

## Chapter 2: The Library

*"We are standing upon the shoulders of giants."*

Legends have a power all their own. Whether true or not, they hold a magic which is hard to recreate. In the darkest times they give us hope. In the happiest times they remind us what we are thankful for. They give us an example to live up to, and a warning of how far we can fall. They can give us solace in our time of need and be a beacon towards a better tomorrow.

Ultimately, though, legends are just stories. Without some pony to act upon their message they will never accomplