magic and put me on a flat surface.

“You dance here, Murky!”

The lights span around me as I hopped from hoof to hoof, my wings flared out as much as they could in their stiffness. Hey...hey, drink makes you *tall!* Everypony was shorter than me! Oh wait...that's a table...

She'd put me on a table! Everypony was dancing around me and some even cheering up at the little pegasus bouncing about on top of it. Why didn't they care I was a pegasus? This was great! Glimmerlight joined me on the table and we linked hooves to dance back and forth as the slaves stomped their hooves in time with the music.

Spinning, I felt the entire world all melt together. How many hooves did I have on the ground again? Oh wait a minute...where was my back left hoof? Oops!

Staggering, dizzy and falling I dropped from the table into the crowd, finding myself caught by everyone below.

“Hey, everypony!” Blunderbuck shot a hoof up. “It's his birthday!”

The crowd cheered, before with a lurch I found myself *launched* into the air! Wheee! I was flying! Dropping, they caught me and threw me up again!

“One!”

“Two!”

“Three!”

“Uh...how old is 'ee?”

“Just keep throwing!”

Laughing each time, I eventually fell into Glimmerlight's hooves where she pulled me close and hugged me tightly, her cheek resting against mine as she looked sideways toward me.

“Doesn't your good ol' sis' throw the *best* parties, huh?”

“Your parties are dizzy...”

The moment her hug was released, I moved forward. Wait...no...sideways. Sideways was good! I could do sideways still!

Glimmer chuckled and hiccuped as she caught me and took us back to the table. I crammed in among the ponies that had sat there, with Glimmerlight beside me. On the other side, that same buck she's stroked before made a bit of an effort to be alongside her. I could see the *wonderful* stuff I now knew as whiskey was about half empty in the middle of the table. More shot glasses were handed out and the talking only kept going. Sometimes I didn't even know what I was nodding to with my half closed eyes. My cheeks felt like they were burning and I occasionally hugged whoever was to my side. She even hugged back! I liked this mare.

My journal got produced from my saddlebag under the table. I had to chuckle as I fetched it, seeing Glimmer's hoof wandering a little with the buck's thigh. Hehe, that's my sister! But I had something much more important! I could draw ponies! I was gonna draw *everypony* at the table! The mare beside me and all other ponies present crowded and leaned to see my drawings. They loved them! I flicked past them. Past them *all* since I had first learned to draw.

“Ooooh! Look at that one!” The mare beside me pointed with her light purple hoof. “You are one *cheeky* little buck!”

The table laughed, Glimmer winked and I grinned widely. They liked my drawings! I showed

the rest, getting lots of 'Ooooh' on each of the really *good* ones. Then I started to draw them all around the table. The charcoal slid a little madly but each of them finally came together...masterpiece! The table cheered at the finished result, while the mare beside me whispered in my ear if I might do one of just her.

Well...who was I to say no?

The table *loved* that one, as did she. I even got a kiss on the cheek for it! She looked about Glimmer's age and frankly my heart was taken. Somepony already *dwelled* in it, if you know what I mean!

I laughed and confused others around me from my reaction to the joke in my head. I laughed a lot tonight...why was that?

But then the table's topic seemed to change, my drawings had drawn the topic of conversation to the subject of mares and bucks. I leaned against my new best friend as I listened to them chatter. Talk of fine flanks and...well...rather more specific things drifted to and fro. Glimmerlight was *more* than willing to share her own stories, even half hiking up on the seat to proudly show and lightly slap her cutie mark while telling of how Filly had a lot to answer for making her lose the perfect balance she once had.

I couldn't help but notice that buck's eyes at the time. I just snorted and leaned my head on the damp table, giggling away to myself.

"First times!" Blunderbuck shouted. "Come on, everypony's got a story, right?"

A resounding cheer met this idea, the table apparently in the mood for a cheeky chatter. A stallion beside Brimstone started and told a tale of him and a caravanner's son during him hitching a lift. Glimmer elbowed my side a few times. I didn't know why...I was too busy drawing little swirly shapes in my journal while listening. The mare beside me jumped in next, wrapping a hoof around an already sleeping buck beside her and saying hers would count for both of them.

Blunderbuck lay his hooves upon the table.

"Oh, you should have seen her! Lovingly figured!"

"Yeah?!" The table egged him on.

"Yeah! Long and slender! Coloured cream with streaks of black! I'll tell you all...she bucked hard!"

Wide mouths and laughing responded to his mad grin.

“Hit all the right spots too! Went off soon as you touched her!”

He smirked wider, before slapping the table.

“And the mare who carried her wasn't bad either!”

Everyone burst into laughter. I didn't get it but I laughed anyway! A few more shared shockingly *detailed* stories of their young forays, before Brimstone (behind a near forest of mugs and tankards) just grunted.

“Killed her father, broke two stallions' heads. She always fucking hated them.”

There was a confused silence. Brimstone just shrugged.

“Raider logic. Strong as good to grab. All that shit.”

Glimmerlight shook her head with a grin. “Moving *right* along...I guess I could say there was the tale of a fellow initiate in the Ranger base...”

She grinned widely, before telling us of him. He was a pretty high flying student of the Rangers and the only one in their young group who was as good with magic technology as she was. So much so, they shared a lot of projects.

“Now, we were out on a training exercise! Got bunked in the tent together, expected to not care what we saw and stuff...you could say I had a few other plans. Oh we'd had a few moments hidden in the lower levels before, we kept it all hidden and stuff. But then while on patrol duty we stumbled across this old cellar filled with all the wine! Literally, all of it! Ever!”

Everypony could see where this was going, but they still waited eagerly.

“So we *may* have been a little inebriated...but I don't consider that bad! I remember what I was doing and fuck knows I wanted it anyway! He did too! So eventually...I just turned and did this.”

She grabbed the buck beside her's cheeks.

“You gonna just stare at my flanks from behind all night or are you gonna *do* something with them?”

Then she leaned forward and gave him one smacker of a kiss, pulling him into her. Oh, she was *clever*. The table cheered them on, the stunned buck recovering admirably fast to take advantage of the situation and let his own hooves wander a little. The story took a little pause as Glimmer proceeded to

apparently try and *suffocate* the poor buck. Eventually, with a circling hoof on his chest, she moved back. I saw her quickly wink at the flustered looking buck. From where I was sitting I could see under the table thanks to my small size. Her tail was rather active at swishing across his legs.

“Exact recreation there, honest! Gotta be authentic, y'know? As for the gory details...well...I dunno if you'd all want to hear *them*...”

Never had I heard a group of ponies demand something in greater enthusiasm. My own will for freedom *paled* in comparison. She didn't disappoint them either and lay with her head resting on the buck's chest as she told them all. I simply sat and laughed when they did, hearing these tales of other ponies and their first experiences felt really cheeky and fun! Why hadn't I ever felt like this?

“What about Murky?!”

My eyes shot open fully.

“Yeah, what about the little guy? What's his story?”

“Come on, lil'bro! I'm sure yours is cute as *fuck!*” Glimmer's language hadn't exactly gotten politer as the drink set in. “Surely you've had a little moment with some slave you cuddled too close to to stay warm?”

My front hooves rubbed together as I sat up, surrounded by some eager faces.

“I...um...I haven't...”

Glimmer blinked. “*Never?*”

“Nope...”

“Not even a little cheeky thing close to it?”

I just shook my head. Glimmerlight seemed a little stunned, as did many of the others. Then she clapped her hooves. “Idea!”

Wrapping a hoof around me, she patted my pocket with the statuette in it.

“Then why don't you tell us all...what you *would* do if it was your little Stable Dweller crush, huh?”

Oh...oh my. My cheeks went bright red. The room seems to be more than a little spiny right now and I was finding it hard to find the words to tell them why I wouldn't say! I just bit my lip.

“Um...oh...I don't know if I...oh dear...”

I spied the still full shot glass before me and in a bid to escape sitting awkwardly I downed it to pass a few extra seconds of thinking and...

The taste rolled down through my body and up into my head. Liquid fun? More like liquid *courage!*

I stamped a hoof on the table to balance my shaky body and rose onto my hind legs upon the seat.

“Well, first...!”

The table threw up their hooves and cheered.

Best. Birthday. Ever.

* * *

“I don't want to set Filly on...um...fire?”

“Yeah, that's the word!”

“Yay! Okay, okay...”

I cleared my throat.

“I...just want to start a flame in her heart!”

What a night. We stumbled and rambled through the ruins of the park to return to the Mall. Glimmerlight trotted back and forth dizzily while leaning on benches and walls to see her through. Me? I lay on my back atop Brimstone (who seemed still utterly unaffected despite drinking four times what we all had), waving my hooves in the air and singing my heart out, with Glimmer doing accompanying vocals!

“In my heart I have...how many?”

“One! One big fucking one!”

“...one big fudging one desire!”

The Mall wasn't far ahead. Even as I giggled between lines I could see it looming up before us as we came toward it. We had left only after that bottle had been drained. Glimmer had disappeared with the buck not long after my grand tale of passion! Brimstone had been the one to decide when to leave and sent me to find Glimmer.

I'd found her all right. I'd trotted, crawled, staggered and scooted back to Brimstone to pass on the most important message she'd ever asked me to deliver. 'Gimme ten minutes.'

"And...that one big fudging one...is you..."

"Last bit! Last bit! I think..."

"I know! I'm...I'm building my voice! I just had a lot of whiskey remember! Add up the shot glasses into full glasses! I had...had...almost a half! Whiskey *champion!*"

I hiccuped, sliding off Brimstone as I unsteadily found my own hooves to limp alongside Glimmer the rest of the way back to the Mall. We leaned on each other for mutual support, both belting out the last line that we could remember.

"...no other Dweller...will doooo!"

The main doors fell open before us and we both collapsed to the ground in a giggling heap.

"I see you all were taking advantage of Master Red Eye's generosity to its fullest, then?"

I looked up, seeing Protégé standing there in the main corridor. He bore a saddlebag as though ready to leave for somewhere. We struggled and slowly got ourselves back up, Glimmerlight eager smiling at him.

"Hey, hot flanks!" She laughed out loud, offering me a hoof to lean on. I giggled and took her up on the offer. Oh she was funny! She called him hot flanks right to his face! Hah!

Protégé seemed to blink with surprise, his usually stoic look dropping into one of mild confusion before rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

"I suppose every worker needs their time to let off steam. Brimstone Blitz? You will make sure they get to their proper accommodations? I see you at least can hold your drink."

Brim nodded. Glimmerlight blew a raspberry at Protégé. It looked fun, so I did it too. Then she began to trot on. I noticed Protégé looking at me. Oh he cared that I couldn't trot! He always cared about *all* of us!

“You...you...”

“Yes, Murk?”

I slumped forward a little. I had wanted to pat his shoulder but slid to the ground and could only reach a kneecap.

“You're my *favourite* master ever...”

“I'm...glad you appreciate my methods, Murk. Now, I think perhaps you should be in bed.”

He trotted on, nodding a thank you to Brimstone as he picked me up again. I spent the time back to the shop cell humming aloud. Soon enough, I felt myself placed onto the sofa. By that point my mind was simply reeling and the walls were all going spinny spinny spinny!

“C'mere, lil'bro...that was a great birthday...”

I felt her pull me into a little mutual snuggle. I'd have agreed with her.

But I had already fallen asleep.

* * *

Forget Wildcard. Forget Barb. Forget Shackles.

Now I was properly suffering.

In the haze between sleep and the waking world I felt myself spinning and my whole head contracting into a tight little thumping ball. I'd been briefly woken up earlier when Glimmer had risen. Somehow during the night I'd ended up flopped over her stomach sideways and her movements to shift me off when waking up had led to a brief murmuring asking her to let me die in peace.

Only now the living world wasn't going to let me do that any longer. With a long groan, I let my crusted eyes creak open and attempted to stir each limb into motion for movement. Hooves flopped and padded at the sofa and ground. Just...just move off it and-

I fell off the sofa, taking the blanket with me as I went. Rubbing my aching eyes, I gradually sat up and began to trot unsteadily toward the door, gasping for breath from a dry throat and a churning stomach. Oooh Goddesses just kill me now, I could feel my barely healed wounds surging in pain as I moved. Perhaps a night like that wasn't the best idea even with a contained megaspell being my saviour.

All three of them were sat in the front of the store. Coral and Brimstone looked no worse for wear, while Glimmerlight rested against the wall nursing a little bowl of likely lukewarm soup. Her mane was a bit of a mess, but she still managed to look over and laugh as I staggered with dead eyes into the room.

“Uh oh....looks like *somepony* is having his first post-birthday hangover!”

“Aaawuuughbya...” I responded.

She shook her head and laughed. “Come on, Protégé got them to fix and refill the fountain with better water, go get yourself some of that and splash your face. I kept some food back from their morning handout for you.”

Coral nodded in agreement, giving me something of a 'Why do you think I left early?' look and nodding her head to the fountain. Carefully putting one hoof before the other I made my way out. Passing the shop's mirror on the way I had to actually grimace as I saw myself. My eyes were sunken and glazed over, my mane and tail messed beyond quick repair and even my wings looked a little ruffled.

“If you're wondering how I stay fairly normal, Murky?” Glimmerlight spoke up. “Just put it down to experience...oooh that was a good one though. Seeing you smile, having a riot, letting loose and ending it with a little 'special relief time' was *just* what I needed!”

Coral rolled her eyes. “Because I clearly needed to hear that...”

“Aw, c'mon! It's just a bit of fun.”

I left them to the minor disagreement. Clearly they still had a little ways to go yet before they truly saw eye to eye but part of me couldn't help but feel they'd gotten better around one another.

Ow...don't think too hard, Murky. Drama later. Cold water now.

As I trotted, I couldn't help but think on last night though. I couldn't remember too much, everything came back in little spurts of memory. I remembered smiling a lot...getting lots of hugs...no-pony cared about my wings...I'd danced...

Hehe! Maybe it wasn't that bad.

I stopped for a second, a certain little vision flickering into my head.

They liked my drawings! I showed the rest, getting lots of 'Ooooh' on each of the really good ones.

Blinking, I groaned and put a hoof to my forehead. Oh, please tell me I hadn't really done that! I trotted onward to the water, squinting at the disorganised order they came back in. How had I gotten back here again? Oh yeah, Brimstone had carried me...we'd met-

"You're my favourite master ever..."

Oh no...Goddesses preserve me! Had I really...I had, hadn't I? My face sank as the nerves really began to kick in. How could I...oh dear! Leaning on the edge of the fountain, I just wanted the earth to open up and swallow me who-

"Well, first...!"

No...no no no no! Nooooo! *Please* Celestia and Luna tell me I hadn't really done that! Shifting from side to side, blushing and murmuring as my hooves rubbed one another I kept expecting someone to laugh. *What if somepony told her!* What if it got on the radio and everyone heard what I'd said? I...I...

My mouth gaped open, before I simply gave up and dunked my entire head into the fountain with a groan of unending embarrassment, leaving my hooves hanging off the concrete lip. I was doomed.

Cool cool water....at least you understand me! I felt my mane drift on the surface as my face cooled off and startled my sense into proper awakening. I could just sit here for hours...separate from the world until everyone hopefully forgot last night before I did.

Only a sound caught my ears underwater. A single word that came through muffled. Eh...I ignored it. Water was good. Water understood me.

Then it came again.

"...urk!"

Wait...was that?

"Murk, would you please sit up out of the fountain?"

It was him! Gasping, I shot out of the water, coughing a little as I flopped back onto my rump and rubbed my eyes.

"S-s-sorry..."

Protégé glanced to the side with a light sigh before offering a small grin and a shake of his head.

“I see you're awake at last. All rested up?”

I nodded vaguely...then immediately regretted moving my head.

“Excellent. You see, the shifts all start in ten minutes...”

“*What.*” Every part of my face drooped. Oh, he had to be kidding!

“...but,” he quickly continued, “I was coming to make you a brief offer. I have a task that needs accomplished in my own service. It would keep you away from the factories or whatever they have slotted for you all in here. If you would perhaps prefer that?”

Holding my head in a hoof, I tried to scowl but perhaps only gave a meek turn of my nose.

“Last time you said that I almost got killed in a Ministry...I d-don't like being somepony's personal slave. It never ends well...”

“This is why you're hesitant to my offer then? Well allow me to tell you exactly what I am asking first. It is not dangerous, rather I just wish you to fetch me something from an old building across town. We were near it yesterday, in fact, when I found you. An old library near the pegasus skyport? I have need of a new reading lamp and I am not particularly supposed to leave this Mall until Shackles returns.”

My eyes blinked and opened wider. That library I'd seen? The one my Pipbuck had...

“Yes!” I pipped up, hopping to my hooves. “I...uh...I'll do it!”

Surprised by my turn of opinion, Protégé gave me an odd look before nodding.

“I am glad to hear it. It really is as simple as that, Murk. Besides...I doubt the clanging of a factory's power hammers would be particularly good for you right now. A nice quiet library could be just what you wanted?”

All right...that I couldn't deny. Sucking it up, I nodded to him. “Okay...”

“Thank you, Murk. Have you given my offer any further thought?”

Ah...

“Well...um...I...not really. We, um...we were sort of busy since I left you...”

“Believe me. I saw.”

Wincing with embarrassment, I tried to cover for it.

“We, um...we were just celebrating my birthday, is all.”

His eyes opened a little wider. “Your birthday? I hadn't known. Many happy returns, Murk. I hope this easy task will give you the best of a break you can perhaps get in Fillydelphia. Be back before dark, however. Good day.”

He turned to leave. Breathing a sigh of relief, I sat down against the fountain to contemplate it all.

“Oh...Murk?”

Protégé had turned back. I looked up. He smiled thinly before trotting on.

“*Favourite* master? I suppose it's good to know I've made an impression.”

There was a brief pause...and then there was another splash.

* * *

In the back of our shop, I took the time to dry out my mane with a somewhat dirty and half ruined towel. It did the job at least. Beside me, Glimmerlight was starting to work on our inventory that they had been carefully hiding in the walls and floor. We had a bunch of spare brass casings Glimmer would turn into explosive lockpicks, numerous cans of solidified oatmeal or packaged gruel. The waterskins had been slyly filled from the fountain. Brim had brought back a few picks and shovels under the pretence that he didn't want anypony else using 'his' ones. No-pony had argued.

Aurora's files were stored beneath the sofa while I'd sewn the maps we'd stolen from Protégé's office into the cushions. When the slave market had come yesterday, not only had the others bought things for my party but they had gotten a few little essentials. An old lantern now hung from the roof. Innocent enough perhaps, but necessary for use in the metro system. Spare clothes and longer cloaks for the wasteland outside were now hidden under Glimmer's pile of scrap while she had stocked up on spark batteries and various other parts I couldn't hope to guess at.

“Library visit, huh? So long as it keeps you from trouble it sounds good to me, Murky. Pity we can't all go for it though.”

She was sat sorting through some wires and little glowing gems welded to small boards as she

spoke. Throwing on my fleece again and strapping on my battle saddle (plus little crosshair thanks to Blunderbuck) I sat down to buckle on my Pipbuck. It may have just been a library, but I wanted to get used to moving with it all on anyway. Even as I tugged the last buckle shut, I felt Glimmer's magic lay my goggles on my head.

“Now before I forget, c'mere.”

“H-huh?” I felt Glimmer lightly turn me to face her. Just like me her eyes were a little hazy from last night and we both likely still stank of alcohol and body sweat from the bar. Yet she smiled and leaned in with her horn glowing. What...what was she...

Something moved in my mind. All the little memories I'd been feeling come back to me gradually over the course of the morning flooded to the surface and flowed somewhere. I didn't forget them, but I knew they'd gone somewhere else. I closed my eyes and felt oddly relaxed, her magic weaving through my mind gently and soothingly. Eventually, Glimmer gasped aloud and sat back with a little sweat on her brow.

“Whew...that was a long one. But here we are...”

“We're...what?”

With a grin, she held up a small glowing orb. It sparkled with a distinctive light green.

“It's last night, Murky. Alcohol...it doesn't so much change you as just lower inhibitions. How you were acting? I have a feeling that's the kind of pony you wish you could be. Happy, smiling and laughing without a care in the world. Now you can feel it as many times as you want. Just ask me and I'll take you into it. Let you relive the happiest night of your life.”

The memory orb dropped lightly into my hooves, where I just stared at it. What a...what a gift...

“Th-thank you...”

Sometimes, those two words were truest when simply left to themselves. I put my hooves around her neck and tightly squeezed.

“You're welcome. Now you better get going. You want to be out of here before the shift leaders arrive.”

I hesitated. “There is...um...one thing? Protégé...he...um, he gave me an offer. I...I don't know how to really describe it but...uh...”

“We all want you to do it.”

“Because he, uh...wait, what?”

I looked up, but Glimmer just leaned onto the sofa from where she sat on the ground.

“You're a real chatterbox when you're drunk, you know that?” She grinned. “We'd all discussed it long before you got up and we all want you to take up his offer. Look...we know it means you'll be away from us but we *can't* let Shackles get you again! He'll be back here after today is done and we need a way out for you *now*. Don't worry about us...we'll get by. Without you he might even leave us alone too.”

“I...I...” I really didn't know what to say as I stared at her. She really was being genuine.

“This gives you a chance to see what you can do, Murky. We'll all get away from him eventually and if you can convince Protégé to somehow make it happen it'll be great. We won't be separate for long. Do your best and see what you can do from the outside. If you stay here we'll all just get locked down again.”

“Okay...” I nodded. “But I'm not leaving you here at all. He...he wants you all away from him too. He says all the slavers are fighting this really weird game to try and get things. I'll...I'll try to find a way to get you all out too.”

“I know you'll manage it.” Glimmerlight squeezed me back and set me down. “Now run along and don't think too hard about this. We'll be able to see each other before you leave to plan out how we're going to do this.”

Allowing a smile to come to my face, I clambered away and moved for the door. Yes, Glimmer was right. I might be away from my friends for a little but I would have so many more opportunities if I helped Protégé. I could try and acquire my friends back from under him! Yes...that was better than being with Shackles again!

Also...last night was the pony I wanted to be? Able to joke? Hehe...

“Hey, um...Glimmer?” I smirked back at her from the door.

Seeing my smile, she leaned on the sofa with one hoof.

“Yees?”

“Last night, when I came to fetch you before we left the bar?”

“Yeeeeees?” Her face clearly showed she was wondering where I was going with this.

“Were...” I giggled to myself. “Were you really going 'woohoo'?”

Thankfully, even with a hard hangover, I managed to dodge out of the room and away from the shop cell before she could catch up with me.

* * *

Unfortunately, the thick air of Fillydelphia with all its chemical stink and ambient heat was not particularly good for a pony with either a life threatening taint infection or a strong hangover.

Me? I had both.

It wasn't particularly far to the library but the journey had made my head pound and the dryness in my throat feel all the worse. By the time I was coming to the same street I was more than contemplating finding a secluded little spot to curl up and sleep for a few more hours.

Something in me decidedly did not enjoy doing more slave work. I was free of my own mind now and openly able to dislike it without feeling guilty. No wonder I'd made such an awful slave, my cutie mark meant the very opposite thing! I knew this was building to something worthwhile now. I wouldn't be doing this forever and at the very least I was getting a step away from Chainlink Shackles.

Truthfully...knowing that Protégé's offer was there had been all that allowed me to forget about that monster if for but a while. The thought of someday having to confront him ever again made me shiver to my core. Free or not, that slaver...

Beep!

I stopped, looking down to the Pipbuck. It continued its beeping while I saw the same symbol flicker onto the screen with much more clarity now. Three balloons that then faded to an arrow. Glancing up, I could see the library just ahead of me.

Well...here goes nothing.

A small layer of stone steps led up to the scarred wooden doors. The closer I got the more my Pipbuck beeped until finally cutting the sound once I passed some unseen threshold.

What was I even doing here? Those balloons meant Ministry of Morale! That pink freak's merry band!

Even as I opened the door slowly, I knew that the answer was all too easy to come to. Simple curiosity. This group had taken Sundial and now his Pipbuck was sending me to something related to

them. If I could learn anything about what happened to him...

With an almost stereotypical creak, the door slid open and slammed shut behind me. Echoing the sound into the dusty interior, I let my eyes adjust to the darkness in here before taking a better look around.

A grand floor swept before me, filled with small working desks or circular benches right up to the lines of bookshelves that filled the walls. Below me, a large mosaic of the Goddesses led up to a low podium for lectures and behind a great stairway that split and arced up to either side. It led to a balcony of bookshelves in a circle all around this large main room. Beyond the stairs on the ground level I could see a librarian's desk and staff book returns.

Taking a glance at my Pipbuck, the arrow was pointing directly forward and to the right, somewhere behind the stairs on the ground floor, I bet.

Each small clip of my hooves echoed dryly, the mostly intact structure cancelling all outdoor noise. The lack of ambience was just what I needed, a break from the clangs and hisses outside that so hurt my head! Hypersensitive hearing was not a boon post-alcohol, I was finding. This place would at least let my head settle for a while during my search.

I had a job to do before any hunting for old secrets though, so I approached the desks. Most bore a smashed reading light that clamped onto the desk and plugged into something beneath the carpets either side of the mosaic. I checked six before finally finding one that-

I heard a laugh.

Spinning around, I flicked out my saddle's mouthpiece. The crosshair pinged up before my eye and I stood ready.

Nothing...

I was *sure* I'd heard something! A clipped laugh in the distance, something likely only my hearing would have caught! I waited at least a few minutes, keeping watch with both sight and sound while feeling the sweat of terror drip from my forehead.

Absolutely nothing. Right...

I turned back to the lamp and started to unplug it, warily glancing around me. It came off easily and folded into my saddlebag. Only as I touched it did I notice it bore a lot less dust than the others. For that matter...so did the seat. In fact, there were a stack of cleaner books beside it as well along with others littered on the floor.

Slowly, I began to realise why Protégé knew this place had reading lamps.

Looking at this one lonely seat in the library, I genuinely began to wonder just how lonely he was in Fillydelphia that he would have come to sit alone in this library. Every time I saw him it was like he was seeking somepony. Once, I'd thought it were simply his interest in seeing me begin my journey to freedom, (Two years...yeah right) but I remembered every time he had been staring off somewhere. Every time he seemed deep in thought when I would meet him. Like he just wanted ponies to share in his vision. Or was it something more specific?

Shaking my head, I decided to take a couple of the books as well, moaning under my breath about my stiff joints and rebelling stomach when I leaned down. Whatever drove him wasn't a concern of mine. He had made his choice.

Job done, I turned again to the back of the library. There was *something* back there and I couldn't deny I wanted to know. For Sundial's sake. Trotting like a ghost, I hunkered down and softly stepped one hoof at a time around the staircase to the staff desk.

That laughter came again, a sort of giggle followed by a snort.

Ducking down before the staff desk I closed my eyes and shivered. What was I doing here? This was stupid! There was some freak out there pulling me in with temptation! Yet I could not simply turn and go! That arrow beckoned me on the Pipbuck! The laughter was muffled and distant, it could be some stupid sign outside for all I knew!

Beep!

I squeaked myself as the Pipbuck, well, pipped up again. The arrow flashed and changed direction to be flickering to the left now. I walked under the staff door's ledge (noting with some annoyance that I didn't have to duck at all) and followed the arrow again.

Beep!

It changed to the right, sending me down to the right again. I passed between lines of moulding papers and ancient books that were never resorted into the main library. I couldn't help but notice my wings were flicked out slightly as though ready to suddenly flap and lift me away. Flying was impossible...but it was still oddly reassuring.

Then I reached a dead end. Ahead of me I found the back of the storage area with piles of disorganised books that were knocked free from the staff shelves in the blast. I saw posters above the walls bearing images of Twilight Sparkle and other unicorns joyously reading whilst others bore a zebra glancing over the shoulder of a young pony reading a black and white book. Even without reading, I admired their ability to tell a message through simply the art of the poster despite the racially

charged meaning.

Then something caught my eye. A single book left on the shelf perfectly still.

Beep!

The arrow seemed to be indicating toward it. I should have been questioning. I should have been running in fear to get my friends. I should have been worrying and thinking...but after everything that had happened lately I simply knew I couldn't go back to being like that. It was time to pony up and do something for myself to make a discovery!

Reaching out, I pulled the book from the bookshelf. Or rather...I tried to.

With a thick grinding of metal, it jammed out before sticking where it was. I retreated quickly, diving behind a bookshelf as the whirring of machines picked up. Pistons churned and a gear turned with rusty squealing as I saw the entire bookshelf judder and move. My mouth fell open when it began sinking into the floor before having to groan and clutch my head. Noise! Too much noise for a hangover!

Groaning and holding my mismatched ears to my head, I simply curled up until the noises stopped ringing in my head. Never again...

With a clatter of mechanical movement, the shelf finally stopped moving. Carefully, I opened my eyes.

A small corridor behind an already open metal door lay before me. Rather dark, it led to a set of steel steps heading downwards similar to that of the ghoul bunker in the crater. Standing stock still, I simply didn't know what to think. Should I? Was I that curious to see? Anything could be down there...that laughter could be down there!

Beep!

The arrow flickered forward. With a brief look on the underside to the Pipbuck, I saw my open shackles interlocked with Sundial's own mark. I couldn't turn back. He had disappeared just as I almost had...I needed to know what happened.

Buckling it back on, I trotted down the stairs.

* * *

That laughter trickled up the stairwell as I kept going down.

My hooves moved slowly, taking each step carefully to avoid any creaking or slipping. If something was down there...I was going to sneak up on it.

Gradually, the stairs ended. Blinking until I got used to the darker nature down here, I saw the corridor widen out almost immediately and uttered a low 'woah.'

An entire secret base was down here. There were offices to either side with half height walls and glass panes showing right into them. Each was filled with terminals and overturned desks and coated in streamers or balloons that limply lay upon the floor. Walls bore the symbol of the Ministry of Morale, terminals had some inscriptions or strangely pink glows on their screens and I could see (and smell) the stench of a long decayed trolley laden with cake and chocolate ahead of me in the walkway between offices.

Of course...what remained of the staff were down here too. I tried not to look at the bones that flopped over desks or chairs in front of still functioning terminals. Some lay under rugs at the side of the office in neat rows. They must have...oh Goddesses give their souls peace. They must have tried to survive down here with no way to get rid of their dead from the impact or disease...

Stopping briefly, I uttered a small prayer for them, trying not to get too much dust in my eyes as I wiped them. Just imagining them all alone down here trying to survive with no idea what was happening any more...

Turning away, I tried to steel myself. I couldn't get too distracted...I would just find out what this Pipbuck wanted and then get the hell out of here!

Gently, I trotted close to one of the walls and gazed around. Every so often I saw huge poster holders bearing pieces of paper and marked photos of ponies in front of several chairs. Even without reading I could guess this was some place where they had once secretly tracked certain ponies. The thought that I might find where they *brought* those ponies terrified me to the core.

I dove under a table, my ears picking up the traces of sound again. It was so much closer! Anypony could have heard it now! A laughing that descended into a mad giggle and a satisfied sigh. The sound wove through the dead offices and past the silent bones. Then I heard another brief snicker even closer than that.

Carefully, I poked my head out. It was in here! It was in this very room!

Yet I saw nothing.

Trembling, regretting coming here, I dared to step out.

“Naughty naughty pony! You aren't meant to be here!”

Stopping dead, I let my head slowly turn to look the other way.

It hovered there. A little steel ball of a sprite bot buzzing silently in the air! No wonder I hadn't heard it, those things made no sound at all when moving. Since I'd last heard its noise the machine had flown right by me without me knowing! Now it stared down at me.

“I don't mind though. Wanna play hide and seek?”

The voice was bright and chirpy, the kind of voice I imagined Pinkie might have.

My mouth stammered open. “I...I...”

“Okay, I'm 'it' first! Get galloping! I'll count to ten!”

It would have seemed harmless...had it not been for the small energy blaster that started whirring and protruding from the bottom of the chassis. Clearly this thing's definition of 'tag' was very different from mine! Scrambling up, I galloped off in the first direction I saw!

“One!”

Damn it! Why couldn't I see over the walls to find an exit!

“Twooo!”

Rounding a corner, I saw one door and struggled to push it open. The lock mockingly clattered in its almost broken hole.

“Th-Th-Th-Th-threeeeezzzzzzzhhh-TEN! Ready or not cheeky ponies, here I come!”

What?! That's cheating! I pulled at the lock and finally felt the satisfying crunch of the thin wood snapping beside the door frame. Joyful, I pulled it open to leap inside and-

It was a cupboard.

“Give me a f...f...flowering break, Luna!” I virtually screamed before turning to find another way. Behind me, the sprite-bot floated idly around the corner and spotted me galloping off.

“There you are! Ha! Ha! HA!”

The last shout came along with a flash of pink and a burning energy flaring right by my ear to atomise a chair ahead of me in the cramped office chambers. Screaming, I leapt onto and over a desk

to avoid the next two blasts that slapped into the wood. On one hoof, that it was only a sprite-bot was something of a relief compared to the nightmares of what that laugh I'd heard from upstairs was. On the other hoof...*it was a sprite-bot that wanted to kill me!*

Coming back to the main corridor that ran down the centre of the offices, I spotted the way out. Screw this!

The sprite-bot had other plans, it whizzed out over the office desks and planted itself right in my way before charging its blaster again. I saw it leak some sparks and judder in the air through an electronic laugh.

“Nuh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uuuuuuuhFFFKK.”

I took the chance to flip out my saddle's mouthpiece and take aim. (Properly, for once!) Blunderbuck's welding had proven true, for after setting the crosshairs over the sprite-bot and pulling the trigger, I saw the grapple whip out and slam right into the little metal nightmare! Rebounding from the casing, the hook itself knocked it clean from the air with a dull *clang* and let its blaster open fire into the wall with a spray of pink sparks.

No time to wait around. I turned and galloped down the office corridor until I found a way out, using the few seconds I'd bought myself to put some distance between me and it. Behind me, I heard the blaster firing wildly and that voice asking me if I was having fun yet. I must have knocked its voicebox on that impact, for the tone was more robotic and monotone now.

Great, only I would have the luck to make it *more* scary!

Exiting the office, I found a few enclosed rooms and another stairwell. The thought of being trapped in the store cupboards or likely interrogation rooms was too nightmarish to think about, so I took the stairs. They curled around into a darker level lit by only sporadic lighting. On my left, I saw a medical symbol of butterflies and dove inside. I just hoped this was far enough to lose it!

After a brief period of hiding near the doorway and listening...I heard it still chirping away in the corridors above me and judged it safe to take a few seconds to hunt. The cupboards and drawers were all pretty empty, but I managed to find a new set of scissors for my sewing and a couple bandages to add to our growing inventory. To my delight, the old fridge contained a half full bag of RadAway, something I eager poured into my canteen. I'd need it by the time I got out of here...or was that just the alcohol on my throat? Urgh...Glimmer's parties could wait till I was out of Filly from now on...

“Wheeeere are y-y-y-yooooou? Hehehe! This is *fun!*”

A hoof shot to my mouth to hide the squeak of fear. That thing had been so silent coming down the stairs I hadn't even noticed until it was *right outside!* Pulling myself inside the fridge, I heard it

bump against the door frame.

“You're r-really good at this!”

It was in the medical bay! My hoof gently kept the loose door shut. Please don't somehow notice me. Please, Pipbuck, don't beep!

But there was no sound. None at all. In a way that was worse. What if it had just given up and was waiting outside the fridge! Oh dear...there was nothing else for it.

Biting my lip and trying not to whimper...I peeked out.

Nothing. It had gone. Breathing out at last, I trotted out into the room again before heading to the door.

“Won't you poke your head out? I wanna see you grin!”

It was upstairs again! I wasted no time in getting out of the room and delving deeper into this strange hidden bunker. I could see a crossroads up ahead but the path directly in front was blocked by a collapsed corridor in this apparently more unstable area. Watching behind me repeatedly, I moved across the buckled floor to see what was left or right.

Immediately to my left, there was a gigantic metal door bearing a brass seal of three balloons about ten feet down the corridor. I could see a terminal beside it but otherwise no way in. The other way looked and smelled damp...but at least had someplace to go. Warily checking behind me again, I began trotting that way.

Why was my Pipbuck bringing me here anyway? I'd found Sundial's skeleton with the Pipbuck itself so what was dragging me in? A part of the broken Pipbuck? I noticed the ground felt wet and I realised I was trotting into a slowly deepening liquid dripping from a broken pipe further ahead.

My ears perked up a little at an unknown sound, a mad clicking from my Pipbuck. Huh? What did that mean?

Lifting it, I glanced into the Pipbuck itself and saw it telling me nothing. It hadn't done that before...the symbol of balloons hadn't disappeared so what...was...it...

My eyes fell to the water beneath me.

Glimmer had fixed the rad-warning...oh *cupcakes* I was in radiation!

I turned and galloped back the way I'd come, splashing through the water. Screw *all* of this! I

was going to sneak by that thing and get out! This was too much now. I wasn't going to die of radiation down here from a leaky pipe! I was-

“I heeear you!”

I turned the corner back to the stairwell corridor again and saw the horrible sight of that sprite-bot wandering down it again. Seeming to hop with joy in the air, it began charging the blaster.

“I r-r-really am good at tag, I should have to-ooooo-old you!”

“Don't! EEK!”

I dove away down the other side of the corridor and curled away from the pink blasts flickering past into the wall. They left smouldering little holes in the thin metal that dripped slag to the floor. If that got me...oh no!

Scrambling to my hooves, I turned to run and slammed right into the huge blast door bearing three balloons. Oh please open! I started pressing every button on the terminal I could, only to have a cross looking Pinkie Pie shake her head in a two frame animation at me from the screen accompanied by a rather loud honk of denial.

“OH COME ON!”

I bashed the side with my Pipbuck. Come on, please!

“Coming to get you! Hehe! No-pony wins, I'm so good at tag I bet I would be the-*kreeeee*-champion!”

I fell with my back against the door, seeing the sprite-bot round the corner joyously and spin around to face me.

Another voice echoed around me. Male and robotic, it accompanied a sudden hiss of hydraulics.

“Pipbuck unit confirmed.”

Before I even knew what had happened, my frantic pushes back against the blast door led me to fall right through it into a pitch dark room. Rolling as fast as I could with pink jets of energy spearing after me so closely that I felt one whip through my mane I tried to scramble out the way. Immediately, the door slammed shut behind me...and cast me into darkness.

Lying still, patting out the small fire in my mane, I just slumped down, took a second to get my

breath back and swigged my RadAway. Mental note...no more adventuring when hungover. Oh Goddesses my head...RadAway did not agree with my stomach right now either...

Gradually, I brought myself to my senses again to take a few deep breathes and start to get up.

My eyes took a few long seconds to get used to the darkness, but I could see I was in a huge room just by a far off tiny light. Clutching my complaining stomach while I stood, I began to look around. I could see vague shapes but...nothing distinct.

A beam spotlight snapped on, pointed directly at me. Yelping and closing my eyes again, I staggered back and peered out from under my hoof. Lights sprung on all around the edges of what I now saw was a circular room. Photos of a certain pink pony surrounded by neon lighting flickered into life and floor lights lit the borders of the room.

Only they weren't what took my attention. Yes, I could have seen the piles of balloon boxes, stuffed pony toys and wooden candy canes against a wall. I could perhaps have seen the desk bearing that same tri-balloon symbol on a brass plate at the back or the masses of little tins across the floor near it. But my attention was rather more focussed on the colossal *cannon* that now swivelled on the spot and pointed directly at my face. I had no-where to go!

Goddesses...make it not hurt!

Pointed directly at me, the cannon fired.

I wasn't an expert on weapons, but the sound was unlike anything I'd ever expected. It sounded a lot more like the little thing Blunderbuck had fired last night at the table. A small concussive force knocked me clean over onto my rump as shrapnel bounced and landed all over me.

It didn't hurt. Wait...I was alive?

Opening my eyes, I saw colours. I was *covered* in streamers and little paper flakes. The feeling of something striking me had been balloons that now floated above me.

What kind of cannon *was* that?

Even amongst my bewilderment while sitting back on my hindquarters I couldn't quite bring myself to understand. I heard a little *clink* nearby as one of the balloons knocked something above me. Confused, I looked up to see the balloons had hit a suspended basket of little bouncy balls that now fell into tubes and pipes strung up onto the ceiling. I watched them twirl and cross over on their journeys. Eventually, they all began to reach one point within a basket that was slowly weighed down until it dropped.

The motion of it dropping pulled something at the side of the room up and let a large pink and yellow ball roll out across the room. It struck the side of the desk and upset a balanced pen that rolled into a mousetrap. I winced as it went off and set alight a whole process of strange 'coincidences' that carried all over the room and grew into chairs falling and stuffed bears being catapulted over my head with precision that might made acrobats jealous. The whole room became a mass of activity until it all concentrated back in one epic movement of flying teddies and toy whirligigs whizzing across to the desk to all land in a huge toy chest behind it. Before my astounded eyes, the entire thing leaned forward under the weight...bumped the chair and sent a fragile looking sphere rolling down a track that lowered from the ceiling.

I knew that sphere...and I could guess now what it would land on.

The moment it hit the holder, a little spark of light formed from within it and grew into a spiralling galaxy of shimmering gems suspended in mid-air. Whirling out from the orb they moved erratically and yet smoothly until they concentrated in one spot and glowed brighter. I knew the sequence now, following the recognisable shapes as they formed. A pink glow that solidified and wove itself with twinkling lines and patterns. Lines, curves and shapes before...before...

Oh my Goddesses...no.

The shape of a pony with a poofy mane and rounded face bearing a gigantic smile came to. I shivered at the sight of *her* appearing. Pinkie Pie!

She looked at herself, as though no doubt feeling a magical sense while recording this. Giggling, she looked up and directly at me. The shimmering lights shifted as she drew a deep breath and opened her eyes wide.

Wait, what had surprised her? What was she so happy about-

“HI, MURKY!”

I blinked. Then I blinked again.

Then I simply pitched over and fainted.

* * *

Gradually, my eyes blinked and squinted. The darkness fell away from visions where I felt myself letting go of somepony else...of sitting down and closing my eyes with the last sight that of somepony watching me...then of being carried somewhere. Was...was that my mother? Was it Glimmer? Coral? Protégé? They were too small to be Brim...

Then my eyes properly opened and it all evaporated. Another dream cast to vague memory.

Instead, I found somepony else watching me from above. Two huge sparkling eyes made of tiny star shapes gazed down from above and blinked incessantly.

Pinkie Pie.

My own eyes shot open. Scrambling so fast my scarcely healed neck and chest flared up in pain. With a yelp, I shot back and away from the pink demon!

“G-get away from me!”

“Are you okay, little Murky Wurky? Cos' you just fell over there really *really* hard and hit your head.”

I kept moving backwards when she trotted forward. No...no...forget this, I'd take my chances with the sprite-bot! This thing was...was *talking* to me! I got to my hooves, turned around and made to gallop. Only the moment I turned, she was right in front of me.

“And I know that hitting your head can make you go all woozy and crazy eyed, like this!” Her eyes swivelled and rotated in their sockets. “So I just thought I'd make sure you were all right! I used to take chocolate to make sure I was fine after I had a fall, cos' the doctors say that stops shock, you know? I know *all* about chocolate and cakes and all the wonderful things they do can do as well as being yummy in your *tummy!*”

“Y-you know me! How can you talk to me?!” I virtually screamed it, backing off to crash into her desk. They were just recordings! “Stop following me everywhere!”

The pink pony snorted and laughed out loud, rolling on her back before darting to her feet again and skipping toward me.

“Aww, but I told you before! It's my *Pinkie Sense* that lets me know what's going to happen before it happens! Sometimes it gets really crazy and I'll do something even I don't understand, like this! Right now, I'm just talking to my desk and really *really* hoping somepony called Murky will be doing all the right things for what I'm saying! I sent him a letter before when I felt an itch on three and two thirds hooves!”

My breathing wasn't calming down much. Had I *actually* died and gone to some crazy land? The letter though, that was all that gave any sort of proof that this somehow made sense...by not making any sense at all. Why when I had a hangover...

“S...so you predict the future? So you're...um...predicting what I'm going to say and do before

I...uh...say it?"

Her head nodded frighteningly quick.

"That's riiight! See? You aren't a dumb little pony even if you can't read or write yet. I did this because I realised there were some things I knew you wanted to ask and some things I needed to *tell* you! So I left little clues around to get you here, like a scavenger hunt! Did you have fun?"

At this point, I was terrified to disagree or inquire about exactly *how*. I nodded and she beamed widely, the pink glow from the memory spell orb's form of her casting right over me.

"Goodie! The Pipbuck, the letter, the little signal and the picture of the balloons! I knew you'd get it!"

"The Pipbuck? The...the arrow?" I looked down at it, before realising this was sort of what I had wanted, answers! "This is Sundial's Pipbuck! You...you took him away! Arrested him!"

"That's the smart bit! Let your old Auntie Pinkie explain!"

She reached out and dragged me away from the desk to trot beside her, one hoof around my shoulder. Then I stopped...and realised.

"Y...y...you're touching me..."

"Course I am, silly!"

"*HOW!?* The others...they couldn't touch me! Memory projections can't touch ponies!"

'Pinkie' merely rolled her eyes. "Eh, they just weren't trying hard enough. Now come on, I gotta tell you *all* about little Sundial!"

I just blinked and quietly decided to shut down the logical part of my brain for now. It was better not to be thinking too hard, for my own sanity's sake. Feeling her grab my hoof, I was dragged at high speed across the room before a little projector screen. Hopping back into view, I saw her lift a small pointer stick with her mouth and clap her hooves. The room darkened and I heard the projector spool up.

Before me, a sepia toned image of Sundial popped up. The picture had been taken as he wandered in the front door of a small home.

"See, we spotted this cute little buck early on when some of those nasty zebras started talking to him! I felt so sad that he had to do what he did to try and help his marefriend! But we couldn't have

our itty bitty secrets going to them, no no! But then we got a *better* idea!”

The projector clicked and changed. I saw a mass of small huts and tents in rows. It looked a lot like some sort of refugee camp. I sat in silence, partly through interest and partly through terror. I took this time to try and come to terms that Pinkie Pie was effectively here with me. Why my life?

“Fillydelphia's a really cool city! It's got awesome big machines that go *chunk-chunk-chunk* and sometimes even *woowoo!* It makes lots of the big fancy things we use but it also meant that the zebras also kept trying to get stuff from it! All the ponies like me in the Ministries saw things going missing...like so many poor refugees in these camps. Poor Fluttershy was heartbroken and I just kept trying to send her gifts to cheer her up...”

It changed again, this time to Hearts and Hooves Hospital. Even in the pre-war era it looked mismatched and in dire need of renovation.

“But then all these other ponies went missing too! One of the really big surgeons here called Doctor Heartcare disappeared for weeks at a time! That was so naughty that even the bigger doctors like Flowerpot and Weathervane started trying to get me to find him! Only Weathervane was out so often with Dashie and the Shadowbolts that it was hard to get a chance to see him!”

Heartcare...but that was the Magister in the ghoul bunker Brim and I had found! What did he have to do with this? The slide dropped into darkness between pictures and blew up another of the Wartime Manufactory.

“Then even workers here started to disappear! Some talked about how they'd gotten better jobs but no-pony ever saw them again! That's why we caught little Sundial. We were watching the factory for the missing workers when a sprite-bot saw him. They're so useful and cute! I just *love* the music they play, don't you?”

“Uuuh...yes?” Disagreement was not something I wanted, even if one had just tried to kill me.

Her face went shockingly wide with happiness. “Thank you! *No-pony* has ever said they liked them before!”

“N-no pro-ACK!” She had grabbed me and given me a hug so strong that two hundred years apart it still nearly crushed my ribs. Gasping for breath and waggling every limb that had lifted from the ground...I realised that Brim had competition in strength! Sucking in air as she dropped me I heard the slide change again.

This one was Pinkie with her hoof around a visibly terrified Sundial.

I could relate.

“I got him to go on a super special mission! He wanted to help Equestria and I asked if he could become a double agent for us! How cool is that? He would go and speak to the zebras again, give them things only we gave them and become one of those workers that I guessed the zebras were taking!”

The slides shut down and the lights came back on. Bewildered, but beginning to take a breath and accept at least the immediate reality, I stood up and looked at Pinkie. I was seeing a different pony. For all the posters and scary watchfulness...she seemed childlike and playful despite being much older than I was.

“B-but what's this to do with me?”

The question hung in the air, a rare silence from Pinkie as she looked at me and clearly thought about how to answer my question.

“Murky...you've probably guessed by now but there was something really *awfully* bad going on in Fillydelphia! That's what I wanted to find, but I knew that I couldn't do it on my own or give it out to too many other ponies. There's big nasty thing happening in Manehattan I need to go deal with so I had to make Sundial into the pony to try and deal with it and bring it to my attention after he had proof.”

Sitting down, she actually looked a little sad with her ears drooping down and that playful tail resting upon the ground.

“There's so much going on now that I can't do it all, Murky. See, I had this really big weird out moment and my Pinkie Sense told me that I needed to take some extra special precautions! Sundial wasn't the first pony we'd sent to try and find things in Fillydelphia, but I hoped that because he was just a normal pony he might stand a better chance than an obvious trained pony. Even then I knew that whatever the zebras were up to or building with stolen ponies...we might not figure it out or get rid of it forever!”

Her hooves grabbed me by the shoulders, leaning her nose in to press against mine and tapping the side of my head.

“That's where you come in!”

“M-me?”

“Even if Sundial gets word to us and we stop it, there might not be enough time if anything *really* bad happens! That's why I needed to make sure I had somepony in the future who could pick it up to stop really bad ponies getting it! This might be a lot smaller than the big things we all need to

deal with right now but that doesn't mean it's not important! If all my old friends worked together we'd find it easy peasy, but we're too far away and busy to see each other these days..."

I needed a second. Moving away from her, I trotted for a few seconds just to think. My mind just wasn't settling. So...this weird pony could see what was going to happen in the future...and had set up all this because she knew I'd find Sundial's Pipbuck to act as some sort of *insurance* against something bad that would be left untouched in the event of balefire warfare?

A two hundred year insurance...one that I was meant to be in the grand scheme of pony history?

Suddenly I felt very small indeed.

I couldn't deny it made some sense though. I had certainly seen these clues, just I hadn't figured they were all related. Magister Heartcare. Fluttershy mentioning missing refugees. Sundial...

Like the star shapes I'd once seen...it was all linked. Now somepony who had looked into future times had seen that I would know these things and chosen me to act as some sort of 'next in line.'

"I..."

This was insane...

"I just...I don't know..."

I heard her trot up behind me.

"I'm really *really reeeeeeally* sorry for all you've been through, Murky. I know sometimes it gets real sad, dark and lonely, I had to work on a rock farm too before I learned to smile! But I'll always be there to try and get you to learn how to as well! This is really important though, Sundial cared a lot and it could-"

"I just want out." I spoke quietly, turning to her. "I'm sorry. I'm no hero or anything. I just want *out* of this place! It's taking all I have just to do that..."

Pinkie put her hoof to her chin and looked in deep thought.

"Well...I guess you didn't see my other little clue then, did you?"

"H-huh?"

"Didn't you see the little Pinkie-bot telling you where the way out was? I left it in an old big cargo box that was so big I could hear myself echo in it!"

I stopped for a few seconds. I had...yes, I had heard it! List Seeker had sent me there before Barb's gang found me! What had it said?

“The way out is-tzzzzch-just downstairs-just downstairs-just downstairs!”

I thought I was remembering, but I saw Pinkie gurning as she twitched her legs and repeated it with rather frightening accuracy.

“You were telling me...”

“Uh-huh! Every scavenger hunt has gotta have a clue! Those zebras got out of the city somehow, those sneaky things! Every time we almost caught them they went underground into the metro and the tunnels!”

She was right...they couldn't leave above ground. The plan we had must be on the right track! They had some sort of route out of the city down there in the metro! Briefly, I couldn't help but remember how Aurora had some strange goings on down there too. Coincidence? I thought not...

“So, Murky! If you take on this super Pinkie Mission? It'll lead you to the way out by the end! You were already on the right track, this'll just point you in the proper direction *and* make you the one to find whatever got left behind by the zebras and take care of it before anypony bad gets it too! It'll take you to the way out, ending all this forever...”

She paused, looking more sincere and serious than I'd yet seen her.

“Sundial believed in it. You've been so like him up till now.”

Pinkie was right. Something about this felt *right*. I had been following Sundial's story...the least I could do was see how it ended and help finish what he had started before the spells fell upon Equestria.

“How many ponies *have* there been on this task?”

“Oh, before Sundial? Five! This has come a long way, Murky and if we can stop this now *and* get you your freedom because of it...that's perfect!”

“Yeah...perfect...”

I looked off to the side. Try as I might, I just couldn't comprehend this at all.

“Aw, c'mon Murky! Get that frown upside down!”

“Not exactly easy in the city these days. Pinkie, I don't know how much you know but...I don't even know if I'll get there! I can dream and believe but it's so hard to smile and feel confident about it! Part of me feels better now, that even if I die and don't achieve it I'll have been died *trying*. But I don't want that! I want to be free and feel it all! Live a life! I've never had the chance to truly feel happy. I'm not even sure I know what it honestly feels like.”

“Pfft...”

I stopped dead in my ramble at her blowing a raspberry. How...how disrespectful! I was opening my heart here and-

“Course you do, silly! Here, let me show you!”

She reached up, standing on her hind legs and clapped her hooves loudly.

“Come on, bots! Get your voices on and come out to show him!”

I heard the vents open in the room. From within them, a low hum sounded. Growing in volume, I realised it was music. Bouncy and happy music. All around us, I saw sprite-bots float in. Arcing around in the air and between the laid out presents or candy canes they bobbed and formed into big circles that constantly rotated around both of us with that music growing in volume! I fell closer to Pinkie, who only smiled and threw a hoof around my shoulders.

A quiet murmuring began to spread as more and more of them entered the room.

I recognised them! They were all the strange video screen ones I'd seen stalking me everywhere! They were speaking as they came...a low chanting chorus among them. Pinkie herself joined it, spinning us around to see them all, as three circles of sprite-bots floated in opposite directions around the room, all facing into me!

“Come on little Murky, smile smile smile...”

The screens began to light up. Each fizzing as they began to show me footage just like how Shackles' captured one had. I stood breathless in wonder as I saw myself in every single one of them.

“Fill your heart up with sunshine, sunshine!”

I was laughing coming down a helter-skelter, shouting with joy and my front legs in the air. Landing in the pit at the bottom, I upped and smiled directly at the sprite-bot's camera before trotting on with a spring in my step. Another had me skipping in circles inside the Ministry of Image, delighted and happy with finding Littlepip's trail and a massive goofy grin on my face...

“All you really need's a smile smile smile!”

I was standing in Weathervane's office, smiling as I glanced at his picture of Sundial with a warm and gentle happiness across my face. Then I was with Unity as we chuckled and shared glances at my journal while huddled together under a piece of scrap.

“And everything will be fiii-iiiine!”

Each sprite-bot joined in, growing the volume higher and higher as Pinkie whirled me around to see each screen one at a time. I saw me sitting up, my wings outstretched for the first time since I was a foal. The look of delight upon my face indescribable! The bots swirled and turned on the spot, almost dancing in the air as they chanted and sung, repeating themselves on the same chorus. Pinkie swung me to face her, her voice picking up.

“Give a perfect grin for me! Just smile as wide as a mile! You'll be as happy as can be!”

One more spin and I found myself facing one sprite-bot that had come forward. Upon it I saw it staring through a window. Inside...above a sea of laughing and cheering ponies Glimmer and I danced hoof and hoof atop a table as they all chanted and stomped in time with us. I was just having fun...carefree and happy. A glimpse to the life I had been having without ever truly remembering all the good times.

I heard them chant again, growing in volume every time.

“Smile! Smile! Smiiiile! Smiiple!”

“Come on and smile, Murky! You've got a *beautiful* smile! One of the best I've ever seen, why don't you do it more? Look at it!”

Her voice in my ear when I simply saw that last clip from the Roamer felt so familiar. Almost exactly like something Glimmerlight had said to me long ago. Under the chants, under the persuasion, I felt a grin come onto my face. We had a way out for sure! The secrets of the past would light the way if we could simply discover that path! Sundial would be my guide, the story I'd always been following and was always meant to follow!

I would be *free!*

What was there to *not* smile about?!

Spinning around, I leapt up and spread my wings as best I could, letting it grow upon my face before finally exploding into being. A huge beaming grin from ear to ear. Pinkie's face seemed to

explode in joy at the sight, cheering aloud.

“That's it! You just have to smile! Sing it!”

“L...” I laughed. “*I just have to smiiile!*”

“That's it! *You just have to smiiile!*”

“*I just have to smile!*”

We continued like that under the ongoing chorus of the sprite-bots for a while, before simply falling over from dizziness, exhaustion, old injury and hangover all at once into a giggling heap. The sprite-bots gradually filtered away.

“You're not as creepy as I thought you were, Pinkie...hehe!”

The pink pony snorted at the odd compliment and rolled back to her hooves, helping me up.

“We've got enough problems, if I can make a pony who *really* needed to learn to smile do so...I'll do it! That's my *thing!*”

“Thank you, Pinkie. For showing the way.” I stood more upright, my neck up proper like Weathervane told me. “I won't let you or Sundial down. Me and my friends, we'll find the way.”

Pinkie almost looked sad for a second. “Isn't that always how it works, silly? Hehehe! They'll wonder where you are. Go give them a hug for me! I've got *serious* business to get back to in Manehattan!”

Across the room, I heard something unlock and a portion of the wall slid open to reveal some stairs. I could see the sparkles around Pinkie Pie's star-shape form beginning to fade and flicker, the memory orb was ending. She looked with wonder at her own hooves.

“Oooh...well, this is it. Of you go, Murky!”

“Thank you...”

I reached forward and Pinkie bumped her hoof into mine. She giggled once more.

“I told them all. Pinkie Pie was going to watch them *forever.*”

Her immense grin became a more genuine smile as the apparition of a pony slowly spread and warped into a little orb of its own...that faded from view back into the sphere and left a few words

lingering in the air...

“I meant it.”

I simply stood still for a few seconds. A lot had happened and been revealed...but I just gave quiet moment of respect before moving off. I was confused and filled with questions but also a purpose and drive. I had regained my life, my free will, my wings and now my drive. The world that had took so much away...had given them back out of the laughter filled past.

Without really knowing why, I felt a few tears drip from my eyes as I looked back from the stairwell.

I simply saw the orb sitting on its holder and heard the sounds of smiling music fading and echoing away into the dark future around me.

* * *

It was approaching later in the afternoon as I returned to the Mall.

I hadn't rushed. Aside from feeling stiff, an odd sense of melancholy had overtaken me upon seeing Pinkie's shape fade away. Every time I looked up, I would see a huge balloon, billboard or some poster announcing her presence. Pinkie Pie was gone forever...but she had lived up to her word. Seeing the future, she had prepared for me and what I would need.

Somehow, despite the terrifying thought of some benevolent force watching me across history, I felt strangely reassured whenever I saw those eyes watching me now.

I didn't return to the plaza immediately. Instead, I went directly to Protégé's office. I knew my friends were likely out on shift still and I had no wish to sit alone. Ragini was waiting on guard and wordlessly opened the door. Avoiding her gaze, I simply trotted inside and closed the door.

“Ah, Murk. You are back.”

Protégé sat at the window, leaning back into the frame with a book hovering before him. With a little surprise, I saw it was the Daring Do one from before. Seeing me looking, he merely smiled and placed it down.

“We all have our escapes.”

I offered a small nod, noticing the small hint in his words. Sitting down before his desk, I began to pull the desk lamp out, only realising now that this is likely *why* he was using the window rather than his desk for light.

“I, um...also saw these beside it. I don't know why I brought them...”

I dropped the books out too. Trotting around his desk, Protégé picked one up.

“Ah! Applied mathematics, my my...it has been a while. Thank you, Murk. Judging from how relaxed you look, I imagine the library did you good?”

After a second, I simply nodded. “Yes...you could say that.”

“Excellent.” Protégé had turned to a smaller desk, fitting the lamp to it and plugging the magic wire lead into a tiny generator that sat in the corner. With a small flick, an amber light shone in the darker room.

“Um...Protégé? I thought about your, um...offer.” I bit my lip, watching as he turned one eye to me even whilst sorting the new books. I couldn't help but notice he wasn't wearing the eyepiece. “I'd like to take you up on it...if it's still open.”

If I had to choose a word to try and describe the ever hard to decipher look on his face, I would have gone with relieved. Protégé sat a book on the small desk in front of a bench and placed a hoof to his chest.

“I'm glad you say that, Murk. I promise you as early as we can we will investigate getting your friends out too. For now, it will give you ample time to recover by acting as my assistant and aide. Truthfully, I just want you safe from Shackles. You can stay here in the spare room over there and you will remain under my protection.”

“Thank you...”

Protégé offered a small grin. “Now don't go thinking this is a holiday. You will be expected to still be my assistant. To be up and preparing my days things to take needless busy work from my schedule or to keep things organised. I'm sure you won't have a problem with that, think of this to get you away from abuse as my gift to you.”

That didn't sound so bad, even if the newly found will to never be a slave again in me hated the thought of doing *anything* for anypony. He was just doing his best and despite myself, I giggled a little and actually seemed to surprise him.

“A gift? You mean a birthday gift?”

Protégé laughed and shook his head, sitting upon the reading desk's bench.

“No, Murk. A gift for you saving my life. No, no...*this* is your birthday gift.”

My eyes shot open in surprise. He shifted in the seat to face the desk in front of it and pat the seat beside him on the bench.

“Come here, Murk. Sit down.”

A little confused, I did just that. In the amber light, I saw him turn from me and open one of the books I'd brought back with me between us. It was just filled with words that meant nothing to me.

“Now...”

Protégé flipped to a certain page before turning back to me.

“...I believe we should start with the alphabet.”

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Foal's First Literacy (Rank 1) – It may take some time to catch up with the rest, but slowly all those arcane shapes are starting to make a little bit of sense. You may be able to recognise a few very simple words or letters from now on.

Chapter 20: The Great Game

* * *

“It is of no use. They have never seen us as equals and they never shall.”

“Was it any different being his assistant?”

Different from what?

“Slavery.”

Well he didn't strike me or shout at me, I guess that was better...

“You don't really sound convinced.”

Of course I'm not. Slavery is slavery and I was still having to respond to his beck and call. The difference was I was knowingly disliking it and wishing not to have to do so. It felt more open or even honest if you want to call it that. I was a slave who didn't want to be a slave, kept by a master who didn't want to have to be one. Amongst the whirlwind my life had become since the pig sty this certainly reminded me how weird life could be when you can look at it with awoken eyes.

All the same, I can't deny that from a sheer practical level it was a massive improvement. In one clean decision, he'd saved me from Chainlink Shackles and the inevitable nightmare that would have descended upon me had I went back to him. Me being free from him, albeit still in the machine of Fillydelphia under Protégé meant that I could focus on other things.

“Like getting your friends away too?”

Yes! I hated leaving them behind. There was a lot of guilt but we all knew this was for the best. With me away and with Protégé admitting he wished them free as well, I knew that I had to find a way to smuggle, steal or else wise acquire them from him. Be it simply sneaking them out or finding some way to make them Protégé's stock as well didn't matter, it was simply a race against time before anything happened to them.

Glimmerlight had tried to calm me by saying he might leave them alone with me gone...but we both knew that wasn't true. They would likely suffer the hardest shifts and the worst attentions if I didn't get them out quickly. If I had to come back to even one of them...g-gone...

No. I wouldn't let that happen! I'd try to find a way, yet there were other advantages too. With my new found freedom by Protégé's side in his work I would have access to the logistic hub of

Fillydelphia. I made it my intent to steal and 'misplace' as much as my gleeful little thieving hooves could manage from the supplies or information gleamed from there. Anything would be helpful for the final effort.

Of course, there was one greater prize than that.

Pinkie Pie's spell orb had shown me some of the truths to look at and help point me in the right direction. We'd been right about the metro being our salvation. But now a message from the past had told us that a way out was specifically built into it that zebra spies used to use to escape the city with any intelligence. If we wanted to use the metro, our best bet rather than aimlessly digging through infested caves was to find whatever it was *before* Shackles and his slaver 'council' managed to locate what they were looking for down there.

Why? I had more than a suspicion that whatever Aurora Star was making there had something to do with this all. I may have been a dumb uneducated pony but even I could put two and two together with at least a moderate chance of getting four. The Ministry Station, I was betting, held the way out. At the very least it was linked into it.

Of course, that left me part of the intrigue that had been running through the slavers long before I even arrived. One that had sought to tear the mall away from Protégé and kill him off from the running. Now to find my own freedom I had to aid a slaver against his enemies.

Then simply pray that he and I wouldn't come to a confrontation over our real objective in the end...

* * *

“Murk?”

There was a voice attempting to stir me. I didn't want to hear it. Right now, I was safe, comfortable and warm...no, no I didn't want to listen to any voices. Hazily, I could sense a thick covering over me.

“Murk, wake up.”

The words cut through the sleepy haze and forced their way into my warm little world. Oh just go away, I was so *comfy* here, the most I'd ever been in my life. I was having a really good dream as well...let me go back to it. Lazily, I lifted a hoof out from under the warm covers and waved it to send the intruder away.

Annoyance taken care of, I drew it back in again. With a satisfied moan I twisted further into the covers, settled on the huge pillow and sighed as I tried to drift back into that same dreamland again.

That was better. Now, Miss Littlepip...where were we?

“Murk, if you don't get up right now I shall have Ragini fetch a pail of water from the fountain.”

Wait...huh?

With a sudden shock of reality, I felt everything annoyingly melt away to leave me staring at a blank beige wall and lying in a bed with the biggest sense of not wanting to move I'd ever felt. Shifting reluctantly under the covers I sat up and wearily opened my eyes.

The sight of Protégé standing by the bed was enough to drop a figurative dash of cold water over my mind. Bolting upright, I rubbed my eyes.

“I...huh...wha?”

His eyes narrowed.

“You were supposed to be up an hour ago, Murk. The tasks I set out for you this morning to arrange things have already been done. I trust this won't be an ongoing problem, will it?”

Even as he reprimanded me, I just kept rubbing my mane with my hooves and across my forehead to try and wake up. After my first lesson on reading (something I'd had a lot of trouble with) he had shown me to the spare room in his office area where I'd found for the first time in my life a real proper bed! It had thick covers and everything! Perhaps the best nights sleep in my life had come from it now and it had led to me oversleeping.

“Sorry...really really sorry, mm...just tired...”

“So I see.” Protégé sighed and turned to the door. “Get yourself ready, Murk. We leave the Mall within the hour if we want to dodge Shackles returning. I've picked out a few things we'll be taking with us so be ready to carry some bags. This is your job now after all.”

Carrying out the soul crushingly horrible movement of leaving the warm covers, I swung myself to the edge of the bed and reached for my fleece. The room was little more than a bed, a couple of shelves and a bedside table but it had been all I'd needed to feel comfortable for once. I hoped there was another like it where we were going.

“I'll, um, be up in future. I promise!”

“Don't worry, Murk. I'm not going to punish you for this, merely ask that you keep better time in future. Besides, I'd be something of a hypocrite if I did.”

Turning back from his office, Protégé offered a small smirk.

“After all, I did the exact same thing on my first day as well. Now hurry up. We've got places to be.”

* * *

Stumbling down stairs and veering from side to side in the corridors I had to quickly question Protégé's perception of a 'few' things. Two saddlebags were draped over my torso bearing books and scraps of paper alongside my own small amount of belongings while trying to carry the replaced reading lamp around my neck. The fact that Protégé trotted on with neater and smaller saddlebags only fuelled my annoyance. He'd said that it hardly cut a good impression upon those he needed to communicate with to be doing it himself.

Not for the first time, I cast an aggravated glance at him as he trotted so much easier than I did under all this weight. Apparently, this was the life of an assistant. At the very least it wasn't as bad as the factories or carts.

“We will make for the FunFarm, Murk. The logistics hub is in there and there are a few errands to run across to the Alpha-Omega Hotel as well in service of our Master.”

'Our' Master, Protégé? Try yours.

Really, I'd found it almost strange to so easily rebel quietly in my mind since my own revival. It was fast becoming a source of strength that I could do so and feel confident that I meant it than all the pondering of resistance I'd done before. Those days were over.

We travelled downstairs, Protégé reading over a small notebook as he went. Slaves passed us as they were directed onto the first shift of the day by Shackles' own followers. I couldn't help but notice the glances they gave Protégé the moment he was past them.

Truth be told, he was confusing me more than ever. Since his return, he had seemed more dedicated than ever to Red Eye to the point that he was willing to fight some sort of shadow war against slavers within the city to try and maintain the status quo. Yet at the same time I'd see occasional glances at me or passing slaves. He truly wanted a better life for them. All the things he'd said before we went in to battle Barb felt so much more important to trying to understand this peculiar pony now.

More to the point, after admitting our plan and even asking him...I had no idea where he really stood. He didn't try to help us directly but he wasn't exactly trying to stop us either. He wanted me free but simply seemed too wrapped up in his own dreams of a better world for everypony under Red Eye to do anything about it.

What about yourself, Protégé? What about yourself?

Reaching the bottom floor we moved out to the main corridor where Protégé stopped me.

“Ragini should join us soon, I'll be sending her on ahead with some instructions prior to my arrival. You can rest for a minute or so.”

I didn't need told to be twice, the saddlebags dropped the moment I heard the word 'rest' spoken. The procession of slaves were still trooping out the doors into the street ahead of us and I could hear others being gathered behind. If I wanted a chance, it'd have to be now.

“Protégé? Could I go say goodbye? You said I'd get a chance, remember?”

Still looking at his notebook for a few seconds, he lifted his head up and seemed to think before responding.

“Yes, I did. You've got five minutes, Murk. You'll find them just outside the plaza if I remember the schedules right.”

“Thank you.” I didn't waste time in cantering off toward the plaza. I knew the part he meant, just outside the cage door's guard room where we were often organised for the actual shift divisions. Upon arrival I could clearly see them beginning to troop out and Brim's head rising well above the rest. If any of the guards gave thoughts to bringing me in...they immediately kept any thoughts quiet with Brim around.

“Murk.” He nodded briefly as I trotted up to him. I found myself trotting to one side, staring at the hole where his eye had once resided made me feel awkward. The fact that this didn't seem to bother him that much spoke volumes about the raider mentality toward injury and expectations of their life.

“I just wanted to come and see you all again before I left with Protégé. To say thank you...”

“Mm. You've said it about forty times now since you woke up and I'll still say the same thing. We weren't going to let you go. If I have to accept what I am and direct that to protecting others than that's something I can be happy with. Coral Eve was right, giving up in some last rebellious instinct isn't worth it. I hope you see that now too.”

“I do...” Sniffing and nodding, I briefly placed a hoof on his leg. “I just hate leaving you all.”

Brimstone snorted a little, clearly not quite as sentimental when it simply made sense for me to get out of here when I could. Sometimes I found it hard to really judge that cold practical intelligence

he had.

“So long as that kid can keep to his word to protect you.”

I wanted to tell them that I at the very least trusted Protégé's word even if I was still unsure where his loyalties truly lay, but my ears instead picked up a bit of a commotion approaching. One all too familiar.

“It doesn't even matter!”

“Yes it *does!* You come out all high and mighty to me and say you're trying to be better and then I find you stripping it out all over again?!”

“I'm not forgetting it! It's just...just not how I want to see him!”

Brimstone only now began to hear it too and turned his head as we both saw Coral and Glimmer coming near the doorway out of the plaza. Coral Eve was pointing a hoof accusingly.

“It's an addiction! The entire point is you *don't* think it matters for just one little thing! You've gotten so used to doing it that there's always that temptation! You don't have any will to resist that for all your words!”

“Seeing him lying dead in a hospital bed was just destroying me, Coral! I...I didn't even sleep last night, I just kept seeing him again and again!”

Glimmer was half pleading and half arguing, but Coral just stomped a hoof and bared her teeth.

“Perhaps if you hadn't spent last night screwing some buck you likely don't even remember the name of while drunk off your head you might remember him being alive again better! You say you can handle the truth of the past and you can't even handle remembering a friend *almost* dying. How are you going to cope with seeing our friends and family butchered on the earth of Creaky Hollow?”

“I will! I...I'm trying, Murky's helping me and...and...”

I could only see this firing up further. I galloped in between them.

“Please! Stop arguing!”

Both immediately turned as they heard me.

“Coral, she is trying really hard...I...I've seen what she's seen. It's not easy but she's trying!” I turned back to Glimmerlight. “But I'm here...I'm okay. You don't need to strip memories, please...”

There was a small moment of silence between them as the tensions simmered down. Clearly neither wanted this little moment of goodbye to be filled with argument. Sighing deeply, Coral cast a look at Glimmer that communicated all her bitter disappointment and turned down to me.

“I'm sure she is. Are you leaving now?”

“Uh-huh, Protégé's just waiting for Ragini before we go off to work.”

Glimmerlight took a few moments to suck in some air after their exchange, only now joining us.

“At least you'll be safe, lil'bro. Just remember what I told you, we all wanted this for you. Something even Coral and I agreed on.”

Clearly seeking *some* common ground for the moment, I saw them share a reluctant nod.

“I know...and Protégé says he wants you all away from Shackles too. He's going to help me find a way and if he gets any way to demand some slaves he'll do it. We won't leave you behind.”

“That's good, Murk.” Coral seemed a little dubious, but any hope was better than nought. “We'll be safe enough, we've lasted this long remember? You concentrate on what you need to do. Now come here...”

She leaned down, giving me a tight embrace for a few moments.

“Just remember you're a free pony now.”

“I will...”

“Good.”

She let go, trotting on by to leave me with Glimmerlight. She looked somewhat ashamed, lifting a small orb from her saddlebag.

“I'm sorry, Murky. I...I just couldn't stand lying alone awake and seeing you like that over and over...I...I know I shouldn't have. I just, well...”

I didn't give her time to fall back into losing hope, simply moving forward and hopping up on my hind legs to hug her around the neck.

“I think you'll do it, sis.” The words were about as comforting as I could think up on the spot, but feeling her hooves wrap back around me as she sat down to support herself I knew it at least meant

something. "I know you can."

Gently, I felt her stroke my feathers on my back and saw her try to smile again. "If you can do what you've done I'll keep going, Murky. Go make us proud."

"I'll try."

Both standing back up, I met her eyes and saw her push a smile through again. "Just look forward to us getting to check out all the cool stuff you nick from them and sharing all the little drawings you do when you're away. It won't be long I know, but it'll all be better for this. We're on the upswing, Murky. Look on this as a chance!"

Nodding firmly, I smiled back. Yes, this was going to be a big boost to us!

"So I've got three tips for you!"

Blinking, I cocked my head to the side. Huh?

"Tip one! If you can get me a proper gun repair kit I'll be able to maybe fix up some of the stuff those idiots throw away thinking it's broken. With a quick scrapyards visit we could get some real weapons then. Tip two! If you're in logistics, see if you can't get some travelling bags from the wagons. A few things like flint, weather cloaks and water filters could go a long way. Oh, maybe even see about some proper explosives too, just in case we need to blow our way out. Stash it all somewhere we can get to afterwards. Sound good?"

Grinning at the sound of all this wasteland stuff, I nodded. "Real good! Um...you said three hints?"

If I grinned, she positively beamed and shoved all her worries back to let out last little moment for now be a happy one. She bent down to my ear.

"Tip three, showing just enough to make them fill in the rest themselves is better than showing all."

I blinked for a few seconds. "What...what does that mean?"

"It's a tip to stick with you forever, Murky. It'll bring you a *lot* of fun if you live by it! You'll understand some day! Now, off you go."

Shaking my head and chuckling, I hugged her once before and turned to go. There was just enough time to stop and wave to the three of them as they entered their lines, exchanging a brief goodbye.

Be safe my friends. I won't let you linger long.

Showing just enough...what on Equestria did she mean by that anyway? What did that have to do with anything?

* * *

If getting down the stairs from his office was bad, this was worse.

Protégé was taking the direct route, cutting across small alleyways and larger roads alike to reach the FunFarm. Even on such a strange direction my own route was somewhat more meandering under the weight of packages and bags slumped over me. Staggering from side to side every few feet, I desperately tried to keep the lamp from falling from around my neck while balancing his armour's breastplate on my back between the saddlebags.

In hindsight, why couldn't he have just worn it? For all his intelligence, he certainly could be impractical at times!

“Now, Murk.” Protégé dropped his pace back as we entered the last road up to the FunFarm. “There is something I need to go over with you before we go here. You won't like it, but it has to happen.”

“I'm not going to have to wear chains am I...?”

He shook his head. “Of course not. However, there is a bit of an expectation amongst many of our peers in the higher ranks that workers understand their place. I'd rather you not receive their ire, you *will* have to call me 'Master' when we are around others. Can you do that?”

I couldn't hide the look of annoyance on my face. With my new cutie mark's meaning in my mind, I didn't want to call anypony that ever again! Seeing the look on my face, Protégé only sighed.

“I know after all you've told me that you don't like it, Murk. Think of it just as a disguise if you really want to. It's just to keep them off your back. You *are* my assistant, there is a lot of emphasis put on rank within this place and in these times ponies are more insistent about who lies where than ever.”

His face turned somewhat more serious.

“If you fail to do so, I will have to reprimand you about it. This is my world in here, I cannot be seen to be weak or losing my authority.”

I sighed. “Okay...”

“Okay, what?”

I almost stamped the ground in frustration. “We're not even there!”

“Yet there are, I count, eight overseers to our immediate right resting outside that old wagon park station. What if one overheard? That word can spread, Murk. *Every* ounce of perception matters these days and I don't have many neutral parties in my favour as it is. You *will* address me by the title, Murk.”

We had actually stopped, staring at each other briefly. A conflict of identity already starting to form. He'd given me a chance to get away from Shackles, only to turn around and request that I call him my master now around anypony else? Make them think I was some slave all over again? It was like he didn't even *care* how I felt now!

Unfortunately, he was always going to win a stare-down of willpower. I knew Protégé was right, if anything it would help me too. Be the grey pony, don't stand out and become a centre of attention. That could aid me as much as annoy me...

“Okay, master...” I muttered from the side of my mouth.

“Better, Murk. I cannot afford any problems today. There is a power gap to be filled, those of higher rank are to nominate the candidates to fall in line behind Stern in the seniority of Fillydelphia. The mare who holds it currently is soon to pass away. The moment that happens, nominations go down for the replacement. This is a crucial moment in Fillydelphian politics.”

“Wouldn't Red Eye put you in?” I saw his eye glance at me. “Master...”

“Master Red Eye cannot dictate everything, Murk. Slavers need some outlet, some source of control on their lives. They are not ponies who like being simply subservient, rather the other way around. If they feel they can rise in seniority or affect who does, it helps placate them. Make no mistake though, it's hardly as democratic as it sounds. From Master Red Eye to Stern to whoever tends to be the strongest among them usually. This will be the first time the system has been tested since its inception, I'll explain more to you later on how it works. Now come on, we're almost there.”

The trot up to the FunBarn caught me by surprise. I expected us to go in through the main door or even the side entrance I'd once used myself. Instead, Protégé took us around the side of the gigantic pink building (Just smile...) to the somewhat less highly decorated rear. I'd never seen this side of the FunFarm before, the way it stretched out with hastily constructed materials to form a corridor linking into a nearby warehouse. Red Eye clearly had at some point outgrown the FunBarn's limited space and connected it to the nearest building he could to better house all the organising required for such a vast operation. The link between them was heavily guarded and sectioned off, as though this warehouse

behind it was part of the FunBarn itself rather than just a handily positioned expansion outside the FunFarm's fence.

“This, Murk, is the logistics hub for Fillydelphia.” Protégé indicated the warehouse. “The FunBarn's big, but it gets mostly used for scientific study and data these days. The logistical demand long outgrew it and we now use this for all the incoming and outgoing food, water, medicine, ammo and materials checking and distribution organising.”

A huge chunk on the side of it had been roughly cut away, acting as a massive open door. Inside it I could see scaffold formed into shelves that slaves wandered between following designated letters or numbers mounted on the sides and glancing at sheets of paper. Behind them, lay stacks of crates in a perpetual state of movement. Some were being dropped off, others filled by the slaves trawling the shelves for items, a few were being emptied and packaged into smaller boxes upon carts and other larger boxes planted onto armoured wagons.

“Everything you see here is either being directed to where in Fillydelphia needs it or addressed to where out in the wastes requires it. Those workers are filling in any missing items or removing extras for stockpiling. We can't waste *anything* by risking over or under supply in this city, Murk. Not that it doesn't still happen...”

We trotted through the organised chaos of the warehouse floor. True to his usual manner I could see no whips lashing or canes beating. Most of the slavers stood around barking orders at the very most. Judging by what I knew (and I *knew* being a slave) I could see the slaves in here were, if anything, rather content compared to what else they could be doing in Fillydelphia. One even hummed to himself without being told off as he wandered the shelves looking for something amongst various sizes of empty ammo boxes.

The little part of me that took glee in 'acquiring' things for myself was rather beside himself with imagining running riot here taking things for our effort. Or just taking some of this stuff in general. They had everything! I could see glue sticks, tools, light bulbs, empty bottles, cutlery, clothes hangers and even stacks of freshly printed paper from the Ministry of Image's presses!

“Sir, I've got what you requested.”

A shadow falling across me as the female voice spoke led me to turn and find Ragini having bounded over upon our entrance. Casting a glance to me, she handed a clipboard to Protégé.

“How you doing, flightless?”

The name felt like an old habit she simply spurted out without thinking of her own situation. Struggling to not dare move my wings and indeed to keep my eyes from her own mangled appendages I just coughed and shrugged.

“All right, I suppose...”

“Try not to bring any of your calamity into here, the workers just spent all last night clearing up after a feral ghoulish somehow got into the stock room.” She almost grinned. “Knowing your reputation for trouble I almost would prefer a horde of them to whatever events seem to follow in your wake.”

“L...h-huh?” I had a reputation?

“Don't tease the poor boy, Ragini.” I could almost see Protégé grinning as he read from the clipboard and waved us both over to a large office filled with slavers and workers around a low and wide table.

Ragini simply grinned and winked at me before I followed them in, not knowing quite what else to do. Why were griffins so weird? Yesterday she hated me but today she was just joking with me. Was this some sort of coping mechanism or did she perhaps see me as someone who could even vaguely understand what she was going through despite what she'd said? I kept an eye on her as I entered the bustling room, noticing the way she paced on her talons. Like she was ready to spring any time. Even without her wings, I knew she would be an agile and lethal combatant.

Very quickly I lost track of what was really going on with this meeting. Protégé bent over the table, seeing the swathes of files laid out over it. Massive maps were pinned to the walls, showing all of Equestria. I tried to flex my new knowledge from last night and read some of the locations but at most I got a couple of the earlier letters. Somewhere with an 'f' had lots of lines coming out of it, likely Fillydelphia...

Protégé, Ragini and the slavers chatted repeatedly over timetables and supplies. I heard them talk of tons of food, daily munitions productions and caravan pricing. It almost seemed more important than working in the Mall, but it was easy to see there was no true value here. Protégé had been reduced to merely a supervisor of keeping things running than any real position of power. A thankless job. Maybe that was why he wanted this nomination thing so badly...

“Krrrzzztch...stupid thing on?”

“Yeah, I-kzzztch...out right now. Need to-kzzztch-as I can, dark room below.”

I blinked a few times, looking down at my Pipbuck. I'd had it left on near silent to hear any news updates with my ears without disturbing anyone else, but other voices crackled through it. Tapping the buttons a couple of times I tried adjusting to another station (Pinkie, really, you don't creep me out as much now but your music station still drives me to insanity) but the voices remained. After a few seconds they clipped out. Probably just a wayward frequency, it wouldn't be the first time I'd heard it.

Something else caught my attention though.

“What about the attrition rates?”

“They've gone up, sir. With the salvage teams resuming their work and the extra power needed from the materials in the crater the ponypower's been burning fast.”

That caught my ear. Sitting up from the side of the room, I trotted to his side and found myself standing around a fierce debate of how to best allocate ponies as resources around Fillydelphia. Protégé argued for safer tasks until they could build numbers again whilst others pushed for greater exertion in light of 'coming threats from above.' Really, it was all over my head, but I glanced at the files below my nose with some interest. I had to hold my stomach as I saw some photos among them. The corpse pits I'd once hid in...a brutalised team exiting a Stable bearing technical prizes...a new machine in a factory driven by wasted ponies...

“Sacrifice must be made, but I will not send another fifty workers onto that deathtrap of a journey to Everfree until we can afford enough hired guns to get at least twenty of them there, Mudball!” Protégé's voice cut in sharply, directed at a dull brown slaver across the table. After a few moments of silence, I saw him nod and back down. Protégé had won this exchange.

“Yes, sir. I'll see if the Hoof Beater's are willing to take a cheaper contract...”

“Good. The rest of you, start lining up the supply train for the journey and organise the distribution of food. We'll need to reduce rations until they can break into that processing plant's vault. The FunFarm workers have the most right now. I hate to take it from them but it's the best we can do.”

“Sir.”

They all backed off from the table and took their notes. Gradually, they left one by one leaving only a half dozen slaves in here carefully checking the lines between settlements on the maps along with the three of us. Sitting down with a sigh, Protégé wiped his brow.

“Every meeting is like a struggle for power now, they're all looking to get one over you every step of the way.”

Ragini nodded curtly. “I caught Mudball openly dissenting against you being assigned here when I arrived. I think he believes he should have been made supervisor instead. I could get him in the locker room and remind him to-”

“No, no Ragini...” Protégé actually chuckled. “That won't be necessary. Now, we have work to do, Murk? I want you to...Murk?”

He had seen the look on my face. I'd been waiting for my chance to speak, standing looking at him with a more than a little distaste.

“Reducing rations to the FunFarm?” As much as I could, I tried to sound angry. “I know how little they get and it barely kept us alive as it was. How can you reduce that?”

I honestly felt disappointed in him. I'd just listened to them debate how best to *exploit* us slaves for their industry's end. It was Fillydelphia in a nutshell and everything I hated about it! Ragini shot me a stern look but Protégé only turned to the table, tapping it.

“Sometimes sacrifices need be made in Fillydelphia, Murk. There simply isn't the supply to go around. It's-”

“Horrible!” I moved up to the table, drawing the pictures across. “How can this all be justified? How can you just pick and choose who gets what and always put your own things before the slaves? I don't see *slavers* eating worse! Why don't they get rations cut? Why always us? I...I mean, look at all of this, it doesn't make sense!”

I expected a reprimand, I expected him to shut me down or Ragini to simply slap my mouth shut. Other slaves around us turned to look, as did some slavers from outside. Seeing them looking, Protégé waved them to keep working and turned back, looking genuinely interested.

“How does it not make sense?” Protégé motioned with a hoof for me to continue. “Go on, say your piece.”

Oh...oh I had been *waiting* to do this. Taking a few breaths to let my tight throat open up and get some air, I stood and faced him.

“Everything about how this is run! It could be much better. I...I mean I know Fillydelphia isn't a nice place but...why not feed us better? If we got better food and...and rewards and less abuse maybe we might work better too? Red Eye spends thousands of caps to buy slaves, he paid five times my market value to get me! If...if they were healthy wouldn't that save him lots of money with them not dying all the time? Look at it!”

I shoved the picture of the corpse pit toward him.

“We're dying every day! Fillydelphia's making me choke on my own blood every few hours without treatment and there are others who won't last past tonight! Why did you have to force us? If you offered security in here, better food and maybe even use the money saved on paying us wouldn't some of us *want* to work here and build better things without just working us till we die? I've...I've never seen it from this side, of slavers debating around a table over how best to do all this. I never

realised how *stupid* all of this really was! How horrible and brutal and merciless!”

“You feel there's a better way then, Murk?”

“Yes! How many slaves die every day? This can't last long, there's only so many ponies in the wasteland and if we die so fast how can we really help? Why doesn't Red Eye just...like...make everypony healthier and let us want to help make better things nicely? Why doesn't he get nice ponies to lead them instead of evil ones? *Why doesn't he put safety railings on anything?* It might be a bit slower but...but we'd not have to do all this...”

To my great surprise, Ragini watched and listened almost respectfully. Protégé did the same, before smiling to me and patting my shoulder.

“You and I think the same, Murk. We're idealists at heart. Unfortunately, reality doesn't work that way. I need to check some things, but I'll explain as we go.”

He began to lead me around the room. Checking things on his clipboard and the walls he still spoke to me as I followed beside him.

“The first issue that causes this is simply that of how the wasteland works, Murk. Ponies are tough, weathered and independent survivors. Loyalty matters little but to making the next day, I think your time in here has made you think of it as some sort of paradise. It's not.”

He tapped the map, checking the lines of transit even as he pointed out vast areas of blank wilderness.

“For ponies out there, it's a day to day struggle without anypony to bring them food. They have to do it all for themselves by themselves for the most part. That breeds a kind of pony over a few generations, Murk. They don't *like* working for somepony else. They only think about themselves. If we were to simply rely on volunteers, we would never get enough bodies to make a difference in Fillydelphia. They simply would not come. Many places have tried that approach and every time the wasteland decides it would rather take care of itself than give up anything. Why would somepony come from Tenpony to here?”

He indicated through a window over the stock yards outside where wagons were being filled. Behind it I could see the vast red haze and brutal landscape of Fillydelphia.

“If...if Fillydelphia was nicer and less smoggy m-maybe they would-”

“It's not, Murk. Fillydelphia was like this long before Master Red Eye came here. Yet it is the only source of major industry left in Equestria now. How would we get enough volunteers to work of their own choice for years on end in such a hell, Murk? We even tried it a few times, offering better

care for those who decided to come. Very few did.”

“Then what about all the slavers? They're the worst thing here!”

Protégé hesitated a second, seeing the others around and guided me out of the office that we could trot alongside the warehouse floor, far from any prying ears.

“Slavers are a unique breed. Remember what I said about them needing an outlet of their own authority? That's only one aspect. Slavers are not a nice group of ponies, Murk. But they have skills we need to control a workforce and unfortunately, the idea of a 'nice' slaver is a *very* rare one in the wasteland. There is no practical way to reform them all. That's the crux of all this, Murk. It's simply not *practical* to make all this good and nice for everypony.”

“But it's not practical to burn through us this fast either! This can't last...”

“It won't. This is not intended to go forever. Indeed, you are perhaps among the last generation of...workers...to be in here. After Unity and after we have reached a certain level of infrastructure, the children of Master Red Eye will emerge from their learning to take over a pre-built city ready to accept their more advanced skills. *Then* we can focus on something greater. You see, Murk...this is all but an unfortunate means to a greater end. The most any of us can do is try to be what we can from the inside. Masters like myself, Old Grizzly and List Seeker...we just try to protect who we can, knowing that the reality is that this was always going to hurt somepony.”

Rounding on him, I actually felt myself scowl.

“Somepony? Try *hundreds*. Thousands maybe.”

There was a silence between us. Ragini had followed on, staying silent away from our argument. We passed by slaves pulling small carts full of oatmeal urns to the exit for distribution. I'd seen that cart before, it was the FunFarm's, now only half full.

“Why couldn't it just take longer? Do it a small thing at a time rather than launching for the whole thing and needing it to be horrible along the way? Spend longer finding nice ponies and working together to rebuild in peace over a much longer period? Why all the sacrifice to rush it?!”

Protégé took a long time in responding, clearly thinking deeply. I saw him look at that clipboard, bearing the exact numbers upon it no doubt of precisely how horrible this city was.

“Industry can't be created in small scale, Murk. By the time we solved one issue we would not be able to protect it as we moved on. We need this large scale to invest, protect and create a real nationwide infrastructure. Equestria cannot linger in squalor forever, Murk. Unity will be soon, the opportunity will have been missed if we are not ready for it. Perhaps this is simply where perceptions

of what sacrifice is worthwhile must agree to disagree. Perhaps I was wrong. Maybe I am something of a realist with loftier goals than a true idealist like yourself and...from what I hear, the Dweller.”

He returned his eyes to the clipboard, turning away from me. It dawned that we really were looking at this from opposite sides despite his own experiences as a slave in Fillydelphia. I was looking at it from an individual pony's viewpoint and morality while he saw it from the view of statistics and large scale practicality. Like master like pupil...

“But you've seen all this too.” I trotted a little closer. “You know how much it hurts us. The very things you support *still* want to hurt you, look what happened to you! Then you come back and just say it all again? How is that worth it?”

I pointed my hoof to the window beside us. Outside, framed in the dusty window, I had caught in the corner of my eye while speaking a slave by the side of the road being unhooked from a cart and falling to the floor. Limp. Dead.

Above him, a slaver tucked his whip away again before simply hoofing the body into the ditch by the side of the road.

Protégé glared at it. For a second I thought he would launch into a tirade, all the practicalities and all the realistic reasons that I knew made sense. I just didn't like them. Instead, he took rather more time than I had ever known him to.

“I...I don't like it.” He spoke quietly. “It...just is. Sacrifices...must be made. That's what he taught me. I will see a new Equestria.”

That was that. He trotted off away from me into the main warehouse area again.

Ragini, having kept quiet, glared at me with an odd look. A small smile creaked across her beak.

“You've done some growing up, flightless.”

She moved off herself as well. The idea was very strange, that she simply judged people by their confidence or ability to stick up for themselves. Was that how griffins worked? Or just her? Why couldn't they just be like ponies and be easy to understand?

I watched her disappear around the corner, leaving me alone in the supply area with an odd feeling of bittersweet 'victory' over the argument. I'd never seen him look that unsure of himself before in all the time I'd known him.

Then it hit me. For all the curiosity about that strange pony, he had left me alone in the supply

area.

Left me *alone* in the *supply area*.

Hehehe!

I quickly cast my eyes around to the shelves, backing off out of sight from the rest. I was right against the wall of the huge complex, at the last shelves before the windows and very nicely hidden from sight. I didn't waste time and started scouring the shelves with my eyes, looking for anything that could be handy! Whipping my saddlebag open, I dropped in a set of matches for Coral's newly purchased lantern, a little monocular, several washers and nuts for Glimmer's modifications and even stretched right up to lift down two sets of glue. I could only imagine how handy they might be for odd tasks. Grinning madly, I even found a tattered old revolver. Lacking a barrel or grip, it was pretty much just the drum in the middle that was still intact, no doubt ready to be sent back to the manufacturing bays. I helped myself to that too, Glimmer would find a use.

Other things I mentally noted down like the large swathes of cloth nearby that Coral and I could sew weather cloaks out of. There were also some larger saddlebags and plates of metal taken out of body armour. I'd never get them hidden right now but I wasn't in any rush. I would be here all day after all. My eyes fell upon a rather lovely looking row of spark batteries that glowed slightly, though. Maybe I could-

“Murk!”

I froze, dropping down and hastily attaching my saddlebag shut again as I heard the hoofsteps coming closer! Protégé stuck his head around the shelf corner and motioned with a hoof.

“Come on, I've got a job for you.”

“Y-yes, master!” I hastily coughed into my hoof and trotted after him. No worries, that was a good haul for now. This place was a gold mine! We had tools, food, drink, a container for my RadAway, a map on my Pipbuck, some explosive lockpicks made from brass casings, a lantern and now a monocular, matches and tons of scrap between it all! Not to mention my very own battle saddle I was being allowed to keep for now. Oh yes...I could see this starting to come together!

Protégé waited for me beside a small cart, holding a sheet of paper in his magic.

“This will be a good chance for you to practice what you've learned, Murk. These files need sorted alphabetically on the shelves near the back of the warehouse under the gantry. The shelves are all labelled. It's just my logs of what I've been organising, a little monotonous and just the sort of thing it's helpful to have you for.”

“I’ll, um, try...”

I saw him raise an eyebrow and sighed.

“...master...” I half muttered it. He nodded and moved away.

Behind me I saw Mudball casting eyes at Protégé's back even as he left, being watched carefully by Ragini. After a moment of matching eyes with the griffin, he looked back down and they left me to work.

* * *

“This is 'Food' so that's, hmm...this one?”

I muttered to myself, crouching beside the cart with my eyes tracking over the document in front of me. I hadn't exactly made fast progress here other than the ones starting with 'M' after Protégé had taught me to spell my own name. Only now I was trapped between these little squiggly lines, one with a small line through it and the other without. Annoyingly, this file while clearly about food (It held a picture of a tantalising looking pie) I couldn't remember what that looked like in word form.

Urgh. Protégé's records method wasn't exactly easy for the literally incompetent...

Unfortunately, there wasn't much worth taking from where I was and I wasn't exactly sure how wary the overseers were in here. Following on from my gatherings before I didn't want to push my luck. Besides, I *did* want to learn to read.

Pulling a few folders out from the shelf, I skimmed them for anything similar to help me figure it out. I *knew* that 'f' had a squiggly line but did it have the extra little line or was it the snake? Everything felt so confusing. Protégé had told me to watch for letters called towels but so far that wasn't helping. Especially when towels also meant the rugs you dried yourself with. Who designed words that way?

My head hurt...

Eventually, I located another file about food. So it did have the little line! 'F' was little line through a squiggle. Ok! I began shifting through all the ones on the cart looking for any other ones about food and threw each of them in at the end of the 'F' section. As it turned out, that was the vast majority. I umm'ed and aah'ed my way through most of the pile, likely knowing I got something wrong now and again. (Why was it 'double you' when the letter was clearly two 'V' letters?) But eventually I whittled it down and felt rather proud of myself as I did so.

The last one utterly stumped me though.

It outright told me what I was to look for, it held a straight line then a circle beside it at the top. I didn't remember *that* in the alphabet. I even tried to cheat and compare it to others on the shelf but found none at all that matched.

Sighing, I eventually trotted over to the nearest slave.

“Um, excuse me...miss?” I shrunk back slightly as the scrawny mare looked down at me without much care. “Where does this go?”

Her magic lifted it, casting her eyes for a few seconds across the top.

“Ah, this? Exception form, goes in the little room under the gantry down there. See? Number ten at the top, if it's a number it's in there.”

“Oh!” What a *cheat*. A *number*. “Th-thank you, miss!”

“Eh, whatever.” She simply shrugged, returning to the heavy crates she was trying to prise open. I didn't expect much from her, if you got a safe job in slavery you tended to just try and not attract any attention to try and *keep* it.

Meanwhile, feeling happier than I really should at having recognised a few letters for the first time in my life alone, I began to trot toward the indicated room with the form tucked under one wing. I was learning to read, we were getting stuff together to escape, I wasn't with Shackles and I could move my wings! All things considered...life was pretty good by my standards.

The room's door creaked open, ahead of me, the room was almost entirely in darkness. I could see the vague shape of shelves and the numbers listed on little stamped bits of paper along with some old filing cabinets and desks on the dusty floor but the lights had long ceased to work. I could see the number I was after, the line and circle right at the bottom of the room if I squinted, the light from out here casting inside.

Slowly, I trotted in. hard concrete tapped under my hooves and without really knowing why, I softened my trotting to not make any noise. The further I walked in, the more the warehouse behind me dulled in sound. Past the first three shelves, then the fifth...

Then the door slammed shut and cast the room into utter darkness.

Squeaking as I blinked and let my natural sight adjust to the change, I made to gallop before stopping. No...no...the door had just been on springs, it was okay...it was okay...

All the same, I couldn't help but feel a rising tension in the air. A sense of something watching

me as I went further in. I felt myself speed up, moving to a canter and pacing quickly with little whimpers. I didn't want to look behind me. The darkness seemed to gather in corners, shadows within the black itself. My neck tingled with sweat and I felt my breathing get quicker.

“Kzzztch-there?”

“Shut up you-kzzztch...”

I knew this feeling, I'd felt it in nightmares. It'd felt it in the Stable. Like being chased by a ghost. Now as I heard that same frequency go off, I realised it sounded like somepony on a radio. Wait...hadn't it mentioned a dark room?

Was...was something behind me?

No, not waiting. Move. Move *now*. I didn't like this, somepony felt like they were right behind me no matter where I turned! Oh Goddesses...oh Goddesses...

Before I knew it, I was almost galloping toward the last shelf and threw the folder into it hastily. Cringing, whining and hopping from hoof to hoof nervously to turn around, I fled immediately for the door, not daring to imagine what that *presence* was I felt in the darkness. It felt like something was *right behind my tail*.

Without hesitation, I flung the door open and dove outside, slammed it shut and spun to run further away from the dark room. I stopped on the spot as I collided with something.

Oh, wait...somepony.

I heard him grunt more in shock than pain. It wasn't like my little body was going to hurt anypony. Staggering away from each other, I felt like throwing my hoof in my mouth when I saw who it was.

“Murk...” Protégé rubbed his side with a hoof. “I can't exactly say you're not making a habit of literally running into me when I'm looking for you.”

“S-sorry! I...the dark in there...just...um...” I caught my breath. “Sorry, master.”

No need to sound foalish by talking about being scared of the dark. Even so, I figured he got the message and nodded.

“Well, your familiarity with the dark and sneaking around is what I need you for now, Murk.”

“H-huh?”

Protégé's eyes narrowed.

“The Great Game continues. We've had a break in.”

* * *

He took me up the gantry to a suspended level above the warehouse floor. A series of thin walled offices atop the catwalk were occupied by banks of terminals or specialist sorting rooms attended to by slaves and slavers alike. Trotting to the furthest office away, Protégé unlocked the door to wander inside. I followed him, glancing around at the recently moved in office,

“What do you mean a break in?”

“Someone infiltrated my office, Murk.” Protégé shut the door behind me with a flash of his horn. “While I was out, somepony has stolen their way in here.”

“What did they take?” Looking around it all seemed very normal. He had brought the items I had lifted here up with him and dumped them by his desk and the remainder held a smattering of reading materials and organisation documents. On a rack at the back were a few changes of clothes with a low bed next to the window. It was a definite downgrade from the padded office in the Mall.

“Nothing.”

“Then...how do you know someone broke in?”

Waving me forward, he lightly opened a drawer.

“Simple tricks, Murk. Anyone seeking ways to ensure things in here keeps careful watch on who is doing what. A simple thin thread stuck to drawer and desk of where I keep more valuable information that would be snapped by anyone looking through it without even realising. I keep this drawer locked, the door secured and the only other way in is a window with a thirty foot drop, also locked. There's an attic above us but it doesn't lead anywhere.”

“Maybe it just got broken? If nothings been taken...”

“More than that. Specific organisation of how I leave my things. Scattered and untidy or not, I know where I leave them. I take measure to ensure I remember where each thing in my desk drawers is in relation to each other. It's been moved.”

I couldn't much help but store these ideas away to watch out for in future from the perspective of somepony who often *did* the sneaking.

“So what were they after?”

“Information, Murk. Likely trying to find out what I knew, what my schedule was or anything else. Detail is key these days, Murk. They likely sought simply to dig up dirt or simply test the waters of whether I would notice.”

I wandered about the room, looking at each part of the sparse furniture and out of the window. How would I have gotten in here? I couldn't lockpick...so the best place for me would be to try and grapple my way to the roof.

“Is the attic's roof, um, solid?”

“The section above this room, yes. The interesting thing is, I keep another length of thin string by the door. It was unbroken.”

I stood and stared at the attic door up a small flight of stairs at the back of the office. There wasn't anything to say they couldn't lockpick themselves and if they'd gotten into the drawer they must have. But they clearly hadn't entered through the door. I saw Protégé sit down, tenderly rubbing his bandaged neck with a slight grimace.

“Are...are you all right?” It occurred to me I'd never once asked that yet.

“Yes, Murk. Thank you. Nothing worse than what I imagine you are feeling. It has not been an easy time for us and there will still be many dangers ahead for either you or me I would wager.”

“I'm sorry you lost what you wanted...”

I didn't really hear his response, nothing other than general politeness that I let slip from actually listening to, for I heard my Pipbuck pick up again.

“Kzzztch-right up there, you all right?”

“Yes, it's fine. Sooner I can leave from up here the -kzzztch...”

It faded off into static with unintelligible noises.

I could hear Protégé asking what I was looking at, but I didn't answer. I simply held up a hoof for him to be quiet and slowly trotted forward. Somepony's radio hitting my Pipbuck's receiver from before...

They'd mentioned a dark room, then told somepony to shut up while I'd been *in* a dark room,

then asking if they were fine 'up there.'

I felt a very cold chill run over me as I leaned close to Protégé's ear.

“Did you check the attic?”

“Not yet. I haven't been up there in some time.”

“Then I know how they got out...they didn't.”

I held the Pipbuck up, close enough that he could hear. Occasional lines asking if they had 'gotten anything' or 'when they could leave.' They weren't stealing into the room...they were always here, checking it and feeding information through a radio every time he left!

Very carefully, I saw Protégé lift his revolver from the pile beside his desk and get off his seat. He spoke quietly, soft enough to let me hear.

“E.F.S can't see them, but there are ways to block it. The stairs creak, they'll hear us coming. This needs to be quick.”

“Kzzztch-just lemme know when they go and I'll tail em.”

“Hold your hooves, Dirk. Least you get to stretch your legs.”

I knew that name. It was one of Barb's shades! They must have been trying to help Shackles to feed him information on what Protégé was up to! My mind briefly wondered why they didn't just go for the kill even as Protégé placed a hoof on the steps and readied his telekinesis around the latch of the attic door.

I saw him nod to me. Shaking, I nodded back. At least he was with me for this.

A couple of breaths...and then he pulled the door open and galloped up. I followed, unwilling to let him face those dark terrors alone again. Ahead of me, he burst into the room!

I heard somepony from above shout, a scrambling of hooves and Protégé shouting for them to 'put it down.' My ears split right as I ran in from a loud gunshot in such close proximity and fell to the side when the stairwell splintered and blasted wood into my face. He was shooting at us! Oh Goddesses!

Protégé's revolver fired back, I couldn't see what was going on, cramped in the little stairwell before actually entering. Wood cracked and the sound of galloping hooves gave way to two more shots from Protégé's revolver, snapping and echoing around the room. Dragging myself up, I pulled myself

into the attic, saddle mouthpiece drawn for...some reason. The attic was large and surprisingly well lit around the wooden beams. Protégé was galloping forward to dive behind an old water tank.

“Murk, get down!”

He shouted it even as another buckshot blasted the beam beside me into tinder. Squealing, I fell to the side between two beams and onto the soft roof padding that I half buried myself in from the exchange of gunfire above me. I could hear screams from the warehouse below at the sounds. Daring to poke my head up, I finally saw our assailant at the far end. A shadowy figure visible only from the glint of a sawn off shotgun magically floating as it reloaded. Behind them, a trapdoor opened to the roof, designed to look exactly like a *part* of the roof itself. No wonder we hadn't known how they got in!

Keeping my head low beneath the beams of wood that traversed the attic at this side I heard their shotgun blast another shot into the water tank Protégé hid behind. He dropped back and blind fired around the corner before reloading his own revolver from a pocket full of rounds.

“You think I can't hear that? Eat this!” The Shade pointed the shotgun and pulled the trigger. Protégé huddled behind cover as best he could.

Click.

“Ah *shit.*” Daring to glance up, I saw the shotgun floating up to his eye after the jam before the Shade clambered out of the trapdoor.

“He's running!” I cried out to Protégé, who simply holstered his weapon and got up to make chase. Following him, we both ran onto the more solid wooden floor where the Shade had been residing. I saw a strange piece of arcane technology humming away on the floor. Protégé looked at it with surprise.

“Grab that, Murk!”

Throwing it in my saddlebag, Protégé and I ran to the trap door and glanced out. In the red light of Fillydelphia even a Shade could be seen galloping across the walkways of the warehouse roof. We both clambered out, dropping six feet to the metal catwalks and tore off after them. Protégé took an easy lead with his longer legs, weaving around the air ducts upon the roof to close the distance.

The Shade moved like water over anything barring the way! I saw him glide over railings and slide between thin gaps in a cage fence around a generator without so much as slowing down. Protégé vaulted the same railing and shot out the lock of the fence door to run through, with me following as close as I could after simply running under the first rail.

“Come on, Murk!”

He could shout, but I'd never be able to keep up here! Ducking and diving I kept my little hooves moving to keep sight on the Shade that fled across a mass of pipes, aiming to turn right toward a fire escape! Protégé put his head down and sprinted, smartly taking the direct route rather than the one the Shade had taken. Even when the Shade got near the fire escape, Protégé's shots slammed on its top level railings, making him leap back.

“Just get to fuck you little weasel!” Growling, having had to jump back into cover, the Shade didn't have a choice but to abandon it now we were close enough to catch him if he tried to go down the steep stairs. Even a Shade couldn't make hooves work well across with such things!

My legs were aching under me though, I wouldn't be in this chase much longer. Protégé I could see was flagging too, his neck no doubt severely hampering him. I had to get smart...think, Murky, think!

The Shade ducked behind a massive air conditioning unit, disappearing from sight. I knew what I had to do.

Stopping, I ran backwards and spun around in the same direction, taking a route around the same unit to catch him if he doubled back. It's what I would have done! Dropping to my side and sliding on my momentum below a (normal pony's) knee level pipe I whipped my saddle's mouthpiece back out and pointed it up the adjoining route through this maze atop the roof.

Sure enough, the Shade was running right toward me. Taking only brief aim, I bit hard on the mouthpiece and shot the hook right at him even while still sliding from my dive.

“Whoa, shit!” Ducking to the side, the Shade simply threw himself at the ground, not having enough time to realise it was only a grapple and not a proper gun before choosing to dodge. Slamming into the other side of the thin gap between the air unit and pipes I at least made him pause and let Protégé behind him catch up. We had him trapped!

“Don't move! I said *don't!* Who was it that sent you? Shackles? Grindstone?”

The Shade, half blurring at the edges into the shades below each part of the roof, spun from me to face Protégé and snarled.

“Shades don't squeal, mister teacher's pet! Especially not to bastards who killed Barb! Didn't even need payment to take up work to fuck up your life when we got the offer!”

“You lot are assassins, why didn't you just kill me when I slept in that room? What information were you after?”

The Shade grinned. “Wouldn't you like to know? Goodbye...”

Neither of us had seen it but that blurriness had hid his horn casting a spell! Only when I saw the growing darkness did I realise it before he melted away through a space so thin even I couldn't squeeze through! A blink spell! Racing up, I saw him reform on the other side, grin at me through the gap and run off.

“Murk! Boost up!”

Before I even realised how silly an idea this was, I put my back to the gap and held my hooves together to boost Protégé atop the gap we couldn't fit through. Feeling my front legs burn with the effort of lifting even a lighter pony like Protégé I gasped and staggered when I felt him reach the top. Catching a breath, I used my grapple to get over myself. From atop the unit I saw the Shade sprinting for the edge of the building, pursued by Protégé. Hopping from unit to unit, I knew I would never catch up to this chase again so I simply tried to keep an eye on what was going on.

“See you later, colt cuddler!”

The Shade shouted over his shoulder before leaping off the building's edge! I actually stopped and saw him hang in the air from the abnormally long jump as he stretched out...and landing on the building just over from here.

Behind him, Protégé clenched his teeth and increased his speed. I saw his horn glow, spreading around himself as he charged up and leapt! He was trying to lighten himself! I ran forward, aiming to grapple over myself...

He made it.

Barely.

Slamming into the side of the building, I heard him cry out in pain from his injuries at the impact. His hooves just grasped the ledge, leaving his hind section kicking in thin air below. Feeling horror in my gut, I sprinted up and fired my grapple to the other building, putting away my fear of falling to zip right across. Landing heavily from such a shallow swing, I scrambled across the pebbled roof and thrust my hooves out to grab Protégé, hauling him onto the roof.

We simply lay there for a few seconds. Exhausted and sore. The Shade kept sprinting even after our stamina had gone. Barb's disciples that still lurked Fillydelphia were hugely fit raiders and we were just a pair of small ponies recently out of hospital with still bandaged injuries. We'd never catch up now...

“Thank...phew...thank you, Murk. It seems I made the right choice in having you around...”

I didn't even reply. The long sprint was catching up to me and I just lay on my side, hooves limp as I struggled to get air. My throat was feeling sore and tight, leading me to rasp each time. With hooves that felt like lead, I took a long gulp from my Radaway canteen and coughed down the horrible mixture. The rampant thumping in my chest gradually died down...the taint growth slowing for now.

“He...” I stammered, having to swallow back the metallic tang left over in my mouth. “He got away...”

“Yes, yes he did.” Protégé struggled to his feet and stretched back and forth, checking his bandages. “That's a new move afoot, that my enemies amongst the slavers have recruited Barb's survivors out of their hatred for me. We shall have to tread softly and keep a wary ear out. Good thing I have you for that, hmm?”

He tried to offer a smile, likely happy to simply be alive after that jump.

“Um...yes?”

“Just from now on, I think I'll leave the telekinesis tricks to the Dweller. I'd heard she was good with them. Who said only you were inspired to ideas from her? Problem is, I don't seem to be very *good* at them.”

Patting my back, he helped me up as we both tiredly limped to the nearest fire escape. His magic lifted the odd object from my saddlebag. Part of me felt a little odd, he could have *asked* first...damn slavers...

“This isn't common, it's an E.F.S blocker. I wasn't aware we even *had* any in Fillydelphia still functioning. Somepony is supplying them with advanced equipment to indirectly aid their interests...”

“Shackles and Grindstone?”

“Well, that in itself is obvious. They've as much as told us before but this makes me worry where they are *getting* this stuff. Now, we've got to go to the Alpha-Omega, Old Grizzly wants to see me with a drop of information somewhere that there will be less outside ears.”

He smirked as we got onto the fire escape.

“Besides, I hear there's a couple of little fillies who are eager to see you.”

* * *

“I just don't understand.”

“Understand what?”

Protégé glanced down to me as I asked my question. We were trotting back the way we have come and around the FunBarn to the Alpha-Omega Hotel. Briefly, Protégé had met with a furious Ragini. She had tried to find us, but our chase had been on such an unknown direction upon the rooftop that she hadn't been able to locate her charge in time.

Couple that with losing a chance to take a shot at the Shades and the griffin had not been pleased. She had been left to guard his office, in case anypony returned with a sneaky subversion. I'd heard her swearing and punching a wall even as we'd left, keeping her rage out of sight of her charge.

“I just don't understand why we can't go to Red Eye right now and tell him about all this. That they were happy to try and kill you when you found us yesterday. That they're stealing and that they betrayed you in the Mall!”

Protégé glanced toward the upper floors of the FunBarn. Likely where Red Eye was right now.

“My Master is exceptionally busy, Murk. Unity is near and he has greater things than my life to worry himself about at this very moment. Even I cannot simply request an audience or walk in.”

“You didn't see him after you almost died? Didn't he come to visit you?”

There was that pause again, before he simply smiled.

“He didn't have to, I hear he looked in on me before I woke up but after that I reported to him from my bed. I will see him soon enough however, once Unity's preparations are finished in Fillydelphia. Rest assured, I will have a full report for him.”

He seemed to grin a little to himself. Whether over imagining the satisfaction of Red Eye's sweeping authority dealing with this or that love of precise writing and reports I knew he had I wasn't sure. Briefly, I pitied Red Eye having to read whatever extensive thing he'd wrote. (Knowing Protégé, it likely had *graphs*.)

“As you might have seen based on what you told me of bringing Lilac here, an act I cannot thank you for enough, security has had something of an upgrade in this place since Littlepip essentially trotted right in.”

Ahead of us, the Alpha-Omega Hotel's gates were secured with great measure. The fence ahead of the lit building thrummed with magic power and two small towers held griffin snipers watching our every move. Protégé was permitted entry without a word though. They allowed him (and apparently,

his 'assistant') in on sight. I took the fanatical glance from Red Eye's guard very seriously. He bore the mark of the fanatical elite core of Red Eye's army upon his combat armour's breast after all.

No. No trouble or hijinks here. In other places if caught I'd be punished. Here I'd be executed on the spot without a warning.

What awaited me just as we went inside was beyond what I could have imagined, however.

Fresh new carpets lined the main hallway of the hotel. That classic design of Fillydelphia to have a grand staircase just beyond the front doors and reception was lit and of a temperature that felt like a refreshing comfort after the stuffy outside. They had working air conditioning! With the doors closed and blocking the sound I could have imagined I was simply back in Old Equestria all over again.

“This is the seat of Equestria's future, Murk. We have done all we could to ensure a safe and happy place for them to grow, learn and dream. This main hall is mostly just for guards and exchanges, but above us in the old rooms they have their dorms while the grand ballroom has been converted to a place of learning.”

We trotted in, me feeling distinctly out of place with my filthy fleece and matted coat. On a guard's insistence I even had to scrape my hooves on a little mat before I was allowed to wander further into the hotel itself and view the long hallways of thick red and burnished gold fittings. I could hear them, children playing, laughing and scampering around on little hooves in adjoining rooms and floors.

I couldn't help but make contrast to the empty orphanage I'd so recently seen.

After we dropped in our equipment and weapons (My battle saddle was a weapon. In my mind) to the reception, we were finally allowed to continue in. Protégé led me upstairs, making assurances to the robed staff that I was with him and having to hide his smirk as I hopped on each of the thickly carpeted stairs. What? It was designed for a time when ponies were bigger than me! No wonder the foals didn't come down here much.

Quite simply, I couldn't quite get over the sort of place I was seeing. It was clean! Those cabinets on the landing between stairs were actually polished and held growing flowers! The bannisters were all intact with recut wood! At the top of the stairs, the large square room bore clear tables, huge doors with intricate stained glass and beyond that a dining room where cooks hurriedly set out a meal upon the serving tables. Clearly, their lunch was soon.

Even from here, I could smell the warm cooking. Tasting the sweet scent of sugar and thick fumes of gravy or soup wafting from between the doorways...oh please...say we can have lunch here, Protégé? My stomach was actually *growling* at me with the need and temptation...

“Not even I or Master Red Eye are permitted to this food, Murk. He would not dare feast on

this while workers do not. Sacrifice must come from all.”

Clearly he'd seen me poking my nose against the glass and slightly steaming it up. Blinking, I blushed and stepped back from it.

“S-sorry...warm food and...um...”

“I know, Murk. I know. We'll get something soon enough. But please, come here. While we wait for Old Grizzly I think you might like to see how the foals are living? It might offer you a better perspective on this entire endeavour.”

“Um, please. Yes.” I nodded, feeling my hooves unwilling to leave behind the dining room. The chef was serving *mashed potatoes* out to the tables! I'd only ever dreamed of them! Yet I forced myself to move along and follow Protégé as he trotted down the adjoining hall. It was rather wide, definitely not just a corridor and arced around a massive curved wing of the hotel. Then as we trotted, I began to see the truth of this place.

Behind clear glass doors, I saw the foals. They were sitting inside the grand hall, dozens of them! Upon cushions resting over an old dance floor they sat and stared as an elderly stallion taught them something on a blackboard. They scribbled in little jotters, some bored and some avidly taking it up. Behind them I could hear another little group singing songs while a third was constructing little wooden models on basic workbenches. Across the grand hall where ponies must have once danced, Red Eye had created a full *school*.

Glancing in, I felt a little spike of envy. Of impossible to ever correct jealousy at seeing them all having fun together as they learned the skills of life. All those foals, sometimes less than half my age were likely more intelligent than I'd ever be...

Protégé rounded off and saw me staring through the window. One little foal turned and saw me there, waving with a smile. They were so idealistic and willing. Waving back, I felt Protégé's hoof on my shoulder, beckoning me onward to not disturb them in class.

“Don't worry, Murk. We'll get you up to speed. I promise.”

The smile was genuine, I couldn't help but sniff and nod back with a little grin. Of all things, I was thankful that he was willing to help me with this, be it ten years too late or not.

Passing around the hallway that encircled the large ballroom, Protégé led me through to a series of common rooms and even a library that had been redesigned out of a music room. I could still see the piano there. Still *hear* the piano as a little colt tentatively plucked out a few chords upon it. The noise of children flooded into my ears as I discovered this was their place to play and do as they willed.

“Foals need time to discover their own likes, Murk. We don't drill them.”

“Protégé!”

The squeaking shout went out and before I knew it a small crowd of them had followed the shout and surged across the ground to us. Allegedly, he was rather popular with the foals.

“Are you here to tell us another story?”

“I really want to hear the one with Daring Do again!”

Rather swamped along with all these foals, I stepped back a little, grinning at him. The thought of Protégé sitting and reading a book to them was, frankly, *hilarious* to me. That serious buck having to tell a tale would be something all right. He shook his head and talked to them, speaking to them all by name and asking how they were doing. I took a step to the side and looked around the room, not daring to leave it for fear of being considered an intruder without Protégé. I could see other rooms attached that led back to the school or on to the dining room while others clearly were large lines of dorms that foals came and went from.

They were healthy. Happy. Bright and with a delighted glint in their eye I'd never known from anypony other than a drunken Glimmer!

“...Murky? Is that you?”

Stopping on the spot, I heard the little rasping female tone and turned with all the hope in my heart.

Both Starshine Melody and Lilac Rose were stood right there. Clad in body covering robes other than their faces, the two little ghouls widened their eyes to see it was me. A sweet little smell came off them, emerging from necklaces that swung around their necks to disguise the stench that being a ghoul brought.

“Starshine! Lilac!”

Trying my best to smile widely for them, I knelt down before them. The pair offered small smiles, and shuffled forward, both hugging me at the same time. Really I hadn't thought about it much of how they saw me, but I'd been the one to save both of them.

“Are you two doing okay?”

“Mhm.” Starshine murmured a little quietly when she stepped back. “They gave me medicine to help the pain go away...”

The poor thing, she must have been coping with the reality of being a ghoulish now, her experience had been far more traumatic than Lilac's. I didn't understand how becoming one worked but in such a short and horrible way the idea of there being pain involved seemed all too likely.

"We help each other." Lilac stood rather adamantly beside Starshine. "We're best friends now. Star got them to let me play and not be scared of me."

"Good girl." I tried to remember how Coral spoke and emulate it as best I could.

"Are you here because it's time to go find Miss Coral again?" Lilac seemed hopeful. "Because...um...Star wanted to know if she could come..."

I could feel things getting ever more complicated again, not to mention a bit of a horrible decision of what to say here. Yes, I'd be more than fine to help her get out, but I knew I was speaking for Coral here.

"Well...you can both certainly come with us, is that...fine?"

"Yes!" Both spoke at the same time, Lilac turning and nodding to Starshine as though saying 'Told you it'd be fine!'

"But it's not right now. I'm just...um...on a really secret mission to get in and speak to you right now!"

Oh my imagination. Here we went...I could see their eyes light up and hustle close to hear secrets. I could see Protégé still talking to many of the other foals and hearing what they had been learning.

"Listen close, we've got a plan coming together but I need to know how to get you two out of here along with Coral's son, Chirpy Sum."

"He's not here right now!" Lilac pipped up.

"Yes, um..." Starshine was clearly the less confident of the two. "They said he got to go to 'advanced studies' somewhere else with one of the leaders cos' he's so smart with maths. I can't even do all my times tables but he can do really really complex stuff like square roots and...and triangle things."

Well now...depending on circumstances, that might make things easier to get him back, I'd have to pass that information on and try and find out where, maybe Protégé knew.

"Good work girls." I patted each of their heads, remembering how I had seen my friend do it.

“But Star, how did you get out last time? Could you do that again?”

“Uh huh...they never found my hole. It's near the drain pipe outside at the fence. I used to sneak down the old servant's staircase to get out to look around from it.”

“I used that too at the orphanage!” Lilac beamed at her new friend and the pair laughed together. I joined in lightly, feeling impolite not to. It really was wonderful to see Lilac having found a place she could be with other foals...

“Right, I'm sure I could find it. Check the drainpipe every so often, Star. I'll...um...I'll leave a note there once we know what's going on. Okay?”

“Okay, Mister Murky!” Starshine lit up. “Lilac's told me about Miss Coral and I told her about the really *really* big pony that carried you off when you got sick! You all sound nice and...and I kinda miss my own mummy and daddy since I came here. They're nice but...I want to go home...”

Straining harder than I ever had to stop my traitorous eyes from dampening, I embraced her lightly.

“We'll all make it. I...I promise.”

“R-really?”

“Yeah...”

I felt like I'd made a mistake saying that. Promises set false hope. But she was just a foal, what else could I say? If there was one thing I knew I cared about helping, it was children. It always had been a thing to me, now that I could see my own life for what it was, helping them escape even these bright and shining chains that sought to turn them into Red Eye's personal little population seemed important. I felt sure Coral wouldn't mind...

“Murk.” Protégé's voice picked up from behind me.

Blinking fast, I smiled a goodbye to the girls and stood up. “Y-yes?”

“Old Grizzly's here, we have to go.”

* * *

“Well, Murk. I'm glad to see you have survived your ordeal.”

Old Grizzly broke that stern face of his for at least a small smile when we entered the small

room. It was rather out of the way, quiet and hidden.

“Th-thank you...sir.” Better to be cautious.

“Now do me a favour, kid. Keep those ears out for anypony for us, will you? This has to remain quiet.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

The thickset earth pony sat upon the bed, casting a dubious glance as to whether the wooden chairs would support his weight. Raising one hairy hoof he shook off a thick brown weather cloak that almost seemed to match the colour of his coat and mane precisely, were it not for the grey hairs forming.

Protégé sat upon a chair. After a moment of wondering, I eased onto one as well until I was sure they weren't going to order me to the floor.

“Sir, you said you had something for me?” Protégé leaned on the table, his eyepiece sat beside him.

“Yes, Protégé. I apologise I could not come to see you directly but there are eyes and ears everywhere now.”

“I know. Murk and I chased one of them off just this morning. Ragini has her hands full just keeping the warehouse from going off schedule. It was a Shade, Grizzly. One of Barb's students that slipped away from the Mall riot. They've thrown in their lot with somepony to work against me.”

Old Grizzly grunted and lay back with his head on the wall.

“That bastard keeps it up even from the grave. Most raiders don't have that sort of loyalty. Strange that one known for backstabbing carried such an inner core.”

“It's...um...” I spoke up, then realised I'd done so possibly out of turn until I saw Protégé smile and gesture for me to continue. “It's how Brimstone's clan worked...he told me they were loyal to each other and that's what helped them do better than most raider gangs. That's why they hate him...because he turned traitor and left. They were the ones that threw me in the Pit with Wildcard because I killed Barb.”

“Makes sense, then.” Grizzly nodded. “You working with Protégé here, with Brimstone helping both of you out at times and already not liking you to begin with my boy. Must have one hell of a hate boner on for you all.”

I saw Protégé squint at the use of language. Clearly he hadn't inherited one of his teacher's traits over Red Eye's.

“I think it's safe to assume they are working with Shackles and Grindstone.”

“They are, sir. Murk here reported that he saw Wildcard in league with them at a hidden meeting. I've heard Wildcard's been around the Mall sometimes too. It seems they have-”

“Made an alliance, yes.” Grizzly cut in before sighing. “That's what I'm here to tell you. The nominations for who becomes Stern's successor in the chain of command, it's not looking good. There's a lot of back room intrigue, as there always is, but I've been tasked with keeping track of preliminary nominations.”

A lot of this was feeling beyond my station, but I couldn't help but notice a sudden change in atmosphere. Grizzly spoke with wary eyes while Protégé narrowed his darkly.

“Sir...you are not meant to tell anypony that, for fear of bias or blackmail and-”

“I know, boy, I know. That's why I needed you here. I've *seen* where a lot of the votes are going and it's not looking good. I'm risking all to break the rules and give you this information because in this 'great game' as they're calling it now...I don't want to see Shackles win out. Right now, he *is*.”

Oh...

Grizzly continued, his voice low. “Naturally, every slaver votes for himself. Shackles has done so, but Grindstone and many of the others have done so as well. Slit put in one for him so we can only assume he paid her a visit too. He has *sway*, Protégé. They're crafting a majority here. He's a nomination for sure and there's no-pony else with enough votes to act as a competitor.”

Blinking, I tried to keep up with all this.

“So...so if he's got a majority...doesn't that mean he wins?”

My voice felt weak beside Grizzly's deep bass and Protégé's strong tone, but it was both of them looking at me that made me realise just how stupid it was to speak. Both of them knew how this worked, I didn't really factor in. All the same, Protégé nodded to Grizzly and turned back to me.

“This isn't a vote to see who wins, Murk. This is simply a case of finding out which leaders are considered highly enough to be put in for a future vote on who becomes the actual successor. In essence, this nomination process is about finding out who the future nominees would be. But if there's only one significant majority vote at the hosting today...they win by default.”

“Precisely.” Grizzly stomped his two front hooves together. “If they found out I'm telling you this my head would be on a pike within the hour. Desperate times, Protégé. You know I've always opposed his style of rule, it's why I'm going to transfer my vote to you.”

“To me?!” Protégé seemed genuinely shocked. “But...but sir, you are the senior, I should be the one putting my nomination to you! You have far more respect among the leaders and-”

“Protégé, no.” He cut him off. “I have much respect but I have hid away in the FunBarn for years now other than a small group nearby in the bumper plough pit. I'm not exactly going to be around for long anyway...there's a reason they call me old. It's sodding *true*. But there's a bigger reason...”

He took a breath, leaning closer.

“Protégé, Red Eye has cast his vote for *you*.”

I didn't think I'd ever manage to see Protégé look so genuinely open mouthed and speechless ever again with that poised figure broken into a stunned student.

“He...”

“Yes, he did. That changes things. As we know, Stern will follow Red Eye's lead no matter what he does, which has led to her putting in for you as well. With my own and your vote that already puts you in the running to have a chance at being a worthy challenger to Shackles' influence. You have the rest of today, Protégé. *Find* those that you can count on to cast a vote to you. I recommend you start with List Seeker, his nomination has yet to come through but I heard he had been visited by Shackles' aid Wormtail this morning.”

Protégé was clearly still trying to compose himself internally a little. If the discussion weren't so deadly serious I might have found it a little funny. Like if I'd been told Littlepip had given me a shout out on the radio or something.

“Yes...” He eventually spoke quietly, coughed and sat up straight. “Yes, I'll do that...”

“It's all backroom politics and intrigue now, Protégé. Be careful out there, they clearly know you stand a chance and I'm not going to make the assumption that they haven't sneaked in and read who's winning too. They *know* you stand a chance, I'll bet. So you-”

“Ssh!”

I held up a hoof and Grizzly stopped talking immediately. I'd heard something. Hooves trotting lightly, as though they were sneaking. We sat in silence as I sneaked over to the door and held my ear

against it. Behind me, I could see Protégé unclasping his revolver's holster lock.

The hooves stopped.

I could feel sweat running down my forehead. If this was a Shade...or Wildcard...

“Ready or not, here I come!” A child's voice squeaked out, laughed and came stomping down the hallway. The set of hooves just outside took off, quickly followed by another.

Breathing out, I slid down against the door and shook my head. False alarm. All these waving lines of allegiance were beginning to set me on edge. The slavers were all meant to be together! Now I was finding ever more that this wasn't as much the case as I'd believed.

Of course...this wasn't helped in that I was working behind Protégé's back myself to my own ends. There were more sides than just “us and them” going on here.

Grizzly sighed and stood. “I should get going, they will miss me before long. Protégé, think about what you will say tonight at the hearing for future nomination. If we get you in there to stop Shackles whitewashing this and gaining more power then you'll need to start making an impact. You're the poetic sort...think on that. Even one more solid nomination might sway it enough to put you in with a chance.”

“Yes, sir. I...thank you sir. This all feels like it's coming apart, plotting behind doors and having to break rules to protect those same rules...”

Grizzly just snorted and headed to the door.

“Welcome to politics.”

Closing the door behind him, I was left in the small hotel room with Protégé. Slowly, I saw him lean forward, head in his hooves. This must have felt huge to him.

“I knew I was considered a potential runner, but to go up against a majority group...” Closing his eyes, I saw him sigh. “Some days I wished we could all just work together, Murk. Maybe what you told me earlier is what I should have tried for more, right now with even leader working against leader I'm not sure what to think.”

Biting my lip, I trotted back across.

“But...maybe if you win this, you could make things better in the future when Stern goes away? Isn't that worth bending the rules a little to get? To have something better for everypony?”

Slowly, I saw him open his eyes, rub them and glance across.

“Yes, yes that would be better. I'm just tired, Murk. Tired of these hidden meetings, always having to watch my back and never take any moves in the chain of command for granted. Shackles' play at the Mall was a major point of a power swing in Fillydelphia now that he has presence back. The sooner this is over, the better. The sooner I can speak to Master Red Eye, we'll solve it. Till then we have to keep Shackles from rising ever higher, Murk. You up to it?”

He stood up, lifting his eyepiece.

“That is...if you'll help me. I'm not stupid, I know you have your own agendas here.”

It somewhat surprised me how fast I thought about it and nodded.

“I...I want out. But I have a better chance of that with you than with anypony else.”

“My way or Glimmer's way?”

We both went silent. I knew what this was...a test of trust. To see whether he could count on me at least for the short term.

“Both...”

He clearly thought about what I meant by that, before nodding.

“Then come on. We've got to meet List Seeker and find out what he knows about Shackles if he's had a meeting from Wormtail. Time to go back on the offensive in this game, Murk.”

He swept past me, cantering out of the room at a speed that I had to almost gallop to catch up.

Protégé had Red Eye's blessing in vote form behind him. I knew he wasn't going to let this go easily and Celestia please understand me...I wanted it for him too.

* * *

This felt familiar.

List Seeker's munitions forge made my feathers rustle with the sheer heat. I could feel them wanting to spread and bask in the hot fumes that would lift feathers and stretch out all the sore muscles. Truth be told, it was a fight to not give in to the urge, we didn't need to call attention to ourselves.

We had found List Seeker fairly easily, looking over a gantry he had been shouting to groups of

slaves to get an urgent order done on time. Nicer slaver or not, he still had quotas to meet to keep the higher ups pleased and allow him to continue aiding slaves where he could in here. Upon spying from his roost, Seeker had pulled the wrap from his face and waved before pointing to his office on the catwalks above.

“I have a feeling I know why you're here, come on in.”

Meeting us at the top of the stairs, I saw him glance with relief to me. It seemed I had more people who cared about me being away from Shackles than I knew. Trotting ahead, he threw open the bare wooden door of his office and knocked it closed again the moment we were through.

“Seeker, I'm here to-”

“I know what you're here for Protégé, you never visit without purpose and given the event later on today I can only imagine what you are after.”

He lay back in his chair, wiping his dirty and sweating brow with a foul looking towel.

“I'm afraid I cannot help you.”

Protégé took the immediate refusal in his stride, trotting over to lay a hoof on Seeker's desk.

“This could be crucial, Seeker. I know you hate Shackles as much as I do, that you try to protect your workers here as best you can, just as I do. We're alike, Seeker. If you help me then perhaps we can make something better of this.”

“Would that I could. We aren't all willing to buck against those in power or have the ear of the big guy himself. Protégé, please listen to what I said in your mind again. I didn't say I didn't *want* to help you. I said I *cannot* help you.”

There was a change in his voice, a vulnerability as he leaned over his desk to meet Protégé's eyes.

“These slaves below here in my factory, they are long term workers. I keep them because I ensure I make every one of them a crucial link. I understand my place and they understand it too. Slavers can't often request from me because I can simply tell the quartermasters how losing such a skilled worker would hurt production of munitions. Put simply...I have a good thing going here. I make no enemies in a position just important enough to get by and the slaves stay safe for as long as I can help them.”

Sitting by the edge of the desk, I could see ranks of photos behind him. Each a slave below taken on an old camera sitting in the corner. Each had a little note below them...likely the skill they

knew.

“You fear that by taking a side, you would upset the balance?” Protégé spoke quietly. “Or is it perhaps a visit you got this morning?”

“Both, you might say. Unfortunately my hoof has been forced here, Protégé. Wormtail has visited and he had information that I keep in a safe. I've already been told where to cast my vote to keep my worker's safe in here.”

“The Shades...” I muttered it just loudly enough that they both turned to me for a second.

“You're being blackmailed.” Protégé spoke quietly and Seeker nodded sadly.

“Shackles has ambitions and I think he knew you might come to me, on account of us thinking alike. My nomination must go to him or things will not turn out well for anypony in here if that information gets out.”

“This information, what was it?”

“Nothing important. It was simply a gesture, that he could *get* it. If somepony can get into my safe like that while I'm here then slitting a throat as I sleep should be no problem. They are blackmailing under a threat because they know I care, Protégé. If I die, these slaves shall suffer all over again.”

“So we can't even steal it back...” I was muttering to myself as I looked at all the portraits. I recognised a few from my brief temporary stints here. Some had red crosses beside them. I could only guess what it meant.

“Seeker,” Protégé sighed and sat before the desk, “this is important. They are playing to your fears. If Shackles gets that nomination from you and *wins* then eventually it will come back to hurt us. He will be elevated above any of us to such a degree he can simply order it. I don't know why Master Red Eye hasn't stepped in yet but you *must* see that we have to fight this! That we have to stand up and resist him attaining power. You know he used to-”

“I know my own city's history, Protégé.”

“Then you must realise what is at stake! These workers below you, is short term safety better when it comes with long term submission? You believe better than this, Seeker. Listen closely, there is a chance that I might be able to challenge him, *if* I get enough nominations. Please, tell me you can do better than this, for all of us? Look what he did to Murky Number Seven here, that *will* happen if we don't take a stand!”

His hoof struck the desk hard enough to make me jump and squeak at the sudden noise while looking at the wall. All four hooves leaving the ground, I staggered back and rubbed my ears. When I looked up, I saw List Seeker looking at me, having seen my nervous reaction.

“I...I saw what he did to you, heard about more. I...”

He was tempted. He *wanted* to do it. I could see it in his eyes.

“I swore I would protect those under my responsibility, Protégé. I am sorry. One pony's words and wishes cannot change Fillydelphia for the better. I don't take pleasure in doing this...”

I could see how disappointed Protégé was.

“Please, will you at least remember what I have said? When you come to mark your nomination...just ask yourself if you're doing it out of love to protect or out of the depths of terror. He's controlling you as much as any slave. If Murk here could break free of that and challenge him...”

He left the question unanswered.

“Come on, Murk. We should make tracks to find somepony else.”

I saw Seeker sitting at his desk, looking wretched. I recognised the fear in his eyes as he spun his chair slowly to look at the lists of ponies behind him he cared for across the wall.

“Protégé?” He spoke quietly, not turning back around. “How do you know that you are in with a chance? The nominations are kept secret.”

Both of us stopped in our trotting, sharing a glance. Before we could answer, Seeker turned his head.

“You know something the rest of us don't. In theory, I could barter that as information. You should be more careful with that. However in this case I shall not do so, though others might. That said...it helps me to know you have something here. I am under threat and my nomination will be influenced but...I know something that might help you.”

Protégé stayed silent, nodding carefully.

“You know of Mister Mosin, the armourer at the Mall. Shackles is trying to force through his elevation to become a lead armourer for Fillydelphia's defence network around the wall. That would then make him eligible to place a further nomination in. Wormtail let that slip when boasting of how easily Shackles would win, so maybe I can't support you...but if those application documents or his nomination slip were 'delayed...’”

“I understand, List Seeker. Thank you.”

“Information is key in this game, Protégé. That is all I can give you for now, I am sorry.”

Protégé nodded a second time before turning to go, myself beside him. He spoke only briefly.

“Think on what I have said, Seeker. If you feel ready to take a stand, you know what to do.”

He left the office. Leaving me to stare back in only briefly to see the gangly slaver meet my eyes.

“If I could have taken you in I would have, Murk. He's an idealist but if he says he'll take care of you then you *can* trust him. Good luck.”

“Th-thank you, sir...”

“Eh...I'm just somepony trying to help folks survive. Goodbye.”

Taking the notice, I closed the door and cantered to catch up with Protégé. We trotted side by side until we were out of the factory with only a few offhoof glances from me at him. Seeker seemed to think I could definitely trust him but all the same, most of what I was doing was helping a slaver further his own agenda, even if that was Protégé.

