

Fallout Equestria: Murky Number Seven

Chapter 26: *The Battle of Fillydelphia: Part 1*

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“What was it like to witness the war first hand?”

Long ago, I said I'd seen war. When I left the Pit with Brimstone, I had stopped and thought to myself that the slave riot was 'war'.

I was completely wrong. My naïve mind saw the chaos of a few hundred ponies running wild in crowds and thought that it even compared to outright conflict between two superpowers of the wastes. Now I was about to be shown how wrong I was. The Enclave were here and they were going to launch their assault any hour. We'd declared the Mall independent from Red Eye and Stern, but we couldn't assume that would really work...not that we had any lack of trouble to handle ourselves.

It was going to be rough. We had no idea what was coming our way, but every sign pointed at this being a brutal fight. The foals were waiting and the Wall would need to be beaten, but before any of that we simply had to *hold firm*. With the Enclave above us and surrounded by those who wanted to drag us back in chains, we were an island whose only hope was to hold out just long enough to make our escape.

“One little island amongst it all, huh? Isn't that how you described having friends in slavery?”

H-huh?

“Well, think about it. Ponies caring for one another is what you said helped slaves get through the day. Isn't this just showing that the same thing can happen on a much bigger scale?”

I..never thought about it like that before. Protégé was saying that we all had to be together. That ponies were better united. Honestly, I think he saw the Mall as 'Equestria' away from Fillydelphia's new age.

“Did it work? Did they come?”

Yes. They did. Oh they came, we took in individuals and groups...sometimes even more amazing things. Ponies were given a chance to stand up for themselves, they took it with all hooves. Or horns or...yeah, you know what I mean? We had a chance. A small one, but we all

had to keep believing in that. The moment we didn't was the moment everything would fall apart. Even this wasn't the end of it. Even if we survived, we still had the assault to save the foals, if we could find out where they were. We had to get the slaves to the Wall, fight our way past it...there was so much to do. I'll...I'll tell you about the defence of the Mall first. It alone was bad enough.

War. Absolute, total war. Weapons large enough to crush entire buildings were being used. The skies burned above us. Every street became a battle. Rooftops were death traps. Fire from skyships rained upon us, while those on the ground sought to run us over. Before the end, Fillydelphia would burn and crumble. From above *and* below. Everything from the clouds to the the tunnels would see blood before the end. Thousands died in a war that felt it should have been kilometres wide in size, but was all condensed into one little city's boundaries.

History would talk of Red Eye's remaining empire fighting the Grand Pegasus Enclave. One side and the other. Some talk of who won, who fought, who died from those sides.

No-one ever thought about the innocents, the slaves. How many died simply because they were caught up in the middle? Our story was one of survival. Escape.

The story of one building that stood up in the middle of the fire and said "no more."

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The Mall was a hive of activity. On every level I trotted through, ponies were galloping, dragging wagons behind them or bearing uncertain loads on their backs that I veered around. Rooms I passed had the sounds of hammers and saws as windows were boarded over; while the warm scent of heated food was starting to waft through the corridors, originating from the food court of the Mall. Protégé had ordered them to start making what they could. It might have been a dull smell amongst the foul sweat of tired ponies working for their freedom or the thick sawdust from building defences, but it was more than many of us had eaten in a long time. The smell was tempting, making me want to stop and start drifting toward it...but all those who could gallop had jobs to do. Jobs we had volunteered for.

Clusters of less fortunate slaves lay in corners or sheltered rooms. As I cantered past the storage depot, I saw many under blankets or upon filthy mattresses as they reunited with old friends or lost family in the vast area. The Mall was beginning to fill up fast, and every pony not directly involved in helping fortify it was trying to find some space for themselves or clamouring for every shred of food or medicine we had. There was a genuine worry about running dry of supplies.

Running around the upper levels, swerving to avoid a blanketed and sick mare on my way, I headed for the centre of the building. My route passed by groups of ex-caravaneers or hired guns, slaves that now remembered their old skill. Rearmed, they headed out to defence

points at all corners of the building. Their bodies were wasted and thin, but put a gun in their hooves and you could see the practised motions as they loaded them.

My head turned to an open set of balconies that now looked into the old slave area above the fountain, where I'd once been imprisoned with my friends, only to see the crowds below being herded in from the main entrance. Stallions, mares, a few donkeys even and at least one goat were all swarming through to where I could see a couple of the Mall's old workers trying to direct them to places we still had space.

Three refinery workers were mixing together some components from the kitchens into an hissing liquid of some sort, maybe flammable? I had to skid to a halt as one of them shouted at me to get back from the scalding soup pot they were carrying between them. I rounded onto the stairs and started my descent toward Protégé's office, the alchemical stench from their passing dizzying me and making my rad-sores sting. I'd been upstairs trying to organise our own escape supplies in a safe spot, well off the ground floor. Somepony had been shouting for me, a messenger sent by Protégé. He wanted me to head to his office.

Apparently, it was time to hear how this was all going to work.

A crowd of ponies barred my way on the floor I wanted as they clustered to collect clothing and blankets, so I kept going down to the ground floor, near to the main entrance of the Mall itself to head up a separate stairway to Protégé's office. The entrance hallway was busy, but at least here I could weave my way through.

Waving my hooves and shouting frantically stopped anypony trampling over me, letting me squeeze around them into the main corridor near the doors, where I stopped to catch my breath for a second as the outside air wafted in, as thick and polluted as it was.

I was running out of breath faster than usual...I really hoped this wasn't a sign of something.

“Ah! Miss Fluttershy! You have come to join me in this most uneventful of duties?”

“Uneventful? We're-eeep!”

Squeaking, I felt my fleece being yanked as I was tugged up by a metal claw to be placed on the shoulder of Mister Peace. Up ahead, I could see the various groups coming in ones and twos through the door. Grabbing on for balance, I looked down at his viewscreen and shook my head.

“Protégé wants me to go to the briefing, I was just getting my breath-”

“A war gathering? Much that I would desire to attend! Alas, I will not shirk in the duty you gave me to protect these refugees of the war returning home, for Mister Peace is nothing if not loyal to his Ministry Mare!”

His screen just below me flickered from an excited general to a despondent private, speaking more quietly.

“Even...even if there isn't a single insurgent strike or infiltration raid to pass the day...missiles six and eight in particular are especially disappointed.”

He let me down, before returning to keeping a watchful eye on the way in. It was right that he was here. Mister Peace was by far our most powerful trump card in all this. Or...ace card...or a full house? Card games had never been my thing. I was terrible at them, the last time I'd tried back on the rock farm the other ponies had accused me of cheating just because I'd found that fifth ace in the other slave's pocket and played it. Weren't you supposed to collect cards and use them in your own deck?

“Um...excuse me? Excuse me? Can we escape too?”

“Y-yeah! We want out!”

My ears perked up, keeping me from running on. Turning my head, I saw a couple of small slaves tentatively stepping into the Mall. They looked exhausted, covered in dirt and muck from no doubt hiding in ditches. The sight wasn't entirely uncommon from those who had slipped their cages or workplaces and made their way to Protégé's promised mall of freedom. They had come in small groups or just alone in a steady trickle ever since the broadcast, before this recent surge as word spread. Occasionally we'd even had to fire some shots to ward off slavers chasing them toward the Mall's open ground surrounding us, but since Protégé's excursions to clear the surrounding street the slavers had mostly stayed at a distance. We weren't their biggest priority at the moment and Mister Peace was already carving out a name for himself by guarding the incoming refugees. Most were exhausted, desperate and terrified after their run from their pens.

Those arriving looked horrifyingly alike most of the time: skeletal like myself, devoid of expression. It was difficult to tell mare from stallion from how worn and abused they were. Stiff blood and mud caked their sides and many had most of their manes or coats falling out. These last few days I'd felt so separate from them again, out on adventure and missions...it shocked me to look at them and see a reflection of my own body, with all its sores, exposed ribs and sickness inside...

It occurred to me how much I stood out simply due to my small stature and wings. More than a couple glanced at me as they passed. Some envy, some hatred...

One of them looked up suspiciously at the ponies we had manning the entrance. A couple of ex-slavers, actually. That had been a surprise, as some of *Red Eye's* workers had come seeking a way out of this too. Given how I knew some slavers treated each other, I wondered if they were at the bottom of the social ladder or if they were just scared of the war.

"You can come in, sure. Follow the path to the main hall, we'll get you settled from there and find what you can help us with."

"S-sure thing!" One of them pipped up and hesitantly pushed past. "Come on, Pike!"

"Coming! Wait up! Cosh, wait!"

The pair stumbled down the corridor, seeming relieved to be inside at last, momentarily locking eyes with me as they trotted. We didn't say anything, instead stared at one another until they turned into the side halls. Those two had tried to cause me major problems in the past and I'd given them a few in return. Right now, however, none of that seemed important anymore. They were just a couple of poor ponies wanting out of Fillydelphia as much as I did...

"Yo! Robot! You might wanna come watch this one!" One of the guards was shouting.

Immediately after he spoke, we heard shots.

Panic set in to those coming through the doorway, as they fled deeper into the Mall. The sounds were from outside our sight range in all the smog of the city. Echoing, inconsistent, the noises whipped through the darkness and sprung off the road leading up to us.

The ponies up front called back and before I could even turn to him, Peace had rolled past me toward the entrance. Cautiously, I crept forward at the edge of the tunnel to peek over the barricade.

Through the smog, under the searing red glare of Fillydelphia, I could see a group of ponies approaching. At least a dozen. They were moving slowly, advancing toward the Mall's main entrance, wreathed in a passing cloud of smoke that kept me from seeing them fully.

"Oh shit..." The ex-slaver beside me grabbed the radio, "Heads up, we got a large group! Maybe slavers, we should-"

"Wait!" I shouted to him, tapping him repeatedly with a hoof to get his attention. My eyes squinted as I watched the silhouettes getting closer. Some normal shaped, but others more...angular, surrounded by others. There was something off about them...they weren't all trotting. Some were...wait, was that wagons? No...tables? What?

“Battlefield analysis complete, non-combatants identified!” Peace boomed beside us, his missile doors slamming shut with the most disappointed sounding '*whirr*' I'd ever heard in my life, **“Ministry of Peace combat medical groups are allied forces.”**

We all looked at him. Ministry of Peace? Combat medical...what?

Hooves clattered, as somepony sped up and galloped out to meet us. Clearing the smoke, I felt my face light up with joy. The billowing medical coat covering a stallion dressed like somepony from two hundred years ago. That drawn, wrinkled and ghoulish face glaring at us with harsh intent. The raspy voice shouting at us from across the Mall entrance pathway wasn't harbouring much patience.

“Well? What are you waiting for, you lazy fucknuts? The hospital guards are right behind us and there's slavers moving in from the side streets! Can't you see I've got eight ICs and another ten injured coming with my team back there who've just lied, fled and sneaked their way from the hospital to be safe here? Or did you think they were about to perform a Luna damned interpretive friggin' dance performance of the great Canterlot alicorn orgy? Get out there and help them in before they catch up to us!”

The slaver beside me gaped as Doctor Weathervane pulled himself up onto the barricade.

“Ministry of Peace parameters are of great pleasure to you, Miss Fluttershy! I will assist!”

Mister Peace immediately surged off out the doorway, veering around the very shocked looking hospital staff and patients who were limping, pulling and cantering their broken or exhausted bodies this way. Some were nursing very fresh looking wounds, as incoming fire slashed at them from unseen places in the fog, coming down from buildings or walkways most likely.

Weathervane's eyes followed the machine, speaking to the slaver before seeing me.

“And you can...Murk?”

His voice betrayed some surprise or perhaps even relief. His eyes widened for a second, staring right at me. I could see, even on the face of a ghoul, that his eyes were dark and his face heavy. A wild anger bubbled in him, quenched only briefly as I offered him a smile and a flap of my wings.

“H-hi, Doc. You came! You really came to help us!”

“Hmph, guess I did.”

“Why?”

That made him hesitate. “You think Red Arse was going to let those needing help live after they became useless? I'm tired of watching ponies I can save taken off for 'removal.' Fucking tired. Suppose some part of me likes to pretend I'm not an old sour bastard and remembered what young Caduceus used to talk about...blame that little shit for me getting all thoughtful. Kid reminded me what it was to care proactively...to go into the storm to pull the poor wankers out like I used to.”

That made me smile. It wasn't often you saw Weathervane admit anything, but the sight of him leading the ponies who couldn't help themselves was, in my mind, what would define him. Helping those who couldn't even perhaps walk to try and respond to Protégé's call.

“Never did let little Sundial know I ended up on some battlefields doing that...” Weathervane spoke quietly, almost but not quite looking at me as his eyes briefly glazed over.

I felt a small surge of guilt and worry. Mostly centred around what I wore on my hoof. I'd almost come to feel like I missed the messages - none had activated recently. I hoped they hadn't stopped...

Out in the distance, I heard the sudden rattle of Peace's weaponry. Clearly, he'd found who had been chasing the staff. Weathervane kept his eyes on us, continuing to speak in a level voice that only served to remind me that he was a pony who had healed during a war before.

“Now, I've got twelve medical trained ponies, including three surgeons counting myself. We've got two small wagons of supplies. We can cater for sixty between us, there's eighteen ponies we got moving from their beds with us already though. Three probably shouldn't have.”

“You brought your patients? Holy shit, that must have been dangerous to move them all out...” the slaver on guard muttered, keeping his rifle held ready as he watched the smoke behind the nearing group. I could see limping ponies alongside nurses pushing occupied stretchers. They really had cleaned out the hospital.

Weathervane scowled and kicked the rifle's barrel away from that direction with a back hoof. “What the fuck did you think I was going to do? Now stop acting goggle eyed at everything and go help them in.”

“Me?”

“No, you cocknobbling arseviolin, the fucking Sun Princess!” Weathervane rolled his eyes. “Get a move on!”

The stallion ran off, shouting to a few others to help him. I saw a couple of slaves rush out too, carrying blankets and water to meet the injured. I watched a severely malnourished pony pass by on a stretcher, her body seeming to lack any and all flesh over the bones. I recognised the type...like me, they had been too small to fight for the food. I'd had to steal mine. If it hadn't been for the medical personnel working on her, I'd have sworn she was dead. Some were limping on wooden prosthetics, while two were blinded and had their scarred faces covered with a potion soaked bandage against infection. I looked up at Weathervane.

"We could really use you in what's coming. I...I'm happy to see you here..."

"Fucking charmed. I've got work to do; tell Protégé I'll be coming to him soon with a list of demands. We'll need an area scrubbed, sterilised and set up with boiling water, far from any windows to set up an aid station. I don't want any opportunistic little shitstain lobbing a grenade into my ward. Any clean sheets get sent to me alone and I want as much strong alcohol as exists and...sod it, I'll talk to him myself when I get the chance."

I gulped. "Th-thanks for..."

"Not in it for the thanks. Ponies need it, might even get the chance to reach my friends in the metro...the ones you found? Won't let go till I save them, Murk. I will...save their lives, the suffering they must be in can't be let to continue. They're the last remnants I have of who I was now. Won't let go..."

He stopped, blinking rapidly and groaning with a hoof held to his head. He looked in pain.

"Weathervane? What do you mean, 'won't let go'?"

The ghoul snarled, shaking his head. The motion was far more aggressive than I had expected, so much so I recoiled. "Not for your young mind to worry...not your problem. Just tell the boy that I'll be along in half an hour."

With that, he turned and trotted away after his patients. Slowly, I began to trot and then canter toward Protégé's office, keeping my eyes on Weathervane until he was gone.

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Protégé, Brimstone, Blunderbuck, Glimmer, Sunny and one pony I didn't know were standing around a table set up in the slaver's old office. The two unknowns were a stallion and mare, the latter wearing armour bearing Red Eye's symbol on it, only now crossed out with white paint. Protégé was speaking to him over a drawn map of the Mall in front of them all, held down by books on all corners. One of them I recognised as the Daring Do book I'd found for him.

The unknown stallion nodded to Protégé, some sort of supply runner. On lanky legs that promised him to be a ferocious galloper, he turned and left, giving me a spot to hop up and look over the table from. Glimmer acknowledged my presence with an excited grin, but Protégé was only looking to Brimstone.

"I can lead, organise and arrange things," Protégé spoke carefully, "but I am no general, Brimstone Blitz. I would highly appreciate your input to this, given your experience in warfare."

Brimstone grunted, speaking dismissively, "Most of what I did was kicking the door in, not holding it shut."

"Then you know what they might try? How would you resist yourself?" Protégé was laying out small coloured pieces from a board game on the map to represent things. Given their locations, I presumed they were what groups we had managed to arm thus far.

The big raider leaned over the map, furrowing his brow and grumbling lowly. "Biggest issue is the shock. Nine times out of ten we'd rush in, kick the figurative door off the figurative hinges and that'd be it, aye. You get inside, you win. A defending group of poor shits sees their line shattered quick, they'll break. Every time. We hold them outside, or we don't hold them at all. We're not working with soldiers or raiders on our side, kid. They're slaves. Scared, sick and tired wee slaves, some of whom haven't held a gun in a long time."

"You're saying we can't do it?" Protégé spoke very precisely.

"I'm saying that left to themselves they'll snap. We've got some good fighters. The robot, Sunny, Coral's got the magic factor, myself...a few turncoat fighters like Whitemane there," he indicated the mare, "and we'll have to spread ourselves out amongst all this. It'll be individuals that keep them fighting, leading by example. Hmm..."

He smoothed the map with a hoof that covered almost a quarter of it.

"They know we aren't a trained force." Sunny spoke up, taking out a full blown cigar she'd unearthed from somewhere to speak, "No doubt they'll know this too. We might pull it in small areas, but the big picture? They have an army."

Protégé shook his head. "Stern's a tactically minded individual. She excels at small, squad level actions, typical of Talon mercenaries. It's a well known, yet rarely spoken fact within the slavers that she isn't cut out for strategic scales the way Red Eye was. Even I can see her tactics for defending the city are clumsy and without forethought of resource management. Not that I could do better...but sending hundreds out to the empty plains to charge an airborne force? No, I don't think we need worry about strategic level big actions against us. She'll want a small force to do it, quick and easy so she can concentrate on the big fight. Fight that off and

she'll probably consider us not worth fighting until the bigger war's done. Worst case scenario is Shackles uses his influence to bring more to bear...but let's just hope he can't rustle up too much before we get out of here."

"In that case," Brimstone cut in, his eye not having left the map, "get our best people and put them on the ground and top floors. Those are the most vulnerable spots. Get the lessers in between on elevated positions to fire down from safety away from the front line. The robot is quick, so...Murky? Tell him to move wherever is hardest hit, he's our reserve. Get those who can't fight furthest from any access ways and post some weaker ponies that can't hack the front as guards to catch anything that slips through."