I just kept reminding myself, play along and do my best. Take the advantages I could. If it helped slaves in general on the long term...well I guess that was good, right? I'd never thought I could make a difference before.

“Murk?”

I blinked a few times, feeling a colder wind blow over us coming out of the factory. “Um...yes, master?”

“Mister Mosin's documents, do you think you could do something for me?”

A chance to steal and mess over Shackles however, was an even *better* difference to feel like I could make.

“I think I could make something happen, master.”

“Good, Murk. Good.”

We met with a brief smile to one another, plan set in motion. After trotting a bit further, I bit my lip and thought to ask.

“You slammed your hoof to scare me on purpose and try to convince him, didn't you?”

“I haven't a clue what you're talking about, Murk.”

“You're grinning.”

“No I'm not.”

* * *

Huddled and quiet, I lay still near the vent's exit and waited for my chance.

Getting in had been easy, I knew the route well these days. Aside from the blood chilling sound of the ghoul stuck in the vertical vent I had to pass over sensing I was above him, there hadn't been any difficulty in getting to here.

In getting over *his* office.

Despite the fear factor, I knew it would be easier than coming in through the plaza duct. I'd have had to move through open and crowded ground there. If I came out into Shackles' office, I could sneak out the door and through the corridors to Mosin's armoury and his desk inside.

That is, if I could bring my courage to do it. Shackles wasn't even in the Mall, but I could see the familiar sights. The bed I'd made only a few days ago. The cell he'd locked me in. The blood stains on the floor. My blood...

I couldn't delay though. Taking a deep breath to calm my nerves and touching a hoof to the statuette in my pocket, I levered the duct's cover away and dropped out into the room. Landing and huddling to the floor, I closed my eyes and took a good listen.

Nothing. Good.

Creeping forward, I reached for the door knob and gently pulled to find it still open. Excellent, I had back up plans to scour the vents for another way through but it seemed Wormtail wasn't nearly as thorough as his master. Yeah. *His* master. Not mine.

Poking my head out, I glanced from side to side. The Mall was quiet this time of day. No slaves came up here and most of the slavers were likely directing the shift changes right now. I gently padded out and turned down toward the armoury's direction. Just down the hallway, turn right, up a

short stairwell and then double back with it on your left...okay.

At a quiet canter, I moved forward and kept my ears more than my eyes open. Sound travelled far in these corridors as I'd so often discovered to my benefit and hardship in the past. The sound of snoring came from my right, a staff break room converted to a rest area for slavers upon mattresses. The hairy stallion within drooped across one with a bottle of whiskey nearby. The sight of the drink made me flush all over again, I couldn't believe what I'd said...oh dear...Glimmer was no doubt biding her time to bring it up at opportune moments.

The thought of her had been the temptation to take the plaza route. I dearly wished I could see them again during this brief visit but I knew they wouldn't appreciate me taking extra risk simply to say hello. Head high, Murky...you've got to stand on your own sometime.

Shifting up to the right hand turn I cast my eyes around and saw the way being clear. Holding my breath, I moved on to-

“Just heading to the shitter, mate. Won't be long!”

Stopping dead, I turned and cantered as fast as I dared back around the corner. Hooves upon stairs sounded out behind me. Glancing side to side, I ducked into the same room as the sleeping stallion. *Please* be as knocked out as I was and don't wake up!

The trot of somepony else came down the corridor, passing right past the room I now hid in. Holding my breath as I heard them stop and turn on the spot, a head poked in the door. Crouched down, I simply held still in the shadow itself and prayed they wouldn't glance side to side.

“Never could handle his drink. Lightweight.”

The head disappeared, but not until it had disappeared down the corridor did I dare move again. All this sneaking had been teaching me. They had said they wouldn't be long, implying they would come *back*. But that was no reason to go early and risk them turning around. Wow...I really could do this sneaking thing...

Smiling at the thought, I retraced my steps and headed to the stairwell again. That slaver had spoke to somepony, so there was no doubt a slaver up here. As such, I crouched low to the stairs and instead used my little mirror to see over the lip of the stairwell. Squinting to see on the shiny fragment, I saw movement up ahead. Another buck was already wandering away toward the security station we'd once laid our plans to take down Barb in. Perfect!

Tucking away the mirror, I sneaked up and kept behind the pony as they trotted onward. Watching the ground every half second to avoid loose plates, I bit my lip that they wouldn't turn around until I could reach the left hand turn that would lead me to the armoury. Ten feet...five feet...don't rush

it...don't rush it...

The buck up ahead stopped. My heart skipped, but I had to keep going and risk it. If he turned...

One...more...foot...

There!

Creeping as best I could, I slid around the corner he had passed. Ahead of me lay the armoury door! Huge and thick, it none-the-less lay open. I could hear somepony trotting around inside humming to themselves. I couldn't risk hanging around outside, so I made my way to the door and used my mirror to glance in.

Blunderbuck was half skipping between cages and a workbench, humming musically and at times almost dancing even while he worked. Blunderbuck was a good pony, but I couldn't risk *anypony* seeing me. 'No evidence' was what Protégé had said. Seeing him looking away at his workbench and straining with a wrench, I took the chance to slip into the armoury.

Thankfully, it being so crushed in with cages and boxes, hiding or moving unseen in here was simple. Sticking close to the walls, I squeezed myself in behind the weapon cages and stayed completely out of sight as I moved toward the back where Protégé had informed me Mosin kept his desk.

“Hmm...I think you'll look lovely with a four holed flash suppressor won't you? Oh yes, you will! Then we'll take a look and see what sights you need to just *complete* you, honey! Oh! Maybe I can even give you a little paint job, you like a little orange?”

Blunderbuck spoke as though he was dressing up a foal, clearly taking a delight in his work. It became clear why he put up with Mosin if he got to play with the things he loved. Sticking to my route, I slid underneath a table bearing various guns in a state of disrepair and moved behind the primary cage in the centre of the room to reach the massive shelves that formed up the back of the armoury. I could see Mosin's desk at the far end under a flickering lamp, nicely out of sight from Blunderbuck at his workstation. Hoof by hoof, I made my way toward it as the light flickered on again.

I almost screamed as I saw somepony huge standing right there.

Stuffing my hoof into my mouth to stifle it, I staggered back and almost made to run. The colossal figure loomed up ahead of me, held aloft by wires and rope tied around them. It...it was metal.

It was a suit of Steel Ranger armour. Dull eyes stared forever outward from the massive figure while its powered joints looked primed and ready to...to...flex? Was that the word? Even the sight

made the back of my neck feel all cold and tingly at the memory of those fire wreathed figures in the Stable chasing us with unimaginable firepower. With a chance to finally see one for what it was, I saw every line of metal, every carefully hoof crafted flourish of design and every thick rivet that stood out upon the plates. More than ever, I reflected on how huge they were, this one seeming even bigger than I remembered. The thought that normal ponies were inside them...wow.

It seemed older than the others though, bearing less machine produced parts and more adornment along the hooves and crest while yet seeming less advanced. Heavier and less refined, it clearly was an earlier model. Maybe even a proto...protowhatever it was. Upon its flank, I saw a single giant green apple.

Wow...

I'd have to draw it later. But for now, I had work to do. Trotting around it to the desk, I set myself behind it and opened my saddlebag. Protégé had provided me with a copy of both application documents and a nomination form to help me compare and identify anything of use to steal. Mosin's desk was filled with notes and schematics of various weapons along with trinkets like a Hellhound's tooth and a glued together collection of various rifle rounds. Annoyingly, his documents seemed written with worse handwriting than my meagre attempts. Either that or it was just his own language or codewords or something...I still couldn't read anyway. Not that I'd need to.

Shifting through the papers with the copy documents in hoof, I got absolutely no-where. Nothing seemed even vaguely similar!

“Let's just put you in a place you'll love. I've got an Ironshod over-under that you'll look a beauty next to! Look at his bayonet, isn't it shiny? Yes it iiiiiis!”

The cage this desk was behind opened and I heard Blunderbuck shifting around inside it. Grabbing a bunch of papers, I ducked down again and kept comparing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing nothing nothing!

“Come on, give me a break, Goddesses...” I muttered quietly and placed the papers back on top before turning to his drawers. “Just one bit of luck?”

Yanking them open quickly, I had to hop up on my hind legs to see inside, almost leaning my head right into it as my hooves scrambled through it all. Come on, come on!

Aha! Got it! His nomination form with a tick already on it upon who he wanted!

“*Ohooi!* I leave you alone for single second and already with the fucking paint! *Ey, parshiviy, syuda idi!*”

Oh no!

“Oh! Hello, sir! I was just-”

“What in fuck have you done to poor rifle? Using pussy plastic shit all over the proud *wood* it was designed for! *Oyobuk!* Get paint thinner before it sinks in and remove anything not ten years old! Is looking like fucking book of comic! You hear that?”

“Hear what?”

I sure didn't hear anything...

“That! Is sound of original designer spinning in grave fast enough to power fucking *country!*”

Feeling sorry for Blunderbuck, I bit my lip and looked up briefly to see their vague shapes through the cage. I liked his designs...he was just having fun trying things, I knew damn well he could make things that worked too. I was *wearing* one. Blunderbuck just got carried away sometimes...

I heard a wooden hoof hit something and Blunderbuck yelping in pain.

“Fix shit now!”

“Yes, sir!”

“All is *polnyi pizdets*...at least I get to sort out ridiculous children with guns on wall soon.”

I heard him trot across the armoury, thankfully not in this direction. Around the edge of the cage, I saw Blunderbuck sigh and reach for a tin of paint thinner and a bucket. The poor buck looked more disappointed in his imagination being stopped than anything else. I still believe in you, Blunderbuck...

Never-the-less, I had a job to do. My concern for him had to come second, if I were caught I was very much beyond help! Casting a glance to his form, I made to simply take it. Let's see him vote with this!

However, the thought eventually came to me. I got a copy of it...what if he could as well? This was a last ditch effort by Protégé and I but it could still go wrong. I needed something better...

Oooh...thank you Glimmer!

Taking all of it, I trotted to the side and hid behind the cage I'd approached through. Pulling my charcoal out, I leaned down and placed Mosin's form beside my copy. I could see his signature at the

bottom, a spiky and harsh kind of writing. With careful ease, I leaned down to the copy and began to copy the shapes. Letters were hard, but I knew curves and shape much better! Gradually, I sketched through it all.

“Assistant! Where is form?”

“No idea, sir! Didn't you leave it in your drawer?”

Looking up, I saw relocating had been a good idea. Barely ten feet away, Mosin was messing around his desk, apparently uncaring that some things weren't in the same place. He clearly wasn't as careful as Protégé. Trying to move slowly, I finished up the signature. Now...the hard bit...

He had no doubt voted Shackles...so that was how his name looked...

Now, 'p' was...it was...um...oh dear...

I scanned the form, looking for Protégé's name. I could do more than just have Mosin not vote!

'P' was a...a line with...um...a circle. But there was another that looked so similar with it all flipped, the 'd'! Which was it? I sat and strained my head, closing my eyes and trying to remember Protégé's patient tuition on these arcane symbols. I could feel my wings jittering nervously, overacting with their newfound movement. Come on, I was a new pony now! I could do this!

Oh...oh wait.

Looking at all the candidates, there was only one with a line and a circle attached. That *had* to be him! None started with a 'd'! It was the best I could try, I just hoped I was right. Marking a little tick beside his name, I grinned and folded it back up. Carefully, I tried to copy all the little marks. Good enough!

“Is not here! Tell me you did not scribble your youth fantasies of what you call weapon on again?”

“I didn't, sir! Here, let me look!”

Behind Mosin's back, I gently slipped the false one back onto the desk and hid before Blunderbuck came around.

“Um, sir? It's right here.”

“Wha...what in fuck is...I must be getting old. Assistant, take slip and deliver. I will clean up after mess you leave, *yeban'ko maloletnee! Go!*”

Blunderbuck grabbed the form in his mouth and took off, no doubt glad to be away from Mister Mosin for a while. The stallion turned, his wooden hoof distinct on the floor before collapsing onto his chair.

“Is driving to madness, is this place...too much paper, too little action. Shouting worked much better in Stalliongrad. Authority through volume, yes. Ridiculous mountain trek shit on supply, giving slave winter rifle...”

Overhearing his mutterings, I was already creeping away and almost following Blunderbuck as he went. Stopping only briefly, I leaned onto a shelf and relieved them of a gun repair kit. Glimmerlight had wanted one, after all! Hooking the heavy metal box onto my saddle, I left the armoury and began my journey back to outside.

I just hoped this would make a crucial difference. Protégé *had* to be one of the nominations or Fillydelphia was in for a very bad future indeed...

* * *

“Murk! Were you successful?” Protégé got up from the old seat in the high rise we'd once visited, out designated meeting point after my mission.

It hadn't taken long, really. After stashing the repair kit and some of my new acquisitions outside near our old cell's door, I hadn't waited to get back to him. Now I wandered happily in and nodded.

“You got it?”

“Um...hehe...better, I gave him it back. Just with your name on it.”

There was a moment of realisation in his face, before he couldn't hide the genuine look of sudden admiration at the cheeky grin I wore.

“Very good, Murk. I'm glad you're no doubt getting something from your first lesson alone. Now come on, we'll have to get back to the FunFarm, the nominations won't be too long from now and I must be there early.”

“Do...do you think this can work?”

“It'll have to, Murk.” Protégé seemed unsure for himself. “Shackles can't win here.”

He led the way back through the corridors and past the old robot still cleaning up. Along the

way, Protégé seemed to ponder on something and looked to me.

“Tell me, Murk. How did you get it back without them spying the difference? You couldn't have made it precise...”

I just smiled and continued trotting with my head held up like a pegasus should.

“Oh, showing just enough to make them fill in the rest themselves is better than showing all.”

I quoted Glimmer word for word and trotted on proudly. Only after a second did I realise the very odd and confused look he was giving me as his lips silently repeated the words to himself.

“What?”

* * *

The trip back was cautious. Travelling through Fillydelphia openly was simply an invitation to anyone who sought a chance to get us alone. As such, we stuck mostly to primary routes despite the longer way there in order to better remain under the watchful eyes of the griffins. Protégé was silent, at most sometimes moving his lips as though wondering about words. Likely what Old Grizzly had asked him to do. After dropping by to find Ragini and bring her along did to finally move toward the FunBarn itself.

Protégé stopped near to the entrance and turned back to me. He held a dark look to his eye.

“Murk, you are sure you wish to come here with me? You could go back to the logistics depot if you want.”

“W-why? Isn't it safer with you?”

He seemed reluctant, as though unsure how to word it. Unfortunately, Ragini decided to just say it for him.

“That bastard Shackles will be in here, feathers. Likely that's what he thinks about. You can go and hide if you want.”

She smirked, as though taunting me to do just that. I couldn't be sure...but it seemed like she was daring me to try and be more than that. Protégé cast her a harsh glance for cutting in, but the griffin just shrugged. She certainly cared less about rank than before...

“I...I'll come with you.” I gulped. “H-he doesn't own me now. Just let's...um...let's try and not go near him?”

Ragini scoffed and shook her head derisively. Protégé just patted my shoulder and nodded.

“We'll try. However, Murk, this is the nominations to take place. All higher ranked slavers eligible will meet in the main presentation hall of the FunBarn for the announcing of it. If you are with me, you *will* see him there. This is it, Murk.”

He turned and looked back at the entrance, flanked by heavily armoured guards.

“I just hope that the one trick you pulled is enough, Murk. That or requiring Seeker to pull through for us. Not to mention whatever else they have planned. I don't like those Shades on the loose.”

“Bring 'em to me.” Ragini murmured to herself and hefted the larger rifle of her pair, the energy one. “Talons and the Shades got a score to settle.”

“This isn't about your revenge, Ragini.”

“Just saying...if there's a clean shot between me and them, I don't care if Red Eye himself is talking at the time.”

She moved on into the FunBarn ahead of us, leaving Protégé looking rather concerned at her back bearing the broken wings. Edging beside him, I coughed a little.

“I'll come in...m-maybe I might hear something needed. You need all the support you can...”

Protégé didn't remove his eyes from the building.

“All right, Murk. Let's just hope this goes how it needs to now. There's one hour till the announcements but I must prepare first. We have to assume this will work. The moment this is done, I shall attempt to see if I can get an audience with Master Red Eye. He will be interested in what you have to say, Murk.”

Following him up to the door, the guards seemed surprised to see it was me. Of course, they'd chased me when I was here with Unity. The interior was much the same, polished wooden or concrete floors alongside cracked pink paint upon the walls until we opened out into the central hub where slaves sat bent over terminals. Around me, I had to weave and follow Protégé as slavers I recognised from previous jobs spoke or sat glaring filled the spaces. This event clearly was of particular importance. A few I remembered seeing in Red Eye's balcony at the Pit. One I remembered from Shackles and Grindstone's meeting...

There was talk. Oh...there was talk.

Moreso, the moment Protégé had entered the room, I heard conversations change. Trotting behind him, my ears picked out hushed whispers remarking on his stance alongside Red Eye or muttered curses against the slave made slaver. If Protégé heard then he made no notice, simply stepping around the groups and continuing his way to the back stairs.

Fillydelphia was as divided about him as they were about how they treated slaves.

Of course, there were the glances toward me...

“Hey! Since when did his wings work?”

“Wasn't he the one in the Pit?”

“Looks like teacher's pet got himself a toy!”

Huge slavers or nasty looking overseers eyed me up, causing me to weave through the crowds to keep up with Protégé. I tried to keep my wings on my side, tried to not let them see the fear in my eyes that any next face could be *his*. Word would spread, he'd know before long...oh this maybe wasn't a good idea...

Finally, at last, we reached the stairs and ascended out of the crush. Ragini was waiting on the far end for us.

“I'll keep an eye down here, sir. Get a feel for the ground.”

“Good thinking, Ragini. I won't be long before I come back down.” He turned to me as we continued on, Ragini taking up post by the stairs. “My apologies, Murk. It's just best to keep quiet and move on. Don't worry, it'll be quieter up here.”

“Th-thank you...”

We emerged to the same line of offices I'd once seen before, again with Unity. To my surprise, Protégé moved into the same one we had once visited, belonging to Old Grizzly. With the window overlooking the side of the FunBarn and the rollercoaster, the red light of Fillydelphia lit up the desk and the massed Pinkie Pie birthday cards that Grizzly had apparently never bothered to get rid of.

Only, it wasn't unoccupied. Grizzly was there.

As was a foal.

A little colt sat at the desk wearing the black and red attire of Red Eye's students, but he bore an almost comically oversized floppy hat that barely even fitted his head. I stopped in the doorway and

stared. I...I'd seen him before! In a memory.

The colt looked up, as did Grizzly.

“Mister Protégé!” The colt's voice was high pitched and excitable, leaping off the raised chair to charge around the desk and barrel into the unicorn. Smiling, Protégé patted his head and gently stepped back from the tiny figure's embrace around his neck.

“How are you doing, Chirpy?”

Chirpy Sum!

It was him!

Coral Eve's son.

* * *

“You'll never believe it, Protégé!” Chirpy was, if anything, a colt who lived up to his name. “Mister Grizzly let me work on the procurement documents because somepony messed up all the numbers! I got to work with tons of decimal points and he even let me do it on the terminal and send it off! I did it for real!”

The little earth pony was bouncing on all four hooves with a huge grin on his face. His two tone blue mane and tail bounced about from his hopping, headed up by a massive white grin below huge rounded and bright eyes of turquoise. Unlike Coral's light grey, he seemed to have a soft and sandy brown as a coat instead.

“Very good, Chirpy. I knew allowing you to get more practical experience would be what you needed. I am very glad to hear you're enjoying it.”

“Enjoying it? He's faster than I ever was.” Old Grizzly chuckled while he trotted over and patted a big hoof onto the *very* proud looking colt's head. “Quick little learner, that's for sure.”

“Uh huh! Mister Grizzly said I could come work in your place cos it's got lots and lots of stuff needing done too and was still a bit of the FunBarn! That's still within Daddy Red Eye's area!”

My heart almost stopped. 'Daddy?!' Chirpy seemed to offer lavish names onto 'Mister' for a lot of ponies but that for Red Eye...

Already, I dreaded Coral having to find that out. Oh Goddesses protect her suffering heart...

“So Mister Grizzly said I could come! Can I? He said I could!”

“Did he now?”

I saw the look they gave each other. *Somepony* had just been elected childminder without being asked. If I weren't so concentrated in the idea that Chirpy was right here, I might have laughed. What was I supposed to do? Did I tell him I knew his mother? Would it upset him? Did I try to get a message to him? I just didn't know what to say here, the effect of Red Eye's influence as a teacher upon Chirpy was evident. Being present through the foal's development had set him into an important figure in the same way I saw Glimmer as a sister...

“I really *really* want to work with you, Mister Protégé! Cause you're real smart and stuff!”

“I'm sure we can arrange it, Chirpy. Sir, would you mind passing on the request form for out of hotel training for Chirpy?”

“Mind? Hah, it's already done.”

“I...see.” There was that look again, although Protégé seemed to take it on the chest and smiled to the colt. “I'll be glad to have you around. But come, where are my manners? Here's my current assistant for you to meet, Chirpy. This is Murk.”

I lifted a hoof and waved lightly. “Um...hi?”

The hoof was suddenly shaken hard before Chirpy Sum shook and skipped around me a few time before landing in front of me and pushing his face up to mine, those impossibly large pupils in his eyes bright with glee.

“Ooooh! Hiya, Mister Murk! You're Mister Protégé's assistant? Wow, you're lucky! I've heard about you from Starshine and Lilac! They're two really good friends! They said you knew my mo-”

“I believe we should perhaps get down to business, Protégé.” Grizzly cut in, almost strategically. “Chirpy? Go next door to see Overseer Comet, he'll take you back to the Hotel for dinner and get your papers organised to maybe visit the logistics hub later today, all right?”

“Okay, Mister Grizzly!” Chirpy turned rather obeisantly and saluted up with a hoof with a big grin. He jumped up on the spot and spun to face the other way to trot out.

“I hope we get to talk soon, Mister Murk! I...um...Lilac said-”

“Chirpy.” Old Grizzly's voice dropped just a tiny level.

The colt cut off and gulped. Nodding, he left the room. Old Grizzly and Protégé both seemed to glare at me.

“While I appreciate you bringing a new foal to us, Murk, reminding them of their parents they can't see again is not a wise idea.” Grizzly didn't seem to enjoy the fact of saying it, as though reading off a mental script. “Don't mention Coral Eve to him.”

“Yes, sir.”

I could grin inside my head. I was lying through my teeth to say that. Protégé stared closely, maybe he knew that I was lying. He'd always been good at that, but he stayed silent.

“Now, Protégé. We should prepare for what will emerge should you win out. We have forty minutes. Go over what you will say to me, I trust you to turn it into a speech to rival Shackles' call for union and results but I want to ensure you say what they need to hear by my estimate.”

“Sir, there are things Master Red Eye must know. You know this but Murk has some information of his own we didn't have time to say before about their plans to take to the mountains outside Fillydelphia and-”

“One thing at a time, Protégé. One thing at a time. We need to win you a nomination first. Then we'll talk about what needs to be done for the future. Now sit down, let me hear what you have. If you could move to the corridor and keep a watch I'd be very pleased, Murk.”

“Yes, sir...”

Passing a last glance with Protégé as I left him with one of his old teachers, I moved to sit outside the door and await him. Even as I slumped back, a door beside me opened and an overseer trotted out with Chirpy in tow.

The little colt saw me and smiled, but didn't say a word. He just nodded.

Smiling thinly, I nodded back.

Smart kid, Coral had raised him well. He knew the score here. We would wait to get a better chance to speak.

* * *

The time passed slowly. For once lately I found myself simply sitting with nothing to do but think. Occasionally I heard Protégé speaking through the doorway, muffled lines and test segments of speech quickly tempered by Grizzly's deeper tone. But on the whole, I was left to myself simply to act

as a watchdog. Despite understanding the purpose, I couldn't help but feel detached from the entire thing.

I hadn't quite realised how important this was to him until now. It had just been taking time to help him but feeling the time mounting and the clock ticking down to this moment the realisation of just how important this nomination was began to sink in. This wasn't just keeping Shackles out, this was something truly meaningful to Protégé and his continued life. A chance for him to perhaps make some real change.

The next few hours would be crucial.

So I simply sat and waited. The waiting was always the worst. I spent it drawing my friends or myself with my wings again with DJ Pon-3 in my ear. Eventually however, the urge to draw began to fade as ideas began to falter. After putting the finishing strokes to an image of Pinkie Pie cracking up with laughter and surrounded by sprite bots...I simply lay my head back against the wall. The thought that she had given me such clues and indications was almost like a dream unto itself. Really, I wished I could get Sundial to come on again soon, I wanted to know what Pinkie sent him on...what happened. What clues I could gather to help know where to go!

“We've not much news on the Stable Dweller's little excursion other than a rumour passing in that she was spotted heading away from Canterlot toward Maripony itself. Now, my little ponies, we can only guess what she's up to now but don't think this won't be something beneficial. Just keep believing and keep fighting that good fight, wasterlanders. We can all stand up for something now and again. I know I tell folks to keep your head down...but sometimes you just gotta put it up high and take the chance. Put yourself in the firing line to do what's right. In the end, somepony gotta stand up tall. Here's something to boost those fightin' spirits...”

My Pipbuck clicked and switched over to a wartime number by Sweetie Belle, intended to lift the mood of soldiers listening in the field and get them willing to defend their country. The DJ had mentioned all that before, but as I listened now I simply sighed and hoped that I could muster that same spirit when the time truly came.

Behind me, I heard the voices stop. Hooves trotted up and toward the door. Perking up, I tucked away my journal and hopped up. With a click, the door unlocked and opened for Old Grizzly to step out.

Behind him came Protégé. I'd never seen him looking so serious. So drawn and on edge as though desperately memorising things he needed.

“You will accompany us, Murk. You are my assistant and you should be in attendance.”

“Of course, I'll come and-”

“Yes will suffice, Murk. Do not forget to address me by rank.”

His voice was terse. This was no off hand reminder. Taken aback from the harsher look he gave me, I got a sense of just how seriously he had to take this. All the same, I couldn't help but feel myself rebel against that side of him. The slaver.

“Yes, *master*.”

“Better. Now come on.”

* * *

The FunBarn was all filtering toward one room. Amongst the crowds, we were afforded a decent space. Protégé and Grizzly led, followed by Ragini and myself. Despite myself, I stuck close to her amongst the harsh gazes of those who had once worked me to the bone. Once too close, as I felt her talon clip the side of my head to back off.

That one room they moved toward now opened before me. A room for Ministry of Morale trials.

A courtroom.

Everypony seemed to know where to go. Old Grizzly split off and shifted through the seating to where a judge might once have sat, taking his place at the seat of power itself. Of course, he'd been put in charge of the nominations. I just hoped no-pony had got wind of the information he had 'leaked' to Protégé. Beside him I saw various officials from Red Eye's staff take their seats. Everypony else filled into the viewing areas by the sides and front of the room. In the middle, there lay two enclosed sections with one chair each, no down for victim and criminal in times gone past. Was that how it worked? I didn't really know. Before the primary seat, between those two areas was one more line of chairs, likely where somepony having to face the wrath of the Ministry would sit to hear their sentence.

The entire thing was somewhat thrown off by the party balloons painted on the curtains all around the edges. Oh Pinkie...

“Well...well...**well**...”

All the sound in the room disappeared from my ears but for that one voice behind me. Everything in my mind, rebellious nature and optimism collided with fear and loathing. To turn or to flee. He wasn't my master...he wasn't my master...

“Look what turned up here.”

I turned.

Ahead of me, standing in the aisle with his enormous bulk...was Chainlink Shackles. Every muscle in my body was tensing painfully, my eyes trying not to cringe in terror. Huge, harsh and bearing a wide grin, Chainlink Shackles trotted toward me. Only after my first glance did I see he was badly limping, one front leg stood up with a wooden aid and various body supports on his torso and neck. A tube ran from his nose to a small whirring machine clasped to his armour. Brimstone had truly messed him up, but even with that the atmosphere he cast over me was impossibly strong.

“Come to return yourself to me, eh? Come back to your **Master?**”

Moment of truth, Murky. Do it. Do it for your friends.

“N-no.”

He stopped on the spot, ten feet away from me. His eyes narrowed. Slavers passed either side of him, but we were left to face one another amidst the crowd. I couldn't see where Protégé was. I was alone with him.

“I...I'm with Prot-”

“**That isn't a choice you can make, Number Seven.**” He resumed stepping forward, myself moving backwards and stumbling. “**You are mine and after this is over you will return with me, understand?**”

“No! I'm not yours, I'm-argh!”

I tripped back from moving without looking. Falling on my rump, he loomed over me and began to reach a hoof forward.

“**Never your choice, slave. You're destined to be with me, you can run to the upstart but he can't survive this and he can't protect you. The longer you remain away the longer I shall make your punishment for defiance. You don't even get to *die* until I tell you. By your mark, by my will you survived by fate to be mine and-**”

“NO!”

He could scare me. He could make me sweat and shiver. I could have nightmares about being his and fear the collar that still hung at his side. *But I knew why I survived and that was not it!*

“My *friends* brought me back, Shackles! My mark is to be free! I'm not yours! I...I never w-

will be any more!”

“Insolent worm, shut up!”

His hoof struck me across the face hard. I hadn't expected him to move as quick. Feeling my jaw wrench I fell to the floor. Around me, slavers had stopped to watch. I saw some looking confused at my presence at all. Others grinned with satisfaction at the unruly slave being put in his place. Most just seemed annoyed at the disturbance I'd made by shouting.

“You've got some ridiculous ideas in your head to believe that, Number Seven. You're coming with me. In your collar, you shall be the icon of how I shall move forward in my city. Of unswerving obedience. Now hold still.”

The collar came off. It was coming down. I made to get up, the turn and simply flee but slavers were all around us. I could hear Protégé far off! They had all heard my protest, they saw this as *right*. I wanted to shout, but the words didn't come.

“Back off, Shackles! He's not yours now.”

The collar stopped coming toward me, before Shackles stood back up and glanced angrily to the side. Ragini stood grimly with her eyes locked on him.

“Murky Number Seven belongs by his will to Master Protégé by stint of voluntary assistance rules. Unless Murk chooses to be yours again, he *isn't*.”

“You're playing a dangerous game, 'flightless.' Look around you...these are those who support my vision. The runt will be mine in time.”

I saw Ragini's talon loosely grip around her rifle's trigger guard.

“Rules are rules in this city. I only enforce them. Even if the dodo's an annoying brat he's Protégé's annoying brat. You can take the issue up with Grizzly if you want. He's senior in this room.”

“Hehe...Old Grizzly is nothing but an appointed favourite of tone. He is no slaver for time to remember. You wonder why he's never been anything but a senior advisor and small time master? You can keep the runt for now...but he'll come back to me eventually. After all...”

He narrowed his eyes, reaching forward and almost lovingly stroking my chin.

“Blood is thicker than water, runt. You'll come crying to me eventually. Especially when you imagine what your friends are going through.”

“They...they're strong...”

“Perhaps. Slaves only last so long in the metro though...”

He grinned at the shocked look across my face. Oh Goddesses protect them, he'd put them in the *metro*! In the mines! Please...*please* be all right! I felt the temptation to give in now, just to try and bargain for them to be out of there but I knew I had nothing to bargain *with*. Shackles cackled and turned to trot down toward the front of the courtroom with his supporters in tow. He knew the worry he'd instilled in my heart. The thought of that pony I'd seen with the infected and distended stomach...then seeing Glimmer's face on hers and...no *no no no!*

“Get up, kid. Don't dare move anywhere you're not supposed to. It's unusual you're here at all.” Ragini muttered down to me as she nearly dragged me into the back rows.

“I won't...I just...th-thank you...”

“Shut up.”

I hunched into my chair, trying to fight back the tears of anguish as I imagined my friends down there. I wanted to get rid of the images in my head. To stop seeing the worst. In an attempt to stay sane and even somewhat controlled to myself I glanced around.

Protégé, Shackles, Grindstone and various other slavers I'd seen hold higher authority sat near the front. I could see Slit off to one side near to Mosin. List Seeker was on the opposite side, looking grim and forlorn. More filtered in, taking their positions.

I could see Shackles glancing back at me, eye to eye. I tried to hold the stare, I really did. But his mouth moved and I heard quiet words only for my ears whisper across the room.

“I can see you shaking, Number Seven. See the fear in your eyes...”

Squinting and pulling my gaze away, I only heard him chuckle and turn back around.

“This event shall begin now!” Grizzly had stood up, clapping a hoof on the wooden table before him. “Quiet down. This should not take long and you can all be on your way. The order of the day shall be the final announcement of the nomination votes as counted in the last hour. There were some late entries from newer promotions but the results now sit before me. In the event of a single majority, we shall hold a hearing from the winner and officially recognise them as Stern's successor in the future.”

“Hold up! Hold up!” A voice cried out from near the front. “Where *is* Stern? For that matter where is Red Eye himself?”

“Hear! We cannot proceed with this in the absence of the leader!”

“Red Eye is currently tasked with the preparations for Unity itself with Stern's tactical aid.” Grizzly spoke over them. “The timing is unfortunate, but he or she will not be joining us. They have cast their votes and Red Eye has given his goodwill to the restoration of democratic representation from those considered of a level to understand the elements involved.”

He stopped, as though offering a space for somepony to talk. No-pony did.

“As said, in the event of a single noticeable nomination we shall declare a winner. However in the event of more than one leader with numerous votes we shall enter into a formal path of election and hear from each nominee with their personal elements for the city as a whole to vote between them rather than having freedom of voting for anypony.”

“What if one pony has a much bigger majority?” That was Slit, she sat looking rather bored and eager to try and point out any loopholes. I knew her as the kind to do that.

“No change. All that matters here is identifying those who have some degree of respect.”

“But if somepony is bigger on votes then surely they win!” Slit carried her protest, before being shouted up by many of Shackles' supporters. They clearly knew their route.

“Because most of you all vote for yourself!” Grizzly shouted over the noise. “A secondary election will then force you all to pick a candidate and get a true majority! That is Red Eye's will! That is how this will be done!”

“Sounds like double voting for me! A chance to screw them over!” Another Shackles supporter.

To my surprise, it was Protégé that stood this time.

“Master Red Eye has decreed this! It is by his neutral opinion that this be designed to allow a better system than a simple *popularity contest!*”

Didn't he sound different! I'd never heard him so harsh in argument, but I figured this was the place for it.

“Neutral position? Says the teacher's pet and 'prodigy' himself?”

Wormtail was making his presence known, I hadn't even noticed him slipping in.

“Master Red Eye knows how to do this, *Wormtail.*” Protégé turned to glare up at him. “This is,

by simple mathematics, a fairer system.”

“Then why does it allow bias in the room for decisions and support of speeches, hmm? Never think of that, upstart?” Wormtail was taking from Shackles' vocabulary again. “They bar slavers of greater knowledge yet allow you to bring a *mercenary* and a *slave* in here to support you?”

That got a good cheer, I could hear Grizzly attempting to gather some sort of 'order' over it all.

“Especially as one of them is a known *mutant* that could overhear sensitive details and pass it on to you! Who knows? That Pipbuck of his could send messages to your little gift from Red Eye!”

“This is ridiculous!” Protégé shouted up, a hoof stomping on the seating panel. “The system *works*, you are simply trying to confuse it under your own bias!”

“Now who's accusing who?” Grindstone stood beside Protégé. “Perhaps if you wish to prove this 'unbiased way' of Red Eye in such a good system you should remove those two from this room? Or do you have any objection to *that*? By rule they shouldn't even be here if other slavers are not here instead.”

There was a silence. I was sure Ragini, Grizzly and Protégé could see what just happened. That was a planned argument. Slowly, I saw Protégé look up at us and slowly turn to Grizzly. The old pony knew it, they were forced into an argumentative corner.

“The masters are right, Protégé,” he spoke slowly, carefully, “technically Ragini and Murky Number seven should not be present if they are not permitted to bring their own aids and assistants in as support.”

He was being forced to allow their wishes. Everypony knew it made no difference, they just wanted to force him to concede to something. If he didn't the entire process was likely to fall apart in argument that I was sure Shackles would take advantage of. Slowly, Protégé nodded and sat down again. Grizzly looked up to us.

“Ragini and Murk, if you would return to your place of work. The hearing is being broadcast on the frequency of Red Eye's secondary channel should you wish to listen in still.”

That was that. We hadn't a choice but to up and leave. I passed a smugly grinning Wormtail on the way out. Looking back, I saw Protégé sitting alone at the front, surrounded by those who would seek to bring him down. I hated to leave him like that but really...I had no choice now.

* * *

We were led away and escorted from the FunBarn, a few of Grindstone's slavers ensuring to not

let up our tail until Ragini and I were outside. Really, I was glad she was still there at the very least. Without her I'd be easy prey.

“S-so what now?” I looked up (and further up) at the taller griffin.

She just snorted derisively. “You go back to the warehouse. I've just been given a bit of free time to go about my own business. Now where did you last see that Shade?”

I told her, pointing out the building across from the warehouse behind the FunBarn. Ragini lightly unslung her rifle and loosened off her neck.

“I'll be back soon. Just going to go hunting...”

“They...they're probably gone. They are really good at sneaking and, um...”

“I caught *you* didn't I? Those raiders aren't going to get away. They took my fucking wings, I'm going to repay the favour to them before they die. *Talons. Don't. Forget.*”

She stalked off, clicking her head around to the rooftops as she went. That griffin sure was intense. I remembered her breaking necks with her talons alone in the Mall, with any luck she might find the Shades. Much as I hated killing in general it would be a weight off my mind if they were gone.

Unfortunately, it left me rather alone. Not wanting to take risks, I galloped off back to the warehouse instead. The guards let me through without incident, allowing me into the main store room. Within, I could see some of the slavers surrounding a radio, listening to the hearing themselves. The thought to take the time and lift some more things occurred to me, but seeing Mudball staring and seeming to grin at me being kicked out of the hearing I really just wanted to go someplace safe. Taking the catwalks, I instead went to Protégé's office and clicked the lock shut behind me, thankfully not requiring a key to do so from inside. After a second of seeing only *his* chair and *his* bed, I instead trotted to the stairs and wearily climbed them into the attic. It felt safer. More hidden.

Besides, I hoped the height up here might eventually set off a message I was dying to hear.

The Shade's kit was still lying around. Some discarded tins of food and notepads to take details on. Even a camera rested on one side, presumably to take pictures of Protégé's files without having to conspicuously steal them. That strange device they had used to block his eyepiece's E.F.S still lay whirring in the corner. Aside from that the attic was mostly empty, just a set of dusty chairs and cabinets under the wooden beams and the bullet hole ridden water tank. An old roll of wallpaper about ten feet wide that lay nearby and that was about that. The attic had long been stripped clean of loot. How boring.

Fiddling with my Pipbuck, I wound the frequency dial around until at last I heard Grizzly's

commanding voice shouting over as much of an argument as when I'd left. I heard Grindstone protesting about the precise ranks involved. Protégé argued the case by definition. Most fell into a blank noise.

“This process is to build a better future! One where might does not simply make right, Grindstone! One we might be able to transfer away from these dark days to past Unity and the new generation!” Protégé argued passionately but sternly.

“Fillydelphia was built upon leadership! You would seek to remove strong leadership to instead permit vote gathering and politics to muddy that which should be counted upon! Red Eye has always led us well, why should this not continue?”

“He has already made his choice, this was his idea! This isn't about changing the boon of leadership, but simply finding the best way to ensure a continuation of that leadership. This is not an election of a new leader for us all.”

“He has been wrong before and changed plans based upon our feedback, Protégé! Long before you came here we helped him shape this. Why risk a fracture? I know it's not replacing Red Eye, but this could set a precedent for future.”

Briefly, I wondered why Grindstone was seeking so hard to overrule the entire process. Didn't he want Shackles to use it to win? Maybe they were getting wind that it was less of a sure thing now and didn't like the idea that Protégé could seek a victory based upon him and Shackles in competition?

This was all far over my head. Either that or he wished it to avoid this process to simply see Shackles' majority as the only clear path. They were trying to shut Protégé out, rather than allow Shackles in.

“The process is decided.” Grizzly cut into the argument. *“Red Eye gave his order to carry it through, if you wish to object upon it you can see him afterwards but for now we will do as commanded and count the nominations. Much of it has already been drafted from early submissions.”*

“Then reveal them already!” I heard Wormtail shout that, followed by most of the arguing slavers present. *“Who voted for who?”*

“We will not be revealing names, anonymity is assured, that is why I have my position. However even as I see them before me here, there is one clear majority.”

Oh no...

“One clear majority and one smaller spike in votes for a second party. These being for Chainlink Shackles...and Protégé.”

The courtroom burst into opposition and support. Most of the older slavers calling for the simple clear majority to simply take it and win. That was no doubt the crux of Shackles and Grindstone's plan, to use the theory of 'most wins.' Now I saw it, they knew he would get the most and simply wanted to...well...simplify it all. Push it on through with 'popular' support. Protégé had to try and argue for it to be an ongoing process without looking like he was simply defending his own chances now.

I didn't envy him that awkward position one bit.

“The process is clear, we have two noted candidates nominated for future vote and-”

“Bullshit!” Slit interrupted Grizzly. *“Look at the numbers! Master Shackles has more than twice the nominations! That's clear as glass!”*

It all fell into more and more argument. Passive aggressive threats mixed with debates of logic and individual meanings of words. It all dragged onto an almost pathetic level, a struggle for power where no-pony was truly allowed to say what they honestly wanted to. The whole idea of having to work that way made my head hurt. Leader and follower was all I'd really known until lately too.

“They can-”

Beep!

The signal cut. Replaced instead by the familiar chirpy of my Pipbuck. Sitting up, I held it before me and eagerly leaned toward the screen.

Beep!

Try as I might, the excitement of hearing him again went truly deep. Even if it had interrupted the hearing. Alone in the attic, I grasped the Pipbuck and waited impatiently while staring at out combined cutie marks upon the device itself.

Beep!

Click.

“So...um...I, I really don't know what to say to begin this again. After the last one, I just...I'm sorry if I scared anypony. I know it scared me. Things have happened. Things have changed. I don't think my life is ever going to go back to the way it was. Whether that's good or not I...I just don't know.”

I could hear a roaring wind behind him. Perhaps he'd gone somewhere alone and high to talk. I'd certainly do the same. That's why I'd come up here.

“See, they got me. The Ministry of Morale. I won't go over all the details but...I thought that was it. That they'd memory strip me until I wasn't anypony anymore! They put me in a cell and I...I admit it, I just lay down and kept crying because I was afraid I wouldn't see anypony I knew again. No-pony told me what was going on! Not until she came. Pinkie Pie herself...”

His voice was still shaking. It couldn't have been long after for him.

“Sh-she came and told me not to worry. That I'd been 'naughty' but that she wanted to help fix it all. I just spilled, told her everything. Told her why I'd done it. That I'd been so worried and...and driven to my wits end by constant Stable drills and test megaspell sirens that I would do anything to get Sky a ticket! Pinkie, she...she just hugged me and told me that she understood what it meant to go a little crazy when you were worried about losing your friends.”

He stopped briefly. Holding my ear close, I could hear him sniffing a little in the background. The wind kept whipping around, stronger than before. Where even was he?

“So she offered me a deal to make up for it. To go into the zebras as a double agent. That she would provide me with some secret plans they'd long given up using to act as a way to smooth myself into them again. I was to find out what was going on then get back to her. If I managed it...she'd get me a ticket for Sky. 'Better to do good for Equestria if you're that bouncy to help your luvy duvy marefriend out' she said. She's right. I'd rather take the risk to help than condemn them to try. I accepted.”

Try as I might, I couldn't help but see something oddly familiar in this. Just as he was to help Pinkie in her task to achieve what he wanted, I was now working with Protégé. Pinkie had been right, he and I were pretty similar...

“Well, long story short it's worked. The zebras found me within hours of me getting out. I thought they might kill me but the plans worked. I don't know what she did to make them believe I'd escaped but whatever it was it worked. They told me that I couldn't do it like before though. If I wanted to keep helping them it'd be as a worker in their plans. I...I've to go where I'm suspecting those missing Wartime Ministry workers are going, to do the same job. They told me to wait here, outside the city and...and...”

He stopped. I heard him shuffling and looking around as the wind picked up again and blasted white noise into the recording.

“They're taking me somewhere. I don't know where. I've heard them talk about somewhere underground or a...a mountain or something. I don't know which one they are taking me to. I don't

know what they want me to do there. I...I'm scared...this is so out of my depth. I hope I get to see Sky again."

I clutched the Pipbuck close, I couldn't comfort the past but I sure as the Goddesses watched over us all could try.

"Just go with them. Do what they want. Find out what's going on and then get back to the Ministry in a week's time when Pinkie returns to Filly. Just one week. That's all I need to do. One week and all will be fine. One...week..."

He went silent, then took a sudden breath.

"I...I think they're coming. I can hear them nearby. This is it. I don't know why my life suddenly became important but...I'm going to try. For Sky. W-wish me luck I guess? Here we go..."

Click.

"Good luck..." I half muttered to myself, clutching my hooves around my own body through just imagining the fear. I'd been through scary things myself but I knew all too well how he felt.

Settling back against a wooden beam, I sat with my head in my hooves, trying to make sense of it all.

My friends had been thrown into the hellish pit of the metro, mining for Aurora's secrets.

Protégé was alone at the centre of a desperate conspiracy net to try and prove his place.

Shackles and Grindstone were making their moves for power.

Pinkie Pie had revealed to me we were on the right track but that a veil of mystery had descended on our route out.

Sundial was a potential guide on his own journey. The plans of the zebras.

I know the pieces. I could see them moving across the game board.

I just didn't know why or for what.

As I sat, all the little things started coming together in my mind. All the things I'd heard. That I'd seen. There had to be some solution! Something that told me what it all was! A growing urge within me to just *know* began to build. I'd been in the dark too long! What was it all?

That urge became action. I wasn't a thinker. I wasn't somepony who could deduct and make educated guesses.

But I could draw.

Surging to my hooves, I grabbed the wallpaper roll and tugged, drawing the massive sheet out across the attic floor. The very ground would be my canvas! Digging for a charcoal stick, I let my mind drop into the past and of everything in Fillydelphia I now knew. Beneath the dull light of the attic I scampered to and fro, adding lines here, curves there, shapes between them and letting it all emerge.

I drew everything, letting it all flow out. I drew three zebras, then Sundial near them. I drew what I imagined Ministry Station would look like with its abandoned platforms. I drew memory orbs, spell orbs and the machine that I had seen in the Ministry of Arcane Science that let ponies see the past without being a unicorn. I drew Magister Heartcare and his cult like ghouls of the zebra belief. I drew refugees looking lonely and scared as they were taken somewhere across the bottom of the canvas, a full six feet long. I drew Wartime workers who had participated in Sundial's area, the ones he'd said had disappeared from arcane projects. I drew the lab in the Stable where they had been researching ponies learning things through memory orbs for education.

Lines...lines! They were what mattered! I was sweating with the effort, the movement to bound and jump from image to image haphazardly with no real order. But only now did I circle and connect them all in a great spider web of elements drawn into one! A star shape...

I drew Pinkie Pie toward the side, making her mane huge and poofy as it truly was. Shackles and Grindstone went on the top left. I circled them and connected both to the Ministry Station. They wanted it. That then connected to a new sketch of Aurora Star! Which in turn connected to the memory research! Which went to the spell orbs!

Again and again, even as I heard the hearing argue in the background over projects and authorities I dared to simply *ignore* it and do what I needed to. Over and over the lines went, crossing and connecting! Beneath me, a huge floor of the past and future connecting unveiled!

There it was...

I fell back, exhausted and staggering. Looking down and letting the charcoal fall from my mouth, I gazed upon my work.

A huge lattice of connected sketches...with the centre blank but for the dozens of lines that crossed over. The one gap that connected everything. That which this was *all* about.

Memory research to help ponies learn, it had worked with spell orbs. Aurora had wanted that and had possibly even continued her research without being allowed to in the Ministry Station and in

their mountain range outside the city. Grindstone had mentioned that was hers! The zebras had mentioned 'underground' and 'mountain' to Sundial. She *had* to be in league with them! A traitor of the highest level!

Aurora Star had places to work and zebras who were bringing in refugees and skilled workers through bribery or threat...into something that Shackles and Grindstone now wanted. Something they had protected so much as to make it a secret not even Red Eye had found. A secret that would be the *only* way out of this city for us no matter what horrors lurked in there!

Pinkie had said Heartcare had been disappearing too...he'd certainly been in league with zebras. What if those ghouls with him were the refugees? Had he been allied to Shackles and Grindstone? He had been preparing for a battle.

My colossal drawing finally brought it all to reality though. Find out what Aurora was doing...find the Ministry Station.

Find the Ministry Station...

...find the way out of Fillydelphia.

We could *do* this. I'd said that line a hundred times the last few days. Only now did I really begin to *feel* it. Whatever she'd been doing was long dead. Pinkie had said it wasn't as important as other things so...it likely wasn't a rogue megaspell or...or a huge hidden army or something. She was all about memory...something to do with memory...teaching zebras to fight better?

I would follow Protégé. He would want to find this out to stop Shackles. We would want to find this out to escape.

Goddesses please help him to understand and not to stand in our way at the last moment...

“The nominations are final! That is enough, Slit and Wormtail!” Grizzly voice came through so hard my Pipbuck crackled with static and shook my mind from its thoughts. *“As demanded by Red Eye we shall hear from both the nominations and end this hearing until a future vote is organised with Red Eye's own authorisation and acknowledgement! Chainlink Shackles, would you care to start?”*

The hairs on my neck bristled as I heard the clanking and stomping in the background of the signal. Whoever was holding the broadcast equipment clearly had to move quickly.

“We can see where the opinion of Fillydelphia lies.”

Warped by the bad quality, his voice sounded more rough and unsettled than ever. I could hear him having to wheeze between sentences, a lingering hurt.

“We can see where those have cast their feelings. Fillydelphia is a strong city, the one that truly rose upon the backs of hard work and proper authority. Power shifts...power changes...but always there is master and slave.”

I wondered if Red Eye was listening to this. He knew what Shackles had been before. He deposed him after all. I had always wondered why Shackles hadn't reacted worse...

“Out there, we build. We grow. We lead. We rise above. You all in here know that in the future, when our dear leader and his second eventually are brought low by time as always happens...Fillydelphia will still need its master. The wasteland can bring anypony to their knees. Remove anypony from life. Would you have somepony who does not understand the history of this city taken to authority?”

A loud cry from the ranks of those involved forced the signal into static. Shackles was brutal and at times even incredibly thin natured...but he wasn't stupid. He knew what to say.

*“Fillydelphia grew on power and strength to hold those slaves into their work! You know who would offer this! You know who has done this! **You know who is master!**”*

How could Red Eye know he was here and not stop this? Shackles would undo much of what he tried!

“Fillydelphia can rise further. A superpower of the wastes who is not restricted. Red Eye's vision is clear to us all. To create through sacrifice. Oh...I agree.”

Like hell you did. I heard the stomping of hooves as he stepped down. Were they voting out of alliance or out of fear? How many other slavers had been threatened like List Seeker on the quiet before? Protégé had to talk to Red Eye soon...this had to stop!

“That is our first nomination, Chainlink Shackles. Bear in mind, this is for Stern's successor. So think to your future, those assembled. Hear both before deciding and-”

“Are you biased, Old Grizzly?” Grindstone's voice cut in, leading to another retort and gradual argument. Struggling to hear, I pressed my ear to the Pipbuck, sitting atop my massive drawing.

“I am...kzzztch...ot biased here. This is a mere reminder that others may have alternative elements to-kzzzzztch-”

The Pipbuck warped and scattered off.

“Kzztch! Dirk? Dirk? You there?”

My eyes widened. That was the Shades! The broadcast lingered off, changing back to Grizzly.

“Kzzztch-please come to the stand for his opposing message to the assembled slavers of Fillydelphia. Protégé, if you woul-kzzztch”

Another drop!

“Kzztch-here, mate. Don't worry, it's all done. Seems somepony fucked with the votes, he got in by one single fucking slip. Plan B's all ready though.”

“Kzzzz-you, Grizzly. To those who nominated me.” Protégé's voice, before it dropped right back to Dirk again.

“Come and give us a hand if we need it in the escape afterwards. This is going to be public.”

“Really?”

“R-kzzztch-lly. They still think it's just Barb fucking with Protégé from the grave. They ain't wrong, either. Means we can get away with it. Little fucker's going down the moment he finishes that speech, right in front of everypony. Dramatic, right? Same way they fucked Barb before us. Shades don't forgive.”

My hooves trembled on the floor. Around me I saw Shackles and Grindstone drawn with circles surrounding them connected to the mountain and Ministry Station. Connected to a sketch of Protégé I'd done. One that settled right below the image of my friends...one that was connected to Ministry Station itself as an escape...

They had been waiting to make their move. To destroy him just as he tried to change Fillydelphia. To prove him wrong that ponies weren't better.

“Kzzztch-let's go. Grab the rifle with the E.F.S sight Mosin left us as you come and-kazzztch!”

Protégé.

“This shall not be a speech for the attempt of changing the minds of those who support slavery at its core. This is a message to those who are, within Fillydelphia, the leaders. Those at their heart whom are not slavers. A message that shall, as my chance to speak to you all...bring with it the crux of my belief. The record that should hopefully remain in those very minds even if I were to fade away. The record...that Fillydelphia is not a place. It is an ideal.”

No! They were going to outright assassinate him! I paced on the spot and in circled, treading

on my massive work. Ragini was out there somewhere...she...she was meant to stop it! But I didn't know where she would be! I didn't have my friends...I...I couldn't fight Shades alone!

What could I do? I was just one little sla...

“An ideal that stretches higher than the wills of us ourselves. Sacrifice not of the body but of our individual wishes to create a greater shared dream.”

No...no I wasn't. Little, maybe. Afraid, certainly. Helpless...not now.

I turned, grabbing everything I owned along with stopping to throw something else into my saddlebag. My saddle wrapped around me as I spun and wriggled into it. I had to do this. No-pony else was going to stop it! Tying my Pipbuck back on, I turned and galloped for the door, leaving the entire star shape of threads and imagery behind me.

Down the stairs. Across the office. Out onto the catwalk.

“I dream of Master Red Eye's vision. We know it isn't perfect. But we can do so much more if we were to put this argument and self wishing behind us. In this very single day I have met those who would protect others at their own risk. I have met those who would put their own life on the line to help protect a future. In this very day I have seen the shadows that seek to strike and draw us back into the wasteland.”

I clattered down the gantry, stunning those around me. Almost falling, panting and desperation lit in my eyes, I galloped for the exit! Slaves stopped and watched as I leapt carts and ducked below empty shelving. Careening outside, I swung to charge toward the FunBarn, passing the Alpha-Omega Hotel on the right.

“Look to the foals we care for. That we protect and so nurture to make them into a greater generation than us. They move on, they improve who they are away from the bleak world. They are not without hurt...they have each been taken from their parents. Parents I have seen suffer.”

The mud clung to me that I bounded and hampered through. Looking around, I tried to watch for any Shades. None appeared, but the back of the FunBarn was coated in deep shadow. How was I even to get into it? They had it locked down! The Shades were likely already inside!

“They can improve and change...why not us in turn by their brave little example? Why can we not change for the better and move past the black that stains this resurgent city?”

I saw guards at the entrances. They stood with readied battle saddles. All around the sky above I saw griffins patrolling. There wasn't a way! How could...how could I...

My eyes found the way I'd left before. The very unrepaired hole that my grapplehook had been found in before! Sprinting forward, I heard a guard shout and give chase. Above, at least one griffin swivelled to drop. There was no way to hide and still keep moving!

“Look around you all. How many of you have been coerced into how you feel? How many simply see no way out but to accept it? How many of us are but slaves to our own slavery? When we creep in shadows and carefully lock our doors out of fear what have we become? Do you not wish for eventual betterment to a new way? I look into the eyes of those who are simply afraid to try...I recognise it. I felt the same way...”

Slipping down the slope into the grounds of the FunBarn, I swerved and rolled underneath a slaver's charging tackle. Springing to my hooves, ignoring the pain in my neck, I pointed my grapple gun upwards and flexed my leg. Blunderbuck's aim pointer swung out with the mouthpiece and I laid it upon the hole near the top floors. With a deep bite, I fired and swung up to the wall, slowly climbing vertically away with my hooves against the sheer wooden face of the tall building.

“Yet I have been shown that we are the cowards here. The ones afraid to stand up. For I have seen even the weakest of ponies show a strength that anypony amongst us has lacked. One that comes not from power or ability but from somewhere deep down that we in this bleak world have forgotten. A will to endlessly strive and above all...hope. A pony who is more than he will ever realise.”

Gunshots slammed into the wood beside me. Shrieking at the splinters firing into me and the growing pains on my recovering body, I tried to sway and bounce side to side off the wall as I neared the hole above! Throwing my front hooves up, I dragged myself in and retracted the hook. Under fire, I rushed into the FunBarn. I was in!

“If a slave we have battered into the ground can look to himself and be more than he ever was...where has that left us? Is it not us who have fallen behind Master Red Eye's dream? Who have failed to do as he would wish? We are the monsters. The ones who sat idle while those we teach and those who serve have shown us what being a pony means.”

“Hey you! Stop!”

“Get off! He's! He's!”

I had no time to argue with the slaver who grabbed me. My back hoof lashed out hard and he went rather silent, collapsing against the wall trying to scream with an open mouth for somepony else to stop me as I galloped on! Skidding around a corner, I passed through the medical bay and headed into the offices we'd been in before! I could hear the griffins behind me coming in through the hole I'd entered.

“Intruder in the FunBarn! Fan out! Stop him! He's got a saddlebag loaded up with

something!”

I was trying to *save* somepony, those idiots! Leaping down the stairs, I yelped and fell to the side against the wall. Dazed, I looked up to see the main terminal hall before me. Not...not far...

“Thus, to end this...I will ask one thing of you all. Think and watch those under your lead. To those who I said this was for...to those who came here with a dream...to those who wish to protect...is there not a better way than these shadows and fear beneath the lashes? Master Red Eye would not if he could, I merely ask that you think if such a dream is truly outwith our power.”

He was finishing! NO!

I reared up, firing my grapple above me to hit the old lighting systems above the slaves who clattered on keyboards. Clenching my teeth on the trigger, I leapt from the stairs and swung over the terminal floor entirely, shocking many of the slavers to not even reach out through sheer surprise.

Not all.

Even as I dropped and hit the floor, they were on me. Three slavers rushed me and piled atop. I squirmed and I fought. I bit, I used the hooks of my hook and my legs bucked out. I'd never beat them...but the little jabbing attacks bought me room to wriggle free. Reaching into my saddlebag, I threw the bag of nails I'd stolen earlier behind me and ran on. An old trick, but it gave me just a space I needed!

The doors were ahead!

“I leave this decision to you all now. Thank you.”

There wasn't much applause or stomping, perhaps only one of two unwary ones. Ahead of me I saw the doors! I felt a wound open somewhere below a bandage, felt my throat choking up and drawing air away from me. My vision blurred from exhaustion. I leapt forward, crashing through the doors.

Dozens of heads turned to me, not in the least Protégé from the stage. I didn't even hesitate, sighting with my eyepiece and biting down hard on the trigger again.

The hook rocketed out, the compressed air blowing my tired body from it's hooves.

It made a much louder sound than normal, so loud my ears rung and ached and forced me to close my eyes and shrink to the ground. The echo of a huge calibre round set off in close quarters somewhere above us all in the rafters.

Ponies leapt to their feet, crying out and swarming for the doors. Crowds kicked up, those not used to combat rushing away while others drew weapons and backed off more carefully. They rushed past me, almost keeping me from pressing through to...to...

...to see...

Upon the stage, I saw Protégé simply lying on his side.

Behind him, Old Grizzly pulled a guard's rifle from him and unleashed the full magazine into the rafters. I heard the sound of something metal dropping up there, before being bowled over by Wormtail sprinting with a panicked look from the room at the gunfire. Grizzly reloaded, spraying fire into the assassins area while I sprinted to Protégé. No...no...please don't be...

I heard him groan in pain, before stirring and sitting up.

The relief that came through me as I saw him mostly unhurt but for a bleeding wound on his cheek where my grapple hook had struck his face and knocked him out of the line of fire.

“Murk? What are...I just...”

He was dazed, confused.

“*Get out of the room!*” Old Grizzly screamed at us, firing again before being tossed backward into the table, a rifle round spearing into his shoulder. Other guards were joining as they got past the surging crowds.

Keeping low, I grabbed Protégé and helped support him as we ducked behind Grizzly's seat and away to the side. Protégé recovered quickly from the stunning blow, outstripping me as we got out of the courtroom and into a small preparation room that the judge had likely used in times gone past. Even so, behind us the fighting died down. I heard Grizzly say something about them slipping away.

I turned back to Protégé, finding him sitting loading his revolver.

“I...I heard them on the radio, saying they were going to-”

“I can gather. Now come on. Those Shades will just try again in a less dramatic way next time, I don't intend to give them the chance.”

He bucked open a door leading to a very thin set of stairs, the age old Phillydelphia style of course that I'd seen in the orphanage as well for fast movement of those serving those in the area. A couple of smaller (or tiny in my case) bucks had no trouble as we raced up them toward the rafters, I presumed.

“I should say, thank you, Murk! It seems you've helped ensure my life's continuation once again.”

Long way to say it. “I...uh...I couldn't just wait there...”

“I appreciate it. Now let's end this attack from beyond the grave.”

The door ahead of us burst open toward the rafters. Immediately someone swore and fired a rifle. Those below us took cover at the new sounds from above. Galloping right out onto the thin rafter walkways, Protégé fired back into the darkness. Blinking, I tried to let my eyes watch for dancing shadows...but instead saw the door at the opposite end open and close.

“They've run away!”

“Come on!” Protégé didn't wait for me to reply, charging out across the rafters himself, shouting for them to hold fire below and to seal off the main exits. I followed still, as we crashed through the door after the Shade.

“Kzzztch-after me, Dirk! He's got that fucking E.F.S!”

“Get down to the maintenance chambers! They're empty!”

“The maintenance chambers, Protégé!” I almost felt proud at my Pipbuck doing its job still and them not figuring it out yet from their radios. Ahead of me I saw him swerve down the next stairs. The Shade was fast ahead of us, long gone, but we knew where he was going.

Both of us arrived into the maintenance area at once...and immediately dove for cover.

We had been chasing them well, but they were the ones who thought to lay an ambush. Shotgun shells and pistol rounds flew across the open workshop toward us! Outside, I could see Fillydelphia itself through a large open door. Had all the guards run inside to secure it? Where were the outside ones?

Hugging behind a thick metal workbench, I finally got a chance to see the area. We were both on a raised section of benches and tool cupboards, but the fire was coming from behind crates in a lower garage like portion near two wagons near the exit. A silenced weapon cracked alongside the throaty roar of the shotgun from earlier today.

Protégé was in that age old problem. He only had one gun against their two and maybe even three. He could hardly outflank them. Already, I could hear someone moving to the side...seeking to get around us. The thought of one advancing and mercilessly firing with no way to hide was

sickeningly haunting.

Thankfully, Protégé was not going to wait for that.

Looking above them, he aimed to the roof and fired twice. An already wrecked air duct pinged free from its rusted housings, dropping directly on top of their position. Under a deafening crash it obliterated the crate they hid behind and forced two blurry shapes out in the open.

Protégé was waiting.

Charging out, he galloped forward and shot at the first as they landed from their dodge. The shots went wide or warped around the frantically blurring and shifting shadow magic user. The tell tale click sounded. Protégé was out of rounds!

“Game over, colt cuddler!”

“Really?”

I only saw his horn glow for a second from my hiding spot, before screaming myself as a loud *BANG* assaulted my ears and drove me into blindness from a flare of white light. Falling to the ground, I held my ears and whimpered as my eyes blinked away the assault of my senses. I heard the raiders screaming too, before one cried aloud when I heard Protégé reload and fire once again.

Still dazed, I could see him and the second raider exchanging new fire, the Shade struggling to see clearly just as I was. Padding hooves sounded to my right and I ran forward to avoid being caught out. Sticking to the far side of the room, I dove in beside Protégé again, screaming as rounds from the Shade that had flanked behind us opened fire from the shadows.

“Are you all right?!” Protégé dragged me into cover, hearing me shouting.

“I...I'm...not shot...oh Goddesses...” Why had I come into this firefight? “I...I didn't know you could do a spell like that!”

“Stun Flare spell. You get a lot of time to read when you're in bed for as long as I was...” He tried to grin a little, but it was still tinged with worry. We'd *really* bitten off more than we could chew here. At least two other Shades were creeping around our cover and I knew Protégé had to be running low on ammo after the chase this morning as well.

“I was rather hoping the guards would have caught up by now...can't help but feel Shackles is up to something again.” Protégé muttered, firing off a shot to drive one moving shadow back into cover.

“I...I can help...I think...”

“Right now, Murk...I don't think you have a choice. They won't let us run. I saw one of them carrying an E.F.S scope though, you can't sneak around them.”

“Um...yes I can.” I opened my saddlebag, revealing the little E.F.S blocker device I'd lifted from the attic. Nervously grinning, I nodded. I'd...I'd try to help.

“Good thinking, just don't try to run out of cover.”

He was right. If we tried to flee, they'd only gun us down as we went. I'd have to play my part here. Stay strong, Murky...Sundial managed to do it...you can too.

“All right...”

I took a breath, looked up to gauge where they were...and slipped back under the raised section, creeping into a small trench that was obviously once used to repair rollercoaster cars from below and making my way across the floor. If I could get behind them maybe I could cause enough of a distraction or make them get out of cover so Protégé could end it!

Unfortunately, it seemed they were even more intent to close down on Protégé than before. Above me, I heard their hooves tapping lightly on the ground moving forward. They weren't Barb...I could overhear them. Maybe even outsnear one!

Creeping around their position, I watched the pair of them firing at the increasingly devastated cover Protégé kept himself behind. Just a pity I didn't have *Rarity's Grace* with me.

“Go, Dirk! He's pinned, you've got time!”

One of the Shades rushed out of cover. I could hear Protégé struggling to reload his revolver in time! Only six rounds was a huge disadvantage to the weapons they had! Dirk galloped forward, that shotgun raised to point over and try to kill Protégé!

Biting hard on my mouthpiece, the grapple hook shot across the ground in front of Dirk. Swearing loudly, the raider tripped over it, slamming into the ground. Protégé leapt up, his revolver pumping shots into the stricken Shade, who only had time for one howl of pain before the third shot slapped into his face and sprayed me with red droplets. Squirming away from the mess, I almost fell into the trench as my grapple hook ground its way across the floor to retract.

Then it stopped.

Looking up, I saw the third Shade had stepped on it, holding the wire taut and stopping it

retracting while his magic aimed the silenced pistol toward Protégé.

“Too eager, study boy. You're good...but you're not *that* good.”

I started forward, maybe I could-

The pistol swung and pointed at me for just a second enough to make me stop, before catching Protégé again as he made to reclaim his own weapon.

“Ah...ah...aaaah...you've killed enough of us now, colt cuddler. You harmed us, harmed our leader. Now you're going to die screaming, lacking all that pride you like to think you have.”

“Oh yes. You *are*.”

The female voice came from above, a much larger shape dropping directly down onto the Shade. I saw feathers fly and talons glint in the dull light as Ragini landed right on top of him. A squelch of punctured flesh popped into my ears.

“You and your little gang, I've been trying to track you down all afternoon!”

“Fuck you, bird!”

Ragini twisted, her claws on those hind legs digging in. I could see she was holding him down by the neck, one of her hind legs pressing right down upon it while her talons grasped her hard shot rifle.

“Fuck *you*, raider! You took my wings! Stripped me of flying with my brothers and sisters forever!”

“Ergh...and ain't we proud to hear it fucking *hurts, huh? Argh!*”

The butt of her gun struck his forehead.

“Oh you get to hear me say that because I want you to know it!”

“Go on, fucking kill me then!”

“No.”

Beside me, Protégé trotted across rather breathlessly and nursing a small wound to his front leg. His neck bandages seemed to be bleeding too. Two of us were a wreck, really.

“Ragini,” he spoke, “just end it.”

“He doesn't fucking deserve a simple death!”

Below her leg pinning him, I could see the Shade's magic flaring and bubbling over his outline, clearly trying to build up power for a blink spell again.

“You think your magic will save you? That's all you have going for you, you cowards! I'll bet those spells are pretty much permanent when you activate them, a part of you! Something that matters more than any...to let you weaklings sneak and steal...ever wonder what happens if that were to be stripped from you?”

Her rifle barrel shifted upwards away from between the Shade's dark eyes. I saw his gang like pride beginning to waver. It was pointing at his horn.

“You want to *feel* the pain you put me in? To know you'll never do it again?”

“N-no! KILL ME! JUST KILL ME YOU WINGLESS COWARD! DO IT! JUST SHOOT ME BETWEEN THE EYES!”

“No.”

Her rifle cracked.

Never...*never* in my life...had I heard a pony scream in that way. I actually felt faint, staggering to the side to throw up and cover my ears. I heard the spark of magic like whenever Coral's failed yet sharper and more painful. I heard somepony wriggling in agony. The *sound* he made...

“*Ragini!*” Protégé grimaced moving up behind her. “End this! This isn't how we work!”

“It isn't how *you* work! An eye for an eye with the Talons! He can bleed to death through that capillary and trauma in his horn. It'll only take a few minutes.”

She had spun off the Shade, who rolled, squealing on the ground and trying to hold his hooves over a malfunctioning, shattered and bleeding horn that I couldn't even see...nor wanted to. Ragini stood with her talons balled up into fists between him and Protégé.

“Revenge is revenge. It isn't pretty but that's how it just fucking works! He's getting what he deserves, I saw him laughing at me when that hammer fell! Just leave him.”

Ragini wanted past Protégé. I watched her go, with a grim look on her face. She didn't look satisfied...just black and void of emotion.

A few seconds after, I heard Protégé's revolver fire...and finally the screams silenced. She spun, facing him eye to eye. They said nothing for a few seconds, but I could see the conflict there. Her revenge against his morals.

“I watched you kill a pony in cold blood for betraying somepony you care about, *sir*.”

“I wasn't causing them suffering for petty childish revenge, Ragini.”

“He was unarmed. So what makes you any better than what you preach?”

“Because I believe we can all do *better* than the mistakes we've made!” Protégé bit back, leaning toward her. “I am not the same pony I was then! I'm looking at this with wider eyes now!”

“Or less blind eyes, but you're just falling back into that naïve little shell of a pony you once were, only with power to actually think you can make a difference now.”

“That your professional opinion to your charge?”

“The one that watches you make enemies that try to kill you.”

A third voice broke in.

“Only because my dear Protégé is more of an idealist to what I have taught him than I think he truly knows.”

The arguing pair fell silent, as did my own thoughts. I'd hung by the wayside, not party to this debate of position and test of trust beyond contract. The voice came from behind me, from outside the FunBarn's main exit with an easy grace and dominant power within it.

I turned with the others and saw him simply standing there as though it was nothing in the world. Red Eye angled his head as though in slight greeting before trotting into the maintenance area. Yet even as I watched him, his movements seemed a little more sluggish than normal. I could see a heavy darkness under his one organic eye.

“I highly encourage debate amongst my leaders, but I must say this has been a rather extreme set of circumstances...” Red Eye almost seemed to smirk at the whole situation as he carefully trotted around one of the Shade's corpses from earlier. “I had hoped this would resolve itself without my needing to be here. My my...”

Ragini backed off, falling silent and bowing her head with a talon clenched over the same symbol on her armour. I simply stood shivering and trying not to attract his gaze. Where had he even

come from? By his side I could see that cybernetic canine, Winter prowling around and glaring at me as though I were some sort of squeak toy.

Protégé meanwhile quickly cantered forward on shaking legs from the comedown after combat.

“Master Red Eye! I have much to tell you! If you would give me one hour to discuss with you and-”

Red Eye held up a hoof. “There is much work to be done, my student. Unity nears and my presence is required soon. I cannot stop for matters, I am afraid. Not even for sleep...”

He bid us forward, moving out of the bay and away from the corpses. Upon a bandstand of the FunFarm next to the barn he stopped and sat upon one of the older wooden benches. Then he did something I never thought I would see in the authoritative figure that controlled this city and my life.

He sighed and held his head in one hoof, rubbing his eye with weariness. Sitting down across from him, I saw Protégé move forward in concern.

“I am tired, Protégé.” Red Eye lifted his head back up, smiling to his student. “It's been three days since I have last slept and yet there is more to do before I can truly rest. The wasteland is changing and I must move with it lest we fall behind or be caught unprepared. It had been my hope this election might conduct itself independently but I would imagine there is more to this than simply the revenge of raiders. Tell me quickly, what happened?”

Protégé looked ready to say a dozen words at once, but gradually caught his breath, stood before his master and spoke at length of the Mall and of the things I had passed on to him.

“However, Master, it is more than a simple petty squabble. They have been seeking to acquire secrets from the past. Murk here has confirmed this to me from eavesdropping on their meetings. Aurora Star's work, from the Ministry? They seek her underground station and her mountain retreat. The Shades were working for *them* to attempt to ensure Shackles has power!”

Red Eye listened carefully as Protégé told him more of what had happened in greater detail. I couldn't help but notice Ragini had slunk off during the talk. I sat nearby on the bench, trying to edge further away from Winter who seemed intend on nuzzling my side curiously. *I hated dogs...*

“I can see that they clearly are.” Red Eye nodded, turning to me and beckoning me forward with a lazily waved hoof. I simply hopped up and trotted forward to find him looking at the E.F.S blocker sticking out of my saddlebag.

“This sort of technology is not common, indeed we only have one in Fillydelphia left in Grindstone's care within that Ministry and it is non-functional. This is indeed proof they are harvesting

things already more advanced than what we know we have. I can't say I didn't expect this eventually from Chainlink Shackles but he could not have picked a worse time. Better the devil you know, they say. To keep your enemies close. It has worked till now.”

“Then we must throw him down from his rank, Master!” Protégé knocked his hooves together. “Fillydelphia must be rearranged to remove their betrayal! If they got this working then they must have found something!”

“No.”

The look on Protégé's face was the picture perfect form of astonishment. Red Eye grunted and rose to his hooves again. It was so strange seeing him anything less than perfectly formed.

“The Enclave draw near, my student. Unity approaches and I need Fillydelphia strong, not split in civil wars of loyalties. We cannot risk a schism at this point or the Enclave will destroy Fillydelphia and the very industry we tried to create! I have known of this divide between idealism and power for some time”

“But what about their efforts, Master? We can't just let them go with nothing! The technology they find might shift the balance and-”

“Oh...I'm not going to do anything.” He smiled. “Because that's what I want you to do. I can trust you, my faithful student. You must go forth. Strive to seek them out, to find what they search for and never to yield to them. If they feel they have enough power from whatever they find they might attempt their own coup upon Stern. I cannot have that, the wasteland cannot have that.”

“Aurora Star has some projects that were important enough that they were taken into a Stable and protected even against its inhabitants, Master. Murk has confirmed this. If they were to use this in some sort of arms race for power...it would undo what Fillydelphia has become, Master.”

“Yes, it would.” Red Eye nodded, an odd look in his eyes. Far off and pained. He had seen what Filly was before his changes. “This is awkward timing. We cannot face them directly for fear of a schism, yet we must face them in the shadows to prevent one. After all, you already have a companion to be proud of with dear Murky here. I give you my blessing for this, Protégé. Do this quietly.”

I felt myself oddly blush at a compliment from Red Eye himself as he looked across.

“If they go to the mountains then you must go there too. Find whatever secrets lie there and bring them home to Stern. I have every faith in you, Protégé. This is, in a way, what I have taught you to eventually do. To be my extension when the needs must be. I realise there are conflicts within but Unity will end that and if not, Stern will always be there to lead this city as a back up. She is younger

than Shackles after all.”

He smirked.

“This, however, is your task leading to a hopeful succession of Stern's rule in future.”

“Then you're not coming, Master?”

He hesitated, then slowly shook his head. Overhead I heard several alicorns before they gracefully landed alongside a griffin pulled chariot off the side of the bandstand. Slavers piling into the area to secure it after the event were giving us all a very wide berth.

“I depart Fillydelphia for the Cathedral and Unity this very hour. Protégé...one way or the other, I shall not be returning as I am. It...it does fill me with regret that this is likely the last I shall see of you in this time.”

Protégé couldn't quite hide the crushing feeling on his face. “I...I knew it was soon but...”

“Do not fear. You have been every inch the student I could have wished for since that day I helped pull you from the muddy pits of slavery. It has been a worthy pleasure to watch you grow, learn and become the stallion you are today. Look forward with pride.”

“Th...thank you, Master...” Protégé was clearly having to struggle a little, I knew he saw Red Eye as a father more than a leader in many ways. To him this was a parent leaving. He trotted behind Red Eye on his way to the chariot, as though trying to lengthen the time spent with him. Somehow, I couldn't shake the feeling of how I was taken from my mother in my head.

“Remember our dream, Protégé. You aren't the student any more. Go forth as who you are and what I have taught you to believe in. A new Equestria...”

“A new world for all of us. I will, Master. I will...”

“Good luck, then. And goodbye.”

The griffins took the command from a sharp rap on the chariots edge. The intimidating alicorns beat their wings, rising up alongside it. Protégé stood watching his master disappear into the sky. Disappearing to lands beyond across the wastes...

He stood there for some time.

Eventually, I approached him.

“P-Protégé?”

“I am...all...all right, Murk...”

He didn't sound it. I saw him have to wipe his eyes before turning. Respectfully, I avoided looking directly to his face. Just because people were used to seeing me do it didn't mean I had to make it seem so in return.

“If we'd had but one more day. How I wish we did. Yet Master Red Eye has trusted me to do this in his absence. For *him*.”

He turned and looked out over Fillydelphia, toward the mountain ranges that could be seen over the hill. They rose up, peaked with oddly glistening snow with some even going past the clouds...

“I cannot do this alone, Murk. These days, I know few ponies I can trust and fewer still who would follow. My does have sworn guards, multiple masters, an armoury and official backing with an expedition to those mountains. What have I? A few rounds left for my revolver and an E.F.S eyepiece...”

Gulping, I stepped forward. “Y-you have me...”

Protégé actually smirked. “Of course. I knew I could count on you, but we may need a larger group than just us two to go against them, Murk.”

I bit my lip, before thinking and biting my lip.

“Well...um...there are some who would follow us. My friends...”

I saw the smile spread across his face.

“You know where they are?”

“Yes...in the metro. Down where, um, they're trying to find the Station.”

Protégé nodded slowly, then clapped my back gently.

“Then let us creaky injured bucks go get a healing potion, a few hours recovery and something to eat at last. After that...”

He glanced out over Fillydelphia, seeing the lines of Masters and Overseers trotting out. I could see those recognisable figures within leading their supporting mass away.

“...we're going back into the shadows. If I have to break free workers from those masters against us to help stop him I will. I will not break his trust. We're going to rescue your friends, Murk.”

He smiled and turned to canter at speed back to the logistics hub. I followed, casting only a brief glance back to those slavers again and seeing the back of Shackles' head moving toward the metro.

Just hold on down there, my friends. *We're coming!*

* * *

Footnote – Perk Attained!

Low Hoof (Rank 2!) – Just when they thought it couldn't get worse, you're turning a nasty little cheap shot into an acquired skill that you actively turn to and try to be good at with an idea on precisely where to strike *hard*. Instead of stunning, your chance to critical hit will now paralyse the target for a brief time. Ouch!

Chapter 21: Just Downstairs (Part 1)

* * *

“One simple survival instinct. If you smell rotten mint...gallop away as fast as you can and do not look back. Do not stop and do not try to hide. Just gallop. Gallop...and pray.”

“What was it like having such a, well, *bizarre* idea on what to do?”

To be working with my 'master' on a mission from Red Eye or to be on a journey pointed out by a crazed pink pony from the past?

“I guess you could say both...”

Well, Pinkie's one...I dunno really. It didn't hit me as hard as anypony might have thought it would. That sort of stuff messes with your head if you think about it too hard. A pony seeing the future, leaving messages in precisely the right places that she needed to and all. Maybe I took it a little at face value, but given it wasn't actively trying to hurt me, could you blame me for taking the chance?

“It sounded like she told you precisely what you knew anyway.”

Yeah, that's true. But there's a difference between having a plan and knowing it's the right one, y'know? Glimmer and I figured out a plan that gave us a bit of hope but Pinkie's message helped give me the confidence I needed.

I guess you could say she just helped me to learn to smile...

“You do have a beautiful smile. Glimmerlight wasn't wrong when she said that.”

Heh...I...ah, thanks...hehe! Well, um, I guess what I mean is that I was free to concentrate on other things without worrying about whether we were heading to the right place. Now that I was with Protégé I had a mission. To get my friends.

“But Protégé wanted to go to the mountain afterwards?”

Yes, he did. The first thought in my mind was pretty simple. If my friends were in the metro, I could get them there and we could make a break for it that very day! We could get Sunny, hide out in the tunnels and look for Unity as well as start thinking on how to get the foals out too! Starshine seemed to know a way. But that was the real problem. Protégé was with me. He wouldn't allow that and he had direct orders that went against our wishes. There was a confrontation coming if I didn't find some new thing that would allow us to leave. Well...

“Well?”

There...there is the fact I guess that...

“You're taking an awful long time to say it.”

Well, I just guess I hadn't quite given up on wanting to see if he might come with us. He was a better pony inside than I had thought. He understood slavery the way I did. Yet we had different objectives, different mindsets, different inspirations...how could all that come to a head? In the end, it was never going to be as simple as us just slipping away then and there. There were obstacles in front of us still, ones that would take a bit more effort to get around.

“You seem to be skipping ahead a little, Murky.”

Sorry, I know. Just this was when it started to accelerate. When I felt my life speed up and start careening forward in ways I hadn't known since that first day in the Pit. We were about to learn things about what this 'way out' exactly consisted of. The remnants of the past would be a lot clearer in how they tied together in this race for information, one that Protégé wanted to win and one that mattered to us just as much. We had to share in his quest while all the time hoping that in the end we wouldn't have to fight *him*.

The metro held secrets in the dark below the city.

'The way out is just downstairs', Pinkie had said.

That wasn't all that was down there...

* * *

I had a tough decision to make.

Protégé and I sought to find, release and steal away my friends from under Shackles' nose to bring them into the fold and beat him in the race for Aurora's secrets. Really, I just wanted them back and safe without thinking much about what would come after. The trouble was, I held a key to this little quest succeeding and I wasn't sure if I should use it or not.

I had retreated to Protégé's attic above his logistics hub office while he took care of business prior to our departure. Having even a little space to myself helped me to think. That and it gave me time to add to my vast drawing upon the ground. Details sprang into life from the much larger canvas. Just being able to doodle and let thoughts wander helped me think so much better.

I could get us into the metro without being seen. I knew a way. It was the same one that I'd exited through before, the one that the ghouls below had told me about. A safe and sneaky way in that would work for sure.

Unfortunately, it was also the same one we were to use to eventually escape. I'd have to reveal a portion of our hand and a potential vulnerability to Protégé if I wanted to use it. Could I risk it? Was it *worth* that risk? Perhaps I could try and act like I'd just spotted it in the distance. Not that I imagined I could fool Protégé for long. He seemed to have a knack for knowing when I was lying.

A sharp rap on the door in the empty office below perked up my ears and pulled me from my pondering. Charcoal in mouth, I raised my head up and looked at the stairs heading downward when the knocking came again. Protégé wasn't in but it had to be someone for him...oh dear...what if it was somepony bad? But it could be somepony like Old Grizzly!

I sat and wondered if I should open it or not...before eventually sighing and getting up to trot downstairs. The knocking on the door came again and then quickly afterward once more even when I pressed my ear against it. I couldn't see anypony through the warped glass but they could have just been standing off to the side...

Biting my lip...I dared to reach out and unlock it. Pulling the door back slightly, I peeked through and stood ready to leap back...

"Hiya, Mister Murky!"

Jolting my head back a little and wincing as the high-pitched voice squeaked right into my ears, I looked down to find Chirpy Sum standing upright and grinning wildly with that big floppy hat of his right before me. He looked rather impossibly happy.

"Ch-Chirpy?"

"Uh-huh!" He nodded rapidly. "Is Mister Protégé here? I want to see if he'll check my work before I go back home to the Hotel! I like getting him to check them, he always leaves really cool and tidy corrections and examples that are so fun to-"

"He's, um..." I interrupted him before he *really* got going. "He's not here right now."

Gathering my surprised thoughts, I glanced around before turning a more serious face to Chirpy and motioning him into the room.

"Come in though, you can, um, wait for him...I need to talk to you."

"Oh yes! You were going to tell me about my-"

"Sshh!" I held my hoof to my mouth desperately, as though pleading him to just *be quiet* for a second!

“It has to be a...a secret! Yes, a real secret! Come on...”

Chirpy's eyebrows rose before he put on a downright conspirational grin and over-exaggerated a sneaky look around before creeping inside. Rolling my eyes, I shut the door behind us and turned.

“I can keep real good secrets, Mister Murky! Please, is my mom out there? I like Daddy Red Eye and Mister Protégé is really cool and all but I do miss her...”

His big round eyes widened out as he looked up to me. I felt distinctly unqualified to handle this level of childlike endearment and wishful thinking. Biting my lip and rubbing my head, I sat down and tried to explain things.

“Well, Chirpy...you see. Yes, she is here and-”

“She is?! Can we go to see her? Can she come visit? Aww, I can't wait to see her again and show her my cutie mark!”

The pang of sadness I felt from merely seeing him and hearing about 'Daddy Red Eye' only doubled as he proudly showed off a mark of four symbols Protégé had explained before in our lesson. Coral had missed her own son gaining his cutie mark...

“See? One for adding, one for subtracting and then one's for multiplying and-”

I had to look away briefly to take a breath as he went on a ramble about how he got it in a lesson where he told the teacher they were wrong. Hold it in, Murky...you're stronger now. You don't have to cry all the time at things like this...hold it in...

“Chirpy...” I breathed, coughing to hold back the wave of tragedy for this broken family from my mind, “Coral, your mom...she's here but...um...see it's not easy. You know she's a slave, right?”

“A worker? Mister Protégé said-”

“Mister Protégé says a lot of things, Chirpy...” I regretted realising this myself. “Your mom isn't as safe as they say, but she is coming. We're all coming. You're going home, Chirpy. This is all over now and we're going to get you back to her and then we're *all* going to take you back home where you belong!”

He stopped his talking, for once, as he opened his mouth wide and let those eyes expand with quivering pupils. “H-home?”

“Y-yeah...” Please don't cry, Chirpy...please don't cry or something...

“I...I am home but...like my second home and I like two cos it's higher than one and...and...but I can...wow! Will it be like, a real adventure or something? They told me coming here would be an adventure but then I had to stay in that hotel for months and months! I like it but I wanna go out there again but they say they can't let me and they-”

“You will, Chirpy.” I couldn't help but find his interest somewhat endearing. “It'll be a big adventure with...um...lots of running and hiding and exploring...”

“Awesome! Lilac and Starshine both said that they had an adventure to go on and told me that my mom might be there! Now I can come! Can we go now?”

Chirpy galloped forward, making me yelp as he launched himself at me and thumped his two front hooves onto my chest. Fighting back the rancid cough as my lungs complained at the impact I found his face looking right up at me, mouth held open ready for the answer he wanted. At the very least, he wanted to go...that was one big thing out of the way.

“N-not right now...”

“Aww...”

“Sorry, Chirpy. We need to get your mother first...and a few other friends of mine. You stay with Lilac and Starshine, they'll be the ones who get in contact with us. Okay?”

“Yes, sir, Mister Murky, sir! Wasteland Adventurer Chirpy Sum is on the job! I'm gonna make a big

cape to wear and stay warm like the ones Mom used to sew for me! Like my hat!”

He fidgeted with the huge floppy woollen hat. It seemed a habit of his to have to push the big drooping thing back up again, like it had been sewn for somepony twice his size. He rushed off and leapt onto Protégé's chair, holding a hoof up and spinning to address, presumably, the walls.

“I'm gonna go swishing out of here on an adventure! Gonna see things with my mom and catch up and then I'm gonna bring her back to show her the cool things Daddy Red Eye taught me to do once we get allowed to work in the big places in Fillydelphia! I can't wait! You can come too, Mister Murky, I like you! You're really cool!”

He stopped.

“Mister Murky?”

He must have seen my face.

“Mister Murky, what's wrong? What's wrong? Did you forget something? You look-”

“I'm all right, Chirpy!” I moved away. Gritting my teeth, I tried to push away the thoughts that had landed *harsh* upon my heart. Coral Eve...I'm so so *so* sorry...I don't know how you're going to cope...

He was adorable, Goddesses bless him...but Red Eye had his hook in deep with the poor colt.

“Just...just watch out, okay, Chirpy?”

Coral's son wandered across, hopping up with his hooves on my shoulder in curiosity to why I wasn't really looking back.

“Your mom loves you, Chirpy...more than anything else. Just...just remember that above *everything*, okay?”

I turned and pulled him a little close, praying to myself that Coral Eve would have the strength in her long-enduring body and mind to handle how her son had changed.

“I will, Mister Murky...”

“Good...good boy.” Coral had spoke like that before, just copy her Murky! “Now you should, um...go, I think? You're safer in the hotel. Don't stop for anything, okay?”

“Yes, sir!”

“You, um, don't need to call me sir, Chirpy...and I'm a bit young for 'Mister' yet I think...”

“Okie dokie...um...Assistant Murky?”

My ears perked up as he tried a few different titles in his politeness. Outside, I heard a familiar voice. Protégé was in the warehouse. I heard hooves on the gantry.

“Okay, you should go, right now! Don't speak of this to anypony else, okay? Your mother will be with you, she won't stop till she finds you.”

I took him to the door, letting him gallop out in front of me even as Protégé could be seen approaching the end of the catwalk about twenty feet away.

“I'll not say anything, Mister!”

“Good, good...I'll try and get a message to you all soon. Protégé and I just have to go get a few friends and your mom. She's all right, she's a strong mare and I know she'll be fine.”

“Wasteland Adventurer Chirpy Sum rogers that and is on his way! I do hope to see her again!”

He skipped on the spot, turned and galloped flat out the door, running right into Protégé. My heart skipped a beat as I saw him *much* closer than I'd thought. He threw me a curious glance that set me sweating with worry as to what he'd perhaps heard at the end there.

“HI MISTAH PROTÉGÉ! I wanted to meet you! I was just talking to your number one assistant

Murky when I was coming to see you!”

“Good afternoon, Chirpy...you do seem in a rush. Are you late in getting back?”

“I'm on an adventure now I've got free playtime!”

Protégé stepped aside to let the rushing colt past. “Good for you. Well I do hope it's for a better Equestria.”

Chirpy stopped briefly, hooves pacing on the spot as he clearly wracked his mind for something. Apparently, imagination wasn't his thing, what with being a foal so used to hard numbers...

“It's...uh...yeah it's a quest for the best Sparkle-Cola in the *world!* It's being held by the evil King...um...um...Stinky! He's *bad!*”

I couldn't help but slap my hoof to my forehead, but Protégé didn't let it faze him as he lifted the colt's work in his magic and allowed Chirpy to go tearing out of the warehouse to meet his escort guards.

“The fun of foals sometimes...quite a group, Murk. Quite a group.”

“Um...y-yeah?” I didn't know what to really say as Protégé bid me to follow him down the catwalk, apparently having just been coming to fetch me.

“Very impressionable. Open minded. This way a second, Murk. We just need to get supplies. Was Chirpy doing well?”

I followed close behind, feeling excitement rise. We were going to go on the rescue now! Our own little adventure! For real...heh...maybe Chirpy wasn't the only one who could get worked up. At the very least, Protégé didn't seem to have heard anything I didn't want him to. Phew...

“Y-yes! He was, um...chirpy.”

We walked behind a set of shelves into an unused line of the warehouse.

“Yes, he tends to be...”

Without warning, Protégé spun and grabbed me by the collar, pulling me off balance before forcibly pushing me against the shelves. Crying out in shock, I almost lashed out until I saw the fierce look in his eyes, one just visible below the eyepiece.

“So, 'I do hope to see her again?' I don't know how much you told him but let me get one thing straight *right* here and *right* now with you.”

His voice was harsh, spiky and tinged with aggressive passion. Lowering his eyes, he leaned closer.

“You have your own little wishes and dreams and I'd be a fool to think Coral Eve would ever agree to help you without wanting her son to come with her. I'm content to let you and your friends seek a better life and so help me that's something I'm half tempted to let go under my nose without raising a problem. But *this...*”

“P-Proté-”

He leaned right into my face, eyes locking to mine with a protective anger I'd *never* seen.

“If you *ever* endanger any of these foals I won't hesitate to put a stop to this, understand? You can run around and do what you feel you need to but keep them *out* of it or you'll find me a much less allowing master, Murk! They are the *core* of what shall save this world. Do *not* make this tougher by reminding them of a past they have already left!”

“Like leaving his *mother?!?*” I tried to pull his hooves off, but he let go of his own accord and dropped me back down. His glare was no less fierce as he invaded my personal space to keep me on the back hoof.

“We all make sacrifices, Murk. Coral can work for her freedom and join us to see him again if she wants; the choice is there! I will *not* let you put any of those foals in danger, Murk! Not on my *life* with

some mistaken attempt at something. Is that very clear?"

His hoof slammed into the shelf beside my head on the last word. I'd never seen him like this. I felt awkward, robbed of any argument momentum by shock at him treating *me* like this.

"Y...yes..."

"Yes, *what?*"

"Yes...master" I muttered the word, moving my eyes away from his own stern gaze. I was screaming at myself to be defiant, to just stay quiet or say it with anger, but the truth was his sudden harshness had shocked me deeply.

I had been too easily forgetting where his true loyalties were.

"I give you a great amount of freedom, Murk." He trotted toward the warehouse exit. "But do *not* cross me on that which I truly believe. Stay *away* from those foals. Now come on, we have work to do and I'm sure you don't want to wait any longer."

Picking myself up, placing a hoof to my throat, I found it sore and even hunched over to cough horribly with shaking hooves. Shivering, I took a glug from my quarter full canteen of RadAway and brought myself back up to see Red Eye's prodigy moving away to the exit.

Taking a few breaths to clear the shock and calm my shivering nerves, I began to follow and stayed a good bit further behind him than I ever normally would.

* * *

I'm not sure why I told him about the way down. Perhaps I was driven by thoughts of saving my friends and using every method I could think of just to make that happen. I had always been a little short sighted after all.

Now I sat at the bottom of the hole, having rappelled down on my grapple line past the drifting dust and growing darkness of the metro. Red light beamed through the distant hole above me as I struggled to get the saddle off me. I'd considered acting like I'd just spotted it...but Protégé was too smart for that. In the end I'd just admitted that I'd found it while looking for a hiding spot. That seemed to have done the trick.

Wedging the mouthpiece's lever to retract the wire in, the battle saddle whirled out of my grasp and pulled itself back up without me to allow Protégé to hold it on his own descent. Glancing up as it disappeared, I squinted from the light and instead turned to the dark.

I'd known I'd have to come back here at least once. Back to this underground nightmare. Last time had shown the reality of a world where Shackles had full control and now I'd have to enter it again. The images of a mare with a distended stomach full of pus or a stallion lacking much of his skin from some unknown punishment kept forcing their unwelcome horrors into my mind. My friends had only been here a day or two now and I doubted they would be badly hurt yet but...the thought still assailed me.

The service door out onto the inner metro line's tracks lay slightly ajar from where I'd been unable to close it last time. Beyond it I could hear the slow *clink* of pickaxes and murmurs of ponies wafting down the tunnel itself.

With a thump, Protégé landed behind me. He landed heavily and staggered to the side.

"I dread to think what drew you down here last time," he muttered with a small glance to me while tugging the small saddle off of himself.

"I just wanted somewhere really far away from anypony who would hurt me. I didn't realise that he was down here." It didn't take long to help him out of the battle saddle. Nor to put the saddle back on and adjust the straps to my size again. Goddesses bless Blunderbuck for his forethought of adjustable sizes!

Protégé advanced to the door, slowly slipping his eyepiece off to hide its blinking red light. We hadn't exchanged many words since the confrontation at the logistics hub. He had been professional, curt and polite

but there was still tension in the air. He knew my intentions to some extent and they didn't sit well with him...yet he needed my help and my friends if he was going to achieve his aims as well. I almost wished for the days when we both knew where we stood on things...

“Which way?” He apparently couldn't hear the sounds as I could.

“To the left. I...I think it's about two hundred metres down the metro line and we'll start to see them if they are still in the same bits.”

Together, we crept out into the thick darkness with myself taking the lead. I could see and hear better after all. Slowly, sticking to the sides of the arced tunnel, I began to advance. The metro was hardly much to look at. Just smooth stone over metal track with old lights and fuseboxes. All mass produced and 'modern' by Equestrian standards, of course. If I squinted I could see lights sometimes in the distance...two hundred metres really wasn't very far at all for that to travel.

“Protégé?”

“Yes, Murk?”

“Why are we doing this alone? Why not bring Ragini? Doesn't she obey you?”

It was a question that had bothered me for a while. An extra gun could have been handy. Turning back to Protégé, I saw him look distinctly unsure.

“Ragini isn't in the best of minds right now. As I said before...her loss of flight hasn't put her in a good mood. You saw what she did in the FunBarn, Murk. Frankly, I am unsure of her stability right now and this expedition requires a subtler touch.”

He looked as though he were about to say something else. Hearing a shout of a slaver around the far off corner, I stopped for a second and decided to push my luck.

“Is that it?”

“Her contract is to Master Red Eye and he has told her to report to me. How she would interpret this I am...unsure on, despite what my Master told me. I don't like uncertain things when dealing in this type of work. Keep moving, Murk.”

I nodded quickly, taking the hint that he wasn't happy to pause down here. Stepping over the rails, I shifted closer to the inner wall of the long curving corner and hugged closely in its shadows. A sharp scream sounded after the snap of a whip. I heard chains moving, drills whining and the rumble of something on the rails.

Cautiously...slowly...with nerve wracking care...I led us behind a small outcrop of supplies, tools and fabric to gain sight of it all.

Stepping out, shrouded in darkness, we now stood before a part of the mining operation I had once seen before. I took a heavy and strained breath before turning to Protégé.

“You're a slave too; well here's what you've forgotten. This is what Fillydelphia is to many of us.”

Clustered around a changing lane between a service lane and the inner metro, we saw the lines of ponies chained together in eternal labour. We saw those lying upon the rock floor trying in vain to rest between shifts at their very workplace. We saw the huge forms of Shackles' personal slavers ruthlessly beating them awake to continue. We even saw the empty look in their eyes and the paleness of skin below fallen hair mangy and coated with blood, sweat and infected fluids. In the corner lay a morbid pile of ponies being loaded onto a low rail wagon while among them were ghouls lacking pieces of themselves. Worked to the very bone of their immortal lives in an all too horrifyingly literal sense. Their lack of needs abused to the full.

Like before, I saw the shift patterns coming in and out with an almost orchestrated routine. I could see ponies wobbling on legs with very little body fat left at all. Many were blindfolded, set only to do the task and not even look around.

There were so many. So many shapes that barely resembled ponies any more thrust into the hellish end of their lives to be nothing more than organic tools for a master whose presence was more symbolic than physical in their minds. A legion being forced to think the way I once had.

Inefficient.

Pointless.

Brutal.

Shackles' own brand of slavery. Control for the sake of control. Only his own wishes mattering in the end with no care to the cost.

I could never have possibly described the look to be seen upon my companion's face. Protégé simply stood and gaped, his eyes focussed on a wide arc of the ghastly sight. Hundreds of ponies were being driven to death in service of a goal they likely did not even know or understand and I saw him have to fight to accept it.

His mouth fell open to try and speak many times as he witnessed one pony simply fall, twitch and then lie still, his body giving out. Just another forgotten soul not even recorded as a statistic to history.

“Sacrifice...sacrifice is needed, Murk and...”

“This is what happens to ponies in Fillydelphia, for a lot of slaves who aren't you, Protégé.” I turned to him. If only I could make him really see here that what he wanted was a lost cause! “This is where he sent Sunny! Where he sent my friends! Where he wanted *me!*”

“We didn't...no.”

Protégé took more than a moment to try and compose himself, shaking with what I hoped was anger. He struck the wall with a hoof.

“There were always going to be acceptable losses in having some slavers here...and...and...”

“This is *acceptable?*”

A hoof went to his face, resting between his eyes. I wasn't sure if I saw it wipe something or just slide away. His body shivered and I couldn't be sure if I saw anger or fear in his eyes. He turned to me.

“Murk, we shall press on.”

His voice was cold. I knew he was looking past me at it. I could *see* his hoof gently rubbing his sides where I knew scars like my own lay beneath those clothes. I wish I knew what to say to finally get through to him.

In a way...I pitied him. I saw only a pony in the same place as I was once, just with a shinier collar. Or eyepiece...

I heard the slow steady march of hooves coming this way. Perking up, I hurried over to the tools we had hid behind and pulled some of the fabrics free. Seeing my haste, Protégé tore his eyes away and joined me as we hid ourselves.

“Station number four needs this shift change ahead of schedule again, eh?”

“Bloody right. I told 'em to keep it to twelve hour shifts with two small breaks but that stupid buggers had 'em working all last night to try and get the big guy to grin!”

The slavers leading the shift were heading down the tunnel we'd come from! Had they expanded their operations again? Were my friends part of some new line of slaves? The thought of them being marched into the mouth of that metro station's doors I'd seen last time was beyond thought. Many times I'd been imagining what horrors really lay beyond that barrier only a few hundred metres further in.

The slaves trooped past, as much pulled by one another as they were by the slavers. If anypony fell they were simply dragged. Twice I saw them being drawn over the rails as their legs failed them. I couldn't resist peeking out; if only I could have seen my friends this would have been easy! Yet down here ponies of all

colours were horribly hard to tell apart...the filthy rags and stained injuries and boils turning them into a group too terrified to dare do anything other than obey to the letter.

Exactly what Shackles wanted.

However, as they passed, I *did* recognise one pony. Or to be more precise...one ghoul.

I whispered for Protégé to stay where he was and dared to sneak out. Keeping low, I shifted along the lines of miners further into the junction. Slaves wandered past me; each time I simply huddled into the lines of workers to try and hide from slavers. I could see him up ahead; Baton Round was sluggishly chipping away at the concrete, trying to break through the reinforced walls in their hunt for Ministry Station. As I neared, I saw Nurse Bedlay Broom behind him, her blind face not even looking in a particular direction as she scraped the rubble into the middle of the tunnel for disposal.

They did not look good.

Before, they had been falling apart, but here I saw a lethargy like no other. Baton Round's flimsy muzzle was visibly swaying on each impact his pick. His body looked loose and drooped...like what remained of him was close to slipping right off. I became very glad that I hadn't eaten much lately, for once...

"Baton!" I whispered near to him, but the ghoul just kept digging. "Baton!"

No notice. His eyes were blank...simply given to the job.

"*Baton!*"

"Little Murky Number Seven...?"

Bedlay Broom looked around, her one remaining ear perked up. Clearly in her blindness, other senses had taken over.

"Is that you, child? The little pony? Baton, look who it is for me?"

He heard her voice, twitching and blinking, he turned to her and then to me. With a quick check to see the guards were not looking, Baton Round slowly shifted to face me and drew Bedlay Broom closer.

"Murky Number Seven...it...it is you. You came back. Is it...time to go?"

I could see Protégé anxiously watching me. I was rather exposed.

"Not yet, but we're almost there! We need your help though!"

"I am...I am not sure I..." He staggered and dropped to all four knees. I heard the distinctive click of bones slipping out of place. A small glow of magic across his body from the nurse seemed to help him regain the strength to speak.

"We are failing, Murky Number Seven...the shifts are increasing. What do you...need?"

Before I could speak, a slaver further back let loose an airhorn into the cramped tunnels. I screamed and covered my ears.

"Shift's up! You lot get back to Shackles' den for food! Ghouls? Get in your fucking hole to regen!"

The movement shifted up slowly around me. Slaves began to move in sluggish and clearly predetermined lines. The fluid of blood and other unthinkable things was left behind at the rock face as the new ones came in to pick up the tools. I fell in with the ghouls as they headed back to the store room and waved at Protégé to join us.

"Baton, some of our friends we need to make the escape happen, they're down here! I need to know if you've seen them!"

"Maybe...maybe Nurse Splint has, they had...had her on the way in yesterday. But so many...oh so many they...they've been moved to-arrgggh..."

A slow and quiet cry of pain came from him as we moved into the supply cupboard and he dropped to

the ground. Behind me, Protégé and the blind nurse Bedlay shifted in. I recognised the smaller figure of Windtail Breeze behind them. Nurse Splint was ahead of us. The four ghouls were all on their last legs. Most of them in here were and all dropped to the floor on wobbling hooves.

“They've been moved to where?!”

Baton round blinked a few times.

“Ministry Station...”

Behind me, the door slammed shut.

“They found it.”

* * *

It took a few minutes for the nurses to give aid to their ghoulish comrades. Protégé and I sat unsettled together near the door as the low mumbblings and gnashing of the ghouls around us carried out their self 'maintenance.' They took it in turns to bathe under a small pipe, the one I had been reminded last time was highly radioactive.

Eventually, Baton Round limped toward us.

“My apologies, little Murky Number Seven. They have worked us...hard since last time. We can recover here but every shift brings us closer. We lost three more last night and two last week fell to the feral while on the line...old friends from the Fillydelphia Post Office. We had to watch the slavers put them out of their misery after launching at one of the slaves unfortunately chained to them.”

“I'm sorry, Baton...”

“We're losing friends fast. Ever since they discovered that station we've had to do more. Dig more. Find more.”

Protégé narrowed his eyes. “If they found this 'Ministry Station', why do you still mine here?”

The question hung in the air for some time.

“Materials? Rebar? Old rooms? Who knows...” Windtail spoke quietly in his higher pitched voice. “Everything we mine gets taken off. Somepony once said to fill a gap. Must have been a big gap...remember that old sink hole?”

“Mm...”

“Yes...held up traffic for a full hour, I missed the game because of that...”

I shared a glance with Protégé. I didn't know how much experience he had with ghouls but these ones were prone to nostalgia as much as I was prone to tears.

This wasn't good though. Shackles and Grindstone had Ministry Station. They were one piece ahead of us now. We *had* to get my friends and beat them to whatever that mountain held now! Whatever it was that connected them...

“They took the slaves there, the new ones,” Baton Round spoke out suddenly, “I remember now, they said 'all the new ones.' The new ones, yes. If your friends were in lately...they went there.”

“Then we would have to enter through Shackles' own hidden den to get there then? Or through their mineworks?” Protégé leaned forward.

“Oh...” Nurse Splint looked up. The gruesome sight of four ribs half cracked below her chest made me have to look above her head. “That wouldn't be easy, the guards there...they don't even let their own kind through and no shifts ever came out in the days since they found it. You need to go through their very holdings, through the doors in that station down the line...the one you came from before, little one.”

So we would have to go into Shackles' own place. It seemed inevitable. It seemed *impossible* more like it.

“We can't do that...” I looked to Protégé. “They know us too well now. I...I saw it. It's crammed with his slavers and supporters! Whatever's in there it's like...like a slaver's paradise or...”

“Don't let your imagination go, Murk.” Protégé sternly spoke. “However you may be right. We cannot break in through a single fortified entrance and sneak ponies out. Not to mention *Brimstone*.”

I heard a raspy cough beside me. Baton round held up a shaky looking hoof.

“There...there may be one other way.”

That got our attention, we crowded around. But Nurse Split placed a hoof on Baton's shoulder.

“No, Baton. They are our friends and helpers for an escape...we cannot-”

“Nurse...I...” He paused and coughed violently. Foul coloured blood splattered before him. “I cannot but let them decide...there is another way. A way that let us find where Ministry Station was. Further back the way you came, they broke into new tunnels five days ago. I thought it nothing but hearsay.”

A shivering hoof clutched to his throat as he hacked and coughed again, worse than any I had ever done. Behind him, the ghouls lay out soundlessly. They were dying...some I could see would likely never move again after today.

“They found new tunnels. It was the outer metro.”

A chill ran through the air. I saw it among the ghouls but more so than anypony on Protégé. He visibly stiffened up.

“Master Red Eye cut off access to there. It was a place no-pony could make useful. A threat! There were things-”

“They did not care. They sent in teams of slaves. It seemed to be working, they said that whatever was in the outer metro had died out. They even got a powered train down there to move and search. They discovered that it was not truly the outer metro but only a part of it...a part that had been cut off on either end from the greater ring around the city by collapsing tunnels. So they judged that it was safe.”

He leaned forward.

“They moved in and they found Ministry Station. A back entrance, a way that whoever built that station had designed in through a place that I heard them say should not have been there. Something that didn't make sense. They sent more slaves in to start connecting it up...”

His whole body trembled.

“They said it was safe...it wasn't. We heard the screams. Echoing down through the outer metro into the inner. Their radios went wild, shrieks and cries about something...a...a smell, or sounds. Grindstone ordered them to close up the tunnel. He just *left* them in there! Sealed them in with whatever it was to prevent them getting out.”

“You say this is the only other way in?” Protégé seemed cautious.

“Yes...we moved freely in there for at least a day before anything emerged. So...if you *must* do it? A couple of small ponies might be able to-”

“No!” Nurse Splint pushed in. “Dozens died down there, Baton! It is not for ponies what lurks in the outer metro! They never even got to see what it was! If you smell the mint, you die!”

They broke into argument. Protégé and I merely looked to each other. I could see he was shaking just as I was. A decision lay here. We had a way to save my friends, but it involved going to the deepest, darkest and most dangerous place in the entirety of Fillydelphia.

I gulped. Protégé seemed to be wordlessly asking me something. I knew what.

The words seemed impossible, but I still forced myself to turn and said them to Baton Round.

“T-t-take us there...”

They went silent.

“If it w-were me...they would have done the same to get me out.”

For all our arguing earlier, I felt Protégé's hoof on my shoulder, to try and calm me.

“Tell us where to go.”

* * *

It wasn't easy to leave them behind. I could see how bad Baton Round's health was getting alongside all of Weathervane's other old friends. He had trotted us out as far as his chain would allow, pointing down the tunnel and directing us back the way we'd came, to follow the slaves that had passed us on the way in.

Watching the ghouls shuffling away, grunting in pain and seeping from horrid injuries, I could only resolve to ensure we would come back for them. For their sake, for Weathervane's sake. He needed somepony he really knew to help him stay away from 'the feral', as they called it, as much as they needed him to save their rapidly failing lives.

“We'll get them, Murk. Don't worry.” Protégé trotted beside me in the quiet tunnels with a stern face. “They've survived however many years, they will survive another few days until we can cleanse this place.”

I sighed. “How can we do that? This is such a big operation and Shackles has a lot of...influ...influa...”

“Influence. Yes, he does. Hopefully, I can raise enough support of my own to at least warrant an investigation through Grizzly or even Stern if we're lucky. It will take time however, time we do not have right now if they have already located Ministry Station. At the very least, after today we shall know where it is as well.”

“That's true...”

I still kept my head lowered. It didn't make me feel much better.

The knowledge of where I'd have to go to find the next step of our escape was hardly sitting well with me.

The tunnels around us stretched on, lit only by occasionally flickering gemlights that still did their duty after all these years, casting a pale white haze over the dull concrete and rusted metal below us.

Occasionally, wind would blow down it, drawn into motion by the smooth lengths and fires the slavers had for warmth behind us that felt unearthly so far beneath the ground. Welded doors lined the sides occasionally and we even had to pick our way around one abandoned train still sitting on the tracks. I dared not look inside it, a train this far from a station must have been abandoned for a reason.

Protégé glanced in however. The sad look on his face spoke all that needed be said as he gently closed over the door once again.

“Probably thought it was a good shelter.” He muttered it quietly, as though not realising I could hear.

It became obvious we weren't discussing the subject. We both knew where we were going. Yet he began to look back from ahead, I'd been falling behind, making tiny trots as though to prolong the time for arrival.

“Murk...” He, for once, didn't seem to know what to say.

“I...I just...I'm scared...”

“I know.”

He waited for me. When we started trotting again, it was at my pace. I saw him checking his revolver a half a dozen times. I kept flicking my saddle's mouthpiece in and out.

We were going to the outer metro. The thought just simply hadn't sunk in yet.

We had been told to watch for the red signal lights still running and turn into the service tunnel there. It took a good ten minutes of slow and careful trotting over the uneven rails to spot the little blinking light up

ahead. We must have been catching up on that group ahead of us from where-ever they went, for I could hear low voices drifting out of the black fog further down the main metro line itself. Thankfully, we had reached our turn. Go into the service tunnel, look for the maintenance room on the left hand side and in there we'd find a stairway to the outer metro.

The service line was hardly as clear as the inner metro itself. The roof had partially cracked and dropped chunks of rock and rebar all around it, leading to a very cautious advance through it. Multiple times I trotted right into a poking point of metal or banged my knee on a rock despite my pretty good sight in the dark. It became a game of tentatively pushing a hoof forward, feeling around and then finally stepping. Puddles slipped below us of foul water that set my Pipbuck clicking and the ground became uneven in a torn part of the underground system.

We were getting no-where.

“I think we should perhaps risk some light, Murk. This will take us all day. Your Pipbuck?”

“O-okay...”

Looking down, I played around with it till I found the button for the light. Glimmerlight's repair work had done well. It responded after the first push this time even if the bulb itself was still weak and inconsistent. One way or the other, it gave us something to see the floor by. Having some light helped me feel safer. Really, the *inner* metro was beginning to feel like a haven. Images of ghastly beasts and unthinkable creatures shrieking from the darkness to drag me underground played through my mind again and again.

After a moment, in an excuse to stop again, I turned down the Pipbuck volume. Sundial's messages could be set off at this depth and a sudden beeping was the last thing we needed. Mistakes couldn't be made. Not now.

“Have you noticed where we're going, Murk?” His dark coat almost invisible in the tunnel, I could only barely see Protégé looking up.

“N-no? I just see tunnels...”

“I mean above us. This is heading back in the direction toward the neighbourhood of the Ministry of Arcane Science. I suppose that's only logical, likely why they started hunting down here in the first place.”

I hopped up on a larger rock, pushing over it. Ahead, I could see a few doors.

“You think they're connected?”

“Unlikely. Grindstone would have found it long ago if it were part of the Ministry. There may be some form of hidden entrance near to the Ministry that's impossible to find from the surface. Maybe in a random house's cellar.”

He shook his head.

“The thought that they're down there, Murk. It made me sleep restlessly after I did my research into it. I...I had nightmares of being trapped in the outer metro once.”

Protégé walked near the wall, tracing the coloured lines that led to each door and around various arcane boxes containing the systems that no doubt powered the rails. Hearing him open up like this, I saw the same sort of look I'd only seen once before, as he'd tried to comfort me before the final pull of a revolver's trigger in a sick game so long ago now.

Yet suddenly, I didn't want to turn and say what I saw. It took a few attempts until I finally pointed.

“I th-think these are the d-doors, Protégé.”

Stopping before four entrance ways, I saw they each rested up on a stone platform with stairs leading up from the service line onto them. Trotting carefully for any weak steps, we came to stand in front of them.

The maintenance door was lying open with a sign crudely nailed onto it rather recently. Trotting up, Protégé tore it off with his magic and read aloud.

“Quarantined by order of Master Grindstone. Do not descend stairs or remove barricade'. Death awaits.”

Silently, I hoped that the Goddesses could still see me down here.

Behind the door lay an already stripped bare repair bay. Only a few steel tables and spare tracks lay against the walls and every drawer, cupboard and container had been looted clean by the slavers. On the walls I saw posters bearing sizes of nuts and various safety regulations bearing the markings of the Ministry of War Things.

Before us, however, we could see the stairwell leading down. It had been blocked off by numerous barrels pushed in and planks of wood nailed across. This likely was to stop us going down rather than stop anything coming up. Despite this it was more than nervewracking enough from the red paint depicting a screaming pony across it amidst a crossed circle. A warning from somepony who couldn't write meant for anypony that couldn't read. They didn't want to risk anypony going down by accident.

Putting his hooves around the rotten wood, Protégé pulled near the nails and prised a few of them apart. The sign came off easily, clearing the way into the blocked stairwell. I simply stood at the top near the cage preventing anypony from falling down the middle of where a lift had once gone, the stairs surrounding the empty pit. Below us I could see the shimmer of a puddle and little else as it fell into the depths. We were going deeper underground.

“The outer metro is significantly lower in places than the inner, Murk. This could be a trek. So...ready?”

“N-no...” I couldn't help but be honest.

“Your friends are at the end, just keep thinking of them.”

Biting my lip, I began to tentatively step around the crudely thrown barrels, following him onto the stairs. Oh Goddesses preserve me...I couldn't believe I was going this way. *They* were down there. The outer metro was a deathzone. Somewhere ponies *didn't* go.

“Then what are you thinking of?” I asked him quietly.

Protégé hesitated, before shifting another barrel to the side and reaching the first landing.

“Master Red Eye faced down this place before. I...I'm just trying to think that perhaps I can steel myself as he did. Now...come on. Let's get this over with, before we both lose our nerve.”

All the same, even as I shook terribly and began to travel down after him, I could see that he wasn't as calm as his own words.

Flight after flight, around the rusting cage elevator, we travelled down into the damp and dark void below us. I strained my ears, but all I heard were the drips or sounds of slavers passing by the maintenance room above us.

My Pipbuck light illuminated stained walls rotting with soft weeds. With a sharper 'clank' under my hoof, I noticed the stairs now were made of metal, reminding me all too uncomfortably of the hazy thoughts from when I'd dreamed in a coma not a couple of days ago. Cages and metal stairs...had I dreamed of them?

It took five minutes. It felt like five days.

Every second I expected to hear something unnatural. To feel a chill on my spine. Protégé even put his eyepiece back on, activating his E.F.S to take no chances.

Eventually, reaching the bottom, we found what truly kept them in. A colossal metal door stood before us.

“An old fire door, to contain any metro incidents from reaching the other tunnel. This would hold anything in or out.”

“D-does it open?”

My eyes had found the blinking control panel to the side. Holding my Pipbuck near for him, Protégé toyed with the controls. It was all I could do to beg him not to open it.

It really began to hit home. A real and true fear that made my gut feel empty and set my hooves pacing. We were going to some place that had monsters known for killing hundreds of ponies and no-one had ever seen them! How could he expect me to...to do this?!

“Remember, Murk.”

Looking at his face, I saw that I was not alone. We were both scared. Sighing, I turned back and looked up.

“Rotten mint. If we smell rotten mint we simply gallop back the way we came. Don't hesitate. Don't stare in fear. Just...just run. Don't look back.”

“I d-don't want to do this, P-Protégé...” The thought of me admitting this when I had to help my friends made me want to curl up and do my usual routine of simply crying.

“Neither do I, Murk. These tunnels...we sealed them for a reason. Even Master Red Eye d...doesn't talk of what really happened.”

I saw him suck his lip, a nervous tick even if his body held still.

“This is the only way to get to that station...”

“Are you sure? We could hide in the slave lines! We could bribe somepony! Wait for them to come out?”

My voice was rising in pitch each time. I put both my hooves on his shoulder, as though pleading.

Protégé simply shook his head. I knew he was right, I'd seen how stringent Shackles' nest was and we had no idea what lay beyond. I heard him take a quick breath, pushing his courage to do it.

“Here goes...”

He hoofed a large blue button and I immediately squeaked in shock. A loud hiss of hydraulics squealed through the room and was followed by the sound of straining metal being torn from its long inactivity. To our right, a red light began flashing and spinning to cast its dual spotlights all around the bottom of the stairwell. Reflecting off the small puddles we sloshed about in, it played badly with my night vision.

Yet I could still see the door before us begin to lift. Massive, thick and heavy it slowly began to rise to give us our first view of our destination, of the outer metro properly.

Before my eyes could even adjust, other senses saw the difference immediately. A crude milky damp washed through my nostrils with a slight breeze the moment it opened. A strange warmth followed it, sticky and humid, trapped underground with no outlet to cool down. It reminded me of the Stable, yet with a rougher and earthier tinge to it instead of the oil and metal. A sweet scent that burned my nostrils.

Yet my first sight was not of the metro.

The moment the door raised up, something lunged out of it. I screamed, I even heard Protégé yell as we both fell back. I saw a revolver drawn and scrambled to turn in the wet ground. A crackling and boney noise fell around us with movement all along the bottom of the door.

I was already going for the stairs, my wings flaring out in shock. I heard Protégé move quickly behind me.

“Murk!”

I dared to turn.

Protégé stood sweating below, breathless and coming down from the adrenaline spike. He was looking toward the door.

Below it, I saw the remains of ponies. Skeletal, bearing still decomposing flesh, they had fallen against

the door. Left behind when Grindstone had sealed it. There were at least a dozen of them, torn bodies lying in a heap against the door to fall through when we opened it.

I had to hold my stomach and turn away when I realised that it was only *parts* of them. The further I saw in from our light casting into the outer metro, the more I had seen bits simply strewn around. One face still bore a scream upon it, a mask of terror and agony. There was no rhyme or reason, no repeated patterns of death. Some had been torn apart from the chest outward. Others limb from limb. Some were intact with their necks bent at unnatural angles. Some had no significant pieces left to recognise them at all...

Enough, I couldn't look. Holding my eyes shut, I had to let Protégé lead me past them. I could hear my heart racing, feel the sweat dripping. I didn't want to be here. I *really* didn't want to be here! Please please *please* let me just pass without incident! Tell me they'd gone away, that these ponies had killed whatever it was!

Coming to the bottom of the stairs, I had to gently help my wings to rest against my side again. Their newly strengthening muscles twinged and locked up all too easily, it seemed.

“They were locked out.” Protégé's voice held no anger, simply a horrified realisation.

He looked at me, eyes sad and wide from the massacre around us.

“They were trapped when whatever it was came for them.”

Stepping inside, I had to check the door wasn't going to close behind us as I got my first look at the tunnels of the outer metro myself.

It could not have been more distinct from the inner ones we had just been in. Instead of the smooth concrete it was made of brickwork and sandstone. Rectangular instead of curved other than the arch along the roof that held ancient ruined lines where trains must have once connected to. Below us was little other than metal rails and wooden blocks to run on, not the same powered ones we had seen before.

“This place is old, even by wartime Equestrian standards.” Protégé shifted along the small platform and glanced down the lines either way. “I'd heard the outer metro was different, like a maze...but I hadn't realised it was like this. Remarkable it even stayed intact in the balefire impact.”

Given this piece was cut off from the majority of the outer metro, I didn't much agree if so much had caved in but I knew he was trying to distract himself. I could see the cracks above around missing bricks that now clustered on the rails or to either side. Moss actually grew down here, turning the ground into a sticky mush while the air held a faint mist and dust filled stillness. Even as I walked, it felt wrong to be wandering through air so still that my own movements sent a ripple effect through the trails I could see floating above me.

It felt all too otherworldly. Like someplace evils beyond my own active imagination could lurk.

“Murk! Over here, look!”

Snapped out of my thinking by his words, I turned to find Protégé. The slaver had trotted down the platform to gaze into the tunnel. We'd been told to go left and we'd know the area when we saw it. Trying to avoid moving near to the smeared remains of those who had been trapped here, I couldn't help but notice how the line of bodies went all the way to where Protégé was. Around the rusted mesh wire holding defunct generators, I saw him trot toward a lump in the darkness.

“The ghoul said they'd mounted a cart down here, I think we may have found it.”

I moved closer and saw what he meant. Upon the tracks, just where the dead ponies had come from, was a small wagon with a crudely wired up engine and pistons to let it move on the tracks. Three seats faced us with another three on the opposite end. A little area for supplies was mounted between the seats.

They had tried to escape on this from where-ever they had been.

Protégé climbed up onto it, looking over the controls.

“Looks like it just stalled and cut out. It still works. I don't know about you Murk but I would much

rather to have something that can get us back here fast if we have to. At least we *know* the door is open.”

“B-but noise...” I bit my lip. I'd had to go onto the rails. I couldn't stand being surrounded by the stench of decay any longer. “It might bring them!”

“They were working here for days before it happened, Murk. I...I think that it should be fine. Listen, we're both injured and only just properly healing now. I don't think either of us can claim to be the fastest galloping ponies around. If anything happens, we need a way out. This almost worked for them.”

“Almost.” I looked back at the door, almost afraid it might close on its own. “B-but...okay...”

I began to climb up onto the small powered rail-wagon, taking his hoof to pull me into the seat. He breathed out slowly, playing his hooves over the levered controls until he found a large key.

“Here goes...”

Twisting it, I heard a dull squirting warble of the engine mounted just behind us. Cutting out, spluttering, it died. He tried again...then again. Finally, with a roar that sounded shockingly loud in the quiet tunnels, it caught and surged into being. Before us, two huge lamps illuminated the tunnels ahead of us with their hanging weeds and uneven muddy ground around stained brickwork. Further than twenty feet...the darkness simply ate the light.

I was taking long breaths. Through the lingering mist, even the sway of underground vegetation and a blow of warm air felt like some sort of ghost. I heard Protégé curse quietly as he played with the levers, eventually finding one that released tension and set the rail-wagon rolling slightly forward. Then...with a grinding squeal...it began to pick up speed.

“We go in, we get them, we get out.”

“In and out...y-yes...”

“Here we go.” He pushed the lever forward with a hoof after resting his revolver right beside him. Carefully, slowly, we began to accelerate and I saw the metro's brick walls shift past us a little faster. Giant sandstone pillars holding up the arch above it swooped by as we rounded the corner and passed out of the station.

Gripping the seat, I simply held Unity's Littlepip statuette close to my chest and tried my best to not pray too loudly...

* * *

“Murk, I need you to keep watch.”

Shivering, I had to force my eyes open from curling up in the seat. Protégé's voice was strained, tense and reflecting the same anxious nature I could see on his face as he kept the speed controlled over the ramps and unstable rails of the ancient tunnels.

Biting my lip, I looked up and around. These ghostly tunnels were flying by a little faster than I'd expected. Little rushes of air every time we passed a set of pillars placed at odd intervals with no consistent pattern while our passing disturbed the strange underground fog that had gathered in here. Casting my eyes around, I saw our rail-wagon pushing its way through vegetation and dripping water over us as we went below partially collapsed sections of roof. With Protégé driving, I had to watch our sides and presumably, our rear.

“Do you see anything?” For Protégé, this was a rather stupid question, like he just wanted to hear communication. I somewhat felt the same.

“N-no...” Behind us, the tunnels curved away and were lost to the dull yellow gemlights that provided only a minimum of sight. “It's like it's dead.”

I wasn't sure if I believed myself. Every so often I'd hear faint noises in the distance. Rocks cracking, wood creaking...all too often something that sounded all too like something alive moving down one of the many side tunnels.

“Pray tell it shall stay this way.” Protégé simply muttered, before scowling as the rail-wagon jarred and bounced over a broken junction. The engine cut out, sending us drifting forward on momentum. After a horrifying few seconds of silence, it spluttered into life again.

I was just watching the side tunnels instead. Each one gave way to thick darkness. Some were as thin as alleyways, hiding orange lights of repair rooms or old generator clusters. We passed an area of construction made of rotting wood barely holding up an unfinished piece of brickwork refurbishment. I whimpered when I saw long dead bones hustled together in the corner, surrounded by empty food packets.

“Oh for the love of...!” The engine cut out again, this time long enough that the wagon rolled to a halt on a flat stretch. The lamps died, leaving us isolated with the flickering green glow of my Pipbuck.

“Protégé?”

“It's just stalled out.” He gunned the engine once, then again. Each time, it died.

I felt my hooves shaking. Keeping the light away from my eyes, I peered into the darkness. Without proper light, the mist flowed and twisted in the black like moving shapes in the distance. My ears twitched, hearing distant sounds. Creaks and rumbles. Drips and brief sounds like a kind of 'whup whup whup' in the far off tunnels. The heat down here was making my mane stick to me, so clammy and uncomfortably close. I couldn't even hear the sounds of industry above us, we were so deep now.

“P-Protégé?”

The engine gunned, unhealthily stuttered and died.

Looking behind us, I swore I saw movement. Or was it just the fog?

My ears twitched in the thick air. I could hear so much in such a silent place. Little drips of pebbles falling. The vibration of the passing rail-wagon making things fall from the roof.

In the distance, I heard something larger fall and clatter on metal.

“Protégé!”

“What? What is it?” He leapt up beside me, revolver pointed.

I pointed where the noise had come from.

Everything went deathly silent. He was breathing hard, his revolver pointing to the left...then the right. I saw his eye glance more intently at his headpiece.

“There's nothing on E.F.S.”

“T-try the engine again, quickly!”

He turned, gunning it once more as I watched in the direction we had looked. Groans of moving air in the tunnels came from either side. Behind us and to the left I heard a pop, like something wet and sticky bursting.

Squinting my eyes, I saw there was a door right there, falling apart from time and leading right where this sound was coming from. I kept hearing things, little noises I couldn't identify, before-

I yelped as a sudden noise broke through the quiet air. The engine flared back into life and light washed over the tunnels. Falling back in the seat, I saw a foul mess near the door, stained yellow like pus, it glistened and seemed to creep up the walls, door and right past it to inside. Some sort of spreading mutated fungus that had overwhelmed that entire room.

I didn't want to dare think about what those noises inside were.

The rail-wagon began to move along, clicking and clacking its way over the uneven tracks.

“Murk, try to pace your breathing.” Protégé looked away briefly to notice me.

I hadn't even noticed I was hyperventilating and gripping the seat tightly. “I...I...trying...”

“Just...keep watch.” I heard him take a breath himself, gulping hard.

We passed a full crossing, one side entirely collapsed and sunken with earth and the other leading to a concrete dead end where a platform led into a caged area. Benches and lockers lay within so rusted they were literally beginning to disintegrate. There was a safe there, but any wish to stop and loot was far from my mind.

“Something's worrying me, Murk.” Protégé slowed the wagon.

“What?”

“My E.F.S. Usually it picks up masses of signatures from things like radroaches and tox-slugs when I'm underground. But it's got absolutely nothing, it's like anything in here has just...gone. We've tried all sorts of infestation control and it's never worked. But here...”

We passed beneath a gaping hole where huge fans lay inactive, the sound of a large passage making a strange groaning hum from our speed.

“...it's just dead.”

My teeth were grinding rather uncomfortably, but I just couldn't help it. Climbing into the back of the rail-wagon, I kept an eye on all sides while hunkered down beneath its raised sides as best I could while still seeing out. We passed under an area where the roof was *crammed* with thick cobwebs that stretched for metres in every direction. We saw shreds of rotting flesh by the wayside, those that hadn't gotten on the wagon in time when they fled. The green light of my Pipbuck mixed with the sickly yellow to make it all just come across like a horrid vomit coloured tunnel that only got worse the deeper we went.

“Not long now, he did say it only took six minutes.”

Beep!

I squeaked slightly, perhaps not even heard by Protégé. But looking down at my Pipbuck, I held it close to me and kept the volume low. I didn't need anything being heard by Protégé by accident that I didn't want him knowing...

Beep!

Click...

“I don't have long, they've left me somewhere while they check something. They've brought me underground to some huge chamber just behind somepony's cellar and locked me in while they went deeper. They've been right beneath us all this time! The zebras have been right here!”

So they had taken him to the metro first. That just about confirmed right off the mark that Aurora was involved with them. I kept looking around. Even the interest of Sundial wasn't enough to quell my fear. We were passing through an open area filled with wooden beams and old storage pallets piled high with bricks and a thousand dark places to hide...

“A-apparently I've to work on something for them. They asked me what kind of terminal I used so they could get one for me. They have something for us to do, some job they need Wartime workers who know arcane things to help with. Oh, Pinkie...please help me get out of this when I know enough. If I could go now and just tell her where they are, I would! I-wait...I think they're coming back. It's some sort of elevator that goes down below the city! I can hear it coming up!”

A shriek from mismatching rails sent sparks flying off the wall, illuminating stone carvings of the Goddesses, sun and moon that had been warped and corrupted by moss and lichen. Protégé pulled back the speed, but going downhill I could still feel the rushing air pick up, we were going faster!

“I just keep feeling like I'm out of my depth, I don't know why I'm here even though I...well...do. I'm not the pony for this. They've got others in here with me, they look like...like refugees. I don't know any of them. I just have to keep reminding myself who I'm doing this for!”

Barely able to listen, I grabbed the holds of the wagon and held tight! Lights flashed by faster, we rode

around a corner. I could have sworn I saw something dash by ahead of us in the lamps under the mist! Ahead, I saw flickering red and orange lights spearing through the fog.

“They're coming now. To take me down. Sky, Dad...Mom...whatever happens now, I love you all, okay? I have to stop before they hear me. Whoever finds this, I hope you can understand why I did what I did. I-”

“All of you. Stand up and move forth to the vertical stairs.”

An exotic tone cut through the speaker as though from further away. The fog swirled all around, becoming thicker and cut with little particles of thick dust that hung in the air! I jolted forward as Protégé hit the brakes, the lights ahead beaming harshly into our eyes before the rail-wagon slammed to a halt on the end of the line with a juddering snap. I flew forward into the front of the back storage area with a yelp.

Protégé snapped up his revolver, staggering up as he pointed it all around above me. I could hear groans and distant pattering sounds. Somewhere, a pipe gurgled. Every noise sounded alive, the heat having staved off suddenly to a dull lukewarm ambience. I heard Protégé leap off onto the soggy floor.

“Let's go Murk. We're here. I...I don't want to hang around here any longer than we have to. This place is unnatural...”

Creeping up, I poked my head above. The brickwork was patchy, stained yellow and led to a massive hole in the wall. Mining tools scattered the floor where they had been left on the ground. Some bore black marks on their blades, dried blood. The ground sank beneath my hooves for a few inches and I dared not see why.

Through the hole, carved into the remains of somepony's deep office to store documents...we could see that somepony had knocked clean through the wall into something else entirely. The architecture changed slightly. Past the roughly hewed rock in the hole leading past this document room I could see the glint of metal and once polished tiles alongside the yellowed brickwork walls.

Protégé led the way in, his revolver spinning side to side rapidly. Ancient papers strewn by more rotting bodies lay all around. Grindstone hadn't just left a team down here...he'd created a massacre to contain the threat.

Slowly, both of us hesitating and glancing to one another with nervous looks, we shifted onward into the hole to pass into what Shackles' teams had found...

As I moved, I heard somepony else shifting and almost freaked on the spot but for noticing it was my Pipbuck. Sundial was being marched with his Pipbuck still active into the lift. I heard the crying of ponies that echoed seemingly to this very same place he was now entering.

“Wish me luck...”

Click.

* * *

“Baton Round was right, this *doesn't* belong.”

Protégé went first, stepping in with his revolver raised and E.F.S active. The hole itself was a good six feet deep, a thick wall that had been mined through to reach this place. The presence of metal linings and mesh wire perhaps hinted they'd spotted it through an airduct that once stood here.

Only, Protégé was right, this wasn't like what we'd just been in.

What we had found was a connecting underground corridor. It bore the same brickwork as the outer metro, still clearly of the same era. Yet the light fittings and flooring seemed newer, more wartime in their design. Protégé looked down and trotted in a circle as he looked at it. I cast my light for him to see. Mouldy tiles ran along the edges with a laminated centre. Other than two hundred years of disuse, it would have been seemed pristine. Clean. Clinical.

“The doors are prefabs, Murk. Somepony refitted this place from what it once was. The outer metro has many old constructs within it where ponies once did engineering work or held as storage areas.”

My hooves made little tapping sounds on the flooring rather than the more common and satisfying 'clack' of stone I'd become used to. Each sound echoed down the stretching line of where we'd arrived in. Dirt had trailed all the way in and inactive lanterns hung on either side but this place seemed frighteningly basic and secluded. The gloom went off into the distance, revealing the prefab doors Protégé mentioned. Almost a half dozen in a line along this corridor ended with double doors bearing cracked glass.

"He said it's through this place that you get to Ministry Station, right?" I kept my voice low, my head as well. Every few seconds I checked behind me.

"He did. Only now I'm wondering why."

Gently, we stuck to one side and crept further toward the double doors. Each one of the prefabs we passed was jammed shut tightly, bearing huge metal padlocks over bars that blocked them off.

Suddenly, I heard something. Every muscle in my body stiffened painfully as I heard a definite sound of movement behind us, where we had come from. I dared not speak, I simply spun around fast enough to attract Protégé's attention. Gasping, he backed off and pointed the muzzle of his weapon at the hole.

The sound kept going. Earth and metal being rung upon. Then I began to hear something Protégé had mentioned a long time ago. I heard a distant *beep*. Oh Goddesses...something was out in those tunnels we'd come through. I glanced to Protégé and found him sweating profusely, his mouth open a little.

Looking closely...I saw a tiny deeper red dot on his eyepiece shivering wildly from side to side.

I dared to whisper. "H-how...f-far?"

"Distant...sssh."

We held still for a few moments. Slowly, he began to back off, his hoof nudging me back away from the hole as well. Dust fell from it, disturbed by our passing and the opposite route down this new place was only filled with hazy yellow dust swirls hanging in the air. My eyes felt like they wanted to let loose tears from stark terror.

Beside me, I heard Protégé sniff the air every few seconds, just to check. I heard it again, a little far off beep like an alarm clock, echoing down the tunnels.

I counted in heartbeats. After ten or so, Protégé seemed to sigh.

"It's gone. But whatever it was, to be at such a distance and move that fast from side to side, it must be--"

"D-don't..." I had to stop him. My imagination didn't need anything more to work with. I wanted to run away, run and hide, get back to the inner metro. Yet now knowing it was *out there* I didn't know what to do and that thought was the worst of all.

"We shouldn't be here, Murk. We might have gotten lucky. Let's get further inside, maybe they're just in the tunnels."

Sounding calmer than I, he turned to the double doors and gently eased one of them aside. They creaked, turning on rusted hinges and I couldn't help but keep watching behind.

"What is this?"

"Huh?"

Daring to turn and quickly move through after him, we found ourselves in a much larger room. Basic metal benches lined the entirely tiled floor that led up to a canteen at the far end...only the canteen was covered with mesh wire and bore a hole for food to be passed out. Something to be protected behind while you did your job from whoever was in here.

We moved in, our hooves stepping over discarded metallic trays surrounded by green rotted food and shattered bowls. Straws and plastic cups lay near them. I tried to ignore the shattered skeletons near the door, just pretending they weren't there before it really struck deep, yet Protégé wandered nearer them and lifted a riot shotgun in his magic.

“Empty...loose casings on the floor. They fought here. These sorts of weapons were given to security guards more often than anypony else.”

“What does that mean?” I didn't turn to him, instead I looked up at the massive banner still hung above the area with smiling ponies beside white clad employees handing them hay and flower sandwiches.

“It means something down here needed guarding. I've never known anywhere like this in any of my books on Fillydelphian history. Some sort of prison the Ministries kept hidden away?”

I knew the Ministry of Morale was known for that, yet I couldn't bring myself to believe it. Pinkie would have mentioned, wouldn't she?

We continued on, shifting toward the larger doors that lay ajar out of this place. On the wall beside them I could see dark stains alongside impacts from buckshot cracking the old bricks. Despite being away from the tunnels, this was still the outer metro. All this new place had done was put new age materials inside old tunnels. Try as it might, it couldn't hide the grim sickness and dull green moss growing everywhere.

The door was heavy, leading to us both pushing it open at once. To my surprise, there was a dull light through here. Trotting through, we found ourselves on a balcony surrounding a huge open plan area. Light shone from above through barely active gem lights in the ceiling that flickered and dropped out every few seconds.

“By the great Goddesses...” I breathed in disbelief as I looked down.

This was more than just an open plan room.

This was a hub.

I could see three floors below us through the great balcony ringed hole leading to shattered outer metro style flooring below. Archways reached up above, crossing between the three floors ringed with heavy iron doors. Each door bore a small viewport in it, surrounded by rubber sealings. A giant clockface had dashed upon the floor below, surrounded by a cluster of pony remains in the centre of the room. Others lay upon the floors above as they ringed around the great rectangular hole.

“This is no quick refit.” Protégé breathed lightly, before whipping around. “Back! Into that room, there!”

We shifted quickly as he pulled one of the iron doors open. Diving inside, I felt the ground soften with a warm dampness. Protégé backed in, his weapon pointed through the crack in the door. He'd seen something on E.F.S further off. I couldn't help but creep nearer, focussing my ears and peering out. I listened for beeping.

Beep!

I yelped in fright. That had been right beside me! I felt Protégé clamp his hoof over my mouth to keep me quiet.

Beep!

It was my Pipbuck! I wrestled with the volume switch, how had it turned back up? Convincing him to let me go, I held the closer to me in the darkness of this tiny room we hid in.

Click.

“He...hello, it's Sundial again. I...oh geez...”

He cut out. In the distance, I heard something fall and clatter upon a tiled floor. Then I heard a door slammed shut. Whimpering, I turned away, back to my Pipbuck as Sundial returned.

“S-sorry, they were near. I'm down here now, trying to record what I see l-like Pinkie asked. This is incredible, incredible and terrifying. They've got a whole operation down here in some sort of station! There's bucks and mares I knew from work who went missing here! Every so often I see troops of ponies like...like refugees. But they look more like slaves. They don't look happy...”

If only he'd known...

“Every room I go by, they've got some sort of odd tool inside with a few workers. Zebras sometimes pass with these weird weapons to keep an eye out, way more than could normally sneak in. Are they planning an underground invasion? They've told me to work on the same things I helped design in the Ministry, to make miniaturised spark batteries like I did for the armour. I don't know why.”

“Murk we have to move soon, we can't stay here. The signal's gone.” Protégé didn't turn around when he spoke. I saw him push the door open a little and had to fight the temptation to tell him not to.

“O-okay...oh please...”

“Just listen out...we're not alone in this place now.”

Oh, great. Just make me feel a lot better, Protégé...

“But I did see something. Those refugees, they're taking them somewhere else! Somewhere deeper. One look through the door, I saw it looked like some sort of prison, they even had guards. I swear I saw somepony too. I don't believe my eyes but I'm...I'm sure it was her.”

I stopped, looking down. Was this confirmation?

“She was directing things, talking to zebras and looking over what we're doing here. I know it's her. I saw the pony who leads the Ministry of Arcane Science in Fillydelphia. Aurora Star is a traitor.”

Click.

I'd known it, but somehow hearing it in his voice made it all seem much more real. Aurora Star had betrayed ponykind to work for the zebras beneath the very city she swore to defend before *Twilight Sparkle herself*.

Protégé pushed the door fully open. Shaking, I followed him only to see him looking back into it.

“What?”

“That room...”

“What about it?”

He pushed past me, putting his hoof on the ground and walls, pressing in.

“Padded walls...iron doors...viewports...oh no...”

He moved back, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“What? What is it Protégé?”

This place, it isn't a prison.” I saw him bite his lip. “It's an *asylum*.”

Quickly, he moved around, looking over the lip of the rails surrounding the gap between floors.

“We're moving on, *now*. I don't think we should be here, Murk.”

I nodded, before cringing and whining under my breath when another creaking slam came from somewhere above us. I heard something moving on creaking floorboards.

“Protégé...why didn't you see this one? It sounds closer...”

“I don't know. *I don't know*. Let's go, right now. Just hope it's a wayward ghoul or...or something. We need to find the way through. Stay quiet. Don't speak.”

He trotted, then cantered and clearly had to stop himself from galloping from nerves to get through this nightmarish place. We headed around the balcony, passing each of the barred asylum inmate rooms as we went. Some lay open like the one we'd hid in and held nothing but festering wool leaking from the padded walls or the remains of chains and gore.

We found some stairs and hopped down the gap in them. Picks lay nearby, somepony had deliberately destroyed this part but got caught before they could finish. Coming to the next level, we saw it straightened out at the end, making a much larger 'common' area underneath where we had been on the floor above.

Passing quickly alongside the balcony again to move toward that, I kept looking on all sides. Shadows moved in here from the lights flashing on and off, casting us from dimly lit to the faint glow of my Pipbuck every few seconds.

Protégé pointed. I don't know what he pointed at, as it just held a word I was in no mindset to struggle and read, but the little picture of a pony running toward a door beside it gave a clue. This place was lower than Ministry Station according to Sundial, so any emergency exit had to be toward the level the station was on...right? Did that make sense? I hoped so. The increasing sense of this place realising two little ponies had invaded its territory was growing with every metre we moved into it. I didn't dare think about how far we had to gallop if we needed to flee back to the rail-wagon.

Then I heard it again. A distant beeping. Feeling about ready to just cry and curl up, I tapped Protégé's shoulder to get him looking around. Judging by where he looked, it was above us again. The noise got louder. A locked door was struck so hard even Protégé heard it. Then it was hit again...and again.

We both staggered back and huddled against the wall as an unearthly shriek pierced the air in the asylum. Long, high pitched and only getting louder and higher, it echoed down hallways from wherever it was. A shattering of metal was heard as whatever door had dared bar its way broke down. I felt my cheeks become wet, I saw even Protégé look frozen in terror. Something was in here and it was very real indeed. I felt him pull my hoof, dragging me onward. At the canter, we kept moving.

I didn't smell anything.

I didn't smell anything.

I didn't smell anything.

Repeating the mantra again and again to make me feel safer, I stuck to the rules. We didn't smell anything, so it wasn't near. Sound just...just echoed here a lot. It wasn't near us! It couldn't be! Goddesses don't let it be! Passing into the common area, overgrown plants in pots wrapped around the benches they had clung to and almost tripped me.

My Pipbuck began clicking to warn of radiation. Tugging on Protégé's clothing, I pulled him away from where it was increasingly madly. Had something got caught in radiation down here? Some sort of zebra wildlife they'd brought with them?

Avoiding the radiation took us closer to the larger rooms where I guessed staff might once have resided. Only something caught my eye. Wires and thick cables snaked into it and I could see the faded light of a terminal. The cables looked too new for this old outer metro style place.

New things were what we were looking for down here in the first place.

"In here," I whispered into his ear before creeping forward to poke my head inside.

What I saw made my face go pale.

There were terminals all right. A whole bank of them connected to the cables was placed on a crude desk. Yet what lay before them is what caught my eyes. Right before me, in this area of all places, I saw something I recognised from long ago. A huge machine that arced over the top dominated the room. A pony could sit in it, with straps that held them tight with a headset hanging on a half torn cable above it.

No, wait, I didn't recognise this thing alone. It was two machines, two machines from separate places connected.

Aurora Star's memory machine for ponies who didn't have magic seemed to have been combined with the machine that created spell orbs in the Stable. Two ends of research connected down here. I saw Protégé trot over to it and cautiously look around. He didn't know the way I did. A machine that showed you

memories combined with a machine that created orbs you could learn from. Was this to...no...this was beyond my mind to guess. This was something for Glimmerlight to figure out.

Just, why here?

“The fact this strapped its users in pretty harshly worries me, Murk.” Protégé shifted the leather straps with a hoof. “You only do that if it creates spasms-”

“Or if somepony didn't want to do it.” I finished for him, a hoof gently caressing one of my own wings. Still unused to them, they had remained frozen to my side this entire trip.

He nodded back, before simply shaking his head.

“What kind of asylum is this place?”

Trotting back, he made it very clear that we weren't pausing to go terminal file hunting. Yet even as we passed outside, I saw more rooms next to that chamber containing surgery beds below lamps stained with oddly coloured liquids and ranks of unidentifiable bottles near them. Suddenly, the groaning of the decrepit structure was all too eerily similar to what my imagination saw this place sounding like while in operation.

Across the common area lay various open windows. Cracked and in some places shattered, they looked in on a third chamber bearing banks of similar machines. Memory machines all linked to one glowing orb I could see at the top. Locked in its own little cage, there was no way we could access it and I highly doubted Protégé would want to use it. Now was no time for memory orbs.

“Memory technology?” Protégé peered closer. “Why would you force somepony to watch a memory? Some sort of torture? Interrogation?”

“Or to show them something?” I added, before realising that pretty much is the purpose of memory orbs anyway. I cast one more look into the room before almost turning to leave.

I did see one thing. Lying on the ground was a pack bearing the mark of Red Eye. A...well...red eye. Reaching over, I pulled it up and found it to contain little more than an audio tape. Ensuring the volume was low, I plugged it into my Pipbuck as we trotted on.

Click.

“I can't get out. I can't get out!”

A buck's terrified voice whimpered into the microphone.

“They told me it was safe! They told me there was no monsters in the old metro! They lied to me! They lied! They're all dying now! Can you hear me? Do you read? Do...do you hear me?!”

He thought it was a radio. Protégé leaned closer.

“There was something downstairs! We were sent to turn the power back on but it was down there! This smell, a horrible smell! Can you hear me?! Get out if you smell it! GET OUT! GET OUT BEFORE THEY COME! PLEASE HELP ME! HELP! HELP ME SOMEPONY!”

I had to turn the volume down again as he shrieked. Protégé glanced around quickly, revolver creeping up again.

“You...you aren't there...please be there...”

Sniffing, beyond crying out, I heard him slump down.

“I can hear them coming...they heard me!”

In the distance, I heard something. Banging of doors followed by some sort of frantic movement followed by mad shrieks. Something was rushing across floorboards and tiling toward him!

“I can smell it...oh no I can smell it again! The rotten stench! Death! They're here! They here NO I DON'T WANT THEM TO BE HERE, GO AWAY! SOMEPONY GET ME OUT OF HERE! NOOOO!”

He dropped the device. The microphone crackled from the damage and the dent on the side suddenly

made sense. He wailed, rushing off in the distance. The sound of movement only increased in volume, getting closer, closer, louder!

It kept getting louder.

My eyes went a little wide.

“P-Protégé...”

The noise kept getting louder.

“Murk, what is it? I'm sorry, that was tough to hea-”

“*Protégé!*”

The striking on tiles played in my ears as I showed him the recorder.

It had stopped some time ago.

“...no.”

Behind us, a tremendous slam of metal echoed across the entire balconied section of the asylum.

We both turned, a cold sweat forming on me as I saw dust explode from around one of the locked and sealed doors. It slammed again, throwing up more pebbles and fragments of brick. Dulled yet high pitched, a great shriek of bile and rage keened out from behind it. The noise made my legs go weak. I fell. My entire body felt frozen up as I heard it.

Huge thumps, rends and slams sent the heavy door buckling, bending and juddering in its slot! A gurgling howl, desperate and repeating like something close to what it had always wanted roared up from behind it.

“It...it doesn't show on E.F.S...” I heard Protégé, his revolver shaking even in his magic as it raised. “Why didn't I see it?!”

The door bent inward, one hinge exploded off as the seal broke.

Like a wash of sensation, there was a tiny hole at the top of the door that let the smell seep into the room and burn my nostrils. I smelled it.

Rotten mint, sickly and distinct.

“Pr...”

“Murk, run.”

“I...I can't...I'm slow and...”

“*Murk! RUN!*”

He grabbed me, *threw* me ahead of him and then took off. I couldn't do anything but scream until my throat gave out and sprinted after him. The world around me became a blur, my eyes watering. My heart slammed against my ribcage on every single great smash of the door behind us. The shrieking became a great cry of desperation and infernal rage, as though we were denying whatever it was something it wanted dearly! An ambience, a low moan coming from every corridor and airvent that grew until it filled my ears with a deathly sound.

Protégé rounded a corner, easily overtaking me. I hoped he knew where we were! I saw open doors!

“In one! We can-”

“NO! Just *run!*”

I felt exhausted, my injuries coming up as I exerted myself. A mental worry of my own lack of physicality making me doubt myself. We ran through banks of sealed doors. I at some point leapt over several beds crammed into an old fitness room. Behind us, the door faded into the distance...until I heard that worst of sounds.

The sound of a door springing open.

There was no delay. No great scream from whatever it was. I simply heard something push the door aside and tear off after us. I felt my wings shivering, moving instinctively to try and speed me up. Protégé hit a door ahead of us, rebounded from its padlock and fumbled with his revolver to aim it and blast the lock off. The first shot missed entirely, the second skiffed it. I heard him curse in a way that hardly befitted him before the third sheared the lock off. We ran through. Ahead, I saw a glint of green, the same symbol for the exit!

Both of us almost fell down the stairs. Behind us the sound of something tearing past beds, upturning them and screeching with lust or gnashing as though this was life or death for it hurtled in pursuit. The stairs we went down led to another twisting series of wards. I was completely lost, I didn't remember where we'd turned and I barely got a sense of where we were.

We came to a crumbled section of roof, sheer rock jutting down. Squeezing, turning side on, I had to wriggle past it behind Protégé, kicking and pushing with my exposed hind section until I was just inching through. I felt Protégé pull me, the sound near behind me! I couldn't see it! I was trapped and I couldn't see what was bearing down on me! I screamed as something slammed into me, until I realised it was Protégé's magic pulling me through to keep galloping! Something scrambled, fumbling at the wreckage before turning and leaving, a wet sloppy sound sucking on every motion, tinged with metallic tinkling.

Then the unthinkable. I heard a second howl join the first. Somewhere off the right, a beeping sound picked up as I saw a flash of movement in the shadows outside of this room at the far end of the corridor. We were far past it before I actually saw anything, but the frenzied electronic sound mixed with a metallic screeching and low drawn out moaning something akin to the noise of a creaking door. It smashed into the room behind us, bringing a wave of nauseous smells in its wake, that mint making me dizzy. Protégé turned and slammed a filing cabinet down in front of the door we just passed, locking it in behind us. Peeled wallpapers of peaceful Equestria lined the walls on either side, maps of the area faded from any comprehension had fallen upon the floor. The door behind us shattered, the wood and glass exploding on every strike until they fell completely off.

Protégé led us through what I suddenly realised was a reception, yet Protégé turned away from it as though to run deeper in! I shouted to him, grabbed his hoof.

“RECEPTION! DOOR! WAY OUT!”

I just cried words wildly as I ran instead to the main doors, suddenly realising my guilt that I had just run ahead and not even helped him up. It was getting hard to see, I felt dizzy as I slammed into the heavier doors. Behind us, the creaking moan, beeps and howls grew closer. The smell grew greater. I struck the doors again and again but they wouldn't open. I cried to the Goddesses to save me until Protégé pushed past and pulled a huge lever to the side. With a dull clank, the doors began to open just enough for us to squeeze through. I didn't even see what was on the other side before running into wooden planks built over the entrance. I heard his gun fire, I squeezed through. Somewhere, somehow, I felt another lever on the other side and pulled it.

Turning back, I saw the entrance we came out from had been nailed off like the ones on the inner metro. Signs of danger had been painted on it. Falling off the lever, I saw the doors begin to slam shut again. Through the tiny hole, I caught another whiff of the smell before they came together. The last thing I saw was the doors to the reception blasting open as though Brimstone himself had charged them.

The doors were too thick to break. The creatures slammed into them and pounded hard. I heard their muffled evil and horrifying sounds for minutes afterwards as we limped and clambered away. I hadn't even seen Protégé until we came out into a thick room similar to the outer metro we had passed into.

Protégé fell against the wall, slumping. His ponytailed mane had come loose in the frantic chase and I saw him lean over, his revolver and eyepiece falling to the ground as he put his head in his hooves.

I hadn't ever seen him shed tears before.

As for myself, I simply found the nearest corner, curled up with my wings and hooves around me and

finally let it all out as the adrenaline painfully wore off.

Not a word was spoken between us for some time.

* * *

We had shifted away from the door the moment we got our breath back. Neither of us wanted to be anywhere near the asylum right now and it was all I could do to stop my imagination running rampant with replaying that minute of terror. I found myself preferring the silence and melancholy of Stable Ninety Three over what lay in the outer metro.

The path had led upwards along a gently tiled slope and simple brickwork walls, almost pitch black but for our lights. It was, however, entirely silent.

At least, I thought it was...every so often I could have sworn I heard something nearby. Just a whisper in the dark or a feeling as though we were nearing something. Like I could sense something deep down below. Shaking my head, I took a deep breath and a gulp of RadAway to ward off whatever I'd stepped in. Brimstone's birthday gift had made my life so much easier.

Ahead of me, however, I saw Protégé stop and stare for a second. He looked to the side briefly as though just at the wall, before shaking his head and moving on quickly. I could have sworn I heard him mutter 'nothing' under his breath. I trotted closer.

“You, uh, all right?”

“I'm fine. Just...thought I heard someone there, felt something in the air.”

“S-so did I...”

There was a brief pause to look at one another. He simply shook his head and kept moving.

“This place was not meant for ponies. Let's just...just go...”

I followed behind him. Yet even as we trotted, I kept looking behind or below me. Little sounds of air moving with no wind in the air playing around us. Like the ambience of a gaping cave.

Protégé seemed more than a little uncomfortable, shaking his head again as we turned a corner and saw it.

So this was Ministry Station. The great door ahead of us, the back way in. It bore a massive bronze emblem of the Fillydelphia Metro.

It surprised me, really. I might have given more thought to what it might have looked like or even what I might find but with my mind so preoccupied on simply seeing the outside world again, the very place I'd strove to find to make that happen held little imagery my head.

Now, far beneath the city of Fillydelphia I had found it at last

The large door before us slid open. Yet once Protégé had pushed it, there were no creaks or stiffness. It quietly fell aside.

This...this was not what I had ever expected. Not in any of my active imagination.

Inside, was not like my world. I had to squint as bright light flooded into the dark corridor. I heard Protégé mutter in disbelief and cover his eyes briefly. A white glare, clean and warm filled Ministry Station. Peering past, I saw that it was fully functional lighting panels over white tiles. I saw a smooth marble flooring dotted with polished metal patterns. There were clean walls, free of graffiti, stretching to either side along a platform studded with benches and backed by murals upon the walls. They bore visages of the Goddesses.

It was not unoccupied. Before us, once our eyes had adjusted to the metro platform's light and shining brilliance, we saw slaves working frantically around it. They polished the murals and swept the floor of any dust. One was repairing a lighting panel near the back. If it hadn't been for their threadbare clothing and bony bodies I might have never realised what they were.

Only none of them seemed to care that we had just wandered in. I felt exposed as we trotted onto the smooth flooring but no slaves looked at us directly. They continued to murmur and go about their business so steadily that it took me a second to really realise what was different.

They were smiling.

None bore any chains, they had no fresh injuries and worked with a confidence and genuine effort instead of the dull and slow grind you would see on the surface or the inner metro.

Yet that smile...every one of them bore it. Almost identical, sharing the same expression and look. Some chatted idly as they worked.

“We're almost done.”

“I know, almost done!”

“I'm so glad I came here, I can help Equestria.”

“I know, me too!”

“Yeah.”

“I can't wait.”

Protégé wandered forward, finding them completely oblivious to his presence. The platform stretched ahead of us, with three low rounded passageways on the left leading further into the station while the metro line lay over a lip on the right. The tunnels at either end had been closed off entirely...or never even dug. It was just smooth stone. No wonder it had taken so long to find this place.

“What in Equestria is this...” Protégé muttered as we moved further in, holding his head and wincing from the bright lights.

I didn't know, but I could feel the hairs on my neck rising and my heartbeat increasing. I had expected blood and...and whipping and slavers shouting and...and...

Not this. This was...was somehow *worse*.

I could see it in their faces, they all wore the *same expression*. Their mouths were smiling but their eyes were dead and lifeless.

“I've finished the panel!”

“Good work, that's one more thing finished!”

“Wonderful, there's so much to do.”

“I'll go ask what else I can do.”

“Okay. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

A slave wandered past us, passing between Protégé and I and I got a good look at that lifeless face. There was no spark there. He moved into one of the passageways and disappeared up a stone stairway. The others simply continued their work.

Even as I glanced at those stairs, I heard the sounds of working going on above and below us. The soft tapping of hooves moving calmly in every direction. All seeking just to help what they could nicely and without any worries...a yawning feeling that there was something different here...a new feeling that was won-

I stamped my hooves and shook my head, knocking my hoof off it a few times. No...this wasn't good. There was something *wrong* in here. I could feel it in the air, an ambience of stillness lacking the personality and colour of life.

“Protégé, what's going on?” I voiced the question I knew he couldn't answer, but I needed somepony to talk normally.

He didn't answer. I turned over to find him.

“Protégé?”

He was near two of the slaves, watching what they were doing quietly. Both were working on some wires behind a metal plate in the wall. One of them stretched a hoof to find a wirecutter and Protégé lifted it to the struggling pony with his magic.

“What are you doing?”

He blinked and turned back to me, as though surprised or even embarrassed I'd seen.

“I...just handing it...no, nothing. Nothing, I'm fine. This place is not what I expected. There's something very very wrong here Murk. Let's get deeper in, find out just what Shackles is doing down here. I...I don't even know what to guess or where to begin.”

He certainly looked at a loss as he went the way the slave had gone. Those behind us simply continued their work without even noting our leaving.

Yet even as I went onto the steps, I heard something. A scratching and earthy sound of something moving quickly. Turning back, I saw nothing but could keep hearing it. The sound was...was coming from the metro line, behind the smooth stone that blocked off the tunnels.

Very faded, lessened by the thick stone, I heard something gurgling and beating against it. Dull thumps and wet cracks. Then I heard a creaking moan. Then another. A third...a fourth...

It was them...

The stone that blocked up the tunnel trembled as a muffled shriek broke the calm silence. I felt Protégé stand ready to flee again as the beasts slammed again and again into that apparently thin wall of concrete keeping them out. Fragments of dust fell from above. Sickeningly wet slaps of something impacting against it rose higher.

Yet the slaves around us didn't pay any heed. Two of them were right beside the wall applying new layers of material to the tunnel to cover any of the small cracks I could see. They...they didn't even acknowledge what was right outside!

“Murk, please tell me, are you seeing the same thing I'm seeing?”

“It's like they can't think for themselves...”

“Come on, let's get out of here. I don't want to be around if those things break through.”

He tugged at me a little while I stared. I could hear more impacts on the opposite end of the platform too. The sound was drawing them in. Even from behind me, a yawning sound of wind rushing through the tunnels caught my ears, yet I felt nothing upon my skin.

Suddenly, Ministry Station didn't feel very safe at all. But I wasn't sure what it was that truly scared me more. The physical threat laying siege to it or the unsettling atmosphere playing on my every sense that lay within...

* * *

It seemed Ministry Station was not simply occupied by mindless slaves. After little more than a few dozen metres into one of the half-circle shaped passageways we had to duck behind an old ticket booth. I'd heard two ponies conversing more normally up ahead, laughing in rough voices.

We settled in behind the old chair where a ticket-pony might once had sat bored all day. Listening carefully, I heard the loose banter that unmistakably belonged to slavers.

“-so I says, 'look, I just want out of this place.’”

A female voice responded.

“Same, the sooner we get that damn shift change back to the inner metro the better. This place just

freaks me the fuck out, you know Squib woke up screaming last night? Saying he heard somepony whispering in his ear in some...zebra language or some shit.”

Protégé glanced back at me as though to check I'd heard the same. This place truly was unsettling to those staying here. What was wrong with it?

“You kidding? Fuck me...let's just check on those slaves on the platform and get the hell topside back to the den as fast as we can. They told us it would only go for the slaves...”

‘It’? Had something changed them? I could feel a cold sweat of fear passing over me. I hated these things...the things you didn't understand or couldn't see. The effects of magic beyond what I could understand.

The slavers trotted quickly past, grumbling about Shackles keeping them down here so long. I gave them time to pass down the stairs we'd come up a few minutes before and took a peek out. The white tiles and colourful artworks covering the unblemished walls stretched out to a junction ahead. No-pony in sight. I could hear many more though, somewhere above...along with a deep throbbing in the air.

Only going for the slaves...what did that mean? We had to move on, I needed my friends out of here as soon as possible. I needed out of here as soon as possible!

“Protégé, it's clear.”

I moved out, before realising I'd heard nothing from him.

“Protégé?”

Turning to look back into the booth, I saw him sitting just staring behind us. With a start, I looked back...and saw nothing. I whispered his name again and shook his shoulder. Blinking, Red Eye's apprentice made a little shake of his head and a little gasp.

“Are you all right?”

He looked over at me, as though surprised to see me there. “Yes, yes. Sorry, I was just...just finding it strange that such a place exists. I'm fine. This place is just...incredible. If we could preserve this, bring it back to perfection...”

“Maybe...” I just muttered to myself, not really caring much what anyone did to it so long as I was nowhere near it for the rest of my life. “It's clear, come on!”

This time, he followed and we crept further inside. The roof opened up, revealing the junction to be part of a larger network of tunnels down here. On one side there lay a gigantic curved staircase of the same marble while every exit from this junction bore a brass emblem above it. Likely leading to each of the platforms, but the old Equestrian architecture properly lit and cleaned by the slaves wandering around us and polishing them was already as breathtaking as it was unsettlingly different. Amongst this light, I felt exposed, unable to hide.

At the bottom end of the junction, opposite the stairs, I saw a large metal door with welded plates holding it shut. I could only imagine why.

“Do you hear that?” Protégé stopped and looked around.

I couldn't, that in itself was unusual. “Hear what?”

“Just...just something out there. I swore I heard somepony trotting nearby, but all of the slaves are still.”

Clearly, Protégé was more spooked than I'd known. I just shook my head, cantering past quickly to the stairs. They had to lead to the main level of the station! I hopped up each of them in turn, trying to ignore how loudly my hooves seemed to echo in an area that no other sound echoed in turn. My head was hurting.

Just get your friends, Murky...concentrate on your friends and getting out.

I reached the top and found the source of the noise. Wait...a noise? Why hadn't I heard all this below? The sounds of mass ponies moving around, of work going on and others shouting or conversing everywhere!

The sound flooded in, only realising it as I walked across some unseen barrier and left the silence of the tunnels below.

I came across the primary floor of Ministry Station itself. I had expected some shop outlets, ticket stations and benches. I got them.

But I didn't expect this...

What I had emerged from was but a small stairwell down to the platforms. Ahead of me lay a *gigantic* room, taller than it was wide! Great columns of white marble rose out of a mosaic floor toward a curved and lavish roof. Decorated archways surrounded the open floor, hiding the empty units where the shops or waiting rooms might have been in. A huge round desk lay in the middle of the open floor, where tickets much once have been sold.

It was filled with slaves. They moved in lines, hooves moving in synch with one another as they trailed or collected wires. Some hung from the ceiling, repairing the lighting panels that had shorted out. The floor was covered in Ministry workbenches that I'd once seen in Aurora's workshop and each bore another slave fixing all manners of talismans, spark technologies and mechanical items. Others offered inane and dead conversations on basic observations as they swept alongside one another to get rid of the industrial burrs and fragments that fell to the floor.

I simply stood and gaped. Ministry Station or...or whatever it had been called before the balefire...it was a masterpiece of design hidden below the city. Only not it occurred to me, this was supposed to be the link between the inner and outer metros, a primary location for anypony who came to Fillydelphia. It was to be a crown of design...and it likely had been dropped and left unfinished the moment the war effort had instead taken the funds away. For all its grand nature, it held no equipment, nothing to set a metro station in motion.

Now it was nothing but a precious secret to those who had found it. Aurora Star's hidden research area where no-pony would ever bother looking.

I felt my fleece grabbed and pulled back. A black hoof covered my mouth from the squeak I made in shock and I felt somepony hold me still.

“Sssh...”

Protégé! Confused, I shifted to look before the slaver trotted by while munching on an old packet of dried biscuits. Blinking, I began to see the familiar things I'd missed in my astonishment. Slavers wandered around them, checking on progress. There were no whips, chains or canes. They simply watched quietly as the slaves did what they were supposed to...those empty smiles on their faces the entire time.

“Let's go. The others are waiting for this.”

“I know, I hope they make use of it.”

“Me too. It will be good to see this working again.”

“Haha. Yes. It will. Haha.”

Two slaves cantered past us, smiling and looking dead ahead as they talked without looking at one another. They talked just like the ones below...like they all had the same personality in different bodies...

There was something about this place, the slave acted strange but the slavers didn't! They said it only affected slaves but...why? My perception kept being thrown off, the sounds and feels of the air in here being...strange.

Something about the atmosphere in here...had to be. My mind hurt from trying to think on it, Glimmer would know though, she'd have figured it out!

Glimmer would...

Glimmer...

I stopped and gasped. *Glimmer!*

I saw her! Right ahead at the opposite end of the great underground hall, I saw her looking along a line of small magical talismans with a careful eye. Throwing a few into a pack, she rejoined two other unicorns and began to trot toward an exit. I didn't see her face, but that unmistakable pink mane shone bright amongst the jaded and dulled slaves who had been in this sterile place for longer!

Taking a quick look around, I scampered out of the stairwell we hid in and took cover beside a workbench. The slave working at it didn't seem to even notice my presence and kept working on her wires. I heard her whispering.

“Yes, masters...I'll do it masters. It's for the best masters...you know best masters.”

Creepy...

I made to go on, before turning to see where Protégé was.

He was...*what?!*

I saw him having stopped in the open, helping up another pony and getting their fallen cargo back on their saddle. Smiling like I'd never seen him do, he patted the buck on the back as he reasserted the heavy load.

“Protégé!” I hissed strongly. “You're in the open!”

Ensuring the pony was fine, he turned, seemed to realise and ducked in.

“S-sorry...I was just...just helping.”

“Helping?”

“Helping *him*. A...a slaver might have gone for him if he was late.”

I just stared open mouthed. Had the mint beasts really shook him up that badly? All the same, his face hardened again and pointed ahead.

“If you go now, you could make that next workbench, the slaver's looking away...go now!”

Almost wanting to shake my head, I hurried as quickly as I dared to get behind the slaver and heard Protégé creep behind me. The two of us pressed into the abandoned workbench, trying to stay out of sight of any slaver we saw.

This wasn't working, we were too conspicuous sneaking about. We needed to speed up. We needed to blend in. Looking up at the workbench, squinting as the lighting fixtures above flared into life with a joyless cheer from the slaves I reached for the rags some ponies had left beforehand and threw one to Protégé. He took it without a word, clearly guessing the plan.

“You...um...” I bit my lip.

“I...what, Murk?”

“You still remember how to...uh...” Oh this was awkward. “You remember how to trot like a slave?”

He held onto the rags for a second, his hooves tightening around them. There was a faraway look in his eyes.

“Two years is a long time, Murk...” He spoke quietly, sighing as he did so.

I wanted to call him out on the hypocrisy. That he had forgotten the suffering while still feeling bad for his own memories. To look at the inner metro mines and the waste of life...or to even see Fillydelphia above and callously talk of 'acceptable losses' while still *daring* to look sad.

Yet right now, seeing that look in his eyes, the one I knew I gave to a lot of ponies, I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

We pulled the rags on, waited for the next passing of slaves and slowly slipped out to trot behind them with our heads level. They might have been falsely cheerful, but they still moved like slaves. Ordered, shivering and clearly weak of body. I hardly needed any help, my body was still aching from the exertions

earlier on my healing wounds but it almost shocked me by how easily Protégé fell back into the routine. With his loose mane, lack of eyepiece and that look on his face below the hood of the rags he really did look every inch the born slave.

He had to come with us...he had to. I...I couldn't leave him here.

Rubbing my head, trying to get my ears to stop twitching and aching from the odd atmosphere down here, I tried to move as fast as I could. I could see Glimmer exiting ahead of me! She was talking to the mare beside her, probably flirting or something! I couldn't wait to see her again!

We came to the same passageway she went into. It was ringed with that same brass pattern and lined with carved wooden benches either side. She wandered in ahead of us, turning a corner farther down. We'd made it! We both sped up, cantering after we left the main room.

It was so quiet in here...it was...

Wait...

I turned, hearing the main room again behind us filled with activity. I saw Protégé look oddly at me. But it had just been silent...why had all the sound went for a few...

“Murk, come on!”

I felt my breathing increase...this wasn't right. Turning, I followed him as we pursued Glimmerlight. The corridor led to a larger room with plush couches and low tables. An empty space for a bar was across one side behind crystal clear stained glass. Some sort of VIP lounge! She must have gone already, had they galloped?

I heard a door close to the side.

“There!”

We both turned...and found a blank wall behind the VIP couches.

“Murk, what are you pointing at?”

“I...I...”

I didn't know...I...I had heard it! I looked closer, seeing the lines where a door had *once* existed before it had been filled in. Protégé trotted up to it, running a hoof along them.

“They've laid concrete to cover the door. Somepony really should fix this up...it looks wrong without it. Would only take an hour to-”

The wall shook in, a guttural howl right behind it. The sound of bone cracking against a hard surface set the entire blocked door trembling. We both screamed, falling back across a coffee table to get away from it, the reason *why* they'd blocked it up becoming clear! Those things were even inside here! Trapped in pockets of sealed rooms!

The wall splintered, pieces of dust and pebbles falling from the joints. I saw small cracks form up the sides. That blockage was strong but it wouldn't hold forever. Rapid hoarse retches like something trying to throw up matched the pace of something hitting it again and again in vain, sensing even the slightest chance to get through with desperate intent!

Up ahead, I could hear her voice in the distance as though not even hearing what was screaming at us through a thin concrete block! I couldn't take it anymore, there were no guards...I galloped! I leapt over the couches, sprinting to the other side despite Protégé's protests and rounded the corner, away from the monster behind the door even while it shrieked and drew slavers running behind us, ordering slaves to patch it and block it up! I heard one shout 'They're trying again' before we got out of there.

This was new...

The corridor opened up, raised over depressions on either side behind frames where glass was clearly once supposed to go. I could see banks of terminals leading to rougher carved tunnels at the sides and

various machines of magical technology all around the walls! Slaves tinkered over them or typed on the terminals with strange excitement on every movement other than their faces. The zebras and Aurora had torn this entire part of the station apart to fit a full laboratory!

“Woah...” Protégé breathed as he saw the torn walls and advanced machinery in various states of activity within. “They must have somehow smuggled entire generators down here to power this.”

“Or it's powered from something already here...” I muttered, remembering (and indeed still feeling) that same surging of power from somewhere deeper. Somewhere up ahead...

We slowed down, seeing the slavers below wandering amongst them. We were still close, only a few steps kept this corridor higher than the lab areas either side. Cables hung from the ceiling connected to memory machines and tables for ponies to lie on beside headsets. The thought of those same ones in the asylum came to me rather uncomfortably.

The raised walkway we were on continued right over it, meeting another one going horizontally across the room too, leaving four giant lab areas around it. Reaching the cross, I looked to either side. There she was again! Off to the right, about twenty feet past where the walkway ended and became a clean corridor again she waited beside a huge metal door that had clearly been installed by Aurora's teams. It didn't match anything in its huge brutal weight.

I was so close! I had to really fight to keep my trotting at a slave's pace, moving forward. I felt dizzy from hope, pain in each leg like it were slowing me down and holding me back. My eyesight blurred as I felt the world around me spin a little. Voices from below mixed, sounding...older...cleaner...more scared.

What...what was going on?

I could see slaves below all holding their heads, some sort of...of pressure in the air...

Staggering...I tripped. A sound of wind passed by again, throbbing in time with crackling sounds in the air. There were more voices here, somewhere, down amongst the slaves. A different language...

No...*no!* Glimmer is there, wake up, Murky! Wake up and move on! You're almost there!

Opening my eyes, not even realising I'd closed them, I began to move forward, hearing the groans around me. Protégé had fallen too, like many slaves. The slavers looked unnerved and silent. I heard voices but no-pony was talking!

Then it passed, as suddenly as the pressure began, it left and normality snapped back.

I couldn't take this. I galloped forth, trying to catch up with her before that door opened. I felt more waves of pressure and more fuzziness in my head but I pushed on. I heard Protégé stop behind me, gasping suddenly.

After too long, I reached Glimmerlight. She was looking at me and I threw myself onto her.

“Sis! I...we're here!”

The pony I'd grabbed turned to me, surprised at this little buck holding her. Her emotionless eyes above a dull smile raised an eyebrow.

“Hello. I've got to get back to work. Sorry. Shall we talk later?”

Not since our argument had I ever felt my heart sink so far...

No, Glimmer...no...*sis*...

I pawed at her even as I heard the door behind her open and the sound of a booming voice within cry out for them to go in. A familiar voice. One that snapped at my very soul. Somepony was tugging me, throwing his hooves around me to pull me desperately through a door to hide. My hooves flailed out, a hoof covered my mouth to stifle the plea.

Yet even before the door closed, red magic snapping it shut, I saw that colossal metal door slide away and Glimmerlight smile and walk inside past Chainlink Shackles himself without a care in the world.

Even as I struggled with Protégé, crying and wanting to shout out, I heard the gigantic door slam shut and I fell back, hopeless, before collapsing into a curled little ball.

Sis...

* * *

Chapter 21: Just Downstairs (Part 2)

* * *

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Sis...

* * *

“**Are we any closer to the primary chamber?**”

“N-no, master...the door remains unbreachable. The slaves say that...that it just resists everything. It must use Stable technology in it or something, the Ministry of Wartime Technology *did* build it after all and-”

“**Silence, cretin! Do not lecture me!**”

There was a sound of somepony being grabbed and lifted from the ground. Sat in the room we had hid in, I could hear the conversation clearly.

“**If you cannot go through the door, go around it. If you cannot go around it, go under it. Whatever it takes. This operation has drained much of what we can muster in this ridiculous mountain expedition already. Now get to work.**”

“Y-yes, master!”

“**Don't forget who it is that saved you from having your limbs removed and who could happily throw you back to the wolves of your debts should you begin to think yourself above your station.**”

“Yes, master!”

They were dropped and quickly galloped off. I heard somepony else trot out of the huge door behind Shackles. The horror of what had become of Glimmerlight tore at my mind, but the fear of who lay just outside kept me silent, merely watching the door that Protégé held his ear to.

My hearing had no such requirement.

“I suppose you can't blame the poor buck, this place tends to leave most with headaches as it is...”

That was Grindstone's voice!

“**Only those that matter. This place holds secrets, Grindstone. It is a nexus for slavery of the mind, the source of Fillydelphia's history of servitude. I won't tolerate delay on finding *why*.**”

I saw Protégé narrow his eyes. Shackles' words were grand in their meaning, a nexus of slavery?

“One of many secrets, yes.” Grindstone coughed harshly and trotted past the door, joining Shackles' stomping tread. “My work in the Ministry has encountered similar problems. We miss one piece of the puzzle to make the simultaneous memory experiment function properly. We try orbs but they simply fracture, they are not designed for it. We need one *made* for it, just as you need what I would presume to be some sort of key to find the end of your own search.”

“You believe this mountain holds these secrets?”

“I only know it is something Aurora had *great* interest in visiting regularly and supporting it with funds diverted from her own Ministry's records off the charts and disguised as payment for several non-existent experiments that all 'failed' and were disposed of. Simply put, whatever lies in her Ministry, here and the mountain's mines are linked somehow. Perhaps we shall-”

His voice trailed away, even for me they had moved too far down the corridor for me to hear the rest.

Finally, I dared let out a small sob with any volume at all. Free of the fear Shackles left in his wake around me, the memory of Glimmer came racing back.

“We need to go in there!” I gritted my teeth, moving toward the door until Protégé blocked me.

“We cannot open it, Murk.”

“*We have to!* Glimmer's in there! She's...she's not well! I need to help her! I...I need to!”

I almost fought with him, trying to push past and scraping my hooves on the ground.

“The door is locked shut, Murk! Calm down, we can-”

“*Calm down?! They've done something to my sister! I need to help her! Help me, please!*”

It was almost a scuffle, I fought and shoved but the bigger pony held me back before dropping me to the ground.

“Murk, listen! We...” He blinked a few times, putting a hoof to his head with a groan and wandered away from me. “We can't get...in. We just need to find something...something in this place for it. So we can help get it open. Help...”

The change in his voice broke my mood. My eyes followed the slaver as he leaned on the wall. His eyes closed and he kept looking side to side.

“P-Protégé? What's wrong?”

“Just a...a headache, Murk. Like I can hear things in here. That sensation when we pushed after Glimmerlight. There's something down here, Murk. Something that affects ponies...”

Getting to my hooves, I couldn't help but glance to the door we passed through in order to hide. I dearly wanted to just shout through the door, maybe she would hear me! Yet I knew he was right, the door was massive and we'd heard it slam shut behind Shackles and Grindstone.

All the same, I didn't fancy hanging around here much longer...I had a growing headache too and the sensations of moving air and thick throbbing power below our hooves on other floors was getting to us. Protégé especially, he'd been acting really strange...

I trotted over to him, finding him apparently very interested in the walls of the darker room. They were broken tiles, dark with rot and yet uncleaned like the remainder of the station.

“Protégé? I...I'm sorry...I'm just worried and...and scared...” I crossed my front hooves. “The things earlier and...and what happens to ponies here I...”

He didn't even seem to notice me.

“Protégé?”

“Seems odd to miss cleaning this bit here...wouldn't take long if somepony went at it with enough effort. Finish it off, they'd feel happier about it, wouldn't they?”

He spoke conversationally. Like he'd forgotten what we had been even talking about.

“Protégé?” I hoofed his shoulder hard and he snapped around like he'd seen a ghost.

“I...” He looked around, down the darker corridor. “I just...nothing. Was sure I heard somepony saying this place needed sorting. Sorry. We should...should head on. Find a way to open the door.”

I just nodded while he wandered away in front. The corridor was actually a room now that I saw it clearer, with low arches with cages barring entrance on either side. The air stank of unwashed ponies.

At the far end of the corridor, I could have sworn the shadows shifted in between my blinks. Like ponies were moving without anypony there. Sweat dripped down the back of my neck. This place...this place...I almost preferred the obvious danger of the metro lines we'd passed through.

Cantering after him, I looked into each of the caged arches. Slaves lay in little pony piles sleeping in strange unison. After a second I realised why, that each of their breathes made their torsos expand in synch with one another.

“What have they done to them, Protégé?”

“I don't think it's them. Shackles said this place did it, those machines we saw, do you think-”

“Murk?”

I stopped on the spot. The deep gravelly voice rumbled out of the cage just ahead of us. I knew it! *I knew it!* I galloped past Protégé and right up to the rusty bars, pushing my head through them.

Brimstone Blitz was getting up right before me. Dropping a thick piece of fabric away to the side he advanced to meet me before bending down. Behind him, I saw Coral Eve look up before rushing over. Pushing her front legs through I met her in the best hug I could manage.

“What are you doing here, you two?” Brimstone glanced at Protégé.

“Getting you out, we have need of you as a team for both our purposes.”

“Our purposes?” Brimstone's face showed no hint of giving any games away.

“Don't take me for a fool, Warlord. You and I both know what this group wants. Just what we both want happens to coincide right now. Are you and Coral okay?”

“As best we can be.” Coral looked up, letting go of me and wiping away some of my tears with a hoof. “It's been hard, we're hurt and starving...very weak. But we're alive...”

She looked it. Coral had always had a strong frame to her body but now she seemed thinner and more drawn. Her cheekbones were noticeable for the first time. Even Brimstone looked lethargic, his injuries in the Pit still recovering. The massive burn scar on one side of his body looked raw and I still wasn't used to seeing only one eye staring back at me...

“G-Glimmer...” I didn't even know what to say.

Brimstone growled under his breath, looking beyond us. “So you saw.”

“Glimmer, she hasn't had it good, sweetie.” Coral stroked my mane gently. “Since we came here, she kept saying she saw things or had dreams of Old Equestria. They got bad, turned to nightmares and she started using her orbs to remove them. I...I tried to stop her but...something in this place, Murk. Something she was vulnerable to, we all felt it, heard things...but for her it was worse. Then she started volunteering for shifts. Even with it just being a couple of days down here she doesn't even recognise us any more after that.”

Whatever tears she had wiped away were quickly being replaced. My...my sister had needed me...

“I'm so sorry, hun. We've seen it happen to others, I don't know why not us. We feel it, things out the corner of our eye in the dark, winds we don't feel, sounds of ponies whispering yet no-one talked. This place is *evil*, Murk.”

Protégé looked behind us at the door.

“If this is a slave pen, they may be back any time. Brimstone Blitz, we need to get this cage and that door outside open. Do you know how?”

Brimstone snorted and knocked the cage with a hoof, the strong bars clanging hard.

“I tried to bring it down...don't think I'm quite as strong as I once was, boy. The only pony with the skeleton keys down here would be Shackles himself, likely his own room. If you can get them, we might be able to get out. Just be aware, I will not leave this station without Glim.”

“I wouldn't imagine it.”

“Good.” Brimstone snapped the word out, staring down at Protégé. “Head back out of here and directly to the opposite end of that big bloody lab they have. Good to see the sassenach bastard's still limping.”

Brimstone seemed rather pleased with that thought. His one eye turned to me and saw me crouching down. We had to steal something...I knew who it would be that had to do it...

“He's not your master now, kid.”

“I...I know...”

“Aye...in, out, grin afterwards when you imagine how pissed of he'll be to imagine wee you stealing his own slaves away from him. You two better get going now, they'll be changing shifts within half an hour.”

I gulped and nodded. Protégé already was moving away from the cage to return to the door and check outside. Shivering on the spot, hearing the strange ambience of Ministry Station in the air and feeling the stark terror of confronting Shackles himself in my mind...I realised I had to rise up here. I *had* to rise to the occasion.

How many times had Glimmerlight saved me? How many times had Coral helped keep me going? How many times had Brimstone obliterated an obstacle I couldn't fight?

For them, I had to manage this. I saw Coral's weak but confident smile as she rested her hooves on the cage and I saw Brimstone winking that one remaining eye at me. They believed in me...they believed in *me*.

Oh Goddesses, they were insane.

“Come on, Murk. You're not alone. I'll help you do this.”

Protégé trotted beside me when we put on our slave disguises and crept back out.

“Thanks...”

All the same, the way he'd been acting and what Coral had said, I worried all the same. Why didn't it affect Coral or Brim? Why Glimmer?

All the more...why Protégé?

* * *

Beep!

My hoof flew to the Pipbuck quickly, tapping the volume dial rapidly to make sure it stayed quiet, my hiding place behind an abandoned cleaning cart left lying by the side of the smaller labs we had entered.

After passing through the main area, Shackles' room hadn't been hard to locate. I had after all heard him talking from far off within it.

Now we simply waited opposite that imposing steel door amongst a small lab of ponies fixing up spark batteries and magical talismans. Protégé watched them, but I had something else to listen to, waiting for my chance when Shackles left...

Beep!

Click.

“Um...um...hi...”

“Hi...”

“Just a quick update, I'm in a room with some sleeping workers so I have to be quiet. It's been three days now down here and I...I don't think they're going to let me out. I'm trapped. I'm so scared, I just keep knowing that Sky must be so worried about me, we were supposed to meet two days ago but they won't let me leave!”

I looked up at the workers toiling with dead smiles around me. The atmosphere was eerily cold and calm, mixed in with hoofsteps going back and forth in the corridor.

Not every set of sounds had ponies actually passing by for them. I returned my gaze to the Pipbuck. Poor Sundial...

“I've been briefed by Aurora Star herself, she's really weird. Like, she's intelligent but she's a little socially awkward. A bit like me before I met Sky actually. She seemed really nervous, constantly glancing at the zebras, did she get trapped in this as much as I did? She wants me to join a team and help construct these memory orb machines. Really, it seems to be an adaptation of the same techniques we used to help the spells in Ranger armour 'remember' user settings. Something about orbs that can teach ponies things.”

Just like the Stable, they had continued her research on their own down there and got to the same thing. Spell orbs.

I heard hooves getting up in Shackles room and nudged Protégé. The unicorn took a second to respond, looking dully across.

“There's something bigger planned though, some expedition soon to take some of us to another place. They keep talking of 'safe zones' to develop something, what's dangerous about memory magic though? It's just teaching ponies how to do things. All the same, I woke up last night hearing somepony screaming, running away from what I now know is an old asylum the Ministry's built and then abandoned once Fluttershy deemed it unsuitable. Her mane had gone white...”

My teeth chattered a little. Just what was in there? What were they doing? Was this zebra magic? I'd heard all the legends about the things they'd done in the past like melting ponies alive or devouring them for food.

“I...I heard someone, I need to-”

Click.

“There is no shortage of slaves to use for testing, Grindstone. I will get more if you require them.”

“Be that as it may, Master Shackles, the slaves here are unsuitable after this place has had its way with them. They are too defined...too imperfectly aligned for any sort of memory tapping. The ones on Fillydelphia's surface perhaps, yet many retain too many thoughts unwilling. If we had a foal, we could-”

“We don't. Maintain what you are doing, we do not have *time* to look into some wretched scam to acquire one of the 'great leader's' so called new generation. You and I both know what's coming...there is one that might help us with minimal effort however. Leave that to me...you simply get that machine of yours working if you think it will help. Waste no time.”

“Of course...heh, you really are getting younger by the day with all that ambition showing, Shackles...not see that look on your face for years.”

“This is my city...no matter what Red Eye thinks it always was to me. Now I own its heart.”

Shackles and Grindstone moved from the room and wandered along the side of the lab, facing away from us. I could see Grindstone was limping, stopping to cough every few feet in the thick air down here. His elderly frame shivered and struggled to keep up with the gigantic slave master beside him. It really felt odd...Grindstone must have been the only person in this entire city that could actually hold a *conversation* with Shackles.

I didn't waste time. Nodding to Protégé, I sneaked out behind them and pushed my way into Shackles'

room. Their words played on my mind, that machine he had mentioned, a shared memory thingy? That had to be the odd device Mr Peace had been beside with that odd buck left inside it.

Could he have been...

No...no that was too ridiculous.

The inside was sparse. Made of steel on all sides it clearly had been put together by the workers down here rather than when the metro was built. A worryingly identical desk to the one in the Mall dominated the room with a rusted cage in the corner...likely where I would have been put had I still been his. To the other side there was a musty old bed on a metal frame. Listening out behind me, I rushed to the desk to start hunting right away.

While my hooves tore open drawers and hunted among piles of odds and ends upon his desk, I couldn't help but ponder more on just what this place was. Sundial didn't mention any strange ambience so that had to have come *after*. Something had happened here, maybe in the balefire? Or after? Did it have to do with some crazy memory experiment that went wrong and released a memory orb into the air creating recurring perceptions to all who were in the area that perhaps felt like ghosts?

I stopped for a second and blinked. My imagination really was on overdrive today.

Could you *blame* me?

I moved drawer to drawer, hooves spreading the papers, tools and shotgun rounds he had all aside in the hunt for keys. Shackles was a practical slaver, he *had* to have spares! I'd just take any I found and...aha!

I found one large ring of keys and threw them into my pack. The thought to rush out now entered my mind...but who knew if this was all of them? I needed to make sure. Shivering the longer I stayed here, I moved to the next line of drawers and began digging through sets of hoof cuffs he had stored ready.

If he came back...there was only one corridor, I'd be trapped. Come on...come on...

Minutes passed. The drawers were finished. I began to hunt along the edges of bedside table and under the folder he kept there. I flipped through it to look for anything in between the papers and instead got a rather unnerving sight of photographs. They were of slaves...each in the same collar and each on their last legs. Every photo bore a red cross over them. There was one of me in here...one I hadn't even remembered he had taken. It bore no cross.

I was a skeletal broken figure, looking up at the camera with submission in my eyes.

Sweet Goddesses...I'd been so hurt I hadn't even remembered things like this.

Well, not any more.

Throwing it down again, noticed a ring pointing out the side under it. The ring led to a huge and fancy looking key. Yes! Throwing it in my bag as well, I made to hunt over the last things.

I should have gone then...I knew I should have, but I didn't want to leave *anything* to chance!

I really *should* have gone then.

The stomping hit my ears just a moment too late. He was in the corridor outside.

Standing rock still, my body froze with fear and my mouth dropped open in shock. He...he was coming! Oh Goddesses! I had no way out! There was no airducts or...or floorboards! He had no cupboards or drawers big enough to squeeze in, it was too sparse!

“Get back to work, worm!”

I heard a whip slap into somepony's back and a stallion shriek in pain. Then again and again until a begging was heard that he would. By the Goddesses, he was in the lab outside! Protégé must have had to hide desperately!

I couldn't!

No...I could, it was the worst hiding place ever, the most pathetic attempt born of a foolish comfort.

I hid under his bed. Crawling right to the back corner I curled up and shook terribly. I was sweating so hard I feared he might *smell* me. My heart slammed into my ribs hard enough that it hurt. With shaking hooves I gulped down far too much of my RadAway than was necessary just to ensure I didn't cough.

The door opened.

He entered.

His hooves were visible in what I could see. They made the thin steel floor bend beneath him under his weight as he limped his way in, having acted stronger for Grindstone to see. I could hear his breathing was rasping after Brimstone's attack a few days ago. Clearly he was still recovering just as much as I, Brimstone or Protégé was.

The hooves moved forward, setting to his desk where I heard a low growl under his breath.

“Somepony has been in here...”

I had to stifle the squeak, he'd noticed! Oh Goddesses, the same trick Protégé used in his office to know! I'd been so *stupid!*

“Somepony after keys...”

Please...please please please...

He moved in further. His mere presence, the smell of that mangy coat and rotted teeth washed into the room so thickly I felt like I wanted to gag. He was moving right toward the bed! Reaching the side, he stood right before my hiding place...before turning and sitting upon it. The bedframe protested and groaned when the huge stallion's weight sank. With horror, I felt the wire mesh holding the mattress above me press down, pushing upon me and effectively trapping me here. Claustrophobia set in, the frame lowering down and keeping me in my little corner, restricting my space till I couldn't move! If...if I did he'd notice me for sure, it was too small a space to move quietly!

I heard him pick up the folder and open it.

“It seems our little thief is getting bolder every day, eh? Daring to come here. Daring to steal from their *Master*.”

Biting my lip, eyes clenched shut, I simply covered my eyes and prayed internally. He knew, he had to know! Maybe...maybe if I came out he'd go easier! If I gave up.

The bed frame suddenly released and he stood up again, his hooves clattered to the ground before me. I heard him put the folder down and move further into the room.

“The perfect slave in the heart of Fillydelphia. The eternal chain...hehe...The Master will be so again. No-pony escapes it, not even the ass for whatever that ageing mule thinks. There is only one Master.”

To my immense relief, he moved toward the door. Only then he stopped...

“Murky Number Seven...”

Never in my life, had my heart felt so still. Hearing my full name spoken without him even knowing I was there. Or did he? Oh no...*oh no!*

“It won't take long to break you back in. To rend those hopes and crush those dreams till they are but a long remembered *mistake* of a past long dead. The born slave, the servant who knows his place. You were meant to come to me, none of the others...just you. Just you and that lovely broken mind...hehehe...”

The door opened and I dreaded hearing even one step back as he stomped out and left. His hoof treads echoed long as they disappeared down the hallway, leaving me in the dark.

I emerged a couple minutes afterwards, trotting into the small lab to find Protégé actually helping piece

some of the spark batteries together, idly talking to one of the slaves. Yet he saw me and turned away, leaving them to autonomously go back to their job. Trotting toward me, he clearly saw the look on my face, saw the tears. He'd heard what Shackles had said.

I fell forward a little, sitting down awkwardly and leaned against the wall with my hooves covering my face.

It didn't matter that he was a slaver, that he was in the end an opponent to my freedom or whether or not I could call him a friend. Just feeling *anypony* resting a hoof on my shoulder and quietly telling me it'd be okay was enough for me right at that moment.

* * *

Our return wasn't so simple.

The moment we had poked our heads through the door leading back to the main lab, we had dropped back rapidly.

Chainlink Shackles stood at its centre, dominating the proceedings and bellowing orders. He was right on the elevated bath between them on the centre. We'd never get past him!

“Find more materials to block the exits! I will not lose another room to these beasts forcing in! Should they take a room of importance, it will be you retaking it! Get going! NOW!”

Shackles didn't threaten. That was an ultimatum.

Only it confirmed my thoughts. Ponies in this place were attracting whatever lurked in the outer metro to every possible way in. They couldn't possibly keep it much longer if they ran out of supplies. Like they were finding every possible way in that ponies might have overlooked. Now that I cast my eyes up, I could see even air vents had been welded shut with huge iron plates.

“There has to be a way around, Murk. We passed a few other corridors, let's go before we're spotted.”

He was right. Much as my eyes were focussed on my *ex* master (I did like to remind myself of that whenever possible, hee!) we had to get moving. I didn't want to be here if we were spotted, let alone if something broke in...

However, just as I began to step back, my eyes caught somepony amongst those moving back through the labs. There was a group of slaves awaiting instructions on where to go at one side of the large room, mostly sitting or leaning on the wall. Slavers were dividing them up.

An earthy yellow coat with a deep brown mane streaked in red.

Sunny Days!

She was *right there!* I knew she'd been taken here but I'd thought it was the inner metro she'd been left in! Yet here she was, lying against the wall and resting as best she could. Filthy and bearing injuries, she looked weak but I could still remember how she'd multiple times found the strength to *try* and help or get free. Please, Sunny...please have held up down here. Don't be one of them...

A massive blue mare began shouting at them, dragging slaves up to move elsewhere.

“C'mon! Git oop! Getcha movin' now!” Her odd accent, seemingly formed of many origins penetrated the air in sharp whiplike comments before Sunny's group began moving. I saw her slide in between the ponies, staying out of sight and inside the crowd. Smart mare. A few others trotted with her, mutually helping one another.

“Murk, what's wrong? We have to *go!*”

“There one pony more we've got to get, Protégé. An...an old friend...”

He pulled me back from the door and let it close. “We won't get anypony standing around, let's go.”

Yes, he was right. I nodded and we slipped off back into the deeper areas of Ministry Station. We passed by many of the fallen slaves idly chatting while carting supplies around or attempting to break into sealed rooms. Others made a point of *securing* some rooms. The lower we went, the more we found they were having to block it all up.

Eventually, we found ourselves entering less populated areas. An old café near some interior windows that had been stripped of anything useful lay ahead of us. This wasn't getting us anywhere, every direction we'd taken was putting us further *away* from our goal of the slave cells yet no way around presented itself. Hanging around to wait for Shackles to move back in wasn't much better...

Behind me, Protégé stumbled and caught a table with his front hooves to keep himself up, groaning and holding his head briefly. He checked behind him briefly, looking at a bare wall.

That wasn't helping much either...

“Protégé, it's...it's getting to you too isn't it?”

“I'm *fine*, Murk. Let's...let's just keep going. I'm just...hearing things. What they said for Glimmer, I won't fall to it...s-something about her orbs weakened her...come on!”

He pushed on ahead, knocking a few chairs out of the way with more aggressiveness than I'd seen in his movements in a while. Not since he'd grabbed me earlier on today at the thought of the foals being endangered.

“But it got others...”

My words went unanswered, the strained look on his face showing more frustration and anger than anything. He didn't like that it was happening.

Reluctantly, I dropped the issue and followed him to where he looked through those interior windows. Below the café on a lower level about fifteen feet below the window, I could see some open platforms beside metro lines. These ones, however, bore only smashed barricades on their tunnels. Something had broken through before the concrete had been laid down...

“That platform, it runs all the way to the east, the direction we want to go, Murk. Look down there.”

I craned my head and hopped up on a small box to see over the lip better, feeling decidedly dejected from my height. The platform was between four metro lines, studded with smashed benches and ruined signs that bore, presumably, times and departures. After a bit of squinting to see and struggles to read, I noticed they all said “delayed.” How appropriate...

“What was I looking at?”

“The stairwell on the far end.”

There indeed was one. It went up to-

Ah.

No.

Nooooo no no no.

“I don't think this is the best idea...”

“It takes us to the opposite end of Ministry Station, below that main lab area and back into the place we found your friends from the opposite side.”

“B-but...the barricades...those things must be down there! It's open to them!”

Protégé glanced at me, before unlatching the window and pushing it open. Stale air swept in over us both, the stench of decay and dust blowing into the café to mix with the rot of overgrowing stains.

“No mint...” Protégé muttered to himself. “It's only thirty metres or so. If we sprinted...”

“No!” I pleaded with him. “If...if we open it they'll be let in here! Everypony will die!”

“We could rappel down from here.”

“There'll be another way!”

“There isn't.”

“I...I...”

I was quaking so hard that I hadn't even noticed Protégé looked afraid too. He was right...we couldn't risk staying unseen forever and we *had* to get over there. Shackles knew I had these keys, he might even have known it was me! We couldn't delay, if he thought it was me he might go for the cells before we did!

For Glimmer, Murky...for your sis.

“Okay...”

Getting a boost up from Protégé, I sat on the windowsill, attracting a curious glance from Protégé to the way in which I sat on my rump with my legs dangling out. (Why does no-pony get it? It's *comfortable!*) He lifted up after me and held on as I hooked my...uh...hook onto the window and bit hard on the mouthpiece to lock the wire in place. We didn't need to jerk and fall. Breaking a leg until those things found us helpless...eeergh...

“Ready, Murk?”

“N-no...”

“Glad I wasn't the first to say it. Let's go...”

He bit his lip, a strangely meek expression from the stoic slaver. I closed my eyes and released the tension on the wire a bit, dropping us from the window. Gradually, we lowered down, the wire taking both our weights fairly easily.

Tnk!

I stopped immediately, ready to bite to pull us back up. Protégé's revolver flew out, pointing down toward a tunnel where the noise had come from. We simply swung in silence, waiting...waiting...

Nothing.

Whimpering slightly to myself, not in the least from the weight on my saddle tugging at my torso, I lowered us to the ground.

“Th-this might make noise when it comes loose to retract, Protégé...”

“Then get ready to sprint. We can make it...we can make it.”

The repeated line was whispered to himself, something I wasn't meant to hear. Taking a breath, I released the tension. The sound of the saddle whirring and dragging the released hook back in seemed deafening, the *clack* as it jammed even worse.

“Oh no!”

“What happened?”

“I'm stuck!”

My hook had wedged on the window as it slammed shut above us, the rusted joints failing. I was stuck onto it! Like I was chained to a post! My hooves tugged at the wire, biting for it to retract hard enough that light traces of smoke flew off from the airgun mechanism and smelled like burning. I looked to either side at those looming dark tunnels. Things lurked in there...if they heard us...oh Goddesses, no...no...

“Come on, Murk!” Protégé pulled beside me, the wood above cracking.

I didn't want to leave my precious saddle! I'd never get another one, but it'd take me so long to get out of it! If I was caught half way...

Tnk!

I had to fight not to scream, another sound from down one of the tunnels rippled out. I saw Protégé's head snap around and gasp. He suddenly redoubled his efforts, pulling harder until the wood splintered, the hook almost free!

“What is it?”

He gritted his teeth, pulling again and again with me.

“*Protégé, what is it?*”

The hook flew free, dragging the entire rotten window with it. Falling away, the hook almost slashed my face as it sucked in and snapped to my side, the window collapsing with a shattering of glass and wood on the filthy marble floor.

“E.F.S spotted something red, *GO!*”

I needed no telling, we made for the opposite staircase at top speed! My hooves clattered on the flooring, leaping over the piles of scrap and weaving around the benches. Protégé clambered over one to simply go in a straight line. The sound from the falling window echoed around and through every tunnel.

The sound played on my ears, our galloping and the crash reflecting off the walls sounding all too like something else rushing too. I didn't know if it was real!

Fifteen metres!

We passed under the platform board.

Ten metres!

The stench was unbearable! Rotting bodies were near the stairwell, insects scurrying over them when we approached. Such a sharp and sweet scent like...

...mint.

“Protégé, RUN!”

I couldn't help the scream, the pain from my chest and neck was too great but I didn't dare slow down! On all sides I heard sounds, something scything along the ground at high speed, faster than us! Snorts, wails and bellows preceded the greater wash of the nauseating smell that exploded from the tunnels ahead of it! Shrieking like a child trying to reach something they'd been told they couldn't have echoed around us.

Five metres!

We were there!

Protégé galloped up ahead of me onto the stairs. Something crashed behind us, I heard a frantic alarm tone sounding from the tunnel just to our right, clipped and broken. Protégé struggled with the doors, trying to heave the massive valve lock with his body weight. I joined him, crying and not daring to look behind me. Slowly, it ground around, slipping and opening.

“Get in!” We both shouted it, piling through the door together, landing in a heap. His horn flared, pushing the door shut and spinning the lock again on this side. Ten seconds after that, the door was slammed into by something...and then another. A metallic clang and bestial roar like something in terrible pain, cracking its voice.

I scrambled up, getting off Protégé and pulled him to his hooves before we both simply galloped away. There were no words, no 'thank goodness', no 'pause for breath' or joke about never taking the train again.

We simply ran because we were in terror. The haunting moans and metallic scraping choking on its screams and rushing away behind us.

* * *

We didn't stop, we just kept running. Up the stairs, into the Station again, through a shop and down the tunnels that led back to the main area.

Beep!

I didn't cease moving, I could hear it just fine! Please, Sundial, say something to make this place feel more real! Less unsure and beyond sanity!

Beep!

Click.

I heard a frenzied panting, not unlike our own to get away.

"I...I think they didn't see me. By Celestia, those zebras are cautious...I'm only allowed this Pipbuck to do my work with, if they saw me using it to say any of this..."

His voice fell away.

"It's been two weeks now, Sky must be terrified, my family must think I've disappeared like all the other ponies going missing! I want to tell them so bad, but I now know how important this is. There...there's something being done down here that is not natural. Something of Aurora's invention corrupted by the zebras and their weird rituals. I hear them sometimes, chanting in small groups...I'm so scared..."

It felt strangely unreal to hear him sniff and clearly hold back tears. I wanted to just hug the Pipbuck close, as though it would help him somehow. That is, if we weren't sprinting for our life to get away from the sounds smashing the door behind us. No chances were being taken, I'd seen one of them rip down a steel door to get at us!

"That's not all, though. I kept wondering how they got in, that's what Pinkie wanted me to find out more than anything. They have this...this room, across from the main lab. It's closed off to us and they tell me I'm not allowed. That's their secret way into Filly. But I know it doesn't lead anywhere, I've been in the overhead wiring ducts around it! It's just a room to no-where, but somehow it lets them in and out...I've got my suspicions but...I dunno..."

"Murk, keep up!"

"I...I'm trying! I'm tired...I can hear ponies nearby..."

I could, even over Sundial's terrified message, I heard the stomping of hooves, of many hooves at the same time. The sound was unclear in these tunnels though, echoing in ways that sound shouldn't...

Wait...that room he mentioned, that must have been the one Glimmer went into! Just off the main lab?

"That's the least of my worries. Those refugees that came in? Some are put to work...they are interrogated for skills. B-but some, they just never seem to be seen around at all. I saw some being taken to that weird prison place, they were saying something about "Orb Duty" or something. Aurora's all about memory orbs, but what could they want from refugees' memories? I...I thought it was just to teach them spells from those, uh, spell orb things but I've seen earth ponies and pegasuses, I...I mean pegasi going in too. I don't know what's going on and I'm a part of it now, two weeks down here and...and..."

He stammered.

"Aurora Star spoke to me...she told me quietly, away from the zebras, that this is for Equestria's benefit when the time comes. I...I don't know for sure, but she sounded worried, like she was even more scared than I was. Look, I...I've got to go, they need me to hook up another of those memory devices for non-unicorns. I feel like I've got all the pieces of the puzzle but no idea on how to solve it...nor what's behind that big door that all this goes toward. Um...goodbye. I...um...I realised I hadn't ever told you how I got my cutie mark, hehe...silly right? M-maybe when I get out..."

Click.

All the pieces of the puzzle but no solution, didn't I know the feeling. Memory orbs, spell orbs, memory machines, missing refugees, Aurora acting stranger than ever, hidden inventions and some secret in a mountain...it *all* had to fit together somehow!

For the betterment of Equestria...in the company of zebras that wanted to destroy it.

Just...how?

“This...this way! It has to right back up to-argh!”

Protégé had run ahead of me, clearly following some sort of tracker on his eyepiece to get back to my friends. Only as he galloped past a corner, I saw him collide into somepony coming the other way. Yelping, I fell back and hid behind a polished bin for a few seconds. It wasn't cowardice, honest! I...I was just aiming to maybe ambush them if they weren't nice!

Y-yeah...that's all it was...

Unfortunately, it wasn't somepony nice.

Protégé fell off to the side as half a dozen ponies crashed down around him, their chains pulling one another off their hooves from the impact. Within it I saw a huge blue shape rear up.

“What in the fakka?!” The mare spun her head furiously, spotting Protégé instantly. “Come 'ere and see!”

She stormed forward, throwing slaves to either side. They shrunk back, cowering...they clearly hadn't fallen yet to whatever happened here. I saw her pull a full chain from her back and start dangling it. Protégé reached for his revolver, but I saw the chain flash and heard him cry out in pain when it scythed over the hooves protecting his face.

“A fuckin' gun! I oughta...I oughta...wait wait...”

She hoofed him out of the crowd, forcing his hood down.

“Fuckin' you?! Spah! You spahin'!”

Oh flustering heck...she'd recognised him!

Protégé rolled away, trying to come to his hooves, looking for his dropped revolver when his magic had burst from the strike. The chain flew down to one side of him, then the other. The mare swung her head, holding it in her mouth and arced it right around, catching his hooves in it. Too injured and slow to dodge, he was pulled from his hooves and dumped down.

I couldn't stand by and watch this!

Steeling myself (by which I mean, repeating 'Oh my goodness...' multiple times very fast on every breath) I galloped forward, flicking out my saddle's mouthpiece and fired it onto the ceiling. Hopping off my hooves, letting it tug me in, it whisked me up to land on her back. I felt muscles coil as she flailed, screaming blue murder in the echoing tunnels loud enough that my eyes watered at the stinging pain in my ears. I held onto her mane, being thrown back and forth. If only I had my old metal ruler I could have done some damage! What could I do?

What I always did, fight dirty. So I grabbed her neck and bit down on her ear *hard*.

“**Aaaargh!**” Her voice roared as she reared up and dropped the chain from her screaming mouth. “Lil' bitin' midge! Fuck ya!”

We had to end this quickly! Please, Protégé, do something! If...if she alerted the others!

She span, hurling me so hard that I came flying off her and smacked into the wall. My chest heaved with pain, making me choke as the iron tinged fluid burst into my throat. Sliding down, I coughed and held my bandages, feeling the swollen wound below pulsate around where Wildcard had...yeah...

Through blurry eyes, I saw Protégé launch back on her. We...urgh...I was so dizzy I could barely think...

He ducked one hoof, stamping on the side of one knee before diving away again. I could see him looking for his revolver, using his magic to keep that chain away from her! I saw him charge up, try to spin and buck for her neck but the mare twisted away, launching onto him with both front hooves!

She threw him away, overpowering the smaller unicorn like he wasn't even there. Her hoof slapped him right across the face and the second tossed him right into me! I howled out, falling to the side, blacking out

for a few seconds in pain.

The world swam back into view, Protégé was stunned himself, holding his head as he lay atop me. I could hear the huge blue mare advancing on us and the sound of a chain being picked up.

“Little spahs in mah place!” Her rasping mouth spat to the side. “Gonna take ya to Master and he'll deal, y'right!”

Her slaves cowered back behind her, their chains rustling as she advanced on us! I could see Protégé's revolver lying nearby, but the pain was so much...I...I couldn't push that far! Not with his weight on me.

“Protégé!”

“H-huh...?”

I worried if she had concussed him, he just stared with empty eyes.

“Your gun! It's right there!” I hissed, trying not to let her hear.

“I...not mine...Master owns all...I...”

I gasped at the words, seeing that faraway look in his eyes. No...no...not now!

“Protégé, fight it back! You're confused! Please! Your gun's right there! Arrrgh!”

I'd tried to force myself toward it, but my chest was in dire pain. I hoped it hadn't reopened the wound, there was no-pony to help me down here!

“Right, c'mere!” The mare stomped over, the chain coming toward us!

I could only look up, seeing those glinting eyes awaiting her revenge and adding a couple more to her roster. I...I could do nothing! Just watch, every second taking a minute as that chain slowly descended, wanting to hook around my neck and drag me in all over again.

Slowly, in just as excruciating slow motion, I saw the form rise up behind her. That red streaked brown mane over an earthy yellow coat. I saw her bared teeth and sheer determination in those eyes. Sunny Days rose up from behind the slaver, launching onto her back with her own chained hooves wrapping forward around the slavers neck.

The moment Sunny had a grip, she pulled *hard* and crossed her hooves, wrapping her hind legs around the massive slaver's thick neck. I lay open mouthed in wonder. Of course, Sunny had been with this slaver last we saw her!

I began to hear properly again as Sunny's dire cry of rage struck past the slaver's roar of anger. The blue mare fell back, staggering as her windpipe was crushed, throwing herself against walls to try and loosen the mare upon her back! Yet Sunny held on tight, a death grip with mad eyes, *weeks* of rage and built up frustration exploding forth on the slave that had held her, now given an excuse to unleash!

“Remember when you choked me, *bitch*? How d'you like it?!”

The slaver gurgled, eyes turning from rage to panic when her mouth began to fail and the air ran out.

“Going to watch you black out just like that slaver who tried to have his way with me! You wonder where your little crony went, eh? *You're getting the same!*”

She tumbled to the side, trying to slam Sunny off the floor, but even under the crushing impact, she held firm, digging in her rear hooves and *pulling* so hard the chains actually began to break the skin of the slaver! They writhed on the floor, screaming and gasping. Even below the injuries that covered her body, I saw Sunny was not weak, those muscles were still strong as ever!

The slaver's hooves began to twitch and waggle more than kick, her movements slowing. With a gruesomely drawn out time...she slowly died before my eyes in a horrible and panicked fashion, twitching and choking even after her eyes had rolled back into her head.

Then there was silence.

The slaves didn't seem to know what to do. Most of them cowered from us and stayed safe near the wall, awaiting another master to come get them. A few came up behind Sunny, asking if she was okay, no doubt companions she had survived with. They all looked stronger than the others, more alive in their eyes.

But my eyes weren't for them, I could only look at my saviour here. Sunny Days stood shakily, exhausted and still venting some anger with little bucks to ensure the slaver was dead.

“Been waiting a long time to do that...always told myself I was saving it for when I knew I was going to die anyway.”

She spat on the corpse, before finally turning back to me. I managed to get myself up, painful and limping but still better than lying before her.

“S-Sunny...I...I'm so glad I...I mean I'm sorry and...or I came to, you can...”

I didn't even know where to start. There were too many things. I held myself against the wall, taking deep breathes just as she was and instead settled on something easier.

“Thank you.”

“Yer welcome, lil' Murk.” She managed a grin through split and dry lips. “Just surprised to see you here, I never knew if you survived that hole I dropped you into. Figured you'd rather that than letting big nasty catch you.”

That little grin. Oooh that grin. Such a relief! I'd witnessed her hurt, afraid and being dragged into the worst of Fillydelphia but here she was still managing to smile. Very quickly, I realised what the bright sunny face on her flanks really meant. No doubt that attitude had kept her alive.

There were so many questions I had for her, so many things to tell her.

Yet with the groan behind us, I knew they would have to wait. We both turned, finding Protégé sitting up, his back against the cold tiled walls and looking around as tough absolutely unsure of where he was. Slowly, I advanced and held out a hoof.

“P...Protégé?”

His eyes snapped around to me, breathing hard and looking almost afraid of me.

“Where is he...?” His voice was weak, higher pitched than normal, like it was about to break with emotion.

I bit my lip, hearing Sunny and a couple of her friends trot up behind. I waved them back, he needed room.

“Protégé it's...” I couldn't believe I had to say this. “It's okay...it's just me! Um...Murky!”

“My...my Master, he's...he's down here, he'll be looking I...I should get back to work and...”

I shifted forward again, placing a hoof on each shoulder.

“C-calm down!”

There was advice I never thought I'd be the one giving.

“Look at us, you were just hit on the head, b-breathe or...um...”

Sunny knelt beside me. “Listen to me,” She began, “Just hear our voices, it's all right. You're fine. Breathe slowly and calmly. In...”

I saw him follow her instructions, breathing in deeply.

“...out...”

A slow exhale.

She repeated it a few times. I saw the colour returning to his face, his eyes becoming sharper, looking around. He made a sharp twitch, his hoof almost pushing us away.

“Space! Please! I just need a little...”

I gave him it, the unicorn trotting off to get his revolver and reasserting his eyepiece upon his head. The moment it was back on, I heard him sigh almost in relief.

“Protégé, you were saying-”

“I wasn't saying anything. A...a concussion.” He snapped back over his shoulder at me, not even looking fully round. “I just hit my head.”

“We can't ignore this, Protégé, you're-”

“*Fine!*” He made to stomp a hoof, before seemingly thinking better. “I'm...fine. Nothing's wrong. Just...just hit my head and...l-let's go.”

He began trotting ahead, leaving me with Sunny and the rest of the slaves. I looked to her.

“We have friends, we're getting them out of their cells, we may have a way out!”

Sunny nodded, not taking her eyes off Protégé. “All right, I'll help you. Come on, I'll explain on the way, I'm sure you have questions.”

She turned to her friends, explaining for them to stick with the group, to hide the body and get back to their cells before it was found. The cover story was that Protégé and I had killed her, given we weren't meant to be here anyway. I hoped it'd hold.

Then we took off, just Sunny and I to follow Protégé as he waited up ahead. Watching him trotting, I saw him constantly looking around, sometimes stopping to hold a hoof to his face. He would seem to breath deeply before trotting on, his trot length shorter than his usual confident stride and looking somewhat more meek than ever.

* * *

“This place, it does things to ponies.”

Sunny moved beside me as we made our way through the lower tunnels of the metro, quickly finding it to be something of a maze of either preexisting metro staff rooms and passenger routes; or newly cut tunnels put in by the zebras hundreds of years ago filled with roughly improvised rooms. Most bore some slaves in equal hypnotic like motions.

The tunnel itself was held up by recurring archways, each bearing carved stone of the Ministry symbols, gleaming with gemlights. Aside from our whispering and the background hush of slaves, everything was silent. I half expected Shackles to appear any minute...this is when he would...

“I've seen them, my friend Glimmer, she's...”

“Fallen?” Sunny's face sunk a little. “I'm sorry, Murk...”

“Wh-what does it?”

She took a long breath, holding her head up. “We don't know. But there's something deep in here, behind doors we cannot get through. No explosive, tool or hack seems to work that we know of, granted that Shackles can't exactly get his hooves on advanced cutting equipment anyway.”

Even I knew the *really* advanced Stable cutting equipment was all categorised and held under very close scrutiny. It was after all one of Fillydelphia's most prized trades.

“I've been near that door before, Murk. Huge, engraved with some sort of symbol. There's...there's something pulsing in there. Something that does all this, I just know it.”

“My friend told me that it makes ponies like this...”

Sunny looked grim for a second.

“It does...I've been down here for some time now. I've seen the patterns. The symptoms, the dreams and all the strange things. The ambience in here is like it's out of the past, Murk. I sometimes hear ponies

talking around the corner who aren't there. They talk about the war. You'll see somepony in the corner of your eye at the end of the corridor...but when you turn they're gone.”

She shivered.

“It goes for those who are vulnerable, plays on their mind and hurts them...making them into automatons. My friends and I...we...we stuck together. Kept ourselves going, stole things from the slavers to survive and shared between us all. They never caught us, no matter how much Shackles wants his 'little thief.' He probably thinks I stole those keys you have. We've lost some along the way, there's maybe only half of us left now.”

With a glance up, she looked across those working at a table and making an eerie similar laugh that stopped at the same time.

“It goes for slaves because we're hurt, Murk. We're suffering and being told to only listen and never speak. To do this and follow orders. We hear things...things to make you want to do jobs. Eventually you just...fall. Broken slaves are the worst, the ones who see nothing other than master and slave...”

I felt my lip quiver, my eyes turning to Protégé striding ahead of it now, determined as though driving himself forward by anger.

Glimmer though...it must have been her memory orb addiction that did it. Made her vulnerable, open to its indoc...in...indocorporation! That was the word!

“Sunny...I'm hurt...Protégé's falling to it and...and my friends are locked up, I need your help...”

“I already said I would, Murk.”

She smiled down to me. I couldn't help but ask.

“Before, I'm...I'm sorry I brought you here and...what you went through. I heard you were sent to the Stable, I saw you in the Ministry! I'm sorry I got you sent here...”

I felt her hoof pat my shoulders.

“It's...all right, Murk. You didn't mean for this. I'm still here...” She took a deep breath. “They wanted me broken, so I gave them what they wanted. Oh they heard me beg, plead and say 'Yes, Master' so many times...but every time I let it build inside, telling myself, 'this is just for now.' When the time came, I knew I wanted to snap out of it. If I'd rebelled all day, they'd have killed me by now...”

Simple, practical survival. I guess a hardened wastelander like herself really knew how to do.

“We are here.” Protégé announced ahead of us, speaking bluntly. Ahead of him, I could hear the main lab still, Shackles voice rising above the rest and making me falter back.

“The portal room will be stripped by the end of the week, Run About! Your excuses are false!”

I heard the slaver squeak his affirmation back, before running off. Poking my head out, I could see him still standing there, watching them all. Seeing him suddenly turn, I pulled back drastically.

That had been too fast. Did he know? What if he knew? *What if he was just waiting?!*

Thankfully, Sunny had no such requirement. She trotted out as though simply going to the cells. With a brief glance I heard her whisper.

“Go!”

We moved out, that one heartstopping moment of running across a corridor in clear view behind him and dive into the cell room. I didn't stop, almost tripping over as the pain from my bandages around me flared up and drove me to hustled limping near the cell, pulling the keys out. Protégé hung near the door, keeping a wary eye out with his E.F.S.

“Murk!” Coral galloped across, seeing me struggling with the keys in my shaking hooves. “Good job, my dear. Well *done*.”

It took a minute of hunting, but I finally found the right one and threw the door open, falling into her waiting hooves. Brimstone surged to his hooves bending the cage door further open on its rusting hinges and cracked his neck out, making the scar tissue up one side of his neck warp in horrid ways.

“Glimmer.” He spoke simply, as though there was no other possible course of action.

I couldn't disagree, helping Coral to her weakened hooves, she limped out of the cell where Sunny quickly took over from me in aiding her along.

“She...she went into that big door, Brim!” I moved across to him, the big pony's eyes focussed on the door out of here. “Sunny, is...is there any way to turn people back from it?”

Sunny cast a little glance to Protégé, before shaking her head. “I'm sorry, Murk. There ins't-”

“There *has* to be!”

I'd forgotten the hollow feeling in my rush to stay alive and hunt for the keys, I didn't need reminding now that she was nothing but a shell! I *refused* to believe it!

“Maybe...maybe if she saw me and-”

“Murk!” Sunny cut me off. “I'm so sorry but...I've had friends who almost died for one another in here in my few weeks, just like you I'd imagine. We could never get through to them, there was no way to make them see! They just...keep working...”

“Lost or not, she isn't staying here.” Brimstone began moving toward the door, leaving me standing between them all.

“*She isn't lost!*”

I was whining, I knew, but I didn't want to believe it! Glimmerlight couldn't be just gone like that! She was...she was *her*...always the one to make a joke...to...to...

No, I'd have to try! I had to! She was in there, I knew it!

Sunny helped Coral toward the door where Brimstone was peeking out.

“The slaving fuck's gone. We can get in.”

Protégé glanced behind us, seeing the other slaves still in their cages. They lay on their sides or padded uselessly at the walls. None of them seemed sane...none of them quite even noticed us.

“Should we not...help them?”

“They are lost, slaver.” Brimstone didn't even look back. “They wouldn't follow us and we can't carry them all.”

That was that, it seemed. No-one wanted to dare suggest we take time away from getting Glimmer and getting out in front of him right now. I could hear that intensity below his words, just waiting for a chance to explode forth. Protégé bowed his head down, still looking breathless and weak, dropping the subject immediately.

Then we moved.

We didn't go like a swift group of experts. Most of us were limping and all of us were on ebbing energy held up only by adrenaline now. The voices in the background of this place were beginning to filter in, unintelligible and distant. This wouldn't help us at all here...we had to get out *soon*.

The huge door lay before us and I held the elaborate key in my hand. A little shaped card that rested in my hooves.

A door to nothing...yet a way out.

Were it not for Unity and the foals still being out there I might have been excited, but this was not the time for thinking on escape. This was the time for saving my sister!

Hoofing the card forward, I shoved it into the slot and heard a series of clicking sounds. They gave way to a hiss of gas and clanking metal struts inside the thick metal. Gradually, slowly, shaking the material as it went, the door began to slide apart. Intricate metal plates swept away from one another and the emblems rolled to the side...revealing the inner room's contents.

I had been used to my expectations being let down...not so this time.

It opened to a room lit by humming lights attached to a generator in the corner. Three banks of terminals lined each side of the large chamber and I could already sense the hum of throbbing power within.

Yet at the back, as the doors parted, there lay the way the zebras had entered and exited Fillydelphia so easily. Their pathway in.

Beneath a huge shard of a purple gemstone, surrounded by a cage of shining metal and flickering with bands of light that sparkled and gleamed...there lay a platform. Even I in all my illiterate lack of any education could tell what this was just by putting together the knowledge I had and even seeing it.

A portal...they'd used a *portal* to get into Fillydelphia!

Suddenly, the scale of what the zebras had been capable of was far beyond what I had ever thought. My companions clearly thought the same as the thought ran between each of us at once. I knew it did, who *wouldn't* think it?

'Did it still work?'

Ahead of us, a pink mane looked up from working below the gantry of the portal's platform and turned to show a rictus grin below lifeless eyes.

"Oh, hello! Do you have the parts I need? I could use them very soon, this machine won't work like it used to any more but we could still use it to power some other rooms. Wouldn't that be nice? It would be bright."

"Yes!" Another slave chimed in. "It would. So much easier to see!"

"Oh yes." Glimmer replied to her. "Then it would be comfortable to stay here."

"I'd like that."

"Me too."

"Haha."

I was standing in front of our group, the first into the room. I knew how many things should have been racing through my mind. All the theories, the possibilities we'd just unearthed in this room! Wishes and dreams should have sparked me to think.

Yet as I felt my world descend to nothing but myself and this dead mask of my dearest friend...I honestly didn't even give it thought. Even when we had argued, I had never felt like this. So helpless, so at a loss to comprehend my own love of a friendship that was now at threat, if not already gone.

Those behind me said nothing. They simply watched me trot forward.

"Glimmer..."

"Can you pass me that spanner? Thank you."

She didn't even look up, simply ducking her head back in to tighten something.

"Glimmerlight! *Sis!*" I felt my words go into a higher pitch, fears of being caught fell away, I just needed time...time to get through to her. Please...

I cantered up to her, shaking her shoulder. Those eyes looked up at me. No, they looked past me, barely even recognising my presence.

"Oh, hello there. How are you?"

“Glimmer, it's me! It's...it's Murky! Y...your lil'bro!”

She simply sat and stared, wordless, then she laughed. A dry and humourless expression.

“It's nice here, isn't it? Do you like it? I've got a lot of work to do, but maybe I can see you-”

“*Glimmer, it's me!*” I grabbed her shoulders, leaning closer. I could feel my eyes becoming damp, my body shaking as the fear grew. I shook her, I actually shook her as I tried to get her to just focus on *me!*

“R-remember? We were going to escape together! How we've fought and...and saved each other? You taught me so much!”

The thing that I was shaking merely looked confused, even a little scared. It didn't know what was going on. It tried to smile.

“Do you need a drink? You seem rather tired, perhaps-”

“*IT'S ME! PLEASE!*” I screamed into her face, the tears erupting forth across my cheeks. “We've done so many things! Why don't you recognise me?! Glimmer, you're in there! I...I know it! Wake up, h-hear me! Please, Glimmer, *please!* I need you!”

I had to wipe my face with a hoof, my words got caught up in a massive quaking sob.

“I don't want to lose you, Glimmer so...so if you can even hear a bit of me, fight it! *Fight it and come back! I know you can! I KNOW YOU CAN!*”

Her eyes just stared. Her mouth formed a sudden 'oh' look.

“Y-yes! That's it! See *me!* Remember how you made me all embarrassed? How...how you'd joke about b-bucks or something? Or...or how you'd try and make me giggle even when I was sad because you know I had to be happier?”

She just blinked, seemingly focussed on me, confused and looking more than a little 'off.' The world was just me and her! I could do this! I had to!

“Every time I was at my lowest you came back to me, Glimmer! I...I want to help you! We'll get by this, we *always* get by things! You and me, sis! You and me! R-remember how you told me that when we got out you'd show me places and we'd travel? How we dreamed together? How...how you'd laugh with my drawings? So...”

I spluttered, tears dripped to the grind, my hooves rested on her chest.

“SO COME BACK TO ME! I KNOW YOU CAN!”

I didn't dare look up.

I didn't once dare even consider any other possibility.

Then finally...I heard her speak.

“You...”

She took a breath.

“You want to help? That would be nice if you could.”

'Glimmer' smiled wider, her eyes not even looking right me any more. Crushed...I fell back.

I just...

No...

G-Glimmer...if only I'd been here I...I could have stopped you using those orbs and...

No...

I fell to my haunches, hanging my head, my hooves dropping off her. Behind me, I heard the others shifting uncomfortably. Brimstone shifted suddenly, his heavier tread moving closer.

“We don't have time. We have to go now. Sunny, was that your name? Is there any other way out of here?”

Protégé's voice kicked up, quiet and thin. “We came in through the asylum, but I doubt the main doors are accessible any more.

“There's a way out through the asylum? You came in through its reception right?” Sunny responded to him. Protégé must have nodded, I didn't hear him respond. “There's one other way, brings you onto the upper levels. I can take you to it.”

“Fine. Sunny, get Murk and take him ahead to where-ever this is, we'll follow behind and I'll carry Glim out. We have to leave now, we have no time for this.”

I was just sitting in a little heap, crying like I was that pathetic slave all over again. My mane hung over my face, hiding that lost face before me. She just moved to work, talking idly about the temperature with the other workers who had never even ceased once. She...she *ignored* me...

I felt Sunny's hooves around me. “Come on, Murk. We have to go, you have to-”

“NO!” I screamed, throwing my hooves around. I didn't care for the pain as I tried to throw her off me.

“Murk, I'm sorry, she's-”

“*No she isn't!*” I fought her pulling me like some foal not wanting to leave somewhere. “*She's my friend! I can...I can!*”

Slowly, I felt myself being pulled further from her. Like I was being dragged from her, like a trigger in my mind it went off. Too many times, I'd always been torn away from ponies I loved! I thrashed, squealing and kicking her off me before galloping back and throwing myself onto Glimmerlight, my hooves crushed around her and I buried my face to her chest.

“She can come back! She can! *They might have something down here! I can fix this! I...I can...I...*”

It all came out, even as I heard her ask if I needed somepony to help me find something, blankly and insultingly not like my *friend* it all just came out in one line, screamed through tears and pain.

“*I just want my **sister** back!*”

None of them dared even touch me in that moment, as I did nothing but wail into her chest, not even letting her move away to work despite all the dead words she spoke and asked above. They hurt more than any wound, harsher than even her telling me not to call her 'sister' long ago. That was still *her*.

Now I'd lost her...

The closest I'd ever come to seeing her truly again would be if I somehow found a way to watch memory orbs...to see the one of my birthday. The night she'd shown me who I truly could be. Her greatest gift to leave behind...one of us truly happy and being ourselves togeth-

I almost hyperventilated, my eyes springing open. I let go, digging through my saddlebag. She couldn't hear me telling her who she was. But there was one last chance, one last hope!

She had become this from being vulnerable, losing her memories that left her open to this place telling her who she was. I could fight fire with fire! Memories of a cruel past with memories of a glorious present! My friends behind were getting anxious but I didn't even listen to them! Protégé even pulled at my arm but I swept him away as I pulled out the bright glowing light-green orb that Glimmerlight had given to me!

“H-here! Glimmer, can you hold this for me please?”

“Oh, of course! I do like to be of help to other ponies. Don't you?”

Her magic caught the orb...and I immediately pushed it through the air to her horn forcefully, not even knowing why I put my own forehead to it as well, wishing and praying for *anything* to help her.

I heard her gasp...and then the world fell away.

oooOOOooo

I don't know why it was different. I knew memory orbs were supposed to take as long as their original length and this was a very long one. Hours long, a whole evening. It was a stupid idea, it would trap me and Glimmer within it until we were caught and weigh down our friends. But frankly, I *wasn't* thinking. Nothing mattered to me except finding some way to help her.

Maybe it was something she did, I never asked her. Maybe something deep down...but the orb passed so much faster. Whirling into my own memories and *showing* her from my tiny perspective what it was like to have a big sister look down at you and smile like there was nothing wrong in the world to worry about.

It all flickered past, like I was blinking again and again and seeing something different every time. From trotting out across Fillydelphia toward the Roamer's inner-wall extension and seeing her bouncing before me, to seeing them all sat around that table with a ridiculous set up of balloons and little hats. From us laughing at Brim sitting with that silly get up and looking like he just wanted to be somewhere else all the way to her cuddling me and setting a mug of alcohol before me. She laughed, I laughed back...whizzing shots of faces and jokes kept flying past. I floated between them, a limbo of my own life.

I saw her getting very quickly drunk! How she grinned and hugged a lot, how she teased and flirted shamelessly with those around her. I saw my gifts from her, she must have seen the little engraving she had done on my Pipbuck! We shared stories, I laughed because of how she gave me confidence. Please, Glimmer...see how you changed me. How you made me better.

That iconic image to me...of me and my sister dancing upon a table, like there wasn't a care in the world and we were free. Ponies cheering and stamping around us as music blared and gave *life* to a place that so often took it. The sights of us stumbling and singing at the top of our lungs even while griffins and slavers wandered past with their weapons and whips.

No you didn't make me better...you made me the pony I *am*. You saw it the moment you met me, you saw what so few other ponies had. You didn't see a slave, you saw a little pony who wanted to be cheeky and funny! You saw one who wanted to enjoy life with friends, not one who ran away and cried.

You saw me for who I was and you did everything in your power to make me realise it.

Please, Glimmer...*see*...see and remember what you did for me! Who you are! This is you, my big sister best friend forever!

Forever doesn't end now! We're going to get out! We've found something that could help, the door to the outside! We're going to escape and travel the wastes! You're going to show me Tenpony Tower and we'll go hunt my mother to free her! We can even stay together, safe and have fun for the rest of our lives, the siblings who chose each other as brother and sister!

Remember me, Glimmer! Remember that little buck who cuddled up to you after you gave him the best birthday ever and let that show you who you are...

...because he's never going to forget you. Not ever...

Please...

oooOOOooo

I was lying down when I awoke. Cold tile below my body cast a cutting chill through me and reminded me all too harshly of where I still was. To go from being in a warm memory of happier times to being stuck in the outer metro, within a labyrinth of nightmares and unseen threats was not easy. I simply curled up tight to the pony across from me and wanted to go back there again.

“Easy, Murky...don't worry...”

My ears perked up as I heard that form speak and feel it wrap thin hooves around me. With a gasp, I opened my eyes and hoped beyond measure...

There was that smile, gently looking back to me. Please...was it truly her?

“S-sis...?” The words felt so quiet...so hard to say. “Please...tell me it's you...”

There was nothing but her and I. No sound, nothing but this close little moment. Gradually, to the joy of my heart, I saw her smile grow far past what it had been locked into. I saw eyes gleam and spring to life and her face light up like how the sunrise did in my dreams of seeing it for real!

“You better believe it! You always did wake up after me from orbs.”

She grabbed me, holding me tight to her chest with my head over her shoulder.

“I knew my lil'bro wouldn't give up on me, Murky! I could see you the whole time, it's like being trapped in a body you can't control! I was screaming, crying that I couldn't just reach out and grab you! To be trapped in the cage of my own flesh for the rest of my life, it scared me so much...thank you, Murky. *Thank you.*”

She was shivering, so much so I worried that she might be in some way truly hurt and not herself. What if she wasn't quite the Glimmer I knew once the adrenaline wore down?

She got up, pulling me to my hooves.

“Now...come on, let's get to the others and get out of this place. I've been two days working beside the *second* best mare flank you've ever seen in Fillydelphia and not even able to have a little date with rosie hooves to let it out! By all the mad gods of the wasteland I am in dire need of a drink! All they had was lukewarm water!”

Scratch that...she was fine. At least, enough to get by here. We'd need to have a talk later, work it all out. Yet for now, this was all I needed to hear. I laughed, I actually laughed and dared to let my heart raise again.

“So who's is *first*? Leafshine?”

“Pfft, who do you *think*?”

I wanted to think of all the other mares I could just to name or mention. I wanted to spend time joking, but this wasn't the place.

“Really...thank you.”

Glimmer shifted closer to ruffle my mane again, before almost falling against me. A hazy look came over her eyes, a dizziness as I sensed another wave of unsettling ambience pass through the area.

“My head's aching worse than after my eighteenth birthday...feeling weak...”

“We need to get you out of here.”

We both turned to where-ever we were...it wasn't the portal chamber. Brimstone and the others had carried us elsewhere and now clustered near the door. Only Brimstone remained by us, standing watchful during our recovery. He hadn't said anything, but I saw his nod to Glimmer. I knew the big guy enough by now to tell when he was genuinely relieved.

Coral lay against a barrel in the corner of the dark room, getting her breath back. Sunny and Protégé were keeping watch outside. I saw Sunny looking over almost in disbelief.

“You actually did it, Murk...I...I didn't even know-”

“Memory magic did this.” Glimmerlight cut in, trotting forward a little unsteadily. “I can feel it in the air, I *know* memory magic well enough to recognise something that a master of it made. Whatever happened to cause this...this effect in the area, it had its origins in memory magic. It attacks the subconscious, I think...it's the same thing from a memory orb, just less directed and...more widespread.”

That sure made sense. Even waking now, I could still sense that great well of power surging through the facility every few seconds. The same feeling that had, down in the lab almost knocked me clean from my hooves with disorientation being so close to its source.

All the same, I could hear its whispers and flowing air going through my mind, like I could always

remember it before it even said anything...

At the door, I saw Protégé groan, looking behind him sharply, most of the others shook their heads harshly to clear it.

"I don't know what caused it," Glimmerlight continued, "but the things they're doing here, I got a good look at them while they had me working. Even if I couldn't control my own willpower, I still *learned*. That portal, it's inactive. It'll never work the way it ever did again. There was a schematic or something I must have skimmed...it was all a blur..."

Brimstone lay a hoof carefully on her shoulder.

"*Think*, Glim. That room could be our way out of Fillydelphia."

"I know! It's broken for sure. Used to be able to take ponies and whoever else in and out every few minutes! But..."

Everyone looked up, that one word standing out.

"But...maybe it could do one more, *if* this place were fully running again and *if* somepony did a little jury rigging and *if* you had a good half an hour to work on it! That's without even considering that you have to know the coordinates of where to go to and none were ever left behind let alone on what kind of input it requires, presumably they did it all from...heh...memory. Appropriate, I know."

She shook her head slowly.

"It won't work for us...simple answer is we know as much about operating it as Brim knows about Tenpony manners. Even if we did, it's unpowered. Not been active in centuries since the zebras probably. It isn't our way out...but this place has other routes to the outer metro we could use to get outside the walls and-"

"As much as I am willing to listen to you all talk of escape from my Master within the very same room as me, I cannot help but feel you would be better served talking of all this *outside* Ministry Station and the outer metro line?"

Protégé moved back into the room. I couldn't help but agree, I had questions and all sorts of things to say to Glimmer and the others but we had to go. We wouldn't stay undiscovered for-

"*It must have been that big bloody raider!* Choked her right out and then he disappears with his own cell mates?"

I almost yelped, quickly shouting to the others for silence and pulling the door to this dark store room closed. Multiple ponies went running by us, the sound of slides being pulled and magazines loaded all too clear to me.

"Where are we?"

Sunny slid up beside me, poking out after them. "Not far from the portal room, about two hundred metres from the nearest way to the asylum. I can lead you all there...if you're that damned insane as to go out there again!"

"We have no real choice." Coral Eve finally stood up and limped over. "Shackles' den is impassable and there is no other way out of Ministry Station."

"Very well..."

I gulped hard, sharing a look at Protégé. I could see the same shiver in his body as I felt in mine. The others hadn't been in there...they didn't know...

We waited another minute, with me in front beside Sunny to listen for anypony coming...then we made a break for it. Our store room emerged into the same primary chamber of the Station, those immense pillars and arches above us with dozens of other slaves moving around. Sticking to the sides, we moved only when most of the slavers seemed distracted and used the massive columns for cover, them being so big even Brimstone could take a few seconds behind one before moving.

Sunny was amazing. A born survivor, she took to sneaking alongside me up front like a radroach to a sewer and helped guide the others up in the right times using my observations as her decision maker. We made a good team, really! Before long, we got to the same raised staircase Protégé and I had emerged from originally.

“There's a good chance they'll see us going in, Murk. They've got guards above and likely down there too. Your big friend could take them but the word will go out.”

“Oh...oh dear...”

I peeked out and saw the rifles swinging from above. They were watching the main concourse for *anything* untoward.

“That Warlord cannot hide his bulk so easily, worms! Find him!”

I almost screamed on the spot, falling against Sunny when that booming voice echoed out into the archway hall. Chainlink Shackles surged forth from the opposite door.

“Search the platforms! Get these slaves for the mountain expedition out of here!”

Behind me, I saw every pony with us have the same thought...that they were going to block us. We had to go...and it had to be fast and hard. No sneaking if we wanted to get there before them now.

They wouldn't follow us into the Asylum, would they?

Curiously, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sunny slipping a hood from her rags up over her face. I didn't have time to ask though.

“We need to go, now. Brimstone Blitz?” Sunny looked to him. “Can you lead the way? Down the stairs to the left then on the far end of the platform the door out is there, all sealed.”

“Not for long.” Brimstone snarled and rose fully to his hooves. “Just keep up, don't stop moving!”

Glimmer nodded, so did Coral. The pair of them were supporting one another as we went, one weak physically and the other I imagined still suffering from the ambience in here. I kept seeing her make the same twitches as Protégé. We'd be out soon though...

“GO!”

Brimstone surged forth from the pillars, charging directly for the three slavers blocking the way down to the platforms! We galloped out after him even as Shackles' voice roared for the slavers and any slaves to stop us!

I saw Brim go past the ticket desk, pause for only a second and rip it from its mountings on the tiled floor. With a great heave, the desk flew fifteen feet to crush the slavers guarding the way and tumble down the stairs behind them. He didn't hesitate, rushing right after it and sending one guard barring the way with a baseball bat flying a full ten feet with a high pitched scream. I actually felt sorry.

Two of them ran up on our left. I heard Coral cry out before a thick snap of pressure that sent my mane flying into my eyes blasted out and knocked them into one of the huge pillars with a sickening snap.

Whipping her head to the other side, galloping forward, her horn flared and sparked. I felt the backwash of telekinetic power wash sharply over me as the receptionists desk spun and lifted to flatten a group of guards getting to their hooves in shock. One dodged to the side, Sunny tackling him quickly, stamping a hoof into his groin hard. I heard others run from our path, getting away from Brimstone!

We were clear!

“Down! Down! To the left!”

We hit the stairs, Sunny shouting the reminder to Brimstone from right behind him! I looked behind us and saw perhaps two dozen slavers gunning for us.

Then I saw something else.

Somepony else.

There was a large group of them, chained and waiting for the 'mountain expedition' at Shackles order. They were being marched out. I only had half a second, but what I saw led me to not believe me eyes. Somepony amongst them, being led right at the front...

Unity.

It made me hesitate. I didn't even notice the bullets smashing the enamel tiles on the floor and even whip through Sunny's hooded garb. There she was, staring at the chase going on herself and witnessing the little dirty green pony looking right back to her. I could have sworn I saw her mouth move...my name. They had her chained and taken separately from all the other slaves. Why? Why her more than the others?

“Murk! Come on!”

I didn't even know who it was that grabbed me, but gunfire whizzed above my head as I was pulled down.

Ahead of us, I saw some poor guard come to see what the commotion was and be simply trampled by Brimstone, his snapped neck lying at a sick angle when I passed him. Unity! Unity was up there! She was still in Fillydelphia!

We ran left, making our way through the low curved tunnels to the opposite platform from the one we had come in from. I simply kept thinking of that one sight! Of her! That orange and highlighted mane flowing around her cream body was too unmistakeable...my very first friend in Fillydelphia.

She would be on that mountain. We were going there.

Yes...we could do this.

My mind was snapped back to the present, being huddled ahead of my friends and helped along forced me to put that away for now. We had to get out alive first!

“That door, there! There!”

A huge steel door sat partially ajar before us, slaves working around it not even noticing us as we ran inside and into the dank service corridor. Coral yanked it shut behind us, stopping onto to touch a hoof to her sore and sparking horn with a grimace, she stumbled and was caught by Glimmerlight. Sunny threw a mop through the handles and we kept going, Glimmer supporting her old bitter friend from her exertions.

There were huddles of slaves in here, mostly all working on the ground in their blank ways to try and clean somewhere that would take *years* to truly be clean again. They weren't even paying attention!

They wouldn't catch us now before whatever we had to reach!

Before us, a massive boarded up door had been placed into the wall, bearing the same design as the one out of the asylum's reception. Just how intermingled were these two places? Brimstone began to smash the boards, not even giving thought to what lay beyond.

“Murk!” Protégé shouted to me. “Give me your Pipbuck!”

I didn't even hesitate, tossing it to him while he played with his eyepiece.

“You went through here once, your Pipbuck will have mapped it out, I can lead us with my eyepiece. Listen, all of you!”

They turned to him and I saw the slaver genuinely look taken aback...almost scared that their attention was on him alone. Only Brim kept up work on the door.

“Mu...Murk and I came through here. There is something in this place...something that we do not know and which I'm sure you have all heard at least once in that Station. We must move quickly, but cautiously. If you smell mint...”

“...run.” Sunny finished for him.

“Yes. Do not stop. We have a tram on the bottom floor through a hole that can, I hope, outrun them.”

“You *hope*?” Glimmer almost choked, holding her head a little.

Protégé didn't even respond to her, connecting a wire to his eyepiece from my Pipbuck and hooking it to his clothing.

“Just...keep moving. Don't look back. These things are not natural, they hide from E.F.S.”

The last board fell from the door with an all mighty crash. Then another smash made us aware of slavers outside the door behind us. It buckled in, the mop beginning to splinter.

“Let's go!” Brimstone shouted it loud, pulling the rusted door open. “Close it behind us, lest every slave in here die from a breach...those things *want* this place.”

We were a group of ponies fighting for good, we were rescuers...heroes if somepony wanted to be dramatic even. But that didn't mean every single one of us went without hesitation. The musty smell erupted from inside the darkness ahead and even Brimstone himself clearly took a second to consider before leading the way in. Then Coral...then Protégé and lastly Glimmerlight with a glance to me. I motioned for Sunny to go first.

Then she held up her hoof.

“I'm staying.”

“Wh-what?!” I stood up straighter, ignoring the crack from the mop in the door behind us. Ignoring even Shackles. “But you *can't!*”

Sunny was already removing that same hooded fabric and throwing it through the door.

“My friends are here, Murk. A good dozen of them...why do you think I sent them back to their cell? There's too many to get out through here, how many can fit on a tram? I know the kind he means, they can fit maybe five or six at most. I won't abandon my friends, Murk...”

She stroked my mane a little.

“Just like you didn't.”

“But...but...” I wanted to convince her...don't leave me now!

“Murk, listen...we need each other to get by, I cannot leave them behind, just like you couldn't for yours! We are on a switch shift, every second day we are in the inner metro mines, look for us there when the time for your plan comes. Then...we will join you.”

The doors almost smashed inward entirely behind us. I was shaking so much, I heard my friends hissing from within, afraid of disturbing what was in there. To come on! Why were we waiting?

Sunny simply moved to the huddle of slaves, blending into them to simply be another mare in the crowd cleaning the floor.

“Go Murk...we'll make it. You came this far for your friends.” That smile showed utmost trust. “I know you'll make it happen for all of us. Now go, Murk...hurry!”

I didn't want to. I really didn't want to! Yet I could see she had made her choice. I backed off to the door, shakily sliding under a part of it and trying to concentrate on her to avoid the fear of moving into this place again.

“Sunny?” I squeaked it out.

“Murk?”

“When...” I gulped. “When we get out of here, I'll...I'll get you a new d-doll...to say sorry...”

There was a little half second of silence between us, before she smiled and looked back to her 'work.'

“I'll hold you to it, little guy.”

Behind us, the door burst open, two slavers using a fire extinguisher to break it smashing through and falling as the others surged after them. Behind them all, I caught one glimpse of Shackles snarling toward us before Brimstone slammed our door shut behind us.

He saw *me*. The snarl turned to a *grin*.

“Into the asylum! Get them!”

“But...”

“Move!”

There were the sounds of a scuffle, of orders given and slavers screaming.

“Let us in! LET US IN!”

“This door doesn't open again till I hear that runt squeal for it. Better get moving fast, eh? We wouldn't want these others here to take your jobs if you don't come back now, would we...? Don't think I haven't seen you all taking more than your share from the supply rooms.”

He was locking in the slavers with us! I just...I couldn't believe him! Using their 'ranks' as prizes to let others still outside with him agree to this sort of punishment for their 'crimes' against him! The desperate cries of those trapped in his sudden game turned into a furious effort to get this door open and get *us*. They didn't have Brimstone's strength but already I saw it beginning to jar open.

Turning to my friends, I found us at the back of an old staff lounge. A couple of terminals sat on desks for recreational use, coffee tables surrounded by chairs lay near overturned hot water containers and the entire ceiling had fallen in. I could see right up into the rafters holding the asylum in!

Protégé looked from side to side, his revolver perpetually out even while he studied my Pipbuck like a map and compared it to his E.F.S.

“We're about two hundred and fifty metres from the hole, I think!”

Crash! The door behind us was slammed into again.

“Protégé, hurry up! Which way?!” Glimmerlight was casting fearful glances around.

“It's...it's...”

In the distance, I was sure I heard a crash of metal and glass.

“P-Protégé!”

“To our left, down a couple floors! This way!”

He took off, moving at the gallop. We had to get away from this door before it attracted them all with angry slavers shouting and slamming!

The wrecked doors of the staff lounge moved out to some of the same offices we had passed in our frenzied rush out of here, but I still couldn't piece which way to go.

“Ahead! Ahead!”

Ahead of us, I could have sworn I heard something in the distance.

“No, right!” I hissed out loud, pulling at his sleeve.

We swung about just as the doors in the room we had left burst open. The offices led to an area with reinforced glass surrounding a pathway to a lift shaft. I couldn't help but notice the glass had been warped and ripped apart by something that had, at some point, torn right through it through sheer blunt force. I stepped on huge chunks of it as I scrambled after them. The warm air in here felt thick and choked my stomach, mixing with the fear to leave me short of breath already.

“Where did they go?!”

“Fuck knows, just get them before Shackles locks us in!”

We could hear slavers shifting into the rooms behind us, a lot of them.

“Can we get down the lift shaft?!” Glimmerlight rushed over to take a look at it. “*Shit!*”

I saw after her, it plunged for six floors, way further than I had ever thought for this place! A dark mist crawled and seemed to pulse below before it passed out of sight. There might have even been more floors I simply couldn't see!

“No, no! This way!” Protégé pulled a desk to the side, shifting through an almost hidden blocked door that somepony had tried to blockade once. “Keep quieter...”

He hissed the last line, completely ignoring that he himself had shouted too loud just before. Behind us, the slavers were rushing with a determination I'd never heard from such ponies before! I could almost imagine Shackles and his elite core of slavers forcing them in at gunpoint, their mission to find us before the door was locked again forever.

Protégé led us into a wrecked series of rooms with foul green flooring and surgical tables set near various devices and wires. I *hoped* these were simply for reading brains or something...but the stains of blood didn't give me much hope.

“What kind of asylum *is* this...” Glimmer muttered as she passed around sections of *bone* on the top of one bed.

At the far end, there were several glass doors. Beyond them, I could see railings.

Wait, *railings!* The balconies!

Protégé seemed to realise just as I did and we made a break for them. We were moving too fast to be silent, we didn't have time! The slavers were the *least* of our worries!

“Hey, hey I heard them!”

“This way! HURRY!”

I was breathing hard, ears straining and worrying over every little sound I heard...but then...

Distant...

Simple...

Sharp...

...*beep*.

A wash of cold ran right through me. I felt tears already start to fall. They were coming, they'd heard us all, they'd heard the slavers! *They were coming!*

Beep.

Brimstone ran out to the balcony again, looking around. He span, seeing the huge floors around him with the ranks and ranks of thick sealed containment areas.

Beep!

“Hey what was that?” Behind me, I heard the slavers shout out. “I heard something!”

Beep! Beep! Beep!

“Murky, come on!” Glimmer waved to me, pulling me out to the balcony floors too.

“G-Glimmer...” I fell against her, my stomach hurting so much from the running and looked up at her. “They're here...”

Behind us, I saw two slavers run into the same room.

“They're over there! This way everypony! MOVE!”

Then it came. That horrible, unthinkable *shriek*.

It filled the asylum, reverberating off walls and echoing around corridors. There was a silence.

The slavers and ourselves merely looked at one another. I could see the dread in their eyes as much as I knew they would see it in mine.

Behind the slaver, I heard sudden gunshots. Rapid fire. I heard screams and saw slavers fleeing toward the one in sight. He looked around in shock, running with them. Two ran our way, us their last concern!

“FUCKING MOVE!” Brimstone *shoved* us, getting us galloping around the balcony. “Boy! WHERE?”

Protégé had been staring, not shoved to go, he looked hurriedly at the map. “This way! Stairs!”

I think Glimmer smelt it first, for I saw her face go wide with shock. Then it hit me, a scent. A thick smell flowing into the area. Sweet and tingling in my nostrils, it made me forget even the horrified wails coming from behind us as the slavers spread all throughout the facility, galloping and firing in all directions at shadows.

Then I heard it, something on the floor below us moving at high speed! It was *right below us!* I had to stifle my scream, it was going for the stairs!

“NO! NO, BACK! BACK! PLEASE!” I tugged at them, before I saw Protégé doing the same, it was on his E.F.S! We turned and rushed backward again, sprinting along the balcony and running past two slavers, bone white with fear, running the other way. They just ignored us and ran past!

“This way! This way!” Protégé leapt through a smashed internal window with a cry of pain at his own injuries being strained. We landed in a room filled with memory machines, skeletons strapped into them screamed their silent eternal pain. The smell was getting stronger, the beeping was still going, coming from the areas we had passed. I heard gunshots again, howls and blood thirsting cries punctuating the silence between each crack of a weapon.

Behind us, I heard the one chasing us reach the top of the stairs...the slavers were still in that corridor, they had to be!

“Oh fuck, *what is that?! WHAT IS THAT?!*”

“*Help! HELP!*”

I wailed as the low moan and thick wet throaty noises grew to a keening roar. I heard it rush forward. I heard them shoot. Flesh *ripped*, their voices squealed higher and I heard harsh slavers become foals pleading. One of them cried for his mother. Bone snapped and their wailing mixed with a muffled snarling. We could only run, hearing the two slavers continue to cry out, screaming far longer than any sane pony ever had to hear.

Then ahead of us, I heard the beeping come closer! It was just through the wall! It-

The wall exploded inwards. I saw *something* reach through the plasterboard and try to grab us! I had never heard Coral genuinely cry out in terror before until she was falling back from it! Brimstone got her, up, pushing her onwards! We were by it before I even got to see what it was! A thin hole left behind with something pale rushing away again after failing to get us! The balconies were ahead of us and I felt the fear that they would see us shoot through me. I was just the little pony trying to keep up!

Emerging onto the balcony, the screams were taking over. On all floors, slavers could be heard spread out and being hunted down. I saw one rush a floor up from us on the balcony and fire behind him. He was crying. Below me, I saw a shape whip past between two corridors, just a blur of motion that I couldn't even focus on! *That had been one of them, oh Goddesses save me!* They were down there too! We had to go there!

I tried not to notice that nothing was left other than blood where those two slavers had been on the opposite side. Whatever caught them was gone. I heard it shrieking back through the corridor we'd emerged from, the one with the surgical beds!

“Up ahead! The other stairs!” Protégé pointed, before crying out and opening fire. Brimstone *threw* Glimmer behind him and took up a readiness to fight. Ahead of us, the slaver begged from the ground, hit in the knee by Protégé's bullet.

“Please! *Please!*”

I saw the look in Protégé's eyes, he had fired before even knowing, they likely didn't care about us any more! Right behind the slaver, I saw a door half buckle inward. He held up his hooves!

“No! *No! Take me with you! Help me! HELP ME!*”

He was too far to reach, Brimstone forced us onward, his cold mind taking the lead. We leapt onto the stairs and started to descend. We got down one flight before his screaming for help howled louder and then went silent. The smell became overpowering, making me dizzy. The slavers were dying, their screams becoming shorter as fewer remained to do so. Yet the beasts or...whatever they were...they only continued.

Somepony unloaded an entire magazine a few floors up. The floor ahead of us was streaked with fresh blood. I saw Protégé slip on it, having to grab the railing for balance. It was me who grabbed him, pulling him onward, even I remembered the way now! This was near the canteen, just one floor up from it!

Then I heard something on the stairs behind us. I screamed, my own voice joining the chorus going on in the asylum, its dark past seeming all too alive. Hearing me, they all ran. It slid, falling and sounded like it was hitting walls in its *absolute desire to catch us!* We ran as a group ahead. A slaver went streaking by ahead of us and we heard the *thing* behind us erupt out even as we rounded the balcony to find the next set of stairs.

It was right there behind us.

Don't look back.

The scream got close. I heard a mouth gnashing. Something wet splattered and bone clicked.

Don't look back!

“Run! RUN!” Glimmerlight screamed it, clearly in as much panic as the rest of us. It was coming for us, right behind us! It was catching us! We all fell into the stairwell, Coral's magic slamming the doors shut behind us. Protégé leapt up, snatching the locks shut as Brimstone held it closed. I saw Protégé fumble with the latches even as he pushed the last crack shut...and then back off.

He'd seen through that crack. His eyes had gone wide and his face turned pale.

He'd seen one...

From up above us, I could hear many of them. Beeping, howling and a rising of their minty stench rose from there like a radroach nest. They were everywhere! Brimstone grabbed the stunned Protégé, throwing him ahead of us with a brutal scream to 'KEEP FUCKING NAVIGATING' that I could have sworn Protégé responded to with 'Yes, Sir!' The doors were already smashing behind us, I cried out as the wood fell onto me.

Reaching the bottom, we could see the canteen ahead! I felt a strength flow into me, we were almost there! The tram was waiting!

“You...you won't get me! You won't get me! Arrrrgh!”

To our left, within the huge open balcony area I saw a slaver try to throw himself from the top level! He was trying to kill himself to avoid them!

He cried out as he fell, before shrieking as something darted out from a lower balcony, snatched him and whipped him back in again in mid-drop so fast I couldn't even see what had grabbed him! His squeals of terror as I heard the snap of a body breaking rose until they strangled and distorted, the sound of somepony's voicebox being torn apart mid-cry to become an unreal moan.

We hit the canteen, just as the last gunshots had fallen silent and a vicious howl sounded through the air. Foul food hit the bottom of my hooves, but I simply kept moving! So close...so close!

Through the canteen, through the double doors, turn right into the hole, the maintenance room...the tram!

It lay right there! Every one of us leapt onto it, wounds a secondary consideration to *getting the hell out of here*. Behind us, I heard something scrambling close. Glimmer grabbed Protégé's revolver to cover it while he started the metro-wagon up!

“Come on!”

I heard it running on the tiles in the canteen!

“Come on!”

I heard it coming through the doors into the corridor!

“COME ON!”

The wagon spluttered, kicked into life and detached its brakes! The engine roared into life as the lights flared on! With a jolt, it began to surge forward and immediately stalled on the spot, the lights dying!

“NO!” I couldn't think what else to say!

“*Fuck this thing!*” The foulest words I'd ever heard from Protégé, born of sheer desperation came even as he cranked it again and tried to build the pressure to start the engine!

It was coming through the maintenance room! I could hear its wheezing breath!

Glimmerlight shoved past us to the control panel, taking over from Protégé. Her magic tore at the circuitry and something sparked twice! The engine kicked in, rushing high in sound enough to make me wail. I simply covered my ears and held onto Coral tightly! The tunnels moved by, a nightmarish chase to be away from whatever was hunting us!

It shrieked, sensing us moving away! My wide eyes stared at the exit to the maintenance room even as we finally began to pick up enough speed to outrun them.

Then my blood turned to ice alone...just as we turned the corner, I saw a shape emerge at blistering speed from the room, shrouded in the dark and the harsh but ineffective light of the wagon's beams. Covered by hanging reeds and thick mist.

There in the dark...I saw only two bright white glows like eyes reflected the wagon's lights with a glint around an indistinct flurried form...then it was gone...passed around the bend and into my dreams for the rest of my life.

It howled even as it saw us moving away on the back of the wagon. A howl that chased us and reverberated down every tunnel and passageway. A sound that was returned as others hurried in tunnels. I saw blurry motion surging down long hallways and heard echos all around us.

I hadn't even seen its real shape...yet I felt locked up...frozen in terror even as I fell back into the wagon and cried the entire rest of the way out to the inner metro, being pulled out of the cart as we hurried through the security door and closed it behind us. It pounded and shook even as we returned to the higher levels.

With my brief glances to the rest of my friends, I wasn't the only one terribly shaken. Brimstone kept an eye out ahead of us instead, leaving Protégé to sit and rest his wounds.

From the look on his face, from what had happened to him in here...or almost happened to him, I could see that he had been given more of a shock than any of us, one that only I could truly relate to.

I just hoped it might help him see the truth...

* * *

The journey back out passed in a blur. None of us really spoke. I simply trotted beside my sister, trying to be there for her whenever I saw the adrenaline wearing off that was helping her push past what had happened to her. The others plodded quietly, taking my directions to avoid slavers. We took the abandoned shaft back up, carefully and gradually, Protégé last of all as he stood and stared down the tunnels to where the

slavers were changing shifts once again of the mining ponies.

Returning to him, I saw his eyes looking at those mining ponies not too far away. I didn't dare say a single word, I could see the frown clearly enough.

Eventually, he pulled the door shut behind us as they approached as we stayed quiet and got the heck out of there.

Truth be told, I barely even recognised the danger of the last part of the escape to the surface and across Fillydelphia's streets.

It just...didn't feel like anything anymore. Not after what lay down there.

* * *

It was much much later.

It had taken the better part of a day for us to rest. To be hidden in the attic of Protégé's logistics centre, our new little place to catch some sleep, food and whatever medicine Protégé could scrounge up.

I'd even used the time to 'acquire' some more odds and ends from his stores.

However, our mission couldn't wait and before too long had passed, he had come to us with Ragini by his side and simply announced that we were leaving. Between shifts, when fewer ponies were there, he led us across Fillydelphia to some place I had never been.

An old station, one too many for most of us but this one overground and connected to the Wall of Fillydelphia itself. Upon its colossal lines, I saw immense train wagons sitting ready. Ponies were loading crates of supplies onto it or even boarding it themselves.

This was to be our transport to the mountain. To become stowaways upon Shackles' own resource train. Their expedition had left hours before...we would slide in right under their noses.

Apparently, they were sealed from the outside before departure with only slavers possessing the ways to open the wagons again to prevent slaves inside escaping. Not that the route it took would warrant a slave *wanting* to escape from. High cliffs, murderous Hellhound lands and irradiated snow surrounded the trainline.

We had guns, medical kit and much to my delight, Protégé even somehow had gotten Blunderbuck to deliver a package to me.

Rarity's Grace.

Brimstone Blitz moved on, carrying something Protégé had acquired for him. The remnants of his armour, minus the helmet. He had been silent, eyeing any slaver with more suspicion than normal and sitting protectively close to Glimmerlight whenever possible.

Coral Eve had surprised me by coming...this wasn't her fight, by her own words. Yet as we had packed to go, she had simply trotted with us. When I had asked, she simply said that it was better than waiting.

Briefly, I had wondered if she perhaps bore a little more hope from her bitter and lifeless pessimism about her life's future as a result of all this. I dearly wished that was the reason.

Glimmerlight moved on beside me, wearing one of the thick fur coats we had gained to resist the apparently freezing temperatures and *snow* that were up there. We shared a nod...her and I had a lot to talk about on the way there to help her after her experience...amongst other things that needed dealing with. We weren't going to go into this with unresolved issues between us...

Ragini simply came along. Protégé had told her she didn't have to but the griffin had simply turned up with her gun and said he couldn't possibly order her away. Revenge, I guessed, still bubbled deep in her heart against Shackles.

However, one surprise had been who waited for us. The huge form of Old Grizzly lumbered near us. Protégé had pleaded with him, that it was too dangerous. Maybe he even felt it was too close to us and our

'plans' that other slavers might take odds to. Yet the slaver had simply remarked that it was too important...we needed all the help we could get. Protégé couldn't disagree.

My 'owner' himself, however...Protégé...

Since we had emerged, he had fallen silent. Speaking in hushed tones and avoiding eye contact, the slaver had taken to his books any time he was not doing anything required of him. In the few times we had spoken since the outer metro, he had given curt answers that were nothing like the genial 'talks' we used to have. He seemed ashamed, afraid...even embarrassed of himself and given what he had been feeling in Ministry station...I could only imagine too well why.

Myself?

Today had been an arduous task. I had run for my life, confronted friends and enemies, seen faces of the past before me and found new discoveries about Fillydelphia that I had never known existed. I could sense this all beginning to come closer...more connected.

Just as Sundial had said, all the pieces...none of the solutions.

Yet I still felt like just that little pony who looked up at that Wall and wished hard...a dreamer. I was just the pony who got caught up. I wasn't anypony special, not *really*. Yet now that I was embarking as part of this proper *mission* that could decide my future I began to remember that this *was* about me. My journey to freedom, it had simply grown from the days of me being an unknowing little rebel running at a wall...

Above me, that snowy peak shrouded in clouds rose above the Wall's height, right on the range that bordered this city...that was the place that mattered now. I had received just one more message from Sundial on our way out of the metro.

He had been transferred to the mountain lab.

Good luck, Sundial...I'll stick with you, if no-pony else in your time ever did in your lonely mission.

Packing away my Pipbuck, I joined my sister, hopping up onto the train. She grinned and I tried to smile back.

“Let's do this, eh lil'bro? You told my yourself...we're going to get out, let's go get the knowledge to make it happen!”

Forcing a grin and a nod, I settled down beside her as I heard the engine spool up.

Forget the knowledge, forget whatever Aurora did. I had a new task now that meant more to be than anything inside that place. Something I had been yearning to have a chance at for so long now.

To find and to get back the first friend I'd ever had back.

Unity was up on that mountain. This was the moment. I would find her, bring her to the safety of our group! Show her that she wasn't alone!

If I had to march alone into the very home of Chainlink Shackles, Grindstone and Wildcard to stop them using her for whatever plans they had I would, because I wasn't going to let her be pulled away again.

Not this time.

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Midnight Pipbuck Reader – You sure are a cheeky one, using your Pipbuck light to read when you should be sleeping. Wait, you can't read that well? Never mind, I'm sure you'll find the ability to have your Pipbuck light on with less chance of others spotting it a handy talent to have!

Chapter 22: Winter Rad Up

* * *

"The story of somepony who is cold on the outside but deep down, is a good pony."

“What's it like to be part of something bigger?”

There's a word about it, I think. About things getting bigger? Begins with an 'x' sound?

“Escalation?”

That's it! I suppose that's what it all felt like. Go back a few...I don't know, weeks? Months? I was just a no-body running at a wall. Then I met other ponies and became part of a group to survive. We got involved in things like a big riot and then I became an outcast for a while. I had to spend days fighting for my life, both waking and in a deep sleep or...or whatever they called it.

Yet that entire time, all we were doing was struggling and garnering what we could. Trying to keep the spark of hope alive. Sometimes we were soaring, gladly taking stock of every little tool, morsel of food and scrap of clothing we could find. Others, we were worried, casting eyes over old documents and failing to find our way free. Every time we moved forward, something tried to push one of us backward. Difficulties lay on and gradually I felt my life hit the ground galloping as I realised that every day was going to have something happening now.

It's kinda hard to say how that feels...a lifetime of unthinking chores suddenly switches to a daily struggle to become the pony I wanted to be. Yet that escalation wasn't finished yet. My life had something more to find cast upon it...we still had our plan ahead of us. The plan to give us a shot at escaping Fillydelphia once and for all!

That required a lot of things...but more so it had become mixed in with the tale of Fillydelphia itself. Chainlink Shackles had his plans to usurp power and Red Eye's machinations were coming to a head in the wastelands with Protégé carrying out his will to stop a rebellion before it happened. A greater tale than our own was coming to its head, yet the things that mattered most to those two powers were also what we needed.

A little group of slaves against an army of slavers that was fighting amongst itself. Our only hope lay in getting there before them and getting away before they even noticed. Somehow though, I felt like I could do it. Aurora Star's secrets, Sundial's story...they all led to this mountain at the same time as us, as though the Goddesses themselves willed this to happen. While I wore that Sundial's Pipbuck something just felt *right* about it having been me to be here to see this.

Before anything could be done though, we had to work with Protégé and his allies to get in. He worried me. Ever since he'd left Ministry Station Protégé had just looked lost and scared underneath that stoic expression. With his nose in a book for the entire first part of the journey, which side of the fence of loyalty he fell on was becoming rather unclear to me. He might see the truth and help us...or he might topple back to the teachings he knew best.

“That wasn't all, was it?”

What do you mean?

“Protégé wasn't your only issue to deal with, was he? You saw Unity...”

I...

“They were taking Unity to the mountain.”

They were...

Before anypony else, there was Unity. The mare I'd only met a handful of times, yet she had always been there, like some impossible mission to find and help bring out! Her and her friend! Or...or lover or...whatever he was to her! Now that I'd see her, seen she was still here!

You asked what it's like to be part of something bigger?

Well, this was how I felt. Desperate. Because I could see everything I ever wanted falling slowly into place. We had an objective, the ponies we sought to get were either in place to be rescued or so close to have a chance at reaching. Our supplies were ready and hidden back at the Mall in a place I could reach them. *We had found Ministry Station!*

Now I was desperate, because for me...for my friends...for all our days we'd lost to slavery...I finally felt like I knew the way. We'd get whatever secret lay in that mountain, use it to unlock whatever there was in Ministry Station and find our way through the Outer Metro to the outside world! Be it through being able to turn on that portal or simply to unlock some door to the Outer Metro proper like we'd always planned!

This *was* something bigger now. This was the beginning of the end. The place that would mark the start of events that would befall Fillydelphia when the world changed. A turning point in history that we would be caught at the centre of.

Of course, that was if we could even survive this journey. My first excursion outside the Walls had almost taken my life multiple times, yet that foreboding mountain held its own dangers to keep us from ever feeling like we were any closer to freedom than in Fillydelphia itself. Or more particularly...to keep me from finding Unity up there at the edge of the world itself.

Then of course there were those who didn't *want* us to make that journey alive at all...

* * *

Glimmerlight hummed to herself, picking up a small pack and thin bolt-action rifle off her bed using telekinesis. In the faint light of jury rigged bulbs strapped to rafters, she checked the weapon over with little sharp tugs of magic to work the little lever thingy and peered into the empty hole the bullets went into. I even felt her magic tug on the trigger lightly to test it. Satisfied, she slung it on her back and almost danced her way to the door. It felt awkward as her body slewed one side to the other, bobbing her hindquarters about and humming in tune. I'd never be caught dead doing that. (Well...not sober anyway, so I had discovered.)

Her home was rather abundant with half finished gizmos and little self made devices hanging off the walls or lying over a desk. Her eyes drifted across what seemed to be a hot stove attached to a large spark battery and I felt her lick her own lips. Clearly, she had something in mind to cook on that by the end of today. Suddenly, the reason for the rifle became much clearer.

Aside from that, it was *clearly* somewhere she had set up herself. Cables leading outside were connected to a row of pink Hearths Warming lights that twinkled above her bed and fireplace. Her Initiate robes hung drying in the corner near her collection of scavenged foods. With the technology, the colourful lights and her own bouncy mood...I couldn't help but feel a pang of envy to have such a cosy little homestead all to herself...

Then of course, I remembered the future and bit that feeling back *hard*.

“Oookay!”

She cheered the word out, before bumping her front door open with her hips and dancing her way out into the village, still humming.

“All right, everypony!” Her voice carried out across the entire little village common ground. “Who's up for some *hot food toniiiiight?*”

Ponies looked up from their everyday tasks with bright smiles. Some cheered. I saw the elderly village leader grin as she looked up from cleaning some clothes in a bucket. Life was going on as ever in the little town. With ponies helping maintain each others wooden buildings or stretching leather over the roofs to keep out any rain. Others sat and sewed with some pumping from a large tank in the centre of town. I recognised it immediately as a scaled up version of Glimmer's scrap built filtration system by the hoses and sieve like rain catcher on top. Clearly, Glimmer had done a lot of good for this place.

Prancing her way across the square, her eyes moved to another certain building that bore a clothesline outside of it along with a few hastily repaired toys sitting by the porch. I could see little crayon drawings across the lower walls of the exterior walls. The door opened to let out the sounds of light playful argument.

I recognised the squeaky little coltish tone immediately.

“But moom! I wanna come! I wanna see the woods!”

“We'll see when you're older, my dear.” Coral's calmly maternal voice spoke down to the little foal being dragged on one of her hind legs. “But not today.”

“You always say 'we'll see' when you really mean no!” Chirpy let go and ran in front of her, stopping only to set his floppy hat back on his head again. “The last five times out of six you meant no!”

Coral stopped and patted his head, making the hat droop down again. It never failed to amaze me how serene and at ease she had once looked...a far cry from the bitter mare of today.

“And you always count very well, hun. Now go on, your friends are over there. Go play till Glimmerlight and I return, okay? We'll have a barbecue toniiiiight...”

She winked down at her son, clearly knowing the reaction that it would make. Almost immediately, Chirpy Sum bounced up to his hooves and ran in a circle around her, repeatedly squeaking about a 'toast up.' Finally, he leapt up onto her back so he could hug her neck from behind, rubbing his cheek against her mane.

“Thanks, mom! I can't wait! I'm gonna go tell all my friends!”

“You do that. Now stay out of trouble.”

“I will!”

Leaping off her, he went scurrying across the village, not even spotting Glimmer as he galloped on past and shouted to the other foals playing on a ramshackle looking set of swings. Chuckling, Glimmerlight only trotted toward Coral.

“Ready to head out? Gotta leave enough of the night to play in! I'm as excited as Chirpy is. You hear that Riot Rush found an old stack of some wine? The sooner we get back, the *sooner* I can test that shit out!”

Coral Eve only laughed and shook her head, trotting past Glimmer and giving her a tug with a hoof on her saddlebag strap.

“I swear, sometimes I feel like I've got two kids...come on then.”

They trotted out of Creaky Hollow together, waving goodbye to the rest of the town before entering the incredibly thick dead woods that surrounded and protected their home. Not for the first time, I found the sensation oddly easy to immerse myself in simply *as* Glimmerlight in a memory orb. Only when I realised I couldn't think what she thought then did the illusion break...not that it stopped me trying. All the same, to feel the wind on her brow and the confident trot she had like no-pony else did was a joyous feeling. An icon of a way I might someday be able to trot. Oh how I wished...to be able to trot with my head up, smiling to everypony around and chatting freely...

Maybe even be able to flirt a little if I met a certain ma-

Oh my...being Glimmer was *really* getting to me. Inwardly, I cringed and curled up a little, even if Glimmerlight only skipped over a little uneven rocky slope down an embankment.

“You've had some good months with us now, Glimmer.” Coral moved down more hesitantly. “When you first arrived you kept saying you might move on. What's keeping you?”

I felt Glimmer put a hoof to her chin while waiting on her friend.

“Well...I don't know. I could joke and say it's the great parties and good flank...”

Coral's eyes hardened a little, Glimmer quickly waved a hoof.

“But really, I guess it's just...being able to be who I want. You all accept me. Let me do what I wanna do, ask me for help instead of barking orders and calling me 'Initiate' every day. There's no ranks...no chains around my neck telling me when I go where and who I do what with. It's just...free out here.”

She smiled as she spoke, before laughing.

“Although of course, the fact that we all got absolutely fucking *hammered* as a welcome party for me until I was singing the old anthems from atop the searchlight platform certainly gave me a little incentive!”

Even Coral had to chuckle, giving Glimmer a prod to keep moving.

“Well, I'm glad. You've certainly brought a certain...energy to the place. Chirpy likes you.”

“He's *adorable!* I love the lil'guy! Comes over and helps me with my math when tinkering. You taught him well!”

Coral pushed aside a branch, holding it for Glimmer.

“Not much of my own. He's a little sponge, so he is. Takes in what he sees very easily. Easily susceptible to being told what to think, though so...don't go filling his head with too much of that attitude of yours.”

Coral's voiced turned briefly stern, prompting Glimmer to make a mock 'Who, me?' motion and laugh. Rolling her eyes with a smile, Coral simply followed my sister further in.

Frankly, there wasn't much to really see. They were hunting for something to shoot and drag home between them yet with neither mentioning what it was and staying silent now to presumably not scare any away I was left rather without much input. Only trying to guess what Glimmerlight was thinking each time she stared into the distance. She did seem to look to the West quite a lot...

“Glim, *there...*”

Her head whipped around as she dropped low. The dry branches rustled slightly beside her and I felt her mouth move in a silent curse. Coral was already behind a huge fallen trunk and poking her head out toward a clearing.

“Radgator, eighty metres...”

“I can make that shot...” Glimmer whispered lightly, settling forward and lifting the rifle from her back. With careful movements of magic, I felt her move the bolt up and back before carefully slotting in a small bullet.

Slowly...slowly...she settled in, taking aim down the top of the weapon. I could see the radgator motionless on a log over swampy ground! A small one, I hazarded a guess at by my own limited knowledge. I'd only known radgators as fancy meat my masters sometimes ate...

“Aim for the skull, Glim...try to-”

“I know, Coral...I know...”

It seemed to blink a little. One beady eye looking directly at the two hidden ponies. Slowly, I felt Glimmer lick her lips...felt her hoof move to the uncovered trigger so her magic wouldn't give them away. She wasn't aiming at it, but there was a wind. Was she compensating? I didn't know enough about shooting. Then...

Crack!

A gunshot echoed out over the forest and the radgator spiralled off into the deep swampy water, thrashing and swimming away rapidly!

Glimmer hadn't fired!

Crack! Crack!

Two more gunshots in the quiet air!

“What in the hell is all that about?” Glimmerlight leapt up, gun held ready in her magic now.

Coral ran up the embankment, looking into the distance from a higher level above the treetops.

Crack!

She pointed. “I saw a muzzle flash a few hundred metres that way!”

Other noises were drifting in. I felt positively *deaf* without my own hearing, but Glimmer was still sharp. Voices crying out. Howls and whoops between each of the bursts of gunfire! It sounded like...like...

“A hunt...”

Coral looked down. “What was that? What is it?!”

My sister didn't even hesitate, but took off into the trees, shouting over her shoulder. “Somepony's being chased! They need help! That's *raider* war cries!”