I nodded, shaking slightly. The feeling of my fate and my life being taken out of my hands to the bigger decisions left a tight fear in my gut. How could those who fought deal with this feeling every day? That you were only one small part of a greater picture, one that could collapse, fail and kill you through no fault of your own if the wrong call was made elsewhere?

"W-Weathervane's here..." I offered, "he says he's going somewhere to set up. Maybe there works?"

Brimstone didn't really smile or nod, remaining impassive. "Works for me. The old rot was a war doctor, he knows where to go."

Protégé looked at the map, no doubt trying to predict where Weathervane might go. "I shall have to meet him. I had hoped to send you out to speak with him, Murky. That he's come on his own is incredible; we shall no doubt have need of his team's skills. Now, what about weapons?"

"We've got the armoury going full tilt!" Blunderbuck lit up, "Never seen my pretties get so much chance to all be used! Mostly single shot rifles with some revolvers and semi pistols. Quite the sight...but we're dreadfully short on ammunition if we have to do more than exchange, maybe not even that. Small stuff, sure, but all the big rounds went to the army. We've got no more than a dozen carbines and automatic rifles left...tragically few shotguns for a battle no doubt inside a building."

Protégé idly tapped the desk with a hoof. "Sunny, give Blunderbuck a hoof in distributing what there is. Try to identify better shots for anything special we might have left. If it even has one round available, we need to use it. I know we have at least a couple big antique hitters left in the armoury after all, they'll stop any mass pushes so get them higher up. If we have rounds or shells with nothing to fire them then wire up some traps. Glimmer, can you do that?"

"Bet your ass I can. If you've got any leftover spark batteries I can use them, find any flour and I can whip up something nasty with that too." Glimmer stared at the confused faces,

“Really? Never heard of a flour bomb? That stuff can flare like a backdraft with the right ignition. Old mining site stallion taught me that trick when I did some rock breaking once.”

Protégé waved her down from the story, “The store room is upstairs, filled with spark technology in the back quadrant. No flour, I’m afraid, the long lasting stuff is kept in the logistics warehouse, but we have plenty of batteries we used for the terminals.”

“Kick. Ass.” She winked, clapping her hooves together and leaning forward on the table. “Wanted to see if those socks were still up there before we leave...”

So much for serious...thanks, sis.

To my surprise, Protégé actually chuckled, grinning openly and shaking his head. He had been going full tilt for hours now, trying to get everything organised before the slavers got their heads together. His theory was it took some time to filter the news through to the higher authorities.

Despite the brief sign of laughter, Protégé still clearly limped from the flogging and I could see he was dying to just lie down for a while. Part of me felt ashamed for not insisting more when Protégé had ordered *me* to rest.

“Speaking of getting out...” I spoke, before recoiling as multiple pairs of eyes turned to me expectantly, “um...oh my...I mean, how do we? How *do* we get out? We’ve got our thing with the metro and all but...y’know, it doesn’t work with so many. What’s your, y’know...”

My voice died out to a whisper.

“...plan?”

Protégé took a deep breath, nodding slowly. “Yes...that is mostly what I wanted you here to listen to. This is not a subtle plan, but it requires much to work. I do indeed have an idea.”

He turned, wandering toward the window and stood with a rigidly straight neck to view the sights. Through it, I could see the colossal wall surrounding us, poking over the rooftops. My mind reeled through concepts. Assault the stairwells up to it? Cross over from a rooftop and a bridge? That’d take forever and there was no way down on the other side. Go under? Did a tunnel even exist? That only got me shot last time. It seemed titanic and unassailable.

“Red Eye’s wall was never intended for assault. It was to keep slaves in and keep raiders out.” Protégé spoke steadily, looking away from us. “It is strong, but it is not a comprehensive defence structure for a war. I intend to bring it *down*.”

A shiver flew through me. I saw everypony else take a step back.

"The foundations don't go down far, we never had the machines for such designs. It's held up mostly on interior supporting girders. Detonating something at the base of it in the right place between the girders...I'm willing to bet that it might just bring a section of it toppling to the ground."

He didn't look back as he spoke. Instead, Protégé just stared directly out the window at that Wall like a hated enemy. "Blunderbuck, we would need a large explosive device. Could you manufacture such a thing?"

"I...sure can?" Blunderbuck spoke quietly, nodding to a couple of us. "It'll take time though...not something you wanna rush, y'know? We've got no real ammo, si-Protégé, can we even last till I do? We're talking most of a day. Hell, longer if I need to hunt for stuff."

"We've got the time," Glimmerlight cut in, "after all, we still have to rescue the foals once we have breathing room. We can't do that while being assaulted."

"They're going to come at us with a lot, Glim. Shackles has it in for us, you can bet he'll be leading it. He'll bring all he can." Brimstone wandered around the table as he spoke. "Slavers. Soldiers. Griffins. Big guns, numbers...all we have to do now is *hold*. The kid's right, if we make ourselves too much of a resource drain to deal with during the Enclave attack, they'll leave us alone to concentrate on a bigger threat. That's all we do now...we protect those we can, we fight for our freedom and we hold the fucking line."

"Spoken like a real war hero, Brim." Glimmer grinned up at him, receiving a dismissive grunt in return. She looked at me and whispered, "Aww, he's embarrassed."

I had to fight not to giggle, even if this kind of talk was, frankly, terrifying me.

There was a commotion outside that caught my ears. Two ponies shouting. The soldier, Whitmane, went to investigate without a word to us.

"Then that settles it." Protégé finally turned. "Gather every resource you can. Every trick, every bullet, every trap. Find every pony that can shoot and arm them. Anypony with skills to care for wounds gets sent to Weathervane. Ask *everypony* for their skillsets. If they can do any spells, construction or anything that might be helpful, try and get them to put it to use. With this ammo and personnel shortage we can but try. We hold this building, use the Enclave attack as cover and wait for our opportunity. We fight...we *survive*. This. Is. It. We stand or we fall right here together."

He looked around us all slowly. "You could say it is appropriate, that this place is known as the Harmony Mall. Good luck."

“Protégé! *Protégé!*”

Whitemane burst back in.

“You've *got* to see this...”

* * *

We clattered as a group downstairs toward the main entrance, only to stop in shock.

Before us, in almost perfect lines, marched a whole *shifts* worth of slaves. We had perhaps seventy in the Mall already...but here was trooping another sixty. Enough slaves to fill an entire factory. They trotted in groups, pulling iron sided wagons laden with crates and metal boxes. I knew those boxes, I knew this *factory*.

The sides of the boxes were marked with calibres of rounds.

Protégé wandered out beside the procession as it headed inside the Mall, passing by stunned guards and a gleeful Mister Peace.

“What is this...what is this eleventh hour saving grace...” Protégé's lips barely moved as he muttered the words.

“It is my apology and my gift, for ignoring what is right for so long.”

The voice was behind us. We all turned at once. A lithe stallion trotted up to us, a multi-ended candle on his flank. His eyes were fixed on Protégé, before the young unicorn moved forward rapidly and shook the older pony's hoof. The pony simply bowed to him.

“Twice before I have ignored your plights. Yet here I saw you stand up once more and take a risk to protect ponies, just as I once said to all my workers that I would be a better pony for them. It is about time I started acting like it and stood up myself,” said List Seeker.

* * *

With the new arrivals, a jolt of energy surged through the Mall. Individuals were bringing their unique skills to bear on every floor and in every room that I toured while acting as a messenger and runner for individual tools and parts. I saw ponies who had toiled for months on firearms clustering into Blunderbuck's armoury to start cleaning and assembling weapons. Unicorns from Red Eye's technology warehouses tinkered with radios and power tools. A dozen were summoned to bulk out Weathervane's team as aides. I had to leap aside from two sweating ponies lugging a truly ancient tripod-mounted machine gun up to the second floor. Passing into the main thoroughfare, I saw the main mall floor transformed, with tables bearing

organised lines of food, survival supplies and clothing being packaged or bagged. Ponies were preparing to leave, for the dangerous journey awaiting us outside the walls.

Those strong enough took picks and drills to walls and windows. List Seeker's workers in particular put an incredible effort into the restructuring with their engineering skills. Doors were blocked off to form chokepoints on the ground floor and new fire holes were cut into the exterior walls. Concrete ripped from inner walls and cell floors was carried by wagon downstairs to block up the main entrance and the roof had hundreds of pieces of sharpened rebar welded to any perches griffins might try to land on. Sunny Days at one point I heard shouting to not go back outside other than the main entrance. She and Glimmer had mined and trapped the old slave camp that surrounded the building to deter flankers.

More than once, we had scares. The alarm would go out with a series of blown whistles and the half organised ponies would need to rush to the windows and walls. We could see griffins hovering nearby, just out of accurate range, watching us through the sights of their weapons. Ponies would rush to the windows, before those spying on us pulled back. Over time, forces began to grow. First a flight of griffins began to linger. Then slavers were spotted out of range in the streets.

Soon after, the flow of refugees coming to us begin to slow...then stopped altogether. Thicker rings of slavers were seen surrounding the Mall and the streets were observed to have been blocked by upturned wagons.

Both Coral Eve and I were standing at a second floor window to watch the activity and listen to the grating of metal and wood on concrete as the roads were blocked. First the main route...then each of the side roads. Through my binoculars, I saw five slaves under guard handling an old sky chariot to even clog an alleyway. Beneath us, two young slaves had just crawled to the main gate, narrowly evading a nastily hidden trap near the palisade wall around the Mall. They had gotten in just before the streets were closed by crawling through a waste ditch nearby. I knew how that felt...

"That's all, I suppose..." Coral Eve muttered lowly, her hoof around my shoulders.

"What do you mean?"

"She means they aren't walling us in, Murky." Protégé trotted to the window, standing opposite us. "They're stopping any more coming to join us until they figure how to handle this. Those two will be the last..."

"How...how many did we get?" I kept my eyes on the new barricade up the street, where gas masked guards now stood amongst a cloud of foul smog that half covered their position.

"Including ourselves, less than two hundred. Nought but a drop in the ocean..."

Protégé spoke bitterly, turned and immediately moved away with a purpose, striding toward somewhere I could hear ponies trying to set up a small ammunition dump.

Watching him go, I felt Coral's hoof tighten and pull me to her shoulder as outside, I heard the orders of soldiers taking up positions to contain anything we might do now...

* * *

In the sky above, the Enclave remained passive. In breaking away, we had joined the two great forces watching each other warily, their hooves resting on the buttons to devastate the landscape and daring each other to make the first move. We were just the flies on the wall.

Eventually, we'd done all we really could. The windows were boarded. Ponies were in position, for the most part. Supplies were gathered. Nopony new was able to get to us. Things were settling. The noise began to drop off inside the Mall. Ponies were realising that the preparation was done.

Now we simply had to wait.

That was the worst part...the quiet. No-pony spoke much, they all expected the next minute to bring the ground shaking earthquake that would signal the war. Briefly, I even wondered if this was show Sundial had felt waiting for the sirens to go off...

Desperate to be with company rather than alone in the grey corridors with my thoughts, I sought out my friends and found Brimstone Blitz in the Mall's old delivery dock. He was directing those ponies who had been placed well off to the sides to keep them out of the way of the true threat on the ground. They were like me, the lower end of slaves who didn't have the strength to do much but cower and survive, so their job was to watch for flankers and other attacks. These ones in here held rifles and sidearms that looked massive on their frail bodies, so Brimstone was a giant amongst them, his deep voice pointing them to where they needed to go. He turned and saw me as I wandered aimlessly into his area, picking at tools and watching the reinforced flooring they were using to create a makeshift gantry to reach the high windows.

"What you lookin' for, kid?"

Biting my lip, I sat down beside him and shrugged, "I dunno...I'm done with stuff, just...I dunno. Felt like seeing everypony."

Brimstone grunted and turned away. "They say the greatest of generals always toured the lines before war in Old Equestria and got their troops laughing."

Blinking, I angled my head, trying to see his good eye to let him see me in return. I tried to smile, perking my wings up a little. "You're saying I'm a great general?"

"Naw, what kind of general in touch with his troops in all their rough and ready glory can't even say 'fuck'?"

I saw that smirk of his and sniffed hard, turning away. "C-can too."

"Prove it." His leg nudged my side, almost tipping me over.

"I just...don't f-funking want to."

The sound of the old warlord laughing was like rubbing two rocks together. "You're holding up better than some in here. You've got us to confide in, talk to...many of these wee ponies don't. Found a few of them crying themselves silly with worry in the back, wondering if they'd done the right thing...there's no way out now that we're cut off. No way for them to decide to not get caught up in it. That's a harsh thing to realise, when you want to turn back but can't any more."

The sudden shift in tone was typical of Brimstone, but it still always caught me off guard. I stood and looked at him directly, moving in front of him. "But you helped them, right? You're an old warrior, surely you know all the ways to...to, y'know...make us feel better? I'm scared myself too..."

Brim looked uncomfortable for a moment. I saw his eye glance at the ponies nearby working on the firestep to reach the windows. One glanced back nervously at Brim before immediately turning away and shivering, as though afraid we'd seen him looking.

"They're scared of you..."

"Aye...they know who I am." Brimstone spoke quietly, solemnly, "Spent long enough around you, Glim and the others I actually started to forget that. They look at me and see the Dragon. They don't trust me...probably rightly so. Can't blame them."

"They'll come around, Brim..." I hopped up and placed on hoof on his leg, "many of them don't like me because I've got wings. R-remember? You said that to me, you can't ignore who you are...b-but just don't let it eat you up. I still see them looking out the corner of their eye when I pass by sometimes. One of them didn't want me to bring his food earlier."

"Hmph. Maybe I did say that, maybe." He strode off, walking across the dock and watching other ponies pushing tool cabinets against the large metal corrugated door. "Doesn't help when I see faces in here I remember. I turn down a corridor and see them scurrying away or hear them muttering behind me, pulling their siblings and friends away from me. Some even

spit and curse as they pass, shouting me away from their kin. They think I'm trying to get out, they fear what that would bring..."

"Do you still want to stay?"

Brimstone stopped ahead of me.

We hadn't talked about that for a long, *long* time. I remembered clearly though. Brimstone, the great redemption seeking raider, had once said he would stay in Fillydelphia to live out his penance in the eyes of the Goddesses.

"Do you want to stay here?"

Slowly, I saw him turn to me and took a few steps back. Friend or not, Brimstone Blitz was a terrifying pony of barely restrained rage and power behind a quiet cover of dry wit. The only thing worse than him thinking you were making fun of him was if he thought you were trying to delve too deep into who he was. He was one of those ponies you had to respect every second of the day. That one remaining eye gazed harshly at me, his mouth creaking into a frown. I tried not to shiver. He was Brim, he was my friend...you could talk to your friends, right? (Whoever had made that saying had clearly never had to imagine Brimstone Blitz standing above you at the time.)

He spoke slowly, purposefully forming each word in turn. "Ask me again if we survive this...and if the rest even want me to come. Most here do not."

"B-but, um, who will teach me to say bad words if you don't?" I tried to grin, before covering my ears as he burst into laughter that set at least a dozen ponies jumping out of their skin with fright. His hoof slapping me on the back sent me sprawling forward.

"We'll see if we get through this, kid. Now isn't the time, but it's good you came...I meant to talk to you. Listen, listen to me closely."

Brimstone helped me up and pulled me toward the back of the loading bay. He knelt down, an unusual move for him to bring himself to my level before sighing and looking at me sadly.

"This is war coming, Murk. War. Not the little skirmishes we've had. Absolute. Fucking. War. Ponies die for no reason in it, heroes might die to a random bit of shrapnel from a bomb. Cowards might miraculously catch leaders off guard and gun them down from the back. They don't warn you. You don't get chances to wait, think and escape. They shoot first."

His voice was turning to a cold steel, pulling me forward by the back of my head.

"I was in the great raider wars that happened forty years ago on the frontiers. You are going to see even larger. You will see things you'll wish you never had. You'll not be able to help or save everypony. Not everyone will die in a fair way. You have to know this going in...or it'll break you. The shock is what kills, so don't lose your mind. It only takes one mistake to end up in a bad spot and the meatgrinder will grab hold of you."

"Y-you're not helping much, Brim..." I was shaking, looking up at the windows. At this angle I could see the vague black shapes of Enclave skyships moving amongst the clouds.

"Better to feel that now than when it happens. Just keep your head down. Always keep your head down. Don't go first, don't come last and don't volunteer for anything."

Shivering, I nodded. "I understand."

"If we both come through this, we'll talk then about where I'm going. They look at me and see the same face that brought what you're about to go through to their homes. I am war to them. I am the Dragon. I'll be going from the front, because better me to take it than any of these youngsters those like me put in here...I'm sure Glim can teach you just as many words."

"They'll see what you are, Brim...they'll see you're better. I know you've got it in you. I-I know I'd say a bad word if it meant you promised you'd come with us..."

He smiled darkly and tapped my cheek before getting up and trotting away a little. I spent a few moments watching him, relaxing slightly. I listened to the advice he gave to those who were willing to speak with him. I heard his warnings on where attacks might come from out of the buildings at the front of the Mall. I even managed to nervously laugh as he shared a pitch black joke with an old pony with a huge revolver who didn't seem to give a damn who he was talking to.

Then my eyes caught something very very wrong to the side. Something so wrong, that it drew me out of the stress for one beautifully furious moment. Something that attacked the very core of my being as I viewed what was being done just to my left at the custom built gantry to the high windows.

"There! All done!" A slave flipped the hammer in his hooves and sat down, looking proud for all the world. Beside him, bits of wood led in a ramshackle stairway to the windows, allowing a pony to fire down on anyone trying to sneak up to the door, a potential weakspot if the slavers knew about it. It was a fantastic idea, one Brim had thought up after telling of how Barb had once attacked such a critical point.

Except...something was wrong.

Something was very very wrong.

"Done?!" I shouted, not even thinking, "DONE?! Oh come on!"

The three ponies turned sharply to me. The tiny pegasus shouting up had caught them all by surprise. I marched over, wings flaring in anger.

"You...you...just give me that!"

All this stress, all this waiting and worry and fear had bubbled up inside long enough that this...this was the least of things I could do now. I would not let *this* chance pass me by, one chance to put things right before this all ended. I would not let this horror, this *cancer* continue. Trotting out, I grabbed their tools, some lumber and went right up their proud new gantry. Ponies were crowding behind me as I stamped back and forth on the firestep's new upper floor and whacked away with a hammer to drive in some wooden planks to its edge. They muttered, confused, as I got a length of metal wire and started to string it between the poles and wooden stakes I had nailed to the edge at chest height, raising it at the height to stop a pony at the edge.