Leaping over fallen branches, she didn't even look back to see if Coral was following but just sprinted into the dense forestry in the direction of the shooting. Skidding over broken ground she almost collided with a tree when turning around an old cobblestone wall. The sounds were getting closer when I felt her legs start to burn from the sudden effort. Even as her breath strained to keep up with the exertion it *still* felt worlds away from the little air I got on account of my disease. The sensation was thrilling! I was a fit and able pony rushing to help somepony else!

Then up ahead there was another wicked snap of a hunting rifle...followed by a sharp cry of pain. I felt Glimmer speed up, snorting as she pushed herself onward! I heard raiders laughing! They'd gotten their prey!

Then she emerged above them. Atop a dusty slope, Glimmerlight held a commanding view of the situation before her! Three raiders were surrounding a dropped body upon the floor. Each bore a patchwork of dyed fabric and foul tattoos and carried long barrelled but rusty rifles by their sides. One of them was shuddering so heavily I thought him in the middle of a fit!

Glimmerlight didn't even hesitate, I felt her own smaller gun whip up and take aim...before the trigger pulled. The tinny snap of Glimmer's hunting rifle sounded small by comparison, but one raider below immediately screamed out loud and fell away from the prone body, clutching a knee that had burst over the ground. She began swearing loudly, scrambling for something in a pack almost immediately. Any other pony would have been on the ground screaming! How had she managed that?!

“W-W-W-What the fuck?!”

“Up there! *Get her! Gethergethergether!*”

Glimmer dropped down, turning her back to a massive and precariously placed boulder by the edge of the slope as two shots whipped past. One pinged from the rock and sent fragments of it scattering across my sister. Fumbling with hooves and magic, she loaded another round to the one shot rifle and leaned out on the opposite side of the boulder.

I saw the raiders swivel...they'd been waiting!

Both they and Glimmer fired at the same time. Theirs slammed in the boulder, making Glimmerlight flinch and her shot go wild above the treetops. Hurriedly, she reloaded and blind fired, just to stop them from rushing her cover...at least I thought that was what she was doing! I felt gripped by a fear that made no sense. I *knew* Glimmer survived!

Bullets would *hurt* though...oh Goddesses...

The raiders whispered to one another. Frustration went through me as I failed to hear what it was...I could have heard that if I'd been there to help her!

Freshly loaded, Glimmerlight dove forward into the trees, crawling along the top of the slope to try and relocate. Rolling up, she popped up from behind some old brown bracken, rifle aimed.

There were no raiders.

“*Shit...*” She muttered to herself, looking each way.

I saw movement behind the rock she had just passed. Right at the edge of her vision. See it, sis! See it! Come on!

She saw it! Her rifle turned and slammed a shot into the thick dead vegetation there. I heard a high pitched squeal and a raider fell back down the slope, hooves to his ear. The raider began thrashing, the same one who had been shuddering earlier! Spasms as he sought to get up, foaming at the mouth! Glimmer moved up, trying to get a bead to finish it, running right up beside the pony they had been chasing as he lay on the ground! I heard her worried gasp.

It was Rough Diamond! He lay on his side, pale and bleeding from the stomach with his

scrappy looking big bolt-action rifle lying across him. But he was still breathing!

“Diamond...”

The raider with the shot knee suddenly collapsed over out of cover, passing out from...shock, maybe? Blood loss? The other, however, was getting up missing an ear! Glimmer spun to see him more clearly, she took aim on him!

A smaller shot came from her right, throwing up dust by her hooves.

“Mag fed pistol, bitch! I can fire again! Don't move!”

From the bushes, the last raider emerged, hunting rifle still by his side on a battle saddle with a thick pistol held in his magic. Glimmer went rather still, breathing hard. I could feel the fear running through her. A chill down her spine.

“Drop the rifle.”

“Okay...okay...” She complied, her own small weapon falling out of her magic.

The raider advanced, standing in front of her. He was disfigured, bearing a horrendous deliberate pattern of scars on his muzzle. With his multi-coloured mane in a mohawk, he seemed to be fighting down mad giggles. The other one moved over, clutching his ear and scowling at Glimmer. His hooves kept pacing at the ground, like he was eager to go somewhere. I saw pinprick eyes, signs of heavy drug use.

To Glimmer's great shock, even the mare on the ground began to get back up while jamming a three full syringes of what looked like Med-X into her leg. These multi-coloured raiders just didn't seem to feel pain the same way others I'd seen did! The way Glimmer's eyes went from injury to injury and saw them still standing as they passed out huge quantities of drugs to one another gave me a clear idea that she was noticing it too.

“Oooh, looks like we got lucky here! Wildcard's gonna love having a little cheerleader come back with us too! Pity the big guy don't let us take stock to the tents for some fun if we're selling them...but we'll have to see if ol'Wildy will let us have-

The solid **WHAM** of the huge boulder Glimmer had once used for cover, bigger than any pony, careening into the two bucks at the speed of a flying griffin sounded like every bone possible breaking at once. He simply disappeared to the right, out of Glimmer's perspective with a rush of air to flatten against the other slope.

Very slowly, a trail of red simply leaked out from below the boulder's new resting spot.

Both Glimmer and the remaining raider looked upward, seeing Coral with a furiously glowing horn standing atop the slope with a pained look on her face as each magical spark exploded off her malfunctioning horn.

The raider raised her weapon. Glimmer didn't give her the chance, as she leapt past, grabbed Diamond's much sturdier rifle than her own and aimed up.

“Ignore *this*.”

Diamond's rifle barked louder than even the raider's hunting rifles, blasting the raider's muzzle clean off and spinning her around. Lacking a mouth, nose or even eyes the raider still wriggled on the ground trying to hit something with brass hooves, making a sickening gurgle from an exposed throat. Standing up, Glimmerlight racked the bolt and aimed down again, firing once more to the still twitching body as those drugs took effect. That ended it.

Wildcard's raiders...I couldn't help but worry if we ever had to face any of them. Drugs scared me enough with what they could do to ponies without an entire gang of overdosed psychopaths.

Coral Eve hurried down the slope as Glimmerlight turned back to the fallen Diamond.

“It's Rough Diamond, Coral! He's hurt! We have to get him back!”

To my surprise, Coral hesitated.

“Glimmer...I told you about this...”

“*Coral he's hurt! Help me!*”

Glimmerlight was trying to tear off her own hunting clothes to staunch the bleeding on Diamond's stomach. Grabbing his rifle, she tried to lift his frame onto her back. Coral looked unsure, casting her eyes at him and around at the raiders.

“I told you those tattoos of his were of gangs! He's in with raiders!”

“He's a trader!” Glimmerlight barked back. “This isn't the time now! He's dying!”

I sensed what was happening here...the start of their falling apart. Coral Eve stamped a hoof. I could see that authority in her eyes, the one I'd seen in my own time. Her stare met Glimmer's head on.

“Don't you see how messed up these drug crazies are? They didn't care that they had a knee blown off! What if they're harming their own to find us, huh?!”

“I...*no!*” Glimmer recoiled, lifting Diamond onto her back more properly and already beginning to move. “You've seen him before! You heard him talk! He's not one of them! Why would they be chasing him before they saw us then?”

“To lure us, Glimmer!” Coral was following, but looking increasingly unsure herself, although I lost sight of her when Glimmer turned around. “They know you come out here!”

“But why now? How would they know? He'd have died before we got here from the village!”

Glimmerlight rounded on her, meeting the stare hard. She stood up the embankment a little, looking down at her friend. I felt her eyes dampen as she pleaded, clearly fearing for somepony she cared about. Only...I feared I knew who was right here...

“He...he isn't a raider! This doesn't make any sense if he was! Coral, please help me! He's *dying*! They can't track an injured pony! We'll...we'll keep him in my home! Locked inside if...if that'll help! I'll blindfold him when he leaves! *Please*, Coral!”

There was a silence between them. I could feel my sisters face twisted in terror. The pony on her back groaned, shifting. A weak voice was heard.

“Who...help...they're...they're trying to...to...” He choked and I heard the rattle of blood in his throat. “Get to Brim...stone...arrgh...”

He gritted his teeth, delusional with pain. I felt Glimmer choke back a whine of worry as the warm sensation of blood trickled onto her back. Eventually, she seemed to come to a decision herself, struggling to get up the embankment again under the well toned stallion's weight.

“I'm helping him! This just doesn't make sense! Even the craziest raider wouldn't plan it like this, the chances of it working...”

I knew that tone in my sister's voice...she wasn't going to give up on him. Just like she hadn't on me. Her mind was set on saving this pony.

“Glimmer...” Coral started to speak, seeing her friend move off back to the village. A few seconds passed, before the sharp sound of hooves came closer and I felt the weight eased as Coral helped lift him back. Her voiced hissed, a horrible hint to the bitterness that I knew would swallow her someday.

“You had *better* be right...”

oooOOOooo

What caught me out more on waking wasn't the sensation of returning to a substantially weaker body this time.

It was the sudden shock of being plunged into a freezing cold.

Wintry air snapped at me, sending my body shivering even before I opened my eyes and gasped aloud. I was swaying back and forth, a sound of metal crunching and rolling coming from below me even as I grasped onto the only warm object I could feel near my hooves.

“Oof! Murky! Throat...need to breathe!”

Finally, I got a sense of my surroundings, finding myself clamped onto Glimmerlight lying beside me. Squeaking an apology (About three words all at once, I was sure she understood me by now) I let go and instead dug myself into the blanket that covered both of us.

Only now, did I really get another look at where we were.

The swaying and metal sounds were the train. We lay on the back deck of it, still caged in to prevent escapes but open to the air with a view behind the train as it climbed and climbed and...

Okay...we were pretty high up...

I had to fight now to simply grab my sister again as I saw the sight before us. Since I had entered the orb with Glimmer, the train had moved far from Fillydelphia. I could see it far below us, down in the plains before the mountain and glowing red from the industry and flames within. That colossal crater shifted and warped to my vision from here, dominating the centre of the city. Yet even with all its sweating heat, the cold mists up here were almost obscuring it behind what looked like a veil of white satin.

We were *far* from there now...

“You doing all right there, lil’bro?” Glimmer, recovered from the assault upon her windpipe, tucked in the blanket and rubbed my back as I held my hooves against the cage.

“Y-yeah I...j-just so high...”

The train had meandered across various hills, slowly gaining height on each pass to cross tall bridges I could see below us below the frighteningly sharp cliffs and jutting talons of rock. All of it covered in a glistening coat of fresh snow. It looked deep, sometimes coming up almost a quarter of the train's height either side. The air felt only steeper as the winds blew away from the mountain itself, feeling like they were trying to shove us nearer to those edges...

Glimmerlight sat up, moving beside me and casting her eyes across the spectacle. The train jolted and squealed on the tracks, leading us both to grab hold of the cage for balance.

“You're afraid of heights? I wouldn't have thought that'd come to a pegasus.”

I bit my lip. “Not really heights so much as...not feeling in control...”

The train weaved around a corner and rocked *toward* the near edge of a cliffside, leading me to squeak and shove myself away from it, directly into Glimmer. This felt too unsteady! I could see rocks falling from where we just passed! The floor angled as we began to climb again.

“I think I see what you mean...well, just imagine what it'll be like when you can fly by yourself. All in control!”

She poked my side, yet I only looked back at her, confused.

“But Weathervane-”

“Screw what that old cook says. You're *going* to fly someday. If it takes us years, it will. I'll be your super sexy fitness instructor for those wings! The one pulling you out of bed before sunrise every day for more wing-ups and gliding lessons! Hey...”

She stopped briefly, before looking back at me.

“Can you lift a wing?”

“S-sure...” I spread both of them, still wincing slightly but finding it surprisingly easy now. It

surprised me how natural it was beginning to feel. I couldn't deny a little spring of happiness inside me every time I just *saw* them move.

Glimmerlight looked around it, carefully toying with the feathers a little with her tongue poking out in thought.

“Yeah...that's a thing...”

“What? What is?”

She grinned at me, leaning back again and holding the blanket open for me to snuggle in too. It was so cold out here...

“You can't fly right now...but who says you couldn't try gliding on those things?”

My eyes shot open. That was...

That was...

That...was a *really* good point...

She obviously saw my shock, laughing and tugging me in close to squeeze me in a tight hug. “Now there's a little thing to keep you wondering away! Might even replace Pip in your dreams at night!”

I felt my face turn red. “I don't...”

“Murky, your ears twitch when you're lying. I *knooooow*...” She laughed and ruffled my mane while I simply tried to giggle it off a little. “It's something to hold close, Murky. Just think on it, okay? Maybe we can find time to see what you can make of it later when we're back in Filly.”

Forget thinking on it then! I wanted to think on it now! I thanked her more than a few times for the idea, clutching close under the blanket as we watched the landscape roll by. Slowly, Fillydelphia began to disappear under the whirling snow and thick clouds that hung lower than the ceiling in the sky. I spent most of it imagining it! I could be swirling out there with the snow! Flying on the winds! Who cared if I couldn't gain height or flap right? It was more than I ever dreamed! I had to ask Weathervane about it! Maybe he knew something and just hadn't wanted to give me false hope? I didn't care! I'd felt hope crushed so many times already that it was no new feeling!

I *wanted* something to look forward to again. This...perhaps was it.

There didn't have to be any words between us. She no doubt knew from my somewhat clingy hugging of her that the idea had cheered me up from my fear up here on what, to me, felt like the edge of the world itself.

“So what *do* you dream about her then? Judging by what you said in the Roamer...”

With a gulp, I tensed up, searching for something. I knew what her joke was, yet there was still some answer I could give to try and...uh...deflect the topic!

“N-not that! I um...” I blushed. “Sometimes I dream of her coming and saving me from Shackles. L-like...y'know, shooting her way in and...and having a big fight with him!”

She grinned, prodding a shoulder. “Go on.”

“Then um...well, she wins! She would, right? He'd fall down after Pip uses her magic to slam him into the ground!” I giggled, enjoying the thought. “Then she'd come over to me and break the chains he'd put on my hooves. We'd be trotting away from the body but he isn't dead! He suddenly runs at us, all covered in blood and...and really scary! He'd shout that nothing would take me away from him, that he was my *master!*”

I bit my lip, staring out over the landscape.

“But she would just stop and suddenly turn...with a revolver raised and her Pipbuck's um...Sa...targeting thingy on him! Then she'd say 'Not anymore' just before she pulls the trigger one last time to make me free forever. Then I...uh...wake up, usually...”

“Storm the castle, kill the baddy, get the buck, huh? I like her style...keep dreaming that one, Murky. Maybe someday it'll come true.”

It was somewhat refreshing to hear her casually joke on it. I laughed with her. We talked of a few other things, but time, I couldn't help but raise the topic. We had just been in an orb after all. I had to know how she was feeling.

“Sis...about Diamond and Coral...”

I felt her tense beside me, but her hoof stroked my mane.

“I...I know, hun.” I saw her bite a lip. “It's looking kinda obvious now what I did, huh?”

The words were flippant, but her tone wasn't. The train bounced, turning against the wind and sending a biting cold washing over us. Briefly, I saw a colossal peak still stretching above us before I turned back to look up at her.

“Well...um...we...we don't know yet, right?”

Something didn't feel right about it. Bonecrusher in the arena had mentioned it was *Wildcard* who killed Diamond. Just internal fighting in the Big Four? Or had it been something else?

Right now, I didn't feel right casting that shaky theory to Glimmerlight. Setting up the wrong idea at this stage would be awful. I had to speak to Brimstone, find out what he remembered about how they treated one another. He was their leader, he'd know.

“I guess it...hmm...”

Glimmer's voice trailed off. I did my best 'cute curious look' until I saw her giggle and give in, yet her eyes still looked sad.

“Sorry, I meant to say...I guess it wasn't really Diamond that got me there. It was seeing Coral looking at me like that. She was my friend, Murky. My best friend in Creaky. That might have been the last time we ever spent together *as* friends before the village was destroyed.”

“She still cares, sis.” My voice felt weak and without much conviction, but I still tried. “When we were getting out of Ministry Station! I saw you and her helping one another a few times to move. Coral wasn't leaving you behind.”

Glimmerlight went quiet for a minute or so, her eyes trailing across the snowy rocks around us. After a moment, I realised where she was looking. West. This time, I knew what lay out there in that direction. Bucklyn Cross.

Her parents...how long had she been keeping *that* one down? Especially now...

Then it finally hit me. What it was that had drawn Coral Eve back toward her friend. At her heart, Coral was a very motherly kind of pony who felt responsible for others.

She had just seen a pony who had once been her friend lose her parents...

I knew Coral by now. No amount of bitterness and anger she held would stop such a thing crying out to her caring heart. As horrible a thing as it was, that event at Bucklyn Cross might have just given Glimmer and Coral the key to putting the past behind them. They'd both been hurt, they'd both lost almost everything of their past lives. Now that they'd found one another again all that before must have begun to just feel, I didn't know...smaller by comparison maybe?

Could such a thing ever truly fade though? It explained Coral's conflicted opinions lately.

Finally, Glimmer spoke again.

“Ministry Station, Murky. I...I can't put in words what that was like. I'm sorry if this sounds bad but...for those days I was there? I think I knew what it was like to be who you were before I met you, hun. I didn't have any say! I couldn't choose anything for myself! It was just...routine. Doing whatever that *place* wanted me to do.”

I saw her wipe an eye.

“It's only right it was *you* to save me from that, Murky. You're the only pony I know who'd *understand* it and have the right...I don't know...heart to pull anypony out of it. I spent so long trying to protect you and help you that I hadn't even considered how vulnerable I was myself. Thanks, Murky...”

She held me close. The pair of us hugging upon the back deck of the train, as much for the cold as for the meaning of the moment. I felt her ruffle my mane again, as though making up for lost ruffles in our time apart.

“I miss them, Murky. I know what happened and I...I know I maybe don't talk about it. But I really miss them...” She sniffed. “But I've made it this far and I've...I've not removed it from my mind. I was tempted...I almost did once. But Coral stopped me and...and I know I'm going to make it.”

She paused, before saying something that almost made me want to cry on the spot, simply out

of how much it meant to hear.

“I don't need the orbs anymore...I've got you.”

* * *

We lay and watched the landscape for a while. Sharp formations of rock were interspersed by snow laden trees that swayed in the harsh winds. Very soon, snow began to blow between the cages as the blizzard got stronger the higher we went. Below us, I could see the rails had changed from their solid pre-war design to a somewhat more ramshackle kind...possibly made nearing the more desperate last few months of the war or even by Fillydelphia under Red Eye.

We were nearing the destination, I'd heard Grizzly announce from inside the carriage. Perhaps twenty minutes away at this slow pace we had to take now. With the cold getting so much more cutting, we made the decision to head back inside.

The inner side of the carriage wasn't really meant for ponies. Storage crates filled with pickaxes, shovels and other tools were lined beside rolls of fabric that we'd taken to using as covers against the temperature. The harsh oaken floor and thin metal sides of the train really didn't offer much comfort to any pony.

Coral Eve lay near to the door we'd come in through. She had wrapped herself up warm and remained mostly silent for most of the trip. She hadn't ever said it, but I was happy to know she was 'with us' now, if only in pursuit of her son that our escape would help bring back to her. All the same, I saw her offer me a thin smile. I waved back a little as we passed by.

Brimstone didn't actually rest against a wall, but rather right in the middle of the train. In passing, I wondered if it was to avoid his colossal weight overbalancing the entire thing if he was leaning to one side. Surely that couldn't be the case? Either way, 'our' spot was just beside him, where Glimmerlight now settled down. The barred windows held no glass and the entire carriage was chilly, sheltered only from most of the wind.

Old Grizzly and Ragini were nearer the top of the carriage, organising our various supplies between them. I saw numerous single shot rifles or rusty looking pistols partially dismantled as they maintained them. Glimmer had offered her aid earlier...but the slavers seemed less than willing to have a slave doing so, particularly Ragini. The griffin seemed dark of eye ever since she had gotten her 'revenge' on the Shades...even more so than before. Protégé's words to her, whether it had been worth it, seemed all too telling now.

In truth, the bodyguard simply looked dissatisfied and angry. Trapped with no-pony else to exact vengeance on other than perhaps Shackles himself. Very quickly, her plan became a bit clearer to me.

Well...I wasn't going to complain if she did.

There were a couple small crates of ammunition pried open beside them that contained other things too. Winter clothing, bandages, a crowbar and healing potions glowing purple. There was even a small saddlebag with a couple sachets of Radpurge, meant for Glimmer and Coral. Protégé had sent Ragini to collect some before we left. Beside it, I saw a sack *full* of Rad-Away and couldn't help but

feel the urge to...acquire some, if I had the chance. That stuff was my lifeblood. A little shiver passed through me...it was never nice to remember what lurked in my lungs, just waiting for me to be vulnerable and without anything to stop it. I still sometimes had bad dreams of choking and drowning in my own blood until I awoke in a sweat, grasping frantically for my canteen.

Frankly, my breath came weak enough as it was compared to other ponies. This thin mountain air wasn't helping much. I was having to suck in air a little too loudly to be comfortable.

“Doing all right, squirt?”

Brimstone's deep voice rumbled out, clearly having noticed me shake. I nodded hesitantly and sat down on the blankets. I dearly wanted to ask him about Diamond. But not with Glimmer around.

“Y-yes...just...just nervous.”

“Average day then.” Brim grinned and grunted, patting my head very carefully before he turned his head to keep me within sight of his eye. “Got that little spudgun of yours ready?”

My what? I cast a look to Glimmer for aid, but she was already toying with Coral's lantern she bought a few days ago, trying to install a gemlight into it for greater brightness.

“S-spuds?”

Brimstone made a low noise. “That pistol by your side. Is it loaded?”

“N-no. They said we'd get bullets when we need them...” I glanced up the carriage. “Old Grizzly said so. This is still a slaver thing I...I think.”

The big raider arced his head right around to see the crates of ammunition. “Just be ready to grab any if you need it. They know we escaped...they know what Protégé wants. If anything happens? Be. Ready.”

His tone went rather dangerous toward the end. Only now did I realise why he sat where he did.

He was being a barrier between us and the slavers. Allies or not, Brim wasn't taking any chances. Even if Pro-

I looked up. Now that was something...where was Protégé? The spot he'd occupied when I left out the back with Glimmer held only an empty rug, his revolver and (to my surprise) his eyepiece sitting alone.

Truth be told, I wanted an excuse to leave anyway. The constant *click* of bullets being fed into their housings were already beginning to make me uncomfortable.

“I'll...um...be back in a second, okay?”

Getting up, I trotted toward the other end of the carriage. He must have went into the next one. Brimstone made to get up, but with a little glance from Glimmer sat back down, leaving me to go. Having to stop a couple times to keep my balance every time the train bumped or rocked I made my

way past the slavers.

“You don't like Shackles, do you?” Ragini didn't look up from snapping bullets into the magazine.

“N-no...” I kept moving, pausing only at the door itself to look back at the griffin. One eye rolled up, her head side on to me. “Not, um...particularly...”

“Guess we got three things in common then, flightless. You wanna kill him, get in line.”

I gulped, my hooves pushing the door aside a little and feeling the wash of cold flow over me until my teeth chattered on the spot. “Y-you can g-go f-f-first...fine with m-me...”

“Just so long as we got an understanding.”

That was more than enough reason for me to get through that door post-haste. Stepping out between the tracks, I had to quell the fear of the grinding wheels just below me. The sound made me wince, every single grind of the connectors and sharp *clack* of two carriages so close bumping into one another sent a spike of pain through my head. Hopping over, I shoved myself into the next one quite quickly.

Different from the thin crude metal of the carriage we were in, this one was almost entirely wood. Fillydelphia's trains it seemed were simply a mish mash of all the intact carriages they had to hand. Red paint peeled on the walls visible behind huge minecarts lashed to the floor on either side. Up ahead though, I could see a red tail protruding from behind one. Protégé.

He must have heard me slam the door shut. His voice was quite quiet, probably only easy to hear if you were me.

“Too crowded in there for you too?”

“Well...maybe. It was just getting too cold outside and...and I didn't really feel comfortable.”

Protégé wandered out to the centre of the train, in better view. I noticed he'd brought a rug with him that he now sat on. His eyes didn't so much as look at me as just always outside the window.

“This place tends to do that. We don't see snow this heavy in much of Equestria anymore. Certainly not with the warmth around Fillydelphia in the ambient air. The cold takes...some getting used to.”

Trotting up, I looked out the large window myself and saw the thin peaks misted in the distance before sitting down on the rug. I took out my journal and opened a new page. Sketch...that'd help me get my mind off things. Just sketch some nice things. Maybe Unity? I hadn't mentioned her much, not with Grizzly around. Only Glimmerlight knew. But I could still sketch her, draw that flowing mane of hers when it wasn't all scraggly and ruined by slavery.

As I did so, that all too recognisable sound clipped into only my ears. Since the metro, I'd had the Pipbuck on near silent volume out of habit. I still felt the hairs on the back of my neck stick up if it went off too loud. The smell of those...*things*...was still in my nostrils too readily if I got scared about

making a noise.

Beep!

I clutched to close, watching Protégé to ensure he didn't look over. To cover myself, I simply kept sketching while I listened. Shapes...yes shapes...make life from shapes, from curves and lines...

Unity...

Beep!

Click...

Before anything else, I already heard the sounds of mining in the background. I recognised the picks hitting stone from the metro. There was heavy breathing close to the microphone.

"I...whew, it's Sundial...of...of course! There's so much to tell, I don't have time!"

The urge to hunker back and listen intently was powerful, yet my art was my cover to not look as though I was doing anything else. I just kept drawing, a broken charcoal tip in my mouth softly arcing to make the shape of her torso...

"We're inside the mountain, now! They brought us up through the night! They let me have a few hours to myself...I...I had to go see her. See my Sky. She had been so worried about me, even my family didn't know where I'd gone! They...they threatened me, if I didn't return! I tried to be calm for her but I was the one more scared than any, because I could feel the temptation to try and run away from all of this! Just take Skydancer, my family and just go!"

The flick of a tail...the wisps of a wavy mane...concentrate on the drawing Murky! Don't react to the sadness of his story, just listen for information. Don't draw attention from Protégé...

"My dad's still out on deployment, he doesn't know yet. I don't know why but that makes it feel easier. He has enough to worry about...if there's anypony who doesn't need to see more suffering than he already has, it's him. But I got to be with Sky, that's all that matters for now. I needed it...she needed it. I couldn't explain much, just a cover story that it was all a misunderstanding! We lay on the roof together like...like we sometimes do and looked at the stars."

I heard him fight back a sob.

"She asked me, 'Why does this have to happen in our time?' I've asked that so many times to myself and I still don't know. I just held onto her tightly and tried not to let her see me cry. Why can't this all be over? I just...I just want to go back to enjoying each day when I see her! No more stupid Stable drill alarms scaring everyone! No more end of the world hanging over us! No more...all of...of this!"

I had to bite my lip. Looking up, I saw Protégé glance over, as though reading my expression. I tried to smile and go back to my drawing.

"Whoever's listening...you'll know what I was like when I first met her. How I was all...all

awkward...then you'll have heard Sky and I um...being in love. The banter we shared. The little jokes. How she'd tease me while I was recording. I'm so scared I'm going to lose all that. I need to do this...get that money...get out of all this and know we'll be safe! That's why I'm on this forsaken mountain! That's why I had to spend an hour waiting in the snow for them to get that little door on the mountainside open. Why I'm stuck in this gem mine trying to spy on a pony who is just as scared as I am now..."

I was really fighting hard now. The charcoal in my mouth was shaking, needing to be put to paper to steady it and draw the little flicks of her ears and the soft eyelashes.

"Even those few hours were enough to keep me going. We...we spent them together. Just the two of us. On the roof...getting food...in her apartment...anywhere. Just feeling her beside me as we lay there in her bed, feeling our love and for just a short while being able to forget everything else...to hear her voice, her teases and see that little smirk on her face. A little bit of magic to remind me what I'm fighting for. I just want this to end...to end so I can go home to her! I-"

"You will cease noise. Cease the talk of babies."

Wait...I knew that voice. I jerked up a little.

"Get back to work."

"...yes...yes, Doctor Heartcare..."

Click.

Doctor Heartcare? That...that was who I knew as *Magister Heartcare*, the crazy ghoul from the crater! Pinkie had mentioned he disappeared or something! I felt like if I were smarter, I could have figured all this out a little more...but it was just one more piece of the puzzle. The refugees were being taken by Heartcare to work for the Zebras on...something...that involved memory magic and learning spell orbs?

All the same, I just couldn't keep my mind objective for too long. Sundial and Skydancer...even just hearing him talk like that made me feel wretched. My charcoal dotted across Unity's cutie mark, before I spotted a little drop of liquid fall from my face onto the picture. Screwing my eyes shut, I wiped them and kept drawing. It...it was like a sense of sadness mixed with a stupid childish envy I wished I could get rid of! Just...just the way that they treated each other...how he had her to fall back on...more than a friend...

"Murk, are you all right?"

I jolted up. The picture below me being what I saw before even him. I'd drawn Unity...yes. But I'd drawn her looking right out the page at me with a little knowing smirk. The same one I could imagine that Skydancer had to look at poor Sundial...

The same one I bet she and her buckfriend shared too...she was doing everything that Sundial was to help save somepony they loved.

"Murk? I asked, are you all right?" Protégé had moved over and I gasped, snapping back to

reality and slamming the journal shut before he could see what I'd drawn.

"I...I'm fine! Just um...being me..."

"Something you drew made you weep?" He sat near me, looking genuinely caring but I didn't much fancy confiding in him right now.

"No no...just scared..." I searched for something to distract the conversation, "I don't understand it, really."

"Don't understand what, Murk?"

I pointed out the window. "You bring slaves up here. Get them working on some mountaintop. But I know it wouldn't take any amount of sneakiness to just...move out and away in this weather. Disappear into the night. No walls to keep you in. How do you keep slaves from escaping?"

Yes...good quick thinking, Murky. Ten points.

"Why?" Protégé grinned slightly, a rare smile from him since Ministry Station. "Getting tempted?"

"No..."

"Good."

Protégé shifted, turning move toward me. I could see his eyes were somewhat lifeless and sunken, clearly he still felt the after effects of whatever that place did to him. I'd seen the same look in Glimmerlight at times.

"Good, why?"

"I wouldn't want to know you'd killed yourself, Murk. This mountain keeps slaves in by being impossible to escape from other than via a train. Low visibility, sharp cliffs, far from anywhere with tundra like temperatures even at the best of times...but that's not the real danger. It's the snow, Murk. Similar to the rain in Fillydelphia, not acidic due to lack of toxins in the air but it holds minor radioactive properties."

He saw the slight recoil I made away from the window and the foreboding snowy landscape in the dark of the night outside, quickly waving a hoof.

"We're safe in here, it's a very weak trace of it in the snow. Just strong enough that if anypony spent enough time in it, getting covered in the snow while trying to get anywhere...they'd die before they got half way down the mountain without impractical quantities of RadAway or RadSafe. You shall have to be very careful, Murk."

I huddled up against a crate. "Gee...now I feel *so* much more comfortable..."

"We shouldn't need to spend any much time in it. I notice you have your canteen, we shall top it up before we leave and get you some spares that Grizzly acquired for all of us. That shouldn't be too

hard, guards will be light outside for the same reason. The real fight is inside.”

As he spoke, I couldn't help but feel and ear twitch, a wooden *thump* from further down the train. I looked up at it, before putting it aside as just another sound of this machine moving.

“What...what do you think we'll find?”

Protégé sighed, actively lying down to avoid the cold air whirling through the open sides. “I'm not sure, Murk. Something pre-war...something that would ignite something in Ministry Station, judging by what they said. A key to that sealed room? We already found that portal down there...I presume you're happy with that result.”

I bit my lip. It almost felt worse hearing him casually refer to our escape attempts than to be the stoic slave master preventing them. Now I didn't know *where* he stood on it.

“W-well...G-Glimmer said it wasn't working...”

“Unless this mountain has the information. Shackles wouldn't hesitate to own such a thing, the power it would give him to find slaves from all over the wastes...I don't even know how it works. Maybe it needs something on the other side? Yet I sense it's something else down there. Something else at the core of all those strange...things...and ambiances.”

I heard another faint *tap* again. If Protégé saw my worried glances, he said nothing. It stopped...and I tried to forget about it.

“M-maybe a megaspell orb creator? W-we found these spell orb thingys that let unicorns learn spells they didn't know. B-but you know that, sorry...I mean, what if it were something that did that on a huge scale?”

I didn't want to mention the healing megaspell Weathervane had used to save my life, but it certainly sounded plausible to me. Could something that scale malfunctioning as the balefire hit have caused the memories needed to create it to leak into the station? Oh this was all too complex for me...

Then there was a third tap.

This time, I didn't let it go. Protégé had been around me long enough to recognise when I was getting spooked. (Strangely, *most* ponies seemed to see me as some sort of early warning system now...) He didn't say a word, but looked around as though expecting something.

“Down there...” I whispered to him, pointing further forward into the carriage. A cluster of supply boxes were affixed past the minecarts in this car. We moved toward it, me wincing every time his hooves came down on a creaky bit of wood. Did sneaking feel as natural now that I genuinely found it an annoyance to hear others not being as good as I was?

There it was again...just ahead! Just...in the boxes?

I had to stifle a gasp. We had a stowaway! A spy? A *Shade*?!

I pointed with a hoof, before I saw Protégé lift an iron bar from beside the minecarts and take

the box's lock with magic too. We look to one another and I saw him mouth the words.

One.

Two.

Oh Goddesses oh Goddesses...

Three!

He yanked the box open! We both started forward! I expected a shrill warcry of a raider! The swearing of a slaver!

Instead, I heard the high pitched squeak of a colt.

“So sorry, Mister Protégé! So sorry! Sorry! Sorry sorry sorry! Please don't be angry!”

I almost smacked my own face to check I wasn't imagining it. Right up out of the box, came the little form of Chirpy Sum, covered in sawdust and wrapped in an entire box full of pristine blankets and wore one almost like a cape. He held his hooves together as he pleaded.

“I just really *really* wanted to see outside and around and they all keep telling me I'd be a really big pony in the new world but I couldn't wait and it sounded like an adventure and here I made this cape and its what will let everypony know I'm out on a quest to see things and explore and be with you and Assistant Murky and Mister Grizzly and see what you see and learn so I sneaked out of the logistics place when I was bringing my homework to you when I saw you going to the trains with Murky and-”

He had to stop, taking in a gigantic breath.

“-and I-”

“*Chirpy!*” Protégé shouted the word to interrupt, pulling him out of the box with his magic to stand before him. “Have you any *idea* how much danger you're in here? Master Red Eye would be livid if anything were to happen to you.”

I saw Protégé glance at me rather harshly. Oh dear...I knew there were going to be *words* about a certain pegasus putting ideas in the colts head...

That wasn't what worried me more though.

“We shall have to get you on this train back to Fillydelphia, Ragini will accompany you the entire way to keep you safe. This will leave us one short...”

That wasn't what worried me at all.

It wasn't the worry that Protégé clearly thought of immediately at all. The worry that...if there was *one* pony on this train who would, for once, hear better than I did to recognise the sound of a certain colt's voice and the sound of his name being shouted...

I could already hear the hooves galloping from nearby before the door *slammed* open behind us. It almost surprised me, how much of a panic I felt. Shouldn't I be elated? Overjoyed? This solved a problem!

Instead, I only felt worried for what would transpire.

Coral Eve stood in the doorway, snow whirling in from behind her and breathing hard. I could see her horn was already glowing ready.

“*Chirpy?!?*” She shouted his name, eyes training from side to side until finally she spotted him beside us. Then she was moving, rushing forward.

Chirpy just stood there, almost in shock with eyes widening until it split into a smile larger than I might have thought possible on such a small pony. He rushed forward, shoving his way past Protégé, who only stood looking shocked. Chirpy didn't have to gallop far, before his mother almost dived onto him, her front hooves grabbing and holding him against her chest.

I couldn't help it. I felt my eyes get a little wet at the sight. Seeing her constantly stroking his back and mane as though just to make sure he was *actually there* from second to second or hearing his rapid-fire sentences that barely made any sense as he spoke with his face buried into her neck.

Behind them, I saw most ponies moving through on hearing the commotion. Glimmerlight's eyes went wide, her mouth gaping in shock.

“Mom! *Mooom!* You're back! You're back!”

“I am, my darling! Oh thank goodness you're safe...you're here now...”

Among the ponies watching on, I saw the reunion I had dreamed of for her. Heard her voice flow back to that caring pony I'd seen in Creaky Hollow as she rocked back and forth with her son, whispering and reminding him she was there now for him. I heard him trying to talk through deep sobs, saw her joining him (and I) with tears running down her filthy cheeks and drawing clean lines through all the accumulated dirt of slavery.

I almost mentally dared Protégé to try and take him away from her now. The train wouldn't *survive* if anypony did.

Chirpy opened his eyes, looking over her shoulder as he saw Glimmerlight moving quickly in. He gasped loudly, pawing at his mother to get down and rush to my sister.

“Auntie Glim-Glim! You came with her! Auntie Glim-Glim!”

Leaping up onto her back, just as I'd seen him do to Coral in Creaky Hollow, he hugged her neck. Glimmerlight wiped her eyes and laughed, bending down to swing him around and grab him in her hooves.

“Good to see ya, lil'rascal! Geez, you've grown!” She laughed, cradling him and ruffling his mane. I recognised the way she did it all too well.

Chirpy just galloped from one to the other, back and forth, hugging and leaping onto them. Hyper as only a colt could be. Seeing the three of them, I couldn't help but notice Brimstone back away into the other cart. A wise move...if harsh on himself. Chirpy could have that explained later. But for now...wow...just...

...wow.

A little time went by. Protégé moved to collect his things before returning and sitting near the edge of the carriage, simply watching with a steely expression. Grizzly and Ragini stayed in the other car, while we 'caught up', as they said.

It wasn't all good.

The look on Coral Eve's face as she saw Chirpy's cutie mark was a fight between elation and personal sadness. She had missed him gaining it and looking overjoyed for him as he talked about what it all meant and how he had been doing a lot of maths to become an architect was heartbreaking. She was putting on such a brave face for her son.

It was Glimmer, who really solved it. Announcing to everyone she would organise a cute-ceañera (Whatever that meant) for both Chirpy and for me. (Allegedly, because I never got one. I saw it as her just trying to get me drunk again) The motion helped ease the tone, to start from scratch and let the lost past be at least recreated. Truth be told...I wondered if, while I had been the first thing to help bring them together again, Chirpy might be the glue to seeing the two mares into a better future as friends again.

I could hope.

Only...I knew it was a ticking time bomb. Eventually, those three words just had to come up.

“And! And! And I got to learn how to shoot a laser gun! They let me fire one in the range because it's got no kick to it so I could hold it in my mouth! It was red! Can I get one, mom?”

Coral sniffed, still almost in disbelief and pulled him in close with a hoof.

“When you're older, sweetie. We'll see about finding a blue one, you always liked blue, didn't you?” She waggled her mane a little to him, making him laugh.

“Hehehe! I like blue! But I like red too! It reminds me of all the help Daddy Red Eye gave me when he taught me how to shoot it!”

Coral went very still, just staring at him. I saw Protégé look up from further away, no expression on his face.

“Mom?” Chirpy patted her chest. “Mom, what's wrong? I...I'd like blue too...I...”

Coral lightly pushed him down, toward Glimmer and myself. Oh dear...I knew that look...

She stood, shivering lightly with a deathly look upon her face. Without any warning, she spun,

galloped forward and *smashed* Protégé across the face. The unicorn fell back, taken completely by surprise. She was on him long before Ragini got through the door behind us! A hoof held against his throat, she pressed him back into the corner, beating away the limbs that tried to shove her off.

“*You look at me, you slaver!*”

Her words snapped out, barking at him. She saw Ragini's rifle lowered, her horn sparking into life.

“You dare make this into a firefight with *my son* in here, griffin, you'll lose more than your wings!”

The standoff was set. Glimmer and I pulled Chirpy back, putting him behind the pair of us between a set of minecarts. Brimstone *threw* Grizzly behind him, coming up behind Ragini, standing ready. Yet Coral didn't care.

All the same, everything felt dangerous now. I could swear even the train was rocking harder.

“*LOOK AT ME!* What have you been teaching my son!? What evil ideas did you put in his head? Telling him his father was that *monster* in that city!”

“He-” Protégé choked on his words, her hoof pushing firmly down on him. “He was being...educated...kept safe!”

“Kept safe and *indoctrinated!* Do you have any idea what it's like to hear him call the beast who's kept me as a slave for months and did his level best to *kill me* for his industry 'father'?! Do you monsters even know what that word truly means? *His father was a great pony! A pony taken away from him before he has the chance to know him!*”

I could see tears streaming down her cheeks. Ragini's finger closed on the trigger, gun levelled to her head. Yet that horn only grew in light, Protégé knew its power, I saw him waving to the griffin, trying to signal her away even as he twisted when she pushed her hoof down harder.

“I had to raise him *alone* in the...the wastes! The same wastes that took the pony I loved! Now I come here...find the colt, who was *all* I had left has been...been made to think some slave lord is his...his...”

I actually gasped in shock, her horn lighting more like a proper unicorn's should. Oh Goddesses...the thought of what Coral could do if she could *control* that raw power. Her eyes almost glowed for a second, the pupils shimmering with light. Or was it just the reflection from the hanging lanterns above?

Wait...those lanterns really *were* swinging more. Why were we speeding up?

“Let me ask you one thing, slaver...” She leaned close to him. “Do you honestly look on this now, see the reality of what you've done to so many parents across the wastes and think this is *right*? After *all* you've seen in that fu...in that Station? After what I saw it do to you too?”

Protégé's eyes were rather wide. I saw his mouth try to move. He had no answer, although

lacking much breath was no doubt not helping. I couldn't look too much though, as the entire train bounced and rocked madly. Coral Eve fell off him, Brimstone knocking Ragini aside even when she made to fire, sending a shot whipping through the window. I heard them scuffle, saw her talons swipe at the raider. Protégé rolled to the side, falling into me.

Everything buckled again, the landscape was *whizzing* by outside!

“Pro...Protégé! Should we go this fast?”

Ragini slammed past us, hurled into a minecart. I heard Chirpy shriek, saw Coral get up and run to where Glimmer held him safe.

“NO!” Protégé shouted it, leaping to his hooves and pulling open the next door. I followed him as we ran away from the developing brawl to go further up the train. Two more carriages bouncing and hurling up from wall to wall. I felt the wheels actually lift off the tracks once! Terror gripped my heart at the feeling of vertigo before it slammed back down. At the end of it, Protégé turned and bucked open the driver's door.

“Driver! What is the meaning of this? *Slow down!*” He cried into the room as he struggled in.

I saw the corpses first. Two ponies lying gutted at the side of the room, lengthways. I had to choke back the urge to vomit, before my attention was taken by the driver who now stood there.

He turned back to us, lifted up his big plaided cap and revealed a crazed smile and multicoloured mane. *What?!*

“Why slow down? It's *fun!*” Cackled Wildcard. “WHOO WHOO!”

He honked on the train's horn pulley as he spoke, pursing his lips and making train noises at us.

“Slow it down!” Protégé lunged at him. “You'll make it crash off an edge! Murky, get the brake!”

Wildcard didn't even have to struggle, Protégé went down in a flurry of hooves from the big raider, grabbing the unicorn's mane in his magic and holding him up before shoving him away with his hooves. I saw Protégé try to lift a stoking rod with his magic, but Wildcard wrenched it away with his own and bucked the slave master out of the driver's compartment entirely!

“You all said you wanted a faster pace to this journey, didn't you?!” He laughed madly as he cranked a handle forward.

I simply stood rock still in terror as those mismatched beady eyes glared right through me.

“Well be careful what you wish for! I'm *always* listening! Chugga-chugga! Chugga chugga! Round and round the big train goes...where it crashes...”

He snapped the brake lever off, I saw us heading toward a sharp bend through the whirling blizzard!

“...NO-PONY KNOWS! BAAHAHAHA!”

I screamed, the train shuddered and twisted. I felt gravity disappear and a sensation of being hurled around when the entire train spun around me. Even as we crashed, even as I saw *him* thrown around in my whirling vision and pain of slamming again and again against things I couldn't see under the blurs...I heard his psychotic laughter filling my ears, mocking me.

With a tortured scream of metal I felt myself being hurled through the windscreen of the train. My wings attempted to spread, desperately trying to catch the wind and instead simply making me spin madly in the air as both the burning engine carriage and I were cast into the dark void that dropped away over the edge of the cliff.

* * *

A hard floor clanged beneath my chin as I tripped and went clattering across the ground. My hooves felt like lead...numb and tired. Everything looked blurry. Just a vague red and grey haze around me in...in a hallway? A street? Where...what was I...

Somepony nearby was breathing hard. Galloping. They passed by me...stopped...came back. Hooves wrapped around my neck, tugging me. I could hear somepony shouting in my ears, crying for me to get up and keep going!

Somehow, just *anypony* asking it of me got me up. They supported me...a soft touch yet so determined and eager. Their voice was...was just muffled...a mare's? S-sis? Pip?

I could heard ponies behind me, dull drifting sounds of chase and bloodthirsty cries. An overwhelming fear passed through me. We were fleeing from something...knowing that to be caught would be worse than a quick death! Why did I know that?

What...what was happening?

We fell again, together. Holding onto one another as we tumbled and rolled...careening down something to a soft ground. We stood up, *together*, supporting one another.

So far to go...we wouldn't make it?

Make it...make it where?

I felt the touch of another pony fading...felt the world drifting away as a cold sharp ice cut into my body and I felt my throat swell. Pain...such pain...as it broke the ice and let me surface back to-

* * *

-life!

I gasped, convulsing and making spasms on the spot. My eyes flickered open to see darkness above. Fierce flames were spread around me in the thick of a heavy snowfall, their embers drifting with the cold white through the air in the pitch darkness of midnight. The train, devastated and scattered all across a deep snow field, was burning and snapping as the wood fell apart.

Then the pain properly hit, the moment I tried to move. I cried out, a hoof going to my side when I felt a hot lance pierce through me. Daring to look down, I saw a shard of metal stuck into me. I was *covered* in bruising...a rib felt broken. I...I couldn't see right through one eye!

Panic, panic from pain was rising! I barely even felt the sudden wracking cough growing in my throat until I sprayed a light mist of red across the deep snow drift that had saved my life just as well as it was now slowly killing me. I had to...I had to move...

It made me cry. It made me whine and squeal, but I got up. The grappling hook by my side had stopped the shard of metal digging in any further. It was small, I could still trot...

Staggering, dizzy and tired; I moved through the wreckage. I cried out for my friends. The carriages at the back looked more intact! They...they could be alive! There weren't any bodies around!

Convulsing, I fell to my side. My lungs felt huge inside me, swollen and sore! The stabbing pain in my side getting worse every time I hacked and spluttered. Crawling, I moved among the fires, trying to find something! Anything!

There!

The carriage we had been in! I saw the box Old Grizzly had brought! Step by step, I made my way toward it, seeing that little purple glow sticking out of the snow. My hooves were already getting numb with my short size sending them deep under the top layer. The wind kept blowing my mane across my face. Outside of the fires...I could see nothing, just a dark void punctured by the occasional shadow of a tree.

Almost falling, I grasped the box, tugging it upright! Two healing potions! I forced myself up onto a length of iron sheared from the train, to get myself out of the snow and bit down hard on a piece of wood. This...this wouldn't be pretty, but I knew it *had* to be done! Come on, Murky...you're strong now! You survived being impaled! You can-

I reached down, pulling the shard free of myself.

In some time, I hadn't quite shrieked and squealed like that. Blood leaked from my side, my cries turning into a sick coughing before I greedily downed both potions. I didn't care what amounts were needed, I just wanted all of it! Quickly, the pain began to fade as the strong magic did its work, the tingle as my flesh re-knitted into a tender closed wound making me shiver all the more than from the cold. That dealt with, I dragged my saddlebag open, thanking the Goddesses that it was still with me that I could down the entire contents of my canteen, about a quarter left.

With that, I lay back on the slab of metal. I had time now...time to think. Sweating from the fires so close to me, even while shivering as that very sweat tingled in the cold winds, I wrapped my wings and tail around me. What to do?

The front engine carriage was down here, shattered and burning. Looking up I could see flames from others still at the top of some giant slope. The ones my friends had been in must have rolled more gently...they weren't utterly smashed like the front engine. There was some comfort in that. There weren't any corpses around, I smelled no burning flesh. This...this had been their carriage! My friends

likely weren't dead! If *I* had survived that in the front car, they likely were injured but *alive*. If...if I waited here I had something to keep me out of the snow and fires to stay warm! Wait till morning, find my friends! They'd come back to look here, I knew it!

Almost on cue, I heard movement nearby. Somepony spluttering as they shoved aside some metal. I stood up, wincing as I did and looked over toward the driver's cab. Protégé?!

The sight of somepony came into view. A stallion. A large one. *Brim!*

Nope...

I thought it just the snow, but that white coat began to get clearer the more I looked at it. Oh Goddesses...don't leave me alone with him! Wildcard had...had lived! He was right over there!

"I don't see any gorgeous little pegasus bodiiies!"

His head looked around, I crouched low behind the metal plate. The shape moved around the wreck, magic lifting a machete from near to him and tapping on every metal surface as he searched.

"That means we get to play hide and go scream! Come on little birdy!" He laughed gleefully, quickly looking around every scrap. Even from here, I could see the horrible wounds, burns and spilled blood across him. He didn't even seem to *care!*

I...no...I couldn't stay here. He'd find me long before morning.

Yet as I looked into that darkness, I couldn't help but remember what Protégé had said about this place.

"Come out, come out! Come play with me! I said *come out!*" Wildcard's voice dropped, angrily throwing aside some scrap as he picked up the pace and stormed around. "You don't wanna play with me, huh? You little fucking rat! *Why not?! Everyone always plays with me but you won't! COME HERE!*"

That was enough incentive to go. The murderous rage set him galloping around, squealing like a pig and stamping on places I might have managed to fit into! Turning, I galloped off. The snow sank beneath me and I almost fell, my side hurt so bad...my chest did too, my bandages soaking through from Wildcard's last encounter with me. Gasping with the pain, I couldn't do anything but limp, galloping was...was too much!

Slowly, I inched away, heading into the black. I tried to stick to rocks to stay out of the snow, but it was so deep! Wildcard became a blur as he began to wander nearer to me behind the smoke. I simply heard his blade sliding over rocks. Oh please please...

The snowfall picked up. No...it didn't. I just was far from the fires! It wasn't melting in the air now! It got in my eyes, landed on my back, made everything damp! My fleece felt thick and heavy and I had to pull out my goggles just to see better. Slowly, the fire got further away, becoming just a pale glow in the background as I simply headed *away* from where-ever I heard Wildcard. He too was venturing out, squealing in the darkness, insulting me. Sometimes shouting that he saw me before I heard him hacking at a tree.

Gradually...his voice faded too.

Before long, I couldn't even see the fire.

I passed trees, worked around rocks and moved into the mountain's landscape. I...I hadn't realised how *cold* it could get...the fires had kept me warmed but out here it...it was...

I couldn't feel my hooves...

Every step, they trudged right up to my underbelly. The pain faded on my side as everything began to lose feeling. My teeth *hurt* from chattering, that loose tooth shaking about. I...I needed a rock to get on...s-stay out of it...

Looking around, I realised I couldn't even see more than a foot in any direction. There were no lamps, no lights, no moon to show me the way. This was the deep wilderness, where night was absolute. Even my eyes, so used to working in darkness, had nothing to see by. Occasionally, I'd stumble across a tree, then a group of them. I realised I was nearing the edge of a forest, invisible to me until I was right beside the ghostly snow filled trees.

Gradually, I began to feel a burning sensation in my throat. My rad-sores tingled, stinging on my snout and leg. Oh please...no no...

I had to head back. Wildcard would...would be gone! I couldn't survive out here! Then I realised I didn't even know which way that was. I tried to find my hoofprints but the snow had already covered them!

I was lost.

Unable to think straight, I tried to gallop. In a flurry of snow, I only ended up tripping. My whole skull felt thick and clotted. A headache began to pound so hard that against the low whipping of wind it felt like drums. A light cough started as my throat began to itch. My chest tingled...

"Glimmer!"

I cried out, before roughly coughing. I screamed again. And again. The snow was building and I was having to fight to stay on top of it. The wet sloshing coating my body as I struggled to find a way to...to anywhere. I tried to look at my Pipbuck, Glimmer said the map worked, yet all I found was that it had been covered in a veil of slush. I couldn't see anything on its faded screen.

"Coral! Briim!" I shouted to the mountain, expecting no reply as hope began to drain from me. The fear truly began to set in. I was...was...

I was so alone...

My hooves found an uphill feeling. Perhaps...perhaps I could make it to the sharper mountain cliffs, find shelter! Struggling, I heaved myself forward, trying to head upwards. Every few steps I staggered, coughing and choking. I had to keep wiping my goggles with my sleeve as they misted up. With my little light on the Pipbuck, I tried to see anything, but the snow just reflected the light back in

and almost blinded me. Yet it showed me I was right, go uphill! Find rock walls!

The memories of my coma induced dreaming were...were faded, but I couldn't help but remember the feeling of an empty wasteland with no-pony to meet.

I don't know how long I wandered alone, trying to keep moving upwards. It took me minutes to move a few meagre feet. Every step growing heavier...I couldn't even feel the ground. I didn't even realise my body was shaking so much that I'd fallen over. Lazily raising a hoof, I tried to pull myself onward with the snow beating down on my face. I felt so lost, a million miles from anywhere I knew in a cold forested tundra.

The feeling grew inside me, the fear moving with it. I knew the sensation by now. My stomach churned and grew hot, my chest thumping as I found I couldn't breathe in. It erupted hard, a spasm of my entire body as I fell again to my side, wheezing and coughing. I saw red fall onto the snow, again and again. It kept growing, my nose felt blocked...my throat running hot and bitter with metallic iron...I...I...

The coughs kept coming, a bubbling filling my throat. *I couldn't breathe!* I felt blood running back down my throat, clogging into me! Desperation filled me, I started flailing with my hooves, dragging myself up through the snow, inch by inch. Please...find something! I started sucking hard, trying to swallow down and get *any* air in...I sucked out of my canteen, tried anything.

In the minute and a half it took me to finally lose control of my body from lack of oxygen I made it another ten feet, crawling before finally collapsing in the snow as it began to fall atop me, burying me while I lay twitching and terrified. I couldn't feel anything other than my burning throat as I laid my head down, only moving when my body convulsed...before lying still when all efforts to get any air failed.

* * *

A fever dream mixed in with a numbing cold. I dreamed of no true images, no ponies aiding me or Stable Dwellers shooting slavers. I merely felt enclosed...trapped, an abstract sense of being unable to move or breathe played out with every second feeling longer. It was like back in the crater, when I had passed out...only much much worse.

Something was tugging at me, making my body shift and move uncomfortably. It hurt and I moaned loudly.

Then something hurt my ears. A noise. Somepony screaming in my ear for me to wake up. I felt something jammed into my mouth, an acidic taste washing into my throat and making me choke and retch. I vomited hot blood, falling back into the cold reality around me. The calm of the dreaming broken as snow lashed against my face and I felt that same object thrust into my lips again. Citric burning flowed down my throat, yet brought with it a calming chill, separate from the cold, that eased the harsh swelling within me.

The last barriers of unconsciousness shattered away.

“*Murk!*” Somepony screamed into my ear again, knowing it would be heard much more!

I grasped the sachet, my hooves lazily pawing around it. I choked and coughed again and again, the fight between RadAway and my sickness wracking my body harshly. Opening my eyes, I couldn't see much through my misted and snow filled goggles, but I could see my own body...the exposed flesh of my wound pale like a corpse from cold.

Hooves were pulling at me, just like in my dream. I felt myself being lifted, thrown over somepony's back and I wearily clutched around their neck. Finally, I dropped the empty sachet and tried to breathe, a thick and entirely unsatisfying wheeze making its way in...but any oxygen was a shock to the system to restart.

The pony beneath me was moving, struggling hard as he moved forward. I clung to them, my back legs drooped either side of their torso. Only with a flash of red and black did I realise who it was. I could see an eyepiece blinking, pointing back toward me.

“P...Pro...”

“Hang on, Murk...just hang on!”

It seemed to take hours. It could have been minutes. He carried me uphill, in an entirely different direction to where I'd gone. We moved past clumps of trees until I felt the wind lessen, a looming rock wall growing ahead of us. Near to it, through my mostly blocked goggles, I saw a black gap of a cave. Two figures were looking out of it. One ran out, azure blue magic carrying a thick blanket.

There had never been any sweeter feeling than seeing my sister's face as the warmth of a heated fabric was wrapped around me, carrying me out of the wind and into the cave.

Finally, in a better way this time, I passed out knowing I would be all right.

* * *

“It would have to be you, wouldn't it, eh?”

I sat shivering in a blanket, sucking deep on a packet of Radaway. Before me a fire glowed in the cave and kept most of the outside air's freezing temperatures out. Technically it was destroying my night vision to stare into it but I just didn't care. It looked warm and I wanted to *feel* warm.

Glimmerlight sat beside me, a hoof around me and another blanket draped over her as well.

“If *any* of us were going to be the one who got thrown away from the rest and got lost, it *would* be you and your luck. I'm just glad you still had your Pipbuck, Protégé wouldn't have found you otherwise...”

Yes...Protégé. He'd saved my life for sure. Not just me even, his E.F.S had been the one to detect those he could find and group them together until they found the cave. My sister, Brimstone, Coral and her son Chirpy had all made it here. Mother and son were huddled at the back, Chirpy silent after the horrible shock to his system and held close to his mother's chest. Brimstone was near the entrance of the cave, staring out into the black void and little wisps of snowy white in the air that whirled in the blizzard outside.

Of Grizzly and Ragini...nothing was known.

Protégé was near us, helping build the fire to ward off his own chill. Everypony looked weak. I saw a few empty healing potions in the corner and a good few bruises. It turned out that Glimmer had protected Chirpy with her body in the crash and taken quite a bad slam in particular. Protégé had fallen back into the second wagon. Thankfully, aside from the front engine carriage the rest hadn't gone right off the edge of the small cliff like mine did, instead sliding and rolling after the twisted rail caught them. My friends had gotten clear either before the fall or had been thrown from the train in the crash. Only the one I'd been in had plummeted right away.

If I hadn't been thrown clear through the window...

“Here, keep drinking, Murk.” Protégé lifted a purple potion to me. “Can you see through your eye again?”

“A...a bit...”

My body still ached. I'd still been recovering as it was and even after three potions it still didn't feel right. At the very least, I wasn't in any danger anymore. Vision had yet to fully return to my right eye and it all felt swollen. I couldn't help but worry that my eyesight would have a lot of problems later in life after all this.

I almost laughed. There notion of worrying about any one part of me failing earlier in life than it should after what slavery had done to my entire body over the years seemed trivial.

“Yes...” I finally replied to Glimmer. “It would be me.”

“Hey, don't feel down about that, lil'bro.” She smiled and gave me a careful squeeze. “As I hear it, you got all the way back up from that lower part of the mountain by yourself in snow that, by all rights, should have dropped you *much* earlier than it did. Hell, I'm impressed.”

I blinked, looking up at her with wide eyes. “R-really?”

“Just the wild stallion within driving you on, Murky. You're stronger than you think you are.”

All the same, I saw her looking a little worried. I'd been around Glimmer long enough to see it in her eyes.

“We'll get you out...I'm not going to lose you to some disease when we're *this* close. Don't listen to what the doctors tell you, Murky...”

“I...I'll try.”

“Just, hang on, okay?” She leaned down and hugged me. “I know it's getting worse, we'll keep finding you that Radaway. Not long now...just *hang on*...please...”

She held on for a little, before patting my shoulder and getting up to go back to her work. She'd recovered a few weapons from the wreckage before they got away and now spent time trying to keep

them clean from all the ice forming over them. I simply tugged my blanket in closer and went back to sipping that foul orange juice to quell the burning in my lungs and throat. I'd had to go into the back of the cave twice already to throw up and I didn't much feel like it again...

Still, I managed to feel a little better from Glimmer's words. Coral nodded in agreement, before going back to coddling her son a little. The poor thing barely knew what was happening. All around me, those in the cave were huddling as best they could. It was *freezing* in here, the walls were lined with a thin layer of ice and I could see the hard stone floor numbing me where I sat. I'd tried to just sit quiet and draw with my journal open in front of me...but it wasn't any good. My teeth kept dropping the charcoal.

"S-so...what do we d-do now, Protégé?" I still chattered as I tried to resist the cold of a gust of wind sweeping through and whipping the fire to one side.

"We can't go back out there, n-not now." I saw him bite his lip, pulling fabric over himself like all the others. "We'll need to last the night first and it's only g-going to get colder as the weather front closes in. In the morning, we'll make a decision."

"Colder?!" I squeaked a little, before coughing badly.

I heard Brimstone shift back from the entrance and stomp across to the fire before setting down. "Aye, the wind's getting stronger out there. Temperature's going to drop hard. Just keep the fire up."

Protégé didn't look up but simply nodded blithely and prodded at the fire a little more. We had a small stack of wood drying beside it that Brimstone had brought in. He was the only one of us properly able to resist the cold out there for any length of time. Brimstone occasionally went for wood, Protégé worked the fire and managed to produce a small book from his saddlebag and Glimmer kept working on our equipment using said warmth. After a little time, she took my battle saddle from me to straighten out the broken parts of it. Seeing the mouthpiece all bent like that genuinely made me feel quite sad...it was *my* saddle I'd always wanted...

Instead of just simply sitting watching her, I moved over to Coral and Chirpy.

"Is...is he all right?" I spoke to Coral, sitting in front of her and looking at the shivering little foal.

"He's with me." She spoke flatly, as though that's all that needed be said.

Chirpy looked at me and, bless his little heart, tried to smile a little. "H-hello mister assistant Murky..."

"Hi, Chirpy." I leaned over and stroked his mane a little. Truth be told I was feeling a little protective of him myself. I didn't like seeing foals in hardship. "You gave us a little s-scary back on the train, in that b-box."

I tried to laugh with it, but he just quaked. "I didn't want t-to make anyone angry...I just wanted to help. You're not angry are you, mom?"

Coral Eve took a second before shaking her head and clutching him close under the rugs they

had over them. “No, darling...not at you...”

“Is it b-because I got my cutie mark and didn't tell you?” The poor thing looked on the verge of tears, like he was afraid he'd done things wrong.

“No! No...it's not. Mommy's just...just missed you...”

“I missed you too, mom.”

I bit my lip, trying not to intrude. Yet I could see how upset all this with Chirpy made Coral. If I could maybe even help a little to break the ice on it and help repair this...

“H-how did you get your cutie mark, Chirpy?” I attempted a cheerful tone and winced internally as I saw Coral's glance at me. Please, let him talk, it's better than nothing, Coral.

The colt struggled and sat up a little, he looked to Coral as though to see if she agreed to him talking and saw her nod.

“Well...I-I was in the classroom? We were learning things about how to build stuff, o-okay? All the numbers and angles and cool stuff like that! They w-ere...um...using a lot of really cool things I didn't know yet! I learned to do trigonometry!”

Trigo-what-now? Oh great, there was a ten year old in the cave and I was *still* the least educated pony for miles.

Chirpy it seemed was getting more into it, looking at myself and Coral alternately as he spoke, gaining speed and volume as it gave him something to think about other than the trauma he'd been through.

“It was really complex and I had so much fun! The teachers s-said I was a natural. Then we did things like...um...like, weights and measuring how much materials could take or hold up! We got to make little things with clay blocks and bricks! Then...then we learned what makes archways stay up and how to make safety rails really strong!”

Forget it. That decided it. Red Eye was the best thing to ever happen to the wasteland if *that* last thing was what he was teaching kids.

It was about that moment, to my surprise, I saw the others were looking over too. Even Brimstone, diplomatically on the opposite side of the fire from them, turned an ear to it all. Chirpy looked a little taken aback, before continuing.

“Well there...uh...there was this teacher who came in and he was doing architecture with us! We didn't like him 'cos he was stinky and shouted at us if we did it wrong. But...um...he marked my test? It was right but he said it was wrong! He was trying to say its the big side squared that's equal to the square root of the other two sides squared! But it's actually just the length of the big side if you're square rooting the other two first! You don't square it too if you have a square root in the equation already!”

Chirpy coughed, pulling his blanket away a little to show his cutie mark. “Then um...he sort of

didn't say anything for a while as he worked on it...then this appeared and everypony knew I was right.”

I saw Coral's face flush with abject *pride* as she heard her little colt reel off things that I imagined neither her nor I got. However I did see both Protégé and Glimmer grin widely and nod.

“Well done, Chirpy.” Protégé spoke warmly. “I believe I know who you meant too...I may have to remind him of that should I need amusement someday. When you next see hi-”

“*Excuse me?*” Coral's eyes narrowed, darting up to Protégé's. I saw the slaver flinch. Of course...that moment on the train had been cut rather short. I imagined Protégé on his own with us had been rather smartly trying to avoid the subject again. The two shared glances, a tension growing in the room as I heard Glimmer pause her work and look over.

After a few seconds, Protégé turned away and went back to tinkering with his eyepiece between his hooves. Coral Eve watched him for a few seconds before simply sighing.

“Well done, my dear. I always knew you'd be a smart colt. I'm proud of you.”

“Aww...thanks mom.” He leaned up and hugged her tight. “I don't know what made you angry...I just want everything to be happy...”

“It will be. It will be...” She stroked the back of his mane, mouthing a quiet 'thank you' to me. Wow...had I actually made the right choice in helping someone with words?

“Well, well...” Glimmerlight snapped the mouthpiece back into place on my saddle, “we heard your little story, Chirpy...we already know Murky's too. Hey Brim, how'd you gets yours then?”

“For what reason?” He rumbled, looking out and guarding the entrance again.

Glimmer sighed and rolled her eyes at the rest of us. “Look, we're all stuck in this dank cave freezing cold till morning. We can either sit depressed or have something to keep us going. So come on, how did *you* get that beast of a mark?”

Brim looked back, around at the rest of us and seemed to sigh in exasperation. I didn't imagine his mentality dealt with tough times by sharing stories very much.

“When I killed my first pony. Not much older than the colt there. Father had broken the back of this town over near the Everfree and we'd all moved into it. Looting, selling off prisoners...usual raider stuff. I saw this little green haired filly trying to pull her toy back off Limb Hack, one of the young bucks in the clan at the time and son of my father's biggest rival...till that rival became me anyway.”

He grunted and adjusted how he was sitting, his one eye staring into the fire.

“He was toying with her, trying to make her cry. At the time, I only wanted to kick the shi-”

He caught Coral's careful cough.

“Hmph...fine...wanted to beat him up because he kept trying to push me around for being younger despite being almost as big as him already. Quick grower, heh...”

I saw him smirk at some memory.

“Stomped him down from behind. Didn't care about the filly, just wanted an excuse to take him down. Only after it was done that filly thanked me and galloped off out the town. Dunno what happened to her. Got my mark after that...thought it was cos I beat a rival. Father said it was.”

Glimmerlight trotted over, patting the side of his shoulder. “But now you're older you see what it actually meant. A shield?”

“Bloody, broken, rusted...not something you'd see a hero carry. Fits me then. Figured it out years later, but of course I couldn't let that on to the Clan. You don't show weakness. You don't show hesitation. You *rule*. You *kill*. Only one pony I ever mentioned it to was in the late days when I was getting tired and old. The one pony in the Clan who I knew wouldn't see it as weakness.”

I blinked a little at that. One pony? Hmm...

It was something of a surprise to me that Chirpy didn't seem afraid of Brimstone while sitting wide eyed and listening to the story. Perhaps Protégé had explained things long ago? Or his mother and Glimmer had before I got to the cave?

“Mom, how did you get yours?”

That was that then. The thing to keep us all occupied and distracted from the rapidly dropping temperature was to be cutie mark stories. Slowly, we all ended up closer to the fire, sharing in its warmth as Coral told her tale. That it was off in another village far from Creaky Hollow that she grew up in. How she had, even as a filly, been the one to watch out for the other foals she played with and matured quickly to take care of them as the eldest of the children.

“Yet it wasn't until somepony tried to take one of them away that I really figured it out, my first time properly using telekinesis that tore the colt from that slaver's grasp and back to me before we ran. That's when this thing appeared.”

My eyes shifted to her cutie mark. I wasn't sure I got it...her magic only became like a tidal wave shown there after her horn rot damaged her control of it. She must have seen me looking.

“Water is life, Murky. At the top of it all, it's what takes care of us all as much as air itself. I realised then that it's because I wanted to help other ponies to grow and be better than what the wasteland was offering them.”

Glimmerlight nudged her on the shoulder. “And the wave shape to remind no-pony to underestimate their power and start messing with them, just like the tidal waves!”

“I suppose you could say that...” I saw a wistful look in Coral's eyes behind that calm smile. One way or the other, she'd lost a lot of what her magic *could* have been thanks to one stupid disease long ago. I knew how she felt all too readily.

I told mine again after that. My story of how I'd misinterpreted it. Protégé hadn't heard it, nor had Chirpy. My story had to pause every couple of minutes to suck on some Radaway or to shiver deeply. The cold was getting worse, I could see some of us getting paler and drawing everything we could to cover one another close. Brimstone even sat right beside me to act as a windbreak while I chattered my teeth and tried not to tear up while remembering that day on the rock farm. Yet feeling them all around me, listening intently, I tried to cheer it up. I even tried to make a joke about how it had demolished the part of the wall that some of the other slaves had just spent time building!

A few little smiles grew amongst my friends. I saw Protégé chuckle lightly. The feeling at having said something to make that happen made my chest swell. Murky the comedian! I could perform in Tenpony! Draw pictures by day and make everypony laugh by night and be happy forever! Maybe I could even get a show on the radio and tell jokes to make my hero laugh, wherever she was. *Eeehehe!*

After about ten seconds I began to realise everypony was staring at me and wondering why I was giggling madly to myself in my own overactive imagination. All except Chirpy, he was laughing with me before stopping suddenly and looking around as he realised the 'joke' was over. Biting my lip and blushing, I tried to hide it under a cough and turned to Glimmer.

“So um...how did you get yours?”

“Oh please...” Coral chided, but I saw the little smirk at the edge of her mouth, “there are children in the cave.”

“Oh come *on* it's not that bad!” Glimmer protested back, putting hooves on hips.

There was a brief moment of staring between the two, before both just laughed. Oh how it warmed my heart more than any fire against the chill in the air to see that they were finding a little more common ground now. At least, until a whip of cold air surged through the cave. I saw everypony shiver and clutch close to themselves or somepony else. (I was just clamping onto Glimmer to warm *her*...yes...that was it)

“W-w-well...” Glimmerlight ruffled my mane as I slowly let go, “it's n-not as crazy as my other stories. See, I'd been learning how to do orb work even as a f-foal. It just interested me! I kept thinking how it'd let me relive the best times of my life over and over...”

I saw her clutch her rug tighter around herself. Somehow, I could guess it wasn't just from the cold.

“I guess that's not how it turned out, huh? But regardless, back then we were springing a surprise party for one of the other initiates. Only he stumbled in on it while we were setting it up! I was so disappointed, I'd even painted up a banner after 'acquiring' some from the stocks we weren't maybe supposed to touch. The initiate...he asked me to use my magic on him. To make him forget he'd seen it!”

Despite the cold, she smiled warmly.

“Th-that did it. H-he got a great party from the rest of the younger generation in Bucklyn. I d-did good with it...kinda what I want to do more for again. Like the one I m-made for you Murky.”

“Hey!” Chirpy poked his head out of the veritable cocoon of fabric his mother had wrapped him in. “C-can you make one for me?! I wanna remember the time we went out and pretended we were saving a Princess from that cave in the woods!”

Something about seeing that look on Glimmer's face as he asked made me feel warmer than any fire. She laughed, agreeing to do so once we got back.

“So what about you?”

Glimmer had spoken again, her head turned toward Protégé. The unicorn looked up, as though surprised somepony asked.

“M-me?”

“Yeah! How did you get that big ornate cutie mark anyhow?”

I saw him look rather unsure, his eyes turning away.

“It's...not worth mentioning.”

“Aw, c'mon!”

“Really!” His voice turned sharper, his head looking to the side. “Just...just while reading something about the past it appeared...th-that's all...”

There was an odd silence, the awkward look on his face said a lot about how little he was describing about that mark he had. The two Goddesses circling around with a red eye in the middle. I understood how the past might relate to the Goddesses...but that eye made no sense, he got it as a foal but didn't meet Red Eye till long after.

My mane whipped up and I heard almost everypony else gasp as a frigid chill raced through the cave from the outside. The fire spluttered, almost blowing out and without it...I began to feel that icy creep of the temperature being lower than before in the near pitch darkness. Chirpy squeaked and clutched in close to his mother.

“We must rest.” Protégé stated it rather clearly. “We won't be any use tomorrow for this if we are all running on no sleep...we'll take watches, keep the fire going large.”

“I'll take first watch.” Brimstone rumbled and trotted to the side of the cave to cover it as much he could. “Pair up, body heat will help more than anything right now.”

To be honest...sleep sounded good about now. My body was weak and tired after everything in the last day and that horrid climb in the snow. I saw Coral begin to settle, pulling the blankets around her and Chirpy. Naturally, those two paired well. That sounded good...a chance to just close my eyes...staying warm next to my sist-

I saw her already beside Brimstone, grinning madly at me. I know exactly why.

“Oh...you're *evil*...” I hissed at her, trying to look as incredulous as I could.

“I *know*.” Glimmerlight only smiled innocently back.

Well...nothing for it. I trotted over, dragging my blanket around the fire to sit down beside the slaver who 'owned' me. I could never really forget that fact right now. He was throwing some thin sticks onto the fire, before shifting back against the wall and drawing the blankets up with his magic.

“Are you feeling quite recovered, Murk?” He asked it quietly when I lay down beside him, each wrapped in our own blanket as his magic dropped another one over the top of both of us. I saw Coral and Glimmer do the same for their own pairs near the fire and settle down. Brimstone kept his back to the fire, one hoof protectively around the mare at his side to keep her warm.

Of course, I could see her peeking and very likely enjoying the sight of us lying beside one another to share warmth. Her and I needed to have a very big *talk* one of these days...

“Y-yeah...just a sh-shock. I know how Chirpy feels...”

“Happens to the best of us, Murk. Don't worry about it, we'll g-get by, like in the metro.”

There was a brief silence between us at that. The metro had been a nightmare for both of us...having to go through that place *twice*. More so for Protégé and whatever it had made him realise about himself.

“I guess...” There wasn't much else I could think to say.

“However, I am glad to see you are no longer the slave you once were.”

That caught me off guard, I twisted to look at him, but saw only a serious face looking back from beside me.

“Y-you are?”

“I am. Even from the start, I had wanted to see you be more yourself...don't you remember what I told you when we first met? That you had to taste freedom to truly know?” He smiled thinly. “I think you're starting to.”

I'd never really thought of it like that. Sure, I...I'd told myself I was no slave of my own mind any more. That I was no-pony's property. But I'd never really felt that last step of owning *true* freedom yet. Hearing that from Protégé, well...that meant a lot...

“Now settle down, get some sleep. You'll need it, I imagine.”

“Okay...”

It didn't take long for most of us to drift off, despite the cold. I saw Glimmerlight happily lounged over against her protector, warm and recovering. Chirpy went out like a light, his mother taking some time to fall asleep as she just kept staring at him in disbelief. I could see it in her eyes. The fear that if she slept...she would wake up to him gone again. It took her some time to finally relax.

As for myself, I didn't last too long even with the cold. The fire and being close to somepony else under the blankets was enough to let me rest...even if my sleep was light and filled with restless dreams of Unity and the fear of what would happen if I didn't use this opportunity to get her back.

Just hold on, Unity...I'll be there for you.

Just like you had been for me so many times before...

* * *

I found myself waking in the middle of the night.

Slowly, I shifted, opening heavy eyes to see the fire burning bright before me. Brimstone sat watching the cave entrance like some immovable sentinel. He hadn't woken any of us...

“Murk?”

I looked to my side, Protégé lay on his front there, tired eyes looking over at me.

“Can't sleep?”

I lay down on my belly, sighing. “I can...I'm just not used to this. So much happening, so many things, such...um...scale?”

“Scale is correct.”

“Yeah, such scale of everything. I just, uh...can't settle for long. I'm not used to this at all. All my life just catching small naps and knowing nothing was really *happening*. Now everything *is* happening and I just don't know how to switch off.”

He nodded, turning his head to look back at me more properly. I could feel him shivering through the blanket, clearly he was as unused to the cold as I was. Heck...he probably had the same trouble sleeping as I did.

“Just try to think on something that's a constant to you, Murk. Like your friends or your greatest dreams.”

“Mhm...” I nodded myself, seeing my journal lying to the side, a thin layer of frost over it, “Protégé can, uh...I ask something?”

He looked surprised, before slowly nodding. “Of course, as always.”

“How *did* you get your cutie mark? I...I mean...you wouldn't have known Red Eye.”

Protégé went rather still, his eyes taking on a sad and faraway look. Slowly, I felt him shift and get his hooves below him to lay more properly.

“I did not feel comfortable speaking of it amongst all listening, I'm sorry.”

“I...uh...understand?”

Protégé didn't acknowledge my words at all. “Speaking to you though, as somepony who understands what it's like, however. Suffice to say, you have made a mistake. Yes, my mark bears Princess Celestia of the sun and Princess Luna of the moon as an image of an old world. The red eye is...”

I saw him make a gesture not common to him, a nervous biting of his lip.

“Suffice...suffice to say, times were different when I was brought to Fillydelphia than when you were Murk. Master Red Eye was still gaining much of his control over the slavers. A great number carried out the things they did before being employed. Ways of...identifying their slaves...”

I felt a shoot of cold down my spine. It wasn't the temperature of the cave.

“That eye is not my cutie mark, Murk.” He sighed. “It's a brand.”

I didn't even know what to say. Just...I really didn't. Of course I wouldn't have known. Protégé had been a slave here years before myself. Any others who had fallen prey to such a horrific practice would no longer be alive in Fillydelphia's conditions by now to have seen it before.

“I...I'm sor-”

“Yet, scar or not. It is a part of me now. I signify it in my mind, wear it proudly to cast away the terror and loss of self that they sought to impress upon me. I feel no shame...”

Frankly, Protégé, you don't sound it. I would never dare imply that out loud however. The topic needed to change. If it didn't, I knew I was liable to want to blurt some awkward pity. All the same, I couldn't help but lay a hoof on his shoulder through the blankets, just to let him know he didn't have to consider it a shameful thing to talk about.

“So, you said you read something to...um...get your *real* mark. What was it?”

He settled down and made a small smile again. “The old world, Murk. A book written by Twilight Sparkle herself. 'The Elements of Harmony, a Reference Guide, Version two. Covering the history of them till our modern day. Once I finished, I saw my own mark upon my flank. After reading of Celestia and Luna, the balance of that which was once great. Yet it was not reading of peace that brought me to realising what it was I wanted to recreate. No...it was upheaval and the restoration that stemmed from it. The tale of Nightmare Moon. When an imbalance brought the land into darkness and lay a terrible choice at the hooves of those who could save it!”

Eyes closed as though remembering it all, he spoke in a hushed conviction as we huddled together and tried not to wake the others with our talk. If Brimstone heard, he gave no sign.

“The older sister, Celestia...she had to bring the world to the light once more, even if that meant having to sacrifice her own sister to the moon for a thousand years to do it. To commit a dislikeable, yet necessary act for Equestria to survive. Sacrifice, Murk.”

Lying beside him, I thought back to the things my mother had told me. The stories she had imparted to me as well. I knew these myths to some degree...if hazy on names and specifics.

“But...didn't Nightmare Moon return and was defeated more properly for good by six ponies coming together and using the magic of their friendship to make a more lasting solution? You said you finished the book before seeing your mark so...um...m-maybe it was...uh...”

There was a silence as he looked right at me, staring through my eyes.

“...uh...that bit?”

Protégé looked at me for some long seconds, made a dismissive grunt and lay down again.

“Try and get some sleep, Murk.”

“L...”

“There is a lot to do tomorrow.”

That was that. He turned away, lying with his back against my side as I settled down beside him again to try and daze off. It actually stung me inside, made me feel wretched to look on him. To see somepony with as much courage, intelligence and kindness so indentured. He could have been somepony so much greater...

Please, Protégé...why do you have to follow him? Why use that loyalty you speak so highly of on *Red Eye*?

* * *

Morning didn't feel much better than the night before.

We had left the cave promptly, Brimstone having woken us at sunrise. The big raider had taken watch all night, not holding to his word to wake anypony else up to replace him. Somehow, I had a feeling that had been his plan all along.

A brief inventory and packing up of our things, we left anything not immediately needed in the cave and moved out into the deep snow. Heavy mountain mist ghosted in the crisp morning air around jagged rocks and steep slopes of satin white. Coral and I had crafted our woollen blankets into things we could wear, sewing rough winter barding together against the icy air.

Our mission hadn't changed, we needed to find where the trains went and get in. Using my Pipbuck and his E.F.S, Protégé led the way by waypoints and maps. Glimmerlight came behind him, alongside Brimstone and myself. To keep me from the snow, I'd spent much of the journey on Brimstone's back much in the same way Chirpy rode on Coral with his little hooves wrapped around her neck. I really hated having to be cared for like this...but my sickness left us no choice. I'd burn every bit of anti-rad medicine we had if I were to wade in that stuff again.

All the same...while I had found it a land of haunting snowy trees last night, today it almost seemed like a new world. Stunning clear views every time the mist blew by over the immense shallow

valley that held Fillydelphia below set me *yearning* to stop and sketch. I contented myself with just staring wide eyed at it all, seeing the world from a new perspective up here so close to where the clouds started. Indeed...the top of the mountain on the other side went right through the cloud layer.

I wondered what was up there...

Every as I stared up, hearing Glimmerlight and Protégé discussing directions ahead of me, my eyes caught something on a ridgeline above us. Something dark and *moving*.

“*Up!*” I screamed, pointing a hoof! Weapons were drawn, Brimstone tossed me around to keep me behind him and I saw Coral's horn light up! Above us, that shape dived from the ridge, spinning and landing upon a tree branch next to us. The impact shaking the snow from it, bending the trunk as a jet black griffin gripped it with her talons. Ragini!

“Been looking for you lot all morning, late risers?” She smirked, before nodding more respectfully at Protégé, “Plan still to go ahead?”

“Indeed.” Protégé holstered his revolver, bringing my Pipbuck to his face again instead, “The mining camp shouldn't be much farther, I had been hoping you'd spot us around. What of Grizzly?”

“The old stallion's up ahead scouting out the camp, we found it last night in the storm before bedding down nearby. Was considering slitting a few throats out of boredom if you didn't turn up. Follow on, I'll take you to him. This may not be easy, given what we're up against...”

“Then let's take a look, lead the way.”

* * *

A couple of sharp rises and falls later, our slow trek brought us to the outskirts of Grindstone and Shackles' mining camp. I heard it before we saw it, the sounds of slavery recognisable anywhere. Moving chains, shouted commands and the ordered crump of hooves in unison over snow. Yet as we reached the ridgeline and Grizzly's hideout beneath a fallen tree I got my first look.

Nestled within a sheltered basin of a plateau, the camp was *definitely* not built after the balefire. Well constructed wooden huts still stood strong under the snow upon their roofs. In particular, I saw one stone and plank constructed building beside a railway with small cranes and offloading facilities. Another long hut seemed to be a dormitory! This wasn't just some small refuge...this had been a full facility! My eyes travelled closer to the base of the mountain's peak and saw the entrance to the mines itself.

This was no small door...over thirty metres tall, a colossal mouth of the mountain itself yawned out from the rock face. Jagged at the top, like teeth ready to snap down shut, it curved around the sides to make a wide entrance that now bore multiple tracks of minecart rails and processions of workers going in and out! I saw carts *filled* with rock, metals and even gemstones!

“This used to be a gem mine in the times before. Impressive?”

I felt Protégé shuffle up beside me, the thick overcoats we both wore rubbing in the tiny space of Grizzly's crudely built observation shelter.

“It's...uh...”

“I figured you did find it impressive. It'd explain why your mouth was open.”

Trying not to squeak, I snapped it shut and shook my head. “N-no it wasn't...I was just yawning...”

“Of course.” He tried to grin, but on his tired face it merely looked forced around the deep worry in his eyes. “The peak mining facility was one that was set to be Fillydelphia's next major source of local material. Saves a ton on import fees I'd presume. Only it got bought out by the Ministry of Arcane Science on account of the high gem yields found within...not much other documentation given it only went active and operational a few days before the world ended. The Ministry I don't think even got official confirmation that it was theirs...”

And yet Aurora had been up here *long* before that, I would bet.

I felt myself squashed to the side, Old Grizzly pushing his not unobtrusive bulk into the post with us. Pressed between them, I could only squeak when either moved. The old stallion looked down at the station.

“You want to get in there, Protégé?”

“That would be the plan, yes. We need to find whatever it is they want from Aurora to get that door in Ministry Station open and keep it for Master Red Eye, not their little coup.”

Old Grizzly shuffled back a little, turning to look at the younger slaver. “You really think this could become an all out coup, kid?”

“Master Grizzly...you didn't see what was down in that metro. The old memory machines, the effect in the very air itself. The influence with such a facility would see them ready to make a claim for power. If any number of my theories are correct about that place, it would give Shackles a foundation to claim Fillydelphia in Master Red Eye's absence.”

“Very well...”

Hearing Protégé talk of that, I could feel the shiver he made close beside me. I had to talk to him directly about that all...I was the only pony who could possibly understand it. Who had shared it all both in and out. Compared to the stern and confident slavemaster I'd known in the weeks before, it felt almost wrong to see him so fragile, no matter how he spoke or tried to hide it.

There was a shoving from behind, I whimpered and felt myself being shoved down a little as somepony else crammed in. Glimmerlight giggled and shimmied in right on top of me to get to the front, resting her chin on my head after ruffling my mane.

“See? Pleenty of room! I've snuggled with more ponies in smaller spaces after a party in Friendship City!” Glimmerlight winked at the three of us. “So what we got?”

“I'd make a joke about three and a half ponies in a post I built for two,” muttered Grizzly with a

grin to me, “but I think I count as two in my old age. Anyway...”

He cast a hoof out, pointing around the facility.

“We've got the entire place ringed by a mesh fence topped with wire. Guard posts on each corner, a sealed gate and ponies watching over the main entrance itself. Slavers trotting everywhere and an old bell I'm guessing they're using as an alarm. There's been some poor sod stuck out in the cold all night manning it.”

I cast my eyes out over the camp itself, following each of the defences he had spotted. Grizzly was right, this was a pretty secure area up on the mountain. I could see a group of bushes leading up to the wire though, I knew at least I could have gotten to the fence itself if it were just me or maybe one other pony. I'd go along that iced up riverbed...stick below those rocks...

Yeah, I could do that. I wouldn't *want* to...but I was allowed to think of plans too even if I was too much of a coward to actually carry them out!

“Heeeeeey! Look lads and ladettes! Da boss is baaack!”

I heard the shout from the encampment below, shuffling forward a little from under Glimmerlight to stare down. A small group of raiders camp pouring out of the dormitory, rushing across the snow toward the gate. Shrinking back a little, I saw the crazed form of Wildcard sauntering through, dragging a gutted mountain beast behind him. It looked like a large tusked boar with thick fur.

“Brunch is on me! Carry it in! Get all the thigh bones out! I *hate* thigh bones! Leave the hips though! I *liiiiike* the hips!”

“Yes, boss! Dis is gonna be great!”

They were *his* raiders...like the ones in Glimmer's orb! I heard her go silent and watch with me too, seeing those tattooed and pierced monstrosities that called themselves ponies stagger around and work with frightening speed to strip and skin the beast right in front of everypony else like animals! Pouring alcohol over the still raw meat and occasionally drinking it themselves or injecting and crunching more devious substances. They were drugged into a permanent state of insanity in the look of their chief, Wildcard. Even as I watched, two played some game with a knife stabbing around their hooves, trying to go faster and closer before it sank deep into the flesh.

The raider merely laughed instead of screamed, holding the limb up with the knife in it, his other hoof pointing to it like a puppet as he made it jiggle. Sweet Goddesses...

“Kid, I'm not seeing a way in here. Harsh as it is to tell. If we'd been on that train then *maybe* in the night we coulda' slunk in but now? With all this in daylight?”

“There *has* to be a way, Grizzly...” Protégé seethed, clenching his teeth as his eyes looked for a way in. “This is the only way in, we have to make it work!”

Grizzly snorted, casting a glance behind us where Coral waited with Chirpy, Brim and Ragini. “Not going to be easy if we don't even know who's on our side...”

“Heeey!” Glimmer snapped, leaning over me in the tiny area. “That's her son, what did you expect?”

I looked from side to side as they snapped at one another. About who attacked who. About keeping it together. It was all above me as I thought about the camp instead. Something didn't seem right. Sundial had said a *small* door. That was anything but small! I tried to look for anything smaller, a second way in! Nothing caught my eye.

Something else did.

Somepony else did.

I almost shoved past the others, pulling Grizzly's binoculars from his hooves to look through them. He didn't even notice as he half argued with Glimmer and Protégé over how to go about this. Yet I suddenly stared through them. I'd seen a whiff of orange and red hair! Between those huts!

I adjusted the focus, a rather amateur attempt but after a few tries I finally got something resembling a clear look.

Down between two huts, the colours stood out to me all too clearly. Chained to a doorway, lying on her side below a frayed blanket, I saw Unity! They had her up here already and she was still outside! I fought to urge to rush through with my own plan to sneak in immediately. She looked so cold! Shivering and dirty, her beautiful mane unkept and bedraggled. Yet I saw her defiantly stare any slaver that passed her in the eye. You go, Unity...

“If we go in one at a time we'll get spotted early.”

“Yet if we all go at once, we get spotted together.”

I held a hoof up. “Um...I-I...”

“Brute force will only get us so far too, Protégé. Think a distraction could clear a way for some of us to go inside?”

“M-maybe if w-we, uh...” I tried to make myself heard.

“Yeah and then who gets left in the killer snow, huh?” Glimmerlight looked at him seriously, “You need everypony you can get in there.”

“*Excuse me everypony I'm so sorry but I-*”

I realised they had all suddenly looked at me and felt far too much in the spotlight.

“...I mean, um...I might have an idea...”

* * *

“Absolute preposterous!” Grizzly hissed his words. “How are we meant to trust something based on a *nothing* that you heard in some diary?”

We all sat in cover, a few hundred metres away from the camp to discuss my idea. I hadn't even finished telling it when Grizzly had spoken out.

“You want to sneak in there, get one particular slave, get back *out* again and then locate something we don't even know exists?!”

“I...I trust him!”

“Trust *who*?” Grizzly threw up his hooves. “Protégé, our best bet is to wait for darkness. Find the next supply train and use that to sneak inside. There is no other method in.”

“But there, um...*is!*” I blushed, almost falling back behind Glimmerlight. “And It's not all of us! It'll just be, uh...me...I'll sneak in and get Unity out. You all can search for the other way in! It's there, I swear it has to be! There must be something else near to the station in...in the rock face or something!”

“If the squirt wants to get that pony out, then he's going to.” Brimstone drowned everypony out rather easily, that empty eye socket staring down Grizzly. “Murk isn't the sharpest tool in the city, but if he says he trusts something, I believe him.”

I sat almost in disbelief. I'd never imagined Brim held that much faith in me...

“As do I.” Coral spoke up, moving behind me. “It only stands to reason to try. You want to wait for nightfall so we can huddle down and barely survive again? Fine. We can hunt until then anyway for this other door.”

“Frankly, I'm not sure what you say is worth much anymore, pony.” Ragini simmered from nearby at Coral, “After that stunt you pulled on the train. Attacking your master, you're lucky I don't just take you off and-”

“Just *try*.”

“Enough! We need every pony we can get, distrust or not.” Grizzly snapped at them both, “I don't like your tone, slave. You better learn your place, nicer slavers present or not. But I will not have you throw this away on petty distaste, Ragini. Both of you understand? Just can it. Protégé?”

I saw Coral sit without a change in expression. Grizzly began looking to Protégé as though for aid.

The unicorn sat quietly, before nodding. “Coral Eve is correct. It merely makes logical sense to search for this secondary door while we have the time to do so. What else would we be doing? However...Murk, I am concerned about this idea of yours. Do you really understand the danger? That is *Shackles'* camp now. If you're caught-”

“I...I really want to help her...”

To my great surprise, he smiled. Standing up, he moves to the outer edge of the shallow ground we'd cleared of snow. “I understand, Murk. I witnessed your passion to help those you care about in

Ministry Station. If you wish to do this, I cannot stop you. Given what you say about this mare...about how Grindstone seems to have appropriated her...it leads me to believe that perhaps she has a greater role to their plans than we may be appreciating. Taking away an asset to them could perhaps aid our own quest here.”

That...that was a point. I'd never thought about that before, why they had lied about her stallion to get her again. Was it something to do with her special talent? I didn't even truly understand it yet.

“I told you my special talent was bringing ponies together, Murky...this is how I do it. To create objects that forever remain as a link between ponies.”

Create objects as a link...a memory? Did Unity know memory magic in a way I didn't understand yet? She *had* to meet Glimmer...my sis would figure it all out.

Protégé nodded at me and the rest, clustered in our little hole.

“Get ready, Murk. We'll support you from the observation shelter and lay ready to give you two a distraction to get out. They have outlying patrols and buildings I'm sure that Brimstone and the others can bring some attention to instead of you. Meanwhile, Ragini and Grizzly? You two search for this additional way in.”

“Hrmp...fine.” Grizzly didn't look too pleased, but stood and picked up his old Equestrian Army rifle, “If you believe this is the right idea, Protégé, I won't distrust you. If there's anything out there, we'll find it.”

Ragini nodded, strapping her twin rifles over her shoulders and wing restraints. They headed off immediately, clearly itching to do *something* other than sit still.

“Now, Murk?” Protégé looked to me and handed over a flare, “Good luck, fire this off if you need us to start anything.”

I had most of my things on me already. Taking a swig of my canteen to ward off the ambient radiation in the snowy air, I made sure that *Rarity's Grace* was all loaded and that the grapple gun functioned right too. I had a few of our medical supplies in case Unity needed any. My journal and other unneeded items I left with Coral Eve to save weight, but I kept Unity's little statuette of Littlepip next to my chest. It felt...right. Strapping on my goggles and wire cutters from Glimmer's tool kit, I felt as ready as I ever would be.

Actually, that was a complete lie.

The moment I stepped up, hopping over rocks to begin my journey...I felt the dread come down. Could I do this? I'd asked myself this question every time I had to do something myself and I never felt any better. But...but this wasn't dark Fillydelphia with all its hiding spots and rules I understood. This was...was wasteland...a mountain with horrible drugged raiders and slavers who weren't playing by *anypony's* rules anymore! I...I couldn't...

“Hey, lil'bro, shall we get going then?”

She suddenly trotted up next to me, a lever action rifle slung by her side for easier movement.

All geared up with her tools and Ranger Initiate robes strapped closer to her body in a more form fitting style.

“S-sis?!”

Glimmerlight simply grinned and ruffled my mane. “You seriously didn't think I was letting you go into the shit alone, did you? After how far you came for me down in the metro? Let me get fucked over every day if I'm letting you do this without me backing you up.”

Behind us, I heard Brimstone make a deep chuckle. “No change from normal then...”

Glimmer's head bolted around, eyes glaring daggers at the big earth pony sitting with a wry grin. I couldn't help but make a little giggle myself, before being shoved by her hoof and saw her make a little pout.

“I try to act all 'wingmare' for you and this is what I get? Psst...*stallions*.”

I saw the grin on her face though. She lifted a hoof and with a little laugh I bumped mine against hers.

“Let's go rescue your friend, Murky. You and me, the dream team, huh?”

“Hehe...y-yeah...”

Both of us cantered off away from the group. Myself hopping from rock to rock to avoid the snow while trying not to over strain my weakened body. Gradually, we came to the top of the small hill and looked down at the camp. Through my binoculars (He hadn't asked for them back. By my logic, that meant they were mine now!) I saw Unity again, same place as before.

“She's still there, sis.”

“Then let's go get her, Murky.”

Together, we dropped off the hill, sliding or sneaking down into the bushes to make an effort to *finally* have Unity back and with us as a group. They wouldn't take her from me again. I wouldn't allow it. Not after this time.

Not *ever*.

* * *

Tnk!

“They hear?”

“No...no...do another.”

Tnk!

Glimmer's cutters sliced through another little bit of wire in her magic. I was glad she was doing this, they looked complicated for hooves. Instead, I sat still and listened out for anything while she made the cuts. The journey up had been tense, but I felt a little surge of pride that the route I'd spotted had worked. We'd gotten to the fence completely unseen!

Tnk!

“Last...one...there!”

Tnk!

The square section of wire popped off rather sharply. We both froze. Looking up, I saw the guard post a dozen metres away behind the bush that obscured this section of wire. A rifle barrel protruded in the opposite direction.

Looking at one another, we breathed a sigh of relief. Slowly, her magic lifted the wire away, leaving us with a little hole to squeeze through. I went first, feeling the chill as I pushed my belly close to the icy rock beneath us and wriggled my way in before quickly rushing between the two nearest huts. Behind me, Glimmerlight shimmied her way through, dragging the block of wire with her. As soon as she reached where I was, her magic settled the piece back roughly where it should be to cover up our way in.

“Hard bit done?” She whispered to me, grinning that grin. Oh how I was happy for that optimism along with me.

“N-no?”

“Pity...”

The huts seemed to be mounted up on short legs to prevent them from being snowed over. Digging away a little snow with my hooves, I pushed my way under the one nearest to me. I didn't feel anything...but a few sips from my refilled canteen felt only the best idea. I'd have to *use* the snow to get around here in such broad light. Well...light by the wasteland's standards anyway. There was still enough dullness to just fade into shadows behind larger snow drifts against buildings, I thought. That could work. As I moved across the loose stones and hard earth, I heard hooves creaking the floorboards above me, maniacal laughter twinged with curses and the sound of meat tearing. Oh Goddesses...this was the raider's cabin...

I shook my head. They didn't know I was here. Now...to get an idea of my bearings.

Hearing Glimmer squeeze under the hut too, I shifted toward the front and poked a little gap in the snow drift covering that end. A perfect little hidey hole to watch and observe.

A cart bumped past, sliding on the slush kicked up by so much movement in and out of the main place. Across the encampment I tried to look for Unity, but the place I'd seen her was out of sight. Somewhere further up the street. I'd have to knock too big a hole to stick my head out.

Thankfully, I had an old tool that had served me well still on my person. Shoving that little mirror into the snow, I angled it to see further up the street, simply praying it didn't glint too much in

the white glare outside. A white mist drew down over the street and blocked my vision. Darn. Patience...

“Murky...”

“Hm?” I looked back quickly to Glimmer. She was looking around the back.

“There's two guards moving down the fence. I don't think they'll see the gap we made but...I think they just came on patrol. They aren't leaving that area. Ah...*fuck*...”

“Could we sneak past?” I bit my lip.

“Not a chance. Not even you.”

I sighed, bonking my head lightly on a leg of the cabin. “You're right. F...fff...feathers...”

She turned back, smirking as she had to adjust where she was lying under the low floor. “Still working on sayin' that, huh? Gotta come from down deep! Can't believe we've not got ya to say it yet.”

Rolling my eyes, I turned back to my mirror. The mist was beginning to lift a little, a harsh wind blowing it away and carrying ice crystals like sharp rain. Blinking as some flew into my hole, I wiped the glass and squinted to see in it.

There she was!

A few cabins up, chained to a supporting beam, I could see her cream body protruding out from the meagre rug. Unfortunately, she was surrounded by slavers. One of them-

Oh no!

One of them picked up her chain, unhooking it from the post! They were...they were...

“Glimmer, they're moving her!”

“Where?”

“I don't know! C...c'mon!”

We had to *move*! Even as I watched, the slaver started dragging her away, Unity with her head held as high as she could from the collar. Retrieving my mirror, I crawled under the hut and through the snow that had blown under. Let it irradiate me, I needed to get moving! Slavers wandered by the edge, their hooves mere feet from me.

“Hard to get good ale up here...I miss the Roamer...”

“Don't complain, alternate was to work for Slit. Hear she got given authority over that factory *district* now?”

“...point, mate. Point.”

“Hey! Hey you!”

A third slaver ran up, a big one in somewhat nicer looking clothing. I waved at Glimmer to stop as I saw the form of Grindstone behind him.

“Has there been word from the Ministry yet?” Grindstone's voice was quiet and breathy. Yet the slaves stood to rigid attention before him.

“Y-yes, master!”

“Anything on the projection engine?”

They went silent briefly and could see Grindstone's leg step forward.

“*Well?*” He broke into coughing even as the shouted line was spoke, his apparent aid helping him stay on his hooves.

“Yes...they...they reported another failure, sir. Another batch of our lads kicked right out of it...no-matter who we send in they all fail, sir. I don't know if it's to do with that buck stuck in it or what but even our best can't manage it. They say it keeps telling them they don't understand it.”

Grindstone stomped a hoof in the slush below him and grunted.

“Well then you radio them back and tell them to *find* somepony that can! Take them from the army camps if you have to, they know how to work together better than you all do. The old team got far enough to learn enough to lead us to what we have reached by now...you only need a little more. It's been our advantage, don't let it be a useless asset now. *Get to work.*”

“Yes, sir!”

“Yes, master!”

The pair galloped off, back the way. Grindstone sighed, waved his aid away and passed by as I breathed a sigh of relief, waving for Glimmer to follow me. So...that machine I'd found near Mister Peace, the thing with the buck stuck in it had been what led Grindstone this far, hmm? It explained why they knew things we didn't. Some sort of special memory orb machine maybe?

And that buck...could he be...

Unity *had* said that Grindstone was one of her master's, hadn't she? Or was I just making that up to fill gaps? No, it couldn't be. That buck had looked too...too clean to be a slave. But what if it was? Urgh...I needed time to think...

This wasn't going to get easier either. Up above, the floor was cracked...rotted through and with a great many holes to the rooms above. There were...

“Hey how come the boss gives us this shitty room but those wankjobs who never give us no

loot get the better one *and* get first choice of steak?"

I could see *raiders* above me. About half a dozen of them, three laid out on the floor quivering in spasms while the other three lounged on old seats. One was fiddling with some little rainbow coloured powder on a table. Another was clamouring, angrily trying to coax more out of an inhaler. The last, the one who's spoken, had multiple bottles of alcohol in his magic at once.

"S-s-s-shuuuupp..." The one with the inhaler almost seem to vibrate, grinning and scowling back and forth as he smacked the drinker on the side of the face, receiving an almost bestial snap of the teeth in return.

"I'm fucking *hungry!* That's what! I'm going over there!"

He got up, smashing the bottle on the floor. Shards fell across me and I covered my head. Thick hooves stomped above me before a door slammed, leaving me alone with the disturbingly twitching raiders. They didn't even speak...just laid there or partook in substances I dared not even imagine the potency of. Glimmerlight shuffled up beside me and together we slowly crawled on.

We stopped almost immediately. They'd been talking like Wildcard wasn't there. He *was*. Just sitting in the corner staring at the wood. I could hear him breathing deeply, sucking in air through his teeth and shivering when it came back out. Not moving...just...breathing.

I tried to ignore him...tried to ignore the thought of that head suddenly turning to look directly at me. He'd know...he always seemed to know. What worried me was just how sane he seemed to be sometimes. Like somehow working out we'd be on that train.

Broken bottles...needles...spilled dusts and bones crowded along with us beneath the floorboards. I had to bite my tongue to not gag as we navigated our way through. I just prayed I didn't feel a little jab on my hide somewhere. There were worse things than sharp edges down here. Above me, I heard a raider scream and thrash, some sort of manic high kicking in before he laughed madly. These raiders were insane.

I almost squeaked out loud as he suddenly moved and rolled onto his back.

Glimmer nudged my shoulder, pulling me back to reality a little. I realised just how much I was shaking while peering up at him right above us, lying still near the other raider who was rolling back and forth on the ground like an animal. Cautiously...I put one hoof in front of the other again, drawing myself toward a gap in the snow drifts on the other side, feeling the wind churning in through it.

"Who's theeeere?"

We both froze. I saw Glimmer's eyes go wide.

"Boss? Is someone there? Who's there who's there who's there *who'stherewhosthereWHO'S THERE?!*"

The raider above us swivelled, getting up, his hoof near Glimmer's head behind me. He leapt up and down on the spot. I felt Glimmer pushing me. Move.. *Move!* Crawling heedlessly, I tried shoving glass aside with the thicker sleeves of my winter clothing. Dragging myself through and

inching to the hole! Had he seen us?

“I heeear somepony! Somepony around here! Can feel the itchy mane and the twitchy hoof and all the little signs of a *sneaky thing!*” Wildcard sat up and started scanning the room, breathing deeply with excitement.

The other raider spun in circles, screaming. A half-brick smacked into his head from across the room.

“Shut it! You've 'ad too much o' that shit!”

The manic raider howled, charging his colleague. The table smashed apart. The drug dust flew into the air as they brawled. Others awoke, leaping into the melee. Soon, the floor was splintering and cracking apart as their weight and strikes torn into the rotten wood. Wildcard fell over, howling with laughter at the sight. His hooves banged near me. Sometimes his face looked down, but with eyes closed while laughing! Oh Goddesses, don't open! We crawled...we crawled...rushing as best we could. I froze as I saw my hoof about to land on a sack of bloodied needles, whimpering when I had to crawl around a wooden post and press over half rotten brahmin guts that had fallen below their sick den.

Finally, I reached the freezing snow drift and pressed through. Oh Goddesses...thank you for your watching over me in there. Irradiated snow or not, I couldn't help but breathe in the cool air again before helping pull my sister out. We stumbled through the deep drift to the edge of the building, before I poked my mirror around it, using the raiders' saddlebags they'd left outside as cover for myself amongst their dark fabrics.

Unity wasn't hard to spot! She was in the middle of the camp, being taken toward that giant entrance! We'd lose her if she went in!

“G-Glimmer? We're not going to catch her...”

“Yes we will, Murky. We'll-”

“NO!” I turned to her, looking her dead in the eyes. “We're not...she's too far. We...we need a distraction!”

She stopped and nodded, understanding what I'd meant. “The flare?”

“We need that to get out...I...I mean another distraction.” I turned away again to look around. “M-maybe something like them finding another fence cut? Or...or getting the raiders to fight each other out here? Or...or...”

“Or I have some fun to give you a chance to get her.”

I stopped and turned, seeing Glimmerlight leaning back against the hut wall, spilled raider packs beside her from scavenging and juggling a grenade in her hoof with a manic grin.

“Or...that...” I squeaked the words a little, “Will y-you be okay? On your own?”

Glimmer grabbed the apple shaped ball in her magic the next time it went in the air, settling it into a big robe pocket before drawing her levered carbine off her saddle. “Murky, sweetie. You just concentrate on reaching Unity. I'll give you aaaall the distraction you'll require. I can be *quite* the mare of action when needed after all. Do remember where I grew up.”

She winked...and I needed no further convincing.

“Good luck, sis.”

“Just be sure to fire that flare off the moment you get her and I'll come running to find you.”

With that, she checked her load and turned to rush around the opposite side of the hut, disappearing behind a set of old minecarts. I had to remind myself to keep pushing on as I watched after her, thinking myself the luckiest pony in the world to have her as a friend.

Right...right...let's um...do this?

I looked either side of me, seeing no way out that Glimmer hadn't already took. I could keep sneaking under huts, but the snow would take its toll eventually and it was far too close. I needed a new way...

In front of the raider hut, a mass procession of minecarts started to trundle back to the mines after dumping their loads at the train station. Wheeling across the cleared concrete road, they passed in and out of the mist that was settling again. I rummaged in the raider's pack, locating the whitest sheets or rugs I could before holding them around me. I *really* hoped that this would work, who said I had to hide in the dark all the time?

The mist descended...and I ran out.

Clad in white, amongst a near whiteout while the mist passed over, I rushed toward the minecarts. Suddenly a big form appeared through the blind conditions. A slaver! Dodging around a her, I heard a shout. Please don't have seen me! Please don't have seen me!

Darting amongst the crowds moving, I heard hooves move.

“Who was that? *What little weasel is out of line?!?*”

Oh Goddesses he had! He'd seen me! The mist was already dropping, it had only been a few seconds! It...it was supposed to last longer! I ran among the carts, trying to run up the line. Slavers started turning, heads swivelled. Slaves I shoved past complained. This was a *really bad idea!* The mist had got me into the line, but staying hidden as I inched toward Unity ahead of me was proving so hard! I'd gotten twenty feet...thirty feet closer! She wasn't far ahead! How was I going to get her away from-

“You there! YOU!”

I didn't stop! Looking back, I saw the slaver spot me! She was coming! Carrying a cane in her magic, the slaver rushed for me, outrunning me in a straight line! I fell back, almost falling! Keep pushing, Murky!

“What made you think you could leave the line?”

If...if I could just push through enough of the crowd and carts I could-

There was a sudden eruption of earth from across the camp. A deep and snapping explosion whipped into my ears, like a nail into my skull from the sharp sound that echoed off the mountain face. Tripping, I felt a slave fall over me, burying me under them until I had to squeal and roll out the way of a grinding wagon wheel, feeling it catch my mane for a second while it ran over it!

Chaos broke out amongst the slavers. They clearly hadn't expected attack up here. I heard multiple whipping shots from the same direction Glimmer had clearly thrown the grenade. There were screams. Automatic fire barked from a guard tower. The slavers were all looking that way!

Up ahead, I saw the slaver taking Unity break for cover, dragging her after him into a hut to take shelter. That was better! From the distance, I heard the heavy retort of a revolver. I remembered that scope on Protégé's sidearm. I guess he wouldn't have just sat idle, flare or not. Amongst the running slaves as they all tried to get off the road and into cover, I sprinted directly for Unity and the hut she was in! In and out! Smash and grab, Murky! Just...without the smashy bit! (Or the grab bit...I didn't think she'd like that...um...)

Ahead of me, I saw Grindstone burst out into the open, the donkey standing out amongst the others. His aid bellowed orders for the frail old slaver, getting the guards to organise and rush for the commotion. They didn't see me, but they were blocking the street!

Swerving to the side, I hopped up onto a barrel and dove between the huts. Well, if I couldn't go under, through or around...I'd go up! Kicking out my leg, the mouthpiece flipped in front of my mouth, the aiming sight all nicely positioned. Firing my grapple above, I shot it up onto the roof of one of the low huts, using it to pull myself up there. I heard wood crack from the hooks under my weight, being drowned in snow piling off the roof in one massive wave from the impact. Spluttering, I bit down on the battle saddle's grip and felt the mechanism winch me upward until I could grab the roof with my hooves.

Gunfire erupted behind me, a group of slavers peppering a tower where a guard frantically screamed for them to stop. Glimmer sure had them in confusion, firing on each other! The whoop of raiders cheering it on from the sidelines, seemingly oblivious, only served to make the situation feel almost deranged. At least they were-*ARGH!*

A shot *slammed* into the roof beside me. On the ground, I saw a slaver screaming at me, the words being lost in the madness. The pistol aimed again, while I screamed and ran across the roof, trying to stay low. I didn't even hear the individual shot, but the hiss of air was as unmistakable as it was terrifying. I slid, almost falling over the slick roof and off it all over again as I galloped and leapt to the next one, disappearing into the deep snow that rested atop it. This...this was the one Unity was in!

The subtle movement all around me gave enough of a reason to take my mind off that as the snow started to move from this roof too. Ooooh noooo!

Taking me with it, the sloped roof dumped its entire load out the front of the hut. My throat

burned from a sudden hacking cough as some of it got in my mouth. Whether from rads or just choking on the snow I didn't know. Struggling, I slammed my hook into the fragile roof, scratching deep into it as I slid toward the edge. I slowed, my grappling hook keeping me on the roof, albeit dangling off the edge until I could clamber back up. With it now cleared, I started to look about. I'd *had* to stay up here. I'd never get in the front door if it was locked! There had to be a way in the top in such snowy conditions, surely! What architect wouldn't think of that?!

Presumably the one that created an acid refinery with no safety rails and silly doors that opened both ways, I reminded myself.

All the same, I saw a little trapdoor on the back end, padlocked shut. Switching my saddle to *Rarity's Grace* I took careful aim, praying no-pony else would take a shot at me up here. Then, I bit hard and *fired!*

And...*fired!*

...fired?

Click.

The sound almost made me wince from bad memories, only cut back as I chided myself and kicked the safety off it. Pulling the trigger again produced that almost musically polite crack of the small rounds it used and the padlock pinged off. I took one last look back to where I thought Glimmer was, seeing ponies sheltering from any direction, unsure what the attacker was. Grindstone strode amongst it, but the fighting seemed to be dying down. This was my chance.

Funny, that right before I was about to do it, I felt every weakness come back to me. The fuzziness in my right eye, the pain in my chest, the magically sealed splinter wound from the fall...but I *had* to do this. Just a little further to get her again, you can do it Murky!

I turned, grabbed the edge of the trapdoor with a hoof and opened it...before diving right down into it. *Rarity's Grace* was ready! It wasn't that high before I landed on my hooves and stood ready to hold up the slaver! I could-

I felt a sudden strike across the back of my head, before suddenly feeling very dizzy indeed...and sore...

Even before I'd gotten a look at the room, I collapsed to the ground.

* * *

Somepony was pulling me. Lifting me up. I heard a voice shouting at me.

Urgh...how many times had I woken up in pain from passing out lately...

“...urk...”

The room was spinning. I saw only the haze of lights, blurry messes of colour that spun as I felt the floor again. Somepony grabbed my hoof, pulling me unsteadily up. I blinked a few times, trying to

reassert myself.

“Murky!”

With a rush, my senses came back. Gunfire from outside, the crackle of a fire and its warm heat upon my back and the sight of a shape close to my face...somepony's eyes...

A few more blinks and I finally got my bearings. I...I was in the cabin. Trashed furniture lay around me as the battle restarted outside. Goddesses...my head *hurt*...I'd been hit with something like...like a...

I forgot all that, as I refocused to see who it was standing before me. Unity was bent over, trying to keep me from falling. I could feel her wavy mane brushing against me as she put a hoof around to keep me steady.

“I'm sorry, Murky! I'm so sorry! I didn't realise it was you! You...you just suddenly dropped in front of me! *What are you doing here?!*”

“I...I came to...wait...” I blinked, wincing as a hoof went to the back of my head, “...didn't realise it was me?”

Blinking more, I looked around. It was a prison cabin, with a thick cage to one side of the room. I could see a slaver lying on the floor, the one who'd been pulling her. He lay unconscious with a snapped plank of wood over his head. The cage door hung open...a set of keys still in it.

Gradually, my mind put together the events of a trapped unicorn using telekinesis. Unity had...!

...woah. So much for her needing *my* help.

Despite that, I couldn't help myself from turning in near shock to her, helping myself stay up by leaning on her. Unity shifted me to the desk of the prison, sitting me in the chair, a hoof holding my head up.

“Are you okay? I'm so so sorry! I really didn't mean to...I just...I was trying to get out and-”

“*Yes!*” I blurted it, “I...I came to get out...I mean you out...I mean out of here! Unity...”

Head hurting or not, I couldn't help but suddenly smile with a small laugh.

“...you're...you're here! I finally found you again!”

I couldn't quite tell if it was just her bruises, exertions or a genuine blush as she leaned forward and hugged me tightly.

“I'm so glad to see you, Murky. I saw you in that weird station with your friends! Just never thought I'd see you on this mountain, I've been trying to get out myself and get *away* from these weird places and what they want from me! It was all a trick, Murky! They never took me to Red Eye's Unity...just straight to Grindstone...”

Her head was over my shoulder as she embraced me, but I felt her suddenly quake a little.

“They said it'd been a lie...he wasn't there...he never had been...” Her voice was strained, clearly not having had anypony to let this out to, “I'm lost alone again, Murky. I don't know where he is!”

I was no good at comforting ponies much...I simply held my hooves around her for a few seconds, allowing this brief moment of having somepony else friendly nearby. I had to fight myself from blurting out how much I'd worried. How many fears I'd had for her and the struggles since I last saw her. About what I'd learned about Littlepip not escaping or how I'd finally decided I was *not* a slave...but now wasn't the moment. I simply shared in the comforting embrace.

Slowly, she let go and leaned back. “I heard the gunfire, Murky. Saw it as a chance to escape...we should go before whatever it is stops. They wanted me for my talent, Murky! I won't let them have it! We...we have to go, now. We...oh...oh Murky...”

Unity stopped, leaning back.

“Your neck...”

I almost shivered a little as I felt her hoof gently stroke around it. Over the dry, blistered and cracked skin from Shackles' radioactive collar. I...I *so* wanted to tell her all about it and just...just get it out to a friend but...we had to get going. I merely nodded and closed my eyes.

“It's been...been hard.”

“I'm so sorry...I'll listen later, okay? I promise. We have to get out of here.”

Yes, that was true. I nodded, wincing a little more at the pain in my head. I saw a frying pan on the floor and gave her a look after casting my eyes to it. She bit her lip nervously and shrugged.

“It...was just what I had to hoof. Uh...sorry again...”

For some reason, I just chuckled, casting away the pain of thinking about what Shackles had done to me forever. It was all so ridiculous to have *finally* found the first mare to ever help me and she immediately whacks me with a frying pan...

An explosion blew in one of the windows. Snow careened into the cabin as we ducked behind the desk. Glass shattered above us, the door blowing open. We both looked out over the top, seeing slavers running around outside.

“What in Equestria's going on? Did you do this?”

“N-no...not exactly!” I took a few breaths, trying to think how best to get out of here.

“Then what are-”

A round blasted through the wooden side of the building, passing right above us and out the other side again! Goddesses! Bullets were more powerful than I thought! Unity pulled me down, asking again.

“What are you *doing* here if this isn't you?”

“L-long story! But I had to come and get you first! There's some g-good ponies with me! I just...”

I bit my lip hard, fumbling with my many pockets until I came across the statuette she had given me. I felt my cheeks flush a little.

“I just couldn't leave you...you saved my life with this...”

Her eyes went to the little scrap metal model, widening as she saw I still had it.

“We're going to get out, Unity! We'll...we'll help you find your stallion but we need to get out of here and I...I saw you all chained up and I couldn't just leave you after you did so much and...and this statue meant so much to me to help me live when I almost died and...I...wanted to come g-get you...”

Unity's hoof lifted my chin up, stopping my rambling.

“After all this you kept it...”

I gulped and nodded. She smiled warmly, lifting it in her magic.

“I'm so glad it brought you good luck, Murky. That it meant so much to you. That's my talent you see...to project a sense of memory into something physical. That it can help remind us of somepony we know no matter how far away they are. A memory strand bound to a small item to forever make us feel like we're never *quite* alone...so long as we still believe in them.”

Her magic tucked it back into my fleece neatly.

“That tells me all the words you could ever say, that you believed enough to come all the way to the ends of the world up here to try and find me again. Now you drop in from the roof like that, huh? Pretty heroic for a stallion like you.”

She prodded my side as we waited for a chance to make a move. I tried not to squeak in embarrassment, she'd called me a *stallion*. Not just a little buck! Had I grown up that much?

“I, uh...heh...” I gulped, “it isn't just me though...”

“Still, zipping onto the roof to swoop in and try and get me out that cage? Pity I already managed it, did you think you'd get to be my rescuing knight in shining armour or something?”

Unity giggled a little, clearly just glad for somepony else to be here to even share a joke with. Normally I might have just blushed and stammered...but I simply found myself laughing with her. It was true...I'd come all this way, through fire, snow and darkness to find her and she'd already broken free *herself*. Just my life.

Wait a minute...dropped in...

Who said I couldn't go back the same way to get out again?!

I looked upward at the hole I'd come in through. It still lay open enough to fit two ponies!

“Unity, we have to go now. Up and out?” I started to lean upwards using the chair, trying to aim my grapple hook to the edge. “Hold on, I'll um...raise us out!”

“I hope you're better with that thing than when we last tried this, Murky...”

She wrapped her hooves around me, holding on tight away from the firing part of the hook gun. While I took careful aim, I heard her speak again.

“You know...when I asked your name you just said 'Murky', is that your full name?”

“It...”

Had I only told her that bit? I must have...why did I do that? Probably I'd just been embarrassed.

I still was.

“It's...the only bit that matters.”

That felt good to say. Throwing off another chain that bound me to what I was. She looked confused, but let it slide. Holding myself still, I bit down on the saddle to let the hook rock out. It flew right through the hole, into the sky above! I'd missed!

Outside, I heard somepony shouting in.

“Retcher, you got that mare? Grindstone wants her in the mine! Safer! Come on, move it!”

Oh dear. Up above, the hook kept flying up. I tried to bite down hard to make it zip back to try again, but that'd take a few seconds!

“Retcher! Come on, buddy!”

“Murky...” Unity hissed into my ear. “Come on!”

I'm trying! The hook came tumbling back to earth, before with a little stroke of an idea I hopped to the side a little, making it fall and drag back into the roof, catching on the ledge of the trapdoor before it came through! I didn't waste time, biting down to raise us both up slowly, the wire taking our weights fine...if a little sluggishly.

“Retcher you swine, I had to get across under fire to tell you this, *come on you lazy-HEY!*”

A slaver ran in the door, rifle in hand. He saw us lifting toward the hole, almost standing in surprise before the gun raised! Unity's horn lit and I saw his magazine fall out of the weapon, the tug on the weapon causing the one round he'd already chambered to go wild into the roof beside us! My

hooves reached up, grabbing the edge of the trapdoor and struggling with all my little might to pull us through, my chest and side stinging badly under my bandages! Crying out in pain, I flopped onto the slick wet roof, feeling Unity roll out after me. We had to get a breath after that, just to-

Crack! The roof exploded into splinters beside me! Then another hole, closer! I shrieked and rolled over again, as Unity went the other way, both of us coming to our hooves. He was firing from below! Clearly a bit dumb to shoot at the mare his master wanted!

“Murky! This way!”

Unity immediately galloped over the roof, trying to keep her footing, leading the way to the edge before simply leaping off! Trusting in her, I did the same, diving headlong away from the wood being carved up by rifle rounds. Dropping to ground level, I landed in the same snow drift she did, sinking deep into it. Spluttering and flopping my hooves around, I strove to get out of it as fast as I could! Was it just my imagination to feel my chest tighten so quickly? The stress? Breathing shallow and fast, I crawled out of it, fumbling for my canteen. Unity popped her head out of the snow, her wavy mane soaked and hanging straight down before clambering after me.

Both of us were shivering, Unity in particular had no proper winter clothing. Between the two cabins, we could see ponies still firing toward the outskirts of town. Presumably somepony had spotted that shots were coming from Protégé's position. I heard a guard crying in pain nearby, begging somepony to help him from a gunshot wound. The others had to be ready by now. It was time to meet up, to fire the flare, but this was a really bad place to do it! We needed better cover.

“Wait...wait! I...I can call for help but we need to find someplace safe! Do you know anywhere?”

Unity stroked her chin for a second, her other hoof trying to wipe any snow off of her. “There's a small storage area near the fence a couple dozen metres from here, I think. Big iron boxes! Would that work?”

I nodded. Not wasting time, the pair of us galloped off around the back of the cabins together. Slipping on slush or huddling in small places as slavers rushed past, even the short distance felt lethal. Bullets whined over our heads, the slavers firing at their attackers. There were no griffins, Shackles presumably unable to garner any from their loyalty to Red Eye, so the slavers lacked any kind of eye in the sky. Something I imagined Glimmer and Protégé were exploiting for all they could in the thick mountain terrain.

One cabin was on fire, sending embers floating in the snow toward us as we ran past it! Up ahead, I could see the storage area she meant, a collection of strongboxes for mining equipment. That'd be perfect, it was like a little bunker for anypony of smaller stature like Unity or I. Waiting for a lull in the fighting, we darted toward it. I hadn't gotten a few feet before dust kicked up around my hooves. I heard Unity yelp as more impacted before hers. We almost fell into one another, rounds dancing off the ground as somepony aimed at us! They were trying to hit us! Oh Goddesses! Help!

Thankfully, Unity had apparently more calm than I did under fire! A slab of metal lifted from the storage area in her magic, whizzing out to stand between us and incoming fire. Small indents bulged near my head as rounds hit it. Some flew right through it and narrowly missed us! I felt splinters of metal shot off the back from the impacts sting my body...before we both leapt into better

cover, sticking low as I fumbled with my saddlebag. I needed that flare!

In the distance, I could hear voices shouting. Wildcard's whoop as he rushed out somewhere. I dearly hoped it wasn't for my sister...

I couldn't help but keep trying to force down the feeling that I hadn't heard Shackles around here yet. I knew he was here...hopefully just inside and not waiting to pounce again out here.

The last time I was escaping him...it had been to get Lilac away.

I never forgot the heartbreak he had caused in me after catching me escaping.

No...*not this time*. Not ever again! Not with *Unity!*

I felt that flare inside. It would call in *my friends!* I wasn't alone this time and they would help me get her out of this nightmare for the last time! Unity was going to join us and *this was the moment when it happened!*

Drawing it out, I finally got a good look at it. Long and red with Pinkie's grinning face on it. Amongst the madness of a firefight, I could have sworn it winked at me. Pinkie...not now...

A round spanked off the cover we were in. I heard Unity cry out and duck down. We huddled together, the fire kicking up around our hooves as others got closer. I dropped the flare! There was so much fire! We...we needed help now! Screaming to try and make myself brave (It made sense to me!) I dove out, grabbed the flare, pointed skyward and *pulled* the ignition string!

With a magical *fwoosh*, sparkles collected around the tip, before half of the stick rocketed up into the sky. I lay on my back right below it, watching it soar into the sky. Beside me, Unity followed it up with her eyes as the glowing crimson projectile flew higher and higher before erupting into an intense glare of light! Exploding in the air, it made the shape of a grinning pony, before falling into becoming a lit beacon hanging in the wind to fall slowly, casting a haze across the entire mining camp.

"I sure hope they can help, Murky! Your friends looked powerful last time I saw them in that metro station!"

She pulled me back into cover, as I glanced over to see those firing at us stop to look up at the light. I heard in the distance to sudden warcry all too recognisable and a half ring of snow fired into the air outside of the compound. Coral was doing her work. I felt myself grinning. My friends were coming. I'd gotten to Unity, found she was safe and not we only had to get out!

"They will!" I smiled and shouted to Unity as we lay beneath the sparkling hue of the flare above. "My sister, she's coming! Glimmer said she'd come to wherever the flare went off from! She'll be along any minute!"

Nearby, I heard a sudden crack of a rifle. Was that her trying to get to us now? A small gunfight broke out, then died off again as somepony hid. Then a few more shots...and another...getting closer! That was her, I could recognise her short barrelled rifle's retort!

"Your sister you told me about, huh?" Unity smiled widely. "Glad to get to meet her if she's the

one coming to bail us out!”

“Oh!” I felt my face flush as I heard Glimmer's voice in the distance coming closer while firing. “You'll love Glimmer! Such a great sister! She's really kind and sweet and...and caring and really funny and just so nice to everypony and-”

She suddenly emerged at the gallop through the snowy mist, screaming at those she shot at.

*“Thought you could take a damn shot at me, huh?! Have some of this then, you fatassed inaccurate **cunts!** Hope who-ever it was that skiffed my fantastic flank gets a bullet through his dick for that, you fucker!”*

Glimmer raised her rifle and cracked off two more shots, her magic levering the action rapidly, before diving headfirst in beside us, rolling up between the two of us. She was grinning wildly from the exultation of a battle, the adrenaline high.

“Oh hi, kids! You *see* this, Murky? That bastard almost got me! Look!”

She twisted, proudly showing the side of her flank near her cutie marks to myself and then Unity pretty bluntly, the small seep of blood from a very minor wound across it. She seemed to miss my aghast expression as she pulled her robes back down again.

“How fucking *wrong* is that? That's like a buck I once knew wanted me to put on his cousin's dress while he did me over his desk! Like hell! Just what kind of sicko shoots at somepony's *ass*?!”

Unity cast a sideways glance at me, her slight grin saying it without even having to speak a word. I just blushed and shrugged. Glimmer...would you ever *not* embarrass me? Please?

After a few seconds, my sister looked from one of us to the other and rapidly shook Unity's hoof.

“So Murky found ya, huh? Good to meet you, Unity! I'm his big sis! Betcha he's told you aaaall about me. He's sure told me all about you!”

She cast a little wink to me, before looking back at Unity. I tried to hide my face in my hooves. Oh Goddesses...please Glimmer...

“It's...lovely to meet you, Glimmerlight.” Unity blew a strand of her mane from her face and shook Glimmer's hoof back. “I can't wait to meet the rest of his friends. Shall we perhaps, y'know...go do that? I'm all for bonding and the friendship of Equestria but...”

“But not under fire?” Glimmer accentuated it by blind firing over our heads to keep the slavers back.

“Rather.” Unity nodded a little. “Got any ideas?”

“Always.” Glimmer smiled widely. “Not all them exactly *relevant* but I'm sure I've got one that works! This way!”

For all her joking, Glimmerlight was pretty serious about getting us moving, her magic tugged me up, shoving me ahead as she gave us cover. Unity and I ran behind the cabins again, swiftly followed by my sister. Up ahead I saw a guard out of a back door. He was turning this way! With a flip of my hoof, I brought up the saddle's mouthpiece and bit hard, firing the remaining two shots from *Rarity's Grace* down the line between the huts! Pings off of the wood and stone signalled I'd missed, but I saw him scream and leap back inside again.

"Can't say I ever imagined you to be the shooting sort, Murky!" Unity got back up from the gap she'd hid behind.

"I'm still not exactly..."

Glimmerlight leaned around the hut behind us and fired again, before rapidly reloading with her magic doing all the work.

"Lil'bro! What's up ahead?"

Leaning ahead, I poked under the raised huts. I couldn't see any hooves running nearby...but there were some up closer to where we had come inside! They were going to come this way!

"Sis! They're coming in a second! We're trapped! The way under the wire's blocked off!"

"Ah *shit*." She swore deeply, looking back up herself to see, pulling a grenade from her pack again. "Maybe if I..."

"Wait!" Unity cried out, gently taking the grenade from Glimmer and moving to the wire nearer us, shoving the grenade under it. "Get behind something, we'll blow a hole under it in the soft ground! It's just all dirt up here under the snow!"

Glimmerlight shared a glance with me as we ducked behind cover, Unity joining us a second after setting the grenade to go off.

"Hey, seems the damsel in distress is rescuing us, Murky!"

I rolled my eyes, hearing Unity chuckle. "Not the first time..."

Covering my ears with my hooves, I cringed and waited for the-

OW! Ow ow ow!

The sudden blast of the nearby explosive sent a shock of pain shrieking through my body. Dizzied, ears ringing, I felt Glimmer lift and pull me along with them through the hole under the wire. I saw snow kicking up from rounds as everypony looked toward the explosion. I saw one smack into the side of Glimmer's saddlebag and deflect off something yet still bowl her over with a cry. Amongst my silent deafened state, I only felt my mouth moving as I screamed something to her, Unity and I both tugging her along. Trying to get behind some rocks outside the compound's perimeter.

We were pinned. We were outside, but unable to move! Shaking as sound returned, I tried to look for any help. The fire was coming from a guard tower. I saw ponies trying to re-angle a fully

blown *machine gun* to face us! Oh Goddesses! We wouldn't survive it!

The pony I was looking at had his head evaporated.

The one beside him screamed, covered in blood, before his neck exploded, gurgling as he went down. I could still hear his hooves kicking at the tower walls.

“Up here you stupid ponies! Come on, flightless! *Move!*”

Ragini rushed down the rocks, scoped rifle in talon as her other arm waved us away. Glimmerlight choked and grit her teeth, getting up to move on her own. Unity and I helped one another, pushing up through the snow toward the crest of the hill surrounding the camp. If we could just get over it! Ragini took a couple more shots, before switching to her energy rifle, firing scything red blasts toward the camp that snapped and hissed as they struck snow covered roofing.

I could see Old Grizzly up ahead. His eyes lit up as he saw Unity, one of his 'favoured' slaves. The big earth pony was aiding Ragini, firing with his army rifle to support her as she too pulled back.

“You were right about that other entrance, kid! Come on! We'll lead the way, it's not far! Was some old emergency exit from the mines or something, not actually hard to find!”

He pulled Unity over the rocks while Glimmer and I struggled over ourselves. I was struggling to breathe. I'd clambered through snow the whole way. The radiation wasn't so bad...but it made me wheeze, combined with my lack of air at the best of times. I sat sweating in the cold as I fought to suck air down.

“Where's...the...others?”

“Distracting that lot on the other side. Follow us, we'll get you there!”

Old Grizzly and Ragini didn't hesitate, moving off immediately. Looking down the length of the hill I could see Protégé in the observation shelter, using the scope on his revolver as best he could, Chirpy hidden down beside him. Closer to the compound, I saw an old rickety building *explode* as Coral shattered the entire small structure, a couple of slavers going with it! Brimstone's warcyry was somewhere in the distance. I saw Ragini wave to her master, who then waved down to Coral. The signal was out, we were pulling back to the entrance.

So began a series of terrifying ordeals. Slavers were chasing us as we fled across the deep snow, taking cover behind thin trees and small rocks as best we could. I caught glimpses of Brimstone always at the back, hurling things or making counterattacks toward them. A true example of his fieldcraft at work, brute strength being only one of his talents. Engaging them amongst rock formations and when they stumbled over a hill. The cold intelligence he bore to slow their advance was as fascinating in its operation as it was terrifying to behold.

Coral Eve carried her son, galloping near Protégé. With her child, she took no chances, rushing as far as she could instead of sticking around to fight. Glimmer and Ragini took her place, stopping to take potshots or snipe as slavers made their way toward us. Three times I was pinned, with no cover but having to dig into the snow itself and pray they didn't shoot near me. Three times I had to gulp the remainder of my canteen from out of fear of the effect. Unity was sometimes with me, other times with

Grizzly.

Just five long minutes of terror, fleeing and worry for everypony around me as I felt my energy reserves drop. Unity was flagging too...not exactly having been treated well in their hooves. I stung me to see her look as dirty and bedraggled as any slave. She deserved better.

The slavers eventually seemed to cease the chase as the weather closed in. A heavy snowstorm kicked up with mist to match it. Strong winds tore at us and drove the fighting apart. I heard Grizzly shout that we were close, but his voice faded into the distance. In an instant, I found myself rather isolated from most of them, only the nearby Glimmer and Unity with me.

“Glimmer! Unity! D-don't wander!”

“I won't, Murky! Stick together here! I-it's gonna get c-colder again as this mist comes down!” She moved closer to me. “K-keep moving the way we were...”

“C-chin up, Murky...we'll make it.” Unity tried to smile, but shivered even worse. I saw Glimmerlight drift a thicker coat to her from a saddlebag, providing at least something away from the wind.

This mist was getting worse, visibility was disappearing faster than we could move. Snowfall got in our eyes. We had to be close now! Passing a tree, I saw it looking like it wanted to tear itself from the ground under the wind!

Then we heard something...an animalistic howl. Another...then another. Pony voices mimicking the cries of wolves. I froze just as Glimmer did. Not from the cold either. We shared a glance. Both of us recognised them from earlier. From a memory.

“Wildcard's raiders.”

“Yeah...”

They were on the hunt. I could hear them whooping nearby. Just like the forest near Creaky Hollow, the drug addled psychopaths were bounding heedless of the bold through the snowy forest. I heard screams of finding tracks, bloodthirsty promises and even the occasional gunshot into the air. Sometimes, I thought I saw dark shapes moving amongst the trees. They had overtaken us...were on all sides...

“Keep moving Murky...just keep moving...*keep moving...*”

She sounded as scared as I felt. Holding close to one another, we staggered and tripped over hidden trunks and rocks in the snow. I felt ill inside, my chest tightening for sure this time. I struggled not to cough...not now.

We just couldn't see! I even tried to check my Pipbuck but it hadn't been anywhere near this entrance to maybe spot it on the map. At least not without the indicator only an E.F.S would give me to locate things!

“Tracks! Yeeeah tracks! *Followfollowfollow!*”

“Coming to get yooooou!”

They barked and sung behind us. It was definitely our tracks! Pulling at Glimmer, I whispered into her ear.

“We can't outrun them...we don't know where we're going. They do!”

My sister thought for a second, looking around. Then she suddenly galloped up an incline toward a large rock sitting precariously, settling down behind it.

“Then we ambush *them*, Murky. Just like in the memory. Only this time I *win*.”

* * *

We waited...

Without really intending to, the three of us somewhat crowded together against the cold. Unity was between the two of us given her lack of winter clothing. I could feel her shivering as much as I was and hear the chattering of her teeth. She gripped my front leg and pulled me into a small hug.

“I n-never said thanks, Murky...for coming.”

“It's...um...okay.” I muttered.

“Really. I just...I didn't know what was happening. I don't know what's going on anymore. I just...can't remember...I don't even know why.”

“Hun?”

Glimmerlight turned to look at us.

“When we get away from this forsaken mountain, give me a chance. Memory's my thing. Whatever talent you have, those slavers wanted it...I'm sure you saw in that station that all this is to do with memory magic. Maybe that's got something to do with it?”

Unity nodded, her head shivering badly against the cold. So was I...the snow was beginning to form around us.

“Just give me a chance, “Glimmer continued, “I'll take a look into your mind, see if I can maybe draw out anything forgotten into an orb. Then we'll see.”

My sister looked at me and smiled.

“Get to use my talent on something good for a change.”

Softly, I leaned in, hugging both of them tightly.

We'd figure it out...we'd figure it *all* out. Together.

There wasn't much opportunity to enjoy the moment, unfortunately. My ears twitched, a sound coming in across the nearby area. There was somepony coming.

Seeing my ear perk up, Glimmerlight swivelled around, weapon aimed. I hunkered down, closing my eyes as Unity and I held close behind the rock, trying to hear from where and who! It was soft...just tiny steps...and crying?

Wait a minute...

I stepped out from behind the rock, hearing Glimmer hiss for me to get back. This was no raider! I rushed down the incline again, into the mist to the area we aimed to catch them in! A small shape was forming through it all...a very small shape, a foal!

Chirpy!

I found him staggering forward, crying his little eyes out and turning pale from the cold. Shivering as he stumbled through deep snow, the little foal almost collapsed as he saw me. I rushed forward, catching him only to find little legs pulling into my neck.

“M-M-Mister Murky I...I lost her! W-we fell when they shot at us! I can't find my mom!” He wailed into my neck. “I can't find anypony else!”

“Ssh...ssh...” I stroked his mane, turning to carry him back. “Auntie Glim-Glim's up there...we got you.”

The name I hoped would calm him, somepony he dearly loved. I just heard him cry more, worried for his mother. I knew the feeling...I-

More sounds came to my ears. More ponies galloping around. Coming this way! Sacred Goddesses they were close! I heard them froth and scowl, a horn blew...they really were thoroughbred hunters beneath all the substances!

Turning, I tried to get going, to run! But they were so close, I wasn't even half way back before I heard one scream.

“There he is! He's got the little morsel!”

Screaming, I tried to run, but carrying another pony when I felt so numb and weak was never easy. Behind me, out of the forest, there came three raiders. Whirling nets above them and drooling openly below slack mouths they quivered and charged at me.

Glimmer's rifle rang out and I saw one drop, his knee exploding. Immediately after, a second shot slammed into their chest. Glimmer had learned her lesson. She wasn't allowing those pain killing drugs that Wildcard's bunch used to have *any* time to effect! I dropped to the ground to give Glimmer clear line of sight, but the raiders had opened fire at her instead, the rounds whizzing over my head and chipping off the rock. I lay in the middle of the gunfight, quivering and holding Chirpy beneath me.

I heard Glimmerlight shift to the side, moving away from her position in the mist. The raiders

avoided me, seeing where I was as a killbox for any other shooters.

“Don't you worry little buck! We'll come for you soon enough! Chomp-chomp! Weehee! Wildy wants you again! He doesn't get to kill many ponies *twice!*”

My hooves rattled against my own head as I shook and tried to drown them out. No no *no!*

Nearby, I heard and slightly saw Glimmer suddenly raise from behind bark, rifle aimed. But even from where I was, I couldn't see the raiders. They had dropped down behind old dead vegetation.

“*Shit...*” Glimmerlight muttered to herself, before looking at me.

I nodded my head toward a set of bracken I could hear some sounds from. This close...I could hear their wheezing breaths. Glimmer suddenly span her rifle and fired into that location, a raider crying out in pain as she fell out of cover, clutching her neck. Glimmerlight fired again...and again. The shots slammed into the raider's sternum twice...but she simply kept moving. I saw her fumbling with a series of needles, unable to gather the concentration to use them. Slowly...I watched her bleed out as Glimmerlight moved cautiously forward again, keeping behind any bracken and trees.

Only, Glimmer had to use so many shots on these raiders that I knew she only had a couple rounds left at most. Thankfully there was only one left.

Near to me, the raider she'd first shot twitched...then rolled over, laughing. He kept rolling until he fell into a ditch, a missed shot from Glimmerlight ripping into the earth where he was. Oh great, there were two now.

She had to reload soon...then they'd just rush her. How had that raider survived? Seeing him sit up and roll with such wounds was...was just *wrong!*

I had to move. Had to give her a way to know where they were! I had to get Chirpy out of there too! Slowly, I started trying to crawl away from the fire lanes while it was quieter, pulling Chirpy with me. If I didn't get away from this skirmish quickly they'd use me as-

“Don't move, little morsel!”

A sudden burst of gunfire threw up the snow in front of me. Squealing, I froze. Then to my horror, both raiders began to simply stand up. Glimmer's shot whipped forward and snapped one in the shoulder.

The raider kept coming...she didn't care. Simply standing back up, dripping with blood and leaking from her nose, the tattooed nightmare kept coming! She strode over to me, looking out at the bushes.

“We know you're out there! How many shots left? Eeeeehehe! Want a gamble? Can you shoot both of us before we shoot *them?*”

I saw the barrel of a gun point at myself and Chirpy. I tried to hide him, put him behind me! The thought of putting myself in the direct firing line terrified me but I...I had to.

“We lllike a gamble...likes it likes it!” The male raider squealed happily. I could see numerous needles in a bracelet. Each was filled with various colours of liquid.

“Wanna play, girl?” The raider looked around. “We gots you all caught up! We know you can get one of us, we don't give a shit! Thrill of the gamble, y'see? Wildy's gang likes that shit! C'mon! Try and kill both before we pull the trigger! Which one of us bites it before your runts do?”

I didn't want to imagine what Glimmer was feeling. She was a good shooter but...not *that* good. I could hear her trying to reload silently, too quietly for the raiders to know. Please Glimmer...be good enough...please. Oh Goddesses...I just didn't want them to shoot. These murderous drug-takers didn't even know reality from the dream, they'd not hesitate to kill Chirpy too after they'd had their fun!

Yet no shot came immediately. I didn't blame her being unsure over whether to try...

Both raiders made a disappointed sound.

“No show? Well in that case, we'll-”

The boulder we'd hid behind earlier *thundered* past my vision. Blurring past us to *crush* the female raider. I heard bones splinter and an eruption of red covered the snow as the rock carried the broken body ten feet away and struck the ground like a meteor. Everypony around looked up and across. A haze of unbridled and uncontrolled magical power *surged* around where it had last resided, linked to where it now lay.

At the nexus of it all...my Goddesses...

“*Don't...you...dare...point one of those things...*”

Coral Eye *burned* with magical power around her horn, a second layer of magic throbbing around it, her eyes almost glowing with light! I saw the rock start to vibrate as though it were nothing but a pebble.

“**AT MY SON!**”

The boulder didn't fly at the other raider, the magical energy coursing through it simply *shattered* it under the sheer pressure of Coral's telekinetic push, sending a hundred sharp rocks scything through the air and tearing the raider limb from limb. The storm of fragments snapped trees and dug deep into the ground while sending a wave of the blooded white snow with it. A tremendous *crack* of air pressure, like a thunderclap rolled across the mountain valleys.

The snow finally settled...as I saw twenty feet of devastation from the rock outwards in a cone, trees having fallen to the side. Slowly...the mist itself that had been blown outward in a sphere around Coral began to settle around us again. At the centre, Coral simply stood panting. Smoke drifted from her dangerously crackling horn, her face a mixture of sheer anger and horrid agony.

And then...there was absolute silence.

No-pony even knew what to say. I could see Unity speechless behind Coral. Glimmerlight emerged from her hiding spot, gun held slackly by the sling. I stood up slowly, shivering so much I

could barely even stay upright. Chirpy, beneath me, simply began trotting toward his mother, rushing to her side when she fell on her side. Using magic cost her dearly...this had drained her utterly. Perhaps even a burnout.

Chirpy clambered up the incline, falling against her side and hugging her neck tightly. Slowly, I saw her hoof raise and wrap around him, holding him close.

Any tranquil moment would have to wait. In the distance, I heard more raiders. More shouts and commanding voices. Looking from pony to pony, they saw the truth. We had to keep moving. I heard others coming behind Coral, before the huge shape of Brimstone Blitz arrived.

He was, as ever, right to the point.

“Entrance this way, move *now*. There's a huge hunting party coming this way. Brutus among them.”

I heard him growl the name of his old subordinate. But the name filled me with a fear. The *minotaur* was coming in the distance. Glimmerlight and Unity went with me, while Brimstone lifted Coral and her son onto his back. If she held any complaints about it being Brim, she didn't say them or simply couldn't.

Behind us, a howl came through the trees.

“I heeear you all! I can smell ya like a gumdrop on Hearths Warning Morning, rascal! Wildy's comin’!”

Wildcard was in the forest himself now...oh...oh Goddesses...

We galloped, fled into the lessening mist, disappearing as fast as it had come. I could start to see shapes behind us, a growing mass of darkly clad ponies rushing to catch us. A rock face was ahead as we passed by some buildings. Just small outhouses and shelters, likely how Ragini found the way in. Then suddenly ahead...a small but thick metal door into the mountainside. A rough construction of logs surrounding it, yet strong enough to deter an army. Grizzly was still pushing it open, with Ragini and Protégé galloping out to help us in. Chirpy leapt onto Protégé's back, while I helped Coral down. Ragini picked up Glimmer...my sister beginning to flag, the bruise on her side growing from the impact earlier.

Even as we stumbled those last few feet, I heard Coral trying to speak to me.

“Just...just like once before...”

“I know, ssh..um...save your strength?”

She groaned and I pulled her upright, not far...not far...I could hear the raiders leading the charge behind us! Some shots went above us!

“Helping Glimmer again, she...” Coral coughed, “she deserves it. Even if she needs to...to sort herself out. I still care for her...”

“I *know*, Coral! Please...hurry!”

I did know. I'd known for a while, but to hear her say it...that meant a lot. No matter what truths we found out, I knew they would endure the reality and the arguments about it. I had confidence in them.

Hard metal under my hooves told me we'd made it, before passing Coral to Grizzly as he helped her inside to the dark interior. A rock cave with a mounted cage walkway through the middle of it, held aloft by scaffold, even though it was only a foot above the cave floor.

I went back for Unity, I needed to make sure she was fine. Ahead of me, there was only her and Brimstone still outside, staring back at the rushing group coming. Ahead of them all I saw that cybernetic monster with his eyes glowing and pistons whirring as he sprinted implacably through the snow, kicking it up in his wake. Behind it, I saw Grindstone hobbling with the remainder of the slavers, his eyes meeting Unity's and my own.

Wildcard came out of the trees on our left, twin machete's waiting.

Behind them all...atop the hill far back, having been aiming to cut us off if we had gone downhill...I could see that huge silhouette of a massive pony. I knew only one slaver it could be.

He was looking directly at me across hundreds of feet. I couldn't tell any details...but I could feel his eyes burning into me. Slowly...I saw a hoof raise, a collar dangling from it.

Shackles, Grindstone and Wildcard...they were all out there. Yet we had escaped them for now.

We were safe...they couldn't get to us before we closed the door behind us and blocked it.

Slowly, we both turned away from them, Unity casting a disgusted look at Grindstone before she went. The two of us trotted together.

Yet we both turned back as the roaring voice carries across the hills.

“Brimstone Blitz!”

Tinged with electronic noise, the minotaur had finally spoken in a deep voice, carrying a strange accent. That unique tinge to his voice making him sound almost unearthly, inexplicable. Brimstone stopped before being about to pull that door shut once we were through.

“Brimstone Blitz!” The shout came again. **“You and I, old Warlord! We shall settle things! The Legend of the Bloodletters! My rightful throne remains to be claimed!”**

Those massive metal claws snapped shut, sparking as they each took an entire tree down either side of him in once pincer like cut!

“Atop this mountain, when the time comes, we shall lay to rest a grudge and story! A duel of titans beneath the sky! You and I, Warlord! You and I!”

Brimstone only stared back, before turning away without a word. I saw on his ruined face a

distant look. An old pony almost beyond caring for such 'legendary duels'. Slowly, he simply trotted away without saying anything in return, holding the door ready. Unity and I rushed in, getting inside before he slammed it shut, casting all into darkness.

* * *

I'd done it...

We'd done it...

We had come up here and gotten Unity back.

She was with us! Finally...*finally* with the rest of us after so long. After so many times being torn apart. I had been through darkness, fire and ice to find her at the tip of the world but now after all that...I could only think four words.

It was worth it.

Now we had a real chance to rest in shelter for once before whatever happened next did. Whatever secrets we'd find in here could wait until we were ready again, yet the race was still on. Sleep was beyond the time we had. Simply enough to get off our hooves and take some food and medicine.

The way in led to a small system of tunnels bearing scaffold platforms. Nothing exactly impressive...yet the way the tunnels expanded said a lot about what might lie ahead. In this dark, blank area we simply found spots and took a chance to breathe.

Or at least...try to breathe in my case. Glimmer had seen the truth, but I didn't much want to think on it. My wheezing was...was just me being unfit. That's all it was. It was just the snow making it worse up here!

No. I...I wasn't shivering and feeling hot in my chest because my illness was getting worse. Coming closer to...to ki...

I forced the thought down. I didn't want to think on that now.

To be fair, we were *all* shivering. The cold of the snow and wind outside had set deep once the adrenaline had worn off. Out clothing was soaked through and hooves numb. We each just...found our thing to try and take our minds off it for now.

Brimstone Blitz sat silently as ever. Watchful of the ways in, guarding them ceaselessly. He hadn't said anything since Big Brutus had shown up.

Coral Eve lay recovering with her son and Glimmerlight aiding her. Her horn sometimes sparked on its own, lighting the darkness with a thin blue haze. According to Glimmer, she hadn't burned out, but it had caused her a lot of shock. I hoped she'd be fine...we might need her power. A power I'd been *sorely* underestimating.

Ragini and Grizzly did some looking around, while Protégé joined them sometimes he mostly

spent his time with a small book he'd somehow still brought.

Unity and I meanwhile...we simply found somewhere quiet to catch up. She told me of how they had dragged her down to the metro, about the same ambience she had to resist and of how they intended to use her as some sort of 'memory signal projector'.

Finally, I knew why they wanted her.

"My power, you see..." She drew out my statuette that sat between us, atop the page of my journal we'd been looking at, "I told you it's to bring ponies together. It's like I put a little bit of myself or somepony into something like this statue. Not, well, literally. Just a replica, a sensation. A little magical field of memory, so they'll never feel alone or separated when nearby it. I used to sell it in the wastes on things like photo frames or treasured items...mostly for those whose lovers went on long caravans. It's like a...a magical signature. Everypony has one, not just unicorns."

"So, Grindstone wanted you to do that for something else?" I couldn't help but feel horrible for her, such a beautiful talent to be so misused.

Unity looked down. "Yes...I don't know on what..."

She leaned against my shoulder as her magic flipped more pages in my journal. We went rather quiet. I just didn't know what to say more on it. Gradually, she moved back through the pictures I'd drawn since she had last looked...before looking at how many pages remained past where we'd first met.

"Murky, what's in those earlier pages?"

My heart dropped a little. "J-just...old memories. Before I m-met you...bad times. I didn't draw happy things then."

"I'm so sorry..."

There was another soft silence as she respectfully avoided them, instead looking at the ones I'd drawn of my mother or even herself, smiling a little. My nerves relaxed a little even to see her chuckle at my uh...'own' pictures. Just anything to feel friendly, to calm down.

Soon, I heard somepony trotting up. Protégé moved around the corner and looked briefly at us.

"Unity, I regret I did not get the chance to say hello." He nodded his head. "Are you quite all right to accompany us?"

Unity nodded, not really coming off my shoulder as he spoke. I sensed that it was similar to Coral and her son...Unity and I were just afraid because of how many times we'd been split apart. My very first friend finally here with us all.

"I'll be fine, really."

"Excellent." Protégé's voice was quiet, weaker than normal. "We'll be moving out soon, you two. You did well back there. We've come this far...let us push just a little further. See what the source

of all this madness truly is...”

He stood there silently for a second, looking at us, before turning and leaving to return to his book. I just couldn't shake how sorry I felt for what he was going through right now in private. A determination to succeed for his master, yet his own mind showing how vulnerable he'd been to orders and suggestion. Now he just felt so...distant. I'd always thought him a lonely soul. Every time I visited his office in the past for a 'talk' he had always looked suddenly happy, like he craved company. Just like he was deeply missing some...pony...

My eyes crept back to Unity for a few seconds, then back the way Protégé had gone. I felt my heart beat a little faster, as thoughts gathered, scattered and revolved in my head for a few seconds.

Hmm...nah...couldn't be.

* * *

Old Grizzly's voice was curt, but authoritative.

“All right everypony, we have to get going. This game isn't won yet...even if we hold more cards than they do.”

Gradually we began to get up. I reloaded *Rarity's Grace* and settled everything on me again, my soaked fleece feeling icky to get into. Unity and I had almost fallen asleep just sitting there, before being roused to get moving. I could see Coral Eve back on her hooves again. Everypony (and griffin) was ready.

Time to see truly what this was all about. The answers to what this all meant lay just ahead.

Answers that would define what would certainly be the most important few days of my entire life...

* * *

“You seem to talk of this mountain like it's...special. Like it's something really defining to you.”

Yes, you could say that...

...

...

“...why?”

Well, it's simple, really...

By the end of it...we would know the truth.

“About what?”

Everything.

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Just that Little Further – The end is in sight. Yet everything stands against you and you feel like you've got nothing more to give...yet you still find the energy to stick it out just that little bit longer or the heart to endure just that little more to perhaps just make it. You may sprint or perform other physical tests for a quarter longer than before.

Chapter 23: The Legacy of Aurora Star

(Small note - This is a rather long chapter, around the same as Chapter 12, the last act finale. For the ease of pacing yourself, I have included breaks where you will see two layers of the * * * page breaks. There are two, please consider these “natural breaks” and feel free to take a rest there! You won’t lose momentum if you do, I’ve written it to work like that. This is a big undertaking and a huge milestone, this chapter, so the level of content had to be high. Now dig in and enjoy as the stage is set here for the third and final act of our journey...)

* * *

“Ever dance with the devil in the pale moonlight?”

“What’s it like to be so close to finding a long sought truth?”

It’s hard to get the scale of how it felt into words. I’ll...I’ll try.

This had started long ago, when I stumbled across a PipBuck while being chased through the FunFarm and...wait, no...before that even. Shackles had been hunting since before I’d even come to Fillydelphia. He and Grindstone had plundered the Ministry of Arcane Science’s secrets, its inventions like tools and salistoosers-

“Sanitisers.”

Yeah, them too. This had pre-dated any 'story' of mine but for me this began the same day I’d learned to think for myself! Every time I’d wondered about what that Pipbuck meant or any small curiosity that had caught my attention in the Stable or...or in records that Glimmer read I’d felt something building. Then of course came Pinkie Pie, who slotted it all together for me, told me that I was right! That I’d stumbled into being involved in something that had been going on for a long time...so much longer than I’d ever known. Or lived.

Something that had been going on for two hundred years through the ghouls who were once involved and others who had picked up the pieces before me. Chance or fate had placed my life at the end of its journey to perhaps have a chance at knowing everything. Just ahead, I thought, lay every answer and I...I...just couldn’t help but feel I’d missed something. Some vital clue.

There was the refugees disappearing into what I now knew was Ministry Station. Taken there by Doctor Heartcare, the pony who would become a maniacal magister of zebra-obsessed ghouls.

There was the memory machines found in Aurora’s office replicated in some abandoned asylum and integrated with the same memory learning technology found in the spell orbs from Stable Ninety Three.

Skilled arcane workers like Aurora and Sundial had been drafted and forced to build...something for the zebras who were entering through a secret portal.

This all fitted together somehow. I could see some threads, I had some ideas, but the whole grand purpose remained so tantalisingly out of reach. Red Eye’s slavers wanted it for their master while Shackles’ loyalists wanted it all for themselves to snatch power over Fillydelphia!

Within all that, there was us. Six ponies, six slaves who wanted nothing more than to escape. Pinkie had assured me that the way out lay in what we found there. Maybe she meant the portal, maybe something else. Whatever it was though...we had to own at the very least the knowledge for ourselves! We had to get to it *first* and take it.

Of course...there was a problem with that plan.

“Protégé...”

Mhm. We *were* still slaves. Protégé still *owned* me. By his allowance and by his aid I had rescued my friends but only at the cost of having to help his side of the conflict! He'd be with us every step of the way to an end that both he and I knew were at odds with one another. He fought for Red Eye, we fought for our freedom.

He, Grizzly and Ragini were with us on this...right beside us. Already once on the train we had shown how close we were to fracturing between 'slave' and 'master.' I knew where Protégé's loyalties lay.

All the same, I couldn't help but feel I had to somehow...I don't know...change how Protégé saw all this and to get him to see the potential it held.

He *knew* all this was wrong. I knew he did! No-pony could go through that in the metro and I could see the denial on his face whenever confronted on the realities of the city he saw his dreams in. I just hoped I could get him to see there was another way. Increasingly, I began to pity him.

This wasn't our final 'battle', there were grander events to come. But this would be one of those defining moments. Us six slaves had to work together, like the legends of those six ponies in the past, to achieve something any one of us alone could not. I had Unity back, now I wanted to do what I'd always said and truly *help* her! She was a tougher mare than she looked but I couldn't help feel a deep caring for her. Unity and I would have to stick together in this as the two ponies that weren't as strong as Brimstone, Shackles or Grizzly. Who weren't hotshots like Glimmer and Ragini or dangerous magic users such as Coral Eve.

Yet even if everything around me was riddled with huge ponies, massive numbers and ancient powers I still just felt like that tiny slave tentatively sticking his hoof out the door. I just kept praying I wouldn't feel a slaver looming over me, telling me what not to do when the time came for us to make a move.

“You mean Shackles? Grindstone? Old Grizzly?”

Nope...

“Oh...”

* * *

Beep!

Beep!

...click.

“I've got to try and leave this on as much as I can. Anything from now on is worth recording, anything could be some...some sort of evidence to take back to Pinkie! They're taking us in at last, down into the...well...whatever this place is. They still haven't told me why they want some of us here.”

A sound of curious accents, distant shouting and harsh tones.

“That's them...the zebras. There's three of them, but I've seen at least twelve so far between here and the metro hideout! They've got two dozen of us or so, just kept us waiting in here for so long in the dark off the mountainside. It's...it's so cold...I still cant feel my hooves and my clothes are soaked through. There's an odd warmth from up ahead though. I hope we move soon, for all my fears.”

A gasp, before the shouts passed down closer. Somepony sternly ordering them to move.

“I...I hope it still picks me up. They're moving us in! There's metal platforms in this cave, just off the ground. Like a maze unto itself! Wait...is...is that...?”

A female voice, young and nasal.

“Must you so stiffly order them around? They aren't slaves, they are still ponies. Ponies who volunteered for this, I might add. They're helping you, why not show them a little respect?”

Then another, heavily accented.

“They will get reward, Aurora pony. Until then are workers. Until then are tools by own wish. Cannot have dissent. Be quick. Be clean. Be efficient. They will do purpose. As will you, as agreed.”

“Don't forget what you need me for...you couldn't hope to do this without me. Nor without them and their skills. They are as essential to this as anypony. Perhaps you should show a little more gratitude to-”

Sundial gasped at the sound of a hoof striking somepony accompanied by Aurora's yelp of pain. Sundial shuffled forward, coming closer to the sound of Aurora.

“Zebra do not show gratitude to ponies. Zebra do not show gratitude to traitors. This was your choice. Now live with consequences. Until reward, you ours. Will find another way if you need removed.”

“All right...fine...”

A long period of heavy breathing and somepony reasserting themselves. Then slowly, Sundial's voice. Quiet and careful.

“Aurora Star...”

“You know of me, then? I can't imagine what you think of me for this.”

“I...”

It was all too obvious...how much he wanted to help her. To let her in on it and his purpose.

“I know of you...yes. Are you all right?”

“I'll survive, hopefully. Whatever drew you into this, whoever you are, I am so very sorry...”

“It's, um, Sundial. I kinda got dragged into it, I really don't want to be here.”

Aurora was silent for some time.

“Perhaps once I thought differently...stay safe, Sundial. Keep that PipBuck with you if you can. Just do what they want...what they tell you to. With enough work maybe we can all get out of this. I...I just can't believe I...”

“You what?”

“...nothing. Thinking on what's been done only makes me keep questioning one unfortunate thing.”

They were clearly back on their hooves. The sound of a pony trotting on metal was all too clear near him. The procession was moving again...going deeper, further in.

“What's that?”

“I only need wonder what Twilight would think of me now...”

From the sound, she clearly moved on ahead. Sundial lightly called after her and the memory scientist seemed to halt.

“Sundial...”

“Y-yes?”

“Just be ready. Please...no matter what happens in here, no matter how crazy things get...no matter what I end up doing...keep your head down and get out of here. Get back to your dancer in the sky.”

A sudden sound of galloping. She took off. Sundial started forward, his hooves sounding like he was really rushing.

“Wait, how did you know-”

“Get back in line, pony!”

“But-”

“Get back in LINE!”

He stammered...sighed...and no doubt shrunk back. A zebra huffed somewhere in the background. Entire minutes passed, the longest recording thus far by some distance. Then finally, he spoke again with his words tinged with light sobs.

“Now I'm just scared all the more...how did she know that?”

He sniffed.

“Seriously, how did she know?! Look, whoever's listening to this? Somepony either tomorrow or...or in the far future or whatever...I don't know what's going on. It's like I'm playing with forces I don't understand! But...but...”

He took a deep breath.

“But her saying that made me feel like I can do this. I always knew I was doing it for Sky but just having somepony say it...urgh what am I even talking about...this is freaky. Can she read minds? I...oh my...wait, we're coming up to something.”

Hooves clattered to a halt. That same zebra voice barked some commands in their own language and the sounds of pistons was heard.

“There's...there's a door up ahead! A big one! Not like a Stable door from what I saw in those horrid drills, it's square and lined with brass. I can see gemlights on it...we're coming to something...something big...they're opening it! I swear, I'll find the truth about this. For Sky. It's...it's...”

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Ah! I...nothing! Noth-”

Click.

* * *

Slowly, I put down the Pipbuck, biting my lip. I felt Unity place a hoof on one of my front legs as she saw the worry on my face.

“That poor buck...he sounds only a little older than us.”

“H-he is...”

We were sat against the cave wall. This journey was only taking us higher since the train...further away from the world I knew. Even inside I could sense the sheer scale of the mountain around me, like an ancient warden of the world itself.

“I found his messages just after I first met you, he's been trying to help the pony he loves. A pegasus called Skydancer. They kept calling him to rush to the Stables with the Balefire sirens in drills and...and it made him worry. Every time he thought it meant he was being taken away to live while she died. It drove him to do this...to...to try and get her a ticket...he didn't feel he had a choice, he-”

“It's all right, Murky.” Unity interrupted me with a gentle smile. *“Of all ponies, I'm one who'd understand doing something like that for a pony you care about, remember?”*

We shared a little smile then and there. Unity was right...she did know. Goddesses help me, I knew it a little too when it came to my friends. I'd help her help him. She didn't have to be alone like Sundial was...

“Aaaaaand got it!”

Behind us, Glimmerlight pumped a hoof with a 'Yes!' when the gemlight lantern she'd found on the way through these caves finally sprung into life. A hazy red formed and spread across the walls, reflecting from wet rock and casting back shadows. I saw the forms of the others waiting around us and couldn't help but see the lush depth it seemed to give Unity's similarly coloured mane.

Frankly...it made me wish I could draw in colour. I had to turn my head to cover my blush.

Yet turning my head was what led me to see it.

Before us, hidden in the dark until Glimmer's lamp had given more light than any of the unicorns could alone, lay a gigantic square door. Heavy, lined with dull rusted brass and bearing the indents of gemlights that no longer worked across it...we saw the doorway that Sundial himself had once gone through. I felt

Unity stand up beside me and heard the others move up.

“Like a little turn of fate itself for him and us to find it, Murky?” Unity muttered quietly.

Behind us, Protégé marched up fairly quickly and cast his eyes over it. Leaning down, he began running a hoof along the edge.

“This looks important, to state the obvious...” His voice was quite thin. “Brimstone, Ragini, Grizzly, can you get it open? It seems we may have what we're looking for.”

The two biggest ponies and the large griffin with us moved up in the darkness. It took them a good five minutes, straining and tugging hard to get the rusted hinges moving. As it opened, I saw a strange glow emanating through the hole they made that grew and grew! It lit the passage we were in, showing Coral lying at the back and resting with her son cradled in her hooves. It downplayed Glimmer's proud new lamp and cast across Protégé's face, glinting off his eyepiece. Slowly, the three opening it pulled back as it finally swung open fully, revealing what was behind it.

Unity and I stood right before it, just beside Protégé, to get the full view of what lay within.

Sparkling and multicoloured light danced and played amongst a *titanic* cave. Hundreds of feet high and wide enough to fit an entire small town in, it stretched so far that it fell into darkness before any end could be seen! I felt my mouth hang open even while we all trotted into it, the hour or so spent in cramped darkness suddenly and shockingly being replaced by such a vast space filled with a warm and gentle air.

Every wall, every ceiling and floor was riddled with jagged crystals of all colours. Rubies, sapphires, emeralds and...and...whatever the purple ones were called! They pierced the rock, standing higher than a pony and glittering in the light from strung up lanterns hung long ago. Twinkling, they formed a starlight sky above us in the darkness of the far ceiling that cast a haze like moonlight itself around the cave.

Yet what lay at the clear centre of it all was what drew every eye.

We'd heard it was a gem mine. That had been right...

They hadn't said what *else* lay in here.

Ahead of us lay a stone platform suspended on a terrifyingly thin strut of rock leading down the massive chasm within the centre of the cave. Upon it lay gold. Gold and silver and gems mixed with treasures, jewellery and chests. A pile larger than an entire house splayed across the entire platform and spilled over the sides into the deep crevices on every side haphazardly.

Atop this pile lay a pile of bones bigger than any creature I had ever known. Bigger even than the balefire phoenix that had so terrified me at the very start of my journey. A ribcage I could have *trotted* into along a serpentine spine that led to a mouth capable of devouring a pony in one bite, Brim-sized or not! It spread over the gold and gems of its final resting place, startling every sense I had.

This wasn't just a gem mine...

It had been a *dragon's lair!*

“By all that is good in Equestria...” Protégé wandered forward and I found myself following him almost on automatic, my eyes wide as I simply stared at the spectacle before me. Looking down into that chasm where the golden pile spilled, I could see the pit was filled beneath us. Like the dragon's storage for whatever wasn't on his own pile.

Glimmerlight couldn't keep herself from looking almost longingly at the pile in the middle, pulling Chirpy to her side with a hoof and patting his head. The foal was mimicking my own wide eyed look.

“See that, lil'rascal? That's the treasure you've wanted in all those adventures we played at.”

“This explains quite neatly why Shackles and Grindstone are so interested.” Old Grizzly shuffled up near us, combat rifle hung ready by his neck. “Bits aren't worth as much as caps now but...this all adds up.”

No, it didn't. It might explain why in a simple sense why Grindstone originally took an interest in this place but this wasn't the answer to it all. Not immediately anyway. Along the outskirts of the cave I could

see more huts and buildings. Minecarts lay near the pile, filled to the brim but clearly not moved for hundreds of years. Mining tools lay in piles while a vast array of overhead beams and pulleys looked like that were once used for lifting ponies carts to the dragon's platform. There was an entire mining camp in this place, just as Protégé had said. The perfect cover for Aurora's work no doubt deeper in.

Speaking of which...I could see a rather large entrance just before the cave's size faded into darkness. It bore the symbol of the Ministry and had carts of gems only waiting outside it.

I'd bet my front right hoof that had something to do with it. (Not literally of course. I liked that hoof. It was my favourite one!)

I saw Ragini creep forward to the edge, before perking my ears up and realising why. Both her and I waved at the others to get down around the same time as I heard shouts and sounds coming from somewhere.

Below us...

Shuffling up beside her, I poked my head over and squeaked lightly at the massive looming drop below. Ragini merely rolled her eyes.

“How would you *ever* cope with being in the sky with fears like that, flightless?”

“I...I'd learn?”

“Sure. Now, you seeing what I do?”

I sure was. Below us, down toward the dragon's pit full of gems and gold, I could see more platforms leading into it with ramps and track systems. There was another entire campsite down there on a lower level! Yet around it, I saw ponies start to march in and take up positions for a shift. Slavers organised it, many of them seemingly wearing trinkets they'd found.

Suddenly the reason why Shackles commanded such respect from slavers made a *lot* more sense. I imagined 'bonuses' for those in his ranks were pretty high.

“Right there, laddies! Lets see that get movin' fer the next train. Ye don't got the time after all that ruckus back there!”

I felt my skin *crawl*. I hadn't sworn much even in my mind, not even as much as I used to. But I couldn't help the thought of 'Oh *fuck*' internally at that voice. The sneering accent that I had come to associate with grief about to strike me.

Below us, Sooty Morass was directing things. The marketeer was no doubt *very* interested in all this. Beside him, I saw Grindstone and...

Oh no...

Shackles...

“Your profit is permitted, trader. However it is not our primary concern. That **runt** and those carrying him along are up there somewhere!”

The massive slaver pointed up and I curled back quickly from the edge. I felt a hoof on my back, turning to find Glimmerlight near me. Unity stood nearby too, biting her lip.

“Aye, Mister Shackles...but lets not miss out on a wee opportunity if I says so? Ye see, dragons store the best under themselves, so's I reads last night, y'see? I got a mind to head up there meself anyway, if you're going.”

Ragini motioned back, signalling to Protégé and Grizzly rapidly with a talon that they were coming up.

“**Fine**, trader. Accompany myself and Grindstone, bring your workforce. They will **not** reach that place before we do. That and I have a slave to reclaim...”

Grindstone's voice sounded so distant...so old. He truly was growing weaker by the day. “I will have Brutus go with you. He has been eager to work with Wildcard again to hunt down the old Warlord. He will prove a capable asset...everything he's done when not in my service has been to become the beast to kill

Brimstone Blitz. I don't think I can order him to stay back much longer. Just be sure to bring the mare. She *and* that buck are important.”

I felt myself shiver. Brimstone was the only pony strong enough to take on something like that monster...now I simply felt in fear for Brim's life. He still wasn't as strong as he once was after the Pit...

Shackles nodded slightly, turning back to the slavers behind them.

“Then get moving. Trader, do not delay...we cannot lose that runt. On your head be it if you get in the way...”

He stomped off, bellowing for slavers and slaves to assemble. Immediately they began to move out to a ramp leading into a curved way around the chasm. One I could see would eventually lead up here. Fear began to creep down my back as I saw Sooty giggle with glee at hearing me mentioned and call for his own assistants. The force they had coming up was not small...I saw perhaps fifty ponies...slavers and indentured slaves.

Protégé saw them too. He made a quiet sigh before sitting back.

“I suppose that's it then...”

He looked to the same Ministry door I'd seen earlier.

“...the race is on.”

* * *

'She *and* the buck are important...'

What did he mean by that? I knew Shackles wanted me but...it didn't sound like he meant that as simply as it seemed. The sinking feeling of what Shackles had said in Ministry Station settled home, that he had more reason to want to own me than just for his personal amusement.

It didn't take us long to traverse our way across the mining camp. Ragini led the way, bounding much faster than a pony could canter and climbing atop obstructions to check the way ahead. Twitching her head side to side with that freaky method of griffin staring, she watched for anything untoward before waving us forward each time. As we moved around a giant crystal springing from the rock floor and clambered over raised wooden platforms it became clear just how large this chamber truly was. A dragon's lair...big enough to contain such an impossibly huge beast. My eyes kept drifting to the side, onto the massive skeleton that seemed to be looking this way.

I wondered what had killed it. The thought of perhaps being caught in a balefire blast and limping home to recover, before dying of its wounds atop the riches of a thousand year long life came to mind.

Gradually, however, that Ministry door was nearing. I could see it had remained open when it had last been left; just enough space for a pony to squeeze through and get a grip. Brimstone didn't hesitate, galloping up to it and putting his back into widening the gap for the larger members of our group. Even while he strained, I could hear the slavers moving closer, coming higher. They were still some time away, but voices carried far even if they sounded tiny in this vast interior space.

“We don't hesitate in here,” Old Grizzly stated as he turned to us all, “we go in, we look around rapidly and we get out again however we can. This is on the clock now and we can't come back this way. I'd say if they don't stop we have at most fifteen minutes before they make it up here. Hopefully there's another way to the mountainside we can find to escape and get back to Fillydelphia. Everypony helps look...but if you find anything do not remove it, only myself, Ragini or Protégé will take anything. Call us over first.”

Glimmerlight cocked her head to the side, raising an eyebrow. “And what's that supposed to mean?”

“It means you are a slave,” Ragini quipped behind us while scanning with her rifle, “Don't think we don't also know what you all really want. We're not stupid. Anything found in here is for Red Eye's purposes. One of us three will take them. If you try to take anything...well...just don't.”

I saw my sister merely roll her eyes. “You've got two memory magic capable unicorns and you want to

restrict them helping in a situation like this...fine fine..."

I glanced at Protégé as we went in; surely he understood that we could help!

Yet I saw him merely look back at me and nod. He was agreeing with them...

"Let's get moving. Time is of the essence."

The door finally shifted further open. Brimstone cracked his neck and stood aside to reveal the dully lit rooms beyond and-

I heard something. Somepony *talking!*

Waving my hoof, I tried to warn them. Everypony rushed to the sides of the door as I crept up beside it and poked my mirror around. Hazy blues and purples flickered and throbbed from ancient gemlights across a sort of reception crudely built into the cave. Behind it, a more proper tunnel had been built, curving around out of sight.

"What's got you, flightless?" Ragini had crept up to me, standing over me to poke her head around. "I don't hear anything."

"I...I did, I swear!"

There was nothing now. It had faded away almost as quickly as I'd heard it. The noises of Shackles, Sooty and Brutus approaching from behind with their small army of slavers wasn't making it any easier. Sighing, I shook my head.

"I don't have anything on E.F.S. There's no-pony in there, Murk."

"We can't wait." Old Grizzly motioned inwards. "Better a possible threat than sitting in the open when that lot comes up behind us."

"I'd been overruled, but Grizzly was right. With Shackles' slavers gaining ground, we had little choice." Truth be told...I'd have preferred if it were just Protégé with us. Briefly, I wondered if Grizzly had come because he didn't trust just Protégé and Ragini alone with so many of us...especially with ponies like Brimstone and Coral.

Protégé led the way, turning and moving into the reception with his revolver already drawn. With us all following him, I found it to drop sharply in temperature compared to the stuffy warm dragon lair behind us. Perhaps the constructed walls offered some sort of air conditioning system through all those vents that still ran? Arcane systems could last a *long* time, I had discovered in the past. Heck...I wore one on my right foreleg that had survived a balefire explosion. Yet this felt stingy on the skin...a deathly cold. Little bits of frost twinkling on the walls told me that this was more than just some fans someplace. This area was open to the outside world in some way.

That meant a way out ahead of us...yes. Who said I was stupid?

Ragini brought up the rear, taking a second to pull the loosened door shut behind us. Unfortunately, the lock was long destroyed. Instead, Brim pushed the reception desk in front of it. Anything to delay them a bit more.

I trotted beside Unity, taking a little comfort in her presence. No matter how out of depth I felt, knowing she was there helped me at least feel like something was going right.

Going by the look on her face, she felt the same. That similar look of nervous anticipation. I'd filled her in on most of everything that was going on, leaving out only the part with Pinkie Pie. I wasn't too keen on making her think I was some crazy pony just yet...

Wait! I had heard something! I knew it! Waving to the others, I ducked into the side of the corridor. Despite not hearing anything before, they all followed my lead. Ragini again cocked her head to the side, before finally nodding. She'd heard it too.

“It's like...faint buzzing and voices in the distance. Around this bend.” She spoke quietly, unslinging her rifle again.

More voices...some overlapping one another or going silent. They were so faint, clipped with buzzes and rasping gargles of sound. I heard one cut out mid sentence, another broke into a long droning hum. The hairs on my neck lifted as Ragini and I crept forward to look.

The curve of the cave didn't last long before we came to another opening. Yet only when we got closer to it did I see that it opened out widely again into another large chamber. Not as large, but filled with a tinny scent of metal and crisp air...like that of a workshop or machinery floor.

The colossal room was crammed with arcane technology. A fully equipped laboratory, easily on a par with Ministry Station's cruder constructions, with rows of worktables, terminals and numerous large machines the purpose of I could only hope to guess at. The sparkling glow of memory orbs lying across the floors and surfaces glinted into the cave's dimmed light beneath a pale blue aura that descended from above. Gemstones littered the walls, while large hanging lights were chained to the ceiling far above. I saw memory machines of varying designs and sizes. Long blackboards were covered in symbols and words that I in my limited knowledge could never hope to read. Around the lab's edges, I could see further doorways leading into tunnels.

This complex went on much more than this main room. At the back I could see a spiral stairwell heading upward to a ringed balcony lined with bookcases and desks, a central supporting column going all the way into the roof itself. Towering above all other machines, at the centre there lay a kind of...of altar? It was made of metal and wood, holding numerous orbs on arms that looked as though they could turn. Maybe it was-*Auurrrgh!*

I screamed, leaping sideways and clambering behind Ragini. A pony appeared from the side of the entrance, galloping right to left! Shimmering like static, barely a comprehensible form, it faded into nothing before it reached the end.

“They're coming!”

Turning into sparkles, the form faded, the lights that had made it up falling to the ground. It...it had looked like...no, it couldn't be.

It had been like the projection orbs. Twilight, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie...the ones I'd found. This was like...like something really similar to that but really dirty and crude by comparison! It-

The pony ran by again! Appearing from the right like static feedback in the air itself, it fuzzed and broke in the air from the movement. Only the vaguest shape was there, but I could see a terrified face looking backwards before it exploded once more into nothing.

“They're coming!”

“Murk, that's like what we found at the orphanage.” Coral moved forward slowly, her stamina still low and her eyes sunken.

Ragini half kicked me out from behind her and advanced inwards.

I bit my lip as I saw the ghostly pony once again, desperately trying to do something at a table. Whatever they had been touching was long smashed on the table below...but allegedly when it had been recorded the table had still been in the same place. After a few seconds, they yelped and sprinted toward us, phasing through Ragini as they went into nothingness.

“They're coming!”

I couldn't help but swallow and try to contain myself as I now saw an old and gooey looking preserved skeleton lying not ten more feet away from where the form had been running.

'They', had gotten the pony.

Unity wandered closer, seemingly more intrigued than immediately repulsed, before pointing at

something. Near the table, there was a little shimmering orb. It *was* a projection orb! Its light was much weaker than the ones I'd seen, but the sparkles returned to it and ejected every time the poor pony played out those moments it had seemingly captured. Either side of me, I heard both Glimmer and Unity gasp at the sight. Of an epic display of memory science.

Gradually, I felt my ears perk up a bit. Against the static of the pony, I could hear other voices faintly. Little blue glows from within the machines or in side rooms hinted at others out there too...eternally repeating over and over...

Old Grizzly cast his eyes around.

“Beyond my ken, this is. Right then, split up. If you find anything, call one of us slavers. We *will* be searching you before we leave. Make it quick, we don't have long to discover what all this is and how we get whatever it is you think we need, Protégé...”

Behind us, I heard a sudden shout. A whooping howl...Wildcard's raiders. Everypony jumped around, looking back the way we'd come. The noise had been far off, but much closer than we'd ever thought they'd be by now.

“Fifteen minutes was a bit optimistic, I think...” Brimstone rumbled, turning his head around to let his eye see Grizzly.

“Agreed, warlord...” The old slaver hummed for a second, before stamping. “Everypony go now, get into twos. You all know this stuff better than I do, so I'll go hunt for a way out while you search. We *need* to know we can get the hell out of this place if we have to. Don't dither.”

As if to accentuate that another scream warbled up the tunnel, echoing off the walls and finding its way into us, followed by a snorting bellow. That of a minotaur.

The orb phantom rushed ahead of us, away from that tunnel entrance.

“They're coming!”

* * *

Ragini stuck with Protégé. They hurried off among the machines, apparently happy for us to look on our own at least. Old Grizzly insisted on remaining near Chirpy, yet allowed Coral to carry her son upon her back as they took the opposite direction, galloping off toward the spiral stairs. Glimmer was rather more excited to dig into this, cantering forward with a grin into the centre of the room to quickly disappear behind a huge spark generator. Brimstone went with her, the watchful protector.

That left myself and Unity. Picking another way aside from Glimmer and Brim, we began our own hunt.

Really, we both felt small amongst these big machines and long rows of tables. Neither of us were the largest ponies around and (by my estimations) pre-war ponies must have been bigger anyway, for everything felt slightly too large for us. The fear of a ghost image suddenly appearing near to us played on my nerves for every single step. Something about it just...just didn't sit right.

Were these ones just prototypes? Earlier models? Aurora had mentioned they were hard to make. I couldn't have imagined those six she mentioned to Twilight just came into being without a few hiccups along the way.

“Where do we even begin?” Unity cast her head around, picking up some schematics with her magic. They didn't show much other than how to create a random part for something neither of us knew.

“I...um...I really don't...” I felt myself stammering, put off by the quiet of this place. It felt like I was disturbing it by speaking. Everything was so still...so ancient and without understanding. That huge altar at the centre just did nothing other than loom in the dull light, offering no explanation for its presence. Even the occasional noise of a phantom pony in the next row, obscured but still hissing in the air without any voice working didn't seem to break up the silence as much as make it worse.

Every so often, the sounds of that small army approaching behind us was merely a reminder that we had to speed up. The quiet lab mixed with a feeling of being hurried was more stressful than I might have imagined. I could pick out individual voices and words now. Grizzly's estimate had been *way* off.

The mere fact that we occasionally stumbled across the remains of somepony didn't make things any easier. Shivering, I stepped around where a pile of bones lay below a table. I wanted to...to be respectful, not rush around them! They had been hiding from something...

Our search found lots of tools, empty memory orbs and workbenches for cutting gemstones. Many of the precious stones *gleamed* from where they'd been polished and shaped into all sorts of wondrous things. Other tables seemed to have been used in the process of putting them into constructions of metal worked out at a load of crafting machines near the wall. I could see lathes and drills, all bearing the marks of the Ministry's of Wartime Technology's construction. Briefly a pony appeared and bent over a lathe.

“Mark four? I said Mark three! It needs to be smaller to do this safely, one crack and we lose the range on-”

They cut. It didn't repeat. The glowing orb laying on a small shelf beside it went back to vaguely glowing. Maybe they didn't all restart instantly?

“Creepy...but it looks like you were right that they were stealing from all the ministries, Murky. There's even an old spritebot over there!” Unity was looking over at the same things, before turning back to move deeper in. “Kind of feel jealous I was just sitting in chains while you went off and found all this old stuff out...”

She cast me a little grin over her shoulder and I felt myself blush as much as shake my head. How could she grin *now*?

“It...it wasn't worth being jealous of. A lot of it wasn't nice...”

“You had your friends though, they saw you through it. That's what friendship's for.” Unity slowed down until we were trotting side by side. “Call me old fashioned, but I still like to believe that a good group of friends can accomplish *anything* in this world. I think my mother brought me up on too many stories of a certain six ponies...”

That made me giggle. So had mine. I just hadn't been free of thought enough to really understand at the time.

“I...I think so too...”

“Then let's put our trust in all this. As friends, with the others too...we'll find everypony we want to. My buck, those two fillies you mentioned and...Sunny Days, was it? Surely if we all work together we can find a way out. A way to go home.”

That made me smile, I really liked it when she spoke as positively as she did. Unity had a way with words that just made my heart lift. A certain innocence. She really had been born in the wrong era...more than *any* of us.

Then she actually laughed, wiping a tear from her eye.

“Sorry, I'm so ridiculous. Listen to me, like something from a child's storybook...”

“It's...it's not...” I bit my lip, before hesitating to ask, “but why are you uh...crying?”

Unity paused, raising a hoof to her eye as though surprised to even realise there had been a tear. Gradually, I saw her look almost ashamed or...or embarrassed.

“I...I didn't realise, sorry.” She looked around. “Just this place...there's so much magic in it. I...I normally don't notice it but...”

I saw her hesitate, looking back toward two phantoms that huddled in a corner, looking terrified and not speaking...simply clutching one another.

“I can...can *feel* them...”

Huh?! Twisting back to look at her, I could only look confused, presumably prompting her to answer my unasked question.

“Murky, I can create replica signatures. I've told you that, but to do that I have to be able to recognise them. But a pony's own magical signature...it doesn't just end. It...it remains in all the things they do. All the things they've touched. I...I could pick up a librarian's favourite book and I'd probably know how to recreate their signature from it for my special talent.”

Okay, *that* was a whole new level to Unity's magic I hadn't even realised. I found myself looking around in bewilderment to check if anypony else heard.

“You can sense ponies?” The question felt dumb, but it was my first thought.

“Oh...no. No...I could never know that much for sure. It's just a...a feeling...like a subtle taste on the tongue. Just like the signatures I create for trinkets, it's a subconscious thing. Just, there's so much in this place...so much magic used...so many signatures all melding together that it's so strong and...and...”

She suddenly whimpered as she saw the phantoms again. Unity was a tender but strong mare...I'd never seen her make such a childlike sound.

“These orbs...they give context to it! I can *see* what I'm feeling! Their signatures left behind with just enough to show me who they were...it's terrible...”

“I'm sorry...” I didn't know what else to say.

“It's...it's all right, Murky. This is worse but I've had to deal with it before out in the wastes.

Abandoned homes and old public places mostly. I'm just glad there's all of you here. Your friends are good ponies with strong hearts. Even in just a few hours all this has shown me that. I know I'm among those who'll support me as much as I'll try to help you all too. Let's...let's just keep going. Sooner we find it the sooner we can leave, right?”

Unity made a weak grin and tapped the bump of the statuette she'd made for me in my chest pocket.

“Just hold on to the feelings of those that mean something to you and we'll get by this.”

I couldn't help feeling how incredible what she could do was. Her talent was so subtle, yet so amazingly meaningful.

Just like her.

Even as I went to reply to her, my eyes caught something. Behind her, through a row of memory extractors, I saw a flickering light in one of the side tunnels around the edges of the big chamber. Pointing, I got Unity's attention to it as well, before we both cantered over. Taking it cautiously...I poked my head into the tunnel, waving to Glimmerlight before we went. I wanted somepony to know where we were going.

Three or four small rooms lined the sides, two to my left and two to my right. I could see one was an office with a simple desk and terminal. But the light was flickering from one to the left. With a look to one another, we moved in.

It was a small room, but every wall and ceiling had been cut from the stone to a smooth finish. Below us, the floor became tiled and I realised that a sliding glass door could close it off entirely. At the back were shelves of folders and bottled stones. In the middle there lay a single table with precision cutting tools on it. One crystal sat there...the most *beautiful* crystal I'd ever seen in my life. It shone with multiple colours refracting out of it, casting a rainbow across the side of the room every time the light flickered through it. Sitting upright, it had a few spires of its own and was rough around the base, like it had just been cut from the cave wall.

There was an orb on the table. I was about to say something when it suddenly flared right in our faces. I heard Unity yelp in shock at the two ponies appearing right in front of us. I cried out as well, a higher pitch than her.

We took a few seconds to let our hearts calm down. Only then did I realise we'd both grabbed hold of one another. With a little nervous grin, I let go.

“Better me than the griffin, huh?” Unity smirked at me, “Least I don't kick you, she doesn't seem very nice.”

“N-nope...she isn't.”

“Really?”

Our eyes shot forward again to the two ponies stood before us around the table, whether mares or stallions I couldn't tell. They seemed to flicker in and out of reality, their shapes indistinct and constantly changing colour or even location by a few inches. Translucent and jerky, the shape made rather horrifying gurgling noises that pitched and squeaked...before settling into more normal voices.

“*Why this thing?*”

“*Aurora said it'd be handy, we need to test them anyway for her project. Might as well do it here.*”

I could properly see it now on this longer recording! It was like the memory projection orbs, only much less refined and...and really bad quality compared to the stunningly lifelike ones of the Ministry Mares. I could barely make out the features and the voices sounded...robotic. Movement barely worked, if the ponies made any more than a slight turn, then the entire picture faded into a wreck of magical sparks that fizzed and popped until they stopped again.

Really...it made me feel quite unsettled. Two phantoms standing where they once did...a replaying of the past. The chilly air was making our breath visible on each exhale and the mist was interfering with the memory projections.

“*Okay so...so entry number what?*”

“*Doesn't matter. Recording first crystal resonance testing. We've discovered some of the most pure forms of crystals we've ever seen in this mine. Normally gemstones all have some degree of contamination in their makeup, but these ones are remarkably genuine. The magical amplification we're getting from them is astounding! The possibilities for orb research with this stockpile of crystals are endless!*”

“*Endless? Hardly a scientific term. Now, connecting the charge plates...shall I do it?*”

“*Feel free, my friend. We shall make history someday.*”

The shapes fuzzed out of focus, before juddering and reappearing near the end of the table. They were working around something that didn't exist. I presumed that the crystal in front of us was not the one they meant...the position was different.

“*Casting a basic light spell and...woah...*”

“*Woah, indeed...the orb won't pick this up, but the crystal has lit. It has amplified the light spell's potency! Common gemlights would be nothing if crystal this pure was used instead! See, gems make up the basis of Equestrian magical technology. Think of them all, spark batteries, gem packs for energy weapons and talismans. They all use gems. But what if these gems could boost the power of something?*”

“*Now now...you know it won't work on a wide scale. It's too impractical to-*”

“*Never mind, Aurora has to know it worked. She'll want to get started right away...this technology is too great to miss out on. Those ideas she had? What our benefactors want? This could let them create new, more powerful orbs! This little recording one might actually work someday! Imagine, not using this for what they want but...but proper projection orbs and-*”

Unity suddenly yelled and leap back. Turning, I joined her, as another form suddenly walked into the radius of the orb, passing *through* Unity on its way. Static and wild glimmers solidified into the shape of something a little different from a pony...a zebra.

“*Has it worked?*”

“*Oh...yes...yes, sorry! We were just excited, it...um...never mind!*”

The orb suddenly flashed again...and they seemed to reset.

“Really?”

“Why this thing?”

“Aurora said it'd be handy, we need to test them anyway for her project. Might as well do it here.”

Gently, Unity reached out with her magic and plucked the shard up. The deep red of her magic sent the crystal into a wild cascade of colour that shone off our faces and reflected all around the room, passing through the light forms before us and warping them even more.

*“Higher yield crystals for those fancy orbs you told me about...that makes sense. It *would* take something greater than any normal substance to do such a thing. It's a special talent of mine just to even give a feeling of somepony from an item...to make somepony actually *appear* takes...”*

She shook her head.

“Aurora Star must have been somepony truly amazing to have created such a thing...”

My mind thought back to the memory orb I'd experienced in her office. Sitting near those masses of light green or cream orbs that strewed her floor, I had seen life from Aurora's perspective. Seen her brilliant but naïve presence as a Ministry Hub leader. Nasal voiced, forgetful without orb help...she wouldn't have been somepony I'd have clocked for a revolutionary memory magic scientist. All the same...life had taught me the most unusual of ponies could do things you didn't expect.

“Well...we can't take every crystal in the mountain with us. Think we should just move on, Murky? I don't really imagine we have time to waste...”

Snapped back to reality, I found Unity had trotted nearer the door. Nodding a little, I followed her back into the side passageway we'd found. I noticed some of the gemlights were growing dimmer or more inconsistent the further they got from the main chamber by the darkening light around us. The air got cooler for every foot we travelled, the frost on the walls growing thicker until I was shivering all over again. We kept going, exploring this abandoned part of the laboratory, seeing the roughly mined out caves formed into crude rooms and areas containing many shards of crystal.

“H-help...somepony...help...”

We both stopped. Just ahead, I could see a dim light from the door on our right, near to the end of this hall ahead of a large frosted over door that likely led to an open cave. Weak and spluttering, it made the same fizzled sounds as the other phantom projections. Near it, a vent was blowing icy wind into the corridor that set both of us to visible wince at its chilly cutting drafts.

Below it, drawing my eye, there was a long stained blood that ran from where somepony had pulled the grate off into the room with the light.

“They killed us...they killed us all when we were done...”

The light faded, before springing back into life. We shifted forward, knowing it was just an orb but all the same...feeling a dread creep into the air.

Within the room, there lay a skeleton collapsed against a bookshelf. Covered in white frost and fallen tomes, it clearly had been knocked back into it. A dark stain covered the floor around it, leading to a silvery orb between its legs. The orb flickered, before sparking into being. The shape of a pony gathered around the skeleton in the same precise shape of how it had been lying, reforming the poor thing over and over for centuries across its own corpse...

“H-help...somepony...help...”

“Oh, Goddesses preserve them...” I muttered to myself, a hoof on my mouth and struggled to keep my eyes dry. I could *feel* them welling up as I saw the dark stain across the bookshelf behind them and could recognise the punch of bullet holes snapping through ribs. They had been sitting there helpless when someone had stormed in and...and...

They'd left this pony to *bleed to death...*

“They killed us...they killed us all when we were done...”

Unity gasped quietly as she saw it, stopping in the doorway while I passed inside.

“I’m so sorry...”

“Huh?”

She silently slid past me, kneeling near the figure with a look of mourning.

“I...I can really *feel* this one...he activated this orb himself.”

Her magic gently picked up the orb, momentarily setting the image to warp out of position before she dropped it right back in the same place with a gasp. She fell back, falling onto her rump like she'd just been shocked. Quickly I moved over to her, seeing her face white.

“Fear...”

“What?”

“So much fear...like I could feel what he went through when he set the orb going...oh goodness...I could feel it so clearly. Seeing him, sensing it all...I just...I need to do something else!”

Unity pushed up, stopping short of shoving past me as she went to the rest of the room, clearly looking to distract herself. I was left for a few seconds gazing at the last orb this pony ever used before regrettably moving away.

Carefully, I tried to see if there was anything worthwhile around the one primary desk in here, but with Unity reading for me it became clear this was nothing but a pony involved in keeping track of logistics for the mine. Just some innocent low level worker who'd gotten swept up in all this.

“There isn't much, Murky...the most I can see is some papers detailing how they tried to hide the findings in this mine. They must have made any special orbs here before sending them to Ministry Station for...well, whatever they were doing down there.”

She read a little further, biting her lip as she went as she clearly tried to fight past what she'd felt in here. I felt distinctly unhelpful, poking my head back out to the corridor. I could hear Grizzly shouting for an update on anything. Time was running out...

The thought of what it felt like to be her in this place of ancient death gave me a whole new respect for her ability to push through that which troubled her. How had she ever withstood Ministry Station?

“They keep mentioning components...comparatively few orbs. Components for...something. It's never mentioned. It used a lot of crystal though. Any ideas?”

“H-help...somepony...help...”

“N-not really...” I gulped, “Probably whatever it is at the centre of Ministry Station. The crystals let them store more power though? Does any of it say it went elsewhere?”

Unity looked over more, before lifting a paper with a symbol of three butterflies on it.

“Yes, actually. The Ministry of Peace signed for some...a Doctor Weathervane? Pre-organised deliveries of orbs for megaspell research? It was Aurora Star who signed this one out...and another for six ordinary memory orbs.”

That *had* to be the healing megaspell that had saved my life! Aurora Star had sent some to the Ministry of Peace and tried to give one to Twilight and all the Ministry Mares too. They hadn't been 'ordinary' at all. One made a megaspell with the purest crystal and the other created six *functioning* memory projection orbs!

Why was I getting the feeling that she'd been trying to cry for help this entire time? Trying to get somepony to see she was hiding something? Sweet Goddesses...what kind of maniacal surveillance did the zebras have that she had to hide them in the logistics footprint just to try and hope somepony *saw* what was going on. That she had to rely on them going to ponies who might realise those orbs weren't normal without her saying a word. Had it been that bad she couldn't have just told anypony? Did they really watch her that

closely?

Or...maybe she was just trying to hide the paper trail from Pinkie...was I giving her too much credit? Sundial seemed to think she was just a scared pony like all the rest of us.

We didn't stay there long. Taking the papers with us, we slowly and respectfully made our way out, before cantering as fast as we dared back toward the main room.

I didn't need a special talent to feel the sadness she was trying to keep down the entire way.

"They killed us...they killed us all when we were done..."

* * *

"Come on! Hurry up, all of you!"

Ragini's shout carried across the room as we emerged. I could see the griffin by the entrance we'd come in, watching the corridor. Seeing the pair of us enter, she waved a talon.

"You found the big fancy secret yet?"

"N-no!" I shook my head as Unity kept going, moving into the centre of the lab.

"Well then get moving, they're on this level. The dragon bones distracted them but we've got a couple minutes at most before they come this way!"

"They're coming?!" Grizzly voice boomed across the room, he was up on the balcony above us.

"There's a way out up here, I believe! The stairs keep going higher. Everypony, find what we need and then *get up here!* Murk and Unity, you two get onto the balcony and start hunting those rooms opposite me! *MOVE!*"

He proceeded to shout out to Glimmer and then Protégé from his vantage point, I couldn't see them but I heard their responses. Glimmer appeared briefly carrying a small bag of orbs along with her lever-action rifle readied up and pointing. She gave me a quick grin before darting off toward the back of the laboratory.

"Hey, Unity!" she called, "Keep him safe!"

Gee, thanks sis...

"Oh, I'll keep him out of trouble! Had to do that enough with my own buck." She laughed, nudging my side. "Aww, doesn't she love you?"

"Oh great, there's two of you now..."

Just hearing a friend laugh was such a welcome relief in this place. "Oh, us mares gotta stick together after all. Say, Murky...think your grapple could reach that balcony?"

Unity was right, with a little aiming, I managed to nail the overhanging room above and whizz us up to it. Ragini stayed below, watching the tunnel entrance. With no safety railings in place (I stifled a groan) it wasn't particularly hard to get onto the upper floor and see the many research chambers laid out before us.

We were on a clock. Slavers, minotaurs and raiders were coming. We were in a creepy lab filled with orb phantoms. Yet somehow...we found time to smile to one another.

Sticking together, we advanced into the rooms here. This was no longer time to edge about carefully. I could see everypony starting to hurry below and we did just so too. Tossing books carelessly aside, we hunted the workbenches and drawers to find *anything* that might tell us just what all this was! What that thing in Ministry Station was!

Two offices...three, then another lab of crystals and orbs. I almost screamed as a phantom appeared in the middle of the table the moment I ran in. It was more broken than any thus far, glitching around and moving its head as though writing in thin air. Behind it was a massive blackboard, the chalk long fading from it. Casting my eyes over it, I saw sketches of the altar at the centre of the main room surrounded by orbs and numbered ponies. A line was drawn between them and a machine that looked like the one I'd seen in the Ministry itself, the one with the buck stuck in it. Another line went to the machines that extracted

memories...that then led to the altar again...then back to the ponies and...urrrghhh...

This was all so *hard*.

"Hey, what are you doing in here?!"

Shrieking, I spun with my back to the board. My shout and the female voice startled Unity, making her drop an orb from her magic. It rung on the floor like a tiny bell, rolling beneath the table. Before us, an orb phantom shimmered and fizzled its way in through the door. Just a wash of static in the air before forming into a surprisingly high quality for these older things.

It was Aurora.

The one we'd been near already perked up, sparking.

"I'm...I'm recording what we've been doing today, Ma'am!"

"Sparkler, you know what I told you...don't record too much on paper. Use the orbs I gave you all. But you should be gone by now!"

She advanced closer to the table.

I shivered as she looked directly at me, before realising it was at the blackboard behind me.

"I...I am, Ma'am! It's just over there. But I find it easier to write, gets it all straight in my head. This is all such complex stuff, it's like we're advancing years in a few months. How could I leave?"

"I know. The team downstairs still hasn't gotten the memory nexus to focus enough power to really activate it, so we're looking into some sort of tandem power source. If you want to stick around then you'll have to tell the zebras I demanded it. You know what they think about not sticking to their plans."

Unity trotted near to me, mouthing the words, 'Memory Nexus?'

"Hey! I can hear them coming, you all!"

Ragini's words shouted up to us.

"Get down now! Get to the stairs! They're *coming!*"

Unity and I looked to one another. I saw the same look on her face. This recording *could* maybe find something! Without a word, we both nodded. A few more seconds...

"But, Ma'am...do you really think we'll get what we want now? I'm getting scared, Aurora...they are getting more eager, more aggressive. I know you told me you wanted to-"

Aurora's form hurried forward, a hoof going to Sparkler's lips.

"Hush. Not on an orb. You've been saying too much on those audio diaries already. Listen, we finish this quickly, we get back to Ministry Station and we'll take care of it, okay? This can still be saved, for all our mistakes. Now get down and help them. The Nexus is projecting on its low settings, but its lacking...something. The test spell we put in it just isn't sticking in anypony's mind longer than the old spell orbs so it's just one big inefficient method...as usual. Maybe a-"

"A signature!"

Sparkler interrupted so loudly his phantom warped and distorted. That wasn't what made both of us jump though. Below us, we heard a gunshot.

Ragini had engaged them. They were here.

"Get moving! Over here!" Grizzly screamed to everypony. We wanted to go but...but this was so close to telling us!

"Aurora, I had been thinking on that. Everypony has a signature, you know that. A magical signature to their bodies. Well...you know how you were toying with being able to replicate that once? I thought...the Nexus isn't projecting properly, right? Maybe it's because the memories we put in it for those spells...they

don't have a magical signature, they're just orbs. Nothing but a copy. With a real magical signature or...or even a replica of one, maybe it'll-"

"Watch out!"

A deafening bang sounded from below, shaking the floor beneath us and making the phantoms go haywire. Ears ringing, I realised I'd fallen. Unity galloped outside, looking over the balcony. This room we were in, it was directly above the entrance to the lab Ragini had been watching. Unity turned and shouted back to me, a sudden look of worry on her face. Holding my head, I waited till sound started filtering back in.

"-a grenade, Murky! They're coming in! Right below us!"

Staggering forward, I saw a black mark on the ground floor right beneath where we hid, around the entrance. Ragini was *sprinting* away from it as slavers poured inside. I could see Old Grizzly hoisting a thick metal desk near the top of the stairs to use as cover, firing down at them. One slaver cried out, going down and being trampled by the raiders coming in behind him.

They clutched mostly melee weapons, but a couple sent a chattering hail of sub-machine gun fire toward Grizzly's position while on the run. Wildly inaccurate, but still making the big slaver pull his combat rifle back into cover behind himself as shots sparked off the surface. Just what did they make that table out of? Well...Grizzly wouldn't have chosen it if he hadn't been sure it was thick enough...

Behind me, I heard the conversation continuing. Against my better judgement, I spun to look at it again as I saw it begin to fade off.

"-genius, Sparkler! We'll get right on that. This could do so much...so so much. I know that's not what they want. They don't want to stop at spells..."

"I know..."

"Come find me in my cottage upstairs if you manage anything. I...I need a little time."

Aurora moved away, her form passing into nothing. Sparkler seemed to sigh, before breaking up on the spot and vanishing.

Cottage!

Upstairs!

That was something! Her own place! We had something!

Below me the skirmish was unfolding dreadfully as slavers stormed the entire laboratory. I saw Ragini taking what cover she could behind the altar, snapping shots with her energy rifle at the slavers and raiders.

One raider took a hit that burned the bottom of his jaw off. He kept going until Ragini had to pump another shot into his face. Even then I saw the corpse twitching. Madly, trying to crawl.

By the Goddesses...

The return fire was intense. Driving Ragini back, they forced her to take cover and relocate immediately, scrambling and diving to get behind a memory machine with a ricocheting bullet pinging past her tail. A war cry howled into the air and Brimstone emerged from the left side of the lab. In his huge hooves he held what looked like a...a safe? Straining, roaring, he hurled it toward the slavers and sent them scattering as the heavy item crushed down among them. I heard multiple voices wailing out. A quick glance saw their legs trapped beneath where it had landed.

The unusual attack gave my friends time to fall back, find better positions and meet up.

From behind the slavers, Wildcard charged into the lab, laughing maniacally at the violence erupting around him. With his presence, the firepower they started to put out below us all became overwhelming. Grizzly was pinned, Ragini I could see huddled down as the gunshots and energy sparks flew around her. The noise echoed around, becoming a crazed firestorm as more and more slavers hurried in. They crouched in cover, using mouth held guns and magically lifted weapons. Raiders started rushing around the flanks,

their muscles straining and desperate drug fueled eyes glinting with delight. I saw three of them meet Brimstone and break into a melee as they swarmed onto him without an ounce of fear. Coral Eve appeared near the back, trying to get her son up the stairwell before shots clattered into the spiral's metal frame. The unicorn yanked Chirpy back, falling in beside Grizzly. I even heard Sooty Morass shouting orders to the slavers, trying to get them to avoid hitting some machines.

This was madness, a whole battle condensed into such a cramped area.

My friends needed help, somepony in a better position. They needed something to, uh, what was the word? Cover them?

Apparently, Unity could think faster than I could. I blamed my head ringing from the sounds hurting my poor ears...

“F-follow me! I've got an idea!”

She galloped back into the lab, her telekinesis widening out to every one of the cabinets and tables, grabbing every orb she could. Phantoms went wild as Unity picked each one up in her magic, activating them. I noticed that even as she moved them, the angles at which they projected went crazy as the alignment of the orb was disturbed. One ran upwards through the ceiling.

“Murky...help! This is...this is a lot!”

Her voice sounded strained. I thought it the limit of her telekinesis...before I realised. She could feel every one of them! All the signatures. All the sensations of a pony's individual unique magical taste on each orb brought to life around her as phantoms whirled, screamed, laughed and cried all around the two of us. It was overwhelming her. Hell, it was enough for me alone!

“*Murky!*”

I rushed over, finding Unity staggering with watering eyes. Her magic seemed to flicker a couple times as I helped her over toward the doorway, a great mass of phantom orbs following us in the air.

“Right ahead, Unity! The balcony is right there!” I helped her through the door, before feeling her hoof push me back. Her face was pained, tear stained and hurt...but her eyes bore a harsher glare.

“They hurt you all...”

The phantoms swept and faded, odd impossible angles they walked at from the orbs being turned and spiralled around her.

“They *killed* you...I feel it! Your fear, your regret. They wanted to use the beautiful things you made for *evil!*”

Slowly...I backed off. This wasn't the Unity I knew...it...it was almost like she was embodying it all, letting the feelings wash into her and push her to this limit!

“These ponies want to do the same two centuries later! Just replicas or not, let this be your chance to fight back as you once couldn't! Give those who want to save your legacy a *chance! GO!*”

With a great cry, she flung every single orb. They careened out onto the balcony, over the edge and rained down. The orbs went *everywhere*, falling, bringing with them an invading storm of ghosts and ghostly static images. I heard slavers suddenly scream, never having seen these strange and disturbing sights now dropping on them from above. From my hiding spot, I saw the terror in their eyes as dozens of ponies ran around them, fizzing in and out of reality. They flurried around the slavers, reaching toward them and failing to fall when shot or swiped at.

Faced with the ghostly attack, many of Shackles' band turned and outright *fled*. Others fell to the ground wailing. Some slashed and shot at them, hitting their allies. The first phantom we had seen also ran across the entrance once more.

This time, it wasn't the zebras who were coming.

Amongst the chaos, their fire lessened. Protégé appeared near Ragini, firing into their ranks with six

quick shots from his revolver even as I saw him looking with astonishment at what had happened to the slavers. His eye caught me looking over and he quickly waved toward the stairs.

Wildcard appeared below us, chasing after phantoms. Swearing and screaming at them he slashed and turned into a frenzied blur as they refused to react to his attacks. Stopping amongst them, I saw him screaming with them, rolling onto his back and kicking his hooves into the air as he fell into the madness of the ghostly barrage even as his raiders became disarrayed around him and even as slavers howled and ran into alcoves or back the way they'd came.

I saw Glimmerlight able to get moving out of cover from the distraction. Brimstone got her moving toward the back, followed by Protégé. Unity's idea had worked...it had worked perfectly. Grizzly had gotten up the stairs, followed by Coral and Chirpy. It had-

Below me, the ground suddenly splintered up. Gunfire from below sheared through the wooden balcony floor and sent both Unity and I dancing back and forth to avoid it. I felt her pull me, before we were galloping away. I caught a glimpse of a pony far enough into the room that he'd seen us and was pulling the trigger again and again on a long rifle pointed at us. I screamed, running just ahead of the furious gunfire until both of us leapt through a broken window into a darkened room.

The solid stone floor I landed on stopped my thoughts rather harshly. Unity fell in afterwards, landing atop me and knocking the air from my lungs. Every part of me stung, my chest most of all and I felt my right eye swell a little again. Behind us, the fire washed across the window as we held each other down, being peppered with glass and bits of broken stone and wood. Finally, it stopped, yet at Grizzly's bellowed command I heard more fire going out. Glimmer's weapon's distinctive *crack* going out every few seconds along with the *blam* of Protégé's revolver. Thanks to our distraction, they'd managed to mostly hold them at the cave entrance...at least I thought. I heard Wildcard's laughter turn to a blood curdling and animalistic howl. Brimstone shouted back...were those two fighting?

Slowly, I got up and helped Unity to her hooves. The poor mare was already tired from her time with Shackles and Grindstone, looking as shaky as I felt. I couldn't see well in here, just the vague shape of...of piles of something on all sides in the corners and against the walls. Something about it made me stop and stare.

"Oh...oh no..." Unity's words were quiet. So quiet I was surprised I heard them against the gunfire going on just outside.

Turning, I saw her eyes wide, looking directly ahead but not at anything in particular. Around the edges, I could see the glint of tears. She had been heavily drained by the effort of that move back there...left vulnerable.

"Unity? What...what's wrong? What is it?"

"So many...so close...I-I can feel them all..."

A blue light flickered around us. An orb at our hooves lit to form shapes.

Oh...oh *Goddesses*...

It wasn't just a pony this time. It was *ponies*.

Many ponies.

Around us, it lit piles stacked in corners. An orb sickeningly left active where ponies had been...been...

I heard Unity retch, almost throwing up. I nearly joined her, my mouth dropping open and twisting into a horrified grimace with unblinking eyes.

All around us, there lay piles of corpses. The zebras had gathered them here...executed them in corners and rows. A dozen...two dozen...all lay lifeless in suspended orb magic. Some with open eyes, lifelessly caught in their last scream. Slowly, the orb flickered, leaving nothing but piles of bones and blank skulls staring back at us from every side in the same poses. It lit again, covering their bones in illuminated flesh to reveal the sickening sight. Then back again...and again...never ending.

My mind reeled as I staggered against Unity. I...I didn't know which was worse. My mind just couldn't adjust. Couldn't comprehend it!

Corpses...bones...corpses...bones...

A massacre held in perpetual imagery for all eternity.

Every which way we looked, some new face looking back.

“There's too many, it's...it's like they're all screaming, all at once!”

Screaming faces.

“They just crammed them in and opened fire!”

Dead bones.

We found ourselves together in the middle of it, all. I could see her face lit every time the orb played and knew she could see the same horror in my eyes. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to break down and cry at it all. Just...just let the nightmare that had happened in this room for the dozens who had been massacred play out until I finally found the strength to flee.

“Murky...lets get out of here...”

“I...I...”

I felt her hoof take mine.

“Murky, I don't want to be here. *You* don't want to be here, let's *go*.”

I'd thought she was the one feeling it worse, but I realised I was frozen. My eyes locked on each of theirs, changing as the orb lit and faded each time. I felt her tugging me, pulling me along.

“I'm sorry, we can't help them now! We can still help your *friends* though!”

That did it. I blinked, gasped and turned back to her. She was weeping openly too, but trying to move me toward the window again now that the incoming shots had died off. She looked oddly calm for a second.

“I've always felt it bad, seeing these things. I...I always felt it more than others. My buck...he always felt sad for me whenever it happened...but he helped me as much as I helped him to get by it. Let's...let's get out of here now. I don't want to see this...feel this...”

My breathing heightened, I knew that feeling all too well myself...

Trying not to look around once more, trying to keep ourselves from thinking about leaving them all behind, we turned and made for the exit. Tripping over the window frame, we got back onto the balcony rather surprisingly out of breath. Just leaving the room was like stepping back into the land of the living.

I hadn't ever grasped the scale of it. This wasn't just a few scientists and workers in isolated rooms. The zebra extermination had been a slaughter, a massacre of ponies who'd been forced or coerced into this.

Very quickly, the idea of just how much of a horror all this in the final days before the balefire had been. Somehow I found myself hoping Aurora or Sundial hadn't seen this...

Gradually, I sneaked up to the edge of the balcony and peered over to gauge what was happening, trying to fix my thoughts back on the present.

Below us, the battle for Aurora's Lab was falling heavily in favour of the slavers. I could see some of Wildcard's raiders stamping on orbs and smashing them. Crazy enough to not care for the voices they likely already heard anyway. With phantoms popping out of existence, the distraction was beginning to falter.

Wildcard almost looked disappointed, almost hurt at them disappearing before a fury came across his face. I saw his expression snap, changing to a childlike glee as he looked at the battle in front of him, not fit to rejoin.

I...just didn't get him. Not at all. He scared me as much as he confused me.

They had the numbers. They had the raiders. They had Wildcard pushing into fire, strangely seeming to dance and bounce gleefully around shots while...while *singing*. He would get around a flank, trying to distract my friends in a terrifyingly sane tactic. Out of a side room, Brimstone launched at him, tackling the insane raider so hard his machetes skittered out of his magic. They brawled, Brimstone slamming Wildcard's head against a table. Merely laughing harder, Wildcard turned and *bit* at Brim's neck with frenzied abandon. Crying out in pain, the old Warlord hurled Wildcard away from him, back toward the slavers.

I could swear he shouted '*Wheee!*'

A shot flew near Brim, forcing him to rush back while holding onto his bleeding neck. Protégé and Grizzly gave him some cover. I could see Coral Eve now up beside Grizzly, sheltering her son behind that thick table at the top of the stairwell. Below us perhaps a dozen slavers lay dead, their casualties even I could tell were simply because they had little cover coming in here. Even as I watched, Protégé leaned out, took aim and fired a superb shot that struck a slaver on the back leg even while galloping between cover.

Slavers or not, a couple of his comrades laid down fire on Protégé until they could get out and pull their friend back into cover. These ponies weren't all merciless...they were trying to survive much as we were. That meant they were fighting hard, taking shots at anything they could while the raiders provided a distraction with their big pushes. The combination of sane tactics and reckless madness was rather terrifying to behold at work.

Unity and I simply remained where we were, mostly hidden. Neither of us were combat capable, not in that below us. A firefight channelled into a cramped lab was brutal and quick. I saw Sooty waving at slavers, sending them running up to the right where none of my friends could see. I tried to wave to them, but they were all too busy fighting for their lives and poking out of cover only haphazardly!

Finally, Grizzly spotted them from his position at the top of the stairs, before trying to hold them off with several shots in their direction. The slavers dove into the same side tunnel we'd explored earlier, getting away from him.

"Flanking! *Flanking!* Everypony get over here quickly, we have to get up! The stairwell won't hold!"

Protégé made a break out of cover, fired twice as he went and cried out as a shot hit the ground before him and bounced up into his side. His momentum carried him into cover during the fall. Before he disappeared I hadn't seen any spurt of blood...I hoped his armour had saved him like it had in the Mall.

It proved it though...the stairwell was going to be a nightmare. The fire from the slavers now surging around the flank Sooty and Wildcard had opened was just too heavy. We had some good fighters, experienced ones even...but we couldn't force them back. There was just too many and they had even bigger reinforcements coming as soon as Shackles or Brutus caught up to this party!

The thought of Shackles approaching was like a wash of ice water over my head. If they fought hard as it was now, with him in the room...

He was coming...always pursuing, always there. I...I could almost *feel* him coming closer.

Off to our right, a huge bang sent my ears ringing, a part of the balcony collapsed entirely. Wood splintered and fell, dragging girders from their sockets on the rough rock wall. Shaking terribly, I cast my eyes around to try and get an idea on what to do. My friends were pinned, struggling to pin down enough slavers till we could get up the stairs! We had no way out! The stairwell would get us all killed with no cover and...and the slavers had the only entrance!

Grizzly poked his head up, casting a glance around the slaver positions.

"Ragini, fire on the right! Protégé, pull over a rifle with your magic and get shooting on the other side! Glimmer, spot anypony taking shots at the stairwell! You'll all die if you don't get up here, so *take the chance! GO!*"

They obeyed, I saw my friends coordinate their fire under his direction from up high. He had a better sense of it all. To my astonishment, I saw what a few ponies working together could achieve against a larger but undisciplined force. One well placed shot could make half a dozen slavers duck, so if they spread

just enough and if Brimstone could hold off those raiders who kept getting too close...

We had a chance.

I heard Protégé's voice shout out, sounding tired, "Into the cave! Unity! Murk! Where are you?!"

If Unity and I were going to cross it all to get over there, we'd have to go now!

That meant...going down into it...

Oh dear.

My eyes looked around for any other method, before finally coming to rest on that huge lighting rig above us even as Unity waved to Protégé, getting his attention.

Or...we could go *over* it!

"Unity...um, you probably won't like this but we could...um, y'know? R-remember getting out the FunBarn?"

The look on her face said it all. 'You *have* to be joking.'

I shook my head and started readying up my grappling gun, twitching my hoof to flick out the mouthpiece. "If we go down we'll be in even more danger. This...this is just a quick, um...whoosh over and they won't have the time to aim at us!"

Unity sighed and shook her head, putting a hoof to her face slowly. "I swear...if you drop us *again*."

"I've been practising!"

"Sure."

All the same, she moved closer and held onto me. Rearing back, I fired up and hooked it onto one of the heavy hanging lights before standing ready at the edge. I could see a big long stretch of a walking space between the machines near my friends. I'd have to aim for that. Aim for that then sprint to where Protégé was!

Yes! So...simple. Yes...

"That bit there." I pointed to it.

"It's not a straight swing, Murky. How will you turn? In the middle of this?"

She was right, the bit I was aiming at was slightly to the side and pointed away from us...if we landed without turning to properly face it in mid air...there was every chance we'd just hit the metal machines too hard to risk...

How to turn? How to turn?

I remembered back to the train...Glimmer's words. Ignore what Weathervane said...flying didn't just mean flapping...

I remembered falling in the crash, how my wings caught the air, no matter how unsuccessfully then.

Taking a breath, I told Unity to hold tighter and flared my wings out behind me. She gasped in surprise, the first time I'd let them out since finding her again. I was going to prove I could make something of them, making something of being a pegasus for once in my life!

"Murky...your wings, they're..."

I just smiled to her briefly. "I've come a long way since the FunFarm...trust me?"

Unity didn't even need to respond, the small smile she gave was all I needed to know she did.

I took a few steps back, before galloping forward. With a leap, we cast out above the lab. A horrible moment of freefall from which I felt my wings being tugged and whipped at behind me before the rope went tight and we *swung*!

We both let out a shout as it sped up, pulling our bodies and soaring over the battle itself! Shots flew by us as we went, phantoms flickered by near us and I felt Unity nearly choke me with her legs to hold on. My puffy eye making it hard to see in the middle of all this! Slavers looked up, I saw Ragini looking up with an open mouth as we soared above, my wings open.

I saw the open stretch and felt us start to move up again at the far side of the swing, off centre! Gritting my teeth, I tried not to scream in pain as I shoved one sore wing out, the weak muscles and fragile bones responding like they had always known how. Stiff, it spread and caught the air, setting us spinning wildly as the grapple rope swung and sent us spiralling toward the gap. Struggling to see it on each spin, I tried to control it, my other wing flaring out too! Briefly, I saw a glimpse of it...straight on!

Releasing the mouthpiece, I dropped us! Hopefully not too high!

...well...one can hope.

We fell a lot further than I expected. I held onto her. I don't know why I thought it would work...I just don't know. But my wings tried to curve out, to catch the air and slow us. Instead it just sent me into a flat spin again, hanging in the air for but a millisecond before falling again. Yet even that little lift...

Glimmerlight's words rang very true from on the train.

The harsh ground threw any thoughts from my mind. We landed *hard*. Rolling over one another, crying out from the impact we thankfully rolled behind something before coming to a stop. We...we'd made it!

I lay on my back...so sore and breathless. I could feel Unity's hooves still around me as she groaned in pain. No...wait...that was me. Damn my thin voice.

“Murky...that...you've really...”

She tried to stand up, her hooves helping me up as my wings dropped a little, still out to the sides. There was just this little moment...away from the battle.

“I knew they'd be there for you someday.”

I felt myself blush. “Thanks...I'm just glad we made it.”

“Hah! Thought you'd made it, laddie?”

The voice cut into me, forcing aside the odd tranquillity of the moment before a hoof struck across my face. Hard. Pain swelled throughout my entire head as I collapsed to the ground, wings splayed out by my sides. My tooth felt loose and shaky in my mouth.

“Murky!” Unity cried out before I heard her yelp too. The sound forced me to turn and open my eyes.

“Two for the price of one, the best deal in the house, me old da' used to say, lad. Hah! Now I got you both.

Before us stood Sooty Morass. The trader wore leather armour and carried a shotgun by his side. For all his mercantile background he had always still been a rough and weathered pony. Amongst this madness in the lab, he had us alone! Unity lay by his side, unconscious near to his hoof.

“U-Unity!”

I tried to rush forward, but Sooty reared up, slamming down and kicking me back again. The impact on the side of my neck jarred my whole head. This time I didn't get up...I just lay in pain, struggling and whining as I felt his hoof come down and pin my *wing* to the floor.

“I knew I'd get somethin' if I came in this little excursion of sorts, lad. Didnae think it'd be ye, eh? I had ye cheated from me once, laddie...not again.”

I tried to move, I really did. But with his hoof on my wing, he only needed to *lean*. I cried out again, held onto my belly. The...the slavers must have moved up this side of the lab without me or anypony else seeing! My friends were shouting somewhere nearby...they were under fire. I heard Ragini cry out as something hit her, Grizzly shouting to Brimstone to help her. I couldn't see anypony, just Sooty.

“Now get up, lad.”

That was his mistake.

He still took me for a broken slave.

The moment his hoof lifted, I spun, trying to whip the mouthpiece up and bit *hard* on it. The grapple line hadn't retracted yet and it began to cycle back in quickly. Quick enough that before Sooty could do a thing, it crashed into the back of his head. Its hook tore a wicked chunk of flesh from his shoulder, sending droplets of blood over my face. Over all the gunfire going on as my friends engaged in the skirmish with Shackles' forces...Sooty screamed.

I desperately tried to swap the trigger mechanism, to get *Rarity's Grace* up. But my head hurt...my hooves were clumsy. Before I managed it, I was virtually immobilised by Sooty screaming at me, the sound straining my already sore ears from the mass of war sounds in this enclosed place.

“YE THINK YE CAN HURT ME, EH?”

His hoof slapped across my face, before going back to holding his shoulder.

“WE'RE ALL ALONE, LADDIE!”

I screamed as another hoof hit me. I...I couldn't move. My body was aching too much. I kept seeing Unity stirring, but unable to stand. Sooty leaned in, pinning me on the ground so hard that I cried out, his braids hanging down either side of my face.

“YES!” His bloody face leaned in. “SCREAM ye wee runt! *Learn* to scream! Cos yer comin' with me! I got a line of *customers* waiting for you!”

No...

“They'll want to *hear* that scream! With wings that *work* I can get a fortune from you, laddie! A FORTUNE! YOU'LL BE THEIR LITTLE BITCH TO SQUEAL WHEN THEY HOLD YE DOWN OVER AND OVER! I got a stallion who was *waiting* for you to arrive! *He'll have you now ye little bastard! I'll let him have all of ye for doing that to me shoulder! I-*”

“Hey! Goldilocks!”

Sooty looked to the side, furious. His anger quickly drained from his face as he saw somepony standing above him on the side of a tall machine. A lever-action rifle pointed directly to his head.

“If anypony is gonna be the one to set him up with a hot stallion, it's going to be *me*.”

Glimmerlight pulled the trigger, blowing the back of Sooty's skull clean off. The merchant's body fell off me, lifelessly dropping to the ground amongst a spreading pool of blood.

My sister quickly leapt down to us, calling behind her as slavers started to move closer. Ragini appeared, as did Protégé. On seeing the scene, he galloped forward, quickly checking Unity with great concern on his face at her dazed struggling. Without a word, he lifted her across his back. My sister helped me up, helping me onto hers as they struggled back toward the stairwell.

Everypony else was putting fire down, trying to hold off the massively superior slaver force as we headed upwards, using every barrier we could for cover. Everypony took turns covering as the next would take the vulnerable run upwards, working together to spot or shoot and move under Grizzly's commands.

Gradually, we all got upstairs. I saw that Ragini had taken another hit to her armour while pulling us up it. She now fell into cover at the top, winded and sore. Glimmer had a ricochet in her foreleg as she had carried me up, but my sister had pushed on, carrying my limp body before dumping both of us. That stairwell had been totally exposed, it was a miracle of Grizzly's tactical thinking and direction that we'd managed it.

I tried to shout to them that we had to go up to the top...to find Aurora's cottage, presumably outside again. To tell them what we'd learned. It was Protégé who ended up near me to hear it, pushing me back in behind Grizzly's table and cramping himself into the same small space to avoid fire.

“Upstairs! Aurora's Cottage! It's upstairs!”

“Impossible!” Protégé had to shout to be heard, even to me, “They'll follow too quickly!”

“But-”

“Murk, we're completely outgunned! The best we can do is get away with our lives right now! We can't delay that many, we're all running low on ammo here!”

I could only watch as Brimstone effortlessly picked up a fully blown machine gun that Ragini had somehow dragged up here with his *mouth* and blazed away with his rather historic inaccuracy. I saw rounds go wild all over the place and somehow manage to even go into the roof. The sound at the very least kept the slavers down as he handed it to Grizzly and turned to the stairwell.

“You say we need to delay them?”

Pushing forward, he started moving back *down*. Protégé looked aghast. To be fair, so did I.

“Cover him! Cover him!”

Looking downward, I saw Brimstone halfway to the lab floor again, galloping down the shaky stairwell before he started pulling at the stairwell's supporting structure. The entire thing swayed, held up only by that central column. Shots pinged around him before one slapped home into his back leg. His face contorted in pain, half falling.

He was trying to rip the stairwell off to stop them following us! Glimmer reloaded and fired with almost psychotic effort, shouting down at him.

“Brim! Hurry it up! You're exposed there! *Come on!*”

I saw Wildcard poked his head up from behind the nexus, grinning. His raiders were clustered around.

“You heard her, my lovelies! Come on, the fun's getting away! Get them!”

A slaver looked up. “B-but-YAAARGH!”

The machete cut down from behind, Wildcard not even ceasing his grin as the slaver squirmed on it, wailing as he was pinned to a table.

“I don't like repeating myself...it makes me **BOOOORED!**”

Wildcard's mouth drooped open, screeching the word like an impetuous foal! Yet the raiders around him whooped and dragged the hapless slavers with them into a gigantic headlong rush.

Everypony opened fire on them, only for Grizzly's big gun to jam. The others didn't have enough mass fire to deal with it! Below us, Brimstone was forced down. He had to duck behind the supporting column of the spiral staircase below us to hide from the fire coming in from all across the lab. Open on all sides, it wasn't much cover. Oh Goddesses protect him! The raiders were going to reach the bottom any second and push up to him! The big raider tried to smash the rusting metal, grunting with pain every time he moved.

Yet then I saw Coral. She moved wearily, but summoned enough power to her horn to set it crackling. She galloped down to Brimstone, hopping her front hooves up on the barrier. With a steely expression, she looked down the last couple of flights at the charging raiders.

“Oh for goodness sakes...such a big nasty pony and you can't even rip apart one little metal thing! You deal with that you and leave them to me, you big baby!”

Brimstone's look would have been priceless if I weren't for how dangerous this was. Coral cried out, her horn flaring brightly, its energies uncontained and raw. I saw a few slavers go into a shocked look, trying to rush away. She terrified them more than *Wildcard*. Clearly Coral was building something of a reputation among slavers.

“As for you all...get BACK!”

Her telekinetic wave surged forward, uprooting tables and blasting the front ranks of the slavers and

raiders over one another, throwing them into an immobile heap. Weapons flew from telekinesis or from mouths. Even Wildcard I saw bowled from his hooves and buried beneath a couple of unfortunate slavers.

Coral Eve slumped over the barrier. Breathless, her horn sparking, she was picked up by Brim and pushed to get back upstairs. Grizzly, the only one of us uninjured and able, helped pull her back up as brimstone continued to wrestle with the column. It was looking loose...I could see the bottom side of the whole thing beginning to sway.

Yet ahead of us, I heard a bestial roar. At last, as though having come from further back, Big Brutus charged into the laboratory. Without hesitating, he sprinted across, trampling slavers in his rush to get to Brimstone. The big Warlord looked back and snarled.

“Don't any of you dare shoot him! Hold your wretched fire! Under the altar of times past we shall fight, Warlord! Come over here! Be the alpha male you thought you were! FACE ME!”

The minotaur didn't pause. Glimmer stood watching for her protector, allowing me to see. Behind us the rest were rushing up into the cave. As I finally saw that minotaur properly...I felt the fear grow for Brimstone. Two massive claws replaced his hands, his whole body filled with cybernetics and I could now see his back riddled with injectors of combat chems and healing potions. Those baleful eyes glowed as his movements were as thunderously organic as they were mercilessly robotic.

“Stay here and we shall end the tale of the Bloodletters, Warlord!”

“Oh shut up.” Brimstone muttered and *wrenched* at the stairs far harder than was probably necessary. The flimsy rusted metal came apart, dropping below him with a thunderous crash. The column tipped from half way down all the way to the ground, sending metal and wood tumbling atop the raiders and slavers still trying to get up again. It hit a lighting panel on the way down, ripping the hanging gemstones from their wire before the whole lot slammed into the ground like some sort of metallic tree. Galloping back up the waving remnants of the upper section, supported only by the roof, Brimstone got away before the section he'd been on fell as raiders scattered below the falling superstructure.

Below us, the roar of anger from Brutus made me actually cry out with pain. The massive claws on those cybernetic arms snapped at the rubble or even the walls, trying to pull at it and climb up by digging into the rock itself, but his sheer size could never allow it.

“You run! You old fool! Ancient coward! You are no Warlord! I will find you! I WILL FIND YOU!”

Brimstone stood and watched him, before again turning his back on the beast, sending Big Brutus into a frenzy of screaming. Over and over again, echoing the entire way as we fled.

We left him there, having put some distance between us and Shackles' group. Left the furious minotaur and the insane Wildcard amongst the phantoms of the past and the dazed forces they'd brought. He bellowed and screamed, slamming the ground as we passed further and further away to send tremors arcing down the cave we found ourselves in. An icy chill passed through it amongst the sleeping areas and offices. Dead...cold...empty...

There...we collapsed as a group. Wounds were treated with the few materials we had. Ragini had her head bandaged while Unity helped Protégé take his armour off to check below it. Thankfully, he had at most a bruised rib. Painful...but not crippling. Brimstone held a swathe to his neck and rested...looking very solemn. More than usual. He refused to accept a whole healing potion, taking only half for his gunshot wound.

I sat briefly and watched as Protégé thanked Unity quietly for her help, offering her a small smile through the pain. She thanked him in return for being the one to carry her out of there before moving away. His eyes followed her briefly, before moving away to sit down and check what we had left.

Briefly, he saw me looking and raised an eyebrow. I just looked away.

Really, we all had to ration out a bit. All of us could stop any bleeding or get out of being in dire need but no-one, even after using our last supplies, was entirely healthy. Everypony was aching while Glimmer's

hoof simply had to be bandaged up when we ran out of the potions. I'd felt her hooves tighten around mine while she bit a bit of cloth at the moment when Brimstone tightened her bandage to put pressure on it.

No-pony had said it yet.

We'd come out in front, but we'd lost the battle.

They were just...just overwhelming. We'd been lucky to survive while on the defensive there and while we had fought well it was impossible to fight them head on. They'd find another way. They had the numbers. This wasn't the end, all we'd done was delay them and next time we'd never be able to hold them off like that again.

If I weren't surrounded by so many who would have seen me...I might have still cried. Instead, I tried to hide the quivers as shaking from the cold. I saw everypony checking. We didn't have much ammo left.

Protégé had twelve shots, Glimmer ten and Grizzly twenty five. Ragini's bullet fed rifle was spent while her energy rifle she carried on her back at least seemed to have a significant charge left. Coral looked exhausted, I knew when she was past the point of casting magic and this seemed to be it. Brimstone meanwhile...

I was afraid for him. Seeing him fight Wildcard, it wasn't the Brim I knew. He'd looked...hazed. Slower. Older.

Compared to the mechanical hurricane that was Big Brutus, who looked like he weighed twice that of Brim and moved with mechanical precision backed up with murderous rage, I really worried for my big friend. His injuries from the Pit either hadn't healed yet or it had permanently affected him.

On top of all this it was just beginning to hit me how much of a one way trip this was. There was no way back down now. They would be watching everything.

I felt so helpless, a sensation I'd not felt in so long now. We were so close and yet I was beginning to worry if it would even matter.

Protégé looked despairing as he settled his barding back on.

“Everypony get up.”

“Protégé...” I started to say it myself.

“We cannot stay here, we still have a mission.” He turned. “The cottage is just ahead...we're under-equipped, but we cannot fail. Master Red Eye himself gave me this task. I will not disappoint him! We can rest there, not here! Aurora's cottage can't have been far from here, if what Murk says is true. After that, well...maybe there's a way down the mountain again. A trail or something if we're lucky. There has to be a way to get back! If we can push a little further...”

I sat there, wondering if anypony was going to chip in the last part of that sentence in a rousing and dramatic fashion.

No-pony did. I just saw tired faces of friends and unsure allies looking down or at their pitiful remaining supplies. Only slowly, did Ragini get up. Then Grizzly after a long sigh. Brimstone nodded slowly before the rest of us, one by one, joined them.

Before long, I realised that I was the only one still sitting. Even Chirpy had gotten to his hooves, climbing up onto Glimmer's back to sit and hug her neck for warmth. Gradually, I saw him look back at me.

“Mister Murky?”

His voice made the others turn too as I hastily scrambled up, stumbled as my chest and throat ached and tried to look even partly dignified.

“Always...always when there's maybe even a chance, right? If it's g-gotta be done, we'll do it together, right?”

To one side, I saw Unity smile and wink at me. I was glad she remembered just who had taught me that lesson even as everypony else made to leave, throwing winter clothing over themselves. Maybe...just maybe we could find a way down the sheer cliffs of the mountain to try and get back after this. Maybe we could get

away.

No numbers. No supplies. No advantage. No plan. No chance.

But never no hope.

* * *

* * *

The way out was just ahead. I could feel the icy grip of the outdoors wafting into this place. Chairs and desks to the offices on either side were coated in a thin layer of frost that looked as strangely beautiful with its twinkling glint as it did deathly in its cold stillness. I limped beside Glimmerlight, feeling comforted to be near my sister for now. Sooty's words had...had brought back a bad time and thoughts that I knew had once made me do something very stupid.

“You know Murky, if you're cold you can just give me a good snuggle. I won't mind.” Through her own limp, Glimmer smirked at me as I realised I'd been leaning against her without meaning to.

Standing more upright, I tried to laugh it off. Instead my voice just sounded thin and fake.

“Thanks, sis...for saving me again.”

Glimmer ruffled my mane lightly through the wool I had wrapped around my head.

“S'what I told you. We're a team. Ponies who look out for each other. Isn't that what siblings do? We'll get through this.”

This time, I smiled more genuinely. Not out of reassurance but because I saw how far she'd come. The Glimmer who'd once cast away harsh memories to only retain the happy was now doing it without the orbs. Staying bright even in this mission where we knew that coming out of this not dead or in chains was virtually impossible.

Yet behind her, I spotted something above an office door that made me stop.

“S...Spa...Spaaaaaa...”

“I could use one too, lil'bro but I don't think-”

“No! No! Look! What does that say? Is that an 'S'? I...I'm not sure...”

Those around us stopped and turned. Oh great, just *everypony* look at the dumb born slave who can't read!

“It says 'Sparkler' Mister Murky...”

Thanks...Chirpy...

Above the office door was a name plate. Sparkler! Aurora's assistant I'd seen back there. Aurora had said he kept 'too much' on audio diaries in his office. Maybe...just maybe it was worth looking!

“Um, everypony just...just head on. I'll just check in here, I heard something about it.”

I waved lightly, seeing Grizzly grunt and nod. He, Protégé and Ragini moved onwards, eager to keep moving toward the door that led outside. Coral Eve and her son went with them, Unity tagging along a few feet behind. The young mare stopped and hesitated, taking only short trots before slowly following the others, not quite staying too close to them.

Or *someone*. I cast my eyes to the front and saw Protégé narrowing his eyes back at us at the pausing. Quickly, he glanced to Unity and turned away again.

Glimmerlight stayed outside the office waiting for me. If she was there, naturally Brimstone was too.

Wandering into the office myself, I shifted across to the threadbare chair before a simple desk. Sparkler had a very low tech looking terminal that had long since stopped working. To my surprise, the frost had

preserved many papers and quills in startling new condition, but they weren't what I was after.

“Murky, the time for clues is over. We gotta go...Aurora's cottage will have the answers for sure. What are you looking for? We don't have time for this!”

Honestly, she was right. Maybe I...I just wanted to try and guess before I got there. I'd been on all this too long, too many little facts and theories. I wanted to figure it out! Rifling in his drawers, I broke the frost to pick up various things and even looking in a filing cabinet.

“*Murky!* Those slavers won't be held long if they find another way! Let's go!”

“Come on kid,” Brimstone joined her at the door, “don't be afraid of what's up there.”

I saw Glimmerlight look to him with surprise. So did I, looking up from the cabinet.

Was...was I just...afraid?

It'd been so long, knowing the truth felt so alien. I wanted more clues, more journeying. I was with friends on a big adventure and I'd...

...I'd never felt so important in my entire life.

Looking at Glimmer and Brimstone, I saw that the warlord was right. He'd seen it. I was just delaying.

“I'm coming...”

Slowly, I grabbed just one audio diary of Sparkler's, strapped it to the ruined slab of metal that was my Pipbuck and trotted out toward them. My best friends stood waiting for me, Glimmer smiling as I emerged.

“Don't feel bad about this, lil'bro. Hey, when we all met in a slaver cell did you really think we'd end up here about to find answers to something really special that might even give us a way to escape?”

Brimstone allowed himself a grin, the shape curved weirdly as the scar tissue from his Pit injuries wound across his mouth.

“Still a little ways to go. Aye, we'll make it out of this one.”

Encouragement? From Brim? Boy...

I hugged both of them, turning to continue after the rest of the group. Together, we slowly caught up as I turned on the audio diary. To my pride, I managed to piece my way through the commands to transfer the file onto my Pipbuck itself. Inwardly, I wanted to thank Protégé unendingly for helping me be able to even read a little. I kept the volume low, just enough for just me to hear without disturbing the others. I heard Sparkler's voice, tired and stressed.

“Overtime something something...I've lost track what day it is without sleeping for a couple nights up here. Too darn cold. We had some progress but...not quite what we intended. We had another nexus test run. Went a little...uh...awry.”

I perked up. What did it do? Was this something?

Really, I *really really* wanted to figure all this out before we got there! I could see the others up ahead, clustered around a door. If this was to be my final clue, I wanted to hear it.

“We tried a simple one using the new signature concept. Everypony was on standby for emergency shutdown. Aurora's the only one of us good enough with memory magic to do that on her own safely but the Ministry Mares wanted to see her in Fillydelphia today. In hindsight...performing a nexus experiment without her present maybe wasn't a great plan but these zebras are insistent. They're actually threatening us now. Anyway, we had four volunteers, all ready to see if they could learn the spell. Last test had minimal subconscious ingression so we felt confident about upping the number from three.”

Sparkler sighed deeply.

“Not a good move. Up the power to account for more ponies and you make it harder to shut down...of

course. It didn't go right. It projected too much of the memory, lots of subconscious ingression. We had to shut it down. Dazzler was on shutdown duty and...well that's the problem. It backfired. Shut down the nexus sure but...it took his memory with it. All of it. Absorbed into the damn orb!"

I trotted slowly, trying to let this pan out. Up ahead they were struggling with the door to the outside and, presumably, the cottage. I had time to listen. Brimstone wandered up, lending his strength to ripping the thick door open.

"They whisked him away to the medical bay. He was awake but unresponsive to anything. So I went up to the orb. I could feel a kind of connection between him and it, the magic was still connected to his body's mind as though he'd become linked with it. I regret to say it, but to help him we had to use his own signature to draw him back and then destroy the orb, one of only six made. Wasn't apparent at first but he's making a slow recovery."

The thought of that sent my whole body shaking. So this was to do with stripping out memories? Was I right? Was that it? But everything had been about teaching ponies things. Wasn't it?

Come on...this would be my last clue.

"So I think we'll wait till Aurora's back before we install the last orb. She won't be happy...she won't be happy at all. I just don't get what we're missing...the zebras keep telling us to continue but we're not getting what we need results wise! The spell orb style of teaching just isn't sticking! All we get is higher levels of subconscious-oh...I...I need to go. Now. I need to speak to Aurora. I just had a bad thought. Sparkler out."

Click.

I wanted to throw the damn thing down. Augh! That wasn't enough clues! I hadn't understood a lot of what he was meaning. Signatures and...and subwhatsists and spell orbs and stuff was all for unicorns! If I'd had time I'd have gotten Glimmer or Unity to listen. They could maybe help.

Until then, I was on my own to guess.

"Three, two, one...pull!"

The door sprung open. Immediately, the mountainside wind slapped me in the face with its chilly bite. Snow collapsed in through the door where it had been piling up. Outside was clouded in thick fog or low cloud to the point of almost no visibility amongst the whirling blizzard...but I could see vague lights dotted in the snow. Gemlights on fenceposts to presumably guide ponies.

"Wrap up and stay close everypony." Grizzly pushed himself out into it. "Keep an eye out, it must be nearby."

Into the snow we went again. The gradient of the land went upwards as I realised there was a thickening dark. Night was falling on the mountain and taking visibility with it rapidly. I tried to stick behind others, letting them tramp down the snow for me to try and keep me from sickness, but the cold alone was seeping in. Unity stuck beside me, both of us helping push the other on or picking one another up if we slipped.

Another gemlight up ahead...that way...

Then another to the right...follow the path, follow the light!

The snow below had been powdery and soft. Like a wet sand dampening me. Up here it was harsh. Like a thin layer of ice that snapped and cracked beneath us. Hard and sharp, it scratched at my hooves as they slipped and staggered. To my horror, I saw this brief path went past a cliffside to our right. In a brief letting up of the cloud I saw it fall away into eternity.

The wool was blown from my head. I saw Chirpy climb inside his mother's saddlebag to get out of the cold. Brim and Grizzly smacked the snow aside, ploughing through it ahead as we all fought the wind to keep up. Annoyingly, Ragini was running atop the snow with her light flyer's footing to locate each gemlight as we had to push through it.

"Look up there!" Protégé was suddenly pointing the way, "There, about fifty metres!"

Unity and I turned our heads rather in unison to see where he pointed, my heart in my mouth. This was too cold, too radioactive. I didn't want to spend much longer out here. *Please let it be the cottage!* There was a dull light in the cloudy fog, barely visible.

“Another gemlight?” I muttered. Unity shook her head.

“No, it's...it's a window.”

We broke up, moving closer to it. Without really thinking, I moved in beside Brimstone. Bigger pony made for a bigger shelter from the cutting wind.

Hey, I wasn't proud.

Ragini had moved ahead, to which I saw her bounding back down through the snow. Her talons have her quite incredible grip in comparison to hooves, the griffin grabbing a rock poking out of the white floor and bringing herself to a halt just above us.

“You were right, Protégé. That's it!”

Shivering, trying not to think about the massive cliff that was just downhill from us, I tried to get a better glance at the dull shape appearing. If I slipped and fell...what if I just slid all the way down and off the edge behind me? Please...just let me go a bit further! Unity held onto me, us sharing a little warmth as we waited. Although I partially guessed it for mutual comfort at this treacherous icy rock below us. Ragini looked around before pointing us to move on, closer.

“Cloud's getting thinner up there too...must be nearer to the top layers.”

She seemed almost happy. I wondered if the height felt good to her after being so grounded since the Mall riot.

Wait...cloud? Top layers?

Were we nearly *above the clouds?*!

I went rather wide eyed at the thought. Not just myself either. Glimmer, Coral and Protégé all looked rather astonished to think we were just that high up now.

“Let's get inside, quickly please!” Unity, surprisingly, made her voice heard to the whole group, “We don't have anything to treat frostbite and most of us aren't clothed right! Chirpy, was that his name? He shouldn't be out in this!”

It almost felt odd hearing Unity speaking to everyone. Up until now she'd only really addressed a few of us at a time and mostly just myself or Glimmer. Yet I could hear the wishing in her voice. It wasn't just Chirpy that needed to get out of this, Unity had just been the first to speak everyone's worries out loud.

Protégé looked at her intently as she spoke and nodded, waving Brimstone on ahead.

“Everypony get up there quickly, but don't rush,” he muttered, trying to stave off shivering himself, “I don't think Murk will be the only one suffering the radiation soon if we don't get there...but we don't need anypony falling.”

Slowly, we waded into the thicker snow surrounding it, feeling the gradient slowly increase until it flattened off sharply, reaching the cottage's level. There was a wall around it, made of loose rocks about ten metres from the building itself. An old smashed gate lay before us. Not far...not far...

I saw Ragini holding her talon to the bandage around her head. Coral was having to lean against Glimmerlight. Unity seemed to be taking smaller and smaller steps each time, looking very blank on her face out here. I was feeling my knees going numb in all this snow. Even my chest started pounding harder. Please don't be anything...please don't be anything...don't let that metallic taste be what I think it is...

My canteen was empty. Quietly, I whimpered to myself while we passed through the gate.

I saw it...a little hovel with a chimney and a single lit window from some light source within. Rock walls, strong glass and wood windows with a mass of snow covering whatever the roof was made of. Piles

of timber laid outside for use in a fire. Just like any quaint little dwelling I'd seen in the wastes from before the balefire.

Ten metres away...so close...probably so warm inside. Out the wind...

Yet my mind kept thinking. Trying to guess on every step I took as I limped forward.

I sought out all the little things I knew and had seen.

In Stable Ninety Three, they'd been making spell orbs that could teach a pony something.

In the Ministry of Arcane Science, they'd talked about a machine to let non-unicorns use memory orbs that had been made obsolete almost immediately by something else.

Five metres...it was right there. Protégé was at the door and pushing it aside. Think, Murky, think!

Refugees had been taken in by the zebras via Doctor Heartcare to work on something, along with skilled Wartime workers and Arcane Scientists...yet Sundial had never seen the refugees ever again after he entered.

The zebras had a portal they used to come in and out of Fillydelphia in secret, building something beneath the city using Aurora's research that included those memory machines. Was it like that nexus thing? To teach more than one pony?

I slipped and fell. Unity caught me, before she and Glimmerlight helped me up. I was...so cold...couldn't think.

That place, in Ministry Station, had a strange ambience that subconsciously affected ponies to do things against their will.

The lab I had just visited spoke of a 'nexus' for something greater than just spell orb learning. The lab had been to build something the zebras wanted.

Some...some sort of...of thing to teach zebras how to fight better? To give the zebras magic abilities? Maybe to let them strip out information from ponies and project it directly into their generals to have them exploit pony tactics? I could think of a dozen ideas that memory could do but...but couldn't orbs do that anyway? Did they just want Aurora's machine to be able to use orbs? To use them faster? Was Aurora just leading them in a giant circle to try and confuse them? But if so...what happened to the refugees? Where did they factor in through all of this?

Then the big question, why was Aurora working for them in the first place?

I felt the step of the doorway beneath my hooves, as I realised I was there. I almost fell inside, my friends helping me in. Sighs, gasps and muttered relief filled my ears as the door slammed shut behind us.

All the clues. I had theories. Ideas. But I just didn't know if they were right. Yet now I'd finally come to Aurora's own hidden place and...and somehow I just...

I knew that in there lay the answer to everything. No more waiting. No more confusing clues. The answers were all here. They had to be! I couldn't entertain the notion that they weren't.

Gradually, I let my eyes open again to look at where we were.

Below me was polished wood while the walls were made of chiselled stone. Within the entrance room we'd come into, I could see my friends leaning on cabinets or sitting against the wall. A rather threadbare rug covered much of the floor and it was all lit by a swaying lantern hung from the ceiling.

So very peaceful. So at odds with the howling wind outside on the top peaks of the mountain. It was almost possible to forget I was almost past the cloud level in here. I sucked in warm air, audibly forcing it as my lungs tightened and squeezed inside me. I coughed badly, feeling my throat burn. I...I could hold on. I had to. Maybe there was...was something in here.

Over the sounds of heavy breathing and chattering teeth around me, I could hear a distant crackling. A cosy almost homely sound of fire.

Wait...fire?

I rolled over and tried to get my protesting body up. Why would there be fire if there wasn't anypony-
Ahead of me, I saw Protégé with his revolver stood ready. His head was tracking something.

E.F.S has spotted something alive in here.

“Everypony, get up. We're not alone.”

Trotting forward, I realised I could hear no-one past my friends. All were still exhausted, sitting and looking more surprised at hearing Protégé saying what he did. Brimstone was first to his hooves as Protégé and I slowly moved further in past the first open door. It was hard to stay steady, my knees wobbled and I was still making so much noise just trying to breathe.

The smell of peat smoke hung in the air like a fruity taste at the back of my mouth as we went in.

Ahead, it seemed to be some sort of front room with several thick plush chairs draped in old woollen blankets. A desk sat near the shaking window bearing a huge tomb atop it. Walls were covered in bookcases while past that I could see the fireplace itself, thick clumps of bog earth burning within it with a richer orange than any wood could ever give. Casting a warmth across the whole room, I could feel it seeping into my numb joints.

“P-Protégé?”

“Somepony's in here...just through there.”

He nodded toward what looked like an old pantry's entrance with a grey tiled floor across the back.

“Hostile?”

“No.”

Brimstone thickly trod in behind us, shaking snow from his mane and waiting ready. Protégé advanced, his weapon held before him. I stayed just behind him, creeping up to peek around his body when he finally looked in...

Allegedly, we were not the ones tracking them. I heard something drop as somepony in there was surprised.

“Sundial? Oh my, is that really you out there?”

A mare's voice. Ragged and rough like a ghoul. Elderly yet...nasal and higher pitched.

I *knew* that voice.

Pushing forward, I shoved my way past Protégé, knocking his gun away as I stepped into the pantry. Ahead of me in the dark, somepony's shape slowly began to turn away from the assorted shelves I now saw glitteringly full of memory orbs. That weak looking shape of a pony I saw only by their glow as a vague outline trotting slowly toward me. I felt my mouth stammer, trying to say something.

“I...I'm not...S-S...”

Clad in a thick brown robe, she moved slowly toward me until the fire lit her face at last. I saw her horn and those milky eyes that I'd only once seen for real so long ago.

“You are...not? I felt his signature...there. You aren't him but yet you wear something of his. The Pipbuck, it led you here?”

The hood was drawn back and I felt myself merely gasp the words almost in reverence.

“Y...yes...”

Before me, defined only in the flickering glow of memory orbs and a fiery hearth at the very peak of the wasteland's height...stood the Ministry of Arcane Science's Fillydelphia leader. The 'traitor' who I had sought to learn about and pursue the knowledge of. Here she stood. Alive. A survivor of the balefire as a ghoul.

Aurora Star.

* * *

Explaining this had not been particularly easy to Grizzly.

We'd moved back into the rest of the cottage. Aurora had stoked another fire in an old dining room surrounded by shelves crammed full of plates that never seemed to quite match one another in design. Here, she had bid us to settle in the warmth of her home and brought a small amount of Radaway. Presumably useless after she had become a ghoul, she liberally allowed us to use it. I was still finishing the sachet I'd been given. The first half I'd poured into my canteen...the second half helped my chest die down for now. Everypony else seemed fairly all right after some to ward off any small effects.

I couldn't ever not feel hurt by the 'condition' I had that made it worse.

The old Ministry leader moved slowly and with great reservation below that heavy cloak she wore. Across its sides I saw the emblazoned emblem of Twilight Sparkle. An old work uniform for being up here, perhaps?

Regardless, it was clear that Aurora was very weak. Her steps were short and every movement shaky and careful. Coral Eve helped her get the fire going as everypony (and griffin) settled on the wooden chairs around the room.

There we had explained to Grizzly why this mattered, the old slaver had been in the dark for too long simply believing there was some sort of weapon or magic spell up here to find. While Glimmer spoke for the most part, I kept finding my eyes glancing back to Aurora and a rather frightening amount of the time saw that she had been watching me back with those piercing eyes. The old unicorn sat in an old chair nearer the back of the room, simply waiting on her sudden guests to finish their internal chattering with a patient demeanour.

Yet as she saw me looking, her mouth moved slowly.

“You found poor Sundial's Pipbuck. Where?”

Something felt odd. It took me a second to realise she'd spoken lowly enough that Aurora would have had to have known about my hearing in advance. How had she?

“In...in Fillydelphia. Behind the FunFarm on his...his...”

I found it hard to say, but Aurora nodded lightly.

“I had feared as much...such a small pony caught up in a world he didn't understand nor want. Yet when it forced upon him trials to do the right thing he didn't hesitate to come with me.”

Turning in my chair, away from the others, I spoke more directly to her. Coral and Chirpy were beside me, but only the little foal was really paying attention to what the two of us were saying. I could feel him leaning against my side and put a hoof around him.

“You knew him? I...I heard on the Pipbuck that you'd met him at the entrance to the mines but you make it sound like you two did something.”

“That we did.”

Aurora didn't say any more than that. She simply stared at me as though looking right past me.

“You look like he did. You have the same will. Something that seems impossible is what you want more than anything. When I instructed him on how to encode his Pipbuck I had always hoped somepony more sentimental would be the only one to really follow the pattern and go to the efforts needed to return here. I can see that in the end it was the right thing.”

Her mouth creased into a smile, her eyes shifting to the colt beside me that I was protectively holding close. Only now did I realise Chirpy was actually asleep...everything had just been too much for him.

“But...but why did-”

“Then it's settled.”

Grizzly's voice overpowered my own as he got up. Trotting forward, he moved around me and held out a hoof to Aurora.

“Aurora Star, it pains me to rush upon this to somepony so clearly isolated for this amount of time. Yet whatever secrets your research in Ministry Station held is now under threat. There are ponies on this mountain, coming for you. We must get you to safety.”

The old mare sat in her chair and stared right back at him without even blinking.

“I can assure you, 'Old' Grizzly, that I am going no-where. Not only because this is now my *home* but for that it is quite impossible. This snow, the radiation...it's the only thing holding this wasted body of mine together with what it does for me as a ghoul. Yet that's hardly why. Don't think I can't read the fear on all your faces...”

She cast her eyes around each of us.

“None of you have a plan. It's clear as day. The waves of fear and hurt are glowing on every one of you. You don't know a way out even for yourselves, do you?”

“Miss Aurora, I insist that-”

“You insist nothing, slaver.”

Aurora slowly stood up, her limbs shaking as she did so.

“I may be old and falling apart...but that doesn't mean everything I studied and learned under the greatest unicorn Equestria has ever known has devolved too. Get good enough with memory magic and you can *feel* it on each of you. To see the signs, the little clues and the subtle auras of magic surrounding every pony to those who can sense them. You want to take me into the service of the monster that turned my home city into what I look down from on high to see and weep at. I see the park where I would play as a foal turned to a pit where corpses are thrown. I see the house I grew up in become the lodgings of a pony who kills in what used to be an ice rink to decorate my room with his victim's skulls.”

Aurora shook before him and staggered to have to sit down again, scowling.

“I will have no part in your efforts. You will not take me back to that place. If I am to die...I will die in a place of my choosing where I have been comfortable. Not surrounded by the violated ruins of my old life.”

Grizzly looked about ready to speak again, but Protégé held his hoof against the old slaver. Moving past, he sat before Aurora, taking her fierce stare.

“Miss Star, the ponies who are coming up here seek to corrupt what you made in Ministry Station. Chainlink Shackles is a pony you may even have heard the name of in your time watching the valley below. He and those who follow him know of your research. They are inside Ministry Station and they need only something they are sure is up here.”

“And you think that's me, do you?”

To my surprise, Protégé shook his head. Weak, shaken inside...but he was still the intelligent pony I'd always known it seemed. He actually smiled.

“I have visited Ministry Station. I've seen that it's repairable and I have seen enough evidence to suggest that you aren't simply a key. I believe there is something else up here that they are after...something they want. I will not ask you to move but I do ask you to tell us what that may be. You seem perceptive...well look me in the eyes and see that this is the truth! I seek to deny Chainlink Shackles the ability to abuse your legacy. Please...at least help us do that. Help us stop him. Don't let him turn your research to the evils the zebras wanted too...”

There was a long silence between them. The fire crackled on my left as everypony stared at the two. Gradually, Aurora Star looked away and smirked. The smirk grew to a short nasally laugh as she carefully balanced a hoof on her head.

“You all have found quite a lot of clues to guess such a thing. It's somewhat admirable. Yet you presume too much about my 'legacy.' I am not some innocent pony who fears her designs being turned to 'evil'. You are two hundred years quite too late for that. My research was 'corrupted' long before even the balefire scourged this land.”

Aurora stood up, limping her way slowly to the centre of the room. Her horn slowly began to glow a pale white.

I thought my eyes were beginning to falter with exhaustion as I felt them haze and blur at the edges. Everypony else I could see doing the same. The only two I saw relaxed were Glimmerlight and Unity. They both knew memory magic in some way, was this something they understood?

“I've had two hundred years to perfect my theories. Two of you I can feel have particular affinity with the art. Settle...and relax if you want to see what you think my legacy 'is.'

The world seemed to rush and blur in all ways around me. I tried to get up and was almost surprised to still feel the floor under my hooves. Every sensation of a memory orb flowed through my mind yet I still felt like...like me. Colours sprung up, the kind of vivid nature that could only be Old Equestria. I was standing upon white marble near a lawn of freshly cut and unthinkably bright grass. Above me, flags of all designed flapped in a slow wind while ponies wearing shining gold as armour lined the verges of the marble causeway. Dizzily, I looked up to see towering white battlements and spires, each seeming to sparkle in the sunlight below a cloudless sky.

I knew this place...I'd see it in books. This was Canterlot.

An excitement flew through me, the massive artistic marvel that was Equestria's capital was finally here to see! Spinning on the spot, I saw the huge vista of all the land out before us over a cliff where a waterfall slowly trailed into the long drop. It stemmed from a pool at the centre of this place, with six enormous buildings flanking the edges with their carved stone designs. Each bore a symbol of the Ministries.

I almost cried out when I heard Aurora's voice in the back of my head.

“The start of my real career.”

The entire world seemed to shift, drawing my eyes down. To my astonishment, I could see the floor of Aurora's cottage below my hooves. My friends were around me, all equally astonished. I wasn't really *in* Canterlot...Aurora was just projecting it around us. Yet it was so easy to forget, so immersive in its depth, sights and smells. I could *feel* the wind from up here on my coat. Only when I looked closer could I see the familiar sparkles of light constructing everything like I'd seen on the orbs before. Just on a much wider scale all around us...

It was like the ultimate evolution of her memory projection magic, one that would have taken two hundred years to master...

My eyes fell upon a younger Aurora Star, standing in line with numerous other unicorns. I saw two identical twins with green coats. All looked like well learned types. Before them stood the familiar form of Twilight Sparkle as she moved down them, pinning a badge to each of their identical uniforms.

“Twilight Sparkle made us her second tier. The leaders and chief scientists of the Ministry of Arcane Science. I'd been given this position after my work to help bring memory orbs to a more affordable and practical level. Twilight thought I would be able to continue that research with the resources of an entire Ministry Hub for my home city of Fillydelphia. I was so proud...one of the youngest Hub Leaders and also one of the first. I swore that day to defend Equestria by any means I could and to end the war as quickly as possible. The same thing Twilight herself had promised in her ascension two days beforehand to command the new Ministry.”

The entire projection shifted, zooming across without me trotting at all until I could see Aurora Star face to face. A young (and uh...rather cute) mare with the biggest and goofiest grin of pride.

"I had dreams of inventing the things to give us an unrelenting advantage and I had ideas even that day for new memory orb technology to help us do it."

The world shifted into itself, colours stretching as they relocated and reformed into something else. The twinkling stars making up the projection whirling around me before reforming elsewhere into a new location. I knew this place, the Ministry in Fillydelphia itself. This was the workshop just outside where her office had been! I could see Aurora working with dozens of unicorns as they cast spells onto orbs or tested various forms of crystal.

"Oh how we worked. The glory days...breakthrough after breakthrough."

In the background, I heard a dull shout, before somepony held up a glowing orb. The others cheered, rushing across to see. Aurora herself took the orb from them to study.

"It all seemed so easy. We only had to think of an idea and we had the resources to make it happen! What scientist doesn't dream of a world where they can think of a concept and be in a position to get everything they need for it? We crafted longer orbs, developed storage that became the standard carry case for orbs all over Equestria to keep them safe and worked with the Equestrian military to help develop simulated orbs for battlefield acclimatisation and intelligence gathering."

All of the projections changed, placing me in her office. I was once again staring out the window I had once done so before as her beside Twilight. The same sounds filtered through it of the park. The stoney silence of that building felt so calming...

With her hooves up on the railing, I could see Aurora gazing outside.

"Yet I had a dream yet unfulfilled. To go further. To use orb technology for learning. A unicorn who could utilise an orb to perhaps gain a new spell to their knowledge permanently or be able to quickly study a new subject by using the memory of a leading expert as a template! Imagine the possibilities for an Equestria where education could pass on everything a generation had learned to their children for them to build upon! Imagine how quickly the war could end if we could make every pony a combat veteran the likes of Macintosh on their first day of training!"

The entire projection spun, reversing to see who stood behind Aurora. I could now see her with tears staining her face, looking distraught and heartbroken. The figure behind her was Twilight Sparkle...slowly trotting away. To the side, I could see her memory machine project that I unfortunately knew would someday also be cancelled in a similar visit.

Aurora's voice turned weak, cracking.

"Yet...war was at our doorsteps and resources grew scarce. The Princess wanted surefire projects, reliable ideas...not the childish dreams of one Hub Leader who thought she knew everything. I saw my projects shut down and felt the weight of demands on what I was to help make. I lost my freedom to innovate. I...I don't blame Twilight. She had to do what she thought was right and I knew th-that she wouldn't seek to harm anypony..."

Dizzily, the entire projection spun where I was standing once more, placing me near to the corner of the room. Just beside me...barely visible, I saw a set of eyes looking out from under a nearly invisible cloak as the Ministry Mare left. Devious...dangerous eyes.

"That's when they came to me. They'd been watching me for over a year."

With a flicker of light, the entire projection seemed to cut briefly. I could see her dining room again and witness all of my comrades standing transfixed by it. Slowly, it all reformed on one end of the room before us. A zebra's face below a hood filling the room and staring down at us directly. It looked horrifyingly lifelike, ready to harm me any moment.

"I woke to them in my bedroom. They told me that they had seen my unfair treatment and wanted to 'help.' They desired my research in a way that Equestria didn't, were willing to get me the resources to do it and could keep it all a secret! I'd been terrified...more than I'd ever been. The dream in my heart had been shattered and now this?"

It all drew out, filling the room as I saw a still image of Aurora in her bed, surrounded by the zebras, bearing wicked knives and long barrelled rifles.

“They didn't say it but I knew if I said no then I would have been a victim of 'assassination' that night. I wish I could use that as an excuse but I can't. I didn't agree because I feared for my life...I agreed because I wanted my research to be made in my lifetime. I wanted to see a better world even if I had to work with demons to get there.”

Aurora herself walked through the projection, reappearing to us as a ghoul that strode around me. Yet her voice still came into my mind, the magic taken hold.

“So we went to work. They brought me skilled workers from the Wartime Ministry. I told them of something I'd never been able to get funded, a mine on this mountain where I'd known crystal caves existed from my family's treks to this cabin as a child. We got that too. They persuaded me to buy out Ministry Station under a guise of keeping secrets from zebras...I hadn't realised it had been theirs since before I'd ever known them. I helped them open a portal with my sway in the Ministry, which thought I was doing research on weaponising portals for battlefield deployment. That's why Ministry Station went unnoticed. It was like the golden age of the Ministry all over again. I didn't realise they were just buttering me up...getting me working until I couldn't help but do it.”

We were inside Ministry Station. Its familiar walls loomed around us as uniformed workers ran here and there with tools and advanced looking components. I saw Sparkler near Aurora, checking off something from a clipboard held in his magic.

“Eventually, we opened the lab in the mountain too. Everything hidden under the massive veils of secrecy in Equestria. Every Hub Leader seemed to have their own secret project or magnum opus waiting to emerge so this was no different. Few questions were asked and if they were I'd just bring out something we were working on to show that seemed innocuous. We developed a machine that I kept in the Ministry as a cover, a machine that lets ponies share memories as different participants with a moderate level of influence in the memory itself that the military were very interested in for team building exercises. That was our external cover and it worked flawlessly.”

Everything darkened, as the projection slid and moved like a tapestry or a mural until I saw Aurora lying in her bed, hooves covering her crying face, her mouth frozen at the moment of screaming out. Around her, almost like other viewpoints, I could see zebras whipping Wartime workers. Aurora being screamed at by one who wore an elaborate cloak. A memory machine with a ragged clothed pony being pulled against her will toward.

“Yet it all came crashing home eventually when they started to take control of the things we'd made in our progress to the final goal. They wanted us to be traitors and damn it we'd given them just that. I didn't sleep for weeks as I saw what I'd done. I'd turned some of my staff into slaves, allowed the zebras to prey on my fellow ponies and refugees. They'd even gotten into the Ministry of Peace, bringing Doctor Heartcare into all this after threatening his family. He brought them the refugees upon which they tested what we made.”

She was right beside me, the Aurora of today, only from the corner of my eye I could see her pained face. Straining every word.

“I...saw...them...hurt...ponies...with...my...research...”

Almost abstract, it changed to another pony, one strapped into a machine and whose mouth was distended far further than it should have been, like a painting stretched to impossible levels. I felt a shiver down my spine, hearing a distant and unearthly shrieking in my subconscious.

“Then they started trying to do their own thing, bringing their fetishes and their shamanism to try and take advantage of what we'd made thus far. Those things that let them grow wings and alter their shapes. Not everything works first time! It destroyed their minds and turned them to blanks. They corrupted the magical signature that every pony has, forcing upon them memory orbs of death and torture to try and find out how much a pony could take in a single orb of mental conditioning. Using their fetishes to try and

change their body's ability to act as a testing victim. Using them as nothing but...but tools! Organic matter that was altered! I remember seeing one...it didn't even resemble a pony anymore. Their testing destroyed them or...or turned them to something much worse."

Slowly, it all condensed back into the Aurora I had seen crying in her bed. All the images flowing through the air and around us into her head. One after another. Screams, dread imagery and worryingly familiar scenes of forced labour. Then suddenly, she moved. Standing up with soaked cheeks, she looked in her bedroom's mirror for some time. I could hear so little...just her gasps and her heartbeat growing steadily faster. Her breath made the mirror steam up before her shaking stopped.

"I'd betrayed my country and now I couldn't help any of the ponies who'd agreed into this because they trusted me to get out again. I'd thought they wanted my plans for orb based learning. No...they wanted my orbs because they could use them to mentally condition ponies. After that they only wanted more. The larger orbs, the projection line...they all have a subtle subconscious signature they emit. Unity, you know of the kind of feeling I mean. The zebras learned of this and wanted us to amplify it. Expand it until it could affect somepony's subconscious. They wanted us to be able to do this on a wide scale."

Suddenly, it all filtered back to a more recent sight. The mountain lab with the nexus at the centre.

"The Memory Nexus. This was what they wanted in the end. A device that could project an orb's contents to mentally condition everypony nearby. They had plans to make it spread wider, to use megaspell technology in it from the medical megaspell research Doctor Heartcare brought them. Weathervane would have gone mad had he known they were used like this. Their grand idea was to turn ponies to the zebra cause with it. Up here we tested a weak one...while another was build for real operation in Ministry Station."

The ghoulish figure stood before her old self, staring blankly into her own eyes. Slowly, she turned to us.

"That's what's in Ministry Station. That's the 'secret' that you all were seeking. My dream of learning progress turned to a nightmare of forced thought."

Yes...yes I could see it all falling into place. Memory magic of the projection orbs that brought its contents out into the real world. The disappearance of the refugees into that asylum. The reason behind the ambience in Ministry Station. My mind hurt at how far back I suddenly made sense of.

Doctor Heartcare...no, Magister Heartcare. He was a zebra worshipper against Equestria when I'd met him.

They'd used even him as a test subject...

Aurora was looking into my eyes, clearly seeing my mind piecing it all together. They'd wanted to turn Fillydelphia against Equestria! Gradually, Aurora nodded as though looking right into my mind. Maybe she could...a master of memory magic was quickly beginning to sound like a very scary individual indeed.

"That was when I started trying to sabotage this. I sent all the projection orbs I could to the Ministry Mares in a hope that one of them, Twilight especially, would see it! I sent one to Doctor Weathervane's research team. The zebras thought I was just covering our tracks with older tech now they had the Nexus being built to project their conditioning field. None of it worked...we'd done too well at hiding ourselves. If I could have told her...but if I did then everypony involved would have been murdered at a hint of betrayal from me! They were always watching..."

The darkness around the projected form of Aurora in the part, wrapped over her, zebra eyes among it, dragging her away higher and higher as I saw the entire living tapestry fly to the sky and soar toward the mountain.

"They carried me here, far away from it for they feared my sentimentality would lead me to do something rash! In the end they kept me here while they finished off in Ministry Station with Heartcare, their first successful convert. Yet up here...that's when I met what could be my only hope to stop all this."

A young buck slid across the wall in a line of ponies all waiting in a tunnel. I recognised him in a heartbeat.

Sundial.

He stood next to Aurora in that cave, quietly talking. I realised this was the conversation I'd heard!

"I knew from the moment I laid eyes on him that he was a sleeper agent for Pinkie. I could feel the determination in him because it was the same as mine. Trapped in something he didn't understand but wanting to help for a cause that now mattered to him. I'd always been good at judging other ponies, my magic enhanced it over time. The more we researched memory, signatures and the pony mind the more I could tell about somepony at a glance. I saw that he had a connection to Pinkie. Maybe, just maybe...I could get the word out from him."

An eruption of gunfire made me shriek. I wanted to run to the window and check, but my hooves felt locked to the floor. Flares of orange and red surrounded us as I saw glimpses of scientists and workers bleeding out up or burning around wounds. Each flash brought another scene. A group in a corner. Poor Sparkler hanging off Aurora with sadness in his bloodshot eyes. Three on the floor, lifeless as their bodies were slowly torched. Within it, I saw Aurora standing over a terrified Sundial, pulling at him.

"I got him out of there alive! Got him to the trains. We were the only two survivors of the massacre up here. When our escape got back to Fillydelphia it felt like we were being hunted around every corner. Desperately, I tried to find somepony of authority but they were all unreachable! Something was happening, there was a threat in the air. I knew that Sundial and I had to do this quickly...I was the only pony left who knew the spell to shut down that Nexus they must have been looking to use! They were removing all threats before its activation!"

A frenzied rush through Fillydelphia's streets flowed around us. Hiding. Running. Gunshots. The flare of magic. Then we were underground. I heard a bestial howl and smelt a tinge of mint...around me I heard many of us stammer and shift on the spot.

"What they'd done down there...it was beyond thought. All we knew was we had to reach the Nexus. Sundial helped me...we had others with us, part of the Equestrian military we'd met in the metro who had been investigating and we fought our way in. Just in time...I cast the spell and backfired the entire conditioning orb they had installed upon it."

I felt almost proud, wishing Weathervane could see the image before me. Sundial...wounded but determined, ripping an orb from the nexus and shattering it against the stone floor.

"Sundial destroyed it himself. We'd won...prevented them releasing a spell that would have turned so many ponies to the zebra cause. It left a horrid ambience in its wake from that event, forever damning the station to manipulate those in it who were weak and vulnerable, but it was better than the alternative. Only one of the soldiers with us survived as we got out. I thought...I thought I could find Twilight and hand myself in. We'd done it, but the cost had been so high."

They were outside. Massive crowds had gathered around a metro that gouted smoke from its entrances. I saw Aurora and Sundial carrying a familiar looking buck between them down the street.

"Only...the world moved on. It ended."

Even as they moved, I heard it. That low drone, the sound you never wanted to hear then. The crowds looked up and around as it began to blare. A deathly wail that grew and grew as the sirens signalled the end coming. Some rushed, others fell. The pictures moved on, the inside of the Ministry. I saw them placing the buck inside the pod where I'd met Mister Peace. Yes! That had been him!

"We did all we could to save the wounded private by placing him in my old memory sharing machine. Its systems would keep him safe and preserved. To reunite him with his team. He'd lost everypony he'd cared about down there. To take his memory and use it for the machine seemed the best I could do to let him be with them again. I implored Sundial to stay with me in the protected Ministry building, yet he had other things he had to do. We parted ways for the last time."

Slowly, I saw the image of a long maned pegasus almost ghost over Sundial's form. I knew he would never leave her...

Green fire whirled around us, burning the images she had conjured and slowly fading Sundial away. Wreathing flames rose to the ceiling, flying between us all and carrying with it the death scream of Equestria. Slowly...I realised that my cheeks were rather damp...

It cooled, the green turning to white as I saw a cloaked figure striding in the snow.

“The most I could do as a survivor was return to this peak. To attempt to escape the madness that overtook Fillydelphia as things escaped the metro and other survivors descended upon the city's corpse. A hell brought to life...a place of insanity...I could not bear it. So I came here to find the zebras gone. Thus, I passed into exile from Equestria to my old family cottage here to watch the world die around me...”

Gradually, everything faded around me. Returning us to the cottage that we now stood in. I was more than damp at the cheeks...I could feel my entire face stinging as I cried openly. Looking around I was not the only one. Coral and Unity too...Protégé I saw wipe his eyes. Glimmerlight was stoic.

Aurora Star stood among us.

“Projections have a subconscious feeling...it's what they used to create the conditioning. What you all feel is my guilt. My pain at the part I played in my nation's death. Uninvolved with the balefire or not my efforts killed dozens, if not over a hundred who had been dragged into this because I was too afraid to see my dream stopped.”

Her eyes met with Protégé's. Her voice turned steely.

“Don't think I am unaware of the broadcasts your master makes. I've heard all the same justifications before and look what they did to those around me.”

No-pony spoke. How could anypony hope to say anything after that?

There was simply an uncomfortable silence. Finally, it had all been laid on the table. Aurora Star stood still, before weakly making her way out of the room. Limping the entire way, it took her some time as her shaking and thin legs carried her.

Without a word from us, she went back to her study, leaving us alone with a dying fire.

The wind blew outside as some of us sat down. Chirpy still slept, huddled into his mother. It seemed Aurora had spared him the horrifying images she'd shown us.

His mother looked up, glancing at Grizzly, Ragini and Protégé. Slowly, Coral spoke.

“I believe that it is beyond a doubt what Shackles wants with this now. You all know it.”

She looked around, we all nodded. Coral was right, it was just Glimmerlight was the one to say it.

“He wants slaves. Total slaves. *Indoctrinated* ponies who could not ever hope to think of escape. It's what he's always tried to do. Every time we saw him in that Mall. Always speaking of it...wanting his 'Eternal Chain'.”

Coral inclined her head back to Glimmer.

“What Aurora made...it's beautiful but so easy to abuse. No-pony deserves what they wanted to do with it.”

Protégé interrupted anything else she was going to say.

“It wouldn't work.”

Everypony looked around at him, even Grizzly. The unicorn stopped and stared, on the spot, before continuing.

“Aurora said it projects someone's subconscious to affect others. Without somepony who *is* a slave like that, he can't hope to ever use it. The same way that he requires Unity to activate it...without that second pony to craft the orb's programming, if you will, off...it's useless.”

Unity sat up at the mention of her name, having been silently looking out the window. I could see her

looking more than a little scared at being hunted for this.

“Unity?” Glimmer shifted over slowly, “Could you...do that? I know you said it before but...do you really have enough power in that horn of yours to create a signature that strong?”

Slowly, I saw the mare nod. “It...it doesn't really matter how big or small it is. I've always kind of hid what it could really do and...I just...I just didn't want anypony to be afraid of me being able to sense and...and create things like that...”

My sister put a hoof around the smaller mare's shoulders, holding her close. “No-pony's afraid of you. Murky and I, we'll keep you safe...promise.”

I saw my sister's look at me and took the hint. I nodded a few times. Gradually I slowed.

“B-but the other thing? Needing a slave who's so broken they can't even know otherwise? Where would he f...fi...”

I stammered, a sudden shock of cold going through me.

A folder of ponies crossed out in his locker in the Mall.

“Find...find a...”

His bedside in Ministry Station with a picture of a broken looking pegasus.

“Oh...oh Goddesses...”

I could hear him. Hear what he'd said when I hid from him in Ministry Station.

“It won't take long to break you back in. To rend those hopes and crush those dreams till they are but a long remembered *mistake* of a past long dead. The born slave, the servant who knows his place. You were meant to come to me, none of the others...just you. Just you and that lovely broken mind...hehehe...”

I fell off the chair, staggering to the side as my stomach turned and my mind filled with panic and fear. I threw up, falling against a cabinet to set plates crashing to the floor. I started to hyperventilate. Hooves went around me, Coral's and Protégé's, pulling me up. Breathing fast, eyes wide and looking around in terror, I now realised how trapped I was atop this mountain.

“The perfect slave in the heart of Fillydelphia.”

“Murky Number Seven...”

* * *

Quietly, I curled myself up on the softest chair in the room and tried to stop shaking. Outside I could hear the wind slapping the windows and setting the whole cottage creaking under its assault. Every slam and sound set my heart leaping...what if it were the slavers arriving?