"You called this done?" I turned and pointed at it with a hoof, waving it at what I was done, "What about this? Doesn't *anypony* think about this sort of thing?"

"Aw, c'mon man, we don't need-"

I just flailed my hooves. That was it. All this *waiting* had wound me up enough to just burst. All this talk of war soon, if this was the most I could prevent now, by the Goddesses I would! I glided down and landed before them all. I wasn't a fighter or a builder or a techy pony or a tactiticiain or whatever in the Goddesses name Brim and Protégé were...but I *could do this!*

"SAFETY RAILINGS!"

I waved my hoof harder at the rough but working ones I'd just added on.

"It only took me a few minutes and I'm a little runt! What's to stop a pony falling off? Why does no-pony *think* about this sort of stuff? Why does *no* building have them? This is important stuff and it's so easy to do so *why does no-pony ever do it?* Is it really that *fucking hard?!*"

I breathed deeply, exhausted. Everypony stood and stared at me in confused or bewildered silence...before I felt my cheeks begin to flush as the adrenaline died down. Soon after, I heard somepony snigger...then laugh, then the entire crowd of a dozen ponies began to roar.

Wait...what had I just...oh Goddesses...I had...

A huge hoof patted my back and a deep voice chuckled beside me.

“Knew you had it in you somewhere, kid.”

* * *

I retreated deeper inside the Mall. Truth be told, I was (after an emergency bout of celestial apologetic pleading) beginning to giggle a little myself. It had felt quite relieving, venting out all the worry like that. Part of me wished Glimmer had heard-

Actually, wait...perhaps it was better she hadn't, come to think of it.

I headed for the armoury. Being deeper inside would let me get away from the unsettling drone of Enclave ships in the skies above. Every time one loomed overhead, I worried it might drop something.

Weathervane's authoritative voice echoed down the corridor, he'd set up in the old staff canteen to make use of its hot water tank. The smell of antiseptic and the groans of ponies emerged from the door when I passed by. Coral Eve was helping him right now, repaying her debt for saving her life with his RadPurge long ago, but I couldn't bring myself to enter that place. Medical wards, improvised or not...they made me uncomfortable.

Instead, I cantered past toward the crowds passing in and out of the armoury. Tables had been set up outside and lined with rows upon rows of bolt action rifles. Antiques, lined with heavy wood, they were most of what had been left after Red Eye's army had confiscated most of the advanced weaponry for their own uses. Beside the rifle table lay a couple of old shopping baskets filled with various pistols, arranged into piles for each type of ammo. List Seeker was shouting for any hunters, caravaneers or old mercenaries to step forward to get automatic weapons, sub-machine guns and shotguns. Such weapons would be far more useful in the hands of those with experience or who would be involved in the ground floor's inevitable close quarter combat.

Grenades were being brought out in small boxes, a mix of old Equestrian designs and improvised bombs taped together by those working inside the armoury. Metal poles were being cut from scaffolding and sharpened into quick weapons, while clubs and shock sticks were being herded together. An ex-slaver even kept his whip handy while three of Red Eye's army had deserted and brought their heavy combat rifles. I'd heard a rumour one of them, probably Whitmane, even had magic rounds that could bypass armour. To my surprise, other slaves than us had produced stolen goods from their cells. Mostly pistols or knives, but there were a couple of sawn off shotguns and one even produced an entire light machine gun she'd kept dismantled and hidden behind bricks. Goddesses only knew for what purpose.

It felt incredible, seeing everything pulling together from the big guns to scrap-build blackpowder weapons that would shatter after a single shot. It felt empowering, like we had everything, but the reality said differently. We were outnumbered, outgunned...and I'd seen how such a disadvantage had hurt us before. We were working together though, in harmony...that was something at least.

Well, mostly in harmony...I couldn't help but hear a murmur about how 'the turkey' got a battle-saddle and they didn't as I trotted past a small group...

"Look, I see your point and all but you're wrong, wrong, WRONG!"

"You're trying to tell me that Equestria's brightest military minds are *all* idiots who don't know a thing?"

Immediately after entering, I came across a scene of argument. The caged interior was emptied of its weaponry. Those left within had been stripped down for repairs or rebuilding, while the rest of the space was given over to the bank of workers Glimmer had taught to turn spark batteries into makeshift energy explosives. Yet at the middle of it all, eyes were on the pair of mares engaged in heated debate while working on their respective kits. Blunderbuck sat between them, trying to work on a large table filled with components, wires and bags of what looked like soil. The look he gave me said it all. 'Help me.'

"Look," Glimmer stuck a hoof out, her magic sliding and twisting a barrel back into position below her, "Equestrian military rifles were designed to win a *war*. You think they just cheapoed that stuff?"

"If by designed to win you mean 'designed by the lowest bidder', Ironshod stuff is just crap! Good to four hundred metres, but what about past that? Look at that plastic tacky nonsense around that barrel!" Sunny countered passionately, before holding up a long-barrelled hunting rifle intricately carved with stock designs, "This is a weapon for reaching out there and carrying that power the full way and-"

"And jamming the second it gets dirty!" Glimmer aggressively shoved the bolt back into place on her more modern-looking Ironshod longrifle. "That's a rifle meant to hunt a radgator. Its muzzle flare's gonna' light up your position up to anyone looking! Meanwhile, this'll keep firing after swimming through a mudbath. Four hundred is just fine, any combat past that is just-"

"An extra advantage, if you're any good! You saying I can't hit that far if I want to? Could shoot your ass off at that range, not that it would be difficult to *miss*," Sunny cut hard with her voice.

"At least I've *got* an ass, Miss Scrawnybones!"

"Yeah and we all know you spend half your time waving it around, meanwhile I'm out learning to *shoot*."

"You saying you can shoot better than me, wastelander?"

"Sure am, *Ranger*. We don't get fancy systems that do it for us, we learn old school."

Glimmerlight sat up straight, eyes narrowed at Sunny and received just as deadly a look in return. I saw both of them take a deep breath, before Blunderbuck grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me around to the back of the armoury just before the frantic shouting resumed behind us.

"I'm pretty sure it's just their way of handling the stress and letting it out...either that or my armoury will have a murder in it before long."

The bright look on his face betrayed the same anxiety in any of us, but I saw him give that joking smile when I giggled. Blunderbuck settled down at Mosin's old desk and started fiddling with wires.

"Protégé wants this bomb, Murk...he'll get it. Personally I think he should just tell those two that the Wall insulted their guns. Unfortunately, I don't make the calls. However I do get to blow it up instead, so I'm happy."

He kicked his legs up onto the desk and leaned the chair back, stretching over behind him to grab an old egg timer and started pulling its casing off.

I sat down on an old stool near the desk, possibly his when Mosin was still around, "You're um...coping. How do you deal with it? The waiting?"

"Simple, I listen to them through there." He laughed and almost fell from the chair, catching himself on the desk with a stray hoof. "Truth is, I'm terrified, but somepony's got to be the one smiling, right?"

I honestly hadn't given Blunderbuck enough credit. We hadn't seen him much, but even under Mosin's harsh authority he had always been a delightful presence, finding joy in his work to help the day pass easier.

"I'm just hoping we make it. I'm not a slave, Murk, but you could hardly tell the difference just being an assistant in this place. Came here to earn money, realised quick I didn't much have a way out again. Sorry, I realise I'm complaining to the wrong pony about my circumstances..."

"S'ok..." I muttered, looking over his shoulder, widening my eyes at the amazing sight that still stood there. A gigantic set of Steel Ranger armour with a green apple motif and archaic-looking joints. It lacked the flashy carvings and designed metal of the knight-like armours I'd seen Rangers in before, but it had a certain rugged beauty to it. It had always caught my eye and for no real surprise why. "Meant to ask...what's that armour? I saw it every time..."

"That," Blunderbuck waved a hoof back, " is my pride and joy. Something we fished out the old Wartime Ministry and Protégé won the auction to have brought here. The *Armour of Mac*, I've taken to calling it. Wasn't the first prototype suit, that one's in Canterlot I think, but damn near to it and definitely the first one that went on public display. I've got the photos somewhere of Applejack presenting it to the crowds in Filly."

I wandered around it's huge weighted hooves. Compared to the refined and more practical ones I'd seen in the Stable, this thing was unwieldy in extremes, not to mention far too big for a pony.

"It's huge..."

"So was Mac. You ever hear about him?"

"Um...not really, kinda?" I shrugged. I didn't much want to learn about history, it always ended up sad...

"Renowned soldier and a big farm hand. Strongest pony in Equestria some say. Lost his life saving the Princess and was heralded as a hero of the land for it. Also, Applejack's brother." He tapped the armour on its leg carefully. "The Ranger project got off the ground after that because she wanted to prevent ponies dying like he had, so she had the first unveiled model designed in his image, his size, his marks. Big propaganda thing of course, but she was genuine about it."

"Does it work?"

"Tried the generator once, couldn't understand a damn thing with all the wires. I'm a gunsmith and occasionally an explosives wizard, not an archeotech stallion. The papers to operate the armour didn't survive the war. Red Eye's lot tried a few times, we never could figure it out. Far as I can tell, it *would* work though, if you could power it and knew what you were doing."

I looked up at it from the front and saw its blank eyeslots looking out across the armoury. It was three times the height of me, standing strongly on all four legs, upright and noble even below the layers and layers of dust that coated its dull metal plates. The imagery of a real hero.

I collected my rounds from Blunderbuck, being the only pony actually using such small munitions, thanked him and headed back toward the exit, passing the near brawling Sunny and Glimmer. They were each holding up different types of rounds and talking at the same time. I was fairly sure I saw two ponies betting money nearby.

No, this was all too loud...I needed quiet. Somepony to just sit in the quiet with and let my mind settle. Letting it all out might work for Glimmer or Sunny...but getting worked up only made me feel worse.

"Hey, Murky."

Outside the armoury, I stopped in my tracks as I picked out the soft voice through the crowd, before somepony took my hoof from the side.

"Mind if we get some air to have a chat?" asked Unity.

* * *

The roof was, in theory, quite dangerous right now. The Enclave could see you and there were griffin snipers around, but even so there were a number of ponies on watch, mostly the better shots and those with keen eyes and binoculars. Tarps had been strung up against occasional spats of rain brought on by the passing of cloud-driven Enclave ships far above. The puddles created by them hissed from blowtorch sparks falling into them as others shored up the griffin defences or welded access doors shut.

Yet despite the danger, it was calm. Apart from the hiss of the welders and the background ambience of Fillydelphia, no-pony was talking and that was just what we sought. The cool breeze up this high, it was a relief from the stuffy heat below in Fillydelphia, especially inside. I led Unity across the roof to a point I knew, one I had sat in before and looked out with pleading eyes, wishing for a moment like this.

I remembered how I had cried, admitting to Glimmer that I couldn't even remember my mother properly...I remembered watching the stars and hearing the memories of Sundial and Skydancer. Now I had returned here after all this time with a very different feeling. I tried to remember how I'd felt, the pain, worry and hollow sadness...before quashing it immediately. That was then, not now.

Unity sat beside me, settling down quite close and huddling a blanket around both of us. "Murky, you look sad."

"Just remembering...the last times I was here weren't happy. I was remembering what I had forgot..."

"Me?"

It was a brave question and I saw the blush, but I shook my head...then wished I hadn't. That had come out wrong.

"My mother...I don't remember her, it's been so long. I was only a little kid. L-last time I was here I told Glimmer and r-realised I didn't even know what she looked like. To completely forget somepony so important to me is just...just..."

Oh...*oh*. There it was, there was the feeling. I felt my eyes threaten to well up, I felt the shame, the twisted guilt and panic that she might have forgotten me too, for all Glimmer's promises. I felt Unity's hoof wrap around me and pull my head against her shoulder, before I felt her cheek rest on my head. I didn't feel ashamed to be comforted. I knew she wouldn't judge me for it. We were there for one another, whichever one needed to be held at any time.

"You know that I understand how it feels," she whispered, "you remembered me, your friend, so you'll remember her someday. Hey, you can come meet my parents at Friendship City if you want. They'd be happy to welcome you in. My mother would probably make cake if I returned. They likely think I'm dead...cake to prove her wrong. That'll be it."

"Never had cake," I mumbled with a small returning smile, "well, cake that wasn't just formed oatmeal anyway."

Unity giggled slightly, before sighing. Mentioning her own parents must hurt. It hurt any slave to think of those who didn't know what their loved ones were going through.

"You miss them?" I knew it was a dumb question, but it was only fair to be concerned in return.

"Yeah...a lot. Sometimes I...I wake up crying, thinking they're just in the next room until I know where I am."

"I've had that dream too." I breathed out the words carefully and put a hoof around her back, a little half hug. "We'll all get back though, right?"

"Right." Unity nodded and we let go of one another. She turned to me, seeming to stare for a second or two, before returning her gaze to the Wall out there. "Just that thing to beat now...or the portal below. Better to have options I guess. There's a lot of old stories where they only had one chance and it was this big dramatic thing, we have two, so I guess we're lucky right? We've got lucky num-"

"No, nooooo!" I laughed and lightly batted her shoulder. "Not that joke!"

Again, there was a brief silence. I was surprised, that had been quite...forward of me, confident. Like I knew her for longer than I had. Of course, I *did*, but feeling it every so often was so weird. I chuckled, wiping a hoof through my mane.

"I feel sad about my mother but...but I'm glad I remembered you."

The words tumbled from my stupid mouth before I even thought about them. Unity widened her eyes, before melting into a truly beautiful smile. Okay...her face was covered in dirt, thin with lack of food, bore some bruises and a sickly yellow mark on her chin from some chemical somewhere...but to me, that smile shone through to the mare I liked to imagine she was when healthy and clean. We were just two filthy little scrawny slaves, neither of us would be beautiful models...but we were what we were to one another.

"Thank you, Murky...me too, if that doesn't sound, y'know, too simple," she laughed it off, turning away, then back again, "listen, I...uh..."

She fell silent, brushing her wavy and matted mane away with a hoof to pass the time.

"I...well, do...you remember the orb, Glimmer's orb she found from us?"

Slowly, I nodded. The one that had proven to Glimmer who Unity was, who I was to her. Before my eyes, the orb floated up in Unity's hazy red magic.

"I haven't watched it. At first I was afraid to, I didn't know what to expect so I...I asked Glimmerlight about what was in it. She told me that it was my choice, that it showed nothing but the truth, nothing worrying or...or bad. Glimmer is a lovely mare, she even offered to let us both see it at once with her. Isn't her talent so amazing? Being able to share those incredible moments with everyone, it just makes such a beautiful thing, a sharing of ones past with those you had it with and...and..."

Unity blushed.

"Sorry...I'm rambling again, you know what I'm like."

"I know," I giggled. It was fine, I liked listening. It meant I didn't have to worry about what I was saying.

"But I just kept feeling like it was wrong...like I shouldn't see it. Wouldn't it only be seeing ponies we aren't?"

I tilted my head, confused. My mane blew across my face from a gust of wind, before an Enclave ship roared overhead, taunting Fillydelphia's guns and drawing both our attentions away. It was small, likely a scout. In the distance, some overzealous rooftop gunner unleashed a

torrent at it, a rapid drumroll that shook my breast even at a distance...before the target climbed off into the cloudbase at a speed that looked wrong for something so heavy. The sound echoed around with voices in the distance and alarm bells ringing. More posturing, more goading the other to attack first and commit themselves. After a few minutes...things quietened down.

"Sorry, sorry...what was it? Ponies...we aren't?" I looked back at her, turning my head from the view to see her slowly bringing her thoughts back to us from the powder keg that was the city.

"Murky, do you think we'll ever remember anything else without going to that Ministry and finding those orbs? We know that's impossible now...why should we look at just this one orb then? It'd be like looking through a window at our twins, they look like us and maybe act like us but...they aren't us."

Unity sat up, properly turning her body to me and indicating me up and down with a hoof.

"You aren't the same pony I met outside Slit's factory, let alone the one I met who came into Fillydelphia. You've matured, done amazing things...survived. I've seen you joke with friends...when I first met you, I couldn't even look in your journal without you breaking down into a stammering wreck. Since we really reunited on that mountain, can you really say we are who we were back then? I don't know if I am...well, different or..."

"You are!" I blurted quickly, my voice squeaking high enough I swore she almost burst into laughter, "I meant, like...um...you were really nice when I met you but now you're carrying Aurora Star's legacy in your mind and in your bag with that orb. I mean that's just an orb you took and...um but, I mean you as well. You seem confident? Yes, that! Sometimes I see a bit of her in you when you get all...all wordy about things you like and how good everything could be. It's like you were meant to carry on from her with your...y'know, talent? Cos they're both about memory, right? You said you just used to use it for little trinkets...but now here you are."

Unity chuckled, "Stammered your way through that one till it started making sense, hm?"

My face flushed and I looked away, trying to smile. "A bit."

"What I'm saying is, we're different ponies now, Murky. This orb," she floated the sparking shape up, "is nothing but a fragment that would try to tell us how to behave or what we should be thinking...rather than what we do think."

Very quickly, I felt my ears grow a little hot and twinge back. I shifted uncomfortably; the area between my wings felt itchy. "I think you're a really good friend."

Unity blinked a couple times, looking down, then away. I felt her hoof move onto mine, holding it lightly. "You remember the things I said about 'my buck', don't you?"

"Y-yeah..." My stomach felt tight.

"I...well I...this is so difficult, because of how all this hurt us, almost broke us away from one another."

"Mhm..."

Slowly, we turned. I couldn't ignore looking her right in the eyes now. She was trembling.

"Murky, you know we're kinda close and...and we both know what maybe happened before. I just wish times were less arduous, to let us really work through it and figure out how we feel about one another, but I don't think I can do that right now. It's too raw, too hurtful when surrounded by...all this."

Her hoof waved, taking in the whole of the city, its situation and the numerous slavers I could see in the streets below. Quite a lot of them, come to think of it, climbing toward their guns. Out in the distance I heard a rumble, but ignored it to look at Unity instead, into those wide eyes as I gripped her hoof back. I couldn't deny that a part of me felt disappointed in a way I hadn't ever really felt before.

"I guess so." I spoke quietly, gulping in a dry throat. "It's all just...confusing and I dunno what to really, well...I just dunno and...well, I wish I knew words like you did and, y'know..."

Unity hesitated for some time, looking ready to say something. Then she leaned closer, placing a hoof on my shoulder, shifting the blanket. "We're still close friends though, okay? But...when we get out of here, once we have time to really think about it all when this is all over, would...would you want to spend some time together? See if...well...things, y'know..."