Everypony else sat around me. Most of them were debating or even outright arguing about what to do or how to get away from here safely. The only ones who remained quiet were Chirpy and Brimstone. The foal huddled between Glimmer and Coral, while the big raider sat beside the arm of my chair. Truth be told, his presence was a significant calming influence keeping me from entirely losing it right now. I knew he'd be there, protecting me. That's why he sat beside me, he was playing guardian after hearing the same as everypony else. The days of seeing him as a wary and unnerving force were long gone as far as I was concerned.

Shackles wanted *me*. I'd always known that but now I knew why and it scared me to my absolute core. Put that together with knowing he was coming up that mountain right now...

“Murky has that grapple of his, could we not attempt a climb? It's better than just waiting here and letting them get Aurora!”

“You heard her, she can't go anywhere in her current state. Aurora Star is elderly and would not even survive the trip.”

Glimmer debated with Grizzly. On the other side, I heard Coral enter into it.

“You don't think we should perhaps simply tell her what will happen? Aurora would not want to work for them.”

“She wouldn't need to.” Protégé looked back from the window, where he kept watch with Ragini. “Grindstone has the Ministry, he has the means to extract memories in there.”

“The same goes the other way, though.” Ragini, surprisingly, spoke against Protégé. “If she cannot survive the trip down with us in her state, then she will not survive with them either.”

“What makes you think he hasn't brought that equipment with him?”

“You have any proof of that?”

“We have to *try* to stop this! At least get her away from here and-”

“And go where ourselves? They'll comb the mountain!”

It had gone in this circle numerous times. I was actually getting a headache from the raised voices and quickly held my ears down with a whimper. I hated arguments...I really did. Especially ones when no-one knew the answer. Not after I'd just learned what I had about Shackles' intentions. Not after all this sudden 'knowing' of everything. Every raised voice was like another harsh thump on my head. Each exasperated slap of a hoof on the ground a nail in the skull. Damn these ears.

I had to get out of here.

Hopping off the chair, I had to wave a hoof to get Brimstone to not follow me. Trotting quietly past everypony else to the door, I left without really being seen or heard amongst their endless...what was the word? Mind thundering? Brain lightninging? I'd heard Glimmer say it once.

The dark and cold entrance hall felt strangely isolated from the very room I'd just left, its dark stone and creaking wood a sudden drop in temperature from the warm room behind me. Crossing it, sighing in relief as the voices faded a little, I made my way to her front room. There was a fire in there...soft seats and peaceful books where I could draw in silence. The door was already open, a flickering orange light spearing out into the chilly hall. With a hoof I nudged it open and trotted inside to feel the satisfying ambience of the room's large fireplace at the far end. Gently closing it behind me, I advanced inwards, moving to the biggest, fluffiest chair I could see.

“Murky?”

The voice might have startled me, but it was soft and calm. Turning to the side, I saw Unity sat in the corner amongst a small pile of books piled up near the already crammed shelves. She had a particularly large one open before her. Far from the fire she was lighting it with her magic, casting a relaxing and cosy pale red over it all.

“Sorry,” I bit my lip, “I just-”

“Needed to get some peace and quiet?” She answered, inclining her head toward the room I'd come from through the wall. Her voice wasn't much above a whisper, tinged with a little anxiety.

I simply nodded twice, a short movement as I looked around the room.

“Me too...I'm really not one for crowds of ponies. Never was. Call it introverted or unsocial if you like, I just-”

“No, I don't. Think it is, I mean.” I quickly added, waving a hoof as I trotted over to sit with my back to the chair she was behind. “Do, um, you mind me sharing the room? I was just going to draw in my journal. I can move to the other side if you'd-”

Now she interrupted me.

“It's okay. I just needed to be somewhere more peaceful. I'd like to see what you do anyway.”

Unity smiled, before settling back with her large book again. Neither of us really spoke as I pulled out

my journal, seeing its battered and frayed edges...barely held together with string and tape along its uneven pages. It had come through a lot, weathering it all. A bit like all of us really...

I had something that needed adding to a certain picture though. Somepony long overdue.

Well, there were a few ponies that needed adding to this still...but I could check one off now.

Carefully moving the yellowed pages, I shifted through my earlier drawings till I found the one that mattered. My friends...or some of them. With me in that bottom left, happy and with spread wings (It had happened for real!), Glimmer off to the middle, cheeky and charismatic. To her right, Caduceus as earnest as ever. Behind them both, Brimstone loomed as a heavyset presence, that wry and sardonic smirk I knew meant more contentment than many would think. Gradually, I shifted to Caduceus' right, and began to set charcoal to paper.

Yes...it'd been some time since I'd been able to do this. To relax and just let it all flow forth in creating the two ponies I knew I wanted to right now. The mantra had long become repeated...but it felt good to feel that process move through me. I could hear nothing but the crack of the fire, the distance wind and the occasional turn of a page from the quiet mare near me. Slowly, as I felt my head fluidly shifting and turning into the ceaseless depths of artistic bliss, this whole cottage became...peaceful. Welcoming. Far from danger.

For now...that was all I needed.

Strong lines for a strong mare. Defined, constant and yet bearing a caring touch that my charcoal reflected in small subtle looks in her eyes and mouth. Criss-crossing as I drew the plaids, I felt the beat and rhythm move faster and set me smiling as I moved down to the bottom and began a new pony shape near her legs, in front of Caduceus between Glimmer and the new additions. A little shape, a happy one bouncing up on his hind legs and waving with an unthinkably wide grin. No, missing something, I let the edge of my hoof rub at an edge, before moving the mare's front hoof to settle on his back. The connection, the care and the pride now reflected from her eyes as though I'd always meant that.

Coral Eve had found her foal, Chirpy Sum. Now, I ensured they were found on my collection the way those two always should have been.

Together.

With us.

Sitting back, I smiled enough that my charcoal fell out of my mouth, dropping into the spine of my journal. Coral had been a solid pillar in my life for so long now. Saving us, carrying us all without anypony ever asking her to. Yes...this was *right*.

“Oooh, I remember that one! You've added more to it!”

I looked up, finding Unity leaning over under the light of her horn, gazing at my drawing. Her face looked delighted as she gently shifted the journal around to get a look at it. I felt myself flush a little...I always liked it when ponies enjoyed what I drew. Until I'd met Unity for the first time no-pony ever had...

“It's...uh...it's the one I want to put all my friends on.” I leaned backwards, against the rear of the chair.

“That's a lovely thought, Murky. This way, we can all hang this up where-ever we get to when we all get out of here. Put it on the wall and see it forever.” Unity looked up, her weary face showing a brightness to it. “What can I say? I'm a dreamer...”

Oddly enough, I found myself giggling a little. “We all are. I...I don't think any slave isn't in some way. Fillydelphia's ruined all our lives since it caught us. I was born a slave but that doesn't mean I'm the only one suffering...”

I looked at my picture, seeing within it my friends smiling in a way I never had seen them in reality.

“Glimmer and Coral lost their entire home, this city pulled them in and took their lives away until both were having to cope somehow. Coral lost her son...Glimmer lost the freedom she'd left a safe place to have

in the first place. Shackled it all down and told them their life was over now. Chirpy taken from his mother...I...I know how that feels, Unity. Brimstone may have been what he was, but he thinks he deserves this place and I just know that isn't true! Not any more, it's made him think he should stay here after we all get out. Caduceus *lost* his life before we could even try. I don't just want out for myself...I want out for them too. To take back the life stolen from us all by slavery and Red Eye's creeds."

I wiped an eye, feeling her hoof on my shoulder.

"While I can't help but feel even Protégé has been hurt too deep by this place to ever know who he might have turned out to be had he not been born the way I was. Then you too, of course..."

Looking up, I saw Unity nod slowly. It made me think, I knew precious little about her life before Fillydelphia. She shifted round, sitting beside me in our quiet little sanctuary behind the chairs, surrounded by books.

"It all happened so quickly for me. Just on the road and...and their wagons went by and just picked me up, before I knew it I was in chains and being taken away. I want to go home too, Murky...let my parents in Friendship City know I'm still alive. Did I ever tell you?" She looked at me, but continued anyway, "I grew up in Friendship City's bookstore. My parents made a decent living off them, enough to stay in that safer settlement. But they did history too, collected old journals and learning annuals that I got really attached to."

Her magic glowed brighter, lifting the book across to sit between us. I could see what it was now. A collection of maps and photos from all ends of Equestria. The real Equestria, filled with bright fields, lush forests, sparkling rivers and mountains below a clear sky. The towers of Manehattan looked so sturdy and everlasting. Canterlot shone as a beacon of grace. Small towns were filled with a rural comfort.

"Probably why I turned out like I did...grew up sheltered in my little room reading books of a time period I'll never see and learning the ways of ponies that no longer exist as much as they used to. I was only to head to the old hunter's shack just outside Tenpony to pick up some...some food to take home, it was cheaper than in the statue. I should have only been g-gone an hour...all they know is I didn't come home."

To hell with nerves, I could hear the strain in her voice. Leaning over, I held onto her very tightly, feeling her hooves wrap around me as well.

"We won't let Fillydelphia win again, Unity." I tried to keep my own voice straight, forcing myself to not think about that sort of situation, so stupid and simple to ruin somepony's life on the spot like that forever. "We'll...we'll all get out, I...I don't know how but we'll...somehow...I..."

"-would do anything?"

The raspy, nasal voice slid into my ears sharply. We split from one another quickly, both our cheeks tearful as we glanced around the couch. Before us, standing lit between the hazy blue light of the window and the fiery orange of the hearth was Aurora Star. Her eyes, drooped with age, held a sudden vigour and intensity that frankly scared the life out of me.

"Y-yes...I would."

There was no hint of lying to sound brave in my voice. Yes...at this point, surrounded by the friends I loved, I would take on any challenge to get us out. To beat Fillydelphia and finally make true the dream we'd all held since the start of this entire journey.

Aurora was silent, her horn flickering occasionally in a way that made me feel uneasy. Yet to my surprise, it was simply to magically pull her cloak's hood down, revealing the thin ghoulish pony beneath. Her magic floated something out of the pantry. Three small mugs with steam rising. Two were handed to us.

Aurora turned around and began to head to her desk, sitting on the padded cushion before it, facing away from us to briefly sip. I did so myself, finding a thick chocolatey warmth spreading through my still frozen body. Oh yes...

Unity sighed openly, looking at Aurora.

“I thought ghouls didn't need to eat or drink...”

Aurora seemed to scoff. “We don't...but coffee got me through being a Hub Leader. It continues its service to me today. Reminds me of who I am after so long. You wouldn't think this fragile body of mine was only thirty something when the world ended.”

I really wouldn't have thought it. Yet she seemed so aged, even as a ghoul. As though the years had weighed heavy on her still. Some psychological thing?

Wait...how come I didn't get coffee? Caffeine had always sounded fun...

The question would never be asked, for Aurora sat her mug down and spoke again once we had settled.

“I listen to you two and I hear the same things I told myself when I realised what was going wrong. The same things that Sundial helped remind me of, that when there feels like no way to make something succeed...you do it anyway for the ponies you love and without feeling shameful about doing it for yourself too. There is no way off this mountain that's not in their chains, young ones. I cannot lie to you about that. It will happen.”

She turned back to her desk and began rummaging for something amidst a disorganised pile of graphs, papers and schematics.

“I've sat here and tried to work out what I could have done better a dozen times. How I might have fixed things or tried to make up for what I did. Two hundred years is a long time to offer hindsight...but it's also enough time to come to terms with it. I do not feel sadness, only a longing to perhaps show Twilight, wherever she is, that the lessons she taught us all in her incredible life made me do the right thing in the end.”

Gradually, Unity and I got up, trotting toward the ghoul. We exchanged worried glances.

“I don't follow, Aurora. How can you help us up here?” Unity shifted toward the desk, before the elderly unicorn turned around again to face us, holding a small parchment. I recognised what was on it instantly. An orb drawn with a pony being projected from it.

“I can do for you what I could not do for my own friends. I can give you an opportunity, a chance to perhaps escape your own nightmare.”

Staring at the parchment, I tried to see if there was anything written or meaningful upon it. There was nothing.

“H-how?”

Aurora laid it down, before leaning back.

“I created six projection orbs. Three were received by the Ministry Mares I attempted to spread them to, the other three were not. One ended up back in Ministry Station, where it was used to activate the Nexus and then destroyed by Sundial. Another was lost in Fillydelphia during the Balefire. The last one I recovered and brought here...”

Unity gasped quietly. “Those power the Nexus! If Shackles and his slavers-”

“Exactly.” Aurora smoothly slid back into her speech as she settled and groaned, her joints popping. “The Nexus requires an empty orb to be imbued with memories for use. One already used for simple projection is useless to it. I hid the one remaining empty one on the peak of the mountain under an old weather station the Enclave already stripped for parts. With that, one could power up the Nexus...and in turn fully power Ministry Station...”

She paused, eyeing us carefully.

“...which would in turn activate Ministry Station's portal used by the zebras.”

Oh.

Oh.

I struggled to find the words. I didn't want to blurt, not now. Not before somepony who was *handing*

us the key to our escape we'd come up here to search for in the first place! A secret of Ministry Station, a way to activate the same way the zebras had escaped Fillydelphia too! I wanted to jump, but my nerves held me. Instead I just stood and shivered with wide eyes until my brain started to register it all.

“But Aurora, if we activate it, then that means Shackles could use it! What if he finds somepony else who can do what I do? What if he finds another born slave that doesn't escape him! I don't want to leave behind such a horrible thing even if I escape!”

Unity was earnest, for sure, but Aurora merely waved an almost skeletal hoof.

“You forget, I know the spell to deactivate it.”

“But you can't-”

“I won't. *You* will.”

Unity stopped mid-word, her mouth hung as far open as mine had been. Aurora leaned closer to us, eyeing us both.

“You two, along with your better friends. I've *seen* what you've been through. During my projection, it wasn't hard to read the memories of you all. Decipher who was what. I saw your origins in chains, Murky Number Seven. I saw your kidnapping, Unity. I know you two are good ponies in a bad world. You coming here is a blessing to me...an opportunity I've wished for in every dream I regretted that I had to wake from. Something to offer me closure before my life ends and I face up to those I harmed.”

Her hoof snaked out and lifted mine, bringing the Pipbuck up.

“Sundial brought you here, young Murky. Even in his passing...he is giving me one last chance to end this tragedy with something beautiful.”

* * *

We gathered once more. The arguments had ceased once Aurora Star led Unity and myself back in. She strode forth to the centre of the room.

“These two have convinced me. I shall help you. All things considered, it is better that this Chainlink Shackles does not possess what I created. I've seen his malice in poor Murky's memories to know now.”

She stood amongst everypony staring at her quietly. The surprise on Grizzly's face was obvious, while Protégé peered sideways at me...I wasn't sure if it was suspicion or gratefulness.

There was plenty to be suspicious about.

Aurora was not telling them quite the whole truth, not as Unity and I knew. The reality was that she was being taught to permanently shut down the Nexus in Ministry Station with the deactivation spell. We would place the orb in, turn it on to power the station and then immediately cast the spell. Aurora assured us we would have just enough time to get to the portal and use it before the power drained again.

Exactly where it would lead even she didn't know...where-ever the last setting was. It could be somewhere in Equestria or anywhere else in the world.

Of course, the fact it could turn on the portal was the part we were hiding from the slavers, that was Aurora's plan. Give us the means to escape without letting on about it. She had given me an orb to hand to Glimmer, one that would teach her how to operate the portal based on what she already knew about it.

Gradually, Aurora explained all that she had told us. About the orb on the peak and that it was the only remaining one that could power the Nexus. About where it was hidden below an old grate and how to locate it. Grizzly in particular sat in thought, Protégé nearby. The rest of my friends crowded around to listen, Glimmer keeping an eye on me with a small grin. Was that pride?

“I will teach Unity the spell that is required for deactivation, I'm sure you'll agree that is necessary.” Aurora cast a hard glare at both of the slavers. “She is the one who needs to be able to use it or turn it off just in case this monster does gain access. You will need such an asset, for you know he's coming here and that you cannot escape now.”

Coral squeezed her son a little tighter at that being said. It was true though, there was no perfect way out of this. We simply had to do what we always did...the best we could to help something afterwards.

"We've waited long enough," Grizzly rumbled from near the window, his eyes looking outside half the time, "If you need to teach her a complex spell I advise you get started. How long will this take?"

"Some time."

"Hopefully not too long," Grizzly seemed anxious, "we'll defend this cottage until you've completed it and then make for the peak. We'll need everypony we have to hold this place down if we get attacked, buy you as much time to do this as you need."

"A last stand." Coral didn't beat about the bush, "If this spell is as important as you say, then we'll have to keep the slavers from reaching you. They don't want you to know it, I'll bet. But what about when we reach the peak? What then?"

There was a brief silence. Everypony seemed thoughtful, trying to just think what we even could do. Eventually, it was Protégé who spoke up, turning to look at his bodyguard.

"Ragini, you're far more dexterous than we are on a mountainside. Could you make it down from the peak alone?"

I saw her eyes turn dangerous, the same look I'd once seen in the FunFarm.

"You would be ordering me to leave you to all your fates."

"*Could you do it?*"

The griffin puffed out her feathers, looking distinctly uncomfortable with it. "Being the one to escape...to carry something important? Sure, whatever. Don't expect me to like being the bird who gets to flee, even if it is a nigh impossible climb."

Protégé nodded slowly, a smile lacking any happiness on his face. "Good, then you'll carry the orb. Get it somewhere safe then find shelter. Take your time and sneak back to Fillydelphia...they can't follow you over those cliffs with hooves. We'll still need you here in the initial defence though. Listen...I'm not ordering you to-"

Ragini scoffed, leaning back on the wall and fixing her master with a stare only a griffin could do.

"You think I'm here following you because of what some dumbshit contract says? Maybe other Talons would but not me. I'm here because you looked out for me and I looked out for you. We fought together long enough that I wasn't going to let you come here alone. If you think that I'm only doing this because of a piece of paper says so then you can cram every inch of that contract, including all formalities and subsections, right up your pony ass...sir."

That brought a bit of a silence. Protégé looked amazed, his eyes wide.

"Glad we understand one another." Ragini smirked and went back to the window again, leaving him standing a little in disbelief.

"If that is your plan...so be it." Aurora seemed nonplussed by the entire thing. She looked around each of us in turn, before slowly coming toward Unity.

The young mare looked up at Aurora, she'd been quite quiet since we'd heard Aurora's plan and had sat near the door when we'd come back in.

"Unity, this won't be an easy learning. We don't have time to study and practice but I've spent enough time up here to refine what I know and what I had hoped to do. Even now...I never really perfected it. A young scientist's dream still, I suppose." She smiled wistfully, almost nostalgically. "I will directly implant my own memory to yours in order to teach you the spell. This can bring confusion and extreme nausea...it's somewhat rushed and I regret I have not had anypony to practice on."

Unity looked around her, nine faces all looking back waiting for the choice. She'd already agreed before but I could see the growing pressure of our situation working up her nerves. Slowly, Unity nodded.

“I...I'll do it. With all I've seen even just today I trust you understand what you're doing, Aurora Star. I just wish I'd had more time to properly learn more about my own talent under you...”

“You'll learn more than you know, child.” Aurora gently patted Unity's shoulder and nodded to the door. “We should go to the study, the walls are thicker on that side of the cottage. Better protected and with a smaller window for if anything breaks out.”

They moved through the door. That was that then...we had a plan. Not the same one as Protégé, Grizzly and Ragini thought (Or any of my friends, thus far) but it was a plan! Grizzly directed us, positioning each of us near a window somewhere. Ragini moved up into the loft of the cottage to peer through a small upper window that Aurora informed us about. Grizzly and Protégé covered the front from the dining room we were in while Glimmer and myself covered from the study on the other side of the house. Coral Eve watched the back, keeping her son safe away from the likely direction of attack while Brimstone was to stand reserve...ready to react to anything. The big Warlord had listened to Grizzly carefully and nodded along. Clearly, his experience agreed with the layout of our defence to the point he said nothing to countermand the slaver.

I settled beside the window, staring out at the drifting mists and lifted snow from the fierce mountain winds. Visibility was terrible, thankfully not as blinding as earlier but we could still only see perhaps fifty metres away from the cottage. I dreadfully wished that we were not about to be under attack...the room felt cosy and warm. It let me imagine what it was like to have your own place away from slavery and I enjoyed that atmosphere for everything I could.

Behind me, Unity and Aurora sat before one another on the floor behind every piece of furniture we could find to give them a little more cover.

“Now, Unity. This is high level memory magic, perhaps the most complex spell you'll ever have known by some distance. You *must* relax and accept it, the learning process is not easy. I won't lie to you, it is untested and will be a great strain on me...so I will need you to be strong for both of us.”

Aurora's voice was cautious, this was as big a moment for her as anything. Her own research after so many years? To do it now under pressure? This couldn't be easy. I saw Unity taking slow breaths, some sort of relaxation technique or something? Her chest lifted and fell with calm regularity before opening her eyes and nodding.

“I'm ready.”

They began. From the outside it did not seem to be much at first. Aurora's horn glowed, growing until it lit a part of the room, streaming on each wall and overpowering the fireplace. A second layer of magic leapt upon it as I saw her wince a little. Unity's own horn erupted into life seemingly without her intention, if her squeak of surprise was anything to go by. She swayed, catching herself as a small stream of sparkling light leapt between their horns. The same twinkling one would see on memory orbs flowed around them, whizzing to and fro, concentrating on horn tips as a current built up from one unicorn to the other.

“This will be difficult...Unity...” Aurora staggered her words, clearly speaking through great effort with her eyes firmly shut, “so try to relax! Accept the flow of magic and let your mind wander. The same feeling of an orb. You will dream of my memories. You can be startled out of it, so you must remain calm if at all for this to go quicker.”

Gradually, I saw Unity look sleepy, shivering as much as anything else. The more she seemed at ease, the more Aurora let the magic grow until she too seemed to zone out. The old unicorn's gaunt face wore more strain than seemed healthy until finally...with a snap of magic, both of them went rather blank, going limp other than just enough to stay sitting up. Watching it with Glimmer, I felt rather ill at ease when the pair dropped into their 'lesson.' My sister seemed only astonished, having to remind herself to keep watch as well.

We sat ready. Aurora and Unity had begun the process. Slaves and Slavers had two plans against one another in the works. All was set for whatever was going to happen on this mountain to take place.

Thus...the waiting began.

Aurora Star hadn't been kidding. This was going to take time.

Half an hour had passed. They had stopped twice already after Aurora had almost burned out from the effort of this rapid memory transfer magic, ejecting both of them from the sleepy state the process left them in. Sitting in her own chair, Aurora had managed to recover and go back into working with Unity both times, yet I could see the harm it was doing to her. The elderly unicorn barely had the strength left in her to do this, seeming more drawn and thin than even before. I dearly prayed for her health to last through this...

Unity seemed healthier, but of course she was a much younger and stronger pony. At least by my guessing I assumed it was also due to not having 'all' the memory yet. Even so, she was glancing around during the breaks, looking confused and dizzy. Twice she had asked where she was. Worried, I had tried to tell her until Aurora assured me this was entirely expected. Yet none of it was obvious, all just subtle 'in the mind' stuff when they were zoned out before snapping awake and looking weaker than before.

Memory magic was scary stuff.

Now they were making their third attempt. The light grew and the sparkles flew around their horns again as they fell back into the process. It was a real fight to not keep watching them, praying for them to open their eyes and say it was done. The experience was clearly not pleasant to have somepony's memory implanted directly into yours in order to learn something. Not as smooth as the orbs had eventually been...

To distract myself, I had sat near the window with Glimmer and quietly explained things to her. The leap of joy on her face had set my heart pounding with excitement to be the one who could break the news of Aurora's plan to help us. Quickly, I had slipped her the memory orb about the portal and shared a tight hug. For now, it'd just be us two, Brim and Coral were too near to the slavers to risk speaking aloud to.

Much as my sis' and I wanted to talk and talk and talk about it...we couldn't for much that same reason. Instead, we sat together and watched the snowfall. I knew how lethal it was but safe inside it was surprisingly pretty in the dying light of the day. Coral brought us some dry blankets she'd found, a welcome relief from the damp I'd still been feeling all over. My chest still felt tight, making me wheeze on most breaths. I'd had to take a regrettable swig from my canteen earlier as the ambience outside had hit me deeper than I'd thought. Now there was nothing but a quarter full. Enough for one more brief trip in that snow at most...

Despite the painful swelling in my sternum and the occasional coughs I dared not take it now. I'd need it sooner or later. Every time I gurgled and retched from it, I felt Glimmerlight pull me tight in, stopping me hurting myself. At least I wasn't alone anymore when sick.

You'll get out...it won't kill you, Murky. Trust in what she said...

To distract my mind I started drawing again while Glimmer watched carefully. Lines, curves, shapes...it all made sense. So much easier to relax and sitting worrying about memory magic, irradiated taint infections, slave indoctrination and Shackles' plans...

I knew what I wanted to draw too. Something, somepony, from a time more hopeful. Somepony I'd seen in a certain way I was sure they might want to see again when I got the chance.

Brimstone visited us briefly, sitting just behind the pair of us.

"Brim." Glimmer smirked and nodded to him, quietly.

"Glim." He rumbled back, not moving his eye from the window, but slightly grinning all the same.

A few seconds of silence after their little 'greeting' dragged on, before he finally spoke.

"I won't let them get to you."

It felt strained, before Glimmerlight turned to him directly.

"Brim, for once...don't think about me for this, big guy. We're all in this up to our necks, you're the only one who can take on that minotaur and you'll need to concentrate on that when it happens. Please, don't let me

be a distraction...”

“Mmm...” Brimstone rumbled quietly, absent mindedly tapping me very carefully on the head. “Not what I swore to the Goddesses.”

“To hell with what you believe, I don’t want you to die!”

That made him finally turn to look at her. Glimmer was clearly trying to hold in more emotion from that.

“He’s...he’s the first opponent I’ve ever really feared for you fighting, Brim. You beat him in the past but...but...”

Brimstone’s hoof stamped back down on the floor a little too hard. He seemed to look at his hoof as though surprised it had.

“Brutus is a mad beast, I don’t know what he’s like now but back then I always outsmarted him. If he comes, I will fight him. That’s all there is to it. If I have to crush his metal skull off the mountain side, for an hour, I will.”

“Brim...”

“Don’t, Glim. If he comes, I fight. That. Is. It.”

Slowly, heavily, he wandered off, stepping round Aurora’s fine furniture with his huge hooves and body with stoic care.

Glimmerlight just looked sadly after him, we didn’t dare talk about our fears about Brutus after that.

Protégé occasionally came through too, checking on progress.

Protégé occasionally came through, to check on progress. On his third trip this time, I heard him before he even came in and looked up as he came through the door. As he did, Aurora opened her eyes again and sighed bitterly.

“Aurora, how far is it-”

“Not far enough.” She seethed through gritted teeth, not looking over at him. “It’s...difficult...I’m out of practice, too much theory not enough...experiments...no-one to work with. I can feel it flowing but finding the...the right memory is infuriatingly distant. It was so long ago...eurgh...”

She slipped and fell to her side, yet I saw Unity’s hoof shoot out and catch her. Lifting the ghoul back up, the younger unicorn held her steady.

“I can feel parts of your memory, Aurora, it *is* working! Tastes...feelings...it’s all there.”

“We need more than just knowing memories, your mind has to *be* me! Knowing how to cast it isn’t enough, you have to be able to cast it with my skill and...and experience. Protégé, I need to concentrate...”

The slaver stood there, nodding silently as once again they faded into that strange unconscious and silent state. I could tell when Protégé was hiding a look of worry. It was clear in his eyes, all too obvious now I knew what to look for. That empty and trying stare he made. Gradually he turned to me.

“Are you holding up?”

“K-kinda...I don’t feel too well still...”

Protégé’s expression softened a little. “I am sorry to drag you through all this...it’s-”

He stopped. I saw him suddenly stare in a couple of directions, his eye flicking to the eyepiece he wore.

“Protégé?” Glimmerlight pulled her weapon toward herself, glancing at the window.

He nodded.

“They’re here.”

* * *

* * *

Slowly, around the isolated cottage, they came.

Hazy black shadows in the mists, nothing more than dull blurs that grew and moved to just within sight. They surrounded us entirely, holding a perimeter at the edge of our vision. In the twilight hours, seeing anything distinctly was getting harder and harder.

Inside, we all clutched our weapons and hunkered down ready. We'd blocked the doors with furniture and at Brimstone's instruction set up a few things to leap behind if anyone threw a grenade in the window. Now, holed up, we waited for it to begin.

Behind me, I could see Aurora slumped to the side while 'out'. The spell was taking so much out of her, with the ghoul looking weaker and weaker by the minute. Unity was tired, lying against a bookshelf as the connection between their horns flowed and sparkled.

We had to hold them off...give Aurora enough time to finish and then fight our way to the peak. According to Aurora we were very near it, just a short gallop away.

This...this could work. Get the orb to Ragini and then just pray we were taken alive...

The horrifying thing was...I knew I *would* be.

He wanted me after all.

“I know you are all in there.”

The quiet dusk was shattered. *His* voice rung out as I saw a large blur begin to move forward. It solidified through the mists, gathering in shape until it became a huge earth pony. A form and silhouette I knew far better than I could ever sanely want to.

Chainlink Shackles strode out in front of the cottage. Rattling, grinning with those sick teeth and crushing the deep snow beneath his bulky form like it didn't stop him at all he moved toward our last bastion on this mountain.

“There is no-where for you to run.” His eyes scanned the front, I saw his head slowly turn until he faced my window, “This mountain is entirely secured now on every route a pony could take to get down. **You. Are. Mine.**”

As he came into clarity, I began to see a strange gushing below him...the snow was actually parting ways for him as he came right for us! A thin crackling and shine was in the air around him as the blown mists shifted and flowed around him in a sphere like shape. The very weather itself was giving way to him!

A shot rang out above us! A whipping crack of an energy powered rifle that echoed across the entire mountainside. Ragini had fired! Shackles didn't even move as a magical flare sparked about half a foot in front of him and took the shot entirely!

Now I saw it clearly...he was shielded! That was what was making the snow flow all around him. Somepony back there must have been casting it out of sight in the mist.

“Heh...amazing things that Aurora Star created, spell orbs...but a mere foal's toy to what we know now.”

His voice rattled inward, powerfully speaking until I could almost hear him shouting directly to me even at this range. That overbearing tone right above me.

“Ministry Station will be a new Fillydelphia's heart, the core for the rightful reclaiming of *my* city. You had me as your mere overseer, upstart! You thought me an old veteran, past his prime. You were wrong...”

Beside me, I saw Protégé lifting his revolver in his magic, looking uncomfortable...even pained.

“Times change and power changes hands...but the chain goes on, upstart! **Eternal. Unbreaking.** That city is mine, Red Eye has only made it a greater prize for my ascension. **How does it feel, my old slave...how does it feel knowing your Master is returning to command you once again?**”

Protégé closed his eyes tightly...I'd never seen him look scared of Shackles, ever. But now, after

Ministry Station, there was a chink in his emotional armour...one Shackles was exploiting, unintentional or not.

“You will come out or we shall reclaim you. All of you. **Come out now!**”

No-pony spoke. I huddled tightly near the window, only the top part of my head really looking out. I could see Glimmer tense up as well.

“Steady, everyone.” Grizzly growled from the next room. “The more we wait...the less fighting there'll be before we're done...”

Outside, Shackles stood, glaring at the cottage. That shield was like an aura of his will, the weather obeying him.

“No? Heh...so rebellious...so foolishly clinging on to some hope. How many times has it been crushed now? How many more times need you fail until you realise we will endlessly travel on this cycle. You cannot escape...not here. Not Fillydelphia. Not me.”

That grin turned to a lethal sneer.

“Let the cycle continue then. You'll be begging before the end I shatter that pride you like to think you have now.”

He turned, trotting away and waving a huge hoof to someone in the mist.

Glimmerlight yanked me down. Protégé ducked. Out in the distance, flares of orange erupted in the fog and the cottage cracked as rounds clashed into it. Glass shattered above me. Wood snapped and burst all around. My ears spiked in pain as the rolling volley commenced. From all sides, gunfire burst forth, the sound reaching me only now before more shots were fired. We couldn't do anything but stay low as bullets ripped into the room through the window. Two or three even penetrated the stone walls, spraying us with stinging shards of rock. I think I screamed as it kept going and going. I heard whoops outside, slavers spraying the cottage with all they had! The sound of a heavier machine gun roared, like someone tearing thick paper that send stone dust spiralling among us in a line across the stone.

We couldn't do anything! It just kept coming! We had...we had nothing! Only maybe a dozen shots each other than Grizzly and Ragini! They had enough supplies to launch a full firestorm on us!

“Everyone! This is it! Hold them!”

Grizzly's voice roared from the next room over, what did he mean?! We couldn't hold this!

Yet despite that, I saw my sister rise, swing her rifle to the window and *fire!* Beside her, Protégé snapped up, aiming for a second before snapping off a shot of his own. Amazingly, the fire from outside lessened slightly, shouts of return fire going out! They were diving for cover!

A shotgun blast tore the window casing away entirely, making Glimmer cry out as splinters dug into her. She fell back, Protégé firing once more before diving down. From the next room I heard Grizzly's combat rifle bark and up above Ragini's own energy rifle flared. Return fire sprayed upwards, giving us an opportunity!

Glimmer, Protégé and myself all rose! I couldn't let them do it alone! Rising, I whipped out my saddle's mouthpiece and took aim. I wouldn't hit but maybe it could scare them!

“Aim for where there's the most, lil'bro!” Glimmer's voice held no humour. “Make em nervous! Stop em firing! Come on!”

I bit hard, the small crack of *Rarity's Grace* bucking my body a little. I fired again. Then a third time to expend the tiny gun. Out there, I saw blurs moving about, trying to move up! Oh Goddesses they were close, they were at the wall!

“They're going to reach us!”

“No they aren't!”

Glimmerlight racked the lever-action, firing again and again, one blur snapped back and screamed, a slaver coming more into focus as the mist degraded. So much snow was getting kicked up, dust from the shot walls flying in front of us. I heard a howl, a guttural and bestial roar as something *big* started to charge across the field. I fought the urge to curl up and scream as I saw the monstrous Big Brutus surge through the deep snow on a collision course with the cottage.

“I...I...what do we do?!”

Protégé aimed carefully, firing at the charging minotaur. If he hit, Brutus showed no reaction, his warcry unending, electronically boosted through what looked like small speakers on one shoulder and given a horrible digital crackling over it as it echoed and continued far longer than organically possible. The ground shook, those massive claws clenched and hissed as he went for the door!

“Murk get *down!*”

Protégé tackled me before the other side of the window frame exploded above me. Glass fell atop us, cutting me somewhere on my back. More shots went through the devastated window, knocking books off shelves and slicing up the room. I heard Unity cry out in fear as one ricocheted past her, breaking the sort of meditative link with a sudden spark of magic.

“Unity, focus! FOCUS!” Aurora shouted at her, holding the younger mare's shoulders as much to keep herself up as Unity.

“It...it almost hit-”

“*Nothing except this spell matters, Unity! This all depends on it working!*”

“I...I can! I can!”

A stone fell loose inside, crashing near me as that machine gun gutted the structure again. The wall began to fall in, stone after stone coming free until another hole was made. Yet all I could hear now was the unending animalistic cry of Brutus as he charged! I could see through the new hole, his form getting closer and closer and-

Another bellow set my ears burning. Squealing, I covered them in the middle of this fury as Brimstone surged up the hall, crashed through the door and *slammed* into Brutus, mid charge! The impact made an audible bassy thwump as the colossal minotaur was lifted from his cloven hooves, carried backwards and tackled into the snow. Brimstone fell over him, his weight crushing down before flailing and trying to come upright. Brim was exposed outside!

“Round the back! They're coming in the back! Charging!”

Coral's voice came through the cottage, right as the whoop of raiders cut into the gunfire. Ragini dropped from the loft, swinging into the far room and bounding toward the back, Protégé went with her, galloping past the hole and ducking as shots chased him the entire way.

“Running low on ammo here!” Grizzly called to us, taking individual shots every few seconds.

“Five left!” Glimmerlight shouted back to him. “Murky?”

How many did I have? Oh, I needed to reload! Stupid! Stupid stupid Murky!

There was a crack, before the timber supporting column of the wall was struck. The entire wall came down near me with a rippling crash, dragging the loft flooring with it. Glimmer and I rolled away from it, coughing and clearing the rubble off ourselves.

Reload, quickly!

With a little dexterous hoofing, I got *Rarity's Grace* off and tried to slip individual bullets into it. Briefly, I peered up to make sure somepony wasn't charging me too! Sweat poured off me, growing hot despite the cold winds blowing through the holes as Aurora's old home was completely destroyed. Outside I could see slavers running from cover to cover, hunkering low as they used the stone wall or mounds in the uneven ground to advance. I could see them so clearly now, see each one as they aimed and-

Oh Goddesses aiming!

The shot went by me and flew into the pantry, hitting a pot somewhere with a curiously humourous sound. Yet with no laughter, only tears in my eyes, I got the third bullet in and started reattaching the small pistol. I only had six more after this...

The sound of crashing metal caught my attention. Outside there was a ferocious duel going on. Brimstone clashed with Brutus. The pair of them rolling and hurling one another around in the middle of all the gunfire! I finally saw Brutus in combat...

He...it...was horrifying.

Larger than Brimstone, he moved with mechanical strength that whirred and changed direction of strikes faster than any fully organic being ever could! Accelerating his attacks to unreal speeds that looked about enough to decapitate somepony from the impact alone! Lost to the frenzy, he didn't say anything, only screamed and roared as he swung and swung and swung.

It made me want to panic. Brimstone was on the defensive. He dove and dodged, knocking those massive claws away each time they swung and grabbed for him to slice him in two in the blink of an eye if they ever got around him! The true horror was seeing the look on his face, the desperation, the feeling of being *completely* outmatched in both strength and speed.

Big Brutus snapped out, Brimstone's hoof knocking the claw away before the old Warlord ducked in and surged upwards. A hoof careened into Brutus' face, driving the minotaur back with a blow I knew would have killed a normal pony. Yes! The minotaur's head snapped back, the arms ceasing their assault for a second. Brimstone drove in, striking again and again, heaving a hoof into Brutus' bare chest to go for his ribs before turning and bucking hard enough to take Brutus right off his hooves again! Finally, the minotaur's ceaseless roar ended, winded right out of him as he crashed down amongst the snow.

"They're breaking cover, hit them!" Grizzly shouted from the next room, I saw the three slavers rushing out from behind the wall, trying to sprint at us.

"Reloading here!" Glimmer shouted back, "Murky! Go for it!"

I felt frozen, that hole had rounds bouncing all over it! I tried to poke out and one zipped right past my cheek. Whimpering, I fell back, shaking uncontrollably. Oh Goddesses...Shackles' pet or not, they weren't playing around...I...I...

"He's pinned down, get the bastards!" A slaver shouted, catching my sensitive ears under the withering hail of agonising bangs and echoes.

They were coming to hurt my friends, I had to stand up for them. Trying to fight my fears, I pushed myself up and almost blindly fired the three shots in the last direction I remembered them being. Ahead of me, two slaves dove away and ran back.

"You said they were fuckin' pinned!"

"They were!"

The third one slipped, coming down hard. A shot from across the other side hit him in the gut. He squealed, writhing and only gradually passing away. Old Grizzly was back in the game and I happily sank back down to reload *Rarity's Grace* once more. Six shots and I'd hit nothing...

Outside, I heard a grinding of gears and an electronic whirring. Big Brutus surged up from the snow again to face down Brimstone. The earth pony rushed at him as he got up, not giving him a chance to get ready. One of those claws shot out, parrying Brim so hard I was sure I saw a small sliver of Brim's hoof shear off in the clash.

"Getting old, Warlord!"

The claw slashed forward again, Brimstone had no choice but to dive to the side as it snipped where he'd been, narrowly missing a back leg. The other came down, trying to pin him on the ground. Both Brim's

front hooves grabbed it, trying to force it wide open, For a few seconds, they struggled, muscle against machine...until I saw the muscle begin to give.

“Getting weak...”

The claw lifted, taking Brimstone with it. Only after a second did I realise to duck as Brutus swung and bodily hurled the massive form of Brimstone into the wall of the cottage near the doorway. In a cacophonous barrage, the entire front of Aurora's cottage came down. Rocks tumbled as Brimstone was slammed right through another supporting log. We all dove away, Unity trying to pull the by now very weak Aurora into the pantry to restart the spell again.

“Getting SLOW!”

Brutus didn't give him an edge, even as I struggled to find cover in the tumbled down front of the home, I saw him launch on the stunned warlord, one of those massive talons slamming across my friend's face. He was thrown back out, struggling to get to his hooves again. I could see the determination on his face, but his body just refused to cooperate. Everything I'd feared about his condition after the Pit was coming true.

My big friend wasn't done yet. Experience was a powerful weapon and without even looking to know, he pulled his body in the right direction to dodge Brutus' claspng claws to crash a boulder off the cyborg's head hard enough to tear one bionic eye clean out. Using the rock to jam the incoming claw, he swept out the beast's legs and sent Brutus falling over back, giving him a chance to get up and reassert himself.

“Kick his ass, Brim!” Glimmerlight shouted out, raising to fire with a clear view on Brutus.

The round sparked off Brutus' back as he got up, annoying the hulking monster and shattering some of the vials on his back. The distraction made the beast turn briefly. Glimmer went to fire more, before gunfire tore up near her. To my horror I heard my sister scream out, saw a burst of blood! No!

She fell back against a tumbled over cabinet, three or four bloody marks across her chest.

“Fuck! Shit! Fucking...argh...ricochet fragments...” She gasped, holding a hoof to her chest.

I rushed across to her, but she waved me away as two zaps of an energy weapon flew between us and set fire to the bookcases behind us.

We couldn't hold this. We couldn't hope to.

“G-Glimmer are-”

“N-not deep...but it'll stop me moving much.” She seethed through gritted teeth, firing blind with her lever-action over the top to dissuade two slavers we could spot trying to make a break for the side of the cottage. *“Three shots left...”*

Around the back, there was a sudden and close screeching. Protégé's revolver fired twice, Ragini's energy rifle spat death as I heard the unmistakable sound of something *evaporating*.

“They're inside! They're-”

An explosion of pressure blew through the entire house, sending books and dust kicking up, lifting all the snow that had fallen since the front end's roof came down.

“No they aren't.” Coral's voice was strained, pained from near the pantry in the back.

“AURORA! HOW MUCH LONGER?!” Grizzly bellowed from the next room, his rifle chattered and then horrifyingly ran dry. I heard the click. *“We're getting overrun!”*

There was no reply. Held in silent focus between the two, I saw Aurora's face grimace without making a sound.

The fire was spreading from those blasts, contrasting the white of the mountainside that sent embers flying through the snow across the besieged cottage. Looking to either side, I could feel myself hyperventilating at the sight. I could see Ragini in the other room, slashing across a raider's throat with her talons before hurling the body out the window. Her energy rifle lay broken at her side, bend at an angle.

Protégé hurled a table at one, blew another's head apart with his revolver and immediately was set upon by a drugged up hunter raider, rolling with the frothing psychopath on the floor. I tried to rush to help him, but gunfire ripped up the wooden floor of the entryway, blocking my movements. Scrambling back, yelled again as my head pounded. That machine gun opening up was like a nail being driven into my skull with its sound!

To my horror, I saw the raiders starting to take the far room. They poured in the windows, singing in unison as they came, a nightmarish war chant fuelling their frenzy. Ragini ripped the raider off Protégé, slammed her broken rifle into its head and lashed out at another. Old Grizzly wielded a length of timber in his mouth like a club and snapped a raider's knee. But three others piled on him. I saw his legs grabbed...they were taking him.

“Murky, head down!”

I heard Glimmer's voice and dropped. A shot from inside range above me, passing through the crumbled wall to impact the slaver who'd sneaked up. Outside I could see them gaining ground.

“One shot left...” Glimmer muttered, lying in the corner and trying to pull a towel from the corner over to cover her wounds.

Biting my lip, I got up with my own weapon to fire but couldn't risk going out. There wasn't enough fire going out now to dare aim. All I could see was the horrible sight of Brutus slamming Brimstone's head over and over with the edge of a claw. My friend was slowing...bleeding...staggering...

In the next room, I saw Coral Eve try to blast the raiders out, but her horn spluttered and sparked before fading to nothing. She fell where she was...burned out, physically beyond consciousness.

Grizzly was gone, pulled through the window and taken, the prize of the raiders.

We were going to die...we really were...

I thought it couldn't get any worse.

Behind me, I heard a scuffling sound from behind the wall. The chimney kicked down a ton of soot atop the flames before finally a filthy white head with multicoloured hair poked out of it, upside down. An insane grin plastered across it.

“Hi, kids! What did you want for Hearthswarming?”

Screaming, in a panic, I opened fire with *Rarity's Grace* at closer range as Wildcard pulled and slithered himself out of a chimney far too small for his thick muscled body. Even as I fired, the shots went wild, almost hitting Glimmer, Wildcard's magic tearing the gun off to the side on my saddle! Ignoring the burns from the fire, he rose up before me.

“They said I wasn't allowed to kill you again, Murky-Murk! But then I killed you once and you came back so I guess it's fine to *try again, huh?!?*”

“Try this, you junkie!” Glimmer pulled the trigger on her last shot at near point blank range.

Wildcard's head snapped back as it impacted right into his face, spinning backward into a chair. For a second I was hopeful, but he growled, sitting back up...grinning as he held the round in his teeth before swallowing it whole.

“High lead diet, little Glimmy...wonders for the complexion!” He stroked his face, smearing the soot over his burns. “Oooh, I remember you, figured out why you hate me yet?”

Glimmerlight lay there in the corner. I was empty on my pistol and finding his magic holding me in place with the saddle. Out the corner of my eye, I saw Coral being dragged off, slavers took her child too, screaming for his mother as he went. They were moving into the back, Protégé fighting back to back with Ragini to keep them away from Unity and Aurora!

“I hate you enough as it is...” Glimmer seethed at him.

“Oh you don't know the half of it, missy. And it's not because you didn't come to my birthday party yesterday *you trumped up too good for me whore of a bitch mother I'm going to **FUCKING GUT YOU!***”

His face twisted as he screamed and rushed forward, his machetes sliding down the chimney to join him. I screamed too...Glimmer might have...but in a black blur a huge figure leapt past me and tackled him bodily into the fireplace again.

Ragini scythed at his face, her talons coming in one after the other in a desperate, rabid attack. Wildcard and the griffin rolled out of the fireplace, burning both of them and dragging embers out that caught the carpet and added to the growing blaze. They tussled on the floor before Ragini got her rear claws down, using her far larger size than almost any pony, she wrapped a leg around Wildcard's neck, ramming him into the bookcase. The raider spurted out with laughter, bleeding profusely across his face as his machete's spun wildly, causing me to dive away myself at his mad magic.

"Flightless! Help Protégé! NOW!" She gasped out, before Wildcard broke free and headbutted her directly, his horn scarring across her already reopened face wound.

I didn't see any more, as I rushed through to the other side, given an order at a time of high stress. In the other room, I found Protégé was fighting three raiders after the others had pulled Grizzly and Coral away. I didn't stop, running into one, turning and bucking right up into the nethers as *hard* as I could! The squeal of agony was enough to let me know I'd gotten it before a hoof slapped me clean against a chest of drawers.

The distraction was enough. Protégé got the other off him, firing into its neck with his revolver, before pulling up its knife and hurling it into the one in front of me.

It was about then that Brimstone crashed through the corner of the cottage. Torn away, the room collapsed around us, me being saved only by Protégé pulling me into the back.

The massive weight took away the corner support, bringing down the other side before Brutus chased him, their heavyweight duel turning into a one sided hammering for Brim. He was putting up a heroic fight, but every strike knocked him back. Every test of strength he lost. Every so often I saw him trick Brutus, feinting, faking or baiting the larger opponent but he was never fast or strong enough to capitalise on it.

Big Brutus brought both claws together, swinging them around in a great arc that crashed into a jutting bit of mountain rock when Brimstone knocked and redirected the blow. The crash send a judder through the ground, sending more wood splintering from the ruined attic area. I saw them disappear around the back as Brutus lifted Brimstone up and tackled him out of my sight, happily taking mighty blows to the face on his ruined eye socket that sent a shiver up my spine.

All that remained was the rear with the pantry now. Slavers were swarming up and over the rock wall now the fire had ceased. I could hear the raiders returning after delivering their prizes.

"Murk, check on Aurora, if we're going we have to go now!"

"I...I..."

"Murk!" Protégé screamed, picking up a fallen shotgun and sending two shots across the rubble, the snow falling around us.

"YES! YES!" I hollered and ran back again, finding shots missing me from direct aim. Something went between my legs. Coming back into the first room I saw Ragini and Wildcard once again.

I...*no*.

Ragini was held down below a hoof. Wildcard bore his machetes above with a grin. She was trapped, Wildcard's meathook of a third weapon embedded in her shoulder.

"It all burns...aaaaall burns! I could have you tonight, burn you up in it! I do feel like some chicken! You taste like that? I wanna know!"

"F-fuck you!" Ragini winced, trying to rise before the hoof stamped her down.

I stood frozen, behind him I could see Unity looking through the door. There was no glow, had they finished?! Oh no...please don't tell me something worse had happened? No...*please no*...

I almost felt isolated. Standing alone in the middle of a wrecked home that had ten minutes ago been a

comforting warmth. Shots pinged off the rubble near me. Grizzly, Coral and Chirpy were gone. Brimstone wasn't getting up as the minotaur stamped again and again. Glimmerlight struggled with a slaver, her wound stopping her. Ragini was held down.

“Come to get a chicken wing, Murkie-boy? Haha!”

I...didn't know what to do...

Yet Ragini did.

With a loud shrieking call, she pushed through the pain. Hook or not, she threw Wildcard off and got right back up through nothing but sheer willpower and determination alone. Her talons sunk into his chest, before leaping up and using her hind legs to kick him right into the fireplace, crashing into the flames themselves to writhe and yell psychotically. I saw her rip the meat hook free, hurling it at the slaver holding Glimmer and trying to pull her away. The hook sunk into him, tearing him free of my sister.

She grabbed his sub-machine gun and sprayed over the top, dragging herself back into cover behind the ruined wall.

“Yo, flightless, they're done in there! Let's go and-URK!”

She had spun, about to point somewhere...only to find two machete's speared through her sternum. The griffin stopped dead, beak open in shock.

Before her, quite literally on fire, Wildcard stood wearing quite easily the most disturbing facial expression I'd ever seen him make.

A completely calm and serious glare.

“No.”

The machete's sliced outward. She didn't even get a chance to cry out as they slid out of her sides and crossed at her neck...taking her head clean off.

Coming through, bearing the shotgun, Protégé stopped dead with a despairing look as he saw her fall. Watching the large griffin body go down, the snow immediately settling across it. He looked up, before with a long cry brought the weapon up and opened up. Glimmer did too, her SMG spraying toward the big raider.

Regaining his smirk, the raider bounced and wheeled, diving and rolling like a foal's bouncy toy. Laughing as he went...but not a fun and gleeful tune. A deathly, mocking laugh that faded as their fire drove him off into the mists closing back in again...leaving us with the first of us to fall...

Protégé fell down, knees going weak. He couldn't hide the tears in his eyes. I could see his E.F.S eyepiece was cracked, a piece of it entirely gone from the front glass.

Behind me, Glimmer kept using magazine after magazine to keep the slavers from getting near again. She was shouting that they'd be here any second.

“-urky!”

“Murky!”

“*Murky!*”

Unity's voice hit into my numb head as I realised I was in pain. My side hurt...at some point I'd been hit by some shrapnel and not even noticed. Only now in a few seconds of a lull did I notice. Nothing serious but...it was the spike of feeling that brought me back.

“Murky! We're done! *We're done!*”

Unity was crying out from the pantry, yet I could hardly do anything but just stare as I tried to get it all into my head at what had just happened here.

Only...it wasn't over yet.

Outside, a victorious roar cried out. An electronic clipping came over it as I saw Brimstone barely

rising. He somehow got to his hooves, staggering forward and swung an attack even I could probably have dodged. Blurring, the minotaur swept forward batted it aside and headbutted the warlord. The crack even hit *me* with its sound like a knock to the skull. Glimmer cried out as the beast raised Brimstone up, lifting him in those claws effortlessly before dropping him down again, slamming Brimstone's side into his knee.

I'd never *ever* heard Brimstone actually cry out in pain before...

Then he went rather still on the ground. Alive, breathing...but done. Exhausted...battered...injured.

Beaten.

Brimstone had *lost*...

Big Brutus turned, raised his claws to the obscured sky in salute and roared. He roared again and again...screaming his victory...his rivalry done. It made sense, he wanted Brimstone to see him winning. From the ground, dumped in kicked up snow, my biggest guardian could only look at his old rival and do nothing.

Gradually, the gunfire began to die down. Soon, there were no more shots at all.

I took the opportunity to rush into the back, finding myself limping suddenly. Something had sprained near my Pipbuck. The pantry lay ahead and I quickly slid in.

"You're done? Did...did it work?"

Unity met me there, pulling me into a tight hug, crying into my shoulder. The poor mare had never experienced anything quite like all that. I realised I was letting it out too.

"Yes, Murky...it did. I...I know now. I know how to stop it. But..."

That word. The moment she said it, I realised there was no Aurora beside her. Not standing anyway.

Slowly, my eyes fell, finding the now pale and weary ghoulish lying against her own fridge door. I felt a heartbreak rising all the more. Oh no...not her too...

"I didn't get hit...young Murky." Her voice was so quiet, weak beyond even her age, thin as newly formed ice. "I...knew this would happen. The spell was so complex...so long...so hard and I am so very old..."

Unity dropped beside her, not caring for ghoulskin as she helped Aurora to sit up a little more. My friend looked tired too, dizzy on her hooves and her eyes kept glancing about as though in confusion.

"Just rest...rest, Miss Star. Please, take it easy and we'll-"

"Hush, child..." Aurora patted Unity's shoulder, "Don't think you can placate me, I know what I did...I calculated it before we even started how much magical essence it would take. Tell...tell me...how to do it..."

Behind me, I heard Glimmer and Protégé peering over. Somepony was trotting up near, but my attention was focused on Aurora and Unity. Slowly, the cream unicorn recited things I couldn't understand. Magical terms, methods and names I had never known Unity could pronounce in foreign languages...ones I knew she had never learned. Yet as she spoke, I saw the most wonderful thing...

Aurora smiled.

A smile that grew...and grew...with every work those wrinkled cheeks quivered and rose.

"It worked...oh...it worked...it actually worked I...it *worked*..."

Tears fell down her face, mouth falling weakly open struggling to breath even as she tried to laugh and failed. Yet such contentment in her eyes...

"I...know." Unity spoke carefully. "I don't know how but...I know it. Like I always did, like I was an expert."

Aurora Star wept openly, coughing as she tried laughing.

“It finally worked...I...did it. Two hundred years. A lesson passed on to the next generation to make something better it...it worked after all this time...I did it...”

Her eyes didn't look at us, they simply and blankly stared upwards.

“I...did it...”

Her body began to slump, each breath getting less and less. Unity and I shared a glance, tears in our eyes as we saw the truth. Aurora Star was dying right before us. The pony I'd sought to learn so much about here between me and my first friend. After seeing her home destroyed to bring her research to one last good act...

No, this wouldn't be the last thing she saw.

“Aurora Star? I...I need you to see this before...um...”

Slowly, my hooves trembling, I brought it out. The picture I'd drawn. Holding it before her, taking her hoof to hold it with our assistance I let her see it and saw that face turn to nothing but contentment.

A charcoal drawn image of the Ministry of Arcane Science's Fillydelphian Hub Leader. Her first day being awarded the post. Young, bright and grinning with the optimism of a lifetime. Bright eyes dreaming of the future...a better future for everypony.

Her mouth opened again, a last smile.

“Thank you so much, Murky...” Her voice was probably only audible to me now. “Please...make the right choices. Let this all mean something in the end...”

Slowly, the old pony's eyes closed, holding my drawing against herself as her whole body settled.

“I did it, Twilight...I did it...you told me to make real what I dreamed to help somepony. After all that happened...here at the end...I finally did it...Twi...”

Her voice faded.

And there in our grasp...Aurora Star passed into memory for the last time.

* * *

There wasn't any time to really do much for her.

There wasn't much time for anything now.

Unity and I trotted back out front with solemn faces to find Glimmer and Protégé huddled behind the last remnant of our cover. Out on the snowy plains behind the mist, I could see the shape of slavers close by. Waiting...just waiting.

Protégé looked up from binding Glimmer's chest in what clean fabric he could find, his hooves slow and lethargic over his own battered body.

“Is it done? Where is-”

He stopped short as he saw our faces.

Slowly, Unity nodded to him.

“I know what I need to know.” Her voice was thin, as though nervous about speaking too loudly after what just happened to break the reprieve.

“Good...good. At least you know this now. At least you made it through that.”

Protégé wasn't putting it on. I could see genuine relief on his face, more than I might have expected.

“Yes I'm...weak, but I'll make it I think...” Unity muttered, looking away from the slaver and taking a seat. What she had done was incredible, but it had cost her. She was trotting slowly and breathing hard.

Protégé didn't reply, instead just sinking down against the wall with a hoof on his head. It was clear why...he'd already lost one close ally today. Whether they were friends or not I would never know...but it was clear Ragini's loss ate into him hard, one of the few slavers in Fillydelphia that had supported him was now dead.

With Aurora gone, that left just the four of us.

“We have to...to...” Protégé began, hesitated and then continued with a shake of his head, “just let come what comes. We cannot go to the orb. We have no way to get it down now without Ragini and no way to stop them getting it otherwise other than to hope they don't find it until we can return.”

He looked away across the demolished house, through the snow now drifting all over us from the shattered and collapsed roof.

“If we can return.”

No-pony seemed to know what to say to that.

Yet it wasn't true. It wasn't right. We couldn't abandon it now, it was our only chance to activate what lay in Ministry Station to give us a way out! We wouldn't get another chance like this...all the other orbs I knew of were already used...Aurora had told us they needed to be empty. This was the only one we knew about.

Maybe we'd just have to look for that lost one in Fillydelphia somewhere...but an entire city was impossible to cover. Not when we were slaves.

Outside, there came the sound of ponies advancing again.

“**You are beaten, slaves.**”

His voice echoed across the front of the cottage's grounds.

“I ordered before, you resisted and lost one of your own with four others captured. **You will come out.** Allow yourself to live and come trotting out with heads held low in defeat. The Master of Fillydelphia is waiting...hehe...”

I saw him emerge through the clouds. Shimmering shield spell protecting him, he carved a way through the freezing ground for his foul presence. Around his neck was slung a heavy looking short barrelled shotgun, while his whip fluttered at his side. His greasy mane blew with the wind as his head scanned over the cottage front. Behind him there came Brutus, stomping his way with still bruising and bleeding wounds from Brimstone's attacks. In his claw...he held Old Grizzly, hurling the old slaver to the ground beside Shackles, where I saw blood begin to stain the snow. He was hurt bad.

Shackles looked down, before mockingly patting Grizzly's head.

“I know about the orb, little worms. It's incredible how talkative you supporters of your great 'leader' become when your precious 'next generation' is even moderately threatened. The foal will live thanks to ponies knowing when they should respond to their master.”

I saw him leer down at the proud slaver and felt my skin crawl. They'd threatened Chirpy to know all this. He knew! Oh Goddesses...give me an idea, please!

“It's true!” I heard the pain in Grizzly's voice as he shouted it, admitting it. “He knows, Protégé!”

Beside me, Red Eye's apprentice shivered and clenched his teeth. Somehow I doubted it was the cold sweeping in as the heat of battle began to wear off.

Grizzly tried to stand before being brutally hooped in the ribs by Shackles. He cried out, falling to his knees again.

“Protégé! Listen...argh...*listen to me, young one!*” Grizzly cried out across the field, trying to muster his strength from a battered body.

Protégé turned, looking out toward one of his old mentors since he had joined Red Eye with worried

eyes.

“We can't fight them, Protégé! I've seen how many they've got coming up. There's...there's no way out now. Listen to me closely, that orb...it *matters*, Protégé! It's what Red Eye instructed you to find for him, not for Shackles!”

“Be silent, wretch!”

The shotgun swung out, striking Grizzly's cheek with its metal stock with a sickening crack. I heard Grizzly cry out, falling sideways. Yet even as he fell, struggling to not lie on his side, he shouted again, even while Shackles bore over him.

“Red Eye trusted you with this, Protégé! Don't let him down!”

Beside me, I could see the hurt on the unicorn's face.

“You're the only one left now to stop all this! You know what you have to-”

The shotgun slammed home again, before a hoof stamped down, making his shoulder pop and holding the big slaver on the ground, face side down in the snow. His shout of pain echoed as the shotgun levelled on his head.

“You know what I will do, upstart! Here's your incentive to come out and return to your Master! Now trot along and come back to me, heh.”

Shackles glared toward us.

“Don't make me ask again. I'd rather you all alive after all...”

His hoof twisted, causing Grizzly to cry out once more. Beside me Protégé was clearly conflicted. His revolver held low in his magic as he shook, eyes closed.

“Come on now...”

His teeth clenched, tears growing at the edge of his eyes. Grizzly was the last true ally he had left in Fillydelphia, second only to Red Eye in how much he had helped the young unicorn.

Then Grizzly shouted one last time.

“You know what he'd want you to do!”

The shotgun's booming sound echoed many times around the mountainside as Protégé's eyes snapped open with a gasp. He saw the same sight I did, of what had been done. Of Shackles coldly executing Grizzly before us all.

Goddesses help us.

I felt myself quivering with sudden terror, yet beside me I couldn't ignore the stark horror of Protégé. His face was aghast, more so than any of us. His whole body stood on edge, upright and seemingly frozen in place.

“Protégé?” I asked, tentatively moving forward. “Protégé what are-”

His hoof shot out, knocking me back away from him harshly. I fell beside Glimmerlight into the rubble as he stood before all of us, looking halfway between scared and angry. His eyes looked around, at first I thought with nerves until I saw him looking at his eyepiece. Every side of the cottage, swinging his head until he stared toward the back.

“Don't...don't follow me.”

“Protégé, what-”

His face snapped toward me, stern and hurt. *“Do not follow me! That is an order, slave!”*

The word hit me like a slap in the face from him. Yet before I could say a thing, he turned and galloped away toward the back, carrying his revolver with him. Bucking the old wooden door open, he rushed out

into the mist. I heard shouts from outside, slavers or raiders spotting him. There were gunshots. I heard somepony cry out as his revolver fired back.

“Fuck, he's over there!”

“Where? There's too much mist!”

“Stop him!”

It became clear to me about the same time as it did Glimmerlight. She pulled me around, looking me in the eye.

“He's going for the orb.”

I nodded, shaking terribly. Was he just going on a last ditch attempt? Was he trying to save us from dying in the fight? Abandoning us?

Then it struck me. I turned back to the two friends I had with me, shouting even as I heard other slavers beginning to close in.

“He's going to destroy the orb!”

The look on their faces was clear, they realised it too.

“What Grizzly said, to stop this the only way he can! They don't care if we don't get away...they only want to stop Shackles having the power to take over from Red Eye!”

“Get in there and bring those two back to me! Move! Get moving!”

Shackles' voice boomed out, before the advancing slavers started to run for us. My heart beat faster, while I suddenly felt unsure of what to do all over again until Glimmerlight grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me closely in the eye.

“Murky, we need that orb to get out!”

I knew!

She glanced to Unity and the pair of them nodded to one another. Quickly, my sister looked back at me. Entirely serious.

“Murky, you're the only one of us who can catch up to him now. You have to stop Protégé!”

“But...but he...I...”

Glimmerlight wasn't giving me a chance to doubt. “If he destroys it then we've lost everything we came here for! Catch him, stop him however you can! You have to go!”

She pushed me away toward the back where I simply stumbled and very quickly felt weak. I couldn't...

“Murky! GO! We'll give them something to think about to keep them off your tail for a little while!”

She tossed a captured pistol to Unity, who caught it in her mouth before crawling up beside the shattered cottage front. Glimmerlight fired a brief burst from her sub-machine gun outward, stalling the slavers who didn't expect any resistance as she leaned up on her bag of memory orbs to support herself.

Her eyes stayed solid on mine.

“Win this for all of our hopes, Murky. Stop him destroying our dreams.”

She didn't need to tell me once more. I turned and ran through the house as incoming fire began to tear at it again until I reached the back. I felt my hooves sink into the snow immediately when I rushed out back into the wind. Near me, I saw two corpses lying with big wounds in them, an empty shotgun lying between them both. I could hear others nearby!

Behind me, Glimmer's weapon chattered again, delaying and annoying the slaves. It gave me the reminder I needed to push onward, she couldn't hold them for long. Into the snow I went, powering through it as fast as I could. Any time a slaver looked near, I'd duck under the thick surface and sneak forward slowly

through the trail Protégé had left. Before long, I knew I was past the cordon of slavers and raiders. In the wake of his breakout, it had been easy.

Raising back up though, I now saw what lay ahead.

A massive pass, steep and sharp on either side that rose upward through the clouds. Jutting rocks surrounded it, making a natural path all the way up that bent and fell off. I could see a trail of broken snow passing into the obscured higher areas. Into this I galloped, trying to ignore my quickly numbing hooves and the biting wind flaring at me. The light was beginning to fail, with me relying only on the fire from the cottage to light my way in the wilderness' all encompassing darkness of the growing night.

She was right, I had to do this. No matter who it was standing before us, I couldn't let him destroy our only hope at escape now! We'd worked so hard, endured and lost so much to let it end like this! Even as the steep slope inclined before me and I felt my hooves slipping and falling atop the treacherous path I felt everything trying to hold me back. The wind in my face or catching my wings that were spread for balance. The cold seeping into my very core. The injuries and painful joints. The sickness growing as the snow worked its horrible magic on my chest that made every breath of the icy air like swallowing glass. I screamed, I cried, I shouted and encouraged myself as much I could as I put hoof before hoof and climbed!

Keep going, Murky!

Climb! Climb!

I fell, my hooves slipping as I collapsed onto the rock and slid on my back further down. Desperately, I spun and fired my grapple hook before I slid all the way back down and broke my leg! With a jarring halt, it caught something above me, before I began to use it in my climb! I was in the clouds themselves, the air thin and my vision going blurry through my goggles! Gritting my teeth before coughing and falling loose on my line, I tried to follow Protégé's path as best I could on the exposed pass.

I wasn't weak. Not this time. I was strong, I had to be. For my friends and *all* our wishes for freedom I had to be! Not after all this! These had been dark days, I had been sunk lower than I ever thought I could be since that moment in the Mall before rising up again.

Grasping a rock, I shouted my frustration at the sky as I pulled myself up another few feet to another ledge. Upward. Ever upward. I'd hit the ground and come back stronger than I'd ever been. If ever I had to be confident, now was it as I ascended. Now I'd gone higher until I was near to the sky itself.

On the plateau, I galloped forward into the white, sticking to his tracks. I saw places he'd fallen. I fell too, here and there. Yet always I picked myself back up to continue the hard trek. I galloped...I galloped...I sped up...

The ground rose up. Taking me up as I saw the clouds begin to thin. My chest was burning and I took what remained of my canteen to help myself be ready for whatever lay ahead. Using my grapple to secure myself, I cut up routes to try and catch up with him before...

...before I reached the peak.

Around me, the clouds finally broke.

A vast blackness overtook my vision. An unending void of beautiful freedom up above me as I ran out of the storm and into the calm.

The ground levelled out to a level peak of the mountain. The top of the world.

Yet my eyes could only stare upwards. The night sky...

Stars. So many stars embedded above me like jewels set in black satin. Different colours, different flares...all dancing in their shapes. Dominant among them, the majestic radiance of Luna's great moon that lit the peak of the mountain. I had glimpsed it but nothing compared to this, a welcoming and reassuring peace above all the nightmares.

Truly, I wished I could have stopped and stared forever.

I never stopped moving, yet my eyes could hardly not wander. Every pain was forgotten now that I saw the place I was supposed to be. The empty space my wings had always been meant to inhabit. Such a tranquil sight above me as I ran across a harsh rocky land in stark contrast. Everything below me was illuminated by the moon's glow, casting a silver sheen to everything before me.

I'd said it many times in my life since I had began to think for myself. Yet this beat them all...never had I ever seen such natural beauty. A strange silent calm resided over this place above the turbulent blinding clouds of the wasteland below.

There...atop it all, I saw the old weather station.

Frozen over, stripped down to its barest structure that had left only rusted metal and rotten wood in the vaguest shape of something that once maybe had a tower atop it stood alone and isolated far from anything else under the unending sky. A little bigger than the cottage, it had not worn the test of time well on its two floors that clearly were falling apart.

My eyes fell to the doorway closest to me.

His trails in the snow went into that. The RadAway kept the edge off, but with a tight chest and thin breaths, I approached it and cautiously stepped in. I was out of breath, limbs aching and many muscles felt pulled or strained. In times gone by this might have stopped me yet now I couldn't imagine lying back now.

With the deepest breath I could manage, hearing him clearly inside as he hunted and galloped around...I stepped inside and cantered quickly toward the sounds.

The interior was entirely covered in a thin layer of ice that cracked beneath my hooves and had spread up all the walls and across the abandoned bits of worthless furniture. Some walls were entirely gone, broken off for salvage that let the wind cast its touch in here and set sharp beams of moonlight to glint off the ice.

With what traction I could manage, I finally rushed into the room I knew he was in. Skidding into the door, I came face to face with my owner.

Protégé sprung up, his revolver suddenly lifting from the floor panel he'd been pulling at. I saw other loose ones upturned around the area where he had feverishly searched.

The one he had just opened though...I could see something in it. A container lying open where something crystal like was reflecting the moon's light. He saw my eyes flick to it, before standing right in front of the hole protectively.

His face scowled, desperation in his eyes clear.

"I told you not to follow me, Murk!"

I was shaking still, I don't think I'd ever stopped but I refused to back off. I stood in the doorway of the room, what was left of it anyway as two of its walls to the rest of the station had long been taken away to leave only a skeleton of structure around us, dripping with icicles.

"I...I won't let you do what you want to! You can't destroy it, Pro-"

One hoof of his stamped forward, breaking the ice. His eyes glared through that half broken eyepiece. They were hard...yet I saw a fear at their centre.

"It's the only way left! Shackles is coming, he knows about it! Destroying the orb is the only way left to stop *him!*"

I had no choice. If that were all that was at stake then it would be the right idea.

It wasn't.

Breathing hard, I stepped forward again.

"Protégé, that orb is the only thing that can activate the...the station..."

"Which is why-"

I scrunched up my eyes, before simply shouting it.

"It's the only thing that can turn on the portal to let us finally get out of Fillydelphia!"

My words carried around the empty weather station, disappearing into the great sky outside it. Taking short and sharp breaths, I stared at him. Pleading with my eyes. Please realise!

Slowly, Protégé backed off and shook his head.

"Then I'm sorry, Murk..."

"No..."

"I am truly very sorry. But there will be other ways. You...you can work two years and-"

I screamed at him, frustration and anger on every syllable.

"Listen to yourself! *Listen!* You're saying everything he's wanted you to say, always! You're...you're no better than you ever were! *Please!* That orb is our only chance! We can't survive it...not now. It's the only thing that can make this all end for all of us, Protégé! You don't want us to die in here! I know you don't!"

Here under the moon and stars, I confronted him. I wasn't going to hide words now.

"You were born a slave, too! You never escaped! You never earned your freedom, you just became Red Eye's own little pet! He told you to do this, so you're doing it! You know it, Protégé! *You know it!* In Ministry Station you saw you were still a slave at heart! Saw how vulnerable you were!"

I saw his face contort and turn away from me.

"I earned my freedom...I...I earned the right to choose and work for-"

"You've chosen nothing! After all this you're going to condemn me to slavery *again?! You're going to stop me and say to me that I just have to go back to working in chains! Say that to every friend I have! After you've seen what it's done! You saw the metro, you saw what Shackles did! It's time to end it forever!*"

"I won't abandon my dream, Murk!" He stormed forward, moving closer. "A better Equestria! I will see those green fields and those...those wonderful buildings as we all live in peace through Unity again! The world rebuilt! I'll see it before I die and Master Red Eye is the only-"

"Stop lying to yourself!" I interrupted him, trying to get myself to my full height. "Didn't you see what I saw when Aurora Star told us what she did? *What she said directly to you?* She thought the same thing! An impossible dream, a road through a nightmare paved with hopes and wishes she couldn't let go of no matter what it cost anypony else! Let. It. Go!"

I stood rock still, before stepping forward, lowering my voice.

"Let it go, Protégé...leave all this and come with us...please." I felt tears in my eyes as I spoke. "You're somepony better inside...*choose* to come with us and we can stop this all going back to the way it was..."

He looked shocked as I said that. Stepping backward from me until he was over the orb. I saw him look at it, his magic still holding that revolver ready.

Then he shook his head slowly and deliberately, eyes blank. The look of a slave in utter thrall to a master.

"We're so close now, Murk..."

"You're not..."

"We are. Master Red Eye has left for the final stage of Unity. It...it will bring us all hope."

I fixed him with a stare, delivering a short and sharp question, my voice low.

"Do you even know what Unity is?"

There was silence.

I could see his breathing become forced and stiff. His eyes tried to look away, they looked to the orb, to his eyepiece, to me. Before he made a sudden and angered scowl.

“I...I trust him...”

“You don't have any reason to.”

“*I believe in him!*”

“You've only been told to!”

“He gave me my freedom!” Protégé screamed at me, fanatical, his mane lying loose around his head and his eyes wild. “He took me in, healed me, educated me and gave me a new purpose! He gave me a meaning in a life that had only ever taken it from me in chains!”

“Then come with *us* and do that for so many other ponies!” I yelled back, moving to advance, one hoof in front of the other, slowly inching forward nearer to the orb and him. “We can all escape forever, live somewhere better! We're both born slaves, Protégé...both our lives were ruined at birth! We can *change* that now if you just *come with us!*”

I reached out to him, raising a hoof to try and place it on his shoulder to get closer. That eyepiece, it was symbolic to him. I wanted to take it off him...let him look properly at me as I spoke.

“NO!”

His magic stopped me, forcing me back as I tried to move forward. Turning, he pulled the orb from the ground as I saw his magic pull the revolver over.

“Ragini and Grizzly died for this! Not when we've come so far and sacrificed so much! Not now! Not when we're so close!”

He looked up briefly, looking me in the eye.

“This...this is my duty. Master Red Eye gave me it...I...I must...”

I saw the revolver moving toward it. I couldn't let him destroy it! With a deep breath I rushed forward until the barrel of his gun pointed directly at me. Standing just across the room, I skidded to a halt as I saw it wavering in the air, aimed directly at my chest.

There was a pause as I looked at it, as Protégé held the orb close, shivering all over as it cast incandescent rays of reflected moonlight over him.

“Don't move, Murk...please...don't move. Don't make me. We've been here before.”

Taking deep breathes, I nodded at him.

“You stood before me once when freedom was metres short of being mine. You shot me to stop me.”

“And I'll do so again. This is more important than both of us, than your freedom.”

“So you're telling me that to my face? You'd sacrifice *me* for Red Eye?”

He paused.

That was the pause I needed.

My leg kicked out, activating my battle saddle's mouthpiece for it to fly up in front of me, aiming reticule before my eye as I aimed back at him, *Rarity's Grace* levelled at his neck.

“My friends deserve this. I'm not the only slave who wants out. Protégé, I'm not the little buck you once could talk down and hold back without a fight. Not when you stand in the way and tell me 'no' once again.”

I knew I was shaking, my aim wobbling about just as much as I saw his was. Protégé matched me eye to eye, I saw his E.F.S blink me from green to red.

“After all we've done. After all the times we've fought together, shared terror, confided secrets and

saved each other's lives...this is what it comes to, Murk?" His voice was oddly calm.

My heart was accelerating, a cold aching uncertainty flowing through my every vein and making me feel incredibly uncomfortable.

"It is."

"You've changed."

"You haven't."

We both went silent. I saw the blank look in his eyes, he was being driven by order. I was being driven by love. Please, Protégé. Just see...see now what it's costing you.

"Murk..."

His revolver moved back, still pointed at me. I didn't move.

"We are generous souls...sacrifices must be made..."

"Don't."

His revolver started to turn.

"A better Equestria."

"*Don't!* Don't make us do this!"

He just gaped at me for a second, his eyes looking strangely hurt and lost.

"I don't have a choice like you do, Murk..."

The extra glow on his horn was the warning. The orb flew up to nearer the turning revolver as I bit down hard on my saddle's mouthpiece.

Rarity's Grace didn't fire. Instead, the whoosh of released air kicked my body back as the grapple gun fired. It flew forward, slamming into Protégé's chest and knocking him backward into the flimsy wall of the station. It came apart, rotten wood splintering as he fell through it. The return shot from his revolver went wild, aimed for me or the orb I didn't know.

I didn't have time to retract the grapple. I simply rushed forward for the orb where it now lay on the floor. Out of the fallen wall, a length of wood slammed into my side and impacted upon the grapple gun. It protected me from harm but knocked me over to skid across the ice as Protégé pulled himself from the wreckage. His magic flung more objects at me, to which I rolled away from only to see him rushing for the orb.

I had no choice.

Switching triggers, *Rarity's Grace* snapped its curt retort and blew a section of ice and wall near his head away. I saw him stop and leap behind the main supporting pillar of the station, his revolver raising to-

Oh Goddesses!

The **BLAM** of it hurt my ears as it sent a heavy round slapping into the floor where I'd just leapt away from. A second round chased me as I fired back to hit the column he hid behind and drive him away from aiming at me directly. I rushed behind one of the walls before a little inkling in my head made me duck.

A revolver round smashed through the rusted metal above me. Of course, E.F.S! A thrill, a fear, a sadness all coursed through me as I tried to come about and get my last shot on target. I was aiming at *Protégé*...he was aiming at *me*.

I felt a tug, before I fell and slid backwards. The still extended wire of my grapple gun glowed red as his magic used it to reel me in. Skittering across the floor, I instead ran with it and dove out, sliding along on my side to fire my last shot toward him while also bucking the orb away into another room, clear of his sight.

Crushingly...my shot missed. It made him drop the wire though, giving me time to jettison the grapple

gun from my saddle now that it was too tangled to retract and start galloping before his revolver snapped its fourth shot at me. I swung behind a thicker column, out of sight.

“Stop this, Protégé!” I screamed, suddenly feeling so very hurt and emotionally drained. “Look what it's leading to! You'll never be free like this! *Ever!* It's what I've learned all this time since we first met. I know! I can help you!”

“You're only wanting for yourself and your friends, Murk...Master Red Eye is thinking of a wider scale for everypony!”

How many shots did he have left, two? Yes. I quickly dove into my saddlebag.

“He's forcing you to believe this! You *know* this is wrong! Think how many ponies you've sent to their deaths by his orders to you! How many did you want to save? How many others like me that you promised you'd look out for and show a better world? *How many of them are still here?!*”

Finding what I wanted, I quickly activated it. The E.F.S blocker that I had brought. He didn't reply, presumably as I suddenly disappeared from his eyepiece's vision. Now I could do what I did best. Silently, I moved away and tried not to squeak in shock at the fifth round that slammed through the metal as he tried to catch me while still knowing vaguely where I was.

The orb was in a room between us, he had to know I was out of ammo but he didn't know if I could reload or not. I had a few seconds grace when I made my move. Creeping around the side, I heard him moving forward cautiously.

“I told you when I first met you that you weren't ready for it, Murk...” I heard him scanning just through the wall from me, through a thin single sheet of insulation. “You've still never tasted freedom, never felt what it is to go free, only within these walls. Even if you went away the victor, you *still* wouldn't know.”

Maybe not, Protégé.

I moved backward from the wall I knew he was behind.

But I've got friends who do and who guide me every single day.

I charged. Mustering my strength, I careened right into the wasted wall, powering through it and right into Protégé. His revolver went wild, firing its last shot before it skidded across the floor out of his magic. I tackled him, knocking his smaller weight than most ponies over with my momentum as he collapsed to the floor. I saw the orb just through the door, the bullet hole near it from where he'd just tried to shoot it before I hit him.

He grappled back at me, throwing me over him to land on the frozen floor and crack the full layer of ice. My hind legs bucked out and hit him in the chest before I ran at him again. A hoof of mine was pulled away in his magic, tripping me in front of him before he stamped down. Rolling away, I kicked out at his legs, bringing him down too and leaping atop him to try and pin him down, I had to talk sense into him!

“Stop this madness, please!”

He choked as my foreleg pressed into his throat. I leaned down with all my weight before a dizzying strike on my head knocked me off him. Roaring in a more brutal anger than I'd normally known from him, Protégé stood and rushed at me. Knocking me up and carrying me to smash through two metal panels into the old control room of the station. The orb lay nearby as we collapsed against a long stripped out terminal desk and my head struck its edge hard. I cried out as I felt him over me, striking down as I covered my head and tried to weather it. I felt cold, some blood ran from my head but I realised I was in snow that had washed into this room through the sides that no longer had any walls to the outdoors.

I tried to hit back, but my hooves were knocked aside. My sore eye went blurry, my ears stung horribly and I cried out before throwing the edge of my hoof into his bruised rib from before. With a cry of pain, he fell back and off of me. Slowly, I tried to stagger up in the hard and cracking snow that had frozen into a single solid mass.

“Arrgh...we can all go home together, Protégé! All of us! I don't want to see you held in a chain to Red

Eye!”

Protégé struggled up beside me, using the table to get to his hooves and hold his side.

“You...don't understand...he is-”

“Still your master! Break the chain!”

“This *is* my life, Murk!”

“*You can't bring yourself to lie that you aren't still his slave!*”

I ran at him, but his magic threw the terminal ruins off the desk and into my side. Falling hard, breathless, I saw him rush for the orb. His magic reached out, picking it up.

Picking up a shard of the terminal, I flung it at the orb as it floated toward him. Striking it dead on, the sphere flew up and through one of the bare walls and out into the snow. My yell of exultation was cut short as he turned and bucked me clean in the chest. I fell, coughing up blood as my lungs were flattened before crying out at the agonising surge of burning pain it sent through my ribs.

“You lie there...Murk...” He gasped, trying to steady himself. “Stay...down...”

I gurgled, my lips stained with my own lifeblood. “That's what they've always told me...”

“We all have our place.”

He turned, limping away toward the outside.

“This isn't yours.”

He stopped briefly, before continuing. I tried to get up, hacking and spluttering as I closed my right eye. Across each desk, I moved after him.

“Stop getting up, Murk..” He say me keep coming. “*Stop!*”

I fixed my still open eye on him. “You don't want to hurt me...you're being forced to. You could be...better!”

I saw him turn to run and surged forward. My ribs ached, but I got close enough to catch his hind legs. We fell, tired and sore together as we rolled and threw each other against the tables and barriers. Yet every time he kept getting closer to where the orb lay outside. I dove up and over him, pushing him to the ground and sitting my full weight on him.

“Protégé...stop! You want better, I know it!”

“I...I do...” His eyes looked soft for just a second, before hardening. “But...I have my orders to the one I follow. I...I must obey them! Master Red Eye told...gave me this mission!”

“Listen to your-”

His horn glowed, I looked for what I needed to dodge before realising my mistake.

The stun spell caught me unawares. I'd forgotten he'd learned that! My ears cried out in pain as my vision was blinded. Everything went white as the snow all over this mountain and my hearing died to a painful throb and hum. I felt myself thrown off as I screamed and screamed, holding my ears. It was agonising, only growing as the full weight of the audio shock landed home. I rolled on the ground, losing track of where he was.

Gradually, I felt my vision return through tears and blood. Hazily, I saw him outside, limping toward the orb slowly, a trail of blood behind him. A large rock held in his magic.

I'd...I'd never catch up to him with enough strength to strike him when he was armed. My legs were sprained and my torso bleeding from shrapnel.

I moved...spotting stairs to the upper level. One by one, I climbed them until I was stood atop the station. I couldn't gallop, I only had one other option. Yelping in pain as I pulled myself near to the ledge,

struggling to stay upright...I waited for the wind.

Glimmerlight...I trust you're right...

The wind changed, its fierce and cutting blow from behind me. With that, I gritted my teeth and endured the pain as I moved the short distance as fast as I could. Moved and *leapt*. Flaring my wings open, I felt the wind catch them and tug horribly upon them. It was painful, less than I'd expected but more than I wanted as the feathers spread and fluttered. My leap from the surface carried me out, falling...falling almost straight down. I felt a vertigo, a fear as the night sky grabbed me in its powerful gales, hurling me away from the station by the surface of my wings. A mere plaything to the whims of the weather. I felt terrified, yet excited. Helpless, but more in control than I was while on the ground.

I flew out, not truly gliding or flying, but simply using my wings like a sail to throw me further as I soared out. The feeling was like a dangerous thrill, mixed with my determination as I saw that rock ahead raise up. No!

I drew my wings in, now falling...I tumbled down, not from high, but enough to accelerate me into a collision directly at Protégé. I *crashed* into him, both of us crying out as my momentum sent us both spiralling over one another across the frozen ice layer of the peak. I felt something in me pull, heard a crack. I was up, then down, then up again. We kept rolling, a horrid impact that dazed us both as we kept falling and sliding...picking up speed as the mountain's peak angled downward. I screamed out as I saw a horribly sharp edge approaching, clawing at the ground with my hooves.

With thankful providence from the Goddesses, I found a rock and clung to it, jarring my shoulder joint as I halted. Protégé slid past and without thinking I reached out to grab him. His hind legs cast off the edge as I felt my shoulder again pulled painfully at stopping his weight.

Our slide stopped...there was a brief moment of silence as we both stared at one another. He knew I'd just saved his life. I knew I'd just stopped him doing what he wanted.

Gradually, he began to climb. Using the rocks to hold his hooves, he started to push onward and upward without so much as a word to me. His teeth gritted, face matted with blood, he pulled himself back toward the orb.

What could I do but follow? Body protesting, a race between two exhausted and weak ponies began as we slowly crawled and pulled our way toward the prize.

"This...can be better, Protégé..." I gasped, trying to reach his hoof before he pulled it out of reach, ahead of me.

"Not...not if Shackles destroys all that Master Red Eye wants..."

"Red Eye will use it himself!"

I gasped and threw myself forward. Edging closer. The orb wasn't far...

"Only...only for the best! I will fight to do what he feels we need!"

"What about *you*?"

He didn't reply as he cried out in pain, his ribs striking a rock before he rolled sideways, trying to get up and get closer to the orb. He staggered, fell, rose again. I limped and heaved my way forward behind him. We were only ten feet away.

Slowly, I saw him slow, his rib giving him bad problems. I used that, pulling ahead, my hooves pulling on rocks. I had endured so much, I could endure more than *him*! My hooves got closer...protect it, take it and force him to see he'd have to kill me to ever dare take it!

His hoof crashed into my head.

I fell back, not even crying out now from pain. It was too far gone. I simply hit back. Throwing my body weight into the strike that knocked him back too. Over the orb, we fought. A fight of long coming, slow and weak blows to two battered bodies.

I wouldn't lose, not now! Not with everypony depending on me!

I rose up, shouting what kind of aggressive roar I could as I crashed into him and knocking him away. He wanted to stop me! He wanted me to be a *slave*! How could I have ever thought him a friend? Right now I *hated* him!

“*How could you?!*” I shrieked at him, “All that intelligence and you're nothing but a follower! After all we've been through this is what you choose? To ruin your life!”

I struck him again, right across the jaw so hard I fell myself.

“You're such a smart and strong pony! You've put your life at risk for slaves! You *tried* to be better! What could you have been if you'd not been his slave? *What could you have been if you weren't here?!*”

He tried to block, I knocked his hoof aside and struck again. Protégé cried out, falling down on his back below me. I stamped on his chest to keep him there, knocking him onto his stomach.

“You took all the Goddesses gave you and you *wasted* it on being a slave to a monster! You could have been a *hero* to the wastes! Doing things for the better, trying to change things! The Stable Dweller, Littlepip...you could've been like her! I always saw that side of you from when you first fought to help those in danger...”

I cried, I cried out of sheer hurt and rage.

“You could have been so much more with that heroic heart of yours! You could've helped so many! Made a *real* difference! But instead you follow him! You did your two years, you could've escaped! Why did you have to follow him? Why *him?!*”

He threw himself over, coming off the ground as his face turned toward me. To my shock, his bloody cheeks were run with tears. A painful voice, lost, lonely and weak as he screamed right at me in answer.

“BECAUSE HE'S ALL I'VE *GOT!*”

He threw himself forward. I fell back from his assault, falling as he clambered over me, his hooves landing on my neck to choke me. I felt fear crawl as much as the revulsion that he felt so lost in this world that he had to sub-serve just to find a meaning! I tried to croak out to him, get him to stop. My hooves flailed, trying to hit him.

They felt something. Something heavy.

I felt my vision darken with his weight above me on my neck. I choked, coughed and stared at him with panic ridden eyes as my hooves clutched the item and brought it surging up until the rock I'd grabbed struck his forehead.

Immediately, he fell off me. The dull *thwock* of the impact sounding terrible to my ears as I choked and threw up in the snow, trying to get air in.

In front of my, Protégé slumped, looking dazed. I found myself glad the blow hadn't done worse.

“I don't...I don't have...”

Moving slowly, I lifted his head up to help him from lying with his mouth in the snow. He was dizzy, looking everywhere, likely losing consciousness.

I trembled. I had hated him...I should have felt no pain for him. Yet I knew that look in his eyes that told me everything.

“I know...”

Slowly, he looked up at me, before his eyes rolled back and he blacked out, leaving me alone to think on the mountaintop.

I fell back, tired beyond measure as my hooves felt the orb and held it close.

“I know...”

* * *

I wasn't going to leave him. For all that had happened I could not bring myself to just leave Protégé lying on the mountainside. With great effort, I dragged him behind me back to the station for at least some shelter. The orb was in my saddlebag.

It was only a short journey back to the station...but it felt like climbing the mountain all over again. My mind was a whirling ball of emotions and confusion.

I hated him. I cared for him.

I wanted to escape him. I wanted him free.

He was an enemy. He was an ally...or so I had maybe liked to think. I wasn't sure about that now.

All I knew was that I didn't want him dead. I couldn't do that to someone who was where I'd been. Gently I left him propped up in the centre of the station and resisted the temptation to pass out myself.

So there I waited until I heard the voice...

“Murky!”

Out in the snow. Not too distant.

“Murky!”

Getting my bruised and pained body up, I hobbled to the door and glanced out into the night air before feeling my spirits lift and fall almost simultaneously.

Out there, I saw Glimmerlight slowly trotting toward me through the snow.

Behind her, I saw the slavers waiting...along with Chainlink Shackles at their head. Big Brutus stood beside the dragged form of Brimstone Blitz while Wildcard and Grindstone flanked him. I saw my friends chained down entirely other than Glimmerlight.

She saw me, her eyes changing to that of relief as she caught my eye. They'd stripped her of weapons, leaving only her saddlebag to have to cart up to this peak.

“Thank goodness, you're alive...” she spoke somewhat weakly, no doubt the trek up here on her bandaged chest had been hell, “Murky, I'm so sorry...they've sent me forward to...to...”

Glimmer looked pained to say it.

“To get you...to bring you in without a fight. If...if you don't they'll...”

Behind her, I could see Shackles with that shotgun hanging ready. A flash of remembering Grizzly below it sent a wave of panic through me as I trotted as best I could toward my sister. No...no I wouldn't have them threaten her, not now.

I give myself up...

Reaching her, I fell into my sister's grasp. Both of us hugged as tightly as injuries allowed.

“Did you get it?” She whispered.

“Y-yes...Protégé's hurt in there...” I whispered back, my hooves falling on her saddlebag briefly. Holding myself close to it. “I got it...it's safe...”

She sighed and leaned against my head. “Then that's something.”

Behind her, I heard the stomping as *he* approached. Slowly, I pushed myself away from Glimmerlight and meekly moved his way. He stood so tall...the smell overpowering of wax, grease and filth as he grinned and loomed over me on his approach.

“Murky!”

Glimmer snapped at me, drawing my eyes away from him.

“Doctor's orders...trot like a pegasus.” She offered what smile she could.

I knew what she meant. Turning, I put my head high, proud and confident as I trotted toward Shackles to meet him. He didn't strike me, I was in no condition to be hit right now. Instead he merely cackled as I felt the collar snap hold.

Yet this time, I did not let it weigh me down.

“Welcome back, little slave, heh...we've got a lot of breaking in to do.”

I looked upward, seeing his eyes before his hoof roughly pushed mine away. I expected anger, I only got laughter.

“So proud of yourself...we'll see how long that lasts. Hand over the orb.”

I didn't hesitate. Learn from Sunny, Murky. Play the part...

My hooves drew it from my saddlebag, holding it up to him before Grindstone took it, trotting around us.

“Very good, all intact. Seems my first impression of you being useless when you were first dumped with me wasn't entirely true.”

Shackles smiled at that, while Grindstone merely coughed and put the orb away in his own bag.

“I hope you won't mind lending him to me, Shackles. After all...we do have something I think their little band might be useful for...”

Glimmer and I shared a glance as another slaver chained her up again. Wait, what?

“Only as long as it takes, Grindstone.” Shackles turned and roughly patted me with a hoof.

I squinted in pain, whimpering at my injuries were knocked.

“Do not look upon your *Master!*”

His hoof struck a little harder, knocking my face down. The reminder of his strength after I'd struggled so hard to beat a small injured unicorn was terrifying. A pony I couldn't ever fight. A monster of slavery I could only run from.

Then I'd run. I'd never see him again at the end...somehow.

Yet now I felt him grab me, tilting my head up as I was lifted from my hooves. The sweaty thick goat of his sliding across me as I was crushed and held tight to his cheek, looking to the beautiful stars so far away.

“Take a good look at them, Number Seven.” His voice was so quiet, dripping with satisfaction. “You got so high, but you're going down now. You're coming down with me, down this mountain. Down the valley. Down into Fillydelphia and back to the ground you crawled up from.”

His hoof squeezed me until I whined in pain. It was so big, crushing my face.

“Then down even further. Below the surface. I'll drag you from this freedom above until you never see it again. Once Grindstone's done and you're back with **me** you'll never even see the clouds again, little slave.”

Turning, sliding across my cheek as his forehead pressed against mine he gave me a rancid smell of his breath as he looked into my fearful eyes.

“Down...down...down...deep into the heart. It's all ready and waiting for you now...”

He dropped me. I fell to my side and curled up, wiping my face and trying to fight the fear of his hoof crashing down from that monolithic presence he bore above me.

That presence that if I looked up, barred my way to Luna's elusive night above.

Yet no matter how ignominious this was to be taken away as prisoners, we had done it. We'd gotten here. Through violence, the elements, strife, loss, pain and tragedy we had come here and I had gotten to the

sky. I had seen it. That alone was a prize.

Then my collar was tugged, making me choke as it was pulled forward.

“Number Seven and I have much work to do. The circle continues...heh...”

We were led away. Myself humiliatingly dragged or pulled behind him. I knew what he was doing. He wasn't going to be rough or brutal now. He was letting my mind worry, letting it build up the fear of what he would do when we got 'home.' He thought me all ready to be broken and accepting of his ways all over again.

Let him think that.

Aurora, I won't let you down.

* * *

I was thrown into the train carriage and the door slammed shut behind me.

I'd been somewhat treated and wrapped in magical bandages after a nearly forced serving of RadAway. He'd been there every time, slapping me back into line. Knocking my head down every time I tried to resist. He seemed happy...happy to have me, happy to see that he could break me all over again.

The thought of my rebellious nature now being broken was as humiliating as anything to imagine.

In the dark, I heard a movement, before hooves wrapped around my neck.

“Murky, I'm so sorry...”

Unity! I happily shared the hug back, as she led me through the dark into a corner where we sat together. She supported me as my tired body collapsed below me.

“Where...where are...” I mouthed, still trying to get my strength back.

“In the other carriages. I saw them loading Protégé on too. Is...is he-”

“No...”

She held me a little closer and I felt no shame in letting my head rest on her neck. We were equals, both the kind of pony that needed a little reassurance in somepony else occasionally. I knew she'd understand.

Below us, the rattle of the train starting up to return us to Fillydelphia sent an uncomfortable vibration through the carriage. There in the dark, we simply sat and rested. As the steep gradients began, I felt her sniff.

“I...I guess we were wrong...” she sighed, “Fillydelphia wins again...”

That hung in the air for a few seconds, before I felt a small rush of belief and creaked the edges of my mouth upward.

“No...it didn't.”

Her eyes shot open, barely visible in the low light.

“What? But...but they-”

I smiled to her, the best smile I'd given since we left.

“All they have is one of Glimmer's old memory orbs.”

Atop the mountain, being stared down by every slaver, they had made the mistake of trying to upset me by having my sister come collect me. He'd been trying to break me by playing his usual mind games to make it all seem worse and instead gave me the exact tool I needed for keeping the orb out of his grasp. It now lay in Glimmer's saddlebag amongst dozens of similar orbs, too similar for them to know. They'd never seen it, never known what it looked like to realise the difference.

We'd come up here and we'd gotten it. Against all the odds, we had actually done it.

“We won, Unity...we...we won. When we get back we're going to finally get out of here. Whatever

Grindstone has for us, we'll get through it as one and then we'll make it happen. This...this is it. This is what Aurora's legacy will be.”

I coughed, but I still smiled afterward.

“The escape starts now.”

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Child of the Sky – When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk Equestria with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been and there you will always long to return. While you have not truly flown, it is a beginning, a feeling to want more. Your wings double their base resistance to crippling.

Chapter 24: Defying Gravity

* * *

“What's it like to know you'd finally won?”

Relief beyond measure. It wasn't happiness or delight I felt. No, that was impossible while chained in a train returning to the centre of those great walls. Fillydelphia was taking us home..

Yet this time we finally had an ace up our tattered sleeves. For the first time in so long we had something that would give us an edge. The mountain had tasked us hard. Aurora's revelations had shaken us and our losses in that last ditch defence of her cottage had struck some worse than others. For all our believing that 'this was it', it was impossible to ignore the massive hurdles we still had to overcome.

“Such as going underground again? Getting into Ministry Station?”

Mhm. Perhaps eventually, but we had higher priorities. Like how we were going to get away from Grindstone. How we were going to find Chirpy, Lilac and Starshine. How to get Sunny back out of the metro. How to keep ourselves hidden and how to get our stashed supplies from the Mall.

Some of it proved to be easy...yet Fillydelphia wasn't about to let us simply run about without making life difficult.

First, we had to get away from Grindstone and his plans for us. He wanted information and he was going to use us to get it.

Really, escaping him would happen quickly enough, before they got what they wanted. It's what came *after* that was the bigger issue. When Fillydelphia was going to show me the depths that ponies might go to escape its pain.

Then of course there was Protégé...

“After all that, you still held some thought toward him? After you'd fought?!”

Look, I...I know it doesn't make *any* sense! Something in me just didn't want to forget about him! Some part of me still felt more sorry than angry...I knew that he and I weren't finished. What he'd done, he'd done because he was ordered to by his master and I guess I just kept wishing that...that maybe still underneath that I could maybe find the real Protégé. The real pony he could be...

My friends helped me find myself to escape those mental chains. I was the only one who could truly understand what he was going through. If I could help him in any way, I wanted to.

Not that I didn't still have my suspicions about him. As great forces descended upon Fillydelphia and events from afar began to trickle back he still had his own path to walk, one I couldn't hold him back from.

The world was about the change forever. Fillydelphia was about to become one of the centres of the great power shift and we were all going to be caught up in it. As he saw his master's work threatened, Protégé had to take what actions he did in the end.

“I think I know what you mean, but there's something you're avoiding isn't there?”

I...wha?

“Unity's friend, the one she'd been torn from. Her love, unable to remember?”

Yeah...

Unity was back with us, safer now. However she had just become one of the most important ponies in Fillydelphia, possessing Aurora's memories of the Nexus and how to activate it or shut it down. Shackles would want her as much as he wanted me. Unity was stronger than her quiet ways might have suggested...but it'd take all of us to protect each other now.

I just hoped I could do my part. Up there on that mountain I'd felt more like a pegasus than I'd ever had before. To trot with my head high, to use my wings in a *meaningful* way for the first time in my life! I remember on that train I just...just wished I could pick Unity up and fly us both away from the cliffs! To soar out and find heroes to return and rescue all my other friends!

Protégé had told me when we first met that I needed to taste freedom to ever be able to feel the surge of *need* to properly escape...dreaming of flying among those clouds was enough to make me think that if I could ever get off the ground then maybe I'd understand what he meant.

“Murky, you're avoiding the question...Unity's love?”

Oh! S-sorry...

It was something I'd wondered about since I first heard her speak of him. Grindstone had lied about him being sent to, uh...the *other* unity. However I had my suspicions by now. Unity was not a mare given to 'needing' others to help her but she clearly had something taken from her. She was lonely.

In all my time in Fillydelphia...I knew at least one other pony that I'd seen the same feelings in. I knew it would struggle to all fit together. Heck, I barely even believed it really could be possible.

“You think it was-”

The truth behind Unity would only be the first milestone of our final journey that wouldn't always go as we'd imagined it might.

For now though, we had our escape from Grindstone to achieve. With a little bit of outside help anyway...

* * *

I heard the hooves long before the lock shifted on the door of my cell.

In the darkness, I murmured and shifted, trying to get my eyes away from the door before it the glaring yellow light of the Ministry's corridor inside. It hurt to do that, just to shift a body that had only now gotten a chance to just stop for a while. The chains around my hooves clanked as I moved.

The door opened.

“Come. Master Grindstone is gathering you all.”

My reply was only to spasm and cough; a throaty and gurgling noise to match the burning pain in my throat. I...I needed some medicine. Today. Coming off the mountain had left me needing badly.

“*Come!*”

The large mare slammed the doorframe with a baton, giving me quite the encouragement to move my shaking frame and stumble past her into the Ministry of Arcane Science's hallways. The baton prodded my rump, pushing me ahead of her. I was being slowly marched to the supply room I'd once found that memory machine.

We passed Aurora's office and I saw Coral Eve strongly walking ahead of me. A turn of her head was met with a sharp word to just keep trotting until we entered our destination.

A storeroom for arcane technology in Aurora's old Ministry building, it was covered in parts and wires across multiple shelves. Marble floors led to sharp columns holding up the walls. Old robots were lined against the walls or broken up into massive piles of components strewn across the floor.

Yet at the back, that massive machine I'd once saw but only now realised the nature of after hearing Aurora speak on the mountain.

A memory machine with numerous chambers for ponies to lie in, possessing a shining orb at the top. Something for many to share the experience as one. Or...or as others? My head hurt too much to think about how that worked. Some sort of military training thing that had kept this buck alive?

I saw him right at the front in the central pod. Battered, wounded and yet lying there motionless. His

light red mane fell across his face, covered in matted filth from his time in the field.

Numerous slavers stood before us with a smattering of firearms hovering or on saddles. Why so many? They were lined to one side of the room, next to the shelf I'd fetched that device from last time I was here. There was still a hole where it should be.

On the other side of the room, I saw the rest of my friends. They had been sent to the back corner, near the machine that I still saw dominating the entire room with that apparently sleeping buck in his pod...

Glimmerlight lay on her side, breathing heavily with her eyes looking directly upward. Her chest was still swathed in crude bandages. Brim stood beside her, leaning on a loudly protesting metal shelf upon the wall. Unity was behind them along with...

...Protégé.

Red Eye's apprentice caught my eyes. There were a very long few seconds as we both looked at each other. He was still here, he'd been kept captive too...

He gave only a cold stare on an unreadable face. While only five feet away, the gulf between us felt incredibly wide.

"I'd imagine you're all wondering why I want you here, right now."

An old voice spoke, weary and deep. I turned my head to see the limping and wheezing figure of Grindstone sitting at the back against the wall. He snapped shut a book I immediately recognised as my journal-he'd been *looking at my journal?! Give me that!*

The thought felt insulting, that old crank sitting against the wall flicking through my personal pictures.

No, not *those* ones!

"Quite a fight you all put up. Quite...a...fight..."

He stopped, hacking into his foreleg. I felt my lungs contract almost out of instinctual sympathy.

Almost.

"It's perhaps good you all survived for this purpose. You should be grateful, it was I who convinced Master Shackles to not have all but two of you cast off the cliffside. On that note, I must apologise that the good master is not here in person."

Grindstone scowled at Protégé directly, his fading beard swinging as his head turned quickly.

"He has a prior appointment at the city headquarters, I'm afraid. Being the only one left to be considered for Stern's heir to Fillydelphia's control. After all, *you* turned traitor, boy. You fired at official slaver business. Now he's taking your oh-so-controversial spot...Chainlink Shackles is being promoted to third in line of power very soon. The true Master of Fillydelphia is returning to claim his throne."

Protégé said nothing. He only stared with an intensity that I knew was him not wanting to give them even a hint of reaction.

Coral helped Unity to her hooves, the younger mare looking decidedly shaky. I got a hoof around Glimmerlight to help my sister up. We didn't want to lie on the floor before him.

"The fuck has this to do with anything?" Brimstone cut in, clearly not as patient to learn all this. The big guy was sitting down now, his battered body shaking on the spot. It was very clear they'd only stabilised him after Brutus' assault. Brimstone was hurt badly still.

"Information." Grindstone smiled and hobbled closer to us. "We saw her body. Aurora Star survived the balefire and you all met her. You spoke to her. You *learned* things from her. We have all we need to set the Memory Nexus into motion after retrieving the orb from you. Yet there are always more things than what we see...modes of operation, details or associated projects. Things I am most interested in."

He circled his hoof at that last section, before tapping it lightly.

“To that end we shall use her own creations. This machine, a memory experience simulator for more than one pony, also acts as a standard memory machine. It's where we learned of her in the first place, from the stallion within...he is part of the team who came through the portal when they found the zebras using it on a far out patrol. He's why we know of the portal's other side out on Equestria's frontier.”

Grindstone lowly smiled, a rare expression from him that seemed completely out of place.

“Did you think only 'innocents' could come across messages from the past? We've noticed you all know more than usual, but we've always been ahead thanks to what he saw and knew in the fight to stop the Nexus two hundred years ago. Now we are going to *strip* the memories of meeting Aurora from you by using it. Wrench them to our possession to learn all she said. At least, we will from Murk and Unity...if you would come forward and rejoin us please? After all, you two are the ponies of the hour once more, are you not?”

Brimstone groaned as he forced his body to move, stumbling forward to block me off with a still bleeding leg. I saw Protégé force his own wounded body between them and Unity quickly.

The slavers backed up, weapons raising. I heard the little clicks of safeties and bolts from those who hadn't been ready to just pull the trigger.

“They aren't going with you.” Coral Eve grit her teeth as she spoke, one black eye squinted shut. The raiders that took her in the cottage battle hadn't been kind. Despite that, her horn lit, a sight that I noticed made every slaver twitch. “Not them...not my son, whatever you've done with him...”

Grindstone didn't seem even slightly concerned. Simply standing there with slumped shoulders around his thinning body.

“I'm afraid, dear, that you don't have a choice in the matter. Not for them and not for your little colt. He's been returned to where he should be.” Grindstone was not intimidated by her snarl. “Now, you two. If you would return yourselves to me for memory processing, please? This way...”

I had to wonder if Coral was going to fly off the handle at that remark about where her son 'should' be.

Brimstone growled, planting his bad leg on the ground and almost seeming to relish the pain of it as he bristled and lowered his head. “If you try to take them...there will be murder in this room, you wee pensioner ass.”

“Please, *warlord*...if you still bear that title after it was taken by my associate anyway. You are all unarmed. You can barely swing a hoof, let alone stand against a firing line. Either way, you are not wrong.”

Grindstone turned his back and wandered closer to the door, motioning to us.

“Only it's not 'murder', it's execution...the punishment for rebelling. Call it Shackles' own recommendation...to do it in front of the runt.”

His eyes found mine.

“He thought it would be a nice beginning to your new life back with us, a reminder to not get close to anyone again once you see them put down before your eyes.”

No...oh Goddesses no, I couldn't see this! I couldn't let this happen!

He raised his hoof, all the guards began grinning, aiming at my friends. They had all lost comrades to us on the mountain.

Brimstone looked like he was about to charge. Coral's horn flickered. Everyone else seemed to be stood rock still at the numerous barrels pointed our way.

“*Grindstone! Don't!*” Unity cried out to him. “We'll come! Don't kill them! We'll...”

She looked at me. I nodded back painfully.

“...we'll come...”

The donkey shrugged. “They're dying anyway. You're *slaves*, what have you got as a bargaining chip? Nothing. Continue.”

That line...how many times had I heard that line before something had been taken from me in my life!?

“No!” I looked from side to side at them, looked to the barrels ahead of us as they each took aim.

“Come on you two, back to your master.” Grindstone looked more exasperated, how could this just be normal life to these...these slavers?

There was...

There wasn't any way out we could go, think Murky think...

I had...no...wait.

I leapt forward, as though going with him. Between the guards and my friends. They looked at me as I stopped before them and stumbled on the spot from my injuries. Trying to get breath, I took a huge gasp of air and...

“HEEEELP!”

I screamed, the most deliberately pathetic and whiny scream possible. Every joke about me sounding like a filly I piled onto it.

“SOME PONY HELP ME PLEASE, I DON'T WANT TO DIE!”

The slavers actually cringed. My friends too. Unity bit her lip and recoiled a little, Brimstone just looked perplexed. Grindstone turned on the spot with raised eyebrows.

“It's no use crying about it, you runt! You'll-”

“HE'S GOING TO HURT ME! HE'S GOING TO!” I interrupted him, screeching until my throat hurt and I burst into a loud coughing fit that sent me staggering.

“SHUT UP!” Grindstone shouted back at me. “NO-ONE is coming to help you! Just...shut...”

The ground shook as something in the Ministry somewhere exploded very violently.

“...up?”

Grindstone let his voice turn quiet as looked around. The guards joined him, seeing the dust falling from the old ceiling.

Out in the distance came the sounds of screams and rapid gunfire. Slavers could be heard shouting for help, causing the ones in here to look at each other and start crowding toward the door to look.

“Guard the door! If *anything* comes down that hall you unload into it! You've got enough firepower!”

The sounds were getting closer. The floor was shaking every few seconds now. Detonations rippled through the building until their shockwaves could be felt even in this room.

“What in the blazing hell is that?”

The sounds came closer.

My friends looked as nervous as the guards, looking at me in confusion.

Another explosion, *very* close.

“Guard that door!” Grindstone screamed as the room rocked. “Don't let anypony through and-”

The door wasn't their issue. The *wall* exploded inward. Marble and underlying concrete exploded into the room, blasting into the slavers ahead of me like shrapnel. A colossal hole, torn through the shelves, had been ripped into it. A tall and dark shape surged through at high speed, its metallic shape glinting in the light with a bright electronic display at its centre.

Grindstone was already gone, apparently having fled out the very door he said to protect. It swung its arm and a bright cascade of energy tore through the two slavers standing that brought their weapons to bear. They exploded into ash, the weapons disintegrating before me.

“THE ALARM OF TRIVIAL WEAKNESS WAS SOUNDED! TO ME, MISS FLUTTERSHY! I AM YOUR GLORIOUS SHIELD OF JUSTICE!”

The voice boomed out into the room as the massive robot spun on its single tire and put itself between me and the rest of the wounded slavers getting up.

Behind me, my friends were...somewhat taken aback, to say the least.

Mister Peace didn't even hesitate as the guards got to their feet. His gatling cannon spoke for him, ripping the remaining slavers into bloody chunks through the clouds of rock dust and ash that filled the room. The roar of the weapon led me to hold onto my ears behind him as the war machine went about his business, laughing hysterically as he did. He gestured at the mess, trying to draw our attention to it.

“BEHOLD THE ART OF WAR. I CALL IT 'PAINTING WITH TRAITORS'. BECAUSE I PAINTED *WITH THEM*. DO YOU GET IT, MISS FLUTTERSHY? IT IS A JOKE.”

I just stared slack jawed as the room crumbled around me and the shouting from outside grew into a panicked scream for 'everyone' to get in here. Mister Peace's screen was showing nothing but the most delighted soldier I could imagine, grinning with childish hope.

“A joke? A show of mirth in the face of thine enemy in order to show them that our lips remain stiff?”

Slowly, Glimmerlight raised her hoof.

“...I get it.”

“MOST EXCELLENT! COME, MISS FLUTTERSHY! CLIMB ABOARD! WE ARE GONE FROM THIS PLACE OF NON APPRECIATION FOR EXQUISITE FLUTTER-FORM! AWAAAAAY!”

I didn't even have time to do more than yelp and quickly scoop up my journal as one of those extendible hands grabbed me, flinging me onto his back. I gripped around what metal I could as he surged outward and hurtled back the way he came. My friends tried to keep up behind as he bore me through Mister Peace shaped holes all the way through rooms he had overturned in his rush to reach me. I could hear slavers in the corridors outside around the Ministry's indoor balconies that Mister Peace was thankfully avoiding.

We passed a doorway to the old workshop I'd once sneaked through and encountered shots whipping out of it. Mister Peace didn't even hesitate, powering through the doorway and taking the doorframe with him into the room with the small arms fire pinging from his chassis. Covering on his back, I heard his energy blaster open up on them and toss tables around as they tried to hide from him.

“Stop! *Stop!*”

A stallion screamed at him, backing into a wall. I felt Mister Peace move as he lifted one of the benches entirely to reveal the slaver.

“*I surrender!*”

The stallion waved his hooves.

Mister Peace hesitated...then crushed him beneath the workbench with a floor shaking slam.

“Surrender ACCEPTED.”

Brimstone caught up to us, bearing Glimmer on his back. Her roughly bandaged chest keeping her from running, she now held onto her own protector with a grim face at the pain. Coral and Unity followed them up. To my surprise, I saw Protégé following at the back. He looked very pale, stumbling slower than the others, but was silent and stayed some distance from us.

“Robot, where are you going?!” Brimstone cast his eyes around during the escape. Slavers were moving nearby, I could hear them again. The sounds of terrified slaves from the main room at the centre of the building were clear.

“Standard operating procedure in the event of assassination attempt, Sir Façade of Great Macintosh! We are to remove Ma'am from the premises immediately!”

The big raider stopped and lowered his eyebrows.

“Sir...what...never fucking mind. Head to the sewers, no-where outside is safe but them!”

“Then so it shall be!”

He spun on his wheel, once fully around and then apparently twice for good measure before surging out into the main spinal corridor of the Ministry, heading toward the same stairs he had gone down once before. Slavers appeared at junctions, but were quick to flee at the mere sight of Mister Peace hurtling toward them faster than any pony could gallop. He wheeled down the stairs, spinning me so hard I had to bite as well as grip to keep myself on him.

“I cannot thank you enough for returning, Ma'am! I worried you might lose your taste for combat for another two hundred years! Many were the dreams of crushing zebra-kind by your side in my slumber until your choral wailing woke me.”

“Um...you're welcome? Please...watch out for my friends...”

“I like them. The red one has a look of devastation in his eye that appeals to my violence craving subroutines. Yet the one of pink hair enjoys my sense of humour! She is most agreeable! Do...do you think it could ever work out, Ma'am?”

What.

My heavily armed and warmongering chariot didn't explain any further, but powered his way into the cargo depot as before. I could see the smashed container he'd been hiding in since last time (Why exit through the side when he could have just opened the door?) lying amongst a series of broken bodies that had likely been on guard duty when he emerged. A crater lay at the centre of the room in the concrete flooring.

Digging his hands into the great door, Mister Peace began to heave, forcing them open until the familiar red light of Fillydelphia crept through them. Behind us, I hear galloping hooves and saw the rest of our party rejoin us after catching up. Behind them, a door started to move.

“Mister Peace!”

He threw the door fully open for my friends and spun on the spot, shoulder compartment popping open to send a missile roaring toward the door. The sound of ponies screaming from behind it followed the sharp crack of the warhead's detonation, still going once my hearing returned. Dizzied...I almost fell off him were it not for him holding me on himself.

“Lead on to the sewers! I shall not abandon you this time, Ma'am!”

He streaked out into the courtyard, spraying fire at the two guard towers overlooking the Ministry and sending one of them crashing entirely to the ground as its wooden supports splintered. Slaves ran for cover as much as slavers did. Those who stood and fired were soon atomised on the spot.

“The path of glory is opened! Miss Fluttershy, hold on tight, we shall remove you from this place! TALLY HO!”

Yet Mister Peace wasn't slowing down. He was headed right for the wall of the Ministry's slave grounds!

“Um...uh...Peace!” I grit my teeth, he was only speeding up.

“WALL! YOU OPPOSE ME! HOW DARE YOU!”

Both shoulders opened, firing a barrage of missiles ahead of him into the offending concrete structure. Impact after impact sent shockwaves through my bones and made every injury ache. Mister Peace rushed straight into the smoke and carried past where a section of the wall had once stood. A wagon filled with scrap metal swerved out of our way and overturned on the road outside, two slavers falling off it to the floor. I felt a bump as Mister Peace ran something over.

He turned back to cover my friends, all four primary weapons spraying fire into the Ministry as the guards got their act together and came in force. One arm went to the sky at a passing griffin that veered off and away as fast as her wings could carry. He was our cover, the shock and awe of brutal surprise as our wounded bodies limped and staggered their way through the breach.

Finally, they had all gotten to safety, leaving me clutching onto his back. The slavers were all fleeing. I knew they could overwhelm Mister Peace in numbers, but the war robot had caught them off guard. They wouldn't follow us just yet. We had time...time to hide and recover as we planned our next move.

Before he sped off into the city ruins with us to hide, Mister Peace turned back to his greatest foe and pointed at the rubble of the wall.

“Let that be a lesson, nemesis of foul stone! Thou does not oppose the passage of a Ministry Mare and her dashing bodyguard! I'll let you off this time.”

He went a couple hundred feet more and stopped once more, shaking a metallic hand.

“THIS TIME!”

* * *

The wet brickwork of the sewers was cold against my back as I sat and tried to concentrate on getting rid of the headache caused by all the gunfire and shockwaves my poor ears had endured during our escape. Unfortunately, it wasn't willing to listen to reason and if anything pounded harder out of spite.

We'd found an old underground pumping station. Nothing extravagant, just a couple of mossy wet rooms out of the main sewage lines that had once been used for diverting flow but at least it had gotten us out of the tunnels. It looked as though it was unused even in old Equestria. Nice, isolated and safe. Just what we needed to stay out of the way for now and to get us out of trotting through almost solidified waste.

Mister Peace had carried me rather against my will. The looks of envy I'd gotten from the others were enough to make me almost want to jump down to avoid the awkward silence while we searched. Voices travelled far in those tunnels and we couldn't ignore the idea that slavers had predicted we'd head underground.

To my amazement, we'd actually stumbled across some familiar side passages that had symbols of the inner metro across them. We'd marked one as our emergency exit from here to go to ground in those more expansive tunnels if need be.

Until then...we rested. All of us were still injured from the mountain and exhausted from the trip up the mountain and our imprisonment. We had no supplies. No weapons. No medical supplies and no food. Lying back and getting some shut eye was the only thing we could really do in the silent darkness, only hearing the occasional whirring of Mister Peace patrolling the tunnels around us. It had taken some explaining to get him to stop shouting at radroaches about being infiltrators and waking us up every ten minutes.

Only I hadn't been able to sleep. The headache didn't help but I was just filled with too many thoughts right now. Too much adrenaline at what we'd been through these past few days and too much underlying excitement over where we were now.

We'd gotten away. We had stopped them getting the orb.

Hanging by a thread or not, we would be in the best position we'd ever been to enact an escape, once we'd gathered everypony and collected the things we'd left around for just this purpose. We even had Mister Peace to help us. Even...

My eyes found the sleeping form of Protégé well away from us all, out on the station's lip overlooking the pumps themselves.

I...didn't even know what to make of him right now. He'd just stayed silent, trailing behind us out of need to survive. No-pony had talked to him. Yet right now I didn't want to think about it. Too heavy, too confusing and painful.

Flicking my journal closed, I tried to get away from the two ponies I'd been looking at on the same page...wondering intently. Lacking my Pipbuck to try and bring up a message and even any charcoal to sketch, I instead took to spending the time scrawling on the walls with a sharp and soft stone.

That helped...the headache began to filter away as I let my mind drift to what I was doing. Gentle scrapes filling the air as I found myself drawing...well...myself. Escaping with all my friends here, wings spread to soar up high...

In the darkness, I briefly turned back to them and gently flapped my right wing. The movement was stiff and restricted, but it was a satisfying pain. The feathers at the end could somewhat spread out, tingling as I remembered them being caught by the wind on the mountain. How I'd...I'd soared on it for a few seconds, held aloft by my own body. I tried to spread them both out, to remember that feeling. My eyes widened as I managed to get them both going in synch a little.

Behind it, I caught the glint of somepony's open eye staring at me.

Glimmer had been lying awake too, watching me draw and now flap about like an incompetent.

I pulled the wings back in from embarrassment, shrinking my neck in.

She just smiled at me, before leaning back against Brim's shoulder and closing her eyes again.

* * *

“All right everypony! Gather around!”

Glimmerlight took centre stage, waving the rest of us toward the centre of the dank room. According to Mister Peace, it was sunrise.

I'd had to promise the others I'd get him to never play that trumpet sound ever again.

Brimstone shifted over, trotting on three legs. He was clearly the most hurt out of all of us, unsuitable for combat. Looking older than ever, he virtually collapsed into a sitting position, his wounds having clotted over during the night. Good Goddesses he was tough to heal like he did and stay alive, but it had put him beyond use to us right now. He'd reset his own leg bone last night with a crack that had sent me into quakes, but his injuries went far further. The scar tissue from the bar mine in the arena that wretched across his shoulder, front leg and across his face around his missing eye had bruised up in a sickening way, after Brutus had identified the weak flesh. Thick pink lines overlaid his older scars where wounds had been closed by the slavers' healing to keep him alive.

I sat beside him, feeling his good front leg tap my head in an gentle motion. In other words, like a frying pan to the skull. All the same, I appreciated that the big guy had some mirth left in him. Unity sat to my right, then Coral, arcing round that we could be in a circle meeting Glimmer at the other side of Brim. Mister Peace stood behind us, watching the tunnel outside.

Everypony looked tired, but determined. Coral still nursed her eye and Glimmer was clearly hurting from her bandaged chest. Unity was the least injured of us, yet her large eyes had a far-away look. After that thing with Aurora, she didn't seem quite the same. I kept seeing her eyes flicking to dark corners, as though she'd head something.

Protégé hadn't joined us. Last I'd seen, he had wandered out into the tunnels somewhere.

“Thanks to Murky's quick thinking up there, this hasn't turned into a disaster. They don't have the orb, but then again neither do we. So we're all in agreement, this is the time to try?”

We all knew what she meant. Escape.

We were going to plan this, we were really going to plan this.

“We've got a lot of work to do. Aurora Star gave up everything she had to allow one shot. That portal in Ministry Station is our goal. We're going to get everypony together, collect all the supplies we need and then get down there as one. This is where it starts, where we're going to work out how, what and where.”

She produced an old notepad she'd found on the wall of the pumping station and held up a pencil in her

magic.

“Let the ideas flow, huns and hunks. Anything and everything.”

I spoke first.

“We've got to get everypony together. Sunny should be waiting in the metro. Chirpy's back at the hotel...”

Coral Eve took a surprisingly logical approach to this, keeping her emotions in check. “We needed to get Lilac and that other filly you mentioned, what was her name?”

“Starshine Melody.” The little ghoul who'd become friends with Lilac from their shared experiences.

Glimmer noted their names down.

“There's...um...” Unity spoke up, before almost looking embarrassed to have spoken into the silence as Glimmer wrote.

Thankfully, my sis was quick to leap on the moment.

“Yeah, that's likely the hardest thing right now, I'm sorry, hun. Listen, once I've got my strength up and run an orb to make sure everything's working as it should with my magic, we'll take a look and see if I can't bring anything out your forgotten memories, all right? We'll do it before we go anywhere.”

That gave Unity a little comfort. She smiled and nodded, before sharing an eager glance with me.

I knew Glimmer wouldn't let her down.

“For now though, you're right. We do need to solve that mystery first. Try to think, hun. When did you last see him? What were your last thoughts?”

Unity shrunk a little, hooves shuffling together. Very quickly I was beginning to think she wasn't too comfortable speaking to groups at all, more than just apprehension. I could relate.

“That...that place we were. The Ministry...it's all a blur and...and hard to keep in mind. But I remember being there with him. Then the FunFarm at the bumper cars where I was alone. Grindstone knew about him though, when Murky and I were at the FunBarn. Even if he lied...the Ministry is Grindstone's place. He has to know who it is. I know he was sent to the Pit but I didn't see him anywhere in the slave areas behind the gates.”

Woah woah *woah*. Hang on a second. Slave areas? She'd been *in* the Pit too?

Unity hadn't specified that to me before...I could relate though. I didn't like talking about that either. The fear and the stress of knowing what's coming...

“Ministry Station?” Coral leaned forward, sniffed and glanced at the floor. “Perhaps even Chainlink Shackles' little den in the metro...I'm sorry, my dear.”

I saw the look pass Unity's face about that place. We all knew its effects or could imagine what went on under Shackles' direct rule.

After all, I'd gotten a few days taste of it once. I felt my hoof lightly brush around my neck...feeling the dry skin. It took some degree of effort to not shake and force those days deep into my mind.

Hang on a minute...didn't I know a stallion who'd once told me he knew the inside of the Ministry? Somepony who'd known enough to know about a salitoony machine he'd sent me for...

It was no secret to me who I was going to have to ask some deep questions to rather soon.

“All well and good talking of who and when,” Brimstone grunted and shifted on the spot, “we need food. Tools. Weapons. What's the fucking point of heading into the wastes to get mown down by the first chancy bastards we meet? It's hardly a paradise out there. That stuff's got to have high priority if even one pony gets out. Grindstone said that Equestrian soldier came through the portal from the other end, so that'll be out on the frontiers of Equestria's borders. Could be fifty miles from anywhere, could be five hundred.

We can't count on being near to civilization.”

“We've got stuff stashed near the mall. You did that right, Murky?” Glimmer turned to me.

“Um, yeah? There's a couple things like the routes and metro material we got from Protégé's office before the riot. A few supplies, the food's probably gone off but I think the water might still be fine? Also, I know how to get in too through the vents to maybe steal some stuff from the armoury.”

The pencil scribbled hastily.

“Hearts and Hooves Hospital.” Coral added to the collection of things. “Doctor Weathervane would help us for sure. We should go there first...we can't do anything like we are right now.”

Glimmer stopped. “Would he join us?”

There was a brief silence as water dripped. I could hear the faint sounds of Mister Peace's internals whirring and the quiet tap of Protégé's hooves somewhere up the tunnel as he came back.

“I don't think so...” I offered with a shrug, “he always says his job is in Fillydelphia, where ponies need him.”

Glimmer looked disappointed, scribbling something out. “Well, we can get supplies from him anyway, at the very least some healing for ourselves. If we can get near our old cell's back door I've got some filtering kit and scratchbuilt batteries.”

“I know good places to get things from!” I felt more eager, leaning in to try and read the list, but my sister's writing was almost worse than my own. “Back when I tried to escape on my own, I could get fabric from the mills and...and borrowed things from slavers.”

That set it going. Everypony had ideas. For rope, for water, a radio, light and all a manner of tools to help see us through any obstacles in the outer metro. For now, no-one wanted to confront the issue of going through that nightmare place again.

I remembered how I'd trembled with enthusiasm while gathering things long ago for my first escape attempt. This felt like that ten times over.

Unity sat in thought, staring away from all of us before suddenly speaking. “We're ignoring the biggest thing.”

Everypony stopped and looked at her, making the introverted mare recoil slightly.

“The orb?”

That...was a point. We had to get our own things back. My Pipbuck, my Littlepip statuette from Unity, that shining green memory orb of my birthday party, my charcoal...

“The ass doesn't know it's what it is.” Brimstone tapped the ground with his hoof. “Far as they know, it's just some slave's random shit in that bag.”

“Hey!” Glimmer wrinkled her nose and put hooves on her hips.

The big pony couldn't hide his twisted grin. “Same goes for the rest of our stuff. The wee one's Pipbuck for instance. Would he keep that? Pretty useless to him like it is, but we need it for the maps.”

“He'd likely send it on the daily sorting wagon to the logistics hub after the third shift to get rid of anything not immediately relevant to his operations in the Ministry worker hub. Grindstone was always pedantic in that fashion.”

The voice was quiet and thin, coming from just near the door. All of us turned in surprise to see Protégé sitting against the frame, not really looking at us at all.

“And why would *you* be offering a hint?” Coral's voice was more accusing than I'd expected. After everything she'd seen from him lately, it was hardly surprising.

Protégé turned back and looked at us all. I saw his weary eyes linger in surprise when he saw Unity

looking back.

“If you're going to be ambushing that wagon anyway, which you'll have to if you want what's in it before it gets to more heavily guarded areas, then I'd wish my eyepiece back.” He sniffed and spoke louder. “That was a gift to me, one I won't suffer them to possess.”

With that he got up and left again. He'd said his piece.

More than anything, I watched Unity looking at the doorway after he'd left for a good number of seconds.

“He's very lonely...empty air around him...”

She spoke very quietly, before looking surprised at me having heard it.

“It's...it's like I can't feel as much of his presence,” she explained softly to me, “I look at ponies, I feel their memory. Like I told you before? Feel all the signatures of their friends, those they've been near. I look at you and I feel Glimmerlight and Brim almost as strongly as yourself. I could never tell all that so specifically but it's been scarily clear ever since Aurora...”

Unity let the sentence falter and stared back at the doorway.

“Yet with him I don't see anything else...”

* * *

I don't quite know why I got up and followed Protégé.

Perhaps it was curiosity. Perhaps it was a feeling that at some point this had to happen.

He was overlooking the motionless sludge of the closed sewage section we were in, standing just beside the railing that surrounded the station's raised balcony to observe the pumping valves below that were long rusted shut. By now, we'd all gotten past the stench.

Protégé didn't look round as I trotted out and stood almost opposite him to look in the same direction, a good ten feet apart. Behind us, my friends continued their frantic planning and chattering over what we'd need to go out and get. Working out who would fetch what.

We simply stood like that for a few minutes, both finding interesting cracks in the brickwork ahead of us to occupy the time as neither said the first words. I could feel my body aching, my throat pinched and wheezing from his choking and my skull still thumping from the lump he'd put there when he hit me with a terminal.

Out the corner of my eye, I could see all the same on him. The bruises covering his side where I'd slammed into. His throat scars from Barb looking angry and swollen at my strike there.

“I don't blame you for what you did, you know.”

His voice broke the silence, quiet but curt and steady. Clearly, he'd been thinking on exactly how to word it, putting the sudden worry of replying with the right thing on time to my side.

“I...um...”

“You had every reason. A mission behind you. Friends counting on you. I cannot hold accusation against that.”

That took me off guard. I turned more properly and faced my old owner.

“So...what now?” I asked it quietly.

We'd been at odds up there. Opposing sides clashed together. We'd fought, really properly fought. Injured one another. Tried to choke, to harm...to shoot.

“Are you going to fight us?” The question had to be asked. “Try and take the orb?”

He didn't reply, before I saw his expression falter. He turned away quickly from me, lifting a hoof to his

eyes. It dawned on me there was something he didn't want me to see. Yet then his voice came out, quietly and emotionally. Fractured.

“They *killed* them, Murk...” I saw him quiver on the spot. “Old Grizzly was one of my mentors...an ally, someone I could seek advice from when my master was not available. I had to watch him be executed!”

He sat down, head lowered. His mane was filthy and bedraggled, hanging down by his side and covering his face.

“Ragini stayed there because of me, loyal to *me*. Not to some contract. They believed in me...believed in what I was trying to do, what Master Red Eye asked me to do. And they died *in front of me*.”

“I'm sorry...”

Their deaths had struck us as a shock. As a terrifying sight. Yet only now did I realise how deeply it had hit Protégé emotionally. He'd been left alone in Fillydelphia now. Red Eye was far away, Grizzly and Ragini were dead and Shackles was only on the rise.

There was another long pause.

“Protégé...you can still-”

“Murk, don't.”

His voice seemed almost more pleading than I'd ever expected to hear.

“I feel all the guilt for what happened up there. For them and as much as you probably don't believe me, for what happened between us. So please, don't try to exploit this. Not now.”

“I'm...I'm just trying to say you don't have to be without choice. I've betrayed your trust in the past too, remember?”

“That is true, Murk. Only it wasn't to throw my dreams under a wagon like I tried to do to yours. I just-”

“I know what it's like being where you are. How you felt. It's no different.”

He stopped and waved a hoof, a clear sign of 'no more.'

“I need to work out a lot of things, I'm not ignoring you, Murk. Don't think I've not taken note of everything lately that I've realised about myself.”

“So what are you going to do?”

He finally looked back at me and sighed. I could see how close he was to emotionally letting it go right now. I felt almost uncomfortable to be witness to it.

“This can still be stopped. I have to go to Stern. Tell her all that has happened. Surely, we can both agree that Shackles has to be revealed as a traitor? I must go back.”

“No. You won't.”

Brimstone's voice cut in as solidly as a rock slamming through a quiet library. We both quickly looked up to see the raider limping through the door, having to duck as he went. His gaze was fixed on Protégé.

“Shackles and Grindstone will have every slaver in their pay out looking for us right now. They'll have raised the alarm about a group of breakaways. They know we came into the ruins. You leaving could compromise us if they see where you come from. For now, you're not going anywhere, kid.”

Towering over both of us, he showed no real expression other than a blunt assurance of what he said.

Protégé scowled slightly, looking up.

“If you want to remove me from the equation then just do it. Don't beat about the bush if you think I'm a threat after what I did!”

Brimstone stood and listened, not moving as Protégé spoke.

“I *betrayed* you all up there. Almost cost you what you wanted and for the love of Equestria I wish I could have avoided it. But that's who I am...it's *what* I am. He ordered me, I had no choice.”

He turned and leaned on the railing.

“If I've lost all trust you perhaps had in me then that's what it is. The things I've done aren't things I'm always proud of. Up there, that was one of them. I know you feel I'll never be different, whether you think of me as just another monster or not, there is no reason to give me a second chance from where you stand right now.”

I stood aside, almost afraid for what either of them might do. Yet I saw Brimstone only snort and lower his head.

“If I believed there wasn't any reason, you'd be floating downstream right now. You're right, I don't trust you, but I think you've forgotten just who you're talking to about second chances.”

With that, the old warlord turned and trotted his huge tattooed and scarred figure away from the two of us.

In that moment, I felt suddenly proud of him.

* * *

“Yo, lil'bro.”

Glimmerlight cantered out of the station to find me. Despite the marked bandages, she somehow held a spring in her step and a mad grin as she saw me. After the awkward talk with Protégé not too long ago, it was quite refreshing to see her delighted face even in this dark and dripping underground hidey-hole.

I'd meant to ask him what I had to...but after that I just couldn't bring myself to broach the subject. How was anypony meant to start that? To just...say?

After all, as far as I was concerned, there were threads connecting. Locations too coincidental. Too many little emotive hints.

“Finally happening, huh? How you feeling?”

I smiled back, trying to stand up straighter. “It's...incredible. I didn't think we'd get this fa-”

“Oh piss off with that, Murky. Of course you did or you'd never have made it.” She ruffled my mane, laughing as she spoke. “Now you get to have the fun part. Seeing everything we gather pile up and get ourselves all geared out to do this. Brim's taking the lead on timing, raiding is his thing after all. I think his plan is to get that machine of yours to hold up the supply wagon coming out the Ministry at noon. He's preeetty cool, gotta admit.”

“He likes you.” I giggled and prodded her side.

“Who *doesn't*?” Glimmer didn't miss a beat as she tossed out her mane like a magazine model, despite it being sodden wet and coated in dirt from the escape. “If he thinks *you're* a mare then I must be radiating enough feminine sexiness to him to cross all borders into the technological world.”

That made me laugh. It felt good to just let some mirth go. This should be a happy moment, as things started to come together in our little planning lair.

“Hey, Murky. About last night...”

Glimmer turned and sat beside me, I saw her eyes looking at my sides. At the wings that had flared out without realising when I'd laughed. Those things would take some getting used to expressing me without meaning to.

Her hoof lightly traced the line of my right wing. “I saw you flapping about. Even on the mountain, I saw you use them to steer yourself while swinging. They getting any stronger?”

“A...a bit. I can move them pretty freely now.”

As if to prove my point, I shifted them in a circle, tipping the ends of them before splaying them out.

“It still hurts a bit...I just don't have the muscles to really flap them.”

Sighing, I sat down and rubbed a hoof over the point they joined my body.

“Up on the peak I...I kinda 'glided' on the wind for a bit though. They can support me in the air, I'm just...just really nervous about them for trying that again. They didn't hold me up. The wind pushed me down which was kinda what I wanted to stop Protégé but I'd never have stayed in the air if I'd needed to.”

My sister sat with a hoof on her chin, how I'd often see her look at a troublesome piece of tech before. Deep in thought as her eyes scrutinised my feathers.

“Well...I'm no flight expert, Murky. They didn't teach us the mechanics of flight, if anything you know more than I do from how it feels on your body. Now...if you want me to tell you how to flare them out to attract attention...”

I waved my hooves. “No! No no...that's quite all right!”

Her hoof nudged my head as she chuckled, looking away briefly. Her eyes seemed to fall on the long tunnel outside the station, dropping away from our raised platform where we sat. A huge concrete pathway ran alongside the sewage away from the pumps, about fifteen feet down. Then she turned back to me with a curious look.

“Why don't we try it out?”

“Wha?”

“You've got a perch up here, I'll go down there and be ready to catch you with my magic so you won't hurt yourself. Dive off, give it a shot! Let's work out what's going wrong.”

She didn't give me a chance to reply, trotting off to the stairs and making her way down into the tunnel.

I looked from side to side, at my wings, at the doorway to where Coral was (curiously enough) working well with Brim to plan things. I saw Unity glance briefly at me as I looked in before I stared back at the tunnel.

“Come on, Murky! Give it a shot!” Glimmer's voice travelled down the tunnels as she shouted to me and waved her hooves with her horn lit. “Nothing to it!”

Trotting up to the edge, I felt my knees shaking a little bit. That...that was hard concrete down there and I was pretty banged up already.

“I'm not sure...”

“Course you are! Just gallop up and take a jump! Live a little!”

I really wasn't sure. I *really* wasn't. Snow below me or my grapplegun to catch me was one thing, but for all my trust in Glimmer I just felt very nervous about this. She was one to take the risks, to just say 'fudge it' and take a leap without thinking. I wasn't...I really...really...

“She flew without wings, Murky! You've *got* wings!”

That did it.

I nodded firmly to her, sniffed hard and cantered back a little from the edge. The roof was high in here. I had room, I had landing space. I'd taken falls before. It'd hurt like *hell* but...

I was overthinking this. Less worry, more dare!

“Come on, lil'bro!”

A couple of heads poked out of the room as I galloped. I passed Unity and Coral. Mister Peace trundled out of a tunnel, attracted by the noise.

My hooves tapped sharply on the ground as I pushed the pain to the back of my mind and made something of an awkward dash forward on aching legs. I felt my wings spread out a little as they caught the rush of the air beside me, the feathers each parting and flickering up. The feeling of being so light that they could lift me came back to mind. My heart pounded hard, trepidation powering the adrenaline.

Then I leapt.

My front hooves stretched out, as though trying to catch a non-existent ledge ahead of me. I felt gravity take over and drop my weight down below the level of the worryingly high ledge I'd left. Everything felt so fast all of a sudden as my stomach lurched and I dropped. Fast.

Yelping, thrashing in the air, my body stretched out and forced those wings as far as they would go! Come on! *Come on!*

A sense of weightlessness flowed across me. Like all the weight pulling me had gone. I thought it was Glimmer's magic, but suddenly I wasn't just going down.

I was going *forward*.

The still air brushed against my face as I felt my descent being slowed and directed at a diagonal. Swerving out over the sewage, I got a nosefull of foul stench before leaning away from it. Leaning sent me wavering back toward the concrete.

“That's it! *That's it!*”

Coral's voice rung out behind me and I felt a smile burst onto my face. It was like on the mountain, but I'd *chosen* it! I leaned again and felt myself glide a little further, only about ten feet off the ground. Each time I banked, letting my wings dip, I lost some speed and some height, but if I just went straight then I stayed almost level. Almost.

It was wonderful...the feeling of being aloft, held away from the dull ground for but a few seconds. I kept wavering and wobbling as I went over Glimmer's head and down the tunnel a bit, rolling back and forth as my wings jittered.

I could actually kinda do this!

Only, there was a problem. As I glided in circles, I was losing height rapidly. I had no real speed left and before I knew it, my momentum ran out. I dropped like a stone.

“Catchmecatchmecatchmeeee-oh.”

I'd stopped. Her magic had, as promised, halted my plummet before I went into the sewage.

Legs trying to gallop in mid air, I calmed down as she drifted me back across to the stone walkway.

“Woah! That was *awesome!* I told you! You *can* do it!”

Standing upright, I felt very uneasy on my hooves. Almost ready to fall over. I had to fall back on my rump to stay upright as I looked side to side at my sore and shivering wings.

I...could. I could.

Glimmer hugged me tightly and I laughed as I gripped her back a little too hard. Her yelp of pain was enough warning for me to back off a little and meekly apologise. Coral and Unity galloped down, while Mister Peace trundled through the slurry to us.

“Miss Fluttershy has demonstrated graceful form! I applaud this development of events! Shall I conduct a twenty-one gun salute to mark this auspicious occasion?”

“NO!”

The three mares around me looked at him and shouted hurriedly at once as the screen turned to that of a celebrating pony. Yet they were smiling, as was I. Even Peace seemed to see the humour in it and saluted me instead.

“If I may, Ma'am. You collapsed due to a lack of upward thrust. Pegasus soldiers are trained to maintain thrust to avoid losing speed and falling from the air, upward motion from flapping wings is the key!”

The four of us were almost surprised to hear analysis from the security robot. I guess it made sense, he saw things differently from us. Read things by numbers and forces.

“F-flapping...?” I looked back at my wings, trying to do just that. They just limply flopped about. I could hold them steady and strong, but not in motion.

Coral patted my back. “Don't worry, my dear. You've made an important step to learn some confidence in yourself. Something you could do with a little of.”

That was true...but I couldn't get my mind off of it.

I couldn't go upwards without flapping. Was...was there any other way? Like using a grapple gun to pull myself back up higher? No, it would kill all the momentum by just pulling me in one direction.

If only I knew how to keep myself in the air longer without dropping after running out of lift, for all the support my friends gave that fact bit hard. I'd never truly fly. With no way to keep or build altitude I was always destined to just come down right away.

Still, it was something.

Flying was hard but it almost felt like I understood the *feeling* of it in a way I couldn't *explain* the mechanics of.

“Something inside you, your soul, magic centre or whatever. It's always going to be a pegasus. Born for the clouds, bound to the open sky and all that other airy nonsense. It's who you are.”

I'd been told that before, long ago when I'd first met Brim. Maybe he'd been right...maybe the answers were all in me like a natural instinct.

Speaking of the big pony himself, Brimstone wandered out of the doorway now above us.

“Schedule's sorted. Get in and we'll get this big auld escape prep goin'!”

* * *

It never ceased to surprise me, how thick the air was down here in the metro.

I had to breathe hard to keep the air going into my lungs with how stuffy and heavy the ambience was around here as I crept alongside the rusty rails that I knew led to Shackles' hidden slave pen. The sucking sound I made on each intake provided an unsettling and discomforting feel to these quiet tunnels.

We'd decided that Sunny had to come first. Fetching her was comparatively easy, needing no overground movement and gaining an extra set of hooves to help us put the remainder of the plan together.

The downside, I had to go alone. One pony was all that'd be able to properly sneak around in these bare tunnels.

My ears twitched as I heard something fall up ahead. A thunk of rock on metal. Slipping to the side, I pressed myself in behind a fuse box and fell still, my eyes peering through the cluster of rubber wires beneath it to try and penetrate the darkness.

Nothing. But that didn't mean there wasn't something about to come. Better to wait, be aware, be sure.

The fact that I kinda wanted a rest too had *nothing* to do with pausing. Nope. Not at all.

The others weren't being idle while I was doing this. Coral was headed to Hearts and Hooves Hospital while using the sewers to get close. It had taken some convincing to get Mister Peace to guide her through that unexplored maze instead of accompanying me. Eventually I had to tell him that I was attending a 'mares only' meeting to get him to drop the issue.

I could still hear Glimmerlight's chortling behind me as I'd sighed and said that. She was having too

much fun with this whole 'Fluttershy' business.

Really, I just hoped she got some RadAway. I'd already had one coughing fit in the sewers and the sound was loud enough to travel huge distances. Everything felt thick and foul tasting in my mouth down here. If Coral didn't get some on this trip, it'd have to become a very sudden priority for my ongoing health...

Unity had waited with Glimmer as the pair began looking into her mind. My sis had said they'd need to do a few 'known' memories first to get a feel for it, dragging them out into orbs before revisiting them check what was found. Then they'd begin to work backwards...slowly finding what they needed. When I'd left they'd been sat in the corner, with Glimmer's horn glowing brightly. Set around them I'd seen numerous cream coloured shining orbs, Unity's memories into empty orbs they'd scavenged from the empty houses above us.

In the meantime, I was to check with Sunny about if there were any stallions down here that might fit the bill. Theories or not, I wasn't going to ignore any possible hint to help her.

Up ahead, I heard hooves trotting in the dark, too far away to see. There wasn't much ambient light down here and sounds carried far. Holding my breath, I watched for any shifts or movements. Inwardly, I was relieved that I heard hooves. That meant pony. Something I could understand. Inner metro or not, knowing what lurked in the levels below this one still made my skin crawl with the knowledge of being separated only by a layer of rock.

The moment that thought came to mind, I felt the urge to turn and flee. Dark tunnels were too recent, too close and familiar. They were *down there*. What if they'd escaped in the station? What if they got into the inner metro with all the slavers were doing?

No more sounds came after a few fearful minutes. Trying not to whimper, I started moving again.

Finding the metro camp wouldn't be impossible. The sound of so many ponies would carry eventually and the inner metro was just a big ring anyway. Eventually I'd come across it if I just kept moving this way and following the tracks. A brief thought about where I was in comparison to the above ground stations had let me figure out which direction to go in to not encounter the slave lair first before I found the workers.

Who ever said I was stupid? I'd been quite proud of thinking of that.

Another sound. Somepony coughing. I turned and quietly cantered back to the same fuse box. No way to assume there was another one further up to use. Take your time...no risks...

It didn't take long before a tall mare wandered past me, humming gently on her trip. Some sort of tunnel watch patrol? One way or another, she didn't spot me, passing right by my still form huddled in the darkness. After she left, I took the opportunity to cantered on a bit faster than before.

Thankfully, before long I began to recognise some tell tale signs. An old traincar looked all too familiar to when Protégé and I had come down here. That passageway I'd quickly gone past a couple minutes ago must have been the one with the entrance to the outer metro in it then.

Ignoring the cold wash of fear, I pressed onward. Before long, I could hear the sounds of pickaxes and shovels ringing through the tunnels, growing from a background hubbub into individual strikes and grunts of exertion. For the third time now, I sneaked my way into Shackles' underground mining camp.

The few lanterns hung from the ceiling illuminated the gruesome sight. Wasted ponies still toiled in exactly the same spots that looked as though they'd only gone about two feet since last time. The tunnel looked wider, but for how much effort had gone in, the entire thing just felt utterly pointless. I knew of machines above ground that could have done that in a day.

I found the same hiding spot Protégé and myself had once used, before settling down to watch for Sunny. Covered in old stuffy rags behind a pile of wasted tools, I knew I wouldn't be spotted. My eyes traced across the lines mere feet from me, their stink wafting down the tunnel, a cocktail of blood, sweat, filth and sickness. The stallion closest to me was hobbling on three legs as he swung his pickaxe. I could see the bandaged stump, left to fester and rot. It was tainted a horrid gangrenous green but his face didn't show any pain...just a tired blankness.

My empty stomach turned at the thought and I let my eyes drift elsewhere.

It was a struggle to not think too hard about this. I knew it would kill all my hope and strength if I even let my mind begin to imagine how many ponies were having their lives corrupted and withered away down here. Instead I just focussed on Sunny, looking for a sandy coloured pony. I saw one on the opposite wall, shovelling away the mined chunks, but it was a stallion. He weakly stumbled between the walls, clearly new to this place. He still looked terrified, lacking the same weary blankness of the others.

As I observed, I noticed that Weathervane's friends weren't around as they normally were. In fact...none of the ghouls were. Had they all been moved? Or..

I threw that thought from my head. Clearly she wasn't here. Great...I'd have to check the other tunnels.

Wrapping myself in the rags (It had worked last time) I trotted in. The slaves wouldn't bother me if I just acted like them, it was just the slavers I had to watch for.

Moving along the right wall, I stuck to the inner side of the metro's slow curve to give me the most time to flee if needs be. My eyes traced every new group of slaves I came to. The ones tugging the laden rock wagons attached to the old rails. The ones working the walls or the piles. Even the ones who lay on the ground, resting at their workplaces by the wall. The sound of a whip sent me scurrying toward the mined rock itself, acting like I was one of them.

“Get up! Rest ended ten minutes ago! *Get! Up!*”

The whip snapped again. There was no scream.

“Ah, shit. You two, load them.”

Behind me, I heard the shuffling of slaves lifting the corpse onto the wagon. Just another pony who'd gone to sleep and hadn't woken up. About the best anypony could hope for in slavery...to just silently pass away from exhaustion after closing your eyes. It horrified me to think I'd once prayed to the Goddesses to allow me such a death.

My head was beginning to hurt down here. The echoing sounds of over a hundred pickaxes and hammers reverberated in my skull, clanging like an automatic weapon's chatter. Unending. The smell was making me nauseous too, as I noticed the pony beside me was foaming at the mouth and reeking of infection.

Thankfully, with the sound of the wagon moving on, I could fall back out and keep moving. A few slaves turned and looked at me, apparently concerned for the little slave who was moving when he shouldn't be. Maybe some of them recognised I was new? None of them said anything, though. They had bigger things to worry about than risking drawing attention. All the same, their dead eyes were unsettling to see turning and following me as I crept down the tunnels.

“Keep up, you slags! *Come on!*”

A slaver came right towards me. He was already looking this way, trotting out quickly from a second tunnel. Oh no...I couldn't dive in now, he'd see that! I just had to keep trotting, keep my wings hidden and try to look like I belonged.

“*Git mining!*”

A cane cracked, before a stallion squealed at it slapping across his rump.

“Not so back-talky now, hm?”

It hit again and I heard him scream a second time. I kept trotting, shivering as I closed on him. I couldn't divert or change direction, he'd *know*.

The cane descended again and the stallion fell against the wall, screeching as I saw the slaver was targeting an already badly infected cut over his cutie mark. He whimpered, holding his head against the rockface.

The slaver cackled to himself as he moved on from the poor pony. He was the kind Shackles attracted, the type of pony that just loved power over others. To make the proud into the humiliated.

It took all my courage to stay the course. Just keep trotting. I was just going to a shift change, moving slowly but steadily to where I'd been told to. That was all. I was *supposed* to be trotting.

I saw the slaver's eyes fix on me. He'd spotted me coming.

“You!”

Oh no.

“Where you goin'?”

I stopped, looking up briefly before breaking eye contact just as fast. Same way any slave would.

“M-moving t-to where I was tol-”

The cane cracked the ground beside me.

“Well I'm in charge here and I say you're needed on wall three. Go.”

Oh *shit*. This was bad. This was very bad. I didn't know where wall three *was*. If I turned in the wrong direction, he'd *know*.

I lifted a hoof, I just had to pick and hope.

My step hesitated. Wait, couldn't I figure it out? Would...would wall three be closer to the pen? So the way I was going? Or...or was the way I'd come from the furthest on bits and thus clearly the older ones?

“What the fuck are you waiting for?!”

I squeaked, before gulping and letting my hoof fall, moving to the side around him to buy a few seconds.

It...it had to be closer to the way in I'd once seen. The proper metro station entrance Shackles had made his lair in. If I was wrong...

I began to trot that way.

I got three steps before I heard the swish of air as my only warning before I felt the stinging cane whip across my rump. Shrieking out, I fell forward and curled up, trying to crawl a little to just get away. I'd picked wrong, oh Goddesses help me I-

“Get moving. Shit, when Shackles gets back on top we won't have uppity runts like you looking at us in the eye again...”

The slaver continued on his way.

I took a few seconds to pant and breathe. The backs of my thighs felt on fire from the strike and I had to clench my teeth to not let out any more sound as I got up and trotted onwards.

I hadn't gone much further before a hoof grabbed me and pulled me toward the wall.

My squeak of surprise was muffled by a sandy coloured hoof over my mouth. I felt myself being pressed into the small space between somepony and the rock before a pickaxe started to strike above my head as the pony kept up the work after pulling me in.

“Lucky guess.”

Sunny Days looked blankly down at me.

Relief flooded through me as I stared up at her from lying on my back.

“S-Sunny! I was looking for you.”

She hesitated, her eyes carrying to either side of the tunnel. Up ahead I could see the point where it broke into two before approaching the slave pen itself in the station. That entrance to a still unseen operation of Shackle's.

“Is it time?”

I nodded. “Yes. I...I came to get you. We're getting together. We've got a plan!”

Her hoof went to her lips. I could see her face was battered and filthy, but her fitness seemed to have seen her through the few days down here. The shrunken belly was obvious though. They hadn't been fed...

“Can you hear any coming?”

I closed my eyes and listened around, before shaking my head. I couldn't be sure with all this noise but I didn't hear any hooves trotting closer. Just slavers shouting from further in or out to either side.

“Then let's go.”

She swung the pickaxe up, seemingly aiming it down at me. I gasped as it descended, whirling right down over me, past me and slamming into the chain by her hoof that held her to the procession of slaves. With a metallic clank, the length broke to leave just the hoofcuff around her leg.

Sunny didn't hesitate. She flung the pickaxe over her back, hooking it onto a strap before staggering back and away from the mining wall. Her strength faltered and I saw her almost fall. I didn't know how long they'd kept her here, but Sunny hadn't done much other than stand and swing for some time. Her hooves seemed ill coordinated.

I went to her side, helping to steady the weary mare. Sunny was a strong earth pony for sure, but a time down here would crush anyone. There was no pride or 'tough' resistance to this sort of environment. Even the best were slowly worn down into shells of who they were. Just like any slavery, only heavily accelerated by Shackles' mind numbing work to break slaves in faster.

Laying her hoof around my back, we began to trot back the way I'd come. I only hoped that slaver had gone down the far tunnels and left the curve into the main circle line open. We hobbled past all the others, still thrashing away. Some noticed Sunny breaking the chain and watched us from behind. Many looked pleading but were too scared to raise their voices. A couple of hooves reached out slowly after us.

It took a lot of effort to not think too hard about what they were thinking.

I couldn't take everypony...

We made it to the side room that the ghouls had once been in. I helped Sunny up to the door and pressed it open. It'd give her a moment to get her bearings before we made the longer journey.

I sat beside the door, peering through a crack while she rested. Sunny had to get her muscles moving again after hours (or longer) of the same repetitive motion. She *needed* a time to get her strength before we risked any sort of real escape.

“Gotta admit...glad you came when you did.”

She tried to smile, but just rolled her head back onto the wall, taking a few deep breaths.

“We weren't going to leave you...we come back for our friends.”

I knew I was trying to sound more comforting, but Sunny just waved a hoof and almost laughed. Despite that, I spotted a small wince before she said anything. Right as I'd mentioned 'friends.'

“Ah don't overdo it...I don't really know your friends yet, do I? Just glad I got *somepony* on the outside to finally get away from that. You can count on me to help your cause, lil'Murk. If you can get me a shot at that big bastard that killed Cayenne I'll be even happier...”

That was a nice thought, but Shackles still felt so immortal to me. Every time he cheated death, got back up after a horrendous beatdown or gained more and more power in this city it only reinforced my belief that he could not be killed. Only escaped.

There were some things I had to check first though.

“Um, down here...or in the Station or...or the den. Are there any...special slaves? Individuals?”

“What do you mean?”

I shuffled my hooves nervously. “Like...um...a young buck maybe? Kept specifically in some place?”

“I’ve been through almost every room, Murk. Seen a few mares or some of the older stallions being kept as 'assistants' to the slavers, but no young bucks.”

Well...that was that. My own theories were elsewhere anyway, but at least that was one potential thing checked off the list.

“Well, uh, Sunny...did you see any ghouls while you were here, then? There was a group in here once. Really old ones...really hurt.”

Her eyes opened again. “The old guard?”

“Old what?”

“We called them the old guard, cos they’ve been slaves since the very start of Shackles' reign in here. Medical crew and security, right?”

“Yes, yes that's them! Doctor Weathervane's last friends...”

“The doc? Heard of him, never met him. They're his, eh?”

I nodded fiercely, turning away from the door to stand in front of her. “Where are they? I'd...I'd like to get them out too if I can.”

Sunny was quiet for a moment and I felt my heart sink. They'd been falling apart last time I saw them.

“Murk...”

“Please, don't say they're-”

She interrupted sharply. “I don't know. They got 'promoted.' In here that means they got taken to the sealed rooms in that there den of his. Ponies get taken there every so often. None come back. Lotsa' rumours about that place behind those doors. Having seen the metro station downstairs we met in before...I don't want to imagine the kind of fucked up shit being done. Some say it's teams to try and fight those *things*. Others say memory experiments or even just being made into a sadistic slaver's plaything.”

I hung my head a little. Right in the core of it all...we'd never get them back now. I knew the kinds of experiments the zebras had done now, the idea of what would happen if those were being tested again by slavers who didn't understand what they were messing with...

“Sorry, Murk. Those who get promoted are beyond our reach...no matter how hard their friends try.”

Her face looked solemn all of a sudden. I got a bad feeling.

“Sunny...were...”

She stood up again, taking a sharp breath.

“You know why I stayed last time. You aren't the only pony who found friends among the slaves. We promised to stick together so none of us had to die alone.”

Sunny opened the door and glanced outside, before taking a step out. She took two spades lying against the wall in addition to her pickaxe.

“Only...somepony's gotta be the last one alive.”

* * *

The pumping station was filling with more activity.

Coral had returned with medical supplies generously gifted by Weathervane once he'd heard we were all still alive. She'd laid out healing potions of hospital grade potency, fresher bandages, RadAway to store for the journey along with syringes of Med-X. (MedYes!) Everypony took what they needed; no-pony tried to overdo it. Brimstone almost had to be forced to take a significant share, his combat skills were necessary and even after it we knew he'd be weak for some time. Downing potions like mugs of ale, he sat back and

impatiently waited as his flesh bound and repaired the damage Brutus had done. The shock to his system, however, could only heal with time.

Feeling my own aches and pains fade was a relief, along with the foul orange gunk that was RadAway allowing me to breathe deeper again. I spent a few minutes coughing and feeling dizzy as the oxygen went to my brain. The others shared amongst themselves, healing Coral's eye and Glimmer's chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Unity take some to Protégé outside and spend a little while trying to talk to him.

Watching the two of them felt awkward...he kept looking unsure around her. Every so often he'd dodge a question she asked about his past or veer away from talking about anyone he ever knew before us.

Yet they got on fairly well. Probably about books.

I felt my mind slowly piecing more ideas together. I'd seen his looks, the fact he was always looking like he missed someone...the fact that he'd once been a slave too and-

It just...it felt so crazy. It felt *impossible*.

All I could think was...why? It occurred that I didn't know how long she'd been in here and likely neither did she with her memory affected like it was. That was what got me thinking most.

Why the memory removal?

Had she-

Sunny rapped my back with a hoof, shaking me out of my thoughts. She was just finishing off her second potion, after insisting she'd be fine with food more than anything.

"Seems you lot have a pretty darn neat operation set up here. We've got the mining tools, a big blasty robot, about six healing potions left alongside three rolls of bandages and a bunch of Med-X...why I'm downright feeling the urge to hoard all over again, just like scavenging outside."

"That's the plan!" Glimmerlight was organising our stuff with Coral, laying the pickaxe and two shovels against the wall after wrapping the potions. "We've got places to hit, all at the same time after splitting up. Feeling up to helping?"

"Try and stop me. I want to take anything from these slaving bastards."

Glimmerlight turned and grinned with delight at Sunny. "Sounding like a gal after my own heart. Say, question...your name? Sunny Days, right? In a wasteland with no real sun, how'd that come about?"

The weathered earth pony smirked and waved a hoof. "Ah, it's nuthin'. 'Days' is just a popular name out where I come from. So what's on the list needing done?"

Brimstone glanced down at Glimmer's lists alongside his own scrawling. (I really wished I'd gotten to see him try writing)

"First up is the things we can do easily before anypony starts to realise we're doing anything and tightens security. Murk and Glim will collect our stashes with Murk getting inside the Mall to the armoury. Hopefully Blunderbuck might even help you if possible. Robot?"

"**Yessir!**"

"Watch them as they go, wait for them in case they need to come galloping back."

"Allow them to lead the enemy unto devastation at my hands! I approve of this methodology! I shall set a tea party for pursuers. By tea party I mean surprise. By surprise I mean *death*."

Brimstone looked almost blank with complete befuddlement, staring out the corner of his eye at the giant machine thumping one metallic hand into the other.

"Some days I honestly feel raiding made more sense..." He shook his head. "Much as I hate the fucking idea, I'm too big and well known to go any real distance, so I'll take a stroll in the ruins with Sunny and see if we can knock over anyone trying to find us and take their stuff. Maybe see if we can poke our heads in and see if the way to the hotel and Ministry's exit road is clear. Coral and Unity? You know the Mill?"

Unity nodded, before pushing herself to speak up after Brimstone failed to see her. She was on his blindside.

“Mhm...I had a work a couple shifts there. Being, y'know...undersized.”

Coral stroked her back. “Nothing 'undersized' about you, my dear. You're just fine with who you are.”

Glimmerlight grinned. “Exactly! See? Murky's nodding, he agrees that you look *good*.”

I...wait what?! Had I been? I looked side to side rapidly, before just blushing. Oh dear.

There was a low rumbling sigh.

“If we can concentrate on us getting the fuck *out*?” Brimstone was clearly trying not to snarl. “Murk, Glim? Get going with the bot to the Mall. Coral and Unity, see if you can get materials to sew some bedrolls from the mill. Hit anything of opportunity you can, all of you. All good?”

Everypony nodded.

“Right. Sunny, let's go. Everypony else make it happen then meet back and we'll head out to new places after that....let's fleece 'em dry.”

* * *

One of the most *satisfying* days of my life began.

I'd always had to steal to make my way in life, it was partly why I was still here. Theft and sneaking around had become something of a little trick of mine to evade all the harm I could and it had served us well. You could say it was my reason for being in the group, their little thief below the real leaders and fighters like Glimmer and Brimstone.

Now I was being told I had to steal *everything I could*.

Glimmer and I got out of the sewers a short gallop from the Mall and made our way toward it. Sticking to the blasted shopfronts that lined most of the streets surrounding the huge building, we leapt from ditch to wall to window, using any hideaway we could.

We found the first stash just behind the building, where I'd once left a set of boltcutters after my race to get RadPurge to Glimmerlight.

Unfortunately, they were on the other side of the Mall's perimeter fence...the fence that I'd once got over by tying linen around those same cutters to use like a grappling hook and rope. Only now...I was stuck on this side with no solution.

“Hmm...this is a problem.” I muttered and plopped down on my rump to think, hoof on my chin while Glimmer watched behind us and moved up.

The linen was still there...if I could stand on Glimmer's back and took a jump...maybe I could make it? Or...or I could glide over from that powerbox nearby? Or-

Glimmer trotted past me, lifted the boltcutters over with her magic then used them to cut through the fence in about twenty seconds, before grinning at me.

“Was there a problem?”

I gaped. Why hadn't I thought of...back then when I'd been in danger I could have just...

They were *bolt cutters* and I'd used them like a...instead...

Urrrgggh...

“Not...not a word, sis.” I muttered and trotted past her as she presented the hole like a magician over their impossible trick.

“I didn't say anything.” She singsonged with a smug grin.

“Just *don't*.”

“I didn't say *anything*...Mister 'Shortcut'.” She lowered her voice, teasing with the name.

I groaned and rolled my eyes, ducking through the hole and cantering up to the back of the Mall. Seeing it again was pretty strange, this place had been the centre of my life for some time in Fillydelphia now and yet even a few days away felt like I'd left it behind. Its imposing height and width still stood out, crafted from those thickset stones carved into shapes of supporting columns topped by sheet metal.

There was a different air to it though. This was Shackles' domain now. The slaves inside likely had it worse than ever.

Yet apparently, the rear was still unguarded. We quickly made our way toward our old cell's doorway to find the second stash. Glimmer had left some of her old trinkets from that pile she had inside somewhere around here.

It didn't take her long to find it and we started loading up.

Spark batteries, crudely realigned to eek out what power they still had sat glowing beneath a tarp while the filter she'd once used during the repairs to collect and purify rainwater was dumped in a sack. I flung it over my back while Glimmerlight used her magic to nab every scrap of wiring and arcane technology she'd left into a bag tied out of the tarp itself.

Behind us, we heard a clatter of rock.

Her magic brought up a thick stone from the rubble on the ground, holding it ready to hurl at whatever we saw.

Instead we just saw a radroach crawling out of a half covered drainage outlet. Covered in yellow filth, it skittered around in the waste before finding something to chew on. I turned away in disgust.

“Jumpy, lil'bro?”

“Y-yeah...we're exposed out here.”

Glimmer let the rock down and grabbed the last couple of charge talismans.

“Well, we both know no-one patrols here. You get into the vents for the armoury, I'll head for the third stash with the metro maps we stole. Coral and I stored a lot more of our stuff there before we got sent to the mines too.”

I gulped. The vents were no longer threatened by the ghoul; I knew he'd fallen into one of the gaps but the thought of having to pass over him still made me uneasy. Quite frankly, I needed a few more minutes to gather my courage.

“Um...s-sis?”

“Bro?”

I tapped my hooves together.

“About...um, Unity? You're finding out who she once knew, right?”

Glimmerlight looked a bit confused, before we sat back behind a pillar of the Mall's outer building. “Of course, hun. I did promise her, use this magic of mine for some good. It felt familiar though...not fragmented like a traumatic memory loss. It felt clean, magically, I mean. Definitely taken out into an orb somewhere, but unicorns who can do that aren't common, Murky. I don't know any other ponies in Filly other than me who can.”

Following that only made my head hurt. So unless there was some pony neither of us knew, it had to be...

I really didn't know how to approach this. Should I just say what I was thinking or...or hint it? I felt my eyes fixating too much on the eerie light of the crater behind the Mall.

“It's just...I really want her to be happy and...and she said that she wouldn't leave without him. They'd promised. But what if he doesn't want to leave?”

Glimmerlight opened her mouth, before closing it again and looking down at me. “What do you mean? Why wouldn't he? Murky, this is *Fillydelphia*, we all want out of here. It's ruined all of our lives. Did you find some sort of hint about him while you were away from us?”

“No...no...I was just, y'know, wondering.” I tried to shrug it off and stood up. “She kinda means a lot to me, is all. I just don't want it to hurt her if it's...not what she thinks it is. Cos it's been so long with no answers and...I just worry I guess.”

She gave me a very strange look, as though studying my every facial expression. Eventually her face softened and she shook her head.

“Don't worry about it, Murky. What happens happens, either way it's better to know. Trust me on that one...forgetting things isn't the way to do it. I learned the hard way, I won't let her go the same direction. Just wait and see, it'll all be fine, I'm sure of it.”

I hesitantly nodded, smiling. Glimmer telling me something would be okay was always enough to make me put something to the back of my mind.

“Now go on, shoo! You've got to get me some bang-bangs!”

Snorting with laughter, I turned and galloped off to the vents. Yes...there was thievery to be done.

* * *

“Blunderbuck, you *blyadischa!* Rifle is not to be corrupted by your fairy dreams!”

“But it looked so nice and-”

“*Otebis!*”

The sound of something hitting somepony hard echoed through the halls. I saw Blunderbuck staggering away after crying out in pain. He held the back of his head, before a wooden hoof struck him again.

“Come with me, assistant! Move! Is long past time I got to Wall to oversee war preparations and all I see is this messing about like child!”

“Sorry! Sorry!”

I really felt bad for the poor buck. Mosin was not a well mannered boss to work for. Watching them both go, I really wished I had gotten the chance to speak to the slaver assistant who'd joined us for good times on my birthday. I was sure I could have convinced him to come...

Perhaps later. For now, I had the armoury all to myself after sneaking by the guards further out. Wouldn't they *ever* learn?

It was almost enough to make me want to hum a tune of happiness as I wandered past the thick metal doors and stood surrounded by the cages of weaponry.

I was alone in here.

It was all mine to take...

Anything I could get.

Anything.

Any.

Thing.

I could almost feel myself salivating before I dove in amongst it.

The huge bag I'd nabbed from Shackles' office came with me, one I'd remembered he had that was big enough to store everything but a long rifle in. Dumping it in the centre of the floor, I ran off to the cages and yanked each of them open in turn. Ammo crates had their tops torn off.

I tossed five pistols of varying sizes into the bag, along with three magazines for each. A heavysset shotgun went in next as I dragged it in my teeth from its wall mount, both of its barrels glinting from recent polishing. After a bit of hunting around Blunderbuck's workdesk, I found red boxes of shells lying stacked in a deep drawer and started tossing them across the room in beside the shotgun.

You could toss ammo right? (I figured so, if it went off from tossing why would anypony need guns? Flawless logic!)

Glimmer would want something accurate, so I galloped around the back and found the lines of rifles lined vertically. Some were bolt action, others seemed to be automatic. (Why did they call it that anyway? You still had to pull the trigger...) I pulled a long bolt action from the stands, feeling its recently polished wood in my front legs as I scooted it across to the back and tucked it in. A lever action followed it from the same rack, I'd once seen Sunny carry something similar.

I ran around the armoury quickly, unsure of when anypony might come in. I was gleeful, shovelling an entire box of cleaning kits into the sack before following it up with two small cans of oil. Some tools followed, before I started looking for the rifle rounds. A locked cabinet denied me access to a set of mines, but I found three loose grenades on Mosin's desk to tuck into the bag's side pocket.

Behind me, I heard ponies talking. I couldn't wait too long, *somepony* would come back eventually. Slavers left their weapons in here a lot of the time and I knew they were regular about it.

A metal filing cabinet opened to reveal a tangled mess of harnesses and straps. I didn't have time to sort this, so I just drew out what I could and tied up the loose long-arms with them to hold them all steady in the bag.

Then my eyes fell upon *it*.

That massive set of armour at the back of the room still loomed and watched over everything I was taking. Yet again, I found myself unable to avoid spending a few moments staring at it. This monolithic knight of steel, an early Ranger design. Less advanced but still tall and carrying the pride and iconography of Equestria upon its chest and shoulder plates.

I'd once been chased by Rangers, yet looking upon this one now with the time to wander around it I began to get a sense of what they perhaps once were to ponies. A symbol of strength and hope.

An icon of the future, not the past.

“Hey, mate! Did Mosin go out yet? Shackles sent a runner asking where the bloody hell he is.”

“Yeah, yeah...he just left. Taking half our fucking staff too, Stern's got anypony not needed here on the walls right now or helping organise the army camps outside the city.”

“Fuck...this really happening?”

The voices rung out from the corridor outside. Shaken from my thoughts, I poked my head around to see vague shadows moving from around the bend outside the room.

Okay, okay...maybe I *didn't* have time now.

“There's chatter on the radios though. Shackles getting a lot of bigger jobs for the preparations. Lots of ponies saying he's already won that vote shit they do. They say he's coming back to power...”

“Fuck me man, I dunno if I even wanna work here if that happens. Bring Red back quick, I say. Least we got Stern.”

Every few days I'd had nightmares of such a reality. Of him in power. I couldn't believe I was thinking it but...please bring Red Eye back, Goddesses. Anything but *him*.

I threw my all my efforts into taking what I could. A tube shaped quietener that was lying spare by the edge of the desk, the much sought rifle rounds that were in a small cage below where I'd found the guns themselves, two long range telescope thingys to attach to the tops of weapons and a shortened carbine lying under a pile of magazines. I threw a bunch of them in too, hoping one of them at least matched the weapon.

Zippering up the bag, I went to start slinging it around me and quickly realised this wasn't going to work.

“Urk...heavy!”

I gasped the word as I was forced to stop trying to lift it and instead wore the bag's looped handles like a harness. Dropping into the straining routine of wagon pulling all over again, I slowly pulled the heavy bag out of the armoury along the floor.

“I heard the scouts said they're definitely coming this way, mate. Rumour is that old Red's got it bad over in Everfree too. We lost contact a while ago.”

“Shit...”

My ears pricked at hearing this.

Something had happened over at Everfree with Red Eye's operations? Something was coming this way? Some force to break everyone out of this place? Oh my wishes were taking off...

Unfortunately. This bag wasn't.

There was a vent in the next room over I could use to get away from them, drag it all the way back to Glimmerlight where she would help me. I just had to get there...ten feet down the corridor of hoping they wouldn't turn into it toward the armoury.

Five feet...

Threeeeeee...

“Go tell that runner to carry back word, though. Mosin left just now. Want a tip mate, tell him to arrive before Mosin does to say he's on his way.”

“Pfft, fuck no. It's Thistle Tip.”

The first guard burst into laughter.

“In that case, tell him to take his time, that guy's a complete wanker. Anyhow, see you later. Gonna go nick a slot of Mosin's drink while he's gone.”

I heard one leave, but the other one was coming this way. Struggling and skittering my hooves on the floor as loudly as I dared, I heaved it into the room and started trying to lift the bag into the vent.

I heard the guard approaching. Just don't look in...just don't look in...

The bag slipped mostly in. Standing on my hind hooves, I started to shove it inside. There was a small slope in the vent behind the wall, so I could get it moving quickly once I got inside myself. Just had to...to lift my legs up and-

“What the fu-HEY!”

I actually screamed in shock as I heard the voice behind me. The guard had looked right in at me. They weren't allowed to do that!

A wiry brown slaver with a whip looped around his neck stood in the doorway.

“It's you! The fucking runt! Shackles' told us to look for you! C'mere!”

I shoved and the bag slid fully into the vent, but I had no time to get in myself. If I moved quickly, he'd grab me! I turned and pressed my back against it...I just needed five seconds more...

“I...I'm just...”

“You're just coming with me, you little shit. You any idea how much we need to put up with the boss rambling about you? Fucking obsessed!”

Sweat dripped down my brow. I didn't have time to turn and go...I...

I looked behind him.

“Oh! Thank Goddesses, Brim! Help!”

The slaver's eyes went wide.

“Brim? Brimstone? The...*oh shit!*”

He spun to face the empty doorway behind him...as I took the few seconds that gave me to turn and hop up inside the vent, pushing the bag ahead of me.

“Wait...you little sneaky *fucker!* COME HERE!”

Hooves grasped in after me, making me very glad he wasn't a unicorn as I bucked out at them in return until I was far enough in. Wiry or not, he couldn't follow me in here. He ran off, shouting to all the others.

The journey was exhausting in the darkness, navigating from memory and by the foul screams of the ghouls trapped in these vents near to the exit. Pushing the bag and stopping to rest, Pushing. Resting.

Pushing. I had to stop sometimes as ponies were heard below me. I could hear them watching vent exits, but I knew they didn't know about the one to the old janitor's room where the ghouls once had been.

It was there I finally let it drop out and found Glimmer waiting for me in the cobwebbed old office.

“Murky!” She galloped over and helped me out with the heavy bag. “Geez, by Equestria are you kitting us out or building a damn army?!”

She already had a thick set of straps made from the janitor's old bedding to carry the third stash worth of items, between us both we got down the back stairs of the Mall and back through the fence toward the sewers and the safety of Mister Peace.

Stashes and weapons?

Check.

* * *

Our first real haul was a complete success.

After unzipping the bag, we drew the weapons out and placed them along the wall. Pistols lay on an old table somepony had acquired, ammo was counted and organised into proper magazines. The long rifles were stripped and checked by Glimmer and Sunny. Mister Peace seemed very interested in them, providing an almost incessant commentary on their histories and development times.

Along with that, everything else was laid out. The metro plans were taped to the stone walls and studied, Red Eye's patrols outside the wall were mapped beside them and overlaid with the tunnel systems, just in case we had to make a run for it there. While the portal was our goal, the idea that we might have to make a break for it in some other way through the outer metro on our original plan wasn't forgotten.

The remaining medical supplies were carefully wrapped and kept safe. Coral got her gemlight lantern lit to provide us with a pale blue haze to work in. Unity and I sorted the mining tools against the wall. Spades, a pickaxe, boltcutters and a couple slabs of long wood to prop anything up were cleaned and kept from rust. Afterwards, Coral and I set to sewing new saddlebags with the stolen linen and wool in a quiet corner while the others worked with Glimmer to make spark battery flares or improvised disruptor grenades of the like I'd seen her create before.

The old forge gloves converted into waterflasks were set near the sewer exit to catch any rain, hooked up to Glimmer's filter. Any on the ground was too contaminated for the filter to handle, it seemed. Sunny laid out the slaver's clothing she'd stolen. Brim and her had managed to 'deal' with two slavers wandering in the ruins. I hadn't asked in what way, but they brought back a two way radio they'd possessed and also taken their clothes.

The idea was to have Sunny disguise herself and camp out near the Ministry with the radio, ready to warn us the moment the wagons appeared. Glimmer carried the other hoofset latched to her barely recognisable Initiate robes.

We had a few hours yet till the third shift ending and the time of our ambush on the wagon exiting the

Ministry. In that time...we had just one more big thing to do.

Raid a logistics warehouse.

The warehouses were the most stocked places in Fillydelphia. From there, the food was stored, the tools were kept in racks, survival equipment was held on shelf after shelf and anything with no real purpose just lay in wait. Even better...some of them were lightly guarded. Most of the focus was on protecting medical supplies, weapons and high technology. Just enough guards to scare off desperate and hungry slaves was enough...but I'd broken in there before while on the run. I knew the ways past.

It was near the FunFarm, just a couple hundred metres from a sewer exit and across the street from Wicked Slit's factory. You could almost call it my old stomping ground from before...well...*all* of this started on that day of the Pit. I knew every little street around there, every ditch and hiding spot. As such, the decision was made to take a small team to raid that place and leave the rest on standby for attacking the wagons, just in case things got set off early.

Glimmer, Mister Peace and myself would go for the warehouse. The robot would be handier with us there, as the back alleys could get him to the warehouse without an issue and we'd desperately need his support if anything went awry. Coral, Sunny, Brim and Unity would remain near the Ministry. Now that we had weapons, there wouldn't be as much need for Peace to handle things there and the last thing we needed was him attracting attention with his firepower if the ambush needed a couple warning shots.

Much as I trusted Peace to protect me, I *didn't* trust him to 'hold fire' when others were getting to shoot instead.

If all went right, we'd be back to join the ambush a good half hour before it was due. In the event of anything going ahead of schedule, Glimmer had the radio to let Sunny contact us and warn those of us not around to make haste back.

All in all...it felt pretty well planned.

Leading up to leaving, I spent the time making a mental count of everything we had. I was just killing time really, my skill was in acquiring things...not in doing anything *with* them once the sewing was done. It was, however, very satisfying to mentally tally it all up and grin happily at all the things we'd gotten together. I wanted to add to the pile, make it larger...the thief side of me was being spoiled rotten today. It was enough to make me trot on the spot with glee.

At least, until somepony saw me. Then I just sort of shuffled away blushing.

Glimmer and Unity continued their own work. Almost all the orbs had been used up by now, lying in a neat line nearby to them, all glinting with a soothing cream colour. Both of them looked quite worn out, Unity in particular. I could imagine why...a slave's memories are not the happiest ones, reliving them to try and look back was something we *all* tried to avoid. Concentrate on the present, don't let your mind be taken up by the routine when you realise how automated your life has become.

Yet as I watched them, something changed.

Glimmer's horn glowed brighter while Unity jumped on the spot. A loud gasp and twitch of motion shot through her like she'd been thrown into cold water.

“Oh...I...I...”

“Shh, it's okay!” Glimmer stroked the back of her mane, holding Unity close in a gentle embrace. “We're out, we're out. It's okay...”

“*What was that?*” Unity's voice was thin, struggling between deep breaths. “It...it was like falling though ice, like something j-just snapped...”

“We've found where your memory ends, hun...” Glimmer spoke gently, “it's normal to react that way, it's unknown territory for you. It's a shock to the system, I'm sorry...do you want to-”

Unity's head shook. For a moment, I could have sworn I saw the same determined look from Aurora on

her face. “No! If that's it...I want to get it done, to see!”

She sat up straight, taking a slow breath as I saw the gentle mare I better knew returning to her calm and quiet demeanour.

“We're so close.”

Glimmer seemed to take a second to decide, before slowly shifting in to sit beside Unity and cradling a hoof around her shoulders. “Then you have to relax, don't get agitated. You won't immediately see what it is until I drag it out into an orb...then we can see. Hopefully we'll get you an image of him, so we'll know who we're looking for, all right? Now, this could be...unusual, unsettling even. Having your memory pulled can feel like you're dreaming of it, but without knowing it yourself this could be weird.”

“I'm willing, if this is what I have to do. I trust you.”

A soft smile came over my sister's face as her horn started to glow. Gradually, she leaned closer and softly nuzzled the smaller mare. Affectionate as ever, she squeezed Unity with her shouldered hoof and whispered.

“Let your breath out...like you're trying to sleep. It makes it easier.”

“O...okay...”

I watched as they proceeded, trying not to feel weird as I just stared at the two mares. Unity was almost snuggled up to my sister for comfort during what was clearly a discomfoting process. If anything, I felt proud of Glimmerlight. Seeing her using her talent in a truly helpful way and offer her very loving personality to relax someone during it felt...right. I'd have to sketch the two of them like this someday; it was such a nice sight.

At least, until I saw Unity's expression change as though having a nightmare.

She shifted, her hind legs twitching and her whole face clenching. I heard a couple of suppressed whimpers while seeing her whole body squirm a little, as though trying to wake up from not even being asleep.

Glimmer's horn glowed brighter, clearly digging deeper as I began to see an orb lighting up. It flickered lightly, like a flame struggling to catch before growing slowly into a bright hue like the others beside it. The process went on for a few minutes, Glimmer's azure blue magic lighting the pumping station and attracting the attention of the others.

Before finally...with a snap of ceasing magic, it finished. The orb gleamed brighter like a little star, before settling into a steady glow.

Glimmer and Unity both opened their eyes at the same time, looking up. My sister seemed fine, if a little...wiggled out. Something had surprised her. Strangely, I saw her quickly lift the orb away behind her back.

Why?

Unity looked confused, searching the room with her eyes for a few seconds before settling on me.

“Did...did it work?”

All I could do was shrug a little and look to my sister for an explanation.

“Sort of...” Glimmer muttered and got up onto her hooves, “I...phew...I didn't really see it too clearly, but I got *something* for sure.”

Unity's face lit up, driving her dizzy self to her hooves in excitement.

“We did? You did it?! Can we look? I have to know!”

“Patience, hun.” Glimmer was acting calm, Unity might not have seen it. *I* did. “A removed memory is never truly gone. We just broke through it into your real memory. Give...give me a few hours to recover, this isn't easy. Then we'll draw it into an orb properly. It didn't really carry properly this time, wasted orb...”

“Oh...” Unity couldn't have looked more disappointed.

“Come on, you've got a chance to rest while we go to this warehouse...get your head down. That wasn't easy.”

Unity let her eyes look around the place, clearly impatient and downtrodden at having to wait longer.
“Okay...thanks, Glimmerlight.”

She passed me on her way to where Coral had organised the blankets into a makeshift sleeping roll. We met each other's eyes on the way.

“You okay?” I couldn't not ask, it only felt right.

To my surprise, Unity smiled. “Yeah, I am. Just eager, I'm sure you understand. Good luck out there.”

“Thanks.”

We shared a little hug, just to let her know I was worried for her. Or just to comfort her? Or was it for her to comfort me that she was fine?

Oh to be socially experienced...

As she left, I heard Glimmerlight approaching behind me.

“Ready to go, lil'bro? We should have left by now.”

“Y-yeah...hey, um, sis?”

Glimmer arrived beside me and looked down, raising an eyebrow. She still looked in deep thought.

“Hmm?”

I stared at her for a few seconds in the quiet dark, the only sounds being the mutters of Sunny fitting herself into the slaver's clothing and Mister Peace rolling by outside. Glimmer's newly sewn saddlebag was weighted a little with that orb in it. I could *see* it.

“Murky?” she asked, prompting me again.

“N-nothing...” I looked away, not knowing how to ask so close to Unity anyway.

If I had to guess, Glimmer had seen what I expected she would and didn't want to drop the bombshell right now. Perhaps that was the right thing. Waiting for a moment to quietly explain everything? Maybe I'd get a chance to ask when we left?

For now though, I just felt her hoof ruffle my mane.

“Nuthin's apparently what's going on in that cranium of yours right now, forgetting your own question. C'mon, let's get out of here and go rob shit.”

She trotted forward, grabbing a few extra bags and jokingly making a big deal out of the weight, before making a pouty look to Mister Peace.

“Oh! Right away, Ma'am! A true gentleman soldier of Equestria does not suffer a pony to struggle without his assistance! Especially not one of such grace and class.”

Coral mockingly blew a raspberry with a roll of her eyes on hearing that, not even turning her head to look.

I grabbed my own bags, slinging the weapon sack over my back as well. After a moment, I picked up my journal as well for safekeeping, before finding it lifted away from me by Glimmer's magic.

“Here...uh, I'll take it for you, keep it safe out of any deep sewage. Longer legs and all, y'know?”

Feeling a little put out for a second, if not confused, I slowly nodded and cantered to the exit into the sewers. “Uh...s-sure?”

“Just for safe keeping.”

“Okay...”

As I left, not getting a chance to ask any further, I found myself confronted by Protégé. He stood with weary eyes at the exit, a couple of Coral's stitched bags around the barrel of his torso.

“I'm coming with you.”

Behind me, I heard Brimstone stand up. The sound was *quite* obvious. Yet I kept my eyes on the slaver before me.

“Something is...odd, about Fillydelphia. The things Unity told me from going up there, the things I saw while outside since coming out of the Ministry. I must get a proper look, figure out what's happening. Why the hospital was stocking up so much, why you've all encountered light security.”

I'd heard guards saying that...something about a force coming? About Red Eye?

I hadn't dared tell Protégé what I'd heard though.

“You're going to be fine helping us steal from Red Eye then?”

Protégé met my question with sharp eyes. You don't pull the trigger on somepony and look at them easily the next day without some sort of awkward feelings.

“I won't be stealing anything...just accompanying you. You won't let me go alone and I don't want to stay here. If you want rid of me...I'll simply leave for the FunBarn the moment you're done. I'll be out of your mane.”

For some reason, the others stayed silent. Was this my decision?

Really, turning him down made no sense; he *was* correct.

“Well, um...okay?”

“Thank you, Murk. Now, shall we proceed?”

With that, we did. He remained behind us the whole way, trotting without a word.

I knew Protégé by now. His lack of speech wasn't because he was unwilling to talk to us.

It was because he didn't know what to say to us in any casual manner anymore, after all that had happened.

* * *

The trudge through the sewers was quiet. Each of us all seemed to have our thoughts in mind.

Glimmer was clearly trying to process what she'd seen and put into that orb. I had my suspicions I knew what...but on account of who was with us I dared not bring up the subject.

At the very least, I knew she had the proof with us. It was going to come to light. *Today*. Unity deserved it.

Protégé meanwhile was almost unnoticeable behind us, had it not been for my hearing tracking his movements. He was so very quiet, deep in thought.

Mister Peace occasionally hummed to himself, taking the lead to scout every way out in his own inimitable way. By that I mean leaping around corners with the cry of 'AHA!' Aside from a few startled radroaches there was nothing to sate his wishes for a brutal ambush.

Eventually, judging by the huge grates we passed, I could tell we were in the FunFarm's area of Fillydelphia. I recognised the way out I'd once used to escape those pursuing me from the same warehouse. I smelled the burning in the air spike up from the heavy industry that polluted Fillydelphia. The drifting smog collecting down here made me gag and my throat burn enough that I pulled a bag around my mouth to try and breathe through.

Oh such a familiar stench...

Mister Peace took a hold of the chosen grate and set his hydraulic arms moving. The rusted metal was like putty in his hands, snapping and bending so easily that I wondered how weak the bars really were. A quick test of my own strength gave me nothing but sore muscles and a gentle pat on the head.

“Do not concern yourself, Miss Fluttershy. Allow me to conduct matters of physical strength against the enemies of your trotting direction.”

His arm ripped the last bar off, before his screen turned to the face of a dress uniformed soldier on ceremony. He gestured me through.

I was getting a little tired of that happening today, actually.

My hooves sunk into the soft mud and sewage outside as I made my way to the embankment and dryer soil. Glimmerlight followed me through, scooting up on her belly to the edge of the ditch to look alongside me.

“Nice navigating, Ma'am.” she teased with a grin.

“Oh...not you too...”

Behind us, Mister Peace let Protégé through...before promptly tearing the entire grate off in one fell swoop for his own bulk to fit past. Why hadn't he just...oh forget it.

The area out here was in the back roads of the housing I'd once used to hide in near the FunFarm. I could see the connecting road that would lead into the factories or deeper into the FunFarm itself. That meant the warehouse was down this rarely used street. Most slavers and wagons would use the larger repaired road that ran concurrent to the FunFarm's borders. Briefly, I remembered spending time hiding from the gang in a sewer outlet in that road long ago...

In other words, we were free to move even with Mister Peace, who would remain outside and wait for us.

However, as we moved up...I looked to the side at a nearby factory surrounded by a broken wall. The glow of molten metal came from within while wagons filled with scrap metal were being tugged into it by weary slaves. I could feel the heat from here, an angry warmth of prickly pain on the body.

Wicked Slit's factory.

“Um...hang on a second, everypony...”

Glimmer and Protégé looked to me in surprise.

“What is it?”

“I...um...I need to get something, I'll only be a minute!”

Glimmerlight saw me looking at the factory and shrugged. “You sure?”

“Yeah! Yeah!” I tried to smile it off. “It'll...um...help with my gliding practice!”

That seemed to give her reason to let me go and I cantered off, dropping into a sneaky crawl before I got near to the factory.

It didn't take long before I saw the others spot me coming galloping at full speed back out of the factory across the ground back to our hiding spot.

Glimmer got up, seeing me just whizz past her.

“Murky?!”

“RUN!”

They followed me without asking more. I could feel the item I'd lifted dangling between my teeth.

From behind us, a figure stormed out of the factory. Frazzled mane over a body so tense it looked about ready to have a neurotic breakdown any second. A curved knife waved in the air as she glanced around with

twitching eyes.

“WHERE'D THAT LITTLE BASTARD RUNT GO? WHO SAW HIM?! I KNOW IT WAS HIM! I FUCKING KNOW IT! THIEVING MY FUCKING GOGGLES AGAIN! AAARRRRGHHH!”

Yup. *Satisfying* day.

* * *

Getting in without my grapple gun was a little tougher than before. In the past I'd climbed up the fire escape and used my saddle to zip up to a higher open window above me. This time, we had to use something of a 'pony staircase' to get there. With me hopping off of Glimmer's back to grab the ledge, then reaching down to help Protégé do the same. Glimmer, being taller, was able to hop up far enough for both of us to grab her hooves and pull her in.

Mister Peace waited below near a door. If needed, he could tear that thing off and rush in at a moment's notice to provide us both a way out and some cover. Elsewise, he was hidden on this unguarded side.

We were getting pretty good at this whole 'working together' business.

Of course, there were more secrets I was keen to see very soon. Ones that could define the next few events in our escape from the filthy sewer into the last part of our plan. Right now, we had things to do.

The inside of the warehouse was simple. One gigantic open floor filled with tall shelves in lines. They were vaguely organised into groups, with all sorts of goodies just lying out for any slaver's needs. Or in this case, ours. Where we stood now was a raised platform overlooking the warehouse floor with an office beside us. Its windows gazed across Fillydelphia's skyline to the great fortifications surrounding it. Red Eye clearly didn't trust slavers around the food alone, instead the guards only ever remained on guard at the entrance with occasional patrols. It had been one of them that caught me last time.

“Murky, head over the far side, you're quietest! I'll plunder this line here.” Glimmerlight kept a hushed voice as she handed me some of the bags. “You know what to grab, right? Survival things, food...anything to keep us going in or out. Let's not push our luck...fifteen minutes at most. Agreed?”

“You'll have at least thirty, we're on a shift time,” Protégé spoke quietly, looking toward the office, “The random patrols only take place in the logistics hubs when slaves might be out and about *en masse*.”

With that he trotted into the office, staring out of the window. I thought it was to look forlorn, but then I saw he was actually glaring around and trying to read the activity in the sky and streets. As he'd said, he wanted a look at Fillydelphia.

“Let's get going!” Glimmerlight hurried down the stairs, shuffling her hooves quickly to hop the last banister and drop onto the concrete floor.

I tried to do one better and leapt from the second flight, wings spread. My momentum carried me! Softening the fall! Yet before ten feet had gone by I simply *fell*. Landing sharply on the concrete, I felt my knees ache in protest at the steep drop.

No lift...I had no way to get lift under my wings. Curse these broken things...

Shaking the thought from my head, I sprinted across the warehouse, ducking my short height below the shelves and through gaps to reach the other side faster. Already I could see Glimmerlight grabbing things in her magic to toss into her saddlebags on the opposite side.

Reaching my target, I started to canter alongside the shelves, eyes peeled. It really was like a supermarket where everything was free.

My hooves grabbed a few things as I hopped up to whisk them off their labelled piles. A bag of cotton tinder, a flint and steel set, a compass in case my Pipbuck shorted out...

All of them were dropped into my saddlebags quickly. As I snatched up a large rolled map of Equestria, I spotted my sister again through the shelves. She was trotting carefully down the lines, whisking small bottles of tepid looking water with her magic, taking my journal out to make room for them. I saw her

casually flicking through it as she went, smiling occasionally. I could imagine what ones.

Urgh...she *would* look at those drawings. It never felt any less embarrassing. Was now *really* the time to look in it?

Shaking my head, I hurried along the shelves. A can opener disappeared from its pile. Two metal cooking tins went in with it, placed either side of the map to not clatter when I moved. I followed it up with some heating blocks that could burn even in the rain. I'd once enviously watched a slaver use them during a storm from my leaky pig sty.

Everything I grabbed would be ours. Everything would help a bit more. I felt eager and confident. It drove me to want every little thing. My hooves landed on a plastic rainshield for the map, a set of hoof warmers for Chirpy and then found themselves grasping for the food section as I galloped down toward its piled boxes.

Behind me, I could still see Protégé up in that office.

Alone.

If I could finish up and fill my bags here right now, I might get five minutes free to go and speak to him.

See...see if I could get anything out of him about this. About her.

To that end, I might have rushed a little. I reached around an entire shelf of mixed tinned goods and just swept a dozen of them at once into my bag, feeling the weight drop on that side of my body. Oh that scoop felt *good*. I followed it up with dried and vacuum packed strips of processed hay. How they made that last two centuries I'd never know, but apparently they were still edible. Even better, they were thin and light. I upturned a whole box to fill in the gaps between the tins. Glimmerlight had briefly set my journal aside, pulling a trolley over to load a full box of oat cereal containers onto it. Of course...we had Mister Peace to carry more for us!

I could just imagine trying all these. *Real* food! Food that could be warm! Sugary! I'd always wanted to try sugar. The thought made me quiver as I cheekily tossed a few foil wrapped chocolate bars in after spending a few seconds trying to decide if blue ones tasted better than red ones. Eventually I settled on blue. (In my mind, red was a bad colour, blue was like the sky!)

Just a few for me to enjoy, hehe!

Soon though, the hoarding was filling my bags. I'd taken some dried mash powder to slip into the remaining gaps and pressed some dry pasta under my saddle's straps, but this was as much as I could feasibly carry myself, knowing I'd have to help with other things too. As such, trying to quench my disappointment at all the yummy things I hadn't room for or couldn't reach, I made my way back down the warehouse toward the office.

All joking aside, this was a serious thing. I had big questions for him.

I was going to confront him on the subject of Unity. No way out.

She *deserved* this. I'd heard it enough times from a voice I'd come to trust. The truth had to be known.

No matter how bad it might hurt.

* * *

Each step of that staircase made me rethink what to say. I was rehearsing lines in my head over and over. How to word it? How to say it? What tone? I tried to think what he might say back, how I'd counter any dismissals.

Yet I kept trotting and eventually, I saw that bare office bathed in the red light of Fillydelphia, glowing over my now ex-master as he stood watching the city.

“Protégé.”

Simple...basic. Just greet him first.

“Murk.” He nodded without looking. “You're done?”

“I...I have everything, yes. I just came to, uh...”

My voice stumbled, leaving a gap after speaking. Thankfully, Protégé picked up where I left off.

“I understand. Things are awkward after what we tried to do to each other...I still don't know how to quite think on it. Perhaps that's why I'm distracting myself from coming to terms with fighting a pony I never wanted to hurt, just because of life throwing us on opposing sides...”

I could have sniped at that with comments about the living conditions, but this wasn't the time.

“Well, um...what have you seen?”

Stepping up beside him to look out, I saw a hive of activity from this vantage point. Protégé was right, something *was* different. Around the base of the wall, I could see campfires. *Thousands* of campfires. An army was set in here, far more than just the small camp I'd once crawled through. The skies were filled with Pinkie Balloons and veering formations of griffins.

“Preparations. It's as I thought...”

Below on the street, a column of ponies with newly created arms and armour cantered past.

“...Fillydelphia is preparing for war. The Enclave must have started to move against us; Red Eye always knew this might happen. It goes against all expected timeframes, however.”

“E-Enclave?” I was just coming to grips with what I knew, but weren't they just a small, almost mythical outpost of pegasi up there? “They're really as strong as...as they say?”

“More than you know, Murk. More than I've seen. You won't be the only pegasus in Fillydelphia soon enough, only you're the one who won't be trying to burn us to glass. I can only hope we have the power to resist them...once Master Red Eye completes his task, we shall stand a better chance with the Cathedral's reinforcements.”

Finally, he turned to me, pushing his mane behind his ears as best he could. He'd found a bit of string to retie his ponytail, but it wasn't keeping it all in.

“This will be a time of woe and hardship, Murk. Whatever you are trying with your friends, I can only hope that if you succeed, it will be before this comes to pass. We have seen many battles together by now, but true war is unlike any of those small skirmishes. Death, loss and undoing of what progress so many have died for will assuredly happen to some degree. It will be when all ponies in here must cast aside their prejudice and band together against the storm. To hold close those they consider dear to them...”

That last line, I'd been given a way in. Awkward or not, I leapt on it.

I didn't turn my head. I simply spoke. A clear sentence, spoken level and simply with no accusation or worry.

“So why don't you?”

He went silent.

I was afraid he was simply going to leave or suddenly shout. He just looked at me with those thoughtful eyes he always had.

“What are you talking about?”

I couldn't back away now. I couldn't let it slip.

“You know who I mean.”

Protégé looked uncomfortable, his hooves shifted in the same way mine often did. His face steeled as he gathered his words carefully.

“Murk...I appreciate you and your friends for what you've done for me, but I...I am not what you all think I am. Yes, having you by my side has kept me alive. Yes, I am grateful, even perhaps happy, that I had

somepony to share the journey thus far with who understood me as deeply as you do. But—”

My hooves raised as I almost wished I had a griffin's talons to tear at my mane in frustration. Stomping them down, I interrupted him.

“Not *us!* We're happy for you too and all you did to try and...and make this easier, even if some of us haven't forgiven you, that isn't *the point!*”

I had to stop myself from seething.

“Why don't you tell her?”

“Murk, what are you—”

“*Why don't you tell her?!*”

I shouted it at him, far too loud than I should have. Any worry of others hearing all the way across the warehouse was cast off. I advanced, shifting closer.

“From the moment we saved her from Grindstone and Shackles, you've been glancing her way! I've seen how she looks at you too, like somepony who recognises how lost and *lonely* you are in this city! You've been like that ever since I met you! Always looking for company, the company you wanted from me because you had no-pony else! We were always together because of how much you craved somepony else who understood who you are and *yes*, we had that...that bond! But there's another isn't there? *Her! You know who I mean!*”

“Murk, I—”

“Just look at both of you! Interests in books, wanting quieter moments to discuss with one pony. Both of you feeling lost in this place. You were once a slave here. In Grindstone's Ministry before Shackles was promoted out of being his overseer, yes? You knew the inside of there as well as I did, you know about the sanisiso—”

“Sanitiser” Protégé curtly added.

“WHATEVER IT'S CALLED!” I was in no mood for corrections. “You knew that Ministry like the back of your hoof to guide me in! That's where *Unity* also was, getting it now? You were *both* there. Tell me, were you at the Pit where Littlepip escaped?”

Protégé almost looked worried, but I couldn't tell in what way.

“Yes, I was. Murk, stop—”

“Unity told me that her closest friend...more than just a friend to her, was sent to the Pit, but she couldn't see him and couldn't ever remember! She never saw him down there...*because he wasn't a competing pony!*”

He went silent, stepping back as I shifted forward again, pushing my head up as high as it could go.

“You're keeping that poor, worried and *wonderful* mare in fear! You're doing it knowing full well who she is to you. Every time she got hurt or threatened, you were *always* the first to leap to defend her. So I want to know, *now*. Why are you hurting her by hiding who you are to her? Tell me! She doesn't deserve this and if you're treating her like this then you don't deserve *her!*”

“MURK! What are you talking?!” He let down his intelligent look, shouting it back and shoving me away from him to stand properly again.

“*Stop hurting Unity and just tell her who you are!*”

My voice felt frail as my vocal chords clung and tightened. I coughed harshly, stumbling. Protégé moved to catch me before I pushed him away, circling around one another.

“Both of you! Stop! Stop this!”

Glimmerlight's voice carried above us both as she raced into the office. Putting herself between us. Standing with her legs wide and firm, she sent us back with her magic, keeping me from wanting to hit him

all over again! Why wasn't he telling her? Why was he denying it?

“Sis! It's him! He's who we're looking for!”

“Murk, I assure you, I-”

“Liar!”

“Murky, stop!”

Glimmer's voice took me by surprise, as she suddenly turned and faced me, leaving Protégé behind her. I made to protest, raising my little hoof to speak up, but she got the word in first.

“You're wrong...lil'bro...you're so utterly, *totally* wrong...”

Then I saw it in her eyes. She was scared. Shivering and unsure of what was happening.

“I...I didn't believe what I saw. I had to make sure, but I think...I think I know who it is...”

The next three seconds as she gulped and got her breath back felt like my slow lifetime all over again. What was I meant to think? What was she saying? Why would she be worried to know?

Her lip quivering, struggling for words...Glimmer spoke again.

“I didn't think it possible...look...”

My heart skipped more than one beat as I felt everything go still...her magic floating something forward and opening it.

My journal.

Pages flickered, going back from what I'd done on the mountain in Aurora's cabin. Back...back past my birthday...back past the lowest ebb of my life...back further to my time in the Mall and then further. Back to my first drawings before the Pit...then the pages kept turning. Pages I'd never wanted to look back to. From before the Pit. From the time of my life I'd sworn never to look back on! I wanted to turn away!

They turned.

Lines, curves, shapes...

Sketchier, rougher, lacking in the life I knew I could do now. Like they were done by someone with no idea of the creative freedom I'd attained, or who was still working at it. The turning stopped on one of them. An environment...the Ministry of Arcane Magic's main interior. I'd recognise it anywhere.

Huddled in the middle were two ponies I knew, together.

Myself...and Unity.

Drawn before I had ever met her.

* * *

I staggered back, almost falling over the office's desk. I felt my breathing heighten.

“Sis...sis what's going on...” I virtually pleaded, feeling my whole body shake.

Parts of my mind were trying to tell me things. I shut them out, terrified.

“Murky, calm down...we can figure this out. Calm. Down.”

Glimmer started advancing, a hoof gently settling with each word. Behind her, Protégé looked very concerned. Yet I fell away from both of them again.

“What's *happening*?! That isn't...it can't...”

“Murky, breathe! What do you remember?”

Limping away, I fell to my rump, hooves either side of my head. Things...things were sparking, things I didn't want to know. It was too sudden, too unsettling.

“I don't...know...I...”

My journal's image kept flickering again and again in my mind. That sight. Her and I, huddled together in fear, seeking comfort. No...I...*no!* I couldn't remember anything of...of the sort! That couldn't be true!

The feeling of how we'd huddled together in Aurora's cottage felt fresh.

Familiar.

No! I refused to...to think this was true! Why was Glimmer tricking me? But she wouldn't. I didn't understand. My head *hurt*.

Running alongside her to escape felt so familiar, didn't it? Working together?

Dreams were faded, hadn't I often dreamed of that sort of thing? That...that was just imagination! I'd wanted somepony to be there with! Companionship! It wasn't...

“*Together...*”

Four other words, I'd heard four other words after it, muffled, distant.

I wanted to cry, I wanted to rock and whine and ignore everything. I wanted to run and hide.

A mare reaching out to you.

I felt a hoof land on my shoulder.

“Murky, it's okay...” Glimmer's voice was soft, but distant. “We'll figure it-”

Out.

I shot to my hooves. I...I knew how to check if this was all true. Pushing past her, I galloped for the window out onto the fire escape. Leaping high, I grabbed the ledge and flung myself over it before running down the stairs onto the streets of Fillydelphia.

As I left, I only vaguely heard Glimmerlight shouting for me in a blind panic before crying to Protégé and Peace to take the supplies as she tried moving her sore body in pursuit.

I didn't even think about what slavers could see me. I simply galloped onto the main road that I knew by instinct and turned toward the direction of the FunFarm. My hooves sharply impacted with the tarmac at high speed, driving me forward. Tears were in my eyes, my head thudded and whirled painfully. Like...like something had sparked that shouldn't have. A feeling like ice was shattering and plunging my realisations into freezing waters.

Like breaking through a forgotten memory's barrier, Glimmer had told Unity.

No...

I didn't remember anything of Fillydelphia from before I'd been sentenced to the Pit because something bad had happened that I wanted to forget.

Slaves turned and watched the little pegasus whisk past them. Their handlers seemed more surprised than anything that they just stared. Griffins above watched with interest at this fast moving pony through all the shift change crowds.

We'd both looked back at each other after we first met outside Slit's factory, like we'd recognised each other.

Thoughts shot through my mind, connecting with chilling realisations. My hooves were sore, my knees were tired...yet I kept galloping, rounding a corner at an angle and leaping a small wall to miss a checkpoint.

She said her buck had been sent to the Pit. She'd known I was a slave all my life before I'd ever actually told her.

The mud and dirt made me skid sideways while turning before I stumbled onto the next pathway and kept running, hearing Glimmerlight shouting behind me. Yet I could not stop. My eyes were wide, seeing

things I could now remember like daydreams.

My first master in here had been Grindstone. He had mentioned Unity by name the first time he saw us together.

It was like my coma from Wildcard's attack all over again. Remembering memories from times gone by.

On my first shift under Grindstone a kind mare had picked me up when I fell...

I could see the FunFarm's helter-skelter a block away.

Whiplash had said he didn't know who dropped me off with him. I'd just woken up there.

A slaver shouted, wondering where I was going. I completely ignored him. My lungs were burning from running through the thick fogs of chemical smoke, yet I powered out of it and made a break for the FunFarm's entrance. I could see that Pinkie standee waving toward the west still as I tore past it.

When I'd visited the Ministry for Protégé, I'd run around without needing the map, I'd known where I was going like I'd been there before...

I gasped as a sharp pain darted through my skull. Worry, stress, emotion and confusion turning a headache into something worse. I staggered in the FunFarm's entrance, trying to clear my eyes.

*In Aurora's office the memory machine had been surrounded by **green** and **cream** memory orbs on the floor. When I'd left, I'd thought to myself that I wanted to come back and 'remember more...'*

I passed by the hall of mirrors.

I'd seen myself behind her. It had shown us the truth...just like it showed me with my wings.

I followed the route we'd taken, aiming for the rollercoaster.

Mister Peace had said the last time that he had seen me was while escorting 'you and your friend away from the Ministry after visiting Miss Star's office...

I could see the mesh fence ahead. See the locks covering it, all clasped to the wire with names carved upon them. Hundreds of them, scattered around, the love-locks of Old and New Equestria all together.

She'd asked me if 'Murky' was the only part of my name...she didn't know about the rest of it...

I fell, exhausted. Clambering, struggling as I approached the one I knew the location of too well for my sanity's liking. Reaching out, my hooves clutched it. My simple mind trying to use my newfound literacy to read it. To figure out every letter with a growing well of indecipherable emotion.

Just his initials, like she'd said.

Two names inside the symbol of Celestia's sun, separated by a small heart.

Unity

M.N.S

* * *

Pinkie's letter was in my mind. Fresh, every word clear.

'To,

Murky and Unity.

So super super sorry that this letter took sooooo long to arrive, but when I knew I had to send it, I was just like 'Aaaaaaaaah!' for at least a minute! I mean, can you imagine?

I'm really really sorry that it missed your last few birthdays, Unity. That's why I want to make my gift to you really special! I just want to tell you that you don't need to worry, it's all going to be fine! I hate to say

it, but there's a hard road to go first, before you see him as who you knew him before. I wish I could just tell you...only you have to discover it for yourselves. But you're a smart pony, smart ponies always figure things out! Except me. But then, I don't figure me out either! How crazy is that?!

Just don't worry, Unity...you'll be with him again. Together or not at all, right?

Hey, Murky-Murk? You're what set off my Pinkie Sense so bad that I spilled somepony's sarsaparilla! I mean...a pony who never had a birthday party in his life? I will not, as Ministry Mare of Morale, let this happen! But it's a few days till your birthday yet, Murky. Be patient, okay?

Oh, and Murky? Listen very carefully to your Auntie Pinkie. Don't. Worry. When the time comes to make a choice, whether to leap or not...you'll know what to do.

I'll be watching out for you two, from wherever I am.

With hugs, (Give each other one for me! Hehe!)

Pinkie Pie!

She had said it right then, right to the both of us together.

You have to discover it for yourselves.

* * *

My sister found me, hunched against the fence staring at the love-lock.

I couldn't even think. I just...couldn't. It was too much, driving me to almost want to blank it all out.

All I could do was just stare at it. Reading it over and over.

I couldn't remember anything of it. Only piece together the evidence that was flying toward me the more I thought about it. All surrounding this image before me...and the image in my journal.

“Murky...”

Glimmer's brash voice was tuned back to a weak whisper as she trotted carefully through the waste and discoloured mud of Fillydelphia toward me. Just the two of us in this foul place beneath a sky of smog...alone with this.

I didn't know what to do. All I could do was lean into her body as she knelt down and embraced me very tightly.

“We'll solve this, Murky...I promise you. Memory's what I do...”

“I'm so confused...I...I...I don't...”

“Murky, ssh...”

Glimmer leaned back, taking me by the shoulders.

“Whatever has happened...this isn't the end of anything. Murky...this is *good*. I've always wondered what happened in that journal, always wanted to take a look but never did because I *respect* you, Murky. For all of who I am, I won't ever pry...but I had to know. I'm so sorry for lying...but I had to make sure this was what I thought it was.”

She wiped a tear from my eye with a cleaner part of her hoof.

“I saw it in her memory. I have the orb to show her. To show *both* of you.”

I shuddered, looking upward at the sky.

“A-Aurora's machine...”

“I know, I saw...”

Glimmer looked at the love-lock, the small smile on her face almost surprised me. I didn't understand, why? Just...just why?

“You were both set for the Pit for trying to escape, hun, the same event that Littlepip escaped from. A punishment that put you both on opposite teams.”

I remembered the Pit...I remembered seeing two ponies forced to do that. Glimmer was right.

“Two ponies who'd become friends in a living hell, a beautiful *beautiful* friendship. You wiped your memories of one another...you used Aurora's machine in her office.”

She was crying. The thought of it terribly upsetting my sister.

“Actually erasing the love you shared...to avoid knowing who it was if it came to you two being told to kill one another in that horrible place...”

“Which is where I stepped in.”

We both sat up sharply. The robotic voice spoke louder than anything we'd said as Mister Peace slowly trundled through the quagmire around here to us with Protégé mounted on his back, towing a trolley of supplies.

Blinking, I looked up at the huge machine.

“M-Mister Peace? What happened?”

His voice quietened, almost to normal levels.

“Miss Fluttershy, I told you when we last met...that I had escorted you and your friend from Aurora's office. Upon hearing of your mission for me, I could not deny its importance. A tragic tale for the operas of great Canterlot, it is so...”

His screen flickered to a soldier with dress uniform on, captured in a still expression of mourning...probably meant for use at soldier's funerals.

“It was not my place to know what you two did, only that I was to carry your unconscious selves to separate areas of this city before returning to my vigilant post.”

“Why didn't you *say anything*?” I almost begged him, holding out a hoof that he (as best a war machine could) graciously took it in both his metal hands.

“You both ordered me...the most hurtful order I have ever carried out. To never tell either of you of the identity of the other unless you somehow knew it yourself, like now. Such a thing could have undone everything. I will never pretend to know why you both did this...it wasn't my place to question. Seeing you both so hurt and afraid...”

For a second, Mister Peace almost looked...*upset*.

“...I wanted to help.”

Something about the way he said that. He *wanted* to help. Not just following orders.

Protégé had moved around everything, before he took a look at the love-lock for himself. I heard him mutter in disbelief.

“Murk...I am so *very* sorry.”

His hoof rested on my shoulder, firmly giving a little shake.

Then things were quiet.

No-pony knew what to say any more.

After but a few seconds, however...it was broken. Glimmer's radio crackled into life, fizzing as a signal fought its way through. Just as she got it dug out, Sunny's voice came though, garbled, but intelligible.

“They're already moving! Way early! If we don't move now, we're gonna miss it, big Brim's already on the move with Coral to block them off, get your hineys over here as fast as you can, folks! We're having to

start without you! Hang on...wait, I-shit!"

A gunshot sounded loud and clear through the radio, before everything went to static.

Mister Peace lurched back on his single axis and seemed to shake out every weapon he had.

"The call of allies in need of munitions based assistance has rung out! Shall we bring to them the glory of reinforcements and become heroes, Miss Fluttershy?"

The others had turned to listen, I hadn't. I couldn't get it out my head.

Unity...how many times we'd been around one another. My first friend in Filly, even if I hadn't known it.

How could I say anything? That I was...

Was I supposed to feel different? It was just so...so sudden...

"We need to get over there, *now*."

The voice spoke before I realised it was mine. I had realised what mattered. I could see my friends over there, fighting for their lives if things had gone badly as it sounded!

"You heard him! Mount up!" Glimmerlight jumped to her hooves as she shouted.

Mister Peace grabbed each of us in turn, pulling us on to his back. Glimmerlight pulled a pistol from her bag, passing a second to Protégé.

"Hold on, little ponies! Interception protocols activating, speed limiter...disabled."

He leaned forward and I felt the vibrations as his wheel started spinning at a high rate in the mud, digging himself deep before it found the hard earth below. My stomach lurched as he tore off through the FunFarm, streaking past a *very* surprised Whiplash as he skidded out of the gate and surged off down the main roads.

"TALLY HOOOO!"

Behind him as he left, I saw the love-lock swing in place from the rumbling, before falling to face its proud declaration looking forward.

* * *

Fillydelphia flew by faster than I'd ever imagined it could. The wind tore at me, sending my wings flaring out behind me from the air catching them. My lips wobbled if I opened my mouth, as I tried to cling on as best I could while Peace veered, leaned and rocketed down the primary lanes too fast for anypony to really get a gauge on what they'd just seen. We were causing some commotion. I could see slavers running to tell their superiors what had just rolled by at high speed. We had to help them and get out of here quickly before Fillydelphia organised a response.

Soon, I heard gunshots nearby.

"Wondrous battle detected to the south, Miss Fluttershy! Shall we greet them?"

"YES!"

I recognised this street! Feeling my entire body flung to the side as he turned a ninety degree angle, my eyes spotted the ambush up ahead. Slavers were running toward or away around us, depending on their armament. No-pony without a gun wanted to be near a firefight.

Up ahead, several wagons were laid out, some of them pulled by griffins. Hang on, why? Without an answer, my heart sank. A griffin in danger would bring the rest *quickly*. They cared for their own and-

Ptang!

Peace changed direction rapidly as a shot rebounded off his thick shoulder plate. Slavers were clustered around the wagons, firing at us or into the ruins by the side, near the Ministry. I could see others from the

opposite side of the street joining them. Not much fire was coming back from where we'd intended to be, where our friends were stationed just below a huge crane that had somehow survived the balefire.

Our ambush had been...*ambushed!*

They predicted we'd try for our old kit!

Mister Peace drove straight into the situation. He curved his path, sending a missile with a surging gout of flame (After we'd had to pull ourselves away from the backblast) toward the ruins on our right to detonate inside a top floor window, an explosion of rubble shattering out onto the tarmac. Making a short hop off the ground over a smooth rock, he leaned tightly to one side, carrying us past the wagons themselves. Two griffins lay with broken necks. Brimstone's work?

Bullets chewed into the ground behind them. Their retorts banging into my ears only after each vicious ping lit up the ground behind or around Mister Peace. Another shot spanked off his middle torso.

“Attain cover! I shall engage them!”

He reversed into the ruins that our friends were in, allowing us a chance to dismount and scurry the supplies into cover before hunkering down ourselves. The incoming fire was met with a deafening *boom* of an anti-machine rifle. From the skies above.

Mister Peace rocked, a portion of his top plating shearing off entirely, exposing the robotics beneath. His right weapon arm rose to the sky, before his gatling cannon shot and lit up the sky with red hot firepower that chased and cut down the heavily armed griffins.

Glimmer and I fled for cover. Pistols were useless here, the slavers had *much* more power to go on. We had to find our friends, see what they had to use with them! We couldn't just leave Peace to do it alone!

Soon, we stumbled across Sunny crouching down in the top floor of a half collapsed home overlooking the firefight in the street. She had a clear view of the houses at the far side and was sending out shots with her lever action, hoof working it after every shot like a natural before ducking down.

“Glad ta see ya!” she shouted down to us, before huddling more into cover as something firing a rapid burst chewed into the window ledge where she had just seconds ago rested her rifle. “The bastards were waiting! The buildings over there were full of em, maybe a dozen or so plus the half dozen we shot out on the carts! Had griffins pulling, shoulda fucking known when I saw them! Griffins *never* pull.”

“Where's the others?” I screamed up to her, before having to repeat myself after being drowned out by Mister Peace's energy weapon unleashing its devastation across the opposite houses.

“Further up! Alleyway between us and them though! Don't even try to cross it. Coral did and almost lost her head to that big automatic they-”

Another whooping bang signalled a second of Peace's missiles firing and impacting with a second noise soon after.

Sunny took a quick glance as the crumbling home across the street lost an entire room.

“Hot damn. Well...they *used* to have one.”

“Do we have the stuff?” Glimmerlight took up position opposite Sunny, doing what she could to keep the ponies behind the wagons trapped in the road pinned down with her small pistol.

“Nope. Sorry, couldn't get out, too much fire! Not enough time to hunt before they hit us. Might have to try again, there'll be more coming.”

She was right. I could see on the skyline the images of Pinkie Balloons beginning to waft toward us alongside wings of griffins. Those balloon riders carried *heavy* weaponry...even Peace wouldn't stand up to them all if he didn't hit them first. Even then...the griffins...

Even as I spoke, the slavers seemed to realise this. Some of them rushed out of the buildings into the street, unloading a mass of firepower on Peace. The big robot was actually forced into cover, cursing their (presumably made up) names loudly as much as cackling about the unfair odds. The slavers got near to the

wagons, seeking to protect them.

“Any idea which one?” Glimmer leaned out and snap shot twice at a slaver, making him squeal and run back to the buildings. Return fire made her and I duck as the round whipped in, hit the decaying roof and rebounded right down past me before burying into the soft wooden floor.

“Front one! Front one!” Sunny swung her lever action out, racking it as she went before putting one through the side of the middle wagon. A scream of pain came from behind it as the powerful round penetrated completely.

A follow up from Mister Peace tore the wagon asunder, sending the rest scurrying around. Up above, three anti-machine rifles unloaded toward him, forcing the machine to go into an evasive circling in the street, before turning back and opening up on the agile griffins. They dove gracefully in the air, separating to make smaller targets than one group.

“Just like Shackles said! Split up, take them!”

The griffin's voice was shocked, they hadn't expected Mister Peace. Yet it betrayed a horrible reality.

Shackles was still there, pre-empting everything I did. He had control of griffin squadrons now...Grindstone had been right, Shackles was on the rise of the ranks again.

That brought a horribly worrying thought. The higher he got, the more resources he had to stop us. Already I could see more slavers at the end of the road, rearmed and approaching again.

This was getting out of hand. We had to retreat.

“Peace! Cover us getting into the sewer!” I shouted, knowing he'd hear *my* voice.

He obeyed, surging through fire, using his body to cover our side as we moved toward the alley and—
Oh no...

I saw the street. With Peace busy protecting us, the last griffin had gotten back in the saddle of the front wagon. The one with our things.

It was *taking off*.

I'd forgotten that's why griffins sometimes went on wagons. They could *fly* materials around Filly if they were needed. A single slaver had gotten in the back wagon, providing the griffin cover to get off the ground.

I'd already given up on getting it for now, but that wasn't what made my heart sink. As the wagon lifted off the ground, passing by the buildings on this side, I saw a pony rush and leap through a window.

Unity.

Diving from an upper floor, she landed on the wagon, tackling the slaver in an effort to try and force the entire thing down. Was she crazy?!

As I watched, the wagon kept going, lifting higher...higher...out of all of our reaches. I could see my friends rushing to the sewers behind me. Sunny leapt down as an energy weapon sparked and set the dry timber into an instant flame that started to spread around the house.

We could escape.

Yet...Unity...

I tried to shout to everypony, but Brim, Coral and Sunny were out of reach. Only Glimmer and Protégé were still close enough, behind a desperately firing Mister Peace, trying to hold half a growing mass of guards by himself. He was making them reluctant to push in here.

No...*no*.

Beyond the flames burning in the house, I could see the wagon lifting up, like the hot fire sending scraps of paper floating on its heat off into the sky. I was watching her carried away in her brave attempt to rescue

our only chance amongst this madness.

After all this I just...I just...

There was a moment, right then and there...that I felt something *click*.

My eyes refocussed, watching the flames. Watching the paper. Anything light above it would rise...

It would *lift*...

A trembling came through me.

Looking upwards, I saw the construct right above this area...the crane.

With that, I made my decision...and galloped in the opposite direction.

Behind me, I heard Protégé and Glimmer shout to me. I simply took off, barging through the flimsy rotten wood surrounding the crane base. The shallow stairs ran in a spiral to raise up and toward the top, where operators would climb to work. Tall and thin, it led out to a huge crossbeam that loomed above me.

“Murky!? What are you doing? We have to get away and try to find where that wagon comes down!”

I stopped, glanced at them and just shook my head...

“We won't...”

I galloped off up the stairs. With a cry, Protégé leapt forward, chasing me up.

Round and round I climbed. The vertigo hitting me was intense as I saw the rooftops fall away, as I felt the wind make the crane sway and creak below me. Yet I didn't let myself stop. No, *now was different*.

The wind began to pick up as I went higher. The heat of the city ebbing away.

After all that had happened, had been revealed, I wasn't going to let Fillydelphia beat me again. Not this time. Not for her. She had saved me in so many ways and was *still* trying to save us by getting that orb.

I couldn't abandon her, not knowing what I knew now.

I came to the top, near the cab. A rusted platform that led past a set of controls to the huge beam. The moment I came to a stop, I felt Protégé leap on me from behind. Not an attack, but making sure I didn't move any further.

“Murk, stop! What are you thinking of *doing*?!”

Turning, I got my distance, casting him possibly the most mature expression I think I'd...well...ever made.

“I'm not letting this happen.”

The look on his face turned from worry to...to a more personal concern. He shifted closer, speaking very precisely and quickly.

“Listen, Murk...you're right!” He spoke quickly, a hoof on my shoulder, another on his chest. “I *have* been lost...so let me do this for you. Come *with* me! Act as my assistant again, we can get in and find her *my* way! Don't think I don't realise what you're planning...please, don't test this...”

I stared at him, before letting my head turn slowly. The wagon was moving slowly, swaying as something disturbed it...I could see it banking around. Below us came the sounds of fighting dying down...they hadn't seen us come up here. The others had escaped. Mister Peace was escorting them back into the sewers.

My gaze turned back to Protégé.

“You would do that?” I spoke while shaking my head. “You would fall right back into the same routine...just to try and make things right...”

“Murk, it's the safe way! The *right* way...”

“You want to go back to the way everything was. What are you even going to *do*?”

I tried to move away from him, but his hoof held me back, I fought it, a brief struggle. Eventually, he let me go.

“You're going to *kill yourself*, Murk! YES! I'm going to go back to it! I have to! I have things to do, to stop all this! To help M-”

“Your master.” I interrupted. “And that makes you happy?”

“Murk, listen to me...”

“No...” I didn't shout it. There was a brief pause, up so high. The wind howled between us. “I know...you mean well. I know you have your things...but I can't do that any more. Not after knowing what I know. After going through what I have and all it's cost me. I'm not going to play by the rules of Fillydelphia any longer.”

That shiver had returned. Again.

I realised what it was...

Anticipation.

“Murk...”

“Come with us, Protégé. Stick with Glimmer...she'll get you away...we can get out of here.”

I laid a hoof on either of his shoulders.

“Together.”

I couldn't delay longer, but I had to ask him. Yet as I looked in his eyes I only saw fear...before he shook his head and slowly pushed my hooves away.

“I'm sorry...” I felt unbearably sad for him. All I'd wanted to hear was him say he'd drop all this madness. Yet I couldn't force him. “If that's what you choose then...I hope it's what you want in the end. This place will only bring evil...it's all it's ever done, just breaking down good intentions.”

Behind him, the sound of hooves on metal gave way to an exhausted Glimmer joining us. She saw me standing there, near where the beam of the crane would go out. Saw the wind catching me and making my wings flutter.

She knew what was going through my mind.

As Protégé slowly stepped back, I turned and strode up onto the beam itself, snapping my goggles down.

My sister looked up at me, seeing me standing above them both.

“You're standing tall at last, lil'bro...”

She smiled sweetly. Her face hardened a little, around a grin.

Glimmerlight trusted me. She *believed* in me.

“Go get her.”

I took a deep breath, before sweeping around on my hooves, facing away from them toward the beam.

There, I felt a rush of clarity.

Limits...walls...chains...

They'd always been there.

Now before me I saw something else.

Open sky.

I could choose. I could go...and do this.

Trembling, I closed my eyes briefly, I could remember her letter. Only now did I know what it meant.

“When the time comes to make a choice, whether to leap or not...you'll know what to do.”

I did.

Galloping forward, I ran down the beam of the crane. Passing out above Fillydelphia at such a height that it all felt so small. Ponies were like specks below between the numerous smoke stacks. I could almost see above the Wall itself. The whole city sprawled in every direction.

So I *ran*. I ran and ran, speeding up as I surged forward. I felt the wind pick up. My wings flared to either side as I saw the end of the beam approaching. Spreading their feathers and feeling every prick and twist of the air. A natural feeling, a *pegasus* feeling. For the first time in my life I felt *like* what I *was*!

I could do this.

I could do this!

I leapt.

My heart in my mouth, I left the edge of the beam into the open sky.

My wings caught the air, as I felt every bastion of safety disappear and leave me to the mercy of the winds. My eyes were locked on the wagon, a few hundred metres away. I swept forward, letting the air rush by me as my momentum carried me forward, gliding in a downward arc. The world began to move beneath me, the ground shifting faster and faster as the air tore at every part of me and swept past my wings in a shockingly firm way. I realised my legs were tucked in neatly, in a way I'd never thought about. *Instinct* had driven it!

I was *so high up*. Every inch of me was shaking with the clenched horror of how far from the safe ground I was. Shivering as much in fear as elation and wonder. The winds were so strong up here. The temperature so much colder. The feeling of isolation so great. Just me and the sky.

Elation and terror hurtled through my heart as I *sped* downward, angling toward the ground as I picked up speed more and more! Piercing through a pillar of smoke, I felt my wings aching with the strain being put on them. My height was lowering, my speed increasing tremendously, but I was still so *high*! The ground was so far away, making me breathe rapidly every time I thought about the distance I was flying over the city that had defined my *life*. Surging on my wings as they carried me forward until I was going faster than even Peace had been through Fillydelphia with street after street I'd have trudged through disappearing one after the other.

Yet always losing height...

Yet before me, I saw my goal. My inspired plan.

Between me and the wagon that was arcing in the air across this part of the city there lay a massive funnel above the smelting pits. I could see the air shimmering, thick with heat.

I was the paper...it was the fire.

The moment my flightpath broke the edge of the funnel, I felt my wings *yank* me upwards in the rising warm air! Under my body as well, the burning heat prickled and stung my skin, but the adrenaline set me to cry in excitement as I felt myself *lift*!

LIFT!

With a growing roar of passing air in my ear, I *soared* upwards! My whole body angling toward the skies as I gained altitude and hurtled back upwards again! The rush it gave me was beyond anything. Beyond any drawing, any theft...I felt a sheer pleasure as the rising heat sent me flying out toward the wagon. I swept past a Pinkie balloon and its grinning face to see the full vista of the city below.

From up here...I could see it all. The rows and rows of ruined buildings punctuated by industry pulling

out before me. The red and grey streaks of concrete and metal rising and falling with the glint of flames through it like staring into the coals of a campfire. A moment of cold clarity shot through me at where I was, away from the furnace below. How terrible and yet beautiful it felt to a pony who'd never flown before...

Within this mighty vista, flying below me, was the wagon.

I could see Unity in the back of it! She was grappling with the slaver, trying to hit him with something! The griffin in front was banking to either side. Squinting my eyes as I fought to concentrate and stay level, I tried to read where they'd go and let myself bank to the side. The motion tipped me over, throwing my balance off as the *whole world* inverted and I spiralled twice to the side before catching myself. I was at least going in the same direction as the wagon now, I just had to get closer!

My wings were so very sore, not used to this sort of use out of no-where, but I felt elated enough to ignore it as I pursued the mare who'd helped me get through this city from the very start. Pulling my wings in; I dove and sent myself hurtling toward them. I saw the wagon turn, bringing it toward me! In it, I saw Unity's eyes go wide for a moment.

She'd seen me.

Seen me *flying*.

A sudden rush of air hit me from below. I'd stumbled over another chimney where the hot air blasted me off course. Crying out, breathing hard, I tried to correct myself, feeling very out of control for all the wonder of this first flight. Everything felt imbalanced, every hard surface felt like a potential death and the worry over getting *down* was plaguing my every thought. Only getting to the *wagon* was keeping me from freaking out in worry by now.

The wagon was slowly turning to the left, toward the abandoned quarter of the city. I could see Unity and the slaver's fight in the back were throwing off the griffin's flightpath with the rocking and sudden shifts in weight. I tried to turn that way, more softly letting myself spin to the side, before I felt a more controlled turn go with me.

Yes...yes this was how to do it!

Suddenly, I was above the wagon again...the second jet of heat had pushed me way above it. I was headed in the same direction, but the griffin could change direction more fluidly ahead of me. I was approaching it too fast! I was too wide! I was going to miss it!

The griffin suddenly changed course. I saw the slaver suddenly snap back as Unity cracked him in the head with something. The weight of an unconscious pony falling onto the side sent the whole wagon twisting beyond what the griffin could correct. It sharply banked to the right again as I saw Unity grasping for a hold to avoid being thrown out.

I didn't have a choice. I hurled myself in that direction, spinning right around once in a stomach upsetting aerial tumble, almost feeling my wings lose their posture.

Then I saw the truth...I was going to miss. I had turned too sharply, I was going to fly past it and I'd *never* be able to turn well enough to get it again. I was so close! A moment of clarity as I saw Unity in the back, shouting something I couldn't hear over the rush of the wind to me. She had the saddlebags in her hooves.

She jumped.

The brief moment of realising that Unity was secretly *Goddesses damned insane* was quickly overridden by the will to toss out my hooves and try to grab her.

There was a moment...a picture still moment...as she was diving from the out of control wagon, one hoof outstretched toward me and the other clutching the precious bag as I stretched to reach her from my flightpath. A moment where we both saw the fear on each other's faces.

Then I felt the warmth of another grasp hold of my hoof.

The weight tore me from the sky.

Unity was a small unicorn, but her extra body weight make me drop almost vertically. I spun, pulling her in to my belly as I used my spin to wrap ourselves around one another. I think I screamed. I couldn't see anything as we tumbled over and over, falling toward the ground from the air. My wings kept getting thrown out of position! I didn't know how to place them to recover from a falling spin!

I decided to just let go of my thoughts...let instinct go. It had carried me this far.

Clutching Unity in tight, I spread my wings with a cry of pain and held them as steady as I could. My body was being spun diagonally downward...I still had *some* forward momentum...use it!

Throwing myself in the opposite direction of my spin, I felt *something* rebalance as the wind snatched us. We were still falling, but the glide was arcing out, becoming shallower...and faster the further we went on.

“Can you *land!*?” Unity shouted into my ear, unnecessarily loud.

“I...I...you jumped! *You jumped!*”

“NOT THE ISSUE!” Unity broke all her quiet personality to scream it as we hurtled across Fillydelphia's skyline. The tops of the hard buildings were getting worryingly close. We passed between two smoke stacks.

I tried to spot any sort of rising heat! Anything to get some height again! There were some, but I couldn't resist the speed we were moving at at to turn into them, not with a passenger. If I tried too hard the winds and air around me felt like it'd throw me out of control into the ground.

“Move left! MOVE LEFT!” Unity shouted again and I did as she asked, trying to curve us left as we almost collided with a scaffold structure. Slavers looked up in abject shock at what just soared past them.

Unity was doing something below me, trying to pull something out. I felt something poke my belly, something metal and hooked. I couldn't turn my head that far down to look, only hold on to her as she prepared whatever it was. I-WOAH!

I felt a sudden surge as we hit a wall of hot air. Burning pits below us cast a stench through my nostrils even as the heated air angled me upwards. I tried to spread out, use it like a thicker bit of air to slow down in with my wings wide, but if I went too slow we'd simply fall out the sky!

“Get near to something, Murk! Now!”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the tall square chimney of the refinery. I used the brief reprieve of height to arc toward it. I must have travelled halfway across Fillydelphia.

The building got closer...the ground got nearer...

“Unity...?”

There was no more heat around to get back up.

“*Unity!*”

Below me, I felt a sudden whoosh of air as something flew away. I saw my grapple's hook fire out and embed into the chimney.

After a few moments, the rope was pulled taut. I felt my momentum simply *end*. It took all the strength I had to hold on to Unity as she did the same for the saddle she'd dug out. We both screamed like foals as we wound around the chimney again and again. We skidded off the wall a few times, slowing us until I felt my back hit the wall and slide down it, slowly letting out the rope. Close enough to the ground, it slipped from her grasp...and we fell.

The old wooden roof of an abandoned hut shattered below us...before I felt myself almost knocked entirely out by the final landing.

Then...all was still.

Flying...

I'd...been flying...

I could feel somepony beside me, groaning and turning under one of my hooves.

My dizzied thoughts slowly collected...finding us lying in a dark hut, staring up at the clouds.

Wood fell around us slowly. Dust rose. The pain settled into my whole body.

The roar of the air was gone. The exhilaration replaced by a quickly dying high of fear, satisfaction and panic. My chest was thumping.

Yet all I could do...was laugh.

I laughed loud. I laughed long. Of happiness. Of success. Even as I felt Unity quickly pull her bruised body over to me in worry...I simply laughed. I thrust my sore hooves to the air.

“You told me what I needed! You *told* me! To taste freedom!”

The very first thing Protégé had ever told me to get. Up there, able to go anywhere, do my own thing, make the choice to leap! I'd done it! Felt what it was like! To be truly at my own mercy, soaring free on the winds of the world! I...I knew! *I knew!*

I punched the air again and again, before simply grabbing Unity and squeezing her tight. I felt her return the favour.

“Murky...I...wow...”

“I tasted it! Freedom!”

I screamed it to the sky, an elation, a *revelation* like no other!

“I know what it feels like!”

Chapter 25: The Apprentice's Downfall

* * *

“What was it like to fly for the first time?”

Sometimes, I really wish I was a pony that knew lots of fancy words to say it in a better way...

“Don't worry, just try. I'm sure it'll come to you.”

It...it was just a completely new feeling. Like my mind didn't even accept that what I saw was reality. Lots of ponies say something really incredible feels like a dream but...well...that actually did. Maybe it was all the air rushing into my mouth making me dizzy, but everything just felt so fantastical and full of happiness to even be up there.

It felt like freedom.

Like, um...like I could go in any direction I willed! No-pony could tell me otherwise because no-pony else was there! Nothing but me, the crisp winds and the choice to go wherever I wanted. It terrified me with the possibilities, laying so many roads in front of me that I just couldn't imagine which one to travel on. You see, on the ground there's streets and walls blocking you...but up there it's all empty. Just a boundless expanse. Flying is like the ultimate freedom and at last I had finally known how much of a massive rush that feeling could be.

Sure, we all wanted out, but my friends had all once lived free. They knew what that was like from memory. Now I joined them in knowing. I understood what drove them to seek an escape without needing the same helpful shove that I did.

“Fantastical? Boundless expanse? Hah, you're more poetic than you think you are, Murky. Must be the artist in you, you tell it almost fairytale like, really.”

It is?

“Your first taste of freedom, to save your first friend. Both these things discovered in the same day. How could that not be something magical?”

Oh...yeah. Unity...

Much as flying was a delight to my mind, I really was still reeling from that one. I felt so stupid, so ignorant to not have how important she was to me when I first met her. Or...met her again. It was confusing...

I didn't feel a sudden rush of attachment. There wasn't any sudden mental snap and glorious remembering of every moment, nor a returning emotional outburst between us. Our memories had been desperately stripped by our own actions and they remained so. Just because we knew what had happened didn't mean we remembered the feelings as normal ponies would. That made things a little more difficult to explain and to comprehend.

We were friends. Yet it was like being told by life itself that we were supposed to be deeper friends than we'd ever thought or known without feeling anything different to our minds in the *present*. Imagine somepony told you to just “like someone more” right out of the blue. That's what it felt like.

Were we still the same ponies as back then? We'd both changed so much over time. My first flight alone spoke volumes of that. Now we were left together after landing with a moment for me to...to try and explain this all to her.

I'm sorry, I'm stammering at random here...it's just so confusing...

“Take your time.”

Unity had *loved* her buck from before. Had we really been more than friends? Was it just something below the surface that had gone unspoken before and only came to mind because her subconscious was all that remembered anything? Had it all been misinterpreted in the memory removal and there was nothing more?

I'd learned what it was to fly and be free. Learning to deal with a lost part of my life in the blur of Fillydelphia's nightmares would take a little longer. At the very least it was a positive and happy thing. We were reunited, I had to tell myself to keep focusing on the upbeat side of it. *We knew the truth.*

No matter what confusion it caused us, whatever came at the end or whatever we were before...I cared for her and I knew she did for me. A burden had been lifted and while I was still in shock, I couldn't deny a certain part of me that had longed for somepony for so long suddenly felt contented. A weight on my shoulders I now recognised as the responsibility I'd felt every time I was near her. I knew she felt the same way, Unity had dragged me out of danger just as many times.

Now we'd just have to focus on getting out of the city. We'd sworn once, 'together or not at all.'

We were together again.

“So that was another big check off the list then, huh? Unity's issue sorted. Supplies found. Sunny was back with you. You had the orb to activate Ministry Station. Just the foals to go, isn't it? This is one long tale you've told, surely this is it, this is where it starts to end.”

Yes. It is, but not exactly in one sweeping motion. We still had to find a way into the Station again. We *could* risk the outer metro and the asylum...but no-one really wanted to use that route again. Not with foals and such a large group. It was at the centre of a nexus of conspiracy though-

“Told you, poetic.”

I...um...s-sure? Whatever, I...I knew there had to be other ways. Glimmer knew too and was working on it when she could. There were complications to come, some huge. Yet even before they happened there was one big issue. That was Protégé.

He'd gone back to Red Eye's regime in an attempt to stop the madness that was unfolding in every slave den and work pit. An enemy was descending and before the next day was out I would see them with my own eyes. Terrible news was due to arrive just before them and Shackles' play for power was accelerating with every hour to take advantage of it.

Protégé was alone amongst that all that...one pony trying to stand against a city that was, without its great leader, now beginning to change for the worse. They'd labelled him a traitor, he had enemies at every level. He had no proof...no-pony to help him from within.

He was more idealistic than he would care to admit to even dare walk into that lion's den. I desperately wanted him to come with us. I wanted to show him the same thing he'd told me to find for myself. Help him find his freedom! As far as I could see, he was a slave to the core and he needed my help. I just needed to talk to him. Get through and let him realise that he could say it, he could ask to come with us and I would let him...

“You wanted to help the stallion who'd fought you on a mountain, shot at you and tried to stop your only chance to escape!”

Only because he'd been ordered to!

Now his *orders* and the ideals he felt he *had* to adhere to were dragging him back into a slave city that was ready to pounce on him in his moment of weakness. He was already set to answer for things he'd done with the best intentions but they weren't going to let that be all. They wanted to throw him down, destroy him before all others. Celestia help me, I felt *sorry* for him! I wanted to help him find a better life more fitting of who he was inside.

Yet this day, after he strode back to Fillydelphia's authority in the face of things ready to crush his dreams and harm him in ways perhaps only I could understand, he would have to do something he'd never

had to do in his life before by the end of it.

Make a choice.

* * *

Unity and I scampered across the street as the large fuel wagon convoy passed, sticking to the cover of the foul tasting dust it kicked up from the road. I had to hold my breath as the hot particles tickled at my throat and nose. It mixed with the smog in the air, it was thick in this part of Fillydelphia, drifting heavy in the air from the surrounding refineries and radiation engine outlets. The buzzing hum of intense power at work filled the air with an unsettling vibration that shimmered in the heat around us, offering background noise to make our escape. As Unity and I rolled off the tarmac into the ditch at the opposite side, I had to hold my mouth to the inside of a leg to stifle a harsh cough.

The ground was such a very filthy place...nothing like up there. My eyes found themselves wandering toward the cloud cover, searching for any little hole away from the clammy ambience of the ground.

“Murky, in here!” Unity hissed from nearby as she gently pressed open a loose wooden door to an abandoned security gate station. One side of it had been charred to a near pitch and gleaming black.

Keeping low to the ground to evade the watchful eyes on the creaking walkways above, I followed the cream mare inside before bucking the metal rimmed door closed behind me.

It had taken us over an hour to get out of the refinery we'd landed in. Over an hour of hiding in rank waste rooms, sneaking behind thick smoke clouds and squeezing through tiny holes of the surrounding walls. Now we were moving through the plant's outer areas to try and rejoin the main thoroughfare of Fillydelphia where we could hopefully locate a sewer line to reunite with the others. For now though, we had to stop. Until the shift change the roads were too barren to use and frankly, we were exhausted and sore after the landing. (Yes, landing. I was going to call it as such and that was final, even if Unity disagreed.)

Inside, I was surprised to find the lights still active on the upper floor. After we trotted upstairs, we found a long broken window overlooking the roads in and out of the refinery above a panel long stripped of its circuitry. I presumed they'd once been for alarm buttons and gate switches, yet now there only existed an empty hole where the controls had once been. While musty and humid, it was a good hiding place. We could see over the fences into the pathways outside while being able to bunker down in and rest for a while. Stripping the worn and only slightly moth eaten cushions from the guard chairs gave us something to sit on too.

Finally, for the first time since we'd landed, the pair of us fell back against the wall and closed our eyes. We didn't speak, instead just taking a moment to get our breath back after the mad rush of activity in the last couple hours.

Outside I could hear bands of Red Eye's soldiers marching past, their hooves sending a slight shiver through the ground. By the sounds of what they were saying, they'd been collecting fuel for flamethrowers and fire traps. If I peeked over the edge, I could see a thick mass of the clumsy Pinkie balloons as the city's reserves launched to keep a wary eye on the skies around Filly. Even in the distance, the Wall's high walkways at the top looked more crowded than usual. There was a fever of activity starting up in the city.

As I sat back down, I found Unity looking at the empty orb from the mountain. It glittered, sending sparkles of magical light around its core and even seeming to drift off it in Unity's magic. The red glow of her telekinesis set the orb twinkling with various other colours too. It never seemed to settle on one colour...always just 'off white' with some shades I couldn't bring my eyes to focus on. It never settled on one solid shade, always drifting between the colours of the rainbow with a white crystal tinge. Unity's wide eyes gleamed as they reflected the non-specific colours, before turning to me.

“What did you see?”

“War...” I muttered quietly, despite knowing I had no experience to state what that was or wasn't, “Protégé told me about it. The Enclave is coming...”

“The nation of pegasi?” Unity seemed disbelieving. “They're just legends. Myths.”

“Well...I'm here, so pegasi have to exist,” I pushed a smile onto my face, “After all, I did just take off and land. That sort of proves we can really fly. What's so hard about believing they live up there to get away from all this?”

Unity snorted in laughter. “Land? No, Murky, we crashed.”

“That was completely a landing!”

“Well then I'd hate to see you crashing.” She stuck her tongue out. “You crashed.”

The nerve of her! Just...just cos I fell on my back screaming after she'd had to save us from really crashing didn't mean it was a...a crash...maybe a heavy landing. Yes, that was it! Murky logic wins again!

Unity laid back against the wall again with a chuckle, she must have seen the insulted look on my face. I'd show her a landing someday...prove I could. Buuuut till then I figured I'd rest off the cra...heavy landing. I settled down beside her, head on the stone wall as I tried to tune out the sounds of army leaders' shouting to their troops and the distant crack of firing ranges all around the city.

Sharing brief moments of humour with a friend in this city. It almost felt out of place after everything I'd come to think of it. Orders, pain, humiliation and crying...this was a world away despite being in the exact same place. Friends really did make all the difference. I didn't want to lose this.

It was then that I realised I still had to tell Unity about what Glimmer had discovered.

Suddenly, the fear and worry settled in. Peeking an eye open, I saw Unity lying with her head resting on the edge of the security station's dashboard, seemingly sleeping. Only her eye suddenly opening reminded me she-

I pulled my head away. Instantly trying to 'unlook' at her, trying to appear as though I'd just been searching all around the whole room.

“Did you hear something?” She asked quietly, clearly tensing up as she brushed a lock of her wavy mane from an eye.

“No, no...just...no, nothing.”

A voice inside was screaming, 'Just tell her!' It pushed my mouth to open and say something, put my trust in Unity being the good pony she was to not think I was insane, yet it simply felt dry and thick, unable to form proper words. What if she thought I was trying to...to exploit it? No, stupid Murky...I had proof on me and back with Glimmer. Then why not wait till then? Yes...wait...give myself time to think on it and...and...

“Murky, what's wrong? You're sweating. I know you well enough to know when you're worried.”

She got up, shifting her cushion closer and gently turning my face toward hers. It was hard to really look at her. I knew this mare more than I...well, *knew her*. Or did I? Why didn't I feel like I knew her more then? I was still seeing the mystery mare I'd met for the first time just before the Pit. My mind knew the truth but it...it didn't *feel* any different...

Of course, I didn't remember. Knowing the truth and *remembering* those days were two very separate things.

Instead, I tried smiling. Immediately, I saw her expression soften as I shook my head and lay back against the wall, trying to think what to say. Quaking, my chest tightened in worry, the thick mass inside me thumping and burning as I felt my windpipe tighten. Turning away, I coughed harshly, my lungs surging in pain as my bone dry throat clenched.

“Murky?” Unity's hoof rested on my back.

Waving a hoof behind myself at her, I shook my head...I...I was okay. I had RadAway back at the pumping station. I'd been in a reprieve with access to RadAway lately, but I knew how quickly these tainted lungs could turn nasty. The mountain had proven that. I was still badly sick, merely treating the symptoms, not the ever growing disease inside. I would be out of here soon, get proper help somehow...I'd beat this. So

long as I didn't have to stay in here.

“Just a...a lot of things going on, worried for what's going to happen...excited that I...I...”

“That you *flew*.” She broke into a wide smile as her hoof wrapped around mine and helped me back up. “I couldn't believe my eyes up there. Seeing you sweep in on the winds, wings spread and those goggles on like a real pegasus. I can't tell you how happy I am for you...”

Unity's other front hoof came down on top of her other one, squeezing mine between the two. I did the same, until we both broke down in a fit of excited giggles, mine fighting to not choke and splutter again. Talking over one another, the moment finally settled in.

“I...I just...it was incredible!”

“Up *that* high!”

“When we went between those smoke stacks?”

“And...and soaring so fast in a dive!”

Really, I couldn't help but laugh. The emotions from those minutes in the air were still surging too strongly and for the first time since coming down they really returned in full. I'd been too concentrated on escaping the refinery to really think about it.

Now however...I felt the shivers returning. The great big grin of excitement and unbridled joy. I'd felt free. Oh so free...like I could do anything.

Like I could...do anything...

If I could do *that*, I could tell her this.

I got up, twisting around to sit in front of Unity. My wings flapped out a little, stretching as I moved away from the wall. The pain in them as the sore muscles worked actually felt good. A satisfying ache of post-exercise success. I swallowed deeply, biting my lip...before me she sat upright and looked a little confused. Why had I moved away a little? Why was I looking nervous and happy at the same time? Why was I gripping her hooves tighter? I could read her face like a book.

“Unity...I...I...it's...”

I felt like my lip was about to draw blood.

“...me.”

Her eyes betrayed the confusion immediately. Oh right, no subject, didn't say what I *was*. I wanted to pull away, frantically make an excuse up.

“The one y-you're looking for, it's...it's really confusing and sorry I didn't mean to just say it but I didn't know how and...it's me and...I don't even know because I didn't know and...and I want to try to tell you but I don't know and...”

I took a breath...screwing my eyes shut in anxiety and praying I did everything right. So I did my best...and told it to her face, trying not to let my voice break as I said the words.

“I'm the buck you were looking for...and you were the mare I'd been dreaming of trying to find...”

Unity didn't say anything, her eyes just widened, almost in denial or finding it too absurd, so I quickly spoke again, explaining the rest.

I'm not a pony who can draw out the suspense when I'm talking. Really I just stammered, blushed and backtracked my way through it. I told different bits in the wrong order and showed her my journal long before it should have been relevant to explaining things. I had to fight to stop myself from letting a few tears slip out as I felt it all well up inside me.

Yet through it all...she just listened. A look of shock and confusion maybe, but she never interrupted or accused me of anything. It took me a few minutes before I figured out why. Unity was in the same boat as I

was, she trusted me more than her heart knew. If I'd heard this from her I might have reacted the same way.

Only as things reached the end...only as I told her my full name did I see the worry set into her eyes. She knew the initials on that love lock. She knew I couldn't read well to have known back then.

She trusted that I wouldn't lie to her.

Then there was the horrid silence. The moment after I realised I had no more to say and stopped speaking. We just stared at one another. Unity was shivering on the spot...holding herself up against the wall to stay steady. I just sat still, one hoof wrapped over the other and almost bleeding from the lip at biting it in nervousness.

"I..." Unity started to speak, before faltering and shaking her head, "I just...sorry I can't...I..."

What was I meant to say? I really didn't know. My mouth opened a few times, my hoof tried to move and gesture...but I just fell short every time.

Suddenly, she shook her head hard. "I just...I need some air, I...I need *air!*"

Unity got up and galloped past me, half limping after the crash as she headed for the stairs to the roof. Her head was down, her magic still carrying my journal with her after I'd hoofed it to her. Briefly, I saw her face look wet, two trails seeping through the dirt and filth any slave in Fillydelphia had. Hooves clattering on the creaky wood, she disappeared upstairs before I could even raise my courage to say or move at all.

"Unity! *Unity, wait!*"

The roof was visible from the outside! We were higher up, likely out of sight but...but it was a risk! I got up and hastily followed her. I could feel the aches setting in as I started on the stairs, my back between my wings especially. Tripping twice, I more fell onto the roof than stepped. It was surrounded by a high parapet for armed guards to watch from, easing my worries a little about being seen. Looking frantically around, I spotted Unity with her back against the lip, breathing hard with her hooves covering her face. She was crying.

Suddenly, I felt very guilty indeed.

"What is *wrong* with this forsaken city?!" Unity spluttered to herself, her head shaking into her hooves. "How can things like this...just...just *happen*? Why does it have to? I just wish I could have stayed in Friendship City that day, not gone out and gotten taken away! If I'd stayed in I'd still be with my family and not all...all this doing things I don't understand! This is just...my life is...*I don't even know anymore!*"

The journal lay open by her side, showing the same image I had first seen. I wish I felt like the same pony that was cuddled up to her in that drawing, but I wasn't.

Slowly, I approached. Partly to not rush her, but also because I needed time to think what to say. My own eyes felt swollen and sore and my breath ragged. Eventually, I just sat nearby.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Unity..." I spoke quietly, not looking at her, "that...that this all had to...to happen. Fillydelphia is..."

Is evil? A nightmare? A blight on this world to cause horrors within that forever hurt you deeper than simple pain and hunger ever could? What other place could have caused such a thing to happen? To put two ponies in this position?

I didn't even finish the sentence. Instead I just watched as she got up and paced indecisively in circles. She was avoiding looking at me, instead just letting her eyes look across the hell of Fillydelphia on all sides. The crude refinery...the glow of the crater, the restraint of the closest wall from life outside...the jagged mountain peak above it...

Slavery and memory. The two things Fillydelphia had been hurting ponies with since long before the balefire and for centuries after it, only growing more foul with every generation nestled within its cruel heart. We were no different, merely the latest ponies to have fallen prey to it.

I put my head down, feeling something trickling down my cheek...before I felt all too young and meek again. Like I was about to just break down like I used to.

“Murky...?” Unity's voice was quiet. Her hooves ceased moving. Her face turned to me, red and wet across her cheeks. “Who are we?”

I forced myself to my hooves. I couldn't sit and look for sympathy here, we were *both* in this.

“I don't remember...” I spoke quietly, not quite looking eye to eye with her. “I know who...I just don't remember that time after I was brought here.”

It hurt me to look at her. For the first time I saw her not as a fellow slave...but as the pony she should be. Just a young learner from Friendship City who got pulled away from her life and cast into this pit. The filth that covered her body was wrong. Her mane that should have looked wonderful was bedraggled and twisted. I could see who she *could* be. A bright, optimistic and wonderfully heartfelt pony with a beautiful talent for friendship though memory. Somepony I would look to and know I wanted to be around them like I did all the others. She was-

A few breaths shuddered through me as I looked more directly at her. “B-but I know one thing? I know who *you* are. You're my...my friend. No matter w-what...”

I raised a hoof as I said it, a small gesture...but one I saw her eyes follow as I lightly placed it over my heart.

“And I want us to both get out of here. Forever.”

I couldn't really hold it in any longer...I let my own sobbing take hold as I looked away and covered my eyes with my raised hoof.

For a moment, I thought Unity was about to collapse in emotion...before instead she cantered and then almost leapt forward. Her hooves squeezed me tightly, as did mine to her. Both of us had been about ready to lose it without somepony else there. Even within the hot metal stench of the production quarter, the warmth of a friend is something entirely different.

Atop that rooftop, in the middle of slavery, even as the horn for the shift change sounded and the processions of ponies trapped in here with us began to march to the rhythm of forced industry, we simply held each other tightly. Muzzle to shoulder on both sides. There was no individual comforting...it was mutual. Not loving...just an act of caring. One little island of peace.

“Murky...I don't know what's happening. I...I don't know what we are. Who we really are, other than what we know. I don't care about the past and if...if whatever we were before ever happens again.”

Her voice sounded frail...but at least she could put words together. Something far beyond me at this moment.

“All I know is you're my friend too and...and we'll...we'll figure it out. Together.”

I sniffed and squeezed tighter.

“Together or not at all.”

* * *

There were perhaps very few ponies in Equestrian history quite as glad as the two of us to see a sewer pumping station in all its filthy glory. After a couple hours making slow progress over the entire city, we wearily trotted through the rancid gunk coating the tunnel floor into that familiar area of our hideout with borrowed clothes around our mouths to block out the smell.

There'd been a couple close calls as we made our way over roads, with how thick the city was with activity it was as much a blessing as a curse. It meant more processions of filthy and hobbling slaves we could blend in with...but it also meant more slavers. They were on edge, red eyed gas masks peering down at everypony they saw from platforms above the roads. The tension in the air was thick, driven on by the

presence of fully armed soldiers waiting at many corners with shining new weapons mismatching against their individually unique and scavenged barding. Some of my older routes to sneak through weren't available anymore, as Red Eye's army was taking over abandoned buildings to construct anti-air batteries on their rooftops. Quad barrels or long thick cannons protruded from edges, all angled toward the main gate.

End result, we were physically tired, mentally frustrated and emotionally exhausted by the time we made our way through it. I just wanted to collapse and let my mind shut down for a while. Yet at the very least, the journey had given us something to focus on other than the awkward glances and half sentences to one another. Friends or not...this wasn't easy.

Regardless, I couldn't help but feel relief at the first face we met in the tunnels outside the station.

“Hey, kids!”

Nonchalant, Glimmer looked up and smiled from the platform above us, just beside the stairwell leading to it and our hideaway. That effortless and confident smirk was just enough to help me feel more at ease. Big sis was here, that meant it'd all be fine.

I sped up a little, trotting up the stairs to meet her embrace, hugging tightly into her shoulder. I actually squeaked as she crushed me in return.

“I'm so proud of you, lil'bro. I watched you from that crane. Saw you soar...”

“It...ack!” I was cut short as the wind went out from my lungs again. Coughing and gagging, I backed off as Glimmer let me go and gave me a thick slap on the back. I went rigid as my sore wing muscles jerked and sent my wings jerking around stiffly.

“It was *incredible*. Just relieved you two are okay, I couldn't see where you landed.”

Unity followed me up, coming alongside my sis and I.

“Well, actually...”

“We landed near the-”

“We crashed off the-”

She and I found ourselves looking at each other with narrowed eyes. Off to the side, I could hear Glimmer's unrestrained howl of laughter.

“Oh you two are too much, sometimes.” Glimmer wiped her eyes before fixing me with a look. Its meaning was clear.

Have you told her yet?

Hesitantly, I made a couple of tiny nods.

“Quite the couple, so I hear.” She teased carefully, looking over at Unity before slowly pulling her in for a hug of her own. “I know this must be hard. I'm here for you too, hun.”

“Hugs like this do kinda help...” Unity joked, before making a small sniff and squeezing my sister tighter, “we talked it out a bit.”

“And? How do you two...feel?”

Glimmer sat down between us, a leg over each of our shoulders to hug both of us in to her sides as we took a moment to stumble and stammer over what we'd discussed on that building's roof. With Glimmer there, somepony more mature and confident than both of us, things felt a little more stable to talk.

“Well, we decided that we wanted to, um...” I stammered, before Unity finished for me.

“We wanted to figure it out together. As friends.”

Glimmerlight squeezed both of us tightly. I could have sworn I heard her go 'Aww...'

“Then you both made the right choice. Now, you two know what I'm like. I'll joke, I'll tease, but I'll not

ever push either of you for real, okay? Just take it easy, there is no need to rush any of this. Be who you are *now*, not what you feel you might have been then. There's no pressure for anything, right?"

We both nodded. Glimmer was right. Honestly, it just felt odd. If I was honest with myself I had spent years kind of...wanting somepony special for me. I'd felt envious of Unity for having someone when I was still alone. Yet now I didn't feel any urge to grab hold of any chance.

Was it awkward timing, the confusing situation or had I just matured a little?

Again, if I admitted my real feelings to myself...I did *like* Unity. She was quiet and thoughtful, easy for a nervous pony like me to talk to and had a slightly off-beat way of thinking that I found very interesting. Perhaps after all this I just felt exhausted at the thought of two ponies being forced together by fate rather than by a genuine evolving friendship. After all...wasn't that what relationships were?

That was, assuming we really had been anything before. I presumed that's what we were trying to figure out.

Glimmer let go of us both, sweeping to her hooves with a musical hum. "Now, let's get inside, kids. Listen, I've told the others. They're good ponies, they'll *all* support you...but I've asked them to give you a little space on the issue. You two do what you need to but don't hesitate to come to us if you need somepony to talk to."

"We won't."

"Thanks, sis."

Glimmer saluted and spun away to trot her way back inside.

"I'm totally reserving the right to still find a stallion for Murky, though!" She shouted over her shoulder as she turned into the doorway and disappeared.

Unity blinked on the spot, confused, before turning and giving me a quick once over, looking half way between smirking and confused. "Is there something I should know?"

I was already cradling my head in my hooves.

"Yes...that my sister is *evil*."

* * *

The others welcomed us with quite significant relief and excitement. Coral held us both tightly, as I felt Brimstone's give me a wink and a prod with a smile. I could tell when he was showing a little respect for something I'd done. (Hang on...is a wink a blink for him now? Nevermind...)

Mister Peace, as ever, was about as subtle as a balefire missile in his appreciation for our safe return. It took us both some minutes to convince him to put us down from his shoulders again. Even Sunny offered Unity a smack on the back and praise for her daring leap onto the wagon.

I felt myself turn around in the middle of it all, hunting for somepony else. Somepony who wasn't there. My heart sunk a little more than I realised it would, before I was dragged back by Coral into another tight squeeze and asked to tell the story of what had happened up there. (It was my story to tell, so I told the *correct* version about how we got back on the ground.)

Surrounding us were the supplies we had stolen. It made me realise just how close we were. We had enough food to last us a few weeks in the wasteland if we accounted for Sunny and Brimstone's hunting skills. Enough medical supplies to keep us going, most especially my sickness. We had weapons, ammunition and tools. We had maps of Equestria, camping utilities and even pop-up tents. All of this was in the middle of being arranged into several saddlebags and thick cargo hoists that Brimstone and Mister Peace would carry. We had Sunny with us again, we had discovered the truth for Unity. Glimmerlight had all she needed to look for alternate routes into Ministry Station and even if she failed, we had an alternative one, albeit at great danger.

All that remained now on our group's plans was to solve the issue of the foals. They had been taken

back to the Alpha-Omega Hotel by Grindstone's own word. He was a silver-tongued liar through and through, but I saw no reason to doubt that he had here. Kidnapping foals would be too obvious, even for them. Chirpy Sum, Lilac Rose and Starshine Melody were coming with us and now awaited our rescue from one of the most heavily guarded buildings in Fillydelphia.

Thankfully...it wasn't up to us to break in.

I pointed my hoof at the hotel on a map of Fillydelphia while the group looked on. (Everypony knew where it was, but it made me feel important to do that.) I knew the foals best, having met all three. So this was my little call to make amongst the bigger plans the others had done.

“Starshine Melody broke out once, that's how she got caught by the ghouls in the crater and taken to that underground base place. She knows how to get a foal out of the hotel and as far as we know...Red Eye's assistants in there never figured out how. Chirpy Sum also got out to sneak onto the train with us because he's permitted to leave for study under slavers.”

Oh Goddesses, everypony was looking at me saying this. I bit my lip and swallowed, trying to force myself to keep talking. I knew sneaking, this could work!

Catching Glimmer's eye, I saw her smile a little. The sight made me take a breath and calm down a little. Believe in your sis, Murky...

“When I got Lilac Rose into the hotel and later met her, I told her and Starshine to watch out for a note in the way that she got out last time. A drainpipe has a hole near it on the fence. If I leave them a note there, then they can sneak out themselves to meet us down the...uh...”

I struggled to remember, tapping my head.

“The...the old servant's staircase! Yes! So we can just wait in a hiding spot till we see them! They'll never even know they disappeared until it's too late.”

Oh yes, feel proud, Murky. You just detailed a *plan!* I felt myself stand a little straighter up. Like a pegasus, yeah!

“Well, someone's happy with his idea...” Coral smirked and patted me on the head before looking at the map where I'd been pointing.

I lowered my eyebrows. Aww, c'mon...ruining my moment here with all this patting...

“We aren't leaving without them.” Coral's words brokored no argument. “If we're going to pick them up we'll need to take some things to keep them warm outside the hotel. Fillydelphia's hot but the winds can be bad for foals. We'll need three ponies in case we have to gallop off and carry them. I'm going, Murky?”

I nodded. There was no way I wasn't. Starshine hadn't met anypony but Brim or I and the big stallion was hardly the master of stealth.

“I'd love to come get that little rascal,” Glimmer spoke as she waved some metro and city maps in her magic, “but I've got to find us a way down. Got a theory about that place you mentioned though, Murky...that crater base where the ghouls were. I'll fill you all in later if it pans out. I'll be busy though, can't go.”

“I'll come with you.” Unity stood up. “I'm good with kids, my first job was minding the nursery at Friendship City and your son already knows me.”

“Glad you stepped up, can't stand the little bastards...” Sunny rolled her eyes, “give me a dog any day.”

“Why, Sunny...” Coral raised an eyebrow as she began to pick up for blankets and warm clothes for the foals, “not the maternal type?”

Sunny leaned back on the wall and rolled her eyes at the older mare with a shake of her head, blowing smoke from a cigarette she'd somehow acquired on our looting. “You've got time though, no need to rush there. Shift change isn't for an hour by my estimate and forget moving before that.”

I agreed with Sunny. We'd just come in from outside and Fillydelphia was getting worryingly bare on the streets with so many slavers around by the time Unity and I had reached a sewer opening. Going back out would be...unwise.

To that end, we used the time packing up what we could. Weapons were stripped and maintained by Sunny as Glimmer put her efforts to mapwork. Coral and I sewed repairs on the fabric we'd gotten as well as strengthening and waterproofing our bags. We'd pass them over to Brimstone and Unity who would stuff them full.

I did have to admit, it *was* pretty funny seeing the small mare and the massive raider sharing the task in silence. They were both as happy with quiet work as the other was.

The tasks didn't last forever though, giving way to a short meal of canned fruit (Oh my Goddesses, the *taste* after a lifetime of gruel, oatmeal and stale bread!) and a moment to rest before heading back out. I sat and drew, bringing the imagery of Brim and Unity to life in my journal with the newly reacquired charcoal sticks.

"Hey...lil'bro?" Glimmer dropped in beside me with a thump, immediately leaning over to watch what I was drawing. "You know, you always draw her mane like it wasn't dirty."

"Cuth it thoodn't be..." I muttered around the charcoal before taking it out, "I draw your mane pretty as well..."

"Eye for the manes, eh?" She prodded my side and leaned in. "What about ponytails?"

I giggled and nodded, I could entertain her. "Ponytails look really nice, I like them a lot to dr-."

Her laugh was louder than I had anticipated. What had she...

"Too easy," Glimmer shook her head, "now listen. We've got a little left before you head out and...uh..."

Her voice died a little, as she motioned me through to a side room of the pumping station. A little confused, I got up and trotted after her, leaving the journal behind me in the main room. Leaving those working behind us, we went to the back room. It was dark, but the driest area where we would often use to sleep if we had a moment spare down here. Numerous woollen rugs and blankets were laid out, everypony had their own little space.

Glimmerlight settled on her lime green blanket and turned to me as she drew across her bag of orbs. Unity was keeping the special orb safe on her. Given what she'd done to get it, I couldn't blame her.

"Murky, I think this is the one where it happens."

Her magic held up a memory orb. Deep blue, shifting and shimmering just below its glass like surface.

"It's...it's the last main piece of my memory from back then. I wanted to use it when you were away but...but I...well..."

I gulped, "You wanted me here?"

In the dark, I could just see my sister nod slightly. If I didn't have pretty good night vision I likely would have missed it.

"It's not that I'm scared and need you here, Murky. Just that you've helped me with this, you've seen everything and you've never judged me. It helps justify myself having somepony I trust here to do it with me. Gets it out in the open. So...would you go this one more step?"

I didn't hesitate. "Always, sis."

Her hoof ruffled my mane, before I felt her kiss my forehead and lean close. "Knew I could count on you. I don't know what's going to happen in this. The village is attacked and we're taken for slavery but...I...I don't know what it involves or how it goes down. Bringing Diamond back caused it, I know that now, but I have to see it to prove to Coral that I'm not who I was then. That I can face the past."

I took the memory orb in my hooves, feeling the magical tingle on my body. The light from it offered

just enough to see Glimmer's face in a pale blue haze.

“Coral still cares for you, Glimmer. You've proven it in the present. You...you might argue occasionally still like really bad relatives and I know she holds grudges for a long time, but she knows you're doing this and she wouldn't let you put yourself through this if it contained anything...too much to handle feeling. Not something that would hurt you today.”

Glimmer sat silently for a few seconds, clearly thinking deeply on that. I'd only ever heard or seen hints of her worries about that time. While it might be painful to watch through this, I had a feeling it'd help let her finally *know*. To beat what had once become a hurtful coping mechanism for her. I trusted Coral wouldn't have let her go through with it...had it been anything too traumatic on a personal level.

“Well then...” Glimmer took a deep breath before just shaking her head and grabbing the orb, “screw it, let's just do it and I can put this away for good.”

Her horn lit and I felt everything drop away around me.

oooOOOooo

Glimmer didn't waste any time on returning to the village. Carrying the heavily injured Diamond between them, she and Coral threw open the door to what I presumed was the hut they held any meetings in. A taller building of thickly woven dry branches and packed earth.

“Madam Beau! Madam Beau!” Coral galloped ahead, past the rows of benches and toward a door behind an frayed flag as Glimmerlight hoisted Diamond onto a central wooden table supported by piled stones.

Her hooves grasped at Diamond's cheeks, peering close to see if there was any life left in his eyes. I (She...) could see a faint movement of his pupils, confused and scared.

“Hold on...just hold on, Diamond...we've got potions! We'll save you! Hold on, please just...just hold on!”

Her rapid breathing betrayed a panic. Looking up at the sound of two ponies returning quickly, I saw Coral Eve and the elderly mare I'd once seen as the village's leader.

She shuffled with haste, if not speed, carrying an old medical pack on her side. Coming alongside Diamond, she began immediately digging for something in it.

“I do not know why you bring an outsider here, Glimmerlight. We shall deal with that afterwards, but I won't watch a pony die in my village before me. Wrap this around the barrel of his torso, quickly!”

A thick dressing was shoved into Glimmer's hooves. I could feel her shaking as she set to work, physically hauling with her limbs and lifting with telekinesis to turn Rough Diamond. Coral Eve helped her, both their hooves becoming matted with slick warm blood from the deep stomach wound.

“What happened to him?” Madam Beau spoke firmly with her creaky voice, not once stopping her work to gradually pour the potion down an unresponsive Diamond's throat.

“Raiders.” Coral spoke the single word curtly, before having to hold down Diamond's kicking legs. “Out in the woods nearby, we killed the ones that attacked him...but there's never just a few on their own.”

“There can be, Miss Eve, if we are beyond lucky. Hold him down! He's going into shock!”

Diamond's limbs were shaking so hard it was actually causing him worse pain. Glimmerlight smothered him in her telekinesis as Coral leaned her weight over the bottom half. It made Glimmer's job difficult, I could feel the complexity of the magic to hold him down while also working with her hooves on a tricky task to tie a dressing around their patient. I couldn't explain it in words, I was no unicorn, I just *felt* the difficulty.

“Madam,” Glimmerlight didn't look up as she spoke, “will that potion work?”

“Gutshot...not really meant to take anything by mouth but potions work a little differently. Not as though we have much choice, young lady. We have no spell based healing in Creaky Hollow.”

They worked together, holding him still, feeding him the full potion bit by bit and keeping the dressing tightly secure around the wound. Blood seeped around it, gradually slowing over time. Diamond's breathing began to settle as he lay back into the Madam's hooves. He was very pale...

“Now, Glimmerlight,” Madam Beau looked up, “did anypony follow you?”

“No...we didn't see anyone.”

“Did anypony see you leave with him?”

“I...”

“Why were they this close? How would they know? Why would somepony on the run come this far out?”

I could feel Glimmer's eyes turning wet under the tone of interrogation. Coral Eve remained silent and stern across the table.

“Glimmerlight, you know our rules...if anypony were to-”

She was cut off by a rasping and distant call from the outside, far off.

A drifting blare of a crooked and out of tune horn crept in over the village from the surrounding forest. A chill ran down Glimmer's back as it repeated, closer this time. A warbling and uncertain note that hung in the air each time it sounded, harsh and cutting.

The three mares looked at one another in silence as it was followed by the not so distant howl of rough pony voices. Animalistic and feral.

Then came the sound of hooves upon the ground. Many hooves.

Coral Eve moved immediately, galloping to the hall doors and blasting them open with a harsh spark of her horn. A blood red sunset cast its light through them past her, as though coming from the forest itself, spreading across the ground and floors. Dust could be seen rising as trees shook by the passing of something out there, coming closer.

Slowly, Coral's head turned from the sight, open mouthed and clearly afraid.

“Madam...Madam get everypony inside! NOW!”

The howl turned to a roar as the ice broke and the stampede from far off began to close in. Raider cries were distinguishable. Even I could feel the sensation, that of 'It'll always happen to some other village.'

Now it was happening here. To her home.

Madam Beau turned back into the hall and pulled a switch on the wall. Outside I saw the glaring white flash of the town's perimeter lights spring into action. In the same motion, she frantically pulled a rope that set a bell on top of the hall clanging madly.

Glimmer turned her head away from their leader to gallop toward Coral and the door. Her magic snatched up Diamond's heavy rifle from the ground where she'd dumped it and loaded it from his own bags.

“Where is Chirpy?!” Coral shouted from beside her as two stallions ran toward the hall entrance carrying four foals between them. The youngsters were pale white and confused, scared but not understanding the true weight of the terror approaching.

“Last saw him at your house! He might be hiding!”

That was enough direction for Coral Eve, she immediately ran out into the growing madness that was the panicking village. Ponies pushed and screamed at one another to move. The worry was obvious on all their faces, they couldn't fight an attack off. Not a hope in hell.

“Coral, wait!” Glimmerlight shouted after the mare, before running outside too. She cast a look behind her at the prone form of Diamond on the table as she went, before everything became quickly too manic to see into the hall with so many ponies pushing into its thicker walls. Ponies bore grim faces, filled with

distant eyes of denial.

She ran across the warm gravel after her friend in the direction of Coral's home, breathing hard. Behind here, there was the small *pop pop pop* of flares being fired from the forest by the raiders. Three red lights erupted in the sky, casting a flickering crimson haze over everything below, damaging what reassurance the bright lamps meant to ward off timberwolves were doing.

“Coral! *Coral!*”

Her words went unheard as she watched a blue tail vanish into her home, leaving Glimmer amongst the few remaining ponies outside. Two mares were seen dragging leather armour on while a young buck struggled with a long hunting rifle. Hardly a force against...

Against...

A great roar emerged from behind her as Glimmer stopped and turned in horror.

The raiders broke the treeline. A wave of huge hounds bounded forth, rough haired and lean. Foamy spit dripped from their gnashing jaws as they surged around the buildings and threw themselves at any ponies they could meet. The screaming began in earnest. Ponies were caught between their homes and the hall and dragged to the ground amongst a frenzy of teeth and savage barks.

Behind them came their handlers, just as crazed as their canines. They carried nets and hooks, backed up by crossbows and old target rifles. Painted coats stood out with white and dull yellow designs below their armour. Some wore nothing and simply charged with the hounds, insane ponies who leapt and bit alongside their pets. After that, the swarm of armoured raiders with proper guns could be seen cheering and whooping to clear the forest and find their prize. They carried flaming torches that stood out under the shadow of the trees. In the glow of the flares above, they seemed like creatures from the depths of fiery horrors itself.

Glimmerlight stood virtually alone in front of it. No-pony was trying to help any another now. Fear had taken the village and they scattered toward the forest.

From behind the hall, a raider wielding a trident stopped and turned, yellowed eyes spotting her. For a few seconds, my sister seemed frozen as he howled and charged. Her rifle took a long time to move, before finally snapping up and barking its own retort into the air. The recoil was heavy, bucking madly against her magic grip. The raider snapped backward, the round punching them head over hooves, leaving them writhing on the ground in circles braying like a stuck brahmin.

To her side, the two mares both fired and shot down a raider before he could throw a burning stick onto the town hall. Their resistance didn't go unnoticed though, one of them jerked and fell, a raider's bullet punching through her light armour with ease. She didn't make a sound, until the shock wore off and she began to wail in pain from the ground. Helpless as the rest.

Glimmerlight started moving again, aiming for Coral's home even while her magic struggled with the heavy bolt. Some huts were already burning, raiders flowed through the gaps between them, silhouetted in the flames of their rampage. Ponies fled from some of their homes as they caught fire, right into the nets and powerful blows of their attackers.

She ran past ponies struggling with raiders. The bigger villagers wrestled in the mud and gravel with raiders jingling from their number of piercings. Diamond's rifle fired again to knock one from the roof of her own hut. Then again at a hound that ran near Coral's house and missed. She kept running. Running and shouting as her home was torn down around her. I wasn't a master strategist, but I could see they had no hope. They were massively outnumbered and the raiders were hardened and brutal. Already the town was becoming an inferno. Out of the corner of her eyes, Glimmerlight could see ponies that fled for the forest being pulled down by raiders that seemed to leap from the shadows of the trees.

Creaky Hollow was already a ruin, scant minutes into the attack. Behind her, there was a bestial roar. A quick glance saw a rather familiar and massive horned beast on two legs act like a battering ram on the hall's main door.

It splintered into tinder, before he and the raiders swept inside to the Madam and those who had sought

refuge...

I'd seen raiders...I'd even fought them and met some of their worst individuals. But the scale and ferocity of a full raider attack...of the Bloodletters in their prime, working as one...it terrified me through time itself.

Glimmerlight finally caught up to Coral at her home, yet as she approached, the wall exploded outwards with two hounds hurtling along with it. My sister was thrown from her feet as debris flew past her face, her vision whirling. Coughing, she pushed herself up.

Through the hole, Coral Eve clutched Chirpy protectively, her horn flickering like a beacon in the firelight. The two beasts that had gotten inside lay shattered upon the ground, their bones snapped like brittle twigs.

"The hall's gone!" Glimmerlight screamed it at her friend as she staggered over the wreckage of a once cosy home, "They got in! They're...they're killing and taking everypony!"

Those words must have hurt to ever have to say. Behind her I knew she could hear the events she was alluding to. The sounds of foals and their parents begging and crying out from within the building. Its bell still rang again and again.

Coral moved beside Glimmer and stared at it with tears in her eyes. Her hooves held Chirpy tightly to her chest. She spoke fiercely and accusingly.

"You did this..."

"I didn't...he wasn't..."

Coral Eve's horn sparked violently, before I felt a wave of pain strike through Glimmer's body.

Everything became a dark blur as she was thrown backwards across the ground to in front of her own burning hut. Her eyes saw it when she gasped and held her chest, lingering on her home as it cracked and fell into itself with a spray of little embers. Her jaw slowly dropped open as the little Hearthswarming lights she'd put up exploded and sparked one by one. Her home after trying to escape a life of servitude to the Rangers...gone.