My lips felt bone dry. I gulped. "If things...yeah, yeah..."

"Is that a yes?" She nervously tried to laugh, but it fell short.

Every inch of my body was fighting in the freeze or flight mechanism, I could feel myself locking up. Confused. Worried. Second guessing every word she said. But I could feel my sister's spirit at my back, urging me to do what she'd always been trying to build my confidence to do.

To be decisive for once in my life.

So I smiled, leaned in and said, "It is."

Slowly, she moved forward and I wrapped my hooves around her, feeling hers latch around my back. Our heads rested in each others shoulders, cheek to cheek...before I felt her shift and a soft pair of lips press against the side of my muzzle.

“Then let's get out together and we'll see what happens.”

I wished I could have just stayed there. Remain close to somepony, both warmed under a blanket in this brief moment of peace. Yet I couldn't help but hear the whistle. Distant, keening as it grew in pitch and power until it grew deeper and became a throbbing roar.

My head turned, looking over her shoulder to the city, before an eruption of light blinded me. The city shattered, the ground rumbled as I felt us both knocked back, as though a wall of noise had crashed into us. My ribcage vibrated as my vision spun and my ears seared with pain. I felt Unity's hooves grip me, felt mine hold her as we were hurtled back from the edge across the gravel of the roof. There was shouting around us, panic. Fillydelphia's balefire siren cranked up, a bass tone joining the rumbling with its low moan of death that spread and howled around the city in its raising and lowering klaxon sound. Disoriented, seeing only stars and vague shapes, I felt a chill of terror gripping me at that sound.

“Murky! Get up! Get up!” Unity's hooves were pulling at me. Her face was masked with fear and determination as she yanked at my hooves.

Dizzied, seeing everything blurring when I turned my head, I dragged myself up, quickly checked every limb and turned to look.

Fillydelphia was in chaos. Ponies were running everywhere. Griffins had taken off and began to surge into the sky in V-formations. Already I could see anti-air mounts traversing to face various directions. Yet behind it all came a pillar of flame from the other side of the city, one that surged above the rooftops and was already belching a thick cloud of black smoke through the thinner red smog.

The FunBarn had been almost obliterated. Half its structure was torn off and it writhed in flame like any of Fillydelphia's furnaces with wood exploding and metal beginning to sag under the heat. The Enclave had attempted to decapitate Fillydelphia's leadership before the battle had even...

From the winds, I heard it again. Another whistling turning to a howl from the sky. Looking up, I saw a sudden streak in the sky, shooting across the clouds before veering and descending like a comet coming to strike Equestria.

Then another.

And another.

No...this wasn't before the battle.

Every pony on the rooftop staggered as the concussive wave of impacts rippled across Fillydelphia. I felt the Mall creak and sway beneath us. To our right, the Ministry of Wartime Technology exploded. Its thick granite blocks being tossed hundreds of metres into the air.

This was the battle...

Then the spires of the old Ironshod Foundry were cast into shadow by the detonation at their base. My heart thudded faster as I saw the two smoke stacks begin to collapse, bending and snapping in the air before crashing across the main thoroughfare of the city amongst scattering lines of slaves and wagons crashing into one another. I heard the ongoing rumble and collapse of a million bricks arrive seconds later. Somepony shrieked in fear as a massive object surged across the sky above us, close enough to throw up a wind and almost take a stallion off the edge of the rooftop with a shriek. Unity and I fell to the ground in its aftermath, feeling blistering heat and a throbbing crackle of magic in the air in its wake. It continued, hammering its way into the thickset reactor building of Red Eye's radiation engine like a bullet penetrating thin metal. The power station did not shatter, but instead coughed and died from a dozen secondary explosions that ejected from every window and doorway.

Soon after, all across the city, lights began to go out. The PA system fell dead in the middle of one of Red Eye's prepared speeches and backup alarms began to ring their shrill tone from factories around us.

Only now did I spy the lines still in the sky. Dull orange, fading on the winds yet leading directly to each of the four impact sites. The trails coiled, glittering with magical energy before small rolls of wind surged and slapped to refill the dead and burnt air in their passing. They drew down from the clouds, their sources hidden away as the Enclave made their preliminary strikes, targeting Fillydelphia's command structure, its weapons manufacturing and its power grid.

Then, like enormous bloatflies, I saw them. Black ships breaking the cloud barrier and descending, seeming to pull the clouds along, coiling them around their hulls in ways that made it hard to really see their shapes. Two more of the earth shattering heavy strikes detonated on the surface, their bone quaking thumps rolling across the city. Then more began spreading out, as I saw the firestorm grow and everyone and everything in Fillydelphia was helpless to stop the devastation around us. The ships fell, turning and screaming their engines in the air as they released dozens of smaller craft and what looked like hundreds of individual pegasi into the air in a vertical drop toward the city, bypassing every single wall defence Stern had set up. They had offered no warning, striking suddenly and with merciless efficiency. Each ship let loose a roll of immense thunder on breaking from the clouds as they began to accelerate, wind, rain and lightning following in their wake at the effect they had on the clouds.

Energy weapons flared from the ships in lancing strikes, targeted toward the sources of the flak and tracers that began to thump and crackle up at them. I saw spears of blue, green and purple meeting the raw orange and red of conventional weapons below. Multi-coloured blasts turned rooftops to glowing slag that splattered and dripped down the sides of entire buildings, as Enclave precision weaponry struck at individual cannons and batteries. A firework display of grey clouded flak and snapping white fragmentations lit up the sky. I saw one Enclave small ship, shaped like a beetle with armoured housings for pegasi to pull it, veer and spin in the air, trailing flame before hurtling at unthinkable speeds into a great crane of Fillydelphia and tearing it down in its death throes to pull up a veil of dust and smoke. The noise became catastrophic, the whistling of energy weapons mixing with the roar of engines and the *thudthudthud* of quad barrelled cannons on the ground. Alarms forming a backdrop to the screaming and electronic rasps of radios we had set up to listen in on the city's command frequencies. Screaming, snapping, thudding, sizzling, searing, howling, roaring, whistling, whirling, crackling, erupting...all around me, overwhelming me with the sensory input. It froze me in awe at the scale, the numbers, the raw suddenness, the noise and the spectacle stretching across the entire city.

The Enclave had made the first move.

It had begun.

* * *

Ponies were clattering down the stairs. This was no ordered movement, but a disorganised pile galloping for the safety of indoors. Unity and I sprinted across the rooftop as the air above us turned into a killing zone of fire and shrapnel. Flak had struck above the Mall and sprayed its lethal razor edged bits of metal in a skittering arc across the ventilation ducts and pipes that were now covered in perforations and ripped asunder. Four ponies went down, screaming from torn limbs and studded torsos. All I could smell was a thick burning scent as smoke washed over us, drawn in by the close passes of Enclave sky-wagons and heavily armoured, tank-like flying vehicles that stayed low and hunted anti-aircraft batteries. They would surge overhead, blowing everyone's manes out and tossing the unsteady from their hooves.

"Everypony, get below! One line! *One line!* Come on!"

I heard Protégé's voice from the doorway. His powerful tone carried above the rush as he directed ponies aside and into both stairwells. The wounded went down first as he tried to organise them. His revolver was drawn, to what end I couldn't imagine, but he kept it pointed to the sky.

"Murky! Unity! Hurry up!"

His hoof waved at us and we pushed past him. I screamed as I heard another flak shell detonate over the side of the Mall after trying to hit a passing sky-wagon. The airburst of the round sent a thousand metal shards whistling and skittering off the metal and concrete. The ground shook as another of the massive artillery-like shots hammered down from the clouds only a few streets away. We ran through darkened back corridors, the lights all gone with the reactor offline. Ponies were pushing their way toward the centre of the building, trying to stay away from windows. I saw bodies in some rooms lying beside the shattered wood of once boarded up fireholes. The shrapnel had come right through.

I felt Unity grab my hoof and pull me into a less crowded side passage, one that I knew led to the old administration office wing. Groups of ponies clustered at its walls, heads huddled. Some were crying, others just shivering in fear as the bombardment of the city shook dust from the ceiling. A group of (I supposed now ex) slavers nearly collided with us as they hustled in the other direction, carrying boxes of freshly sorted ammunition.

"Out of our way! Come on, you little winged rat, move!"

A hoof struck out at me, knocking me against the wall with a yelp.

"Hey!" I heard Unity turn and shout at them.

"What's your care?" One of the slavers turned and scoffed, "The runt's just one of them anyway! Fuck all this! How're we meant to fight that?!"

They didn't give her a chance to answer, galloping onwards toward the front of the building.

"We have to get to...to the others." I gasped, holding my side. Their hoof had struck right where I was still healing up. "I-I don't know what we should do, they might..."

"Other than survive?" Unity tried to make it sound like a joke, but her face was pale and shaken.

I had more knowledge of the Mall than most. Taking a longer route avoided the massive crush of terrified slaves who now sought shelter from the blitz. We ran along the balconies that bordered the main slave hall and passed the armoury on our way to the front centre above the main gate. I saw Blunderbuck lying on the ground outside his armoury and almost panicked until one of his assistants, Slotshow I thought, leaned down to put a wet cloth on the young stallion's head. There were bloody marks on rubble nearby and a hole in the roof from where it had been shaken loose.

"Blunderbuck, you've got to rest, you're hurt..." Slotshow was saying as we came near.

“Just help me up, get me back in there...we need this bomb.” Blunderbuck gritted his teeth and staggered up, supported back inside. He flashed me a grin as we passed by, before wincing at the effort. “Sunny and Glimmer left, Murk, they’re up front. Go on, get going, I’ll be all right.”

Nodding a thanks, we kept going. We passed the same four who had been cut down on the rooftop coming the other way toward Weathervane's makeshift aid station. Two had gone quiet. I could only hope for the best as we went passed them, trying not to touch the stains on the floor from their passing. We were thrown from our hooves as the entire building rocked on its very foundations and I felt Unity collapse onto my side. A rush of air powered down the approach to the front of the building, carrying dust and gravel that stuck in my throat and clogged my nose. It was followed by a second, sharper strike that shook a light from its fixtures in the primary staff reception to shatter on the floor. I saw Pike and Cosh cowering in a small huddle together behind the desk.

It was unending. The floor kept moving. My ears were *burning*, so painful I was beginning to actually tune it out from consistency until they just tingled and throbbed. We were covered in dust as we stumbled through the barricade to the second floor overlooking the entrance. Through the glassless windows I could see the war outside. Yes, *war*. This time, I was correct.

Dozens of parts of the city were on fire, warped by gigantic energy blasts. I couldn't see far enough to witness it all from this lower height, but the sky was quickly becoming a shrouded mess of lingering smoke and coloured blasts lighting it from behind, like a coloured thunderstorm just over our heads, lit with fiery red from below.

Glimmerlight turned from peeking out the window and waved us in, motioning to a heavy block of stone somepony had lugged up here for us to take cover behind. I didn't even hear her the first time she shouted at us, before ducking as a building two streets away from us was levelled. The flare set my eyes seeing bruise coloured false shapes even after closing them and turning away. The sound of the building collapsing got completely lost amongst everything else. Above it, I could see a dozen Pinkie Balloons ripped from the sky, trailing fire as they fell, helpless against the advanced flying machines of the Enclave. Every single one of them had been taken down in minutes, being nothing but giant targets. One in particular I saw speared by a hot red laser, Pinkie's face twisting into a demonic and blackened visage as the fire curled the balloon shape before it disappeared behind a rooftop.

“Protégé's call seems to have worked!” Glimmerlight screamed again to be heard, “They're not targeting us directly!”

“Could've fooled me!” Unity cried out, biting her lip at the cacophony from outside as streaking energy blasts tore down a block over, aiming at a road.

"If they wanted this place gone we'd be gone, hun!" Glimmer shrugged and turned to watch the street again. The whirling roar of an Enclave skyship went overhead, one of their fast ones. They would strike and shoot off before you even realised they were there. I'd seen them from the roof, moving in straighter lines before banking off outside the city limits and making a long turn to come back again.

The insinuation of how quickly our lives would have been over had the Enclave thought we were trying to trick them became a cold reality for a single moment.

"Blunderbuck said you wanted us!" I shouted, hoping I didn't sound too shrill in my terror.

"Want you where I can see you, lil'bro..." said Glimmerlight, her face momentarily darkening. She'd known we were on the rooftop; she'd seen the injured pass by here on their way down.

She was worried I'd die somewhere she couldn't help me. It was as simple and as gut hollowing as that.

We crouched down. There was nothing we could do but take cover. Ponies around us stuck behind harder objects and only dared peek through the windows on occasion. The bombing was beginning to make joints and heads ache. The slave camp outside the Mall, surrounded by its wooden fenced wall became a pock-marked wasteland as a strafing run on a nearby building overshot. Mud actually arced up and through the windows from the impact, blinding us to everything for a few minutes.

I would occasionally look out and watch the air-war above us as griffins spun around the sky with black-armoured pegasi. Watching them move in the air almost made me forget for a time that I was trapped down here...I felt a momentary pride in my race. So graceful, so powerful, attacking the forces that kept me held here. A scream from the next room over was enough to draw me out of it. The Enclave weren't saviours. Behind me, Weathervane's assistants rushed by to find them. I recognised one of them...Blood...something? Bloodshot? I couldn't remember his name, but he'd once chided me when I was first sneaking into the hospital long ago.

I kept wondering when it would end. When it would taper off. Maybe an hour, I figured, who could keep fighting after an hour?

The hour came and went, as we did nothing but huddle in fear and feel relieved that it wasn't us every time something came down hard nearby. Double that time, as the second hour painfully approached, led me to sitting and praying silently.

Three hours later, with no end in sight, I began to simply feel ill. My stomach was lurching on the impacts. My teeth hurt from clenching too hard. My ears felt numb.

The war kept going. Unending. We heard reports on the radio of a colossal clash going on outside the city walls. Stern's voice came through a few times, ordering focused fire on certain ships. Fresh wings of pegasi came down as I saw ships travel back to the clouds for repair and rearming. It was as exhausting to simply watch it as it was darkly fascinating to imagine the logistics and communication involved to create something this...this senselessly brutal.

Then the fourth hour went by as we sat still and waited. We were waiting even as everypony else in the world fought for their lives. We could only wait for when it was our turn, granted that small respite that the slaves dying by their hundreds outside were not given. There was a brief moment of tension as the bombing started to come this way, a creeping barrage that moved street by street, levelling a whole block and driving slavers before it before stopping sharply.

The fifth hour passed. Somepony had got a generator to work and the lights began to flicker on before dying again after a particularly heavy hit near to the building. I saw Glimmerlight holding her rifle tightly, peering out. Sunny sat opposite her, watching the opposite side of the street. For all their arguing, they knew what they were doing together.

My body hurt through the sixth hour. Ten minutes into it, Unity had stood up and declared that she was going to the aid station...that she couldn't handle doing nothing any longer. She passed out the door, checking only that the orb was still in her saddlebag as she went. That same group of slavers that had struck me passed by her on the way out, before heading downstairs to join the ground floor guards.

Then...right as the seventh hour began, I saw Sunny leap up. The lever action was ready in her hooves as she pointed it over the windowsill and stared out. Her sudden movement caught everyone off guard, startling others into motion.

I looked over the edge of the window, quivering as I saw a refinery belching a sheet of flame a hundred feet into the sky from one of its pressurised tanks. Drawing my eyes down, through all the smoke, I saw shadowed figures. From three of the roads facing the Mall, they came. Other forms were clambering into the buildings facing the front of the Mall, the closest perhaps two hundred metres away. They were indistinct, vague in the thickness of cloud and moving slowly with heavy weaponry lashed to large saddles. There must have been at least a hundred of them, plus whatever was hidden in the smoke...or waiting in the air.

Protégé was beside me, I hadn't heard him come in. My ears were shot and useless, only a ringing coming through above muddled sounds of everything else. Part of me wished this was it...an end to this unbearable waiting.

“They're spreading out,” Protégé commented as they did indeed begin to move to surround us. Some went north or south to cordon the Mall. I saw observers we'd long spotted watching us directing them. The main force however advanced almost in formation, as though seeking to intimidate us.

At least to me, it worked. A feeling not too dissimilar to vertigo was whirling in my mind. We had around a hundred and fifty refugees, sure, but perhaps only eighty could fight. They had almost twice as many fighters as us, heavier weapons and no doubt griffin support...

It was the same feeling I'd felt on the mountain at Aurora Star's cottage before we had been completely outclassed in open conflict.

“They're in range if you want it,” said Sunny, speaking from the corner of her mouth.,

Protégé didn't reply. He just stared at them. I saw his revolver held ready, the flag of Equestria bold and clear on its grip. Turning back to the outside, I saw a flag. A break in the smoke showed it to hold the symbol of Red Eye himself. There was no mistaking it...they were coming for us. Behind them, much further out, I could have sworn I saw a larger figure with them and hear a deep rumbling voice bellowing orders. I tightened up at the sound of *that* voice.

His voice.

Around me, ponies raised their weapons in nervous hooves. The sudden *click-clack* of the two tripod-mounted machine guns Blunderbuck's assistants had repaired getting ready made me jump. Below us I could hear Brimstone shouting to those with him on the ground floor while Mister Peace's whoops filtered through the Mall. In the distance, the war burned on in other regions of Fillydelphia, as though it respected this smaller and more intimate showdown to be left to itself.

Protégé opened his mouth, slowly. He was clearly hesitant, almost wishing he didn't have to say it.

“Fire.”

* * *

I would always remember the moment of brief silence after that one word.

He hadn't told any one pony to be the first one to pull the trigger, and it was as though the entire building was awaiting somepony else to do it. Dozens of barrels protruded from the front three floors of the Mall and yet none of them lit with anger. Even as the world burned around us, there was silence here.

“Oh for fucks sake,” muttered Sunny, spitting out her cigarette and unleashing the first shot that would mark the Siege of the Mall.

A heavy calibre hunting round barked from the brass tipped barrel of her rifle, lighting up the smoke with the muzzle flare. Three hundred metres back, I saw the banner of Red Eye pitch and fall. Its icon slammed to the ground before being drawn up again, dripping mud and foul water as those around the fallen bearer scattered and rushed forward. Voices cried out from the half-observed force, sending them toward cover or demanding them to return fire. One shot from Sunny had sent them all scurrying.