Only then did her eyes moved back to Coral.

The unicorn simply stared at Glimmer. I could see the Coral I had first met. Bitter, angry...unable to fix things and letting it all bubble over in deep set rage. Coral didn't even turn her head to look at the huge raider she sent hurtling head first into a wall with a sickening crack of bone on stone, her eyes remained fixed on Glimmerlight's through the pain this use of her broken magic was causing her.

Slowly, her mouth moved. Inaudible over here as Glimmer gasped and tried to stand. The words, however, were clear.

You. Did. This.

With that, she disappeared behind a cloud of smoke drifting from a hut between them. I knew she didn't get away...but it hardly made it any less upsetting to see. Coral Eve leaving Glimmer to try and save her son alone.

My sister simply lay there, eyes stinging from tears and smoke.

The growl was the only warning Glimmer got. Something barrelled into her, sending another shock of pain through her body as she was thrown onto her back and launched upon by a filthy wet smelling mass of writhing muscle. A snapping canine jaw went for her neck. Screaming in frustration and anger, Glimmer didn't even hesitate to punch it directly in the muzzle and give herself time to get the rifle between her and that mouth. The hound's paws lashed at her, drawing blood as it leapt upon her. Pinned down, Glimmer could only jam the weapon into the beast's mouth to stop it closing around her flesh and kick at it with her hind legs.

Straining, clenching her teeth, she fought it from the ground with a desperate strength. I felt her magic

activate and rack the bolt that was inside the hound's mouth. The motion caught its flesh in the mechanism, making it whine and pull back. It gave her a little space...not enough to escape. The hound spat out the ejected round and rushed forward, its weight slammed down on her from behind, pinning her. A low growl began rumbling in its chest...leading to the bark that would signify its rush forward to-

The weight lifted off her completely. Glimmer could still hear it snarling, before falling silent as though on command.

Slowly, she tried to rise, reach her rifle...

A fierce grip of magic snatched her around the neck and dragged her back. I felt the choking pain grip tight and cause her to gag as her entire body was lifted from the ground and turned to face a mangy white coated unicorn. A manic grin stretching from ear to ear met her around a crazed fringe of all bright colours in existence, one eye twitching in place to its side. Wildcard.

He stood above her, holding Glimmer's struggling body in his magic with his personal hound gnashing and wanting to get at her. Reaching down, he patted his pet before leering at my sister through a face lacking that same cruel scar I'd have seen in the present day.

“Come along, Glim-Glim...”

Glimmer's eyes widened, the obvious question.

“Oh...I know who you are. We're going to be the *best* of friends, aren't we? We can *screeeeam* together! ARRRRRGGHHH! Eh?”

His screaming face was shoved into ours. I wanted to move her limbs for her, do anything, but I had to sit and endure, feeling the throat tighten and tighten...

“Aww...well, come on then!”

His magic loosened, sending her crumbling to the ground, before a rope attached to a meat hook dragged her away by wrapping around her upper body, the metal claw worryingly close to her chest.

The village had fallen in but a couple of minutes. It had never been a battle, simply a massacre of rending and exultant looting. Glimmerlight was dragged breathlessly to the front of the hall where ponies were being led or dragged out. Many were badly injured. Foals were being thrown in wicker cages thrown over the bigger raiders' backs. Their crying and screaming was haunting, young voices that you just never wanted to hear in such a situation. All around them the village burned to the ground as the sun began to go down and bring darkness to the remote area. The air felt thick with heat and smoke, all too familiar to the reality we were in outside the orb.

“Release the foals at once! Let them go! They're nothing to you!”

The creaky voice of Madam Beau met Glimmer's ears as she tried to force herself out of a raider's grip. She flung herself at Wildcard, reaching out to him.

“Have you no thought for the young?” she pleaded, falling to her knees. “Even if you take us, let them-”

Wildcard's machete flashed in the red light. A stream of blood followed it, before the Madam's headless body fell to the floor.

Many villagers, Glimmer included, called out to her. Many shouted her name. Wildcard however just stood and held his hooves to his head in pain, shaking it madly.

“Shut up shut up *shut up SHUUUUT UUUUP!*” He shrieked at them all, overpowering their voices. “If you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen! When will you all *just fucking LEARN?!*”

He paused, breathing hard on the spot. Slowly, he coughed and waved a hoof to the raiders.

“Nah...nah...lapsed, I'm cool, it's all cool...we're all veeery cool, right, right? Just a mistake, I'll make it

up to you all. Now...go have fun kids.”

The raiders knew the signal, they streamed into the remains of the village or back into the forest to chase anypony who'd run. A mad dash for the prizes. It left Wildcard and just a couple other raiders waiting with their couple dozen prisoners in the light of the fires. Some of it was spreading to the dry forest itself.

After what he'd done though...no-pony wanted to dare say anything to a twitching pony in their midst. I found Glimmer looking at the others nearby, spotting that minotaur stomping around the raiders and slapping those who found anything he wanted. What I now knew as Wildcard's hunters (Who would become his gladiators in Fillydelphia) prowled around with as much shivering and foaming at the mouth as their leader.

“Glim-Glim! Come here, Glim-Glim!”

I felt the fear run through her as Glimmer turned her eyes back toward Wildcard. He was advancing on her as he waved to the other two ponies with him. He stared into her eyes...past them, it gave me a horrid feeling as he looked deeply at her...no...he wasn't looking at her...

No, no, just my imagination, it had to be.

“I've got a gift for yooou! A little truth, that's what you wanted, right?”

“What are you...who are you?” Glimmerlight spoke with a raspy voice. Her clenched throat and the smoke made it hard to speak up.

Wildcard grinned and narrowed his eyes, a worrying glint of him actually staying consistent appearing in them.

“How I found this playhouse, little cutie.” He patted her head. “Let me introduce you again...”

He turned her head to the side by force. She tried to resist but simply hadn't the strength.

Ahead of her, the two raider's dumped Rough Diamond in the dirt beside Wildcard. He leaned down and sniffed at the earth pony's mane, taking a deep whiff of it with a big smile.

“Such a good smelling...not-totally-a-raider kind, hmm? He couldn't drink, y'know? He never ever came to any of my three birthdays! I even *told him!* Not one of us, no...but that's fine, he does his job I do mine, the order of the universe, right?”

Glimmerlight didn't look at him. Her eyes were fixed on Diamond. He was awake, slowly stirring in pain as he fought to figure out what was happening.

“No...he...he said...”

“He said a lot of things, Glimmy...” Wildcard whispered far too close in her ear, “bet he told you about wanting to pack up and leave the 'traders' too...always a good one for the more cautious that. He really is goood.”

Glimmer sat still as the embers of the burning hall were blown past the three of them. I could only imagine what she was feeling right now.

“I'm sorry...”

The breathy voice came from in front of her. It was Diamond. With a cry of pain, he pushed himself upward between the two raiders. His eyes stayed put on Wildcard and Glimmer, but I spotted the sickening sight of blood dripping from his stomach wound again.

“Glimmer, Ah'm so sorry...” His voice was thin, his accent weak under it.

“You did.” Glimmer barely said it above a whisper.

“He did...” Wildcard hissed and giggled, hopping back between the two and glancing each way expectantly, “I do so love a little drama, go on! Make some blame! Burning village theatre!”

Rough Diamond looked at Wildcard with a sudden rage.

“Why do you keep me alive...you want me gone to make room for Bonecrusher! You don't think I'm a

proper raider, not deserving of the Big Four...and you're *right!*”

He stepped forward and stumbled, nearly falling completely.

“This time...I *did* want out. You tried to have me killed.” His eyes turned to Glimmer. “Why would I lie now? They've won...there's no need for a charade. I lied, at first maybe but...I thought I could use the hidden village here to get away! I wanted *out* of all this when I couldn't convince Brim to-”

“Liar liar pants on fiiire!” Wildcard chimed. “Big guy getting soft and bringing you in as one of the four doesn't mean you're one of us or that you could ever leave! You don't *leave* the Bloodletters. You enjoy the fun or you get ripped and-”

“SHUT UP! Glimmer! I'm so sorry I lead them here, I didn't know where else to go...I...I did my job even when I tried to get away from it...”

Glimmer stepped forward a little. I couldn't feel if she believed him or not, whether she felt upset for him. In the middle of all this, everything was too confused in her body language to know. At least...until she spoke.

“I...I believe you...I saw them trying to kill you!” Her words grew in strength as they went. “I *knew* that made no sense if it was a ruse!”

She brought a hoof out to support Diamond where he stood. I felt his rough coat on her own, matted with blood and sticky, yet she didn't shirk back from helping him.

“Glimmer...look at me...look at me...” His voice was quiet, dropping to a whisper.

“Diamond?”

“Run...”

I could feel her having to fight reacting too obviously.

“No, you-”

“Pink dream...I'm going to do this for you. You gave me a gift...the bullet. That magic enhanced bullet. Never used it, because it meant more to me than just a good bit of ammo. You showed me that there was another life I could have had, one my birth took away. One where ponies were nice. Knowing...knowing that at the end I...I had someone who would have accepted me, that's enough...”

Glimmerlight was shaking her head. “Diamond, don't do this, we'll find a way, you don't have to-”

Wildcard began to stomp forward like a petulant child. “Speak up! I wanna hear!”

“I wanted out, but I couldn't *get* out. This life wouldn't let me get past its walls. If you can't get out...go...go to Br...Brimstone! He can be different, I've seen it! I tried to bring it out in him! I hope I'm right about him...so take the only apology I can truly manage, I wish I had longer...RUN!”

He cried out in pain. The motion tore at his stomach wound, but he spun on the spot to bite, draw and sink a hidden knife into Wildcard's face so deep I heard it clink against his skull, the raider leader howling in pain. Diamond's legs bucked out at the two raiders either side of him as he shoved Glimmer away. I felt his hooves impact on her side hard, spurring Glimmer to take off.

“GO! GO, Glimmer! RUN!”

Raiders looked up as they heard the shouting. Most of them seemed more surprised than anything, yet Glimmer's frantic vision noticed a dozen break off and chase her. Skidding in the dirt, she turned and fled to the forest, looking back for Diamond.

She was just in time to see Wildcard, his face looking carved in half, tug the stallion in with his meat hook and bring the two machete's down hard. There was no scream.

Even through the orb, I felt Glimmerlight's heart sink.

Slowly, that wrecked face turned to her. It bubbled blood as he roared across the clearing she was

sprinting away from him over. Each word gurgled through a wound, howling after her.

“HAVE YOU FIGURED IT OUT YET? I ASKED IF YOU KNEW WHY YOU HATE ME! SEE YOU WHEN YOU WAKE UP!”

His psychotic laughter echoed and bounced around the valley after her as Glimmer powered her legs to an effort that could only be drawn from emotion and desperation combined. The raiders and their hounds followed her down the forest path as she fled...fled for no-where, anywhere but here...

The black branches reached down like claws, the darkness falling around her as she aimed for the thickest parts of the woods...only to find that escape would not be possible. Not possible at all.

Through the forest, the main force of raiders was coming. They surrounded her by the sheer width of their line, the biggest and most heavily armoured ones she'd ever seen spreading around to box her in. Many wore parts of Ranger armour as vambraces or helmets. Giants of ponies. Most of them older than the young maniacs that had raided the village, all of them clearly weathered veterans, the hardened core of the Bloodletters. They didn't run...they didn't need to. They simply plodded on thick boney hooves to surround my sister. She stopped as they parted to let their leader through to face this one stray escapee.

Heavily armoured behind slabs of metal and a dragon shaped mask, taller than anypony else and shaking the ground with his steps; the Great Warlord Brimstone Blitz gazed down at the terrified and shivering mare like a small child. The mask showed two beady eyes behind it, old and weathered as they stared into hers without a word. The greatest of raiders in this band regarded the cowering, bloodied and dirty mare before him without a word.

Behind her, Wildcard's hunters entered the clearing, catching up. They exulted, charged forward, screaming that they had found her.

They stopped at the sight of their leader, who made four precise steps around Glimmerlight, keeping his eyes on her. Those four steps were enough to put him between her and them.

“Bring the villagers to the wagons. Unharmd and untouched. They will go to the city.”

Glimmerlight kept watching the massive pony, twisting her head...before she saw one of those dinner-plate sized hooves reach out.

Before everything fell away into the void.

oooOOOooo

The bleak darkness of Fillydelphia's underground felt all too small to wake up to. With my eyes struggling to adjust, I felt around for Glimmerlight, finding her stirring body as she too got up.

I expected to have to perhaps hug into her or find her upset. Yet as I blinked my eyes and got a clearer view, I only saw her move away and stand up away from my reaching hooves.

Glimmerlight wasn't showing much on her face. She simply looked up and around her, before I realised she was taking in the world as a whole down here...probably thinking about the city above us. Her eyes were wet, but not crying. I'd never seen her look so stoic and yet emotion all at once.

“He wanted out.”

Her voice was quiet. Soft but tinged with a solemn note, yet it built. I felt her frustration and rage bubbling below the surface of my normally cheery sister.

“He was trapped and wanted to be free, Murky. Wildcard had him murdered for petty raider advancement, chased him toward our village and butchering it! He killed a pony trying to be better, he killed Madam Beau! He was the one...*he* is the one who did this! Fucking *Wildcard*. If I get a chance to pull the trigger on that psychotic's head, I swear...I'll avenge them all.”

I began to trot over to her, before stopping as she turned directly to me.

Her growing anger stopped, as she sighed and kept calm.

“I was to blame, yes. Yet now I know that I did the right thing, helping somepony find the same thing we're trying to do now. Escape. The blood of the village lies on Wildcard's hooves. He is the one who needs brought to terms now for Creaky Hollow to rest easy. Rough Diamond...I'm sorry I forgot that you were a good pony at the end...thank you for what you did for me.”

“Sis...”

Her hoof patted my shoulder, before absentmindedly ruffling my mane without really looking at me.

“Thanks, Murky. That's the last orb I'll need to see. The last sight to the truth. It isn't what I thought, for better or worse. But I did what I promised, even if it hurt.”

She paused at the doorway.

“I just need some time to think now, I should get back to work...and plan what I'm going to say to Coral...and on how I'm going to end that multicoloured bastard if he comes for us again.”

“If...um...if I can help-” I bit my lip, sitting down on the blankets again.

Glimmerlight looked at me for a few seconds before nodding. As she left I saw the real feeling inside from how she moved and felt...not a tragedy, nor a relief. Nothing but a bittersweet victory.

* * *

Fillydelphia was unusually quiet.

We had moved out with the shift change, using the period of activity to leave the sewers and start moving toward the Alpha-Omega Hotel. Yet after getting past the industrial sectors was done, the air seemed to deaden to the point even my ears heard only distant noises. We weren't too close to the factories now, yet even these outlying areas approaching the FunFarm usually had processions, riotous slaver activity and construction going on. It occurred to me that anypony not essential had been transferred to the more distant arms factories or to preparing the Wall.

The city was not silent, but felt more like it was holding it's breath.

Coral, Unity and myself had moved through the same ruined buildings we'd once used to get Lilac to the hotel safely. I knew the route, knew the hiding places and after a little observation had seen only a few slavers in the area. Most were clustered around fire barrels inside the husks of slave pen huts, speaking in hushed whispers. A couple moved between the buildings, heading to or from their daily tasks. Some had slaves in tow carrying their possessions, while others slept as best they could. Most slaves picked at the meagre slop they had been fed, an all too familiar taste coming to my mouth at the rank 'food' I'd had to eat all these months...if not all my life.

There was a curious lack of griffins in the sky, likely they were all flying further out from the city on patrol. Despite that, we had to take cover inside one of the smaller and unused hotels as a Pinkie Balloon's bloated mass lurched overhead. I could hear the soft burn of its flame igniting to gain height before it drifted away toward the army camps.

“I think I prefer this to last time.” Coral peered around the edge of a blown out window, looking toward the lit windows of the Alpha-Omega Hotel.

Squeezing in beside her, I mentally charted out the route we could take. Some organised piles of cleared up rubble would make good cover until we reached the next of the hotel buildings. They hadn't survived as well as the Alpha-Omega...but they had enough structure left for hiding in. This must have been some old holiday street near to the FunFarm. The next one was the same I had zip-lined Lilac from last time, if push came to shove I knew I had the reach the hotel with my saddle from there.

Carefully, the three of us edged from cover to cover. I would go first, followed by Unity and then Coral afterwards. The slavers weren't really paying any attention at all, so I hurried it up. The faster we got there, the less chance we had of another group coming back and blocking us off. The hotel we'd chosen to overlook

our target was empty and half collapsed, made up of three floors. After checking each of the rooms we finally settled on the ground floor nearest the perimeter fence, inside what used to be a common room.

We blocked off every door, set up a few hiding places with blankets and checked our escape routes.

We'd have to stay here until we next saw Starshine come out to check her secret hole. That could be hours for all we knew...if not an entire day. The group back at the sewer knew to give us a time, so we didn't leave anything to chance. This had to be our little hidey hole under the nose of the most important building in the city.

Which made me wonder why I didn't see anywhere close to the amount of guards I had last time...Stern really was pulling them off for defence duty, it seemed. Inside the fence was empty as always, but there had been far more slavers last time patrolling the outside. Or was that just because Shackles had set that trap for us before that I'd seen more?

After Coral composed the note and I had sneakily placed it under the fence where Starshine knew to check, we settled down in the uncomfortable ruin to watch and wait.

We took turns being the one to keep an eye on the Alpha-Omega Hotel itself. The other two would stay out of sight and rest or eat as they needed to. Coral Eve and I would sew together, with her teaching me how to do more than just a basic stitch for practicality on one of the blankets. On their turns I could hear Unity asking about Coral's son, quietly chuckling at the stories. Glancing over my shoulder, I could see Unity idly carving a broken chair leg into the figure of a pony...Chirpy Sum.

When it came to my turn to rest with Unity, we looked through my journal. All of it.

"Uh...this is, um, how I first saw Coral Eve. Sick in a hospital bed. She can't take proper RadAway, you see."

Unity nodded, turning the page. "Brimstone and your sister? She looks sick too..."

"Y-yeah, she was in the same condition when I found her. Brimstone was watching over her, I think she was the one that made him...y'know, be better?"

Recent sights made me question if the big raider's transformation hadn't begun earlier. Somehow, I doubted he'd like to be asked about it.

We didn't really go in any order. Sometimes we'd flick forward to recent things for a bit of casual conversation about them...other times we'd dare to delve into the ones from times neither of us could remember. Doing so, I found images I never knew I'd drawn. Only having her there let me find the courage to look at drawings I'd long been terrified of seeing. Some were shockingly unskilled compared to my work now, but I could see my talent's work in them. The same style...the same hidden emotions in imagery that only I could truly spot for myself.

The truth was anything but dreary though, if a little melancholy...as Unity lifted a page in her magic to find one of herself, sitting lonely away from the other slaves. She paused to look more carefully, speaking quietly.

"That's me...I mean, that *is* me. Away from the crowd, trying to just pretend I was somewhere else. Think this was how you found me, like those other pictures?"

"How do you know you didn't find me?" I countered, "You did the second time when I'd fallen...and the third time...and the fourth..."

Gee, come to think of it, she'd had to drag me out of a lot of trouble.

Unity shrugged, looking up at the ceiling and crushing her wavy mane from her eyes. "That was different. I've helped ponies in here before, stood up for a couple, but I felt this...this *urge* to rush in and help you that time. Like I didn't even think about it. I never even thought about it. Now I know why that was, I *knew* you."

She smiled, a touch of that pure innocence in her eyes.

“It's quite beautiful when you think about it. Friendship found a way through all the adversity of a world trying to make us forget each other.”

“Y-yeah...” I might have blushed a little, I just didn't know what to say. Unity was poetic and flowing when she got like that in a way I'd never be. It always left me so dumbfounded on what to say back.

“Now, what's this?”

She flicked all the way forward to more recent images.

“W-wait!” I reached forward, trying to get my hoof in before her magic. The page turned to the mare from the Roamer Inn on my birthday who'd asked me to draw her in a somewhat...uh...sultry fashion. I tried to turn the page, but Unity's magic lightly tugged back.

“Aww, c'mon! Let me see!” She laughed, nudging my shoulder. “Felt like drawing more of that stuff, huh?”

“S-she asked me! She really did!” I felt my voice go squeaky, this was the truth! “C-Coral! You were there! Tell her!”

Coral Eve turned her head slightly from the window and grinned. “Sorry, my dear. I'd already left by then. What raucous things the rest of you got up to aren't my concern.”

Groaning I felt my wings and ears both slump down at the incessant giggling beside me now as Unity began to flick through more.

From places to friends to battlesaddles. Old images of the two of us together for comfort to new pictures of what I believed my mother looked like. Drawings of the wasteland areas I remembered, of broken chains, mares and flying. We shared the journey. Quietly, we laughed together, confided in feelings of the more depressing imageries and even once leaned against one another in a fashion similar to that of the old pictures when a majestic sketch of Aurora Star in her prime was turned to. I'd done that one mere hours before...with little stars of black charcoal twinkling around her. We went right back to the start, many pages had us individually. Then laughing, alone or together. I saw Mister Peace in one of them, looming over a tiny pony that was too smudged to make out as either of us.

Yet one image hadn't come up yet. The most important one of them all. After seeing all this, spending this time with a renewed friendship, I couldn't ignore it any longer. I (politely) pulled the journal from her magic and started flicking through pages rapidly till I found it. One she'd seen recently too...my ongoing greatest work.

My friends.

“Murky?”

“After all this...how can I not? You're one of us, you always were.” I looked up and smiled at her, seeing a little blush on her cheeks.

Then I set to work.

There had been a space on the left of me ever since I drew it. Had that been subconsciously deliberate? Everypony else had been to my right. Glimmer then Caduceus, Chirpy in front of them, his mother's hoof on his back. Behind them loomed Brimstone. Yet to my left...empty space. It was time to set that right.

I pulled the charcoal from my pocket and leaned down. So softly, I let a thin edge weave and drift. Nothing heavy, not like Coral's strong and defined lines or Glimmer's wild and curvy arcs of charcoal. These touches were wispy, short and light. Never letting the charcoal touch the paper for more than a second, every line curving into the next. Gradually, they built up, forming a smooth contour. This wasn't drawing...it didn't feel like it. This was a shape I knew well. One I'd done since the moment I'd come to this city and been helped back on my hooves during my very first shift.

The nib drifted and twisted back, refining the outlines of a pony. Adjusting the leg shape, pulling it inward...scaling it all down to just slightly taller than myself. Rapid bursts of sketching for wavy lines

around the head. Hundreds of individual touches for every strand getting thinner and thinner toward the edges as a mane was crafted around two large and bright eyes. Then, finally, I allowed the lines to *draw*. Following the masses of guidelines that formed the exact shape I wanted, that of quiet grace using fragile looking thin lines. No...not fragile...*gentle*.

There, beside me, I drew Unity. Finishing with her eyes and that soft smile to bring her to life on the paper with the rest of us. Just to my left, close enough for best friends. Close enough to make up for lost time.

Shivering a little, I drew back off the page. The entire thing had felt so natural...no mantra, no thought. Just a smooth memory on paper. Unity took the drawing in her magic, smiling as she glanced at it.

“I'm still struggling to...to get over all this, what we are. I think I need some time before we really go over it all, but seeing this helps a lot. Knowing you consider me enough of a friend regardless of what's happened to put me on here with the others. Thank you.”

She'd asked me to draw her when I got out, to not forget. We weren't out yet...but this was that one. Through a lot of time, pain and strife from that moment in the FunFarm to now, I'd kept my promise. For a brief moment, I just looked over at her, watching somepony enjoy my work. Her eyes glances sideways, seeing me looking. I-

Across from us, I could see Coral Eve turn and briefly pause as she looked at us. However, she took a breath and nodded toward the Hotel.

“I think you two better come take a look at this.

* * *

“I don't see anything.”

My eyes scanned around the hotel's grounds, fence and wall. There was no movement, no-pony hiding that I could hear and all the lights were on inside as usual. The hotel's thick walls and carved granite pillars that had seen it through the balefire surrounded still windows with no motion behind them.

“Coral, what is it, there's nothing there,” Unity whispered as she peered out the window to either side.

Coral Eve nodded. “That's exactly it. There's nothing. We've been watching this for hours now and there's not been a single patrol. We've not heard a single foal shout, nor seen a single movement in those lit windows at any time. It's like the hotel is dead.”

That was a point. Now that I thought about it, last time I had been here I'd smelled the warm food from the kitchens. Yet there was nothing but the burning stench of Fillydelphia meeting my nostrils, giving rise to a filly-pitched sneeze as I took too hard a sniff.

It wasn't hard to see the growing concern and frustration on Coral's face. Her son and a foal she'd promised to adopt as her own were supposedly in there, but now it seemed utterly empty. Even the kitchen's ventilation pipes gave off no steam into the warm air, not even a wavy bit of heat.

Something was wrong, something was deeply wrong. I could *taste* it in the air.

“Do we wait?” Unity asked it to both of us, but her eyes were on the hotel's windows. “We've not given it the whole time yet.”

“If something is wrong in there then waiting might put us further behind it.” Coral rubbed her chin.

Squinting, I peered at the little depression in the earth that marked where Starshine had squeezed through on her escape long ago. Our note sat hidden in it, a hole just big enough for a foal or somepony only a little bigger than a foal to squeeze through.

Oh why did this always have to happen...it *never* ended perfectly...

“I'll go take a look...alone.”

The other two looked back at me.

“More than one is too easy to spot! That place doesn't have a lot of shadowy areas. I'll just poke my head in! See if anypony is inside, maybe they're all just clustered in one room to be safe? If I see the foals I can bring them out too. I'll be real quiet!”

Coral and Unity shared a look. I could see the concern about this idea on both their faces, but after a moment they nodded.

“Don't take risks. You *don't* want to be messing about with the Alpha-Omega, dear.” Coral set a hoof on my shoulder to talk seriously, “Red Eye won't let anypony go who trespasses.”

“I won't be long. I...I got to look inside it before with Protégé, I know my way in it. I can always glide off from the roof, right?”

My smile brought something of a small grin to Unity's face, yet I could tell she was serious.

“Maybe you can try actually landing this time. Be careful.”

I collected my things, mostly just my saddle, grapple and *Rarity's Grace*. The Pipbuck was tied to my hoof and my goggles set on my forehead. After a brief glance to the surrounding area, I crept out through the window and crawled my way to the fence and Starshine's hole, feverishly trying to remind myself why I had decided to do this.

* * *

The servant's door was, much to my relief, open. Trotting my way across the inside of the perimeter fence had sent every hair on the back of my neck upright with worry. If anypony saw me there wouldn't even be a shouted warning. I was in truly forbidden territory now, more than ever before. I was treading upon Red Eye's core values by being here as a slave and I'd heard of the punishments that had awaited those who had trespassed before.

Trying to ensure the old oak door didn't squeak on its hinges, I opened it slowly and only just enough to could squeeze inside through the gap. Within it lay a tiny staff room with a time stamper on the wall for employees starting their day and a line of hooks bearing identical green jackets. Past them was a set of dark stairs leading upwards into the building.

Cautiously, I trotted in and reached out to the door, pulling it behind me. Through the gap I saw Unity and Coral watching me, before I shut it entirely. The click sounded deafening, but I couldn't leave any trace to follow me by.

The stairwell was made of roughly hewn wood, clearly not an area for guests to see if they allowed such base construction. It was just for the use of servants entering at the start of their work day, it seemed.

Squinting in the suddenly darkness, I took my time on the steps and tested each one with a hoof first. A few squeaked, leading me to do awkward stretched and half hops to bypass them. I'd learned that trick long ago on the rock farm when I'd had to steal food, my master there had deliberately kept a few loose. Thankfully there was no guard dog here listening for it as there had been then.

At least, I hoped not.

The stairs curved round an exceptionally tight corner, even for me. The edges of my saddle scraped and rubbed at the warped walls, rising a thin smell of old polish. Goddesses knew how normal ponies were supposed to do this for getting to work!

Mercifully, I could see a crack of light beneath a door at the top. Sitting and listening, I could hear absolutely nothing beyond. No voices and no hooves. Certainly no young ponies.

A swell of nervousness began to settle in. Something felt very wrong in here.

Strangely, the door's pull handle was in the centre of the door, not to one side. Why would you do that? Some sort of equality for left hoofed ponies? Regardless, I felt it swing the normal way as I cracked it open just a smidgen and pressed my face to the gap.

Pressing my head against the door, I poked an eye through and squinted hard at the flare of light. Bright

powered lamps and hanging glass gemlights glared at full power to illuminate the entire lavish hallway that lay outside. I could see the familiar design of carved wall rims and the thick patterned carpet that I'd felt beneath my hooves last time. Tables with plastic flowers sat at intervals near stained glass paned doors. A set of interior windows were further down, looking in on some unknown room. I couldn't tell at this angle, but I could remember the dining room or canteen had those types of windows. Beside them there was some sort of black mess on the floor, scattered and spread around.

More to the point, it was completely deserted. The worrying emptiness in my gut began to clench harder. I had to go in further. I had to *know*.

My teeth clenched, I pressed open the door and poked my head through properly. Looking down the other direction I still saw nothing, only the hazy windows to the outside world, not clear but smoky to block out the horrors just outside the building. Gulping, I stepped more fully out and closed the door behind me. I didn't even have a shadow, the light was so complete on all sides, leaving me feeling terribly exposed.

Hooves close together, I meekly ambled my way along the hallway toward the interior windows. I passed familiar doors to the old guest rooms that I now knew were used for the foals' bedrooms. Each had drawings and (unreadable to me) nameplates with crayon or stencilled letters on the outside, but none of them had any sounds of occupants inside. Daring to peek in, I saw bunkbeds with untidy blankets and covers on them. Some had fallen off entirely across the lines of soft toys and train sets that sat on the floor. The second was much the same...yet I could see in every single one of them the covers to their beds were thrown off onto the floor.

The third had a bunkbed entirely knocked over onto the floor and a smashed hoofmirror. This wasn't just untidy nature, it was too chaotic. Something had happened here for sure. Backing out the foal's room I went back to the main hallway and cantered further down at a faster rate. The temptation to run out, to tell them and look for new information was clawing at me, dragging me back to the door, but I had to know. If something had gone wrong in the internal struggles to involve the foals.

Oh Celestia, protect their little hearts.

The silence was, in its own way, deafening. I had hypersensitive hearing (Protégé had taught me that term!) and even I couldn't hear anything in here. My own almost silent steps clipped much more loudly than I would expect in such a lush and soft carpet below them out of a lack of anything else to hear. I kept worrying somepony would pick them up with how out of place my presence seemed. Every few steps, I would spin and look over my shoulder with a gasp, but see nothing other than the length of hotel hallway I'd just walked down. I hadn't gone far, just ten feet from the door I'd come in yet every moment I expected somepony to wander out into the corridor.

I came to the mess on the floor, that as I got closer I found to be one of the false plants that had tumbled...no...been *shattered* across the floor. Its pot had been smashed, dropping fake chunks of plastic soil everywhere. It lay just across from the interior windows looking in on what I now saw was the dining hall.

One of the windows was smashed.

A cold fear started to overtake my body. I felt my muscles start to gear up to bolt off. The glass lay near my hooves, invisible with how clear it had been till I got closer. Following it, I saw it led toward the plant...where a bullet hole had been made in the wooden wall behind the jar. Something had shot from inside the windows out here. Below me, I could see the soil was trailing in hoofprints away from where I'd come from. Somepony running from a gun...

I hopped up to the broken window and looked inside. Yes, this *was* the dining room, only looking from the opposite side as when I'd visited last time. I could see the door I'd been standing drooling behind at the sights and smells of this place on the far side. Inside there were lines of white wooden tables near to several knocked over stools and cushions scattered everywhere. Meals lay half eaten, some spilled on the floor. Pottery had smashed and I could see some fabric sacks scattered around that were quite out of place in here. I knew them...they were mass produced here for the slavers.

Gunfire, some sort of mass panic...the bedrooms having been ransacked made horrible sense now.

Someone or *something* had gotten inside the Alpha-Omega before we had. Oh sweet Goddesses, let the foals be okay, they had to be hiding silently somewhere, right? Foals weren't dumb! They'd be okay! They...they would be! Fillydelphia couldn't be *that* cruel...

Carefully, I pulled myself up and through the window into the canteen. Small tinkles of broken glass knocked away by my hard hooves made me twitch and stare around, but no other noise followed. Alone in this most precious of Red Eye's buildings was driving my wits to the breaking point. My eyes hurt and I had to blink as I realised they'd been going dry from staying fixed open so long. My heart thudded and the tainted lungs spasmed with my faster breathing until I gulped greedily at my RadAway to prevent a coughing fit in here.

There was very little glass on this side, the gunshot had gone outward. I trotted between the benches and poked my head into the kitchen. Among the clearly newly made appliances and cookers lay massive pots of stone cold soup and stew. Poking my hoof in and tasting it revealed a clammy taste of something that had been sitting unattended. Instead, I decided to go back outside and-

The moment I wandered back into the canteen proper, I saw a shadow at the doorway.

It moved quickly, yanking the door open with a flare of magic on the handle. I dove back in the kitchen, my hooves skittering on the slippery clean tiles as I yanked open the first cupboard I saw and pushed myself inside it, trying not to make too much noise on the pots and pans I was squeezed in around. Why was I doing this? It had seen me! Why else would it move quickly?!

Somepony galloped across the canteen, coming this way. I heard their hooves on the tiles. Heard a couple of cupboards opened.

What choice did I have anyway? There was *no-where* to properly hide quickly in this bright place.

Instead, I got myself ready. The moment they opened it...I'd rush into them and make a break for it.

The cupboard next to me opened. I heard them trotting closer...I braced myself.

"It's all right! No-one's going to hurt you, little one...come out. It's just me! I just want to know what happened here! Are you okay?!"

As the cupboard opened, I didn't move. The concerned voice had struck me by surprise as I pretty much just fell out the hiding spot instead and looked upward into at him upside down with a forced 'I'm innocent!' smile on my face as the clatter of pottery tumbled out around me and over his hooves.

"*Murk?!?*" Protégé blurted.

* * *

He half shoved and half helped me onto one of the benches outside, keeping me ahead of him and pushed me along with his magic.

"I'm going to give you five seconds to tell me exactly why you're...never mind. I *know* why you're here and it ends this instant! You will not drag these foals into the insanity you seek! *What have you done?!?*"

I waved my hooves frantically, leaning back as he leaned over me.

"This wasn't us! I...I just found all this! Why are *you* here then? What's going on?" I didn't much feel like getting into the same argument all over again. "There's bullet holes and it's all empty and torn up!

Protégé stopped on the spot, trotting away from me briefly. He wore one of his scholar shirts and had his mane tied in a ponytail again, but nothing else.

"I received a note from an anonymous source. Somepony who had seen Shackles' plans for themselves, possibly List Seeker. They spoke of something about to happen at the Alpha-Omega Hotel...I came to see what it was, to warn them. Only to find this..."

He waved his hoof around, I could see the anger in his eyes as he began to trot to the other side and

investigate the way I'd come from.

“No...no they'll just be hiding! Downstairs or-” I started.

“I've been there! I can't find any of them, they're just gone! I don't even know what happened to the guards and teachers! The foals all know to get quickly to one side of the building and try to lock themselves in, though. I was on my way there now, there's still hope! But what was that you said? You saw *bullet holes*?”

“Y-yes!” I hopped off the seat, pointing over to it and guiding Protégé to look through the window.

“Don't get out of my sight, Murk. I will chase you if you try. Regardless of our feelings right now and going separate paths, I might need your help if the worst has happened. I...just hope that we shan't come to oppose one another this time if we find them.”

I coughed. “You mean, less shooting each other...”

“Hopefully so.”

“*Hopefully?!?*”

Ignoring my pouted exclamation, he spent some time examining the impact, looking at where it must have been fired from. After a few moments, his magic lit and lifted several objects from the other side of the room. Brass casings; six of them.

“Magnum rounds. Six of them in one spot, this was a revolver reloading here...”

He froze for a moment, his eyes shooting open with fear.

“Protégé? Protégé what is it...”

“There's no reason to fire weapons in the dining room, there's only one hole, so five shots from this weren't done in here. That means there was other shots elsewhere.”

A look of horror shot across his face.

“This wasn't just a raid...this was a shooting...oh no...”

Protégé took off toward the door, dropping the rounds as he went in a frantic rush that dropped all dignity in his haste.

“Protégé! Protégé!”

I galloped after him as he rounded out into the same hallway we'd once visited before, near the main stairs. He turned left, running down the other side of windows, toward the classrooms.

“Where are you going?!” I screamed after him.

“The place they go! The place of safety! It's a sealed room! They have to be there! They have to be!”

Struggling to keep up, I galloped through the empty corridors. On the wall, there was a streak of blood that had smeared for a good ten metres before disappearing inside a door. Protégé stopped briefly, opening the door to reveal a young teacher, not much older than him. His skull had been shattered open across the far wall, a dripping star of red fluid staining the polished wood behind a shocked looking and pale face.

There had been killings in this place of foals.

We couldn't stop. I felt the same drive, the same panic rising. I didn't want to think about what we might find where we were going. They had to be there! They had to be safe! More bullet holes, more broken windows and a door that had been bucked clean off its hinges into a foal's bedroom stood out along this area.

Protégé uttered a denial before he turned and barged through the main oaken double door to the classroom itself...

...to be met with the sight of a massacre.

Guards and teachers lay together. Massive exit wounds had gouted and poured dark blood across the lush carpet. One mare lay beneath her desk, huddled up with a rigid scream of terror still on her face as she clutched her stomach. Another had fallen with her hoof still stuck in the far door's latch. Two stallions clung to one another in the corner, riddled with holes. The blackboard was streaked in red, impacts having shattered its brittle surface. A dozen ponies in all, cut down without mercy. None had any weapons on them.

This hadn't been a scene of a firefight, it was the scene of an execution.

Protégé and I stood at the verge of it, horrified. The smell gushed from the room, filling my nostrils with the sickly odour of death, enough to make me feel light headed. My whole body shook and my stomach turned. I had to turn and leave to throw up on the carpet outside, gagging as the foul taste stirred my throat into a heavy wracking cough. Behind me I could hear Protégé try to find words...but only producing a pained moan as he staggered forward.

Spitting acidic bile, I tried to move in again...and saw the broken desks and exploded cushions of the foals' area.

"Murk...this is...I...I..." Protégé clutched a hoof to his mouth as he moved through the room, looking through the back. As he pushed the doors open, it gave sight to the missing ponies from elsewhere. The cook, two of the guards and a doctor had been cut down in the play room. A place of joy, turned into a carnal pit. They had all retreated here to get away.

The guards lay unarmed...the only weapon I could see was beside me. A scoped magnum revolver lay empty, its drum poking out to the side in a sticky pool of cold gore. Six shiny brass casings lay around it.

I knew that revolver by sight.

He turned back to me, somewhere between desperation and horror as he saw the revolver held gently in my hooves.

"That's...that's mine." Protégé uttered, "That means it was *him*...*Shackles* took my weapon...how...why I...I..."

He opened his mouth and screamed upwards, clawing at his mane with his hooves as he turned this way and that, uprooting desks and pulling aside curtains to reveal the hiding ponies who had bled out in pain here. He checked their threads and eyes, trying in vain to find a survivor amongst the workers. There was none.

I was gasping, trying not to hyperventilate as it sunk in to me as well. I'd never hated the non-slaver workers in Fillydelphia. Many of them weren't *bad* ponies. To see them cut down, the fear frozen on their cold faces. They had only taught foals, not whipped us...yet now the innocence that had still resided in here had been shattered by Fillydelphia's most brutal slaver.

"Why? *Why would they attack here?!*" Protégé outright screamed ahead of me, throwing over a desk in anger, even as his cheeks were wet with tears. Yet he kept moving toward the back of the playroom, toward two huge doors sealed with massive handles. Gunshots had struck at its locks, but failed to penetrate them.

"Why?" Protégé repeated over and over again, "How could this happen? There are guards! Where were they all? Please all be in here safe, don't...please don't...they couldn't have been-"

My ears twitched. I heard movement. *Close* movement, from someone who must have been unmoving to avoid detection, before the reinforced double doors of the foal's panic room slammed open as a heavy stomping and a rattle of metal broke into the area.

There were no foals in the re. Only one massive earth pony stallion.

"Couldn't have been in my service? As ever, you are a naïve fool, upstart."

Chainlink Shackles stood before both of us, armed with his blunt nosed shotgun hanging around his neck. His beady eyes twitched toward me, a slow grin spreading across his mangy face, before he surged forward and struck Protégé harshly, sending him hurtling back into me. Gagging in pain as his weight crashed into my chest and crumpled me to the ground, I found myself staring upward at the hanging lights.

“With a little luck on the side too. Welcome back to me, Number Seven.”

I couldn't help a whine of fear as I started trying to squeeze out and get toward the door. He was right here, right before me, but had a gun. I couldn't flee.

“You won't find Fillydelphia standing for this, Shackles!” Protégé hissed toward the massive slaver, pulling himself off me, “The foals are sacred to this place! You have attacked our very core! You've-”

“Become its saviour, *traitor*.” Shackles cut him off with another savage backhoofed slap, moving forward till he was looming over me instead. His hooves squelched through the blood soaked carpet under his bulk.

Protégé fell again, face down but turning as he pushed himself up to his knees. “Saviour? You are no such thing! You-”

“Saved the foals. Got them out of the building where a slaver had continued his rebellion by trying to assassinate the next generation of ponies. The same one who tried to kill a higher rank multiple times on a mountain excursion...that would be you.”

His hoof pointed toward me, still holding Protégé's revolver.

“Your weapon, slave! Manufactured in this city, identifiable as yours. Ballistics will match the rounds, we **are** a weapons industry after all, we have the experts. Dozens of slavers saw you on the peak in your sabotage attempt. You were seen with the escaped slaves at the Ministry of Arcane Science. This revolver was stolen back during your ambush-”

“*No it wasn't!*” I shouted out, trying not to sound too squeaky, but I balked the moment Shackles glared over at me, killing my protest on the spot with his presence. Within just five feet, he was a towering monstrosity of filth and power, I couldn't move...not from this close...this held by his stare.

“-stolen back...and used to commit an atrocity in here. Thankfully...**I** was here to stop you with my slavers moving the foals somewhere safer and secret till we have ended this war and rooted out the **traitors** like **you!**”

His deception laid bare, there was a moment of quiet for him to drink in the look of shock on Protégé's face. The unicorn looked over to me, his eyes focused on the revolver, then around to the ponies cut down by his weapon.

I felt sick again. The *foals*. The foals had been taken by *Chainlink Shackles!* No...no no NO! That *couldn't be true!*

Every horror I'd been through, every fear I felt when I saw him moving that hoof closer to me, every memory of the whips, the collar, the mental torture and humiliation...imagining that on to every one of the foals under him. No...*no*...

“Where are they, Shackles?!” Protégé shouted up at our attacker, before hissing more quietly “I see it now, you sent that note...”

“Not so clever now, are you, eh? You expect I'll say?” Shackles chuckled, keeping his shotgun ready as he almost lovingly stroked a hoof around Protégé's jawline, “What you going to think when they trial you...punish you...maybe you'll get to be mine again, eh?”

Protégé was seething with anger, his teeth visible and clenched.

“This will never pass...I've done nothing but help the foals!”

That thick, dirty laugh rumbled out from my old master. His hoof moved up, patting Protégé's face, drawing both of us together. My hooves felt rooted down. Every instinct said run, but every bit of sense knew he would happily gun me down. He'd once talked about that shotgun being loaded with something he called “pegasi shot”, to not kill...to stop his slaves escaping by ravaging them with tiny pellets.

“And yet who will believe you now?”

His hoof drew back, grabbing a collar that hung on a chain around his neck. Lunging forward with a

laugh, he sent it dropping down toward Protégé's neck.

“Now both of you get to come with me...your 'friends' will come to try and get you, Number Seven. Only they won't be able to...you'll get to watch me break their pride one by one through you...it'll be a fitting way to punish you for defying me. Yet first...”

The collar crept closer to Protégé.

“I have an *old* slave to reclaim...”

It stopped in mid air, surrounded by a red magic field.

Protégé looked up, tears welling in his eyes as his horn strained and glowed brightly. He shoved me to the side, making me stumble away over a chair. Tumbling, I looked back up to see Protégé staring down the gigantic earth pony from below, the collar held tight in telekinesis.

“I'm not coming with you...I escaped you before.”

Shackles growled, his hoof raising.

“You insolent worm! **Remember your place!**”

The hoof descended, yet Protégé didn't let it land.

“You *will not* own me again!”

The collar surged upward and struck Shackles across the face in a harsh blow, making the massive earth pony stumble and stagger off to the side. Roaring his anger, Shackles threw a hoof in a backward motion, lashing out at Protégé only to miss as the small pony ducked below it, turned and bucked Shackles in the throat.

For a moment, I found myself spellbound as I heard Shackles gag and wretch. The second swipe from him however, came powering through like a freight train, as Shackles thundered into Protégé's skull with a left hoofed swing even as he choked on the strike to his throat. The young pony was sent flying off his hooves, tumbling through the air to crash through a foal's desk with a cry of pain.

I saw the shotgun swing up.

“Protégé! Watch out!”

The words tumbled from my mouth. My hoof twitched, sending the mouthpiece of my saddle snapping out before I bit on it three times. Each time sending a shot from *Rarity's Grace* across the room into the unmissable target of Chainlink Shackles.

They didn't even slow him down as the tiny rounds buried into his skin. One even deflected from a buckle.

He didn't even lose his grin as he began to turn his head and trot toward me, a second collar trailing on the ground behind him that dropped from a hook on his torso. Two thin trails of blood went down his side from my shots...he wasn't even affected, the tiny rounds meant nothing to his size.

“**Attacking your Master, Number Seven...such gall and insolence, COME HERE!**”

Screaming as he picked up the pace, I ran to one side to avoid his bulky charge before diving away from a huge hoof reaching for me. Terror *surged* through my veins. Chainlink Shackles was trying to attack me! Memories of him lashing my back and crushing me below his hoof repeated over and over in my head. He was trying to hurt me again! Scrambling, I crawled forward, trying to get up. I felt the huge dinner plate sized hooves grab at me.

“*Where are the foals, Shackles?! Stern will never allow anything to happen to them!*”

Behind me, the shotgun around Shackle's neck twisted in a red magic field, trying to aim upwards at himself. Protégé charged from the side of my vision, lowering his horn as he attempted to impale the slaver's neck, only to be smashed aside by a shoulder. Protégé landed hard, rolling away from Shackle's brutal stamp on the ground.

“Oh, they're quite safe, **slave.**” Another missed stamp. “Ready to become the **new generation as I intend.**”

We were fighting...I was *fighting* Chainlink Shackles. The thought just wouldn't leave me, yet I couldn't leave Protégé to it alone. He wanted to take the foals...he wanted to use the memory on *them!* He was going to make a *whole generation of ponies like I had been!*

The thought...it...it just made me so **angry!**

Changing trigger, I steeled myself and fired from the floor, sending the grapplehook out to grab the shotgun and keep it from aiming at my comrade. Pulling on it dragged its muzzle away before it fired. The loud retort send a shooting pain through my head in the enclosed room as I heard it smash a window somewhere off to the side. Suddenly I was being dragged, pulled on the wire toward Shackles as his hooves wound around it.

“Murk!”

Protégé shouted from behind the slaver, hurling a chair at his head. It impacted *hard* across Shackle's jawline and staggered him. Protégé's magic tore the shotgun from around Shackle's neck in the brief space he got. He tried to take it for himself, but it flew toward me as my grapple hook retracted, bouncing and rolling away into the next room.

“You...little worm! You think you can hurt me? You are no slaver! You never were!”

Undeterred by the attacks, Shackles turned and hurled the chair *back* at Protégé using that unreal strength, impacting on the unicorn's side and sending him falling into a corner.

He lay still.

Fear was settling in hard. Protégé was down, I was alone with Shackles. Putting aside the sickening feeling of the slick red stains below me I attempted to get away, slipping and pulling myself as best I could. I could hear the stomping behind me.

“All alone once more...”

He sung it, no doubt grinning at his sing-song tone that dripped with sick delight. Whining, I limped faster before an almost casual strike knocked me on my side.

“All alone where he belongs...”

I tried to get up, before a hoof landed on my chest *hard*.

“Oh no, you do not slide away, Number Seven...”

I wriggled, before he *leaned*. Some of his huge weight crushed down, as I felt my ribs flare in agony, felt them *shift*. I screamed, batting his leg with my tiny hooves.

“Isn't this familiar, little slave? Disobedience means punishment! You think you've been heroic and brave, staying away and accomplishing things...do you really think you'll escape?”

He pressed down, as I threw my head back, unable to stop a squeal of pain coming forth.

“No...I-aarrgghh!”

“You think you've been special, Number Seven. Just because you merely *glided* for a while, so I hear. Because you have friends? Because you've not been in chains for a few days?”

His face leaned down, yellowed teeth and sweaty mane dropping to fill my vision, I tried to block it away with my front hooves.

“You think that puts you closer to escaping? Well let me tell you something, Number Seven...”

His face crept in uncomfortably close while his hoof kept me pinned. His lips slid in beside my ear, within an inch. His smell was overpowering, it made me want to gag...I was covered by his hoof, his mane...trapped in such closeness to the foul slaver as he whispered.

“You're no record holder, others got closer...*much* closer to escape than you have. One even got seventy miles away from Fillydelphia in the old days before the Wall. Got married...had a kid, all just before I caught up to him. He lived ten months thinking he was *free*. I dragged him from his bed right in front of his family, dragged him screaming all the way home where he lived another eighteen years in my service. You see, there's nothing special about you, Number Seven. Nothing I haven't seen a dozen times before. He got so far for nothing...and you're still here with **ME!**”

I cried out as his last word screamed into my ear, dizzying me. The weight on my chest disappeared, before I rolled on my side and held my sore ears and head. Yelping as I felt his hoof bat me onto my back, the terrifying feeling of one of my wings being dragged out from my body and spread onto the floor set me wriggling madly. No! Of all things, my wings!

“These made you think you were something more? A foal's belief...perhaps you need to be reminded. *Broken* back in the way you first were!”

One of his back hooves landed on my back, crushing me to the floor. One of his front hooves pulled my wing right out. I screamed.

Glancing over my back, I saw his other hoof lift up...ready to stamp. A whole host of horrible feelings from the past raced through me. I could feel the cold floor like an anvil, see the same fury in his eyes. The same intent! I couldn't help it, I begged...I wailed for him to stop, but that hoof only stopped rising and surged down like a hammer.

Protégé's voice screamed as he launched on to Shackle's neck. Gripping around him, forcing the slaver away from me by the momentum of his charge. I saw him drive his horn into Shackles' side, hurling a solid metal typewriter into the slaver's face with magic. The slaver roared, tossing the smaller pony around as he tried to get him off.

Protégé was *fighting back*. I...I couldn't just leave him.

I could *fight* Shackles.

Struggling to get the breath, I stood up, grabbed a chair leg in my mouth and rushed in to *smack* it across the slaver's face! He'd wanted to break my wings! The wings I'd only just learned to *love!*

The impact hurt my teeth as the wood snapped on contact. I turned and tried to buck at him instead as Protégé kept him distracted, but even connecting with the attack sent me bouncing off him. I wasn't anywhere close to being strong enough to hurt him like that! He threw me to the ground with a simple barge of his body and twisted enough to drag Protégé off him, roaring at me the whole time. I had to ignore the words, ignore the orders. I knew what freedom was, I couldn't look back now!

I knew he was big, but in the context of having him actually furious and throwing his weight at me, Shackles was *massive*. Every swing of a hoof sent me scurrying away. His furious eyes promised retribution and punishment for every second I defied him as I dodged and ran away from his chase around the room, hopping over a table and diving under the next one to stay away from that huge weight. Protégé was all that kept me going, as he tried to use his magic to hurl items and attack the slaver alongside me. Having an ally, somepony brave enough to fight this monster was what I needed to find the courage to keep doing this.

My grapple hook would hit him in the face every time I got some room. Protégé ducked and weaved, throwing himself away from those haymaker like sweeps of Shackles' hooves. My hook cracked off Shackle's temple, drawing blood from the impact and giving Protégé the space to get out of the corner Shackles had backed him into, sending a whole filing cabinet collapsing onto the huge pony. The heavy item knocked the slaver's pack on the floor as it snapped the leather buckle and sent its contents scattering on the floor. I saw the magnum rounds he'd used with Protégé's revolver scatter everywhere as he shook his head. The hit had dizzied him! There was my chance!

Grabbing a shard of sharp metal from a broken school desk, I galloped forward and hurled myself off a desk to try and land atop him...I'd stab down and-

His rear hoof came up and *bucked*.

I passed out from the impact for a good few seconds. Knocked cleanly unconscious as pain flared through my head into the black void as I felt myself tumble with no direction.

Awaking to a splitting headache, I found myself lying against a wall outside the classroom. Somewhere on my back I could feel a sharp pain and wet blood. Around me lay shards of glass from the window I'd been sent flying through. My forehead was swelling into a thick lump where he'd even just glanced it with his buck, making even blinking sent a shot of pain to the very core of my head. If that had hit me directly...I'd likely just have had my neck broken on the whiplash alone.

The adrenaline was wearing off, the rush to fight ebbing away. He was...he was so strong...it was like fighting Brimstone as a normal pony. His weight, his surprising speed on a bulky torso, his sheer power...

I could hear his roars and Protégé's thinner cry from inside the room as my consciousness dipped in and out. My eyelids felt heavy. Thumps passed through the floor in time with Shackles' movements, waking me up every time. Eventually, hissing in pain, I staggered up in time for the heavy retort of a revolver to send a sharp whip of pain streaking through my head all over again.

Wearily, I pulled myself up to the interior window and looked back in.

They were gone. From the opposite side of the building I heard gunshots. First the brutal roar of a shotgun, then the heavy snap of Protégé's revolver. On shaky legs, I staggered and somewhat galloped toward the area, before the sounds began to move downstairs.

“How long can you avoid coming back to me, my old slave!”

Three shots from Protégé's revolver answered him, followed only by Shackles' laughter. The sound reverberated around the Alpha-Omega Hotel, as I started to find the chaos of their moving gunfight on my route. Holes were torn out of old paintings and parts of the carpet exploded upward from buckshot. I turned into the stairwell, frantically trying to reload *Rarity's Grace* on the way and fighting the temptation to lie down and close my eyes.

“You will not hurt the foals! I will not let them come to harm!”

“They aren't yours, upstart...they never were! Slaves don't own anything!”

I burst into the main hallway just in time to see Protégé rush out the main doors to the streets of Fillydelphia. He was hurt, one side of his cheek swollen and bleeding. While he hurried, I could see him pushing through pain. Skidding to a halt, I saw him point the revolver. Shackles was in clear view near the gate! The open ground of the hotel's exterior held no cover until the far away buildings of the next street over! He had him!

“*Stand down, you are surrounded!*”

A griffin's voice shrieked through the air as multiple large figures dropped from the sky, long rifles aimed directly at Protégé.

Sneaking forward, I poked my head through a window to look outside before recoiling in dismay.

Other griffins hung in the air, weapons pointed cleanly at Protégé. He was surrounded by at least a dozen other ponies that were now advancing from the ground. All were armed, most were soldiers, not slavers. Yet he stood with his revolver pointed firmly at Chainlink Shackles. Two spotlights were centred on him...watching him and calling repeatedly for him to throw down his weapon.

The big slaver stood in the perimeter fence gate, grinning and leering at the small unicorn before him. Masses of rifles were pointed at Red Eye's apprentice.

The revolver shook in the air. I could tell Protégé wanted to pull that trigger. He had Shackles dead to rights, the gun was powerful enough to shatter anypony's skull. I heard the slaver speak...just loudly enough for Protégé to hear.

“I know you want to. Go on. The eternal chain keeps on moving with or without me...there's others

who'd do it. So go on...come on upstart, colt cuddler, *slave!* Throw away everything to end me, won't it make Fillydelphia so much *better?* Will it?"

I could see Protégé's teeth clench as the griffin shouted again to him.

"Throw down the gun, Protégé! You are accused of traitorous acts, we will hear your side in trial!"

"Come on upstart...what are you waiting for? Think of all the ways I hurt you...make you beg...all the ways I hurt the runt to break him..."

"Put! It! Down!"

"Revenge for all of it. Give it all up to kill me, worth it?"

There was a moment of silence. It might have been a couple seconds, but it felt so much more. I wanted to run out...to tell the truth, but they'd never believe a lowly slave. I couldn't help him...I just had to watch this happen.

His eyes were wet. I could see how much he *wanted* to. He was being blamed for hurting the very thing he believed in. He could end the tyrant of Fillydelphia right now!

Those eyes clenched, his teeth too.

Gradually...his whole body shaking...Protégé dispelled his magic. The revolver clattered to the ground.

Chainlink Shackles only smiled and let a low chuckle rumble through him. He watched as the griffins descended and chained Protégé. He *enjoyed* the sight. Standing there all triumphant, as though he was the one in the 'right.'

The sight made me sick to see.

Then he cast his eyes to the Hotel and me...and I had to flee.

I didn't have a choice, he'd have come for me.

I fled through the hotel to the servant's entrance, passing over bloodied floors even as Protégé was no doubt led away in chains past a mocking Chainlink Shackles. I heard ponies behind me begin to filter into the hotel to find the devastation from Protégé's own weapon he'd been caught carrying in his magic. Feeling my muscles seize up and joints ache, I fell into doorframes and tripped on stairs during my hurried retreat. My head still felt dizzy, the lump throbbing.

It was a tiring effort to reach the servant's doorway. Galloping out, crawling under the fence and diving into the ruins, I simply fell to the ground upon reaching Unity and Coral. Exhausted and stammering, I began desperately trying to tell them what had happened. The loss of the foals, the proximity I'd come to that evil slaver again, the framing of Protégé, the massacre in the hotel.

The fact that Chainlink Shackles had played us and won.

* * *

I winced, squeaking as the wet towel was held against my stinging forehead.

"There we go..." Unity whispered, pulling one of my own hooves up to hold the cloth myself, "just let me get this potion open."

"Thanks, I can d-do it myself though." I murmured, before inwardly biting my tongue at maybe sounding ungrateful.

"Then humour me." She smiled, albeit humourless, popping the cork of the potion with her magic before taking over holding the towel again.

My hooves free, I drank the tingling magic liquid. Slowly, I felt the pain subside. The hot lances of pain firing through my skull every time I moved it died down to a dull thumping. "Um...thanks..."

"No problem." Unity seemed a little hesitant to smile more, before putting the empty potion away, trotting back inside the pumping station to do so. Sitting back, she sighed and lowered her head.

We'd returned to the sewers a few minutes ago. The news did not take well amongst the others, Coral least of all. She had ranted and raved, repeatedly asserting the atrocity that such a tactic by Shackles was. I'd never heard her curse before until now. In fact, her vengeful mood had scared Glimmer completely out of talking to her regarding the orb.

I didn't blame her. Coral's anger was not something approached lightly at this moment. Even Brimstone had kept his distance.

The foals were likely somewhere beyond our reach now, kept hidden by the most dangerous of slavers. It was clear to us all that they were probably in the metro slave den, but that didn't help them feel any less distant or ease the worries of what they might be going through right now. Of what he might do to them. We'd never gotten into that lair of Shackles' before and if possible we wanted to have avoided it forever. A world entirely devoted to just him and his madness was something I wanted to stay far away from. Yet with the foals in danger, it was feeling like a very worrying reality that we'd have to attempt to get in there.

Only it lay beyond the reach of our abilities. I'd seen how heavy the guard was down there personally. Even with Mister Peace, Brimstone and Coral at her best we couldn't penetrate such a fortified underground place. Not that it had stopped her from trying to suggest it compared to considering them beyond saving. Eventually, she had accepted none of us were even thinking of that.

Unity returned, sitting beside me. Part of me couldn't miss the fact that we instinctively sat a few feet away from one another. There was still an awkward air, despite our friendship.

“Your sister was saying she's closing in on a way in, you know? I tried to ask more, but she's just got her nose in those maps. Something about the crater? A hidden base? She wasn't very talkative, for once. Like she's really sad about something right now...”

I sighed and leaned back. Honestly, my mind was elsewhere too. I kept seeing Protégé being led away and feeling a horrible fear creep over me. He'd already lost his precious Mall, then much of his reputation...then his friends and allies. Now he could lose so much more.

“Murky?”

Snapping up, I yelped as the back of my skull hit the wall harder than I expected.

“Yow! Um, oh...sorry...yes, the crater place...thing.”

I certainly remembered it. That and seeing it go deeper, the tunnel the ghouls had chased me from long ago had went somewhere yet unexplored for sure. Given Magister Heartcare's connection to the zebras it seemed likely that the chamber I'd been trapped in might be linked to the outer metro and Ministry Station. From what I'd heard from the others though, the issue was where it actually met the trainlines. Running into the outer metro with no knowledge of where we were was suicide of the most horrible sort. Those ancient tunnels were not meant for ponies any more.

“You sure you don't need to rest it off?”

It occurred to me that I was still sitting in the middle of a conversation. Good Goddesses, my mind was everywhere, even with Unity right beside me. Shaking my head (and quickly regretting the dizziness as the potion did its work) I tried to force a smile back at her. It failed.

“No, no. I'm just...um...worried.”

He was being marched away in chains...no aid forthcoming from any slaver. They could do anything to him now! I couldn't just...no. I had to know for sure what was going on, but I knew the others wouldn't agree to me going out.

“In fact I...” I coughed into my hoof, getting up and pulling my saddle back on. “I think I'm just going to get some fresh air...”

“Murky, we're in Fillydelphia. There isn't any fresh air...outside is thicker with chemicals than in here.”

I turned, surprised. I'd never heard Unity pull a deadpan comment before. I met her with eyelids

lowered and a thoroughly disbelieving face.

“You're going to hunt for him, aren't you? After what you saw.”

Slowly, I nodded, my hooves shifting meekly together as I lowered my head.

“Want some company?”

That took me by surprise, but it wasn't possible. “I'll...uh...I'll be okay, thanks. I won't take any risks, promise.”

I tried to smile, but the look of disappointment on her face hit me *hard*. Feeling guilty, I made to explain. To say how I needed the grapple and gliding to get where I was intending to go, but she spoke first.

“Murky...I know we have our moments of bonding and friendship but...things are still a bit, y'know...”

“Awkward?” I offered, hesitantly. It was right, for every warm shared time there were countless little 'glance across the room nervously' moments as we each had our own thoughts about the truth.

Unity nodded, quietly sighing and looking to the side, her thick mane hiding her face from this angle. “I don't, uh...make you uncomfortable, do I?”

A thousand words at once tried to explode through my mouth. Instead I simply produced something more akin to 'ablurgghh'.

Eventually I corrected myself. “No...no. It's just like...um...”

“You look over and wonder what kind of friend you see or not? If it's the same pony you knew in a time you forgot?”

I just gulped, nodding. It was about the best either of us could vocalise it. Unfortunately, her slightly unsure look at the reply didn't fill me with confidence.

“Be careful out there, Murky. I'll let them all know.”

She briefly embraced me. There was a moment that I felt her move, similar to when she'd kissed my cheek weeks ago near the FunBarn...but she pulled away before just any contact was made, as though reconsidering it. Letting go, she trotted back to the pumping station with soft and slow steps.

As I left, I had the distinct impression I'd done something wrong...

* * *

Outside, I had to try and push down my worries.

Unity was safe down here with the others, but Protégé was not. The foals were in lethal danger, yes...but I couldn't do anything about them right now until my friends figured something out. Protégé however, was perhaps reachable. He had done a lot wrong to me over the time I'd known him, yet I felt wrong abandoning him to all this alone.

It was because of that feeling that I moved to the rooftops of factories and buildings to approach the FunFarm once more. With the grapple on my saddle and even a few short (and wonderfully confidence boosting) glides from roof to roof I didn't find it difficult to traverse Fillydelphia. There were enough scrap built covers from the acidic rain and heavy industrial vents to hide from the balloons and griffins after all. Moving like this felt invigorating, free of the same boundaries.

Eventually, I crossed into the old amusement park. Soaring over its fence and firing my grapple to the top of the helter-skelter. It was an old hiding place and one I felt intensely comfortable in. Even better, it was close by to the FunBarn itself, close enough that I could see and hear the commotion going on outside.

Amongst the grounds strewn with raw metals and lumber, a large group of ponies had gathered.

Consisting of mostly slavers, they clustered in the FunBarn's outer area near the gate. Keen guards were posted in newly raised watchtowers at each corner of the Barn, while I could see slaves crawling all over the Barn welding metal plates of armour to its walls, giving it the impression of a kind of metallic tortoise. The gathering of slavers was as much directing them as it was discussing its own things. They were preparing the

headquarters for battle, that much was obvious. The slaves involved had been worked to the bone, many of them looking little more than skeletons as they tiredly hammered away to bend metal around support struts.

Below them, slavers and guards came and went in rapid succession from the main group. I recognised many of them from the time I'd spent at Protégé's side within that building; Red Eye's higher ranks. The organisers, generals and master slavers. Several griffins loomed in the crowd, fully armed and holding rifles ready around the unmistakable form of Stern herself. Her rifle along speared above the rest to end in that thick lump of metal that was its barrel end. Big Brutus and was visible, standing stoically quiet behind Grindstone with cybernetics humming and hissing as they flexed and pivoted. Upon his cubed artificial shoulder I could see the symbol of a dragon crossed out to proclaim his victory on the mountain.

With a little careful peering I saw List Seeker in there too, then Mister Mosin and Wicked Slit. Some clean uniformed unicorns stood talking to Stern, bright red with golden bands on their shoulders. Diplomats for Red Eye? One was shaking his head despairingly, as though bringing bad news. I tried to pick out what he was saying from my place of hiding. I could hear the voice...perhaps if he'd been the only one talking I might have figured it out, but with everypony blabbering at once it was impossible.

That was set to change. With a great shriek, Stern caught the attention of every pony and griffin in the area. I clamped my hooves over my ears. Even the slaves all stopped for a second. Stern stopped, lowering her head and looking around as she claimed the moment as hers to speak by force of authority.

“We have received word that the survivors of the Cathedral will be returning shortly. You will all prepare supplies and aid to integrate them into the defence of Fillydelphia immediately upon their arrival. Red Eye's great city will take the advantage of every griffin, pony, weapon and shred of ammo it can for the coming battle!”

A murmur passed around. This was not the best of news...apparently Red Eye had *lost* at the Cathedral? Was this Enclave really that strong? The thought boggled me, Red Eye was *the* power in the wasteland! I remember hearing about rivals being bought or stomped under. He had paid many times my price to get me and considered it cheap. No-body messed with him on a large scale! Yet the Enclave had...had beaten him?

“I have assigned you all a Talon representative who will bring my instructions to your appointed zones via air. You will follow them to the letter. Fillydelphia will not fall. Do not share this information, it needs only be followed. These pegasi are known to be able to intercept radio signals. Those of you in the factories have designated delivery sites. All of the Pit combatants are to be released into the fighting arm. Volunteer forces will be assigned to the rooftop defences. I want hourly reports from every sector via Talon despatch flight, is everyone understood?”

There was a chorus of shouts and stamps.

“For our great leader. For Red Eye. For Unity.”

“*We will sacrifice!*” came the reply from the assembled ponies. Some more zealous than others.

Stern nodded firmly, beating a clenched talon off her breastplate before leaning toward the elderly donkey standing near her. “There shall be no dissent now, we must act as one. Those who dare to do so will be harshly brought down upon after our inevitable victory. Grindstone, you say that one alleged traitor has been uncovered that you brought to my attention...”

“Indeed, Ma'am.” Grindstone coughed, waving to an aid, who turned and ran into the FunBarn. His hoof wobbled to touch the ground again, as he spurned the help of a young buck carrying Grindstone's belongings now for him.

“Then bring them forth...an example will be made in this moment, while all are gathered.”

I knew exactly who they were talking about. Creeping forward, I peered further out of the helter-skelter at the events below through a snapped hole in its red and white rotted wood. Ponies were stamping, outraged and shouting in the crowd as they heard of such a thing. Wicked Slit in particular held a foul look, repulsed that such a thing could exist. They were fanatical...

There, from the FunBarn, I saw Chainlink Shackles emerge at the head of a security column. Walking proudly and taller than I'd ever imagined the big slaver being able to do, he led them through the crowd toward the clearing in front of Stern. Behind him, manacled around all four hooves and reduced to awkward stumbling was Protégé, surrounded by four of Shackles' own slavers bearing electric prods and the hardwood sticks slavers loved so much to swipe across a chest or a rump.

Protégé tried to walk with his head high, but short steps and heavy chain made it difficult. No doubt this was Shackles' exact plan. The huge slave master strode into the centre of the clearing, grinning as he nodded to Stern and turned to face his prisoner hobble after him. At his motioning, the guards threw Protégé into the centre of it all, causing him to stumble and fall into the dirt. I couldn't see too clearly, but I wondered how badly they'd mistreated him. I knew what being alone with Shackles was like, the way he broke you down, worked at the chinks in your pride to lever open a gap to exploit.

Red Eye's apprentice's presence lit a wave of reaction however. They all knew who he was. Some were clearly shocked, but many saw it as a chance to let their rage come out at somepony they'd often see as 'favoured' above them by their leader. Howls and insults filled the air, before Stern's rifle butt rapped upon her wooden platform and drove them to silence.

“Chainlink Shackles, Grindstone...you are aware of who you accuse?”

“Oh, absolutely. The one *none* of us would have expected, eh?” Shackles didn't take his eyes off Protégé as he spoke.

It almost lit a fire of hope in me as I saw Stern glance down with confusion, perhaps even disbelief. Protégé stared right back at her, an intense look in his eyes.

“Stern! This is nothing but a grab for power by-*argh!*”

Shackles struck him over the face.

“**Silence! The accused does not speak!**”

Protégé fell again, gritting his teeth and trying to get himself back up on his hooves.

Stern rubbed a talon on her beak, scrutinising the scene before holding her claws out. All those assembled fell silent.

“This is Protégé. Once slave master and now logistics manager of the primary district. He stands under accusation by Masters Chainlink Shackles and Grindstone of traitorous acts. They claim evidence to his crimes!”

The crowd jeered, shouting their support for the two slavers. I wanted to scream out against such things, they were setting him up! At the very least, I could see List Seeker remaining silent.

Stern's rifle thumped again for quiet. “He has offered loyal service and learning under Red Eye for years, as such I request to hear of this evidence and from those you claim witnessed it. I shall stand as adjudicator as Master Grindstone offers prosecution on this alleged turncoat. I shall hear your side with those in attendance as those to bear witness to justice. Protégé, young one, you may be granted one to speak for you...if any wills it?”

Stern looked to the crowd, scanning it. Many slavers shook their head.

Protégé I saw looked only to one, List Seeker. Their eyes met, I could see the pleading in Protégé's face...the silent willing for any help at all here.

Yet List Seeker only lowered his head and looked away, looking sick to his stomach. Too afraid to stand up here, likely worried for the slaves he cared for too. Before him, Protégé let his shoulders slump.

“Very well, you shall speak for yourself.” Stern turned to Grindstone, lowering her eyes. “We are at the brink of war, Grindstone. This will not be drawn out or given to break periods. Make your case *now* or do not make it at all.”

Grindstone nodded serenely and began to trot forward into the clearing. The crowd fell silent for the old

slaver as he moved toward Protégé and began to circle him. Coughing, he cleared his throat first.

“By now, you may have all heard of the unsettling events at the Alpha-Omega Hotel...”

The crowd roared their displeasure, Stern only nodded.

“We have at least twelve ponies and griffins of the inner wall security who will testify that *this subject* was found at the Hotel, wielding the weapon he is known to carry, the weapon used in the killing of twenty members of foal-care staff!”

Protégé whipped round, held back by the chains but forcing his head toward the donkey.

“Those are *lies!* I found Chainlink Shackles over the corpses of those who protect the children! My weapon was stolen!”

“And yet who do you have to back up your side of the story?” Grindstone rolled it off his tongue as he closed in, coming almost muzzle to muzzle with Protégé, “*Chainlink Shackles* is the one who has *saved* our precious foals from your attempts to undermine us! You deny that he could reveal the foals in safety? You deny that he could *prove* they were evacuated and have been kept unharmed?”

“I *do*. Stern, if you would permit us to an investigation of-”

Stern shook her head. “I have seen the foals myself the moment they were evacuated to the FunBarn while security handled apprehending those at the scene. Shackles' aid Wormtail brought a message from his master that requested to move them underground for safety in the coming war, to which I agreed. Grindstone's motion stands.”

“They are lying to you, Stern! They-”

Grindstone swept in front of Protégé, cutting him off. “You have attempted to lie in trial! It is not *us* with countless witnesses who need to answer to *you!* I have witnesses! They are all here!”

He threw a hoof around himself. The slavers liked that one, they clamoured and stamped their approval. Indeed I recognised many of them from the mountain or the wagon ambush. I was feeling frustrated beyond measure, this was all lies and slander against him! He was a good pony! Why wouldn't the others listen?! This wasn't a fair process!

“You attacked the Alpha-Omega Hotel alone!”

“I did not!”

“You attempted assassination upon the mountain expedition mere days ago where dozens of slavers saw you firing upon their friends in service of *slaves!*”

“*Under Master Red Eye's orders!*”

“That same slave group that has gone rogue was seen stealing from the very convoy that held the weapon we found in your magic at the Hotel! You were seen with their war machine! You have been enamoured with ponies from that group ever since you petitioned us to allow you to own the pegasus! You are a turncoat and a traitor!”

“I AM NO TRAITOR!” Protégé screamed at him, trying to push forward, his eyes locked on Stern, “I have done nothing but serve Master Red Eye! He was afraid of this! Afraid of this very thing happening, Stern!”

That got her attention, appealing to her loyalty. Protégé took a deep breath, moving around Grindstone. I saw Chainlink Shackles' grin dip slightly.

“The assassination of Master Grizzly and of my associate Ragini is proof here! They had flawless records! In Grizzly's case decades of service, yet in Ragini's case she was a sister to your faction! A Talon! They were murdered by Shackles' group on that mountain top, the expedition that Master Red Eye bid us infiltrate to root out corruption at the very heart of Fillydelphia! He had the raider Wildcard end her life!”

Stern's gaze turned harsh. This was a dangerous game Protégé was playing, I knew well how intense the

Talons' feelings were for their own. To attempt to use Ragini's death for this was playing with serious fire. Yet Protégé met her gaze right on.

“There are those who can see the reality! That's why they were killed! They murdered a Talon in cold blood to prevent you hearing about their lust for control of this city! She was family to you, a comrade to me! She died in utmost service to the one her duty told her to protect. You knew *her*, Stern...and she fought beside me up there. Would she have turned traitor if what they say is true? Would a Talon turn against you?”

Silence.

Stern did not move. Her fierce gaze never left the small unicorn before her. I could see her talons gripping the rifle so hard that it was shivering.

“Ragini...would not have turned. She was sister to us all...”

“Then you kn-”

“Silence.” Stern interrupted him, “If you claim this...then what proof do I have that you did not betray the Talon I tasked to protect *your* life...in the face of everything else, *that* is what I see is the most likely story here. That you killed my sworn sister! You kill one of us, you hurt all of us!”

Stern was seething, her wings snapping harshly behind her.

“I seek to bring her killer to justice! I have grieved for her!”

“Then explain your lack of appearance to her funeral!” Stern bitterly roared, almost looking like she wanted to leap off the platform. “Shackles returned her body to us with full honours after the desecration the slaves and their raider met out to her corpse.”

No we didn't! Brim didn't touch her! *We fought with her!* How dare he claim that!

“Chainlink Shackles presided over her cremation. He spoke of her courage in trying to help his and our vision by attempting to put a stop to the rogue slaves, but now I see the truth is worse than I had thought. You were scheduled to be trialled for things *other* than the Hotel shooting already out of suspicion. With confirmed witnesses of you attacking and murdering Fillydelphia's ponies...why should I believe this one element alone? Especially from an *ex-slave*.”

Protégé was quiet. I could see his mouth opening a little, trying to find the words, trying to think of anything. The temptation to glide down there and shout my support of him was overwhelming, but they would never believe me.

They'd never treat any slave's opinion as anything. That thought hurt deeply to my stance in this city.

“You see?” Grindstone turned, smugly grinning to his supporters, “He is without evidence, without witnesses and incapable of defending himself. Loyal though he may have been, it seems his existence as a slave elevated has clouded his mind and confused him into supporting a dissident cell's cause! Caused him to attempt to kill the spirit of Fillydelphia's young on the eve of *war!*”

“NO!” Protégé outright screamed it, I could see the absolute pain on his face, standing in the city he had dreamed of restoring, being accused of tearing it down. “There are those who know! Those who...who have seen this insurrection among Fillydelphia's ranks! Blunderbuck, Mosin's assistant!”

“*Pizdet!* He is fool!”

Protégé turned and shifted across, I saw him moving to List Seeker, speaking directly to him, quieter.

“You...you know of the blackmails, please...*speak out!* We can stop this! Please! You want to protect your workers! Then help me!”

In the crowd, I saw List Seeker only offer a sad look. He just stood and shook on the spot...before silently shaking his head.

Dismayed, Protégé backed away into the centre again. He pointed at the huge slaver as best he could with his chained legs.

“Shackles is wanting his power back! He was our *enemy* once! Master Red Eye fought this city from him at great cost and now he is only one rank from ruling this place once again! Can't any of you see this is an obvious powerplay? You all know the games and politics! You saw the vote! You would all elect him? The pony who made this a place of terror and darkness? The one we had to rebuild this place from?!”

They laughed at him, Wicked Slit's voice shrieking above it, “I think somepony is *jealous!*”

The crowd jeered.

“Just because he's not the teacher's pet!”

“Not a real slaver!”

“Never *earned* anything!”

“I saw him slipping food to slaves he liked best! Medicine too! Only certain ones!”

“He shot my fucking brother on the mountain!”

The insults and accusations spun around the circle of the trial. The slaves up above watched it. Some were grinning, a couple looked upset. I recognised the latter ones from the Mall when Protégé had been in control...

“Listen to yourselves!” Protégé hollered at them, “Just listen! We were here to build something greater! Something more like Equestria deserves!”

His voice broke on the last word. The crowd quietened down. The passion in his voice was unmistakable. Impossible to fake. Yet he sounded desperate, as he clearly saw himself on the brink of losing the only thing he had left. His dreams.

“To restore Equestria...ushering in a new era away from the wasteland! We weren't just...just slavers, we were sacrificing for a new world! We achieved that through his direction, his plans and the toil of the work...of slaves. How many have suffered here? How much will it be for nothing if Fillydelphia becomes the city of darkness that it once was again? Look at all we created, *Master Red Eye* gave us purpose! I have done nothing but serve! *Nothing!*”

The sound of a rifle butt rapping on wood filled the air. Slowly, Protégé turned back to Stern.

The huge griffin was looking very grim. To her right stood Chainlink Shackles, atop the platform with her now.

“Nothing...” Stern began, “is precisely what you have now to make me believe anything but the advice of dozens of ponies, griffins and the words of elected superiors of yours. Chainlink Shackles has shown exemplary service since abdicating to Red Eye years ago. Once I thought you might show the same over time. I trusted Red Eye's opinion to once vote for you, young pony...I now see that in his absence you have revealed your true colours.”

My hooves tightened on the ledge of the helter-skelter.

“You are found guilty by trial. You are stripped of all rank and your status among us considered invalid. Red Eye would be very disappointed in you for disgracing his trust in you.”

Protégé's expression utterly sank.

“Even aside from your other crimes the punishment for assaulting the Hotel is simple death, normally via arena combat. However...in the absence of time for such an event...”

Her talon's blurred, pulling the rifle from her side. I clumsily tried to get my wings and saddle ready, I had to try, I-

Her rifle was stopped half way down to aiming at Protégé. Shackles' hoof had met it.

Stern gazed at her second in command sideways, clearly spotting the small smile on the huge pony's face as he stared at Protégé.

“With your permission, Stern...we need every bit of aid this city can get right now. Every bit of time...every bullet...”

His smile turned to *that* grin. That lustful and controlling power fantasy I saw in his eyes at the opportunity to rule over another. He'd always looked at me like that.

“...every slave.”

Protégé remained on the spot, but I could see the twitch go through him and the slight movement in his hind legs as one of them shifted backwards.

“Stern, please listen to me, I-”

“*Silence!*” She shouted harshly at him, not turning her head from Shackles. “He's yours, assign him to the Mall...perhaps he'll learn something being in his old cell. Protégé, you are hereby rescinded from your status as a member of Red Eye's city. You will return all equipment given and your personal possessions will be auctioned.”

He staggered backward, sitting down as his legs clearly went weak from the crippling realisation.

“Furthermore...in shame of what you have done, there will be no allowance for access to the three methods for freedom. Not by six Pit victories, not by crater work and not by two years of hard service. If you wish to serve as you say, you will do so as the foundation of our work. That is your punishment for betraying he who gave you purpose.”

“Master...I didn't...” Protégé's voice was so quiet, I barely heard it...

“This meeting and trial is over.”

Her rifle butt struck the floor once more, announcing an end as the final humiliation was set home.

The slavers cheered at the resolution, supporting their leader. I saw Protégé at the centre of this maddened sham of a fair trial. His head fell low, as the dispersing witnesses cast their real thoughts about him aloud. I saw some slaves applaud, those that knew him stayed very silent and turned back to their work.

I simply watched from the helter-skelter, hooves over my mouth and tears in my eyes as the FunBarn emptied and Protégé was left behind with only a few others. Those that guarded him and one malicious figure who now began to stride down from the platform to claim his prize. Chainlink Shackles advanced on the slave who had once escaped him long ago.

The glee in Shackles' eyes was obvious as he dropped the collar around the immobile unicorn's neck and bent down. Protégé didn't move as it clamped shut, seemingly at a loss of spirits, but his nose wrinkled as Shackles' sweaty and horrid bulk drew close.

“It's the same thing I tell every slave who thinks they're going to escape soon, little upstart. Same as I told you back then...”

Protégé looked up at him, trying to keep a reaction from his face.

“...they aren't as special as they think they are. Even if it takes years, I always get them back in the end. You can't break the eternal chain. Welcome home, eh?”

I couldn't do anything but watch and shiver, trying to fight the guilty sense of selfishness for feeling terrified for myself at his words. He'd said that to me too...

Protégé gagged as the chain was tugged hard, yanking him from his hooves. I saw the sight that my friends once had of me, of seeing somepony you care about humiliatingly dragged behind their Master on a chain.

Gathering myself, wiping my tears, I stood up and got ready to follow them.

I needed a chance, just one chance.

* * *

They moved through the same route he had once taken me. The wide primary roads of Fillydelphia that would lead any visitor from the main gate past Wicked Slit's factory and deeper into the city toward the Mall. He was parading his new prize, taking long side routes and sticking in the open. Even now he had come back around from the 'tour' of one district and was passing by the parasprite pits nearby to the main gate again.

It hurt me to watch Protégé having to amble along, falling every time the chain was pulled. My route was far off to the side as I stuck to the cover of the buildings, leaving me unable to get close enough to attempt anything. Could *Rarity's Grace* penetrate a chain? Could I sneak up and detach it from Shackles?

Taking a breath, I sprinted through the office I was hiding on and leapt from the window into the next building along. Skittering on my hooves, I almost fell through a gaping hole at its centre, hurriedly grasping a nearby pillar to avoid the splintered edges of the drop.

“Hey! Look who's back where he belongs!”

The shouts had continued the entire way. Protégé had no shortage of enemies among the slavers. Some just looked confused while others turned their backs on the whole ordeal. Shackles paid them no mind, instead simply lavishing in this moment.

“You remember this, slave? How many years ago, when you first came here...”

He didn't turn around to look at Protégé, who simply trotted with his head held low, the chain to his collar dragging through the dusty road.

“Oh, don't worry about trying to look like you don't care...we'll have you back to the same whimpering slave you once were quite soon, hehe. I've got time.”

The chain whipped hard, catching the unicorn's chin and whipping his head up by force. Briefly, I saw his pained look. He was understandably terrified, but mostly just looked lost.

“That's the look I know. Now-”

“They're here!”

The shout went out from across the street. I poked my head through the nearest window and looked down to see a small group of Red Eye's soldiers galloping out the bottom floor of this very building. One of them was faltering under the weight of a huge wind up radioset on his back as he moved.

“Patrols have seen them! The survivors were followed! They're coming! *They're here!* Look! LOOK!”

They rushed past, before gaining a small following of other ponies. Other slavers downed their tools and followed. A group became a crowd. A crowd became a horde. The entire block was shaking from running ponies. Even slaves joined it as they all ran for higher ground to try and see something. What in Equestria was going on? Who was here? I couldn't see anything with how high the factories in this district were.

Fillydelphia was coming alive. The breath was exhaled in a sudden surge of energy and action. I saw soldiers rushing to stations, numerous balloons changed direction in the air. Below me, even Chainlink Shackles stopped and began to trot backwards with Protégé in tow. Griffins took off, massive guns mounted on rooftops swivelled. A momentum picked up on all sides of me as ponies shoved and clamoured for the best vantage points.

It couldn't be...

I began to gallop around the massive hole through the centre of this building until I was at the opposite side. In the distance, I heard Fillydelphia's balefire sirens begin to wail, its deathly howl picking up volume and sending shivers down my back as one alarm after another joined the chorus of nerve shredding sounds that drifted across each district. Voices and shouting were coming in from all over the city to my ears, like every pony in it was talking at once. The ground shook at the crowds outside the building.

Aiming up, I fired the grapple to the rooftop through the hole and immediately pulled the trigger to winch myself up. Dragged out over the hole, I felt the saddle take my weight, sending me soaring upwards. I bit hard, making the mechanics whirr and hum with the sound of wire being dragged in too quickly past floor after floor. Up above me the blood red clouds broiled and flickered as they grew closer...until I *launched* out of the hole, hurtling past the point the hook had stuck by a good ten feet. Legs flailing, I feel forward and downward toward the rooftop, only just getting my wings out in time to soften the landing.

Yes...*landing*...

Picking myself up, I coughed out the dust from where I'd skidded and looked up in the direction of Fillydelphia's main gate. I stood atop a tall building, legs wide as I ran out onto a stray girder poking out from the side of the building for some extra height and truly *saw*...

Beyond the Wall, in the skies above...they were here.

I thought they were clouds, but truly they were not. They were formed *from* clouds. Two gigantic fortresses hanging in the air as they seemed to slowly shift toward Fillydelphia from far off like moving mountains. Castles in the sky. The longer I looked, the more the scale began to settle home about their true mass. I saw the twinkling lights of windows and the all too obvious shape of siege weaponry bristling on shaped mounts. Their shadows on the ground below covered the mountainsides forming the valley outside Fillydelphia, casting the land into further darkness by their presence. How could anything in the wasteland stand against such titans of war?

Around them I saw smaller vessels. More streamlined, surging forward on the winds to guard their colossal vessels. They moved far faster than anything that size had any right to and I watched as one suddenly pulled upward and shot into the sky, above the clouds. Between them I could see chariot sized vehicles moving in formation, surrounded by tiny dots. I watched them spin and veer with perfect control, inches from their co-fliers. Groups of individual flyers that took off and landed from the huge floating citadels.

An army of pegasi. My eyes could barely believe it, after so many years alone...and yet the sight filled me with nothing but terror for the powers that were about to clash in this corner of the world.

The Enclave had come for Fillydelphia.

“Get the gate closed behind them! Move it! Pass the word up! Get them all in! NOW NOW!”

Tearing my eyes down from the giants of the clouds, I saw an overseer race onto his balcony below me and scream at those on the ground. Casting my eyes across, I saw what he meant. The open grounds beyond Fillydelphia's main entrance were in chaos, the cracked concrete surfaces that once had been a site for wagons to park was filled with commotion. Through the gate streamed a convoy of battered wagons and limping ponies. Most were wounded, some carried on stretchers or mounted on trailers. They were soldiers, primarily, the survivors of the Cathedral who had come back alive from Red Eye's last battle against the Enclave. I'd heard about how well equipped they had been, with armour bypassing rounds and even rumours of some massive ally alongside the alicorns...but they had been laid low. What chance did we have?

Teams of medical ponies rushed forth. I saw Doctor Weathervane and his own trained team among them as he raced to those who were falling the moment they got through the closing gates. Many of them bore fresh wounds, clearly the Enclave had been hounding them the entire way.

Across the walls, an arsenal of weapons began to point out toward the sky, but the Enclave seemed in no hurry to continue the pursuit. Their smaller ships would veer closer, sometimes even drawing fire that rippled across the wall in bright flares, but the ships would whisk away on the winds before any impacts were made at this extreme distance. The missiles and huge anti-air rounds instead collapsed into the suburban outskirts of the city, devastating already ruined buildings with dull thumps taking a few seconds to reach my ears. I couldn't see the impacts, but I heard crumbling architecture and saw the smoke billow up from beyond the Wall.

Even I could see what was going on, the Enclave were testing Fillydelphia's range in preparation for later.

“RETURN TO YOUR MASTER, SLAVE!”

I froze at the words, yet I realised they were aimed elsewhere. Letting my eyes fall in the direction of the sound I saw their unmistakable source on the ground. Much as I felt guilty for it, I was relieved they hadn't been meant for my ears.

Below me, I saw the form of Chainlink Shackles ramming his way through the crowd, hurling ponies aside as he chased after Protégé. My heart leapt, he'd gotten away!

Up ahead, the black unicorn ducked and dived between ponies, trailing his chain behind him with his magic. He must have unclipped it when Shackles was distracted, yes!

Immediately, I turned and ran off the girder, veering across to tear over an unused walkway between the two buildings. I cantered past two guards who were far too busy looking elsewhere in my efforts to try and keep up with Protégé, once he made a break for the buildings and cover I could swoop down and get him away!

That wasn't what he was doing. Not at all. Looking to the side as he ran he wasn't trying to get away to the buildings...he was trying to get toward the survivors.

Even at this distance, I heard his impassioned cry.

“Master Red Eye! *Master Red Eye!*”

He ran from group to group, staying ahead of Chainlink Shackles as the slaver closed in. Other guards began to circle around.

“Where are you?!”

He was trying to find the one pony who could prove his side...

My gallop subsided to a trot...as I stumbled to a hiding spot overlooking the square inside the main gate and watched as he fled from each slaver, desperately sprinting around asking anypony he saw as they made their way in. Tired soldiers and some scientists looked at him...some shook their heads before he would move on.

“Where is he? *Tell me where he is! TELL ME!*”

His hooves grabbed a high ranking soldier, shaking the pony before he was knocked off. Slowly, the procession of Cathedral refugees began to move by. Protégé watched them group by group, but they lacked Fillydelphia's leader. He began more frantic, more hysterical and demanded it of anypony who would look his way as the back of the column neared.

Out of the corner of my eye...I saw Chainlink Shackles stop. He saw what was going on.

He was letting Protégé *try*. He *knew* something...

It didn't take me long to realise what. On why Shackles was happy to let this continue. To stand there with his filthy grin and watch as Protégé continued his anguished search among the wounded. Oh no...

Red Eye's apprentice didn't stop crying out. I watched as he threw open the doors to closed medical wagons and stood among the slowest movers...the final ones through the gate before its thick doors heaved shut, cutting off the outside world that had clearly taken something from him.

I saw Protégé standing slumped as those last ponies moved by him, asking them with a quiet voice, one I couldn't hear. I saw light glint from his cheeks...before the entire procession moved by at last. The final pony merely patting Protégé on the shoulder before shaking her head and moving on.

In our travels, I had seen Protégé at his weakest sometimes. I'd seen him scared, upset or in terrible pain. But this...as the pony who he had given him what he believed to be his only purpose was taken from him, it was new to even me.

It hurt me to hear that long and mournful scream as the reality hit home.

I couldn't help him. He was much too surrounded and in far too open an area. Instead I was stranded, only able to watch as he collapsed, his head falling onto his grounded front hooves.

The disgust flowed through me as I saw Shackles advance at the moment Protégé was most vulnerable, to gloat quietly...in words I could easily guess at. To drive it home as he pulled the unicorn up with his hooves and reattached the chain.

The sight of Protégé obeying was simply the worst part of it all.

I had to return to my friends...I had no choice. With the Enclave present I could only flee before Fillydelphia's rooftops turned into a lethal zone of readied troops.

There was nothing I could do...not now.

* * *

My friends were debating the plan...*again*.

“If the wee foals are in the metro station, we *could* get them on our way there.”

“If we know the way there at all,” Coral chimed in, “and if they're kept in the inner metro we're without a hope! Shackles' own slaver den is separate from Ministry Station down there, even though they're joined by tunnels. We *will not* leave without them by risking it all to an assumption they aren't in the section we can't fight into!”

“Aye, we won't.”

Brimstone Blitz spoke simply, but with great power. He sat towering above them all, regaining some of his old strength as his wounds gradually healed.

“But until we know where they are or not it's a right bastard to know what to do, Coral. Perhaps getting an inside-pony somehow...”

“And how long will that take?” Sunny's voice piped up from across the room. “Who the hell would want to go into that place anyway? Hey, Glim-gal, you know where we're going anyway yet?”

From the back of the room, my sister wiped her brow and stood up, holding up a map with charcoal scrawled over it. She had a thin smile on her face, it seemed distinctly underwhelming compared to her usual expression.

“You bet. Finally managed to work out what part of the tunnels the crater corresponds to. It's *very* close to where the station is, hell it might even be what used to be the Aurora and the zebras' main route to it compared to the long one we took before. Only...I don't know the conditions of the tunnels on that side and the way into the station itself will be blocked.”

“We planned for that. Peace and I'll handle it.” Brimstone added.

“So we get in there and hope it's less defended on the inside.” Sunny shrugged and tapped her rifle, “We could spend forever trying to be clever here and get no-where.”

“Then what about the foals? I can maybe get us there but we still don't know if-”

“Everypony, we're going in circles here...” Unity raised her voice to the group, an unusual enough sound that it caught their attention. “We're all trying to plan the big thing...why not take a moment to plan how to locate the foals first...and how to deal with the fact we'll have maybe dozens of them on our hooves. We can't just take three and leave the others down there. What would we be to sacrifice that for an escape?”

I had just returned, they hadn't seen me. Hiding in the shadows of the doorway, I leaned against the cold metal and listened.

“We aren't just escaping slavery...we're escaping evil, we're trying to break free from the nightmare that this city has become from what started with Aurora and those dark days. Leaving somepony behind we could save...I don't think that's who we are. I know you didn't intend that but we don't want to be caught with it by accident...that's what happened to Miss Star so long ago when it all got out of control. Would we give it all

up on a risk at this point? We must step back, look at this and find a way to know...not let excitement drive us to being predictable. They've outsmarted us every time, why wouldn't they do it now? If we play their game, we lose...so let's play our own, how we want things to be.”

Unity was right, we couldn't leave those behind that we could save if given the opportunity. We'd never get everypony, but to walk away from those those in need went against every lesson I and the others had learned. Friendship and caring had pulled us this far, pulled us through the nightmares we had endured.

“Protégé.”

They turned at the sound of my voice, as I strode back in. I balked, it hadn't occurred that they wouldn't hear my hooves.

“We're going to get Protégé.”

Coral Eve's eyes turned harsh. “Murk, my dear...he has made it clear he does not want to come.”

“I don't...I don't care!” I felt myself tremble as I dismissed on older pony's point. “It went bad...real bad. They framed him, called him a traitor! He's...”

I took a breath.

“He's been given to Shackles as a slave, now that Red Eye is dead.”

There was a silence.

The pony that had enslaved us all, who had led Fillydelphia into what it was to ruin our lives was now gone. That voice we'd all heard a thousand times on the loudspeakers would speak no longer.

“Fillydelphia is going to be led by Stern and Chainlink Shackles now...” I continued, quietly, “Stern's a battle leader...she'll no doubt leave Shackles to run the industry and slaves until it's over. He'll have full command to do as he wishes...and if Stern dies in battle, it won't ever end.”

I took a shallow breath, feeling very small in this mouldy cave below the city.

“Chainlink Shackles will control a slave city again.”

Coral Eve let her mouth gasp silently open. Brimstone glowered in thinly veiled rage.

“That's why...um...” I took a breath, “we need to get Protégé. He would help get the foals, I know he would. No matter what he decides for himself.”

She didn't move her eyes off me, but I saw them soften. Appealing to her son and the other children no doubt helped. Almost as though she had forgotten her criticism, she nodded.

“You think he might know something we don't about Fillydelphia and how to get them, I see” Coral gestured with a hoof, “So where is he then?”

“And do you think he'll, y'know...stay?” Glimmer chimed in from behind.

“The Mall! It's easy to get in there! I can get in and speak to him, but I don't know what he'll say. He really believes this place could be better, I know you may not but...he does. He'll help but after that he might stay, even though it sounds stupid. It's a...a...born slave thing. We get attached to ideas.”

I felt oddly embarrassed, talking about that. Like it was some sort of racial stereotype.

“No matter what he does after, I'll need all of you to get him out again, though. He might be our only chance to figure something out so we'll have to be ready to be...um...”

“Proper bloody violent?” Brimstone offered for me with a wry smirk.

“...yeah, that.” I gulped, meekly ending the sentence.

“**Then what are we waiting for?**” The whirring of Mister Peace joining us from the sewer tunnels shifted in behind me. “**A classic case of storm the castle, get the stallion for Miss Fluttershy here and if**

possible install organic ventilation for the bad guys.”

Glimmerlight snorted. She bumped the side of Peace's newly repaired chassis with a hoof.

“You seem eager.”

“These overgrown crickets in tunnels offer not the satisfaction for my compulsions, my dear.”

“I didn't hear anyone else coming up with a better plan of our own. Least this is something, so grab your shit and lets rock.” Sunny Days flipped her new lever action up on a hoof, catching it in her mouth as the others began to get up. “Timesh washtin!”

“Protecting Miss Fluttershy while surrounded by fighting mares who share in my enthusiasm. Truly my life is a good one.”

It was decided. Rest was over, the next stage of our plan had to go into action right away. The heavy saddlebags were left in the dry back room on top of old staff tables with only the required weapons and tools carried on our backs. It took a little while, we hadn't been planning to need any more trips here...but this was worth it. Any information on that area underground or who might be bought out could be helpful.

“I'll try and sneak in to him, can the rest of you get into the old cell through the door?” I asked to them as I struggled with one of Brimstone's tool bags.

“I'm sure Peace and Brim can get the jammed door open. Just give us the shout if you need us, Murky. With or without Protégé.” Glimmerlight ruffled my mane. “We'll be ready.”

We moved out as one group. Somehow, this time I found myself at the head of the group to move through the tunnels toward the Mall. I cantered ahead, eyes fixed only on the way to go.

Protégé...please, let me get through to you this time. Don't let this become your life.

* * *

I heard the crack of the whip before I even left the ventilation shaft.

Stopping on the spot, I felt immediately sweaty, my back crawling with unsettling feelings. The sound was too familiar, too painful. Memories of standing, unclothed and alone in *his* room as he lashed it across my bare back were still too fresh. Especially so, as I was now exiting into that very same office.

Yet as I finally pushed myself to drop out of the duct into the Mall's upper floors, I could only too well feel the fear of that same whip flaying again. Dark stains against the corners told where I'd bled.

Poking an eye through a crack in the room's door, I heard it again. A hiss of pain followed the sudden snap of leather. My stomach turned as I crawled out and began to move toward the sound, keeping low against the cold stone walls of the Mall. That noise would lead me to who I wanted and the knowledge that it did filled me with disgust.

That direction took me to the balcony overlooking the slave pens in the Mall. My old home.

I stood alone upon the platform that I had once been bucked off of, looking down onto the slabbed floor and multi-levelled shopping centre. The fountain, long broken now, still vaguely stood after hasty repairs while the walkways were now finished, connecting all areas of the upper levels to one another. Shop fronts held scared and weak slaves, as sick and as frail as we were on the run. Immediately, I had to suppress the urge to cough. The smell in here was sweet and foul, attacking my nostrils with its noxious scent and setting my sore throat convulsing.

They had gathered at the shop exits for they had something to see, something to watch. I came upon the sick theatre of Shackles' intentions laid bare. No-body in the entire hall spoke, a silent audience of fear from all sides around the show.

Slowly, my attention fell to the ground itself, past the punishment pits and hanging cages where slaves would be locked for disobeying. My eyes trailed to where slavers and slaves alike watched what was happening. Mister Mosin stood beside a distraught looking Blunderbuck, while Wormtail trotted to and fro, watching with a smug grin from all angles.

Shackles' whip blurred through the air, before connecting in a light spray of blood with its target. The young red maned unicorn chained by his front hooves to a pole in clear view.

Protégé gasped in pain, clenching his teeth and falling forward, slipping from the wooden pole to hold himself up on one hoof only. His back was already bruised and swollen...the last hit having only now broken skin. He tried to stand, before it struck again with a meaty slap that echoed around the halls and set him to seethe and growl, trying to deaden the pain...to keep it in as he rested his head on the base of the pole.

“It's no use trying to bear it, slave...”

Crack!

Protégé cried out, before exhaling sharply, trying to cull himself, closing his eyes tightly.

“You know I'll keep going...”

Crack!

I saw all too clearly the splitting of the skin, before he yelled in pain, gasping between stammering breaths.

Crack!

“You have years to answer for! Now you will! Before all those you tricked into thinking you were free! You are nothing now but mine, you can stop resisting now...as soon as you do it will stop!”

CRACK!

I saw his head go back, crying out in pain. His whole body shifted in muscle spasm, trying to instinctively get away from the pain. My eyes spotted Wormtail closing in, leering from beside Shackles as he drew back and struck again and again. Each time weakening Protégé's pain resistance a bit more. Each time eroding his strength as the blood trickled around his back. I could see tears in his eyes, unable to hold them back before two more lashes descended. The second one striking home *hard*...hard enough to surge past what he could stand.

The look on Chainlink Shackles' face was naught but satisfaction at the loud and pained shriek.

I'd been there, I knew how badly it hurt. I wiped my eyes, wishing that my understanding mattered. The fact that anypony would eventually be driven past their point of endurance until they were screaming, no matter how strong they were, was not the point. Shackles was trying to attack his pride, his confidence he had gained when he had gotten away from him. Trying to force him to fall so much further.

As each one landed, drawing those screams again and again...I had to turn away and hold my ears closed. It was too much. There was nothing I could do for him. I simply waited until it was over.

Finally, mercifully...once the slavers had their satisfaction from his agonised wails, I heard no more strikes. Only a low and weary moan of pain.

“You! Get this wretch a potion...he must be able to work his shift tonight.”

Chainlink Shackles stepped forward, moving around Protégé where he lay on the ground, breathing hard. One large hoof lifted the unicorn's chin.

“Now listen here, slave...you've got work to do. You'll go to your old office and you will put everything there into crates to be *sold off*. You'll do it yourself, to remember with every item why slaves don't own shit, eh? **Go.**”

Protégé sipped the magical potion eagerly, eyes locked on Shackles as he did. Cautiously, he nodded...before trying to limp away. It took three attempts to move properly, seething and gasping as his back muscles moved.

“HALT!”

He stopped...turning back to the massive slaver who was simply looking around to every assembled associate and slave around.

“What do slaves say?”

Protégé didn't speak, he just stared with red eyes. I could see the disgust on his face, the pain and fear. He didn't want to say it. I pleaded silently with him, just say it and get out of there!

“Go on...”

Slowly, I saw him take a breath, shivering and hating every letter...

“Yes...master...”

“Louder.”

Protégé grimaced, turning away with his eyes closed.

“Yes, master!”

The words were weak in his tortured state...but they were enough for Shackles to wave at him to leave. One slaver joined him as guard, but I saw Wormtail grin at Protégé as he went by. It occurred to me that the slimy little assistant was wearing Protégé's eyepiece.

“Not such a brave one now are you, huh? What would Red Eye think to have heard you *squeal* like that...guess you'll be taking orders from me too now!”

Protégé clearly tried to ignore him, but a warning glance from Shackles was all it took.

“Yes...*Master* Wormtail...”

“That's riiight...”

Mercifully, that was it. Protégé was led out toward his office. Everypony began to disperse, several slavers clustering around Shackles.

“Mosin, have you and your assistant collect the required equipment to defend the station. We will not let those winged rats in, should it come to it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, master!” Mosin replied sharply, clicking his wooden hoof on the ground.

“Then **move.**”

Both Mosin and Blunderbuck hurried away, before Shackles began to amble toward the exit. I noticed now he still moved with a limp, it seemed Brimstone's attack still hadn't fully healed for him. It was a good enough memory to let me not break down after what I'd just seen.

“The rest of you, get the chosen slaves ready for transport to the metro tunnels! I'm going there now to prepare for their arrival, do NOT be late. Bring them before the Enclave attack, Wormtail will organise it here. GO!”

That was my cue. I began to gallop off toward Protégé's office.

* * *

It hadn't been hard to distract the guard. Repeatedly bucking a steel door around the corner until the annoyance drove him to investigate, I looped around via the corridors and approached the door before he returned.

How many times, so long ago, had I approached this heavy carved door as a slave? As somepony called to his master to report or to answer? Its flaking wood stood imposing as ever, hard to the touch and heavy when I began to slowly pull on it. I had to resist the urge to knock.

Behind it, I half expected to see Protégé at his desk. Eyepiece on and scanning across documents and letter. To see him with numerous books floating around, looking up with that worryingly genuine smile to greet the slave he had called. It made me meek to fully open and trot through with that image in mind. Of days when things were better for him and worse for me, not now.

Yet within, there was no such thing.

There was no-pony at the desk. The books had been scattered, not in the 'messy but somewhat organised via the floor' way as before...but left open on their spines or torn into heaps. The window at the back was cracked, letting in a small breeze of thick and warm air. Muddy hooves had been treading around on the old musty carpet. If I looked down, I could see a small trail of bloody drips leading toward the desk.

Tentatively moving, my hooves making sound on the soft floor, I saw that Protégé's side rooms were open, their beds stripped clean. No-pony was present in them. Instead, I simply heard a short breath and sniff. Several in succession...alongside soft sobbing coming from up ahead, behind the desk.

Part of me felt invasive to approach, to trot up and move around that thick desk after what I'd seen happen over today. The silence felt impossible to break, to announce I was here and suddenly impose myself upon this.

I swallowed my doubts and moved around the desk.

“P-Protégé?”

He looked up sharply, as I found him hunched over, sitting inside the space the missing chair would normally push into, as though it was a hiding space. His front hooves were curled around his rear ones as he sat with his head resting on the wood, cheeks thoroughly wet and eyes sore. Up close, I could see the treatment he'd undergone. Bruises, cuts and lumps all over, held back only by the healing potion they'd given him to keep his servitude going today. The small part of his back I could see was a ragged mess.

The moment he saw me, he almost looked ready to bolt. Jumping at the sight, he gasped and rubbed his eyes.

“Murky?”

The name caught me off guard...he'd only ever called me 'Murk' before...

His face betrayed the shock of me appearing here of all places.

“You shouldn't be around...he...he'll come to check on me, somepony will. Go...go before he gets you too!”

I simply shook my head, biting my lip as I moved closer and sat down with my back to the desk and looked ahead out of the window to the clouds above.

“I...came for you.” The words were clumsy, stilted even as I said them. I tried to look at him, but his eyes avoided mine, instead looking at the ruined floor beneath us. He showed no reaction to my words, but merely shook his head.

“He's gone, Murky...he's not coming back...” He shook again as the words stammered out, a hoof going to his brow as his eyes screwed tightly shut. “I went to...to the gate a-and...”

“I know, Protégé.”

He turned to look at me, surprised.

“I saw it all.” My lip quivered, as I slowly reached out and placed a hoof on his shoulder. “I was watching you, I'm...I'm so sorry...”

This was Red Eye, a pony who'd made my already ruined life even worse. Yet in this case, I knew the issue was deeper down, Red Eye wasn't simply a bad pony in this moment...he was a comfort, a meaning to somepony who'd never known it. I'd once believed...still believed...in a hero who I discovered to my shock was not without her flaws. We'd each chosen one pony to help us out of being born into slavery, regardless if it was Red Eye or not, it was a matter of a constant in our lives being broken. I'd been through that.

Here, Protégé was experiencing much the same thing.

“I d...I don't know what to do, now. He's *gone!* He gave me so much, so much!” A fresh wave of anguish poured over him, as his teeth clenched and he leaned his head back onto the desk, seemingly ignoring my hoof. “I...I tried to do what he said. Tried to *help* Fillydelphia and now I've...I've lost. It's all gone! They...they took everything from me.”

“Not every-”

“Yes! Everything!” he turned back to me, red eyes sore and dripping, “my...my rank and the position I went through hell for two years to earn! I w-worked my way to a better place and they took it away! My allies...my friends...the sla...slaves I tried to help are *his...I'm his*. He's going to keep hurting me until he's taken all the pride I tried to give myself when I thought I was free! Now Master Red Eye's been taken too, he was like the father I never knew, Murky. I d-don't care what anyone thought of him, that counts for something!”

I looked away in shame, trying to avoid staring as he let out the emotion, coughing and having to wipe his eyes again. I remembered the pony I'd first met long ago...this wasn't him. I had a sense this was the real pony beneath. The pony who'd once been dragged into Fillydelphia and thrown in a cell.

“I...I'm sorry...” What else could I say?

“They think I'm a traitor, they're going to break me, Murky...break me in front of everypony that I tried to be better for! It...it...” he moaned, a hoof reading around to his back, “...it hurt so much...”

Close up, I could see his back now. Even after the potion it was carved up. He would bear scars for certain, even with magic. Pink streaks of re-knitted flesh stood out over the blood stained coat.

I couldn't bear to see it. Without a word, I drew the bandages from my saddlebag and sat behind him. Protégé didn't protest as I began to wrap it around his torso, although he winced as they lay upon the swollen lines or reopened cuts, continuing to weep. It occurred to me how much he trusted my presence that he would not try to hide his feelings now.

There wasn't anything said for a long time. I felt him jump and heard him gasp in pain every time the bandages lay across any still open wounds. Every so often, I would see him look up, as though wishing or hoping for something to come to mind that would make this all better. I knew that look, every slave did it now and again. Just imagined something correcting all this for them before the crippling realisation settled in again.

At least I could give him this. A fellow slave looking out for another by tending to their wounds. Reminding them they weren't alone. I reached around his torso to wind the bandages and tie them up, seeing over his shoulder that he was sitting more still, with his eyes closed.

“Th-thank you...”

“I want to help, Protégé.” My hooves, as deftly as they could, pulled another line around his chest to try and hold it in place.

“It doesn't matter...I'm his again. You don't get away. I thought this place could change; Master Red Eye s-showed me. I thought this city could be good! That we could, agh...restore the wasteland!” Protégé spoke more solidly, as he dried his eyes with a loose bit of cloth I hoofed him.

“I know...”

“But now it's ruined! It's been ruined!” he almost shouted, “Chainlink Shackles has destroyed it! He's taken the foals and...and gotten rid of the good ponies and now he's going to undo it all! They're hurting without reason, it's not a sacrifice anymore. Murky, when I was there, he was suggesting to Stern to use slaves as living shields against the Enclave!”

He turned, seeing the look of abject *horror* on my face. How could they consider that?

“Fillydelphia is turning back into what it was long ago. It's not the same city I once believed in, not the same one that grew and recovered. I...I once thought we'd actually make it! That I might s-see a good Equestria. I had it all planned, Murky! All of it! Wh-what I was going to do and w-where...”

His magic lit, as something floated across from the floor. An old photograph of Equestria before the megaspells, cracked and faded, but easily viewable. He held it in front of my face as I smoothed out his bandages to avoid tangling with careful strokes.

Taking it in my hooves, I stared at it closely. A quiet town of wood and yellowed rooftops. Bright green grass and blue sky contrasted beautifully around the centre building. A thick tree, tall and possessing strong branches that filtered out to the sides, but I saw windows in it, a balcony to one side and a door on the front. Somepony had turned a tree into a home. To its left, I saw a sign with an open book.

A library.

“I always sat in here and told myself, when we restore Equestria, I was going to live there. Right there.” Protégé’s chin quivered a little as he took the photo from me, “When we had made everything right again, I’d find it. Just like it is in the photo with...with real grass and an open sky for the sun! And...and the tree would have had leaves just like this, not brown and dead ones.”

I felt for him, I really did. Dozens of times I had heard his swearing to help Equestria, but only now did I truly see the gulf that lay between his wishes and reality.

“It’ll n-never happen now...Murky, these slavers are of the old wasteland. A different generation to you and I. They will turn Fillydelphia into an abyss of suffering and fire below the excuse of war. No doubt Shackles has his assassination efforts ready for Stern. I’ve lost, I have failed Murky and I am afraid...I thought I’d escaped, but I never had...what comes next chills me to think about. To become a humiliated toy to them. To see the foals used for their sick purposes. I only wish I’d seen it coming earlier.”

Slowly, he turned back to me, meeting my own rapidly wetting eyes with his. His hooves grabbed me by the sides of my shoulders, his words solid and intense.

“I think that’s why I took interest in...in trying to know you. You were always stronger than I was because you had friends who believed in you. I think I hoped that maybe you’d...help me, even if I didn’t realise it. Help me see I wasn’t free. I wasn’t the one teaching you...it was I who was learning.”

“Protégé...”

With a shake of his head, he cut me off.

“Now I’m just lost and...and laid bare for all to see all that I am. Stuck back where I was. A slave with no hope any more, this city holds nothing for me. It never did...now I just don’t know and I want to...I...I don’t even know what to do now and...and I want to ask something and...”

There was another long silence as he let the sentence drift off. We sat close together. Every so often he would turn to me, then away again. Protégé was clearly thinking of something, his mouth opened and closed a few times.

Eventually, he turned and began speaking softly, little more than a timid whisper. The words were hesitant, almost fearful.

“Murky...can...can I come with you...” His still face cracked, looking away as I saw another tear drip to the floor. “I want to be free...”

There was nothing more to say. In the red light of the window, I leaned forward and pulled him into a tight embrace, pushing my head into his neck with his into mine. I felt him grab my torso in return, letting the last of his pain out after this day from hell and the fall of everything he thought he had. I felt myself sniff and quake at finally...after so long...hearing those words from him.

We had met as master and slave, now we would try for a better life as equals.

* * *

Some minutes passed. We needed them. *He* needed them. Somepony to trust and hold onto during his grief and pain. I’d always had others for it; Glimmer and Unity, Coral and even Brimstone behind that quiet mountain of a presence. This might have been the first time he’d ever experienced having somepony to just hold and be grateful for their presence.

Eventually, with as calm a breath as he could, Protégé sat back up and attempted a smile. It was stilted, forced. The thought was what counted though, I offered my best in return.

“I thank you, Murky; you did not have to come for me. I don't know what I can say...everything that's happened, things I've done that I...I wish I'd done differently.”

I just shook my head. “I might be the only one to understand. It's, uh...okay? The others are waiting, but I can fit you through the shafts, we'll get out without them knowing.”

Protégé glanced around and through the window. Below us, we could see the first group of slaves leaving under guard from the Mall for Goddesses knew what purpose. I saw the disgust on his face.

“He wants to hurt them. As he brought me here in chains, he told me that there are things to do. Things he wants both of us for, Unity too. I fear he will be trying things...indulging sick curiosity into that place's technology where no eyes can see with what he found down there. I have witnessed too many ponies disappear into that hole without emerging again.”

“S-Sunny said the same...we need to get in there. The foals-”

“I know, Murky...” Protégé rapped the windowsill with a hoof, clearly enraged as much as saddened, “it burns me that I cannot save more...but I am just one small pony, if anything I've been made to feel even more tiny today. What can just one good soul do against the forces at play here now?”

Gulping, I moved behind him, slightly to one side. Through the window, the dominating presence of the Enclave in the sky was all too clear. Weapons were tracking one another across a kilometre of sky...probably even in range. Just no-pony wanted to be the first to truly pull the trigger on it yet. Fillydelphia felt ready to explode in a heartbeat.

“You aren't alone...not now. You always told me what ponies could do when they worked together, Protégé! That's what you dreamed of...and I don't think that was all Red Eye talking.”

His head lowered, a still bruised eye closing. “I dreamed of ponies coming together out of will, Murky...out of love and willingness to try for something better. They never did...Red Eye convinced me this had to be done, I always wished that we didn't have to. Now it terrifies me to hope for that future, because I do not know where Red Eye's teachings where my own thoughts begin.”

Something felt off, before I clicked to what it was and pushed up beside him, looking him dead in the eye.

“I think I know who's speaking now...you didn't say a very important word.”

He went silent...thinking through all he'd said. I could see the moment that the cap dropped in his mind.

No Master.

“Protégé, you wanted ponies to come together, well we have! Just maybe not how you dreamed of but...it...it's something. We're just trying for each other and the ones we *can* help, like you. We're not struggling to restore Equestria...we're not trying to change the world. ”

I moved away, looking over his desk and lifting the photograph of the library.

“We rose up and fought hard because we wanted to be *free*. Look how much has happened, how close we're getting! We had something to fight for, something immediate, that we could passionately believe in. It's the very first thing I ever truly *thought* for myself. If it could work for me, it works for others trapped in here! Yourself included...”

My saddlebag was pulled open as I paused to pull something out and reverently hoof over to Protégé. A weapon that I'd stolen from the armoury in my raid. A magnificently crafted revolver, a newbuild from Fillydelphia's factories. It was made of solid forged metal and brass, embossed with the flag of Equestria on its side within a polished wood grip. One of Blunderbuck's side projects.

“Equestria isn't green fields and blue skies any more. But equally, Equestria isn't factories and weapons, it's not printing books and forcing foals to learn. To us, Equestria is *freedom*. That's something we'll fight together for. That's what made us lift up from the cells. Equestria is what's behind that wall or what lies in

reaching tomorrow alive. It's the friend by your side and it's the brief smile they give you for just one moment in the hardship.”

My eyes narrowed as I softened my voice.

“Equestria is whatever we want, when we have nothing else to hope for.”

Catching it with surprise, Protégé's eyes glanced over it with astonishment, a hoof tracing the grip's design. The same as his own cutie mark before slavery had taken its meaning from him.

“Equestria...is hope. It's what ponies want in these bleak times we live in...”

His hooves cradled the weapon. His eyes carried a sudden clarity.

“They wouldn't follow us for what we told them they should have...but they would follow for what they *want*...”

Suddenly, his hooves clenched onto it, checking for ammunition with a sudden and startling determination. For the first time in my life around him, I saw Protégé as a free pony, come to a decision of his own. A fire lit in his eyes, tempered by a shivering, nervous excitement.

“The foals are in danger. Slaves are being taken, ponies are being hurt for no reason. I will not follow him any longer, the dream I had is broken...a childish wish cast onto the winds. Yet even with this I find myself afraid...Murky, I don't see a road ahead of me.”

“Because you're the one to choose now.” I stepped forward. “Every time I saw you fighting for what you wanted I saw the pony you could be. You're not weak inside, Protégé! M-maybe just in some ways...but we're all like that, no-pony's perfect. You care, you're so passionate about what you feel is *right*. Use that...choose a path.”

Protégé mulled over each of my words. Eventually I heard him mutter one.

“Choose...”

The revolver turned in his hooves again as he looked back out the window.

“Then I choose...that I will not slink away alone. You came to find me, to ask me to come with you, but I know the foals are on your mind, as they are on mine. There is more to do. Yet we cannot do it alone, for I do not have the answer you might seek. There is no easy way into that den, one way in only and heavily guarded. With help, however, we *can*. With the support of others. Murky...if we wish to find them, we shall have to raise the stakes!”

He seemed gripped by a sudden drive, words gaining strength as he spoke them and brought everything into clarity for himself as much as anyone. Then, to my surprise, he began to trot forward, grabbing one of his spare sets of armour from the corner and throwing it on even as he headed to the door. The revolver lifted in his magic.

“They seek to end the next generation. I will not permit a legacy I shared in as an accomplice of evil to continue into its worst stage. There are those needing saved and kept away from Fillydelphia's grasp. We need help to get the foals? Then that is who we shall seek out.”

His head turned briefly as he shook off the ponytail clasp and tore the symbol of Red Eye from his armour.

“One pony *can* make a difference, Murky. I intend to. If Red Eye was right about one thing through all that he taught me...he was right about that. Murky, after all this, I cannot say in words how much you allowing me to come with you and your friends means. How long I've wanted to ask you. Yet think, there are other ponies waiting for somepony to give them that choice that you gave me. We shall seek their help!”

“Wait, wait! Protégé!” I ran after him, this had accelerated far beyond me. All the pain was boiled up in him, a slave ready to push *back*. Protégé was back in control of himself...only this time, completely. “What do you mean find others? What are you going to do?”

The door was thrown open from his telekinesis, hard enough that it knocked the guard clean out as he

strode into the corridor. Out limped Protégé, gritting his teeth against the pain of moving again and walking on still shaky hooves. He stopped briefly, looking back at me. His eyes betrayed a sense of *need*, a calling as he briefly looked to his own cutie mark.

“I'm going to light a fire of hope in the darkness.”

* * *

The cage door into the slave pens was hurled open. Stepping boldly forward, Protégé emerged with the revolver floated meaningfully beside him and advanced directly toward the middle of the massive shop area. Dozens of slaves turned at the slamming metal and the dressed figure of a pony they'd seen scream before them return. Ten or so slavers, all of Shackles' group, began to look around too, jerking up from corralling the slaves into their pens. They began to trot forward at the sight, immediately closing in to assert power.

“You!”

Wormtail turned and began to run forward. His hooves stumbled and shook as he pointed one leg with a grimace and a shriek, trying to intercept Protégé.

“You, slave! I remind you that you follow me, now get back to your office and keep-”

Protégé shot him in the head without even breaking stride or glancing to the side.

The ferocious retort of the new revolver echoed around the chamber multiple times, as he reached the centre and looked around him at the slavers, raising the revolver to the closest one. A dozen slavers surrounded him, yet he held it firm.

“Oi! He slotted the Master's guy!”

“The fuck?!”

Protégé took a deep breath, meeting the eyes of the slaves first as he slowly turned, addressing them loudly and clearly. The slaves seemed confused, they'd seen him in agony not too long ago, yet now he stood here strong and passionate.

“To any and all slavers here...leave *now*. I will give you this one chance.”

They laughed, many of them pointing their weapons at him. “Give us one reason! Just cos you found a weapon, little shrieker!”

“You aren't a big boy now! Throw it down before we rip you in half!”

Protégé merely smirked, turning his head upward and to the side. His eyes caught mine, as he nodded.

“I had thought you might not...perhaps some persuasion?”

From my hiding place on the upper floor, I breathed in and stuck a hoof in my mouth to blow a piercing whistle. The slavers glanced around in shock, a few weapons pointing to where I'd been. Naturally, I had vacated the area immediately, instead dropping down on my grapplehook.

On each level, from areas the slavers were not, came my friends. Glimmerlight and Sunny on the upper levels, their weapons trained on the slavers with a little smirk on both their faces. Coral Eve, her horn blazing, appeared behind three of them, Unity with her. Brimstone Blitz wandered his way out from our old cell, towering over the five quite suddenly terrified slavers nearby as he stomped up behind them.

I dropped right down to the other side of the mall, the wire humming loudly as my switched triggers to flip out *Rarity's Grace* at a slaver. He reacted in shock at me dangling suddenly beside him, dropping his weapon. I waved hello. *Satisfying!*

The slavers were surrounded, caught off guard. A few of them spun weapons to face Brim, to face me or Glimmer...they looked horrified. Two kept them pointed at Protégé, trying to advance closer and assert power over him. They were the big ones, the old slaver veterans.

“I'll ask you again...leave.” Protégé's voice was clipped and short, “You are a skeleton crew while the others are away, you couldn't take all of us and I know there's few left in the building!”

“This...this is just a fucking standoff! We could kill some of you too! You ain't got shit, we outgun ya!”

There was a slow rumbling from our old cell, before the bars were bent aside to make room for the last member of our party to roll in. The slavers slowly let their jaws drop at the mechanical sight that trundled in with a proud display of old world weapon tech. Mister Peace saluted to them and put on a winking face to his monitor.

“I would *heartily* disagree, my good fellows.”

As one, the slavers dropped their weapons. One even squeaked.

* * *

The mood was growing. I could *feel* the excitement in the air surrounding events beginning to flow and surge through my veins.

The slavers were gathered on the bottom floor. Their weapons were taken and piled in a cell as Protégé approached them as a group. Around us, the slaves were perplexed. Some were scared...but many of them came out their cells, approaching the familiar faces of us. Most just looked in disbelief at what they were seeing. Mister Peace had been sent to round up any guards in the nearby security room who now were marched out to join their fellows.

Protégé looked up at their tall, gangly leader. “Fetch your comrades on the way out and *get out*. The mistreatment in this place has finished.”

“Fuck you!”

“Truly, you have the most eloquent of arguments.”

Some of the slaves behind us snickered, but most just seemed afraid of the sudden change in the air here. Protégé turned to them. “They will control you no longer. You are not their slaves, you are not *my* slaves. You have seen me cry in pain, you saw that I am no different from any of you. My pride was broken before you and now I bring humility to make amends. I am not anypony with authority, but one acting on his own will to do what is needed to bring the suffering to an end.”

That got their attention. Skeletal, sick and injured ponies began to cluster. The balconies were full and the walkways swayed under the weight of curious stallions and mares. Bigger ponies approached, one mare already looked ready to lay into the slavers now that they were unarmed. Heads poked out, limbs wearily limped to see what was happening. We were at the centre of over fifty ponies staring.

“What in the everloving *ohooiet'* is going on down here! Where is slaves for transport? I demand answer!”

Mister Mosin came storming through the cage door, Blunderbuck in tow. He shoved past the slavers, before stopping sharply as he saw us in front of the slaves.

“*Chyort voz'mi!*” His eyes went wide. “This will bring you kill! You will die! Traitor!”

Protégé advanced forward, pressing his muzzle into Mosin's. “I believe I just gave my last warning...this is no longer slaver controlled territory in here.”

The old pony clattered backward on his wooden hoof. “You will regret it! You hold us to guns and demand we leave? Stern will flay you! I will tell her...I will tell *Shackles!* He will come for you and he will make you *beg* for him to show mercy! *Assistant suka?*”

Blunderbuck looked from us to his master, stumbling over before having a full bag of tools hurled into his face. He yelped, catching them in his hooves but the weight slapped into his jawline and made him stagger back to his knees.

“*Come!* We go to inform them of rebellion at gunpoint! Come on! *Suka!* Hurry, incompetent idiot! Hurry! Get up!”

He clipped Blunderbuck over the head with his wooden hoof. The young, sprightly pony yelped, falling backwards with a bruise already formed. On the floor, he started trying to pick up his ordered load, his eyes

looking up. They slowly found us. He looked at Protégé, who only offered a calm demeanour.

“Come on! Hurry assistant! Stupid youngster, get over here this instant!”

Then Blunderbuck turned and *threw* the tools right back at Mosin.

“Oh shut up! You dishonest old tree-legged unappreciative *arsehole!*”

The old armoury pony was knocked back, his face far past anger into sheer surprise.

Glimmer's grin could have lit up the night as Blunderbuck turned and marched over to *our side*, leaving behind the bewildered slaver. He briefly stopped as though to ask Protégé if it was okay, before his old master simply shook his hoof thankfully. I felt proud of Blunderbuck, that had been a long time coming.

“I think that's a way of saying...get the fuck out. Cos there's a lot more of us than there are of you...”

Brimstone grinned down at them and started to move forward. I saw a lot of ponies started to follow.

Marching forward. I grinned, going too, the smallest pony doing so. A large group of slaves closing down on their old masters, some bearing makeshift clubs and bars of metal in their mouths.

The slavers *fled*. The sight was satisfying beyond measure. Slavers were running scared from this building from the *slaves*. The chains had been broken in the Mall. Today, I stood in the presence of something very special happening in Fillydelphia.

Left behind from those who chased them right out, we turned back to the slaves. Once the slavers had gone, there was an expectant tension. I could see it on their faces. 'What now?' We had a building to ourselves, or soon to be once Peace had finished his sweep. Here in this area...we were free ponies.

“Any who wish to leave, to not risk it...can go now.” Protégé indicated the door. “I will force no-pony to face what might come, for his is only going to get more dangerous. I offer you not an instruction...but a choice.”

“Why should we stay? What are you even going to do?” A voice from the back cried out.

“I...”

Protégé took a breath, the stoic nature of his face the only thing to hold him in serious stead. Then he spoke, raising his voice, projecting it into every corner of the Mall's main arena as he clambered up onto the lip of the fountain. Visible to all above and below.

“...am going to attempt to free you, all of you...and anyone else who will come.”

He spun, taking them all in as they grouped around, us as well. Protégé trotted lightly in a circle across the fountain wall, speaking sometimes to one, then another.

“Some of you may be afraid, some of you may have plans of your own, yet I only ask for you to choose now. Today, I was laid low. I was humiliated. I had my brow beaten before you and was stripped of everything I had. Or I thought I had. To admit this in public, is perhaps the final step. I was nothing but a slave to them, held in silk chains perhaps...but now I see the truth. I admit my wrongs...I do not ask for forgiveness from any of you, only a moment to be listened to. For I intend to free as many slaves from Fillydelphia as I can, under the cover of the war with the Enclave.”

That got their attention. Ponies moved in closer. I saw them talking to one another. I shared excited looks with Glimmer and Brimstone. The slaves we had spent so many days around in here were getting worked up over this. Discussion was going out. Above us, Protégé continued.

“We will work together, as *one!* As ponies! I will not lead you, but I will provide for you. The skills we all have can be put to use. We have technicians, fighters, thieves, cooks and organisers. We could get medical specialists. We have enough to defend us here and then to make a coordinated breakout when the slavers are busy fighting for their own lives outside, if we all pool our resources. With any luck, we would be a low priority for Stern so long as we leave her forces mostly alone.”

He stopped, looking at me.

“And with extra help...we can achieve things we could not do alone in tiny groups, such as reuniting

many of you with your loved ones. Your sons and daughters so stripped from you! I bring this woeful news to you, that this day Chainlink Shackles has taken your children for experimentation in dark beneath Fillydelphia! You, there!”

He pointed through the crowd to a shocked looking lime green mare.

“Miss Huckle Belt! When your child was born, they took her before you could even name her! Even now, she resides with the rest of the foals in Shackles' grip! You, Mister and Mrs Brick? You had twins when you were brought here, just toddlers? They are still alive too, they always asked about you! Coral Eve...”

Beside me, Coral nodded slowly. Protégé smiled at her. The news of the foals had hit them hard. Some were furious, already two fathers were crying, worried. They clenched their teeth through the tears.

“We can fight...we can win them back and take them home. Please, decide now if you wish to risk it and stay or not...we have much work to do and not much time. But look around you, we have a fortified building, we have an armoury and we have supplies with some powerful assets such as a war robot and several combat veterans! We *can* do this!”

His hoof struck the marble rim of the fountain sharply. A couple of ponies shouted their willingness. The parents, mostly, but their own friends who knew the hardships of those who had lost foals. Protégé didn't let up, he spoke to them in particular, before aiming at the quieter ones.

“We shall take this moment, we shall not lie in squalor alone waiting for the end any more! We shall stand up for ourselves...I *was* one of you and I forgot that. Now I will help you fight! For yourselves! For the lives denied to you by days, months or years in this hell hole! For all those we have lost in this nightmare since it began! *For our children!*”

Some of the ponies actually lifted their hooves and *roared* their support. I found I was one of them, I shouted my throat hoarse, leaping onto Glimmer's back to feel taller. Delight raced through me, the ponies that had laid silent and hopeless were being given a path they could take. A chance to fight and make their own destiny, not to simply wait for the inevitable day when they keel over in a factory!

“Then choose! Let us decide our fates by our own hooves!”

One last *epic* cheer.

In the end, perhaps a quarter of the ponies left. Those who stayed were made up of parents and those that had needed a push to make a bid for freedom. Some were unsure, but preferring *anything* to dying of sickness, of wanting *any* possible chance to fight to the end compared to lying down and giving up. They came together and wanted to hear exactly what he had planned.

Protégé, owing to his education, was a natural coordinator. He sent out parties, always *asking*, to find and eject any remaining slavers from the building. Some volunteered to watch the perimeter. Others begged him for the supplies they were denied that they dearly needed. He got some of the other volunteers like Blunderbuck to get the food out from their storage areas. Right now, the task was to secure the Mall and find out exactly what we had.

Soon, he came to us. He looked somewhat embarrassed, even while shivering on a high of adrenaline by the initial buzz of what he had set in motion. He called out to three slaves if they could check the roof access. Two more were already bringing out their own secret stash to put onto the growing piles of supplies. Protégé finally reached us, as he smiled at me.

“An idea, Murky...it needs only be ignited for it to grow itself slowly over time. Just like the one you set in my mind with your talk of freedom long ago. Yet now I need your help. Well...I apologise...my words assumed you would join me in this course of action. However, I can help you find your-”

“Kid, shut up. We're in.”

Brimstone Blitz spoke for all of us. Protégé caught me grinning, I'd explained it to them when I went to get them for the ambush. The chance to get help in reclaiming the foals was enough to convince us.

Everything we had planned worked just fine in this, there was nothing stopping us from still taking the portal out of here the moment we could. Getting Chirpy, Lilac and Starshine back was the hard bit. What Protégé had started would help us beyond what we could ever have imagined. A large group of ponies we could make the effort with and bring joy to the returning parents as we did so.

“I...I cannot possibly thank you enough...” Protégé actually laughed. “Yet I must ask you for your assistance. To lead them, to organise them and get everything set out to keep this building safe. We'll go over the plan later, but for now there are things that must be said aloud to more than just the Mall. Murky, Glimmer...I shall need your help to truly set this alight. Or rather, your Pipbuck and technical expertise.”

I looked down at my Pipbuck, my sister seemed curious. “What are you planning?”

“There is something grand we must do, the last step of this. To bring it to the people of Fillydelphia...all of them.”

He galloped off toward the cage door and the main stairwell. Looking at each other, we all followed. Up floor after floor all the way to the roof. Past us ran ponies carrying weapons, food and tools to block up doorways.

I felt a mounting excitement as we climbed nearer. What did he mean? Bringing the word to all of Fillydelphia? Was he really going to call out to the whole city as Red Eye had done? How? I couldn't put the question to him before bursting out onto the top of the Mall. The masses of pipes, vents and cage fences that dotted its top let in a path to a tall aerial near the front edge that overlooked the city.

“There is a wireless PA system across Fillydelphia. The Mall houses one of its transmitters. Glimmerlight, could you connect Murky's Pipbuck and its microphone to it?”

“In my sleep, I thought this would be hard...”

The two of them walked to the edge where the transmitter was located. I hopped up onto a ventilation duct, seeing the vista of a city prepared for war before me and feeling the warm and slow wind drifting over my face and spread wings. The sky was lighting up in a brilliant orange behind the distant Enclave ships that were spreading out to surround the city. Above us, cloudships streaked overhead, leaving intense sound in their wake that shook the building below us. They were too fast for the guns of Fillydelphia to catch them as they banked around pillars of smoke and rocketed off again.

The red glow of Fillydelphia was stronger than ever, as the forges all lit for supplies. A vast population of slaves spreading out in all direction, the setting of what I thought would be the end of my life. Instead...it had become the start of my true one.

“Okay! Pipbuck!” Glimmerlight reached behind herself, until I threw her the device. She grabbed and connected it with wires before handing it to Protégé.

“Can you keep them from overriding my signal? Does this stretch far enough? The Enclave must hear it.”

“Just shut up and do yer talky talky thing.” She winked at him. “Aaaaaand....three, two...”

She slapped him on the back. At least, from my viewpoint, I *hoped* it was his back.

Protégé took up the Pipbuck in his magic and strode forward to the edge. He cast one look at me, mouthing a couple of words first.

Thank. You.

I smiled warmly back.

Then he turned...and took a breath. We all stood behind him as he sent his message to the masses, broadcasting loud and clear to every slave, slaver and Enclave soldier near Fillydelphia. Already below us, I could see slavers shouting and pointing at the building. Not at us on top, but as the shock of what we'd done was spreading and settling in to every slaver and guard around the Mall.

Such local surprises were about to go a whole lot wider...as Protégé let loose his words upon the entire

city at once.

“Fillydelphia, look up from your tools and the burdens of servitude. Look up high and pull yourself from the toil. I speak to all who would listen. Some of you will know my voice...others will know me by my name. Protégé...previously of Red Eye's slavers. Some of you may trust me, others may not...but I am not the same pony that was known to you before. So hear my voice and judge for yourselves. To those that we see in the sky, the denizens of the clouds...I ask only that you maintain this signal.”

“I speak not to slaves and slavers. I speak to ponies. I speak to anypony ever hurt by Fillydelphia, who is trapped here. You, are not, alone. The rigours of war approach us all. Fire will rain from the skies and we will lose many good ponies in the coming days. We are afraid...I am afraid. Yet there is a haven. A place where ponies can come to take shelter during this. The Harmony Mall will be a safe zone, where those of us unwilling to fight this war have come to be saved. We have food, we have medical supplies and we can keep you safe! The more who come the better chance we will have!”

My Goddesses...I felt beside myself as I heard his voice become powerful and dripping with idealism. The scholar I had known, putting to work the study and presence he had learned, now powered by the force of his care and dreams for others.

Behind me, I heard Glimmer swear, before laughing as she unplugged and swapped some wires. “Nice try, amateurs, can't put him off air that easily...”

“And thus I ask any of you...alone or in groups. Come to us, help to protect others together! To seek shelter and eventually...to be free in the aftermath. To those in the skies above, this signal location, the Mall, will not fire upon you! And to those who would oppose this choice of ponies to have safety and freedom...we will fight you if you come, but we will not attack you first. We shall be neutral, uninvolved if at all possible. This is not our war.”

There was a pause, as I saw his face harden. He poured impact and a thundering tone into his words in what came next.

“As such...as of this exact moment, in the pursuit of freedom from chains and the protection of life itself, the Harmony Mall hereby declares its independence from Fillydelphia!”

That line echoed across the city. He paused, that one would have to sink in. I felt chills down my spine. I was in the presence of potential *history* here. Behind me, the others moved up, some ponies joined us too. All watched him.

Below us all, I could see ponies looking up. Slavers were confused, slaves meekly wondering if they could truly believe it. I saw at least one of the cloudships slow down near to us. The Enclave were listening.

“Slip your bonds, break your chains...the Wall held us in, but now there is a place to go. A building where you might find a chance to be free. It will be hard, they will no doubt strike back at us, but we will resist them if we only are willing to try! We truly are better together, better united as ponies from all places in this stand against the eternal chain. This is your choice, ponies of Fillydelphia...the choice I give to you, the choice you have been denied all your lives within these walls.”

He slowly turned to us. We stood together, supporting him, united at last ahead of the struggle to come. Brimstone having fought for redemption, Glimmer through her past, Coral to be reunited, Sunny to pull herself from the fires in here. Yet in my will for freedom, with the wonder that now was the time in my mind, I found myself holding Unity's hoof and she smiled sideways at me. Slavery, war, the Enclave and fire and death about to strike home, we united whom we could.

Pain and loss had led us both to this moment, starting from our very first hopeless days as slaves. Now there were plans and means to assault the very chains that had held us here and sought to break us apart. This was the moment that it would all come down to.

The endgame. The Battle of Fillydelphia.

Before us, on the parapet, Protégé's chin was wavering. He took one last shallow breath.

“To those poor souls who would be listening, good luck in the days to come. Let us go forth together, so that we might all, at last...go home.”

* * *