Then, finally, the remainder of the Mall spoke. There was no consistency of sound, we didn't have the same mass manufactured weapons with standardised ammunition that Red Eye's army did. Deep-throated revolvers roared near to tinny cracks from game rifles, the clattering thumps of heavy calibre platforms almost drowned out the dirty coughs of improvised firearms. The front of the Mall opened in fire, the forty ponies we had on the front floors raining shots down upon the advancing force in the main street. Heavy black figures were pitched from where they stood, others sent tumbling as they ran for the buildings either side. Some crawled, others got back up and limped. The stitching trail of our largest tripod mounted machine gun chased and harried those who dared move, carving a line in the tarmac. Sunny's rifle opened up a second time towards a target I couldn't see. The deluge was far too great to keep track of, yet I could see perhaps eight bodies left in the street.

Something pinged behind me - a shard of the wooden doorframe blew out as rounds began to snap back at us. I felt hooves grabbing me, pulling me behind a thick block of stone as return fire began to pick up. First sporadically and then growing in weight, the slavers and soldiers outside had gotten into cover and were starting to bring their own firepower to bear.

“Hold them at the buildings! Don't waste your ammunition! Fire at targets if they push! *Fire at targets! Don't waste!*” Protégé screamed to the entire floor from behind me, his hooves having been the ones to get me out of the line of fire.

The shout went down the line. Glimmer repeated it before I heard two other slaves further away bellow out loud. Our ragtag group of slaves were clustering at the windows, ducking out to shoot and pulling back as shots whined and whistled through the gaps into the walls behind us with thick slaps or vicious ricochets. Somewhere behind me, I heard a scream of pain and a voice crying out for a doctor. Distantly, I could hear Brimstone's thick voice echoing up from the lower floors shouting much the same thing.

Protégé got up and crawled his way to the windows. Without having much to understand, I followed him and took a place beside my sister. She was tracking targets almost mechanically, poking out and following for three seconds before firing and hiding again. Her rifle clacked and rung as the bolt moved and clattered new rounds in from her magic. Outside, I had lost sight of most of the attackers, but compared to the inconsistent sounds of our scavenged weaponry,

their response was distinctive with crisp retorts. Bright flashes came from the sewage ditch surrounding the Mall, or from the lower floors of nearby apartments.

"They've stopped advancing and gone to ground!" Glimmerlight shouted over to Protégé as he was just seeing for himself, "I don't think they expected this kind of firepower!"

"Thank Seeker for the ammo to do that," Protégé cried back, "watch out for anypony trying to flan-"

Sunny stopped and stared, peering intently toward the slavers, toward the opposite roof two hundred meters away at the edge of the Mall's wagon park, just over the street from the palisade wall Shackles had built. I could see something too, three soldiers pulling something up and-

"*Shit!* Heavy! HEAVY GUN!" Sunny threw us down, tackling into Glimmer and I.

Protégé turned to the line of ponies across this floor. "*EVERYPONY GET DO-*"

It drowned everything. I'd seen them before in the factories, those long barrelled and thickly-built 'land hammers' as they'd called them. They fired the same rounds that the Talons' anti-machine rifles did...only at a rate greater than ten of those mercenaries could manage together. Every shot was like the step of some legendary giant beast, booming and almost irregular, like the heavy machine gun wanted to fire as fast as it could and refused to stick to a pattern. It unleashed its fury upon the Mall.

The walls and windows exploded inwards as hoof-sized chunks were torn from wood, metal and stone. I heard screams of terror as ponies hid their heads below hooves or galloped for the rear rooms. I felt pebbles and splinters wash over me at the heavy machine gun's rampage upon the architecture. I saw its line of fire travel down the length of our floor, crushing through the wall like it wasn't there and pulping three slaves that it travelled across. They didn't even get to cry out and my stomach turned as I saw the effects of those rounds on a pony's body. The stench of gunpowder and rock dust filled my nostrils. I could see some ponies getting up, valiantly trying to send some fire in the gun's direction, including Glimmer. They were sent diving for concealment as their muzzle flares drew its attention. The heavy desk I had once hid behind during the bombardment was torn into a thousand pieces and sent rolling back down the hallway.

We didn't stop it. The land hammer *decided* to leave us alone and focus on a lower floor as its crew swept it across the building, trying to discourage all outgoing fire. Gasping for air, I got a mouthful of dust set and erupted into a spasm of coughing. Shaking, feeling my rough throat lance in pain, I pulled myself to a window for just a second. My nose was bleeding, I didn't even know why. Pulling myself on instinct to a window for air, I caught sight of deep red tracer

rounds whipping through the smog to lacerate the other side of the building, thirty feet away from us.

We had held their intimidation, but now their battle began in earnest. Below the cover of their massive weapon, I saw dark shapes move from the houses that faced the Mall and begin to gallop forward with belted commands. One group of twelve even tried to go further into the exterior slave camp, until one of the tripod guns sent them diving backward again into a sewage ditch.

I could see a group of them moving to the right in an odd direction, before I remembered that place I'd seen Brimstone, the delivery bay! The words caught in my throat amongst a coughing fit as I struggled to shout a warning, that they were using this lapse in our fire to rush across the road in the open while everypony was still recovering or hiding from their huge cannon.

I saw the flash of the rocket just too late to get Protégé to radio a warning anywhere.

It streaked out from where they'd moved to and whistled its way into the right of the Mall. The eruption blew out the upper floors and send entire chunks of masonry collapsing down. We'd had ponies in that area...a good dozen to defend the approach to the delivery doorway where wagons had once gone in. I couldn't see them from here...but I could see the smoke belching from around the corner. Seconds later, the sound hit us and thudded through my bones.

My lungs hacked and wheezed, before I finally gave up and resorted to just hitting Protégé with my hooves and pointing frantically. He glanced and saw smoke pouring from inside, took a second to think and then spat to clear the thick dusty mush from his mouth.

"Glimmerlight! Sunny! The delivery warehouse is hit, they're moving on it, take a few with you!"

The two mares didn't argue, for the soldiers were already beginning their attack. Sunny pointed to a few ponies at the back and whistled to them to follow while Glimmer lifted a pair of saddlebags from the end of the room I knew contained ammunition. One of them floated to my back.

"Come on, lil'bro! Stick with me and stay back from the worst!"

We took off as I heard Protégé's group at the front fire again. We ran down the front of the Mall, leaping the debris the heavy gun had left and diving to take cover as it rattled over the front of the building again. My mind was whirling...the gun, the assault on the front, the flank attack, the bombing...all so much. *All so much*. I passed ponies lying motionless at their posts, trying not to look at the massive sucking wounds. I sprinted and jumped over a fallen floor panel

as the huge rounds stitched in behind us and tore the old noticeboards on the rear wall in half. My vision tunnelled, pulling me along that corridor amongst whizzing rounds and keeping my head as low as I could. I didn't know how I was still alive. I didn't know why my limbs were still moving to keep me trying. Everything was focused on that feeling of 'movement means life.'

Those we passed were involving in snap shooting with our foes at the palisade a hundred metres away, or with those still in the buildings beyond that. Whoops of success followed those moments when I saw a slaver or soldier tumble in the mud and cease to move or snap backwards from a windowsill. One old stallion we passed seemed to be making a kill with every slow shot, holding a single load rifle in his magic like an old gamekeeper. Two young bucks beside him followed his every motion, taking his lead, holding five soldiers behind an abandoned wagon in the road, stopping them from rushing the bottom floor of the Mall. It had too many empty glass shop windows on the ground for us to let them get anywhere near us and Red Eye's army *knew it*.

We emerged into the delivery station, that same tall room with a thick corrugated door deemed too heavy to ever lift again. I remembered the large wooden platform above the doorway, where ponies had been posted to keep watch from. Only now...

The missile had torn a hole through it all. Eight feet of the upper wall and doorway had been blown inwards, dropping fragments of the outer structure all across the long wagons below. The platform had been snapped in two, leaving a five foot gap where the impact had been. Like a buck to the gut, I saw ten ponies lying strewn away from the location they'd been defending the door from, unmoving and some torn to literal shreds that painted the floor behind the door. Trying my best to look away, I saw another three were hunkered down in cover, screaming as unending fire tore and fizzed past them. No-pony was defending anymore, the missile had broken them.

Sunny turned and rattled up the half wrecked platform's stairs to what remained the upper level and shoved the nearest pony up there out of the way to fire her weapon around the hole. She wasn't taking any prisoners today.

"Get up! Get up and fight or they'll just run over us!"

Her back hoof lightly kicked at the ones who had been pinned down.

"Come on!"

Glimmer slid into cover on the opposite side of the door to Sunny, nodded and they both leapt up. I took a chance to peer out and realised why the others had been so scared.

They were only fifty metres away and closing. A dozen slavers and soldiers, firing as they came with the lead ones charging right for us. Behind them two gas masked soldiers were

preparing another missile. The rest kept their fire up and I heard the others (and myself) squealing as we all had to duck again. Rays of red light were puncturing through the wrecked door in little pinholes, but most came roaring through the enormous hole above it.

I tried to help out, to bring *Rarity's Grace* to bear, if only to make us seem more powerful, but Glimmer shoved me back down with a determined hoof and shook her head.

"You stay safe...not this time, just hand out the ammo."

The other three ponies had gotten themselves organised. One of them took my place as I went to the back and did the literal five second job of putting ammo on the ground for them before just having to sit under cover...safe while the others fought.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

"Wh-where...I...*ugh!*"

My ears pricked up. The scream had come from nearby, looking up I saw a badly wounded buck lying on his side with a thickly bleeding shrapnel wound on his left hind leg. I'd thought he was a corpse, but under a heavy saddlebag load, he was stirring again, waking up and finding himself in great pain amongst the corpses left on the floor from the missile.

He was also still lying in clear view of the slavers through the giant hole, screaming as he tried to move away from the incoming fire...yet the enormous weight of his saddlebags kept him pinned on his bad leg. Glimmer and Sunny saw him, but they were trying to hold off soldiers not twenty metres away.

He should have played dead, laid still...but he was delirious in the agony of waking up to raking shrapnel wounds and turning himself into a target.

I'd been that pony left to suffer far too often to leave somepony else like that now. Charging forward, hearing Glimmer shout nearby, I leapt the rubble in front of the breach.

Whether any shots came near me, I didn't know, but I heard enough of them as I passed in clear line of sight to everypony outside and rolled to the other side of the pony. Grabbing his clothes in hoof and mouth, muttering an apology for the harsh movement on his injuries, I skidded my hooves and did my best to pull him back into cover on the opposite side, my wings thrashing as though trying to provide extra power to pull. He was heavy and I was weak bodied, but he seemed to get the idea and his good limbs thrashed to crawl even as he hollered and gasped in pain. Two shots skiffed off the floor, driving dust into my eyes and making them water.

I was doing it! I was saving-

The third shot streaked across the skin into the pony I was saving, opening a gash before the round pinged into the back of the storage area.

Their cry hurt me. The helpless, horrified wail they made drove right to my core. The tears on his face spreading across dirty cheeks clear as he pawed and begged for me to help him.

Sunny leaned out to cover us, before she cried out and swore enough to inspire Weathervane. A smattering of buckshot had reflected off a bit of rebar and tore into her shoulder, tossing her back. Rolling back into cover, I saw her hiss and press a hoof over the bloody mess it had left, tearing off her top's sleeve with her mouth to try and tie it down.

I tried to do the same for the pony I was with, pulling the heavy load off his back the moment we were in cover and tearing a part of his clothing to hold over the rushing blood. Seeing us out of the line of fire, Sunny got back up, blood still leaking from below the makeshift bandage but running on enough adrenaline to keep going. Then there was a rush of noises, ponies shouting and screaming as hooves clattered outside.

"Here they come again! Come on everypony, defend!" Sunny cried to them.

"Keep that launcher's head down!" Glimmer shouted after her.

A desperate action ensued. Yet Sunny and Glimmer left me in awe as I witnessed them hold the breach and inspire those around them to pick up the fire again. The slaver advance stalled and the launcher's head was indeed kept down from the accurate fire the two mares put out; their high powered rifles barking in turn as the other reloaded. It was a moment of everything balancing on a knife edge. Any moment I expected the missile to hit. Any moment I expected them to get close enough for grenades. Any moment I expected the five ponies defending against what seemed to be twenty to take more hits.

Yet somehow...*somehow*...they held.

"They're pulling back!"

Glimmer's shout was a relief to the soul. I dared to look up from the moaning buck and saw the fighting retreat still going on. The warehouse flank had pushed them back and we'd saved at least a couple lives.

Well...Sunny and Glimmer had saved, I'd only really done one thing...

"Launcher! *Launcher's back!*"

My heart skipped a beat as I turned, looking through the hole. One soldier broke cover and aimed a heavy saddle with a long tube on it directly for us. Both Glimmer and Sunny fired at once. The shot was long and Glimmer's bullet went wide to spank off an old signpost.

Sunny's slammed into the slaver's chest, sending the rocket mare careening forward onto her chin before lying quite still. The missile screamed as it fired and soared into the sky, arcing backwards and away from the Mall and passing near to a fast moving Enclave ship before being vapourised mid-flight; intercepted by some sort of Enclave laser defence system. Its fragments peppered back down on the ruined approach to the delivery door...where the soldiers had now departed from.

"Told you, IronShit can't do range..." Sunny tiredly muttered with a slight grin as Glimmer's curse of annoyance as they both relaxed and gazed outside, thankful to be alive at all.

The slavers had been waiting. Two leapt up, automatic rifles training on us. I felt myself freeze up. They'd been hiding in the dead, waiting for our guards to be down!

Sunny swore and fought with her rifle, trying to get the heavy action to chamber the next round, but I heard an unhealthy crunch of metal and something amounting to 'fucking dust'. Glimmer's bolt flew back and forth like a smoothly oiled and machine driven piston in her magic as she turned the barrel, nailed the first one in the shoulder; reloaded with a clean motion, and then shot the second one across the chin. The slaver fell just as Sunny got her rifle back on target.

"Told you, civvie rifles can't do war." Glimmer winked back at the rather infuriated looking hunter, before sitting down with her back to the wall, rifle laid across her hind legs, and seemed to finally take a breath.

* * *

Later, five more ponies arrived after we sent one more back to fetch more help. The warehouse was better defended now, but it seemed we'd be staying here to ensure it. Two nurses came down to treat at the scene, including the one I'd once had catch me trying to take RadPurge. She was injured herself, but ignored the burn on her cheek to help others, her cleaner hooves standing out from the rest of her soot covered body as she worked on Sunny's shoulder.

The ones hit by the rocket hadn't made it. The only survivor had been the one I pulled away, who now was holding my hoof and professing a lifetime of thanks after the Med-X (Med-Yes!) had put his mood above the pain of his torn body, yet he seemed eager...trying painfully to move until the nurse had to hold him down.

"What were you even carrying in that load?" Glimmer asked him, "What's the hurry?"

"Ammo! I have to go! The roof lost theirs to the bombs, they-*argh!* They need it now, they said griffins were coming to attack! I-*urrgh...*"

He clearly wasn't going anywhere. His back leg was shredded and his torso had a horrid hole in it. Without the medicine, he'd still be screaming. His war was, for now, over. Only a trip to the aid station remained. His fate was in others' hooves.

"We can't spare anyone, this place is too thin as it is," Sunny remarked, motioning to the few ponies watching around the breach. I could still hear the fighting going on at the front of the building. The heavy machine gun kept firing and the ferocious battle to hold or take ground on every side of the Mall seemed unending.

The radio squawked in Glimmer's magic. "*Griffins! Griffins on the roof! They're circling in to attack! They-*"

There was the boom of anti-machine rifles and the screaming of ponies returning a smattering of fire. I heard the echoes from above as well as on the radio...the roof was the next place they were trying, no doubt for the vulnerable skylight with the very elite of Red Eye's forces.

"See? See?" the wounded pony protested.

I started to lift the bags, "I'll take it."

"No." Glimmer shot the word in with all the authority a big sister could. "I'll call up Protégé and-"

"*Glimmer!*" I moved closer to her, pulling the radio down from her mouth and looking seriously at her, "I'm not a fighter. L-let me do it, I want to help! I can do things too!"

I took up the heavy saddlebags and pulled them on, seeing her sad face shaking at me. Her hoof caught mine, as though afraid I'd run. Behind her, Sunny cried out as soldiers were seen coming this way again.

"I can't protect you up there if you go off alone in all this. I won't be there to keep you safe..."

It was clear, Glimmer wasn't afraid I couldn't do things myself. She was scared that something might happen to me without her being there to stop it.

I tried to smile for my sis, gripping her hoof before reaching up to ruffle her mane.

"I can do it, big sis'."

"Just come back, lil'bro. You were with me through my journey to...to face up to the past. Just like I helped you face yours. We're so close to the end. I don't want to lose you now...not like-"

Glimmer stopped short. I didn't know which name she was going to say, but she didn't need to. My sister had lost or likely lost a lot of ponies she had cared deeply for before meeting me...

Letting go, I trotted further back, hearing the panicked shrills on the radio and the intensity on the roof pick up. Glimmer was being called to the windows, just as the buck was shouting at me to get going, but we held for just this one short moment.

"This isn't Creaky Hollow, sis," I whispered, gulping hard, "I...I promise we'll make it to the end. Both of us."

Slowly, our hooves parted, lingering until the very edge.

Then I was gone, and the war raged on.

* * *

The halls were in anarchy. Ponies were charging or fleeing all over the place. Every time the bone shaking *thump* of something detonating overhead reverberated through the Mall, huddled groups of the sick and injured began screaming. I scurried around stamping hooves and steered clear of hallways that led to the outer walls. Gunfire occasionally came raking down them through the exterior windows along with the rushing wind driven up by the battle. In an effort to not get trampled, I took a route through the main shop outlets, rushing around the fountain.

A sudden whine of engines made me look up. A smoking Enclave ship went spiralling out of control in a flat spin above the Mall, trailing fire that was visible through the empty skylight and dropping shards of black armour like hailstones. Ten seconds later, I heard it careening into the ground from the direction of the crater with a crunch of folding metal.

That skylight entrance that had once saved us all from Barb was perhaps our weakest point. Protégé had set List Seeker to its defence, trusting the dedicated overseer to do it right. Many of his workers looked to Seeker for leadership and now stuck with him even in the most dangerous zone up top; trusting his authority now he had broken from Stern. Indeed, many of them treated him with enormous love and respect.

Climbing the stairs, feeling my lungs begin to sag and wheeze at the numerous levels from the ground floor upwards. I limped and staggered my distinctly unheroic way to the roof access to find it blast scored and charred black. The door was completely gone. Lacking anypony to meet, I took what little breath I could and pressed on outside to make the delivery.

The smog of Fillydelphia rushed in to meet me before I even got there, choking and black, clinging to my throat. The air outside smelled burnt, filled with lingering energy from the enormous magical weapons the Enclave was using. Not a few feet outside, I found myself stunned into staring at the warfare around us. Enclave flight groups in their dozens were tussling with griffins in the air amongst mad three dimensional combats or were diving to raid the rooftops in dangerously close passes. Geysers of flame erupted into the sky from entire factories crumbling on the skyline, their roars lost under the rumble of weapons fire, so much that it combined into an eerie and unending howl. In the distance, off the back end of the Mall, I could see inside the crater where the Enclave ship had gone down, carving a great wound into the earth. Small flashes of light stabbed outwards from it; the survivors skirmishing in the radioactive hole against those looking to plunder it.

From the highest clouds to the lowest craters, Fillydelphia and the Enclave were mauling each other to pieces.

Looking to my left, away from the edge and onto the roof proper, I finally located those defending the skylight. There were about fifteen left, with three of them clearly out of the fight and nursing heavy wounds behind the huge rooftop pipes. I felt a pang of hurt as I saw the prone bodies of at least five more on the ground, stripped of equipment to keep the others going. Most of the survivors had automatic weaponry or shotguns, weapons that could hit close aerial targets more easily. They fired up at the dancing score of Talons that were trying to punch their way into the skylight. Others could only hide from the griffins, lacking any ammo to respond with. Even as I watched, another pony cried out that he had just fired his last shell.

If the Talons got in, we would be completely outflanked inside our own fortress. The pony below had been right; they desperately needed these supplies.

Griffins swooped and the defending party of ponies ducked. Huge anti-machine rounds from those signature rifles tore into their cover, missing only by dint of the targets staying hidden than anything to do with the stopping power of the roof's features. They were being harried, flanked, circled and led around a frantic dance of the roof to find cover from griffins on all sides. It had disintegrated into a hurried fight for angles where many had simply gotten unlucky. Skill had little to do with it up here, just luck on which way you were facing at the time they approached.

I saw Seeker track one and let his huge shotgun blast a small cloud of shot into the air, missing with the first and slapping the second barrel's load into the hind legs of a griffin. It didn't fall, but shrieked in pain and glided away over the lip of the roof. Seconds later, Seeker was flat

on the ground as three griffins stopped, turned and rattled fire after him and his companions that sent sparks off the metalwork and tore bricks from the corners of power blocks.

Behind him, two griffins surged out from behind the radio antenna and aimed at him and his companions from behind.

Racing from the access tunnel's cover, I bit the trigger for my saddle, angling upwards and trying to lead them like Glimmer had taught me. Clenching multiple times, *Rarity's Grace* snapped by my side. Its tinny noise was lost in the chaotic fighting, but the flare was visible enough that the griffin pulled off. Stolen of any heroic recognition, I felt myself being pulled hard. Seeker was up and dragging me to a new piece of cover even as I arrived. My neck craned, trying to keep an eye around me. The griffins were circling the roof, stopping and firing when they weren't being looked at. Sticking too high and too fast to target easily, it made for an uncoordinated and incredibly scrappy fight, one that I felt utterly lost in the moment I was yanked into the cluster of vents and pipes below a weathervane.

"Murk? What in the bloody hell are you doing up here?" Seeker fumed, exhausted and angry. "Watch! Watch the back of the Mall!"

Evidently, he hadn't noticed me trying to ward off a griffin behind him as I saw him doing his utmost to make sense of the terrible position he and his workers had been caught in.

"A-A-A-AMMO!" I stammered, trying to fight with the saddlebags, "I have-"

"MOVE!" A slave screamed at us, before the weathervane was snapped in half from a heavy round tearing through it, the passing shockwave slapping me in the face like a hoof.

Desperate, I dropped and crawled, moving underneath the ventilation ducts that were held up on thin metal legs. Shots slapped into the ground near me, some sharp eyed mercenary having spotted me going under. Frantically I crawled and whined as I went as shots tore through the vent above me. Seeker and his slaves rushed to the front end of the Mall at a sprint as they leapt and climbed the obstacles under fire, trying to get away from the chattering shots chasing and worrying them across the surface before turning and returning the favour. My route was slower, staying hidden in the shadows of the vents as I sneaked across the gravelly rooftop and pushed off the saddlebags to the ponies before the griffins returned, trying to ignore the enormous blasts of flak cannons and energy blasts arcing worryingly close to the Mall.

Then I had to take a moment to wipe my eyes with terribly shaking hooves before shrieking as lightning struck a rod on a taller building across the street, the clouds reacting in strange ways to the sheer number of skyships pushing their bulk through them with enormous barrels pointed downward. Everything felt so vulnerable up here.

“Truly you are a divine intervention, little Murk.” Seeker said it without a laugh as he started tossing the magazines, clips and shell packets to his workers. “We were on our last rounds here...lost three just keeping them away with a charge...”

Something about the way he said that, a *charge*...I wondered what heroism I'd missed happening up here to keep the griffins from breaking through the massive gap in the roof of the Mall. Although right now I didn't want any part of it, I was quite keen to just turn around and get back downstairs.

“Will this do?” I asked meekly.

“For now. We've seen a big wagon full of slavers circling in the air out there, waiting for an opening to land on the roof. Too dangerous if we're here; the griffins are trying to clear us out for a full force to land.”

The griffins weren't in sight, but there were enough places they could hide below the level of the roof. Or they could head into the low cloud or behind the belching smoke from the passing of damaged Enclave ships...

Dear Goddesses, I was shaking...I'd never felt adrenaline like this up here. There were literal miles of blasts, shots and fighting going on and I was in the centre of the city involved, on a rooftop, dodging a dozen or more griffins. I could taste metal in my mouth and I felt slick with sweat. Oddly, I felt an insane pang of hunger in the middle of it, as my body fought to understand the million different things its senses were telling it.

The slaves got rearmed and repositioned to cover all sides, trying the best they could to guard each other's backs. Yet before anything occurred, we heard a griffin shriek in agony.

Behind us, up on top of the Mall's long dead and rusting generator housing, a quietly gliding griffin had come down hard on one of the fiendish spiked edges that had set out to catch them. Slaves who had no care for fighting fair or cleanly. Now the Talon was stuck, crying in pain as his back legs had been impaled on the barbs. His pain didn't last long before three slaves put him out of his misery.

The sight took a lot of the 'good' feelings out of a small victory, as the body slumped and hung upside down from the hooks. That was no way to die. The other eleven griffins seemed to agree, as they soared up from either side to avenge their brother. Filled with a need for revenge at the hanging sight of their kind, they swooped, aiming for a close in battle with talon and hoof. I could see the fury in their eyes and heard Seeker screaming for everypony to turn this way and reorient to face the charge.

The griffins never made it. Scourging green energy lanced across the roof and struck four from the air before they could even pull away to dodge. I felt the heat of passing magic

above us before six black armoured pegasi raced above our heads with a clap of passing air and tore off to chase the griffins, the lead flyer breaking through the hanging ash in the air from where one griffin had completely disintegrated. Behind me, ponies cheered and waved their hooves to the sky as the flight of Enclave troopers chased after their prey or wheeled gracefully away from the massive rounds fired at them in return.

A looming shadow was a brief warning, before I felt myself hurtled into the dirt by a passing roar of disturbed air. Something heavy passed mere feet above us, sending a blast of heavy wind across the rooftop that pulled at my wings and ears like a gale. Rolling in the gravel, I looked up to see a skyship that was trailing the flight of pegasi; its own massive beam cannons lancing out at the griffins and forcing them into utter retreat around the spires of the city. Each shot didn't even leave a corpse, but just vaporised its targets. Its angular hull was partially obscured by dark stormy cloud that shifted and danced around it as the house sized ship banked hard on its side, forming thick vapour clouds at the sharp turn, to sweep past the fleeing Talons and form up with its allies.

"They're helping us!", screamed one of Seeker's workers, a stallion with a thick green mane, as he whooped and punched the air with a hoof. "The Enclave's on our side!"

"We've held", shouted another, relief in her voice, "we've held! Look! Here they come!"

Taking a deep breath to stay my quivering body, I crawled out of my hidey hole to peer over in the direction of the pony's pointed hoof. The skyship was returning toward us, having chased off the griffins, and was now flanked by the six Enclave soldiers we had seen. I could see their strong wings furiously snapping at the air and the glint of their quad weapons on stunningly beautiful battlesaddles.

Pegasi had the best saddles. Oh yes.

They were approaching fast, arcing down toward us. I felt excitement begin to flutter in my heart, my wings instinctively shifting and attracting the attention of a few ponies beside me. M-maybe they'd seen what I was and come to help one of their own? Or just lucky? Seeker got up, moving forward as though sensing somepony had to communicate when they landed.

The stallion who had first shouted ran forward to the far edge of the building as they descended, waving in delight.

"Hey! Hey! Down here!"

His body turned to scattered dust as they opened fire.

* * *

In Fillydelphia, I had been surrounded by an arms industry. I had seen large guns test fired near to me. The infamous heavy machine guns that dwarfed most things in the wastes, the same as the one that even now tore into the Mall, were among them.

The Enclave skyship's two primary beams were on another level entirely. Firing at us; from so close; at their maximum rate, was like the death scream of a sun.

The roof of the Mall was thick; strong even. It had weathered the storms. It had survived a firefight from a riot and even hours of bombing. It had stood protecting the upper levels for two hundred years now, possibly more. It had been a constant of this building that had defined my life in here. A place I had come for various reasons even until this day.

Under the skyship's strafing run, it folded like wet paper.

Entire sections, rooms wide, erupted into the air or simply were crushed down to the next level as enormous plumes of dust and rock blasted up in two parallel lines that traversed the rooftop from end to end. Each impact seared and surged with green lightning that arced off every piece of building it catastrophically annihilated before it. Foundations buckled and I felt everything beneath us drop away, our screams completely lost in the static-laced *howling* of the cannons above. We tried to move, we tried to run. Some managed to get their hooves moving, I presumed mine moved too, as I felt a frantic panic in my muscles. I remembered nothing but seeing the skylight and willing my muscles to move.

My ability to tell up from down disappeared as the ground tumbled and twisted. My skin burned. Pain washed over me and I felt my very bones rattling. Everything went white, then black as the floor left us and then I was falling. The shaking grew to a height and passed over us as a rush of wind in the ship's wake caught my wings and sent me spiralling, plucking me from the air. I felt myself hit the ground once...then inexplicably I hit the ground a second time as I rolled down a slope of the collapsed roof. My mouth bit something out of instinct as I kept tumbling over and over, expecting any second for a huge slab of masonry to crush me, before a tug from around my torso pulled me sharply to the side. Curling up, not knowing if I was falling or being buried, I heard the sound of the building collapsing around me.

The skyship went end to end, its firepower eclipsing everything used thus far on the Mall with in its decision to attack us. By the time I later woke, half buried and stunned below a sheet of thin metal and crumbled stone, possibly only a few seconds later and alive by some miracle of the Goddesses, the skyship was gone.

And so was the entire roof of the Mall.

* * *

She reached out for my hoof because I had fallen. The panic and determination mixed in her eyes. Thick and clouded, I saw the fires around us and the beacon lights atop a vast wall behind.

We were trying to escape together.

Now, I knew her name.

Now, I knew what we had been trying for, that had taken its long journey through darkness to finally be together to finish it.

"Unity!"

* * *

The world was grey. It had once been red, yet now it was grey. My hooves didn't leave the uneven ground that formed the mountains of rubble sitting atop this great building as they shuffled and carried my pained body through the silence. It occurred to me that it wasn't actually silent, my ears had just given up. I didn't even hear a ringing, just a dull sound of the void. Something was dripping from my ear, hot liquid that ran over the side of my head to meet with the thick coating of blood from my nostrils. Maybe it was more blood. Maybe my eardrums had burst entirely.

I didn't feel *anything*. For a few strangely peaceful moments, I wondered if this was it. That I was simply awaiting to be lifted up. Just like how I had told Brimstone before his pit fights, reminding myself as much as he about death. It was a peaceful moment, followed by one of the Goddesses coming to find you and take you to the next place...a place to find and reunite with others and to tell the Sun and Moon of your life...

No...no, my mother - who had told me all this - had said the pain would fade, not grow.

The pain did grow, until I stumbled and fell, feeling my very core filled with lancing agony, as though I had been lifted and shaken until torn up inside by a giant. Each motion dragged the extended rope of my grapple hook along behind me. I still couldn't see anything up here but grey and rocks followed by the spikes of metal rebar and the feeling of hot winds.

The enormous quantities of thick dusted clouds lying across the top of the Mall began to fade and my sight returned to the ruin of our holdout. I was atop it still, having fallen to the top floor when the roof cracked and sundered below us all. That fall, that motion toward the skylight and choosing to fall instead of be struck by the weapon, was all that had saved my life. My grapple had caught me, pulling me to the side to evade the avalanche of wreckage that now filled the area below the skylight. As the heavy dust cleared, I saw that the entire top was now a dishevelled mess with some areas of the roof still at its normal height, but most now crashed

down onto what used to be the top floor's...well...floor. Like a massive ruin atop an intact structure with no rhyme or reason, I found myself in a vertical maze of shattered stone.

Dull coloured ponies staggered and limped amongst the still standing walls. They were all the same, coloured like the rock surrounding us. I sat among them and felt myself silently retch as my body tried to flush the adrenaline spike of coming within a whisker of death. The shock lay in so thick that I barely even paid attention to the sounds returning around me until I felt the hoof on my shoulder.

"Little Murk, you must move! They are coming!" Seeker's rapidly failing throat rasped at me as he shook me up. He was watching across the new landscape of the roof.

Dull thuds became sharp noises again. My ears *ached* as they were forced to do their job again and began to pick up the whizzbang of energy weapons above me and the raging barks of the Mall's assault through the floors beneath us. Haunting voices drifted from the distance, both of fear and hatred.

"En...clave?" I found my throat bone dry with dust, dry heaving after daring to try and use it.

"No! The slavers! Come on!"

He turned away, waving his hoof at the others. I could see more clearly now, amongst the ruins of the roof, beneath the sky, there were sky wagons descending. The slavers had seen the Enclave do their work for them and now they were assaulting the area that had been blasted open. Griffin-pulled transport chariots led them. There must have been a good twenty slavers...and I only say maybe a few ponies left here, including me, and only two held their weapons. Seeker dragged me to my hooves, before shaking or even slapping other disoriented ponies to get them up too.

The first shots lanced down at us before anypony could think about what to do. Heavy rounds got lost among the chaos of the rubble, but their sounds were more than enough warning. The first wagon was veering around to land at the far side before slavers leapt off and started to prowl the unstable upper levels for a way down, moving this way.

"We can't fight that...shit, we're lost," Seeker growled and raised his weapon to unleash two booming volleys of buckshot between now smashed supporting pillars. "Move! *Move!*"

More shots whined in. Seeker didn't budge, instead waving a hoof frantically at those trying to escape. The radio on his saddle blared and screamed. I heard Protégé's voice through it.

“Seeker! If you're still alive we've got ponies moving up to try and give you something to fall back to but we cannot push up to you if there's an assault! Get the hell out of there!”

The workers were doing their best. Of the five remaining around Seeker and I, three could still gallop and headed past us to start the undignified climb down to some part of the top floor that still stood and could be reached. The access tunnel had ceased to exist. The skylight was gone, now just a colossal *hole* at the centre of the area. Ponies ran to its sides and tried to lower themselves to the balconies below that were now much closer from the levelling wrath of the skyship taking perhaps ten feet of building off the top. The workers were limping, one firing behind themselves with a magically held sub-machine gun to join Seeker's covering fire. Behind us, somepony shouted that they had a way down and I heard the scramble of hooves. I rushed to join them.

“No...”

Seeker's hushed voice caught my ears. I turned to see him standing slack jawed and staring forward. Following his gaze, across the rubble, I could see a purple haired mare crawling ahead of the slavers that were approaching behind her behind a tumbled wall. The terror on her face was clear as she heard them hunt and track their way past the bodies we had left behind.

“Chief, come on!” A stallion behind us, unaware of the situation, screamed at Seeker. He was helping the last buck down before finding himself being thrown the large shotgun that Seeker carried. “Chief?!”

Seeker turned and galloped into the ruins. He weaved between the fallen slabs, as the incoming fire switched to him almost immediately. My jaw felt slack as I saw the lanky slaver run toward those he had turned against to rescue just one of his workers.

“Come on, little guy, fire! Help him!”

The booming retort of the shotgun scared me into action with *Rarity's Grace*. Between the two of us, we scared some of the lead elements of the slavers into cover. Seeker skidded around a pillar and leapt a shredded vent hanging down from a still surviving column. A shot tore his saddlebag off as he came near the mare and threw him to the ground beside her.

Yet the number of slavers was adding up. We couldn't hold them all down with only two shots in his weapon per time and my frantic failings at reloading. Combat rifles chattered and snub nosed shotguns roared to tear up the concrete around Seeker and the mare. I heard her wail as he lifted her broken body onto his back, standing up amongst a whirlwind of fire. I found myself staring, captured by the sight of a now ex-slaver doing this for one he'd been an overseer for.

“Chief! Hurry!” The stallion beside me fired two shots that both connected, its buckshot punching three slavers away from an upturned chunk of flooring.

Seeker ran. The slavers were not ten metres away as he began to rush back to us. Behind me another two ponies had climbed back up and brought pistols to bear. Together, the four of us covered for him as he staggered back to us, weaving and ducking. I could see the grim look on his face, driven by need, not by sense or logic.

Ten metres away...five metres...

At two metres the first shot slammed directly into his torso.

A heartbeat later, the same shooter put a second shot across the side of his neck.

As he fell, with the screams of his workers collecting in the air, he grimaced and threw the mare to us as he limped, staggered and fell. Two more shots whined off the ground, one of them skiffing off his hoof on the rebound and making him twitch.

“Chief! *Chief!* You motherfuckers! *You motherfuckers!* Graph, help me!”

The shotgun fired twice more, before two of the workers rushed out and dragged Seeker back into cover under growing fire, leaving a wide red trail behind him. His eyes were glazed over, staring purely at the mare the others were carrying down off the rooftop.

Fleeing ahead of slavers and now soldiers landing, the survivors of the roof made their painful way back down to the lower floors. A group was waiting for us, led by Protégé. They pulled us through their hastily erected defensive barricades. I could hear the non-fighters being driven from the open areas in the slave pens into harder cover in the old offices, now that the roof had fallen, their crying and panic an awful sound amongst the rattle of gunfire coming closer. Seeker was placed on one of the stretchers the hospital team had brought with them.

“Somepony, get him to Weathervane, now!” Protégé screamed at them, but I was already moving to take it.

“I...I can't fight anyway!”

“Then go! Go and...watch out! Firing positions!”

Behind me, from the way we'd came, a group of slavers had wandered into their sights. Even as fighting broke out, I took the stretcher's reins and cantered off as fast I could. I had to avoid areas where I heard combat, as gunfire could whip past the ends of shop outlets, punching through the old glass from outside or down the wide corridors that led to outer walls and windows.

The slaver noticed me coming right out of the stairs. I didn't know why he was there, but he was confused and wandering, likely having found another way off the roof and got separated in the madness. The look of shock on his face at seeing anypony turned to sudden realisation.

"Hey, you're the fucking pegasus! Oh, he *wants* you, c'mere!"

Shackles had told them to look for me. I screamed, fleeing with the stretcher and the unmoving Seeker in the only direction I really knew, the aid station. I hoped somepony there still had a gun or...or something! I rounded corner after corner, taking a mad route to try and lose him, but slowed down by my short legs, my body being at its limits and the stretcher, he was gaining ground on me, not firing his pistol. I could see he held something else in his magic instead though.

Chains.

"Weathervane! *Weathervane! Help!*"

Crying out, I rounded the last corner, feeling him trying to grab the stretcher with magic to stop me. With one last mad dash, I powered into the aid station and hit its smell like a wall. Strong antiseptic was lathered over an undercurrent of rot and blood. Sweat and fear permeated the entire canteen. Steam from pots over gas fires filled one corner at the end of a row of mattresses on collected tables. A few stronger ones were being used as operating tops in the middle, covered in what used to be clean sheets.

Near the entrance, his horn glowing over an unmoving and heavily bleeding stallion, Weathervane was working. I figured he was there to direct anything that came in, as his fierce eyes rose and saw me.

"On the right." He spoke firmly, then went back to his work.

"HELP! Be...behind..." I wheezed, before the slaver rushed in behind me.

"Gotcha, ya little...what?" He stopped, looking around, before realising where he was. I took the opportunity to slowly move away as I saw him grin and move forward, walking straight for Weathervane, apparently forgetting me. His pistol was drawing up just as I realised the same thing he did. No-one here had weapons.

"Oh...I see. You took your medical guards to hold us off up there. How incredibly fucking stupid of you all." The slaver cackled over his shoulder at me. Numerous nurses and patients spotted him, and began to move back rapidly. I saw Unity among them, her front hooves coated red.

"Well, I guess that's the end of you keeping them in the fight, eh? Traitor?"

The pistol rose to aim at Weathervane. I fought to get off the reins of the stretcher, trying to at least get my pistol reloaded, I could help, I could-

The old ghoul finally looked up from the stallion he was desperately trying to save.

"Can I help you?"

The slaver paused, blinking. Those weren't the words he expected.

"What?"

"Can I fucking *help* you?" Weathervane snarled.

"No...no...I...no, I don't," the slaver looked at his floating pistol, as though hoping it would tell all by pointing, "I'm...going to kill you!"

"Oh." Weathervane's milky eyes twitched to it for a second, as though having never seen it before. His voice was hard, scolding like he would a trainee nurse. "Does it have to be now?"

The slaver hesitated, mouth moving but no sounds coming out, taken completely aback.

"Come back later, I'm very busy." Weathervane ordered, immediately looked back down at the patient, ignoring the slaver entirely. His hooves held a stained bandage in place, his horn casting spells to try and staunch the flow of a gutshot, trying to encourage his stunned assistant to work with him.

Left alone, the slaver didn't seem to even know what to think. He just stood in place, looking around at others staring at him. He even looked at me as though for help. I just shrugged, feeling lost as anypony.

Shaking his mane out, he advanced closer, marching around the table.

"Look, I'm trying to fucking kill you here so if you'd-"

Weathervane's eyes shot up. I saw rage in them.

"Oh *shut the everloving fuck up*. Don't even *try* to say 'fuck' again, you curse like shit anyway. You're the kind who hurts the word's impact! Now are you going to bitch all day and get in my way or are you going to leave me in peace? In fact, you know what? Come here. Get rid of that thing!"

His magic took the pistol from the slaver's grip without a fight and placed it on the side bench beside his tools. The young slaver blanched under the verbal assault, being pulled in beside the ghoul.

"I...I...I'm supposed to ki-

"Oh, be quiet. If you're going to screw around you might as well do something useful. Put your hoof here! Pressure on the wound! Least you can do if you're going to stand around staring like an adolescent in a mare's gymnastics class! No, not fucking there, *there!* Put your weight into it! Nurse! Two packs of blood! That's it, lad, now let me at it..."

"I...o-okay..."

That, it seemed, was that.

"Well, uh...I guess we all make new friends in different ways, right?" said Unity from beside me, having trotted over in the commotion and was now watching the new nurse being directed in his duties. "Come on, let the doctors handle Seeker, let's get you cleaned up."

* * *

The aid station shook terribly, making the long lights above sway and buckle in their fixtures. The deep throaty rumble of bombing was followed by a wave of groans and fear passed through those lying prone on beds, sitting on stools or crowded on the floor. I sat at the edge of a table, drawing a few funny looks in the manner in which I settled down. Either that or from my wings splayed out. I felt like I had run a marathon and woken up the next day. My very core ached deeply and even small motions made me feel sick to my stomach. The metallic tang of blood in my throat and the rough wheezing in my lungs wasn't helping much either. All this dust in the air was drawing up the radiation that permeated Fillydelphia.

Unity returned, trotting around bandaged and stained ponies lying on mattresses or reaching out for help, before handing a quarter full packet of Radaway to me and placing down a small bowl of hot water.

"Since when were you a medical pony?"

"Since about forty minutes ago?" Unity smiled back, wiping my nose with a damp cloth to clean out the dried blood, "Don't gulp it, Weathervane says you can't take too much or you'll just bring it back up with all the adrenaline."

"Yes, Ma'am." I tried to smirk, but just winced at her light bat on my shoulder, "I...I don't think it's going well..."

Unity put a hoof to my lips, motioning with her eyes toward the terrified ponies nearby, the ones relying on others to protect them from a massacre. The hot water she was dabbing on my muzzle felt searing and yet cleansing as the blood was wiped away, “Just keep breathing, that goes for everyone in here, okay? Are...are the others?”

“All still there. Sunny got hit but...but she seems fine. What about-”

We both looked up to where Weathervane and his most surgeons were working frantically to save Seeker's life. Blood dripped from the table. He was lying very still.

“They'll do what they can. Just you focus on staying alive. It's a miracle you weren't hurt worse, we all felt it in here. I thought the whole building was coming down...everything was shaking so much.”

“I-argh!”

“Sorry! Sorry!” Her hoof retracted from what was clearly a bad bruise, not a stain, “Okay...maybe a little worse. You can rest for a while though. Whitemane was in there when I was getting your Radaway. She said they're managing to hold once Mister Peace went to stop the ones coming from above. The front of the Mall's still deadlocked though...and they tried twice at fire exits in the back. Glimmer's mines made them run away for now.”

I took a sip of water and sloshed it around my mouth before spitting it into a bucket to clear the dust from my mouth before drinking the Radaway. Not long after, the swelling in my chest began to quell, as I could finally suck in the hot air again. I hadn't even noticed how bad it had gotten. This battle would kill me without a shot being fired if I wasn't careful.

Shaking my head, I refocused on the now. I tried not to think on the whirlwind I'd just been through. Hours of tension ended in a burst of terror. Just keep breathing, Unity was right. Just keep breathing and try not to be sick. It wasn't over yet.

“Hey! Hey! Help! We need help!”

We both looked up as the voice started shouting into the aid station. A mare galloped through the doors. Behind her there was a sudden rushing of hooves and a distant echo of fresh screaming over the background of gunfire from above and below.

“They got a grenade in! They put a grenade through a window! Right at the front! They're bleeding out!”

Bloodbank responded first, letting Weathervane keep his focus on the prone Seeker.

“Just get them here as fast as possible! You, you and you, take the stretchers!” His hoof pointed to the three slavers that Unity and I had run into while fleeing the bombardment earlier on. “Who's got dressings?”

Unity looked at me, before grabbing a small pack from the next table. Sucking down the rest of the Radaway (sucking wasn't gulping, right?) I moved after her.

“Murky, you-”

“I...I'm used to being all beat up, it's just pulling stretchers.”

Clearly, Unity saw I wasn't brokering much argument, as her magic just lifted a stretcher's harness onto me while she gathered bandages up from Bloodbank and looked at the other slavers carting the other mobile beds.

“You two midgets ready? It's on the front, that place is a fucking nightmare right now.”

“Just go!” Unity cantered out the station, with the three slavers quickly following her. Groaning, I followed behind all four of them, trying to not look like I was limping too much. In truth, I just didn't like the idea of sitting idle in a medical lounge any longer...and I couldn't bear not knowing what was happening out there.

Stepping outside into the Mall's high corridors again brought the sounds so much closer. I could hear the heavy cannon at the front pumping short bursts into the structure of the building again and again, surrounded by inconsistent but endless spats of smaller gun fire. Smoke drifted near the ceiling, blown in from outside or picking up from the fires that had been started in the strafing run. Entire areas looked buckled and ready to collapse as we ran beneath the arches and pushed out way through a team carting buckets to a room in flames. Right above us, I could hear Mister Peace laughing in delight as he held the rooftop breach.

“This way!” One of the slavers veered to the right.

“But that's away from the front!” Unity hesitated, before the next one passed by her.

“If you want to run down a straight corridor facing the windows with that damn land hammer, be my guest you stupid bint! I'd rather not get turned inside out!”

“Hey!” I felt offended at *anypony* insulting her, but both of us did indeed follow. The route took us across the middle of the Mall, into the line of shops that faced the fountain courtyard in the middle. The roof had crushed and sheared some of the balcony lips entirely off the pillars that they'd been mounted on and torn down the walkways that had once carried across the width. Below, I could see the ground filled with wreckage and yet somehow, the fountain remained mostly intact, avoiding being buried.

Ahead, there was a huge canyon of a hole, wide enough to cover almost the full width of the shopping route. One of the Enclave ship's blasts had torn right through the Mall, leaving melted concrete and rebar in its wake. The mosaic flooring was twisted into a grotesque mockery of its once beautiful design.

One of the slavers, a rough and hairy brown stallion, paused and peered down it, whistling in awe, "Shit...that goes right to the ground floor, I can see the main entrance area down there."

I heard the others slowing behind Unity and I. The mare, a tall unicorn with a mane that nearly reached her knees, began tugging her stretcher off, "Damn thing pulls at my shoulders..."

"Mine too, but...shouldn't we keep going?" I gulped.

The first stallion looked back up, then around. Then he nodded.

My mouth barely had time to open before I felt a pair of hooves grab me from behind. My scream was muffled by hairy hooves and I felt myself lifted clean from the ground, my hind legs kicking uselessly.

"What are you doing?!" Unity stared in horror, before the stallion beside her pounced. Her hooves flailed, kicked and struck, but the vastly stronger slaver had her pinned beneath him within seconds. The mare rushed forward, tugging at something.

Unity's saddlebag. Why would that-

I realised. *Aurora's orb!* They were insiders! They were still working for Shackles! I struggled, trying to get my mouth free, but my captor stifled my mouth. I tried to bite, but found only a hard hoof had been used to stop me screaming.

"Get it! Get it!" The stallion was shouting at them, "If they see us we're fucking dead!"

"I've got it!"

The orb briefly appeared before me, just as the snap of the saddlebag's strap broke through the air and the mare fell away with it. Checking the glistening orb, she stuffed it back in. "Okay! Let's get the fuck upstairs to the sky-wagon and get out of here! Get those two tied up!"

Oh Goddesses, they wanted us too, they wanted to deliver us back to him! How many ponies had he told to look for me? Even now, Shackles wasn't letting me go! I was always in his sights, his plans.

My blood ran cold as I remembered what he wanted me for, and imagery of Aurora Star's memory research turned to evil was all too fresh in my mind to not fight and writhe, trying to cry for help.

"Stop struggling you little runt, before I knock you out!"

No threat could have made me stop. Nothing was as bad as going back to him. I lashed out in every way I could, wriggling and twisting till I got one hoof free and flicked it out. With a mechanical snap, the mouthpiece of my saddle whipped out and I hit the trigger with a hoof. The grapple fired directly upwards, embedding in the roof, before it pulled both the slaver and myself vertically. His head impacted on the arched ceiling with a sound like a sledgehammer on a cinder block, before we both dropped back down amongst a pile of falling tiles and plaster.

"Just shoot him in the fucking leg or something!" The stallion holding Unity screamed at the mare, who got up, a sub-machine gun held in her magic. I was still trying to untangle myself from the unconscious stallion. I threw up my hooves in a feeble protective gesture.

A glowing red stretcher slammed into the mare from the side, driving her through a still unbroken glass pane in the shop beside us. I could see Unity's horn glow red as she jabbed upwards with it, trying to hit the stallion in the face.

Pushing the heavy leg off me, coughing and groaning, I found my nose dripping blood all over again. Through the shop window, the mare was slowly getting up, bleeding somewhat worse than I was from a dozen cuts.

Twisting the mouthpiece into my teeth, I pointed *Rarity's Grace* at the stallion holding Unity, pulling the trigger before he could start using her as a shield. The polite crack of the weapon felt lost among the warfare going on just through the walls, but I saw the stallion jerk back and scream, falling off Unity to roll away.

"The orb!" Unity shouted, turning as though to rush after the mare, her horn grabbing the saddlebag in her magic and engaging in a magical tug-of-war.

We both saw the sub-machine gun pointing right at us. In a moment of horrible clarity, I saw her deliberately aim low. Aiming to maim and wound to keep alive. Beside us, the stallion was pulling a shock stick out from his bandoleers, moaning in pain at the sting of my own weapon.

"C'mere, you two!"

The stick swung. Yet before it hit, all I felt was a sudden pulling at my body. Unity had barrelled into me, pulling me with her as she flung us into the hole the Enclave blast had made.

In that precious single second as my world turned upside down, I saw her magic tug hard on the saddlebag, while also attaching my already extended grapplehook onto the edge of the hole.

The saddlebag came open at the seams. Her magic pulled the canvas and most of its contents with us...but in a sickly yellow that lit the mare's face, the orb remained where it was. The slaver had let go, concentrating all her magic on just the one item to keep it where it was.

I wanted to scream about it, but already we were dropping down the hole to escape harm. As we went, I saw the item we'd struggled through cold, blood and loss to acquire being taken.

The key to our freedom down below...

Then we were gone, as I felt gravity take hold. We fell, vertically dropping down through two floors of the Mall. I tried to get my wings out, but screamed as one of them slapped off the edge of the crowded hole. We clung to one another, as I tried again and again to slow our descent, my horrid attempts at flapping failing dismally as my muscles seized and weakly worked. I grabbed the mouthpiece, biting hard at it and catching the edge of my tongue in the mechanism. The whirr of the grapple-guns mechanisms were the only warning before our descent came to a sudden stop.

The stop was sudden enough that I choked and let go of the mouthpiece, causing us to fall again with a mutual scream. I saw the ground rushing up before Unity leaned over and bit the mouthpiece herself, arresting our fall mere feet from the cratered stone floor.

There we hung for a few seconds, upside down. Apparently, the slavers had simply fled when we fell, rather than staying to grab the hook. Behind us, I could see the barricade piled up on the main doors to the Mall not ten feet away from us, with ponies looking back in surprise at the pair of little slaves having just falling from above, clutching one another and hanging from a rope.

With a roar of incoming fire, their attentions were taken right back. I could smell smoke coming from adjoining rooms and hear the fury of battle. We'd fallen right into the frontline. Orders were being shouted and I could hear Brimstone nearby. There were screams about them getting close trying to be heard over the horrendous barks from heavy weaponry outside.

Unity locked the mouthpiece in place and let go of it, letting us down as she started frantically searching the ground, even as bullets pinged off the ceiling and raked down the entranceway to embed in the floor or benches.

"The orb...Murky, the orb!"

Pulling the grapple down from above with some degree of shaking it around, I looked down at her. I hated to say the words, but I had seen it with my own eyes.

"They have it..."

My body hurt...but seeing that look on her face hurt me more than anything yet today. Seeing her surrounded by the contents of her torn saddlebag and denied the key to our escape.

"No...*no*! That was Aurora's! That was mine! O-our freedom! Get...get the word out! We can catch them before they get out!" Unity was grabbing everything she could get, trying to hold her torn bag together before pulling herself up, tears in her eyes.

"We-"

I shrieked. A heavy round tore through the barricade and took a hoof sized chunk out of the floor near us. Pulling both of us toward one of the arches leading to old shopfronts either side of the main entrance, I got a sight of the ground level. Whoever had designed the Mall had made it thick, not full of tall glass windows but consisting of thick concrete pillars and strong stone bases that came up to the neck of a pony. In old times it might have made practical sense for such a thick base to support the building...but now it was providing slaves with good cover to try and hold off any rushes the soldiers made. I could see blasted holes from rockets and grenades that created little breaches in the defence all down it, some still stained in blood.

A desperate and bloody fight of the barely equipped against the well armed. I looked for anypony with a radio; there was no-way either of us could catch them. Outside I could see soldiers trying to advance across the slave camp, rushing from ditch to crater, from fence to low wall as they gradually made their way forward. Griffins were sniping relentlessly at the upper floors, while the occasional keening whine of a rocket pre-empted a bone quaking explosion that further tore at the defences.

We were holding. Barely.

"What the hell are you two doing here?!"

Brimstone's guttural voice boomed and I felt the floor shake as he galloped out of one of the rear archways into the shopping mall. He didn't stop moving, rushing up beside us to act as living cover from the shots pinging over the barricades or punching right through the stone itself.

"We fell! Brim, they got the orb! Slavers on the inside were working for Shackles! They're trying to escape from the roof!"

"Where?!"

I pointed upwards, "T-two floors!"

Brim looked up and saw the hole, before barking for a radio so loudly that I saw several ponies around us flinch or recoil from him. Whitemane, the 'turncoat' soldier, crawled up, staying low.

"Tell the boy to stop anypony getting to the roof, and I mean *anypony*. Get that, aye? We've got rats in the building."

Whitemane nodded, rolling away behind a counter that had been shredded at the level it was still visible and started trying to reach Protégé. A small surge of pride went through me at how seriously they were taking me without even questioning.

The old warlord looked back at us, pulling us both (quite effortlessly) inside the shop, "This can't go on much longer. As soon as we have them pinned down again, you two are getting the hell out of here, you shouldn't be down here. If they get close, you'll get caught up in it all and you two aren't built for a melee."

"We know..." Unity sounded despondent, a feeling I could quite relate to right now. She kept looking back, as though wishing she could run after the orb. Its safety was in Protégé's hooves now.

"Mmm...just stay here. Falling into this..." Brimstone muttered to himself, clearly angry that we'd ended up on the absolute frontline. I knew it wasn't at us, just the situation, but it didn't make him any less intimidating. "Keep your head down. That fucking heavy passes across here every so often and-"

'The heavy', the huge machine gun from earlier, decided it didn't want to have its presence simply told. With a crunch, a chunk of the protective stone wall disintegrated about twenty feet to our left and a red fiery projectile shot through to embed in the rear wall. Then another, and another before the first thudding sound of the weapon firing finally reached us.

"Keep back!" Brimstone picked us both up, before half hustling and half throwing us toward where Whitemane was fighting with the radio, repeatedly shouting Protégé's name.

Distantly, I heard a whistling, barely audible over the carnage and the war above. A descending sound, whirring and high pitched. I'd heard that before...was it on the mountain? Wait, wait!

"Brim! BRIM!" I screamed, hopping up on the counter, "I hear mor-"

The first shell hit ten feet in front of the Mall. Somepony grabbed me from behind and I was pulled down right as the mud and shrapnel plastered the front of the shop's broken

windows. Earth and metal splattered or pinged around inside. Somepony screamed in horror, a wail that could only have come from pain. Another whistle, then another picked up. Two more impacts just outside the windows launched chunks of stone that crushed and pulverised anything they landed upon, whipping through the manes of ponies lying flat on the floor to keep away from it all.

"Fire between hits! Fire between them or they'll move up under the cover!" Brimstone bellowed to those around us, pulling at everypony who was lying down. Some fearfully blind fired above the lip or around window frames, others just screamed at his touch, pulling away shouting incomprehensible things at 'the raider.'

The heavy machine gun tore a new opening with a concentrated burst that brought down two more slaves in squealing heaps. A blizzard of shrapnel, bullets and concussive waves roared across the Mall. The ponies at the barricade to the main entrance of the Mall could do nothing but hide and hope, as the entranceway became a firestorm that blocked any movement.

Three whistles, three more shells...yet I didn't hear the explosions. I felt my ears had gone deaf again, hearing only three dull *whumps* instead of the barking detonations. Only when my eyes saw what had happened instead did I realise.

"Smoke! SMOKE! Get up, everypony! Get up now, or you're dead!" Whitmane rushed out from behind us, hurriedly attaching a bayonet to the end of her bulky combat rifle.

Where once I could see the slave camp outside and the far buildings beyond, I now only saw a filthy grey veil like a polluted version of the snowstorms on the mountain. It clawed and wound its way inside, heavy and hanging in the air. Already, I began to choke as its thick fumes hit my throat, hearing dozens of others doing the same. The slavers and soldiers that had been advancing through the slave camp, held back by our haphazard efforts, now disappeared behind it, invisible to our eyes. I was no battlefield expert...but the realisation of how bad this was began to creep up on me. We couldn't see them to shoot them, so we couldn't hold them back.

You get inside, you win.

Brim's assertion on how assaults went was too clear in my mind. I wanted to flee, but the barrage of fire was still piling down the entranceway, even through the smoke. My breathing sped up, growing shallow. They were coming.

Brimstone turned to everypony, half hidden in the smoke, "IF YOU CAN'T FIGHT CLOSE, GET BACK! *GET BACK NOW! GET-*"

Through the smoke, I saw a black shape. Then another...and another...then three more. The shapes of bulky and armoured ponies charging through the mist.

In the distance, I heard an order shouted, before they as one let out a raspy battlecry that warped through their gas masks into a horrifying belch of musty ferocity. As one line, Shackles' forces poured through the windows and into our threadbare defence.

Whitemane speared forward, thrusting her bayonet through the window and crashing into an approaching black figure, hurling him back with brute strength, before firing on two others to bring them crashing to the ground. Around me, some slavers got their weapons up and dropped half a dozen soldiers into rolling heaps as they came through, but there were always others behind. Fully automatic weapons roared, ten times inside here, while glinting bayonets gleamed and stabbed forward to send slaves fleeing from the front. For every one that stood, another two fled at the sight. At the gallop, they leapt through the windows and landed atop ponies.

Unity and I tried to avoid it, but stinging eyes and flares of weapons on all sides killed any sense of direction stone dead. We got around the counter, hoof in hoof, trying to find somewhere to hide or get away to. Soldiers rushed past us, so close that one knocked me clean over in the confusion. A soldier and slave rolled on the ground, leading us to jump over them and trip on their weapon slings. Behind me, I saw a group of slavers charging forward, about ready to trample us. They emerged from the smoke like demons, glowing torches on their helmets casting hazy beams through the coiling smoke.

Brimstone crashed into them like a red fury. His own warcry drowned their own as he piled into the soldiers and crushed three of them against an outer wall pillar so hard that it cracked under the impact. Swinging his body around, his hooves lashed out in a savage buck that crushed helmet and skull alike.

"GET BACK!" He was screaming at us, "GET! BACK!"

Beside him, two slavers charged into the shop through the windows and executed a wounded slave on the ground with a brutal shot to the back of the head, before one of them was pitched upwards and over by a shotgun blast. Two slaves rushed in and beat the remaining one to death with empty ammo boxes. Brimstone bucked a soldier across the room to land atop a brawling mass of slavers and slaves. A shock stick stabbed him from the side, its wielder already dead from another soldier shooting his ally by accident by the time Brim turned.

This was chaos. Condensed, lethal, chaos. Terror gripped my heart so tightly that I was afraid I hurt Unity when I pulled both of us harshly to flee through it. My eyes stung so much I had to pull down my goggles just to keep them open. Behind me, Unity was squinting hard, eyes watering just as much as mine. A soldier appeared in front of us and we both tackled his knees before he could do anything. A hoof lashed out and caught me on the side before we scrambled up and over the foe to keep running. There was no pain. my body was simply too wired with fear and adrenaline to feel it.

But where were we even going? We could have been going in circles as we passed around an old clothing rack and almost skidded across a thick puddle of blood below us. I couldn't see anything right. More than once, we found ourselves at the windows, having to duck below the merciless short range fire. Wounded ponies from both sides lay on the floor in piles, screaming for help or for mercy from those still standing who killed and killed.

"MURK!"

Brimstone's voice cut through the melee. Turning, I saw him in the midst of it, valiantly trying to hold an entire window front alone. He was wounded, possessing several cuts and burns across his thick limbs and shoulders; but those huge hooves crushed and rended anything that came within reaching distance of him.

"RUN FOR THE ENTRANCEWAY! GET OUT!"

I couldn't see it! *I couldn't see it!* All around us, slaves and turncoat slavers were fleeing before a second wave of soldiers becoming clear through the slowly fading smoke.

"The front of the Mall is falling! Flee! *Flee!*" Somepony shouted, before running for the staff rooms at the back of the shop. Others all crowded in another direction, carrying us along with them. We passed Brimstone, who bodily hurled an entire counter across the shop at a group of soldiers with a strangled cry, before recoiling as rifle fire slammed into his side from outside. Staggering, he snarled and lashed out at the invaders so hard that I saw a soldier's gas mask visor shatter from the impact. Even before they could realise he was coming at them, he landed among the group and broke limbs, skulls and ribs with thunderous attacks. He spun, throwing one slaver into another, before falling upon them both and slamming their heads into the concrete again and again and again until a sickening crack was heard.

"MURK! GO!"

Soldiers swarmed in behind us as the ponies who had once defended the front fled into the entrance tunnel. The heavy machine gun opened up, and I felt ponies crowded either side of me cut down. Unity and I grabbed one between us, a mare minus one leg, and pulled her toward the back, trying to ignore her pleas to find it.

"Protégé! *Protégé!*" Whitestone was screaming into the radio, "The front's falling! *I repeat, the front is falling!*"

There was no reply. I could hear the victorious cry from behind us as Brimstone skidded out of the shop and retreated after us, grimacing as he saw the cluster of beaten defenders all fighting to get through the same door. I felt crushed on every side and instead tried to pull Unity and the wounded mare behind an old roadblock; we'd never get out this way!

Brimstone dropped down beside me, along with a small group who started putting shots back down the entranceway. On the far barricade, I could see its staunch defenders lying motionless as soldiers began to clamber over it and approach us from a whole new direction. A short range firefight broke out, as us few tried to hold them off long enough for the majority to retreat inside. Unity took a pistol from the mare and fired blindly above the roadblock, as I got off my shots with *Rarity's Grace*. Whitemane tossed a combat rifle to Brimstone, who caught it and put fire down as well. Most of his shots hit the roof...as they always did with him, but it was everything we could do. Unicorns leading the soldiers lit magical shields to try and let them push down the corridor without any cover. Our shots sparked off them without any effect.

"Murk...when I tell you, both you and Unity run for it." Brimstone spoke quietly as he clumsily reloaded the rifle.

The radio was silent. Protégé wasn't responding. We didn't even know if help was coming.

"Protégé! We need-"

Whitemane was cut short, as the back of her head exploded and her namesake turned red. I screamed as she fell, leaving Brimstone, Unity, myself and a couple other slaves who were now pinned down after the mass had fled inside. I stared at her lifeless body with wide eyes and just shook. She was a soldier. A trained soldier, experienced and sharp and then just...pop, a stain of matter on the floor.

In her place, within my mind, I couldn't help but project any number of more familiar faces than a mare I didn't really know. We were so stuck...what if it were somepony closer to me? Please, somepony lift us from this hell! I didn't want to be in this city any more! None of us! It was just too much!

"Murk...when I tell you, run." Brimstone spoke lowly, "Don't look back...just keep running."

A very hollow feeling began to fill my gut as I saw him drop the rifle and limber up, ready to charge out from behind the roadblock toward the advancing ranks of soldiers. Formed up behind their close quarters shields and magic, they advanced while pouring fire toward out disintegrating cover.

"Brim-"

"Don't say it. Just-"

He stopped talking, as we both felt it. Like the building was tightening up. A build of pressure in the atmosphere. I felt my ears want to pop as it grew and grew. Soldiers began to

look around nervously. The air itself quivered...before I heard a female voice scream in utmost rage and determination.

The wall to the right of the entranceway exploded into the corridor as though a wagon-full of TNT had gone off behind it, a concussive blast of magic ripped through it, hurling a ten foot length of wall into the attacking force and burying it beneath the magical devastation. Through the flying fragments, I saw Coral Eve, horn blazing mightily...surrounded by Protégé, Glimmer, Sunny and a force of slaves charging behind her, leaping over the remaining wall with weapons pointed and blazing hard.

Brimstone shoved Unity and I back behind the roadblock, before leaping up and galloping toward the soldiers, cursing them and screaming as he dove into them. Gunfire from the others rippled through the stunned force, puncturing armour and shattering magical shields from the close range. Heavy rifles pointed right into torsos before unleashing large rounds right through them. A slave with an automatic pistol sprayed into a pile of fallen soldiers on the floor, mercilessly bawling all his pent up hatred out. All the rest unloaded, dumping everything they had into Shackles' forces.

Their momentum stolen, caught in the open, those still able began to fall back before being cut down. They fled to the barricade, climbing it or running back into the shop to try and get out via the windows.

"Lil'bro! Get to me!"

Unity and I galloped toward Glimmer, who was reloading behind one of the few still standing parts of the wall. We all ducked as Coral Eve aided the soldiers in escaping over the barricade and blew the smell of gunpowder and smoke across the interior of the Mall, as I felt my sister grab hold of me tightly, before reaching back and actually slapping me across the face.

"You...you stupid little idiot! What were you doing down here?! You could've been..."

She just clutched tightly, her magic yanking Unity into the same embrace.

"I won't have another Creaky Hollow...I *won't* be the last one standing again, Murky. I've lost too many friends. I won't lose you. Any of you."

The three of us remained there, as behind us, the first attack on the Mall was ended. With Mister Peace and Protégé's group having fought off the attack on the roof, they had rallied to the ground floor as one whole. The soldiers, well trained, had attempted to counter attack, but with a defiant cry, Mister Peace had rolled past us to the front. His weaponry put a definite end to the assault. The outcome being a mess of ash piles, torn flesh and one very delighted robot.

Filled with renewed courage, those that had fled returned to their positions, flowing past us; rearmed and bolstered by the sight of fleeing soldiers. I heard Protégé crying out to hold fire, before Peace repeated it for him, only much louder and with a much greater sense of disappointment.

Slowly, we filtered after the others to view the remains.

The front shop was nought but a carnal house. Ponies were searching it, occasionally howling with loss as they discovered someone they knew or just standing in shock. Bodies lay thick on the floor, some buried beneath others from the brutal close quarters assault that had taken place in here. Protégé trotted amongst it, a grim look on his face as he witnessed the cost of repelling this assault.

Brimstone stood at the window, watching the remains of the soldiers heading out. There were departing shots, but hasty and without aiming as they sought to prevent any of us charging after them...clearly not realising how little chance we had to do that now.

"Force that size...they won't be back. Not unless Shackles can magic up another small army from Stern's forces...and I doubt that right now." He glanced upwards to the sky.

Hopping up beside Brim, I cast my eyes out, feeling shocked at the sight of the skies on fire. Burning ships crossed with enormous smoke plumes from below. Things had been so intimate down here...the thought that this same action was happening in a hundred places across and above the city as well felt inconceivable. I just couldn't imagine it all; my mind couldn't picture it.

"You know, kid?" Brimstone muttered to me as we stood there.

"H-huh?"

"They also say a great general leads from the front."

He wryly grinned at me, before giving me a slap on the back and trotting away, ponies making clear way for the big raider.

"Slaves...you can hear me, can't you?"

The sounds of grief, elation and relief came to a halt.

Every pony in these walls knew the voice. I fell down behind the window, cowering away from it almost as instinct.

The voice came from outside, projected through speakers or through magical amplification. Deep, brimming with malice and sounding like it was worming its way to my ears in particular. I...I knew the truth, I could just hear better...but it didn't feel any less wretched.

“You're probably feeling warm and safe about now...aren't you? Thinking you have won...”

Protégé crept to the window, glancing out. Other slaves followed. They didn't speak...they only listened. Cautiously, I peered out myself and found my eyes attracted to the glowing yellow of what seemed to be a shield spell atop the far building. My knees felt weak as I saw him standing amongst it, grinning with rotten teeth toward us, eyes glinting in the see-through magic keeping him safe from an opportunistic sniper.

“Some of you will know what I mean when I tell you...you are wrong. You have lost so much. So many friends...family...in your childish spat against the city that owns you. Against your masters. Yet you have lost more than that...”

His hoof raised up, as I saw what he held within it...the orb.

“...you have lost your hope.”

My friends must have felt the same thing I did. That crushing emptiness inside as he possessed the thing we had given so much to attain. All that distance, all the blood, tears and sacrifice...

“You thought too highly, you trusted too easily and let my allies slip among you. It has ever been your folly, upstart; to be such a naïve little colt. So, upstart...are you going to let them live by coming out this time? All those slaves looking to you to save them, so very precious. Will you obey me now, to walk from your hole and return to your master to save all their lives?”

I looked at Protégé beside me. I could see that same look on his face. We had been here before...the responsibility weighed heavy. Last time it had cost Old Grizzly his life.

Shackles' grin widened, **“Ooh...you feel it, I know. You feel that same sense I do. Like they matter to you, their lives *belong* to you...you wanted choices? There's one right here.”**

“It's a bluff,” Sunny scoffed, keeping her weapon aimed, “we just kicked the ass of his little army he raised. He's got nothing but a small bodyguard now.”

“Never count Shackles out, Sunny...” Protégé whispered quietly, the strain showing in his eyes.

Across the slave camp, past the corpses and wreckage of war, Shackles remained on that building, before putting the orb away and laughing. He trotted to one side, along the building as though watching us. That shield moved with him...was it still that one he had found on the mountain? The talisman Aurora made?

“Heh. Loyalty...not coming out, eh? Well, you may think you've won, but really...you would have been better to let your masters take you back. Now, you've forced my decision. Now, upstart, slaves, Number Seven...you will suffer. You all know well enough by now that I don't make threats. You will beg for us to come and claim you again instead of *them*...”

He turned away, motioning to somepony else, before turning his gaze to m...to us.

“You think that you have won? You believe yourself through the nightmare? Then I leave you in their hooves, slaves. The disobedient are always punished in the end. This is your punishment.”

From behind him, I heard the thick stomping of something heavy. I heard the sound of insane laughter. The machine noises of hydraulics and the scraping of metal blades upon stone.

From behind Shackles, as he departed, came the two figures. Multicoloured and shivering...horned and moving with robotic twitching...Wildcard and Big Brutus moved to the fore.

“Hi, hiiii, everypooooony!” Wildcard screeched to the gap between them and the Mall, “You beat the softies trying to be nice to you...you get *us*...”

Us?!

“Raiders of the wastes! Raiders of the Pit! Raiders of the crater! Of every corner of Fillydelphia who needed a new Clan! Come on out, all of you! This is a surprise *party*!” Wildcard yelled, spinning, waving a hoof in the air. Then I saw motion. Movement every side of us. From every rooftop, every hole and doorway, there came ponies.

Not just ponies. Raiders.

Not just raiders...

Bloodletters.

I had seen this before, in Glimmer's memories...

Tribal, barbaric...they were as different from one another as they were from us. Some enormous and muscular, others skeletal and sneering. Some bore painted hides and foamed at the mouth as they shivered on drug induced madness while others looked like hunters of the wild, leading pack dogs that snarled and snapped. Behind them, I heard the crump of launchers, before four stars shone in the sky, blood-red flares that cast an evil hue across the Mall.

“You wanted to live, yet not you have chosen death!” Brutus' voice echoed off buildings and made slaves whine and fall back from the windows. **“You don't face soldiers...you face Brutus, the new Warlord of the Bloodletters, greatest Clan in all the wastes! The old one, the beaten warlord, he brought you here and he set you to fight for him again, a mockery of his own past. *Now face true fury!*”**

The mechanical minotaur threw both his cybernetic arms to the sky, before yanking them down, pushing his chest out and throwing his head back, howling to the heavens above in a deep bass roar, to all that fought in the sky. Enormous magical weaponry cracked like lightning around the rooftops, lighting him in all colours from all sides, as every raider swung their heads back and joined his chorus. The hounds howled, adding a high pitch to the sound that spread and surrounded the Mall.

Alone, crowded in the Mall, clutching the remnants of what we had...we looked upon them, like any small village had in the past.

And we despaired.

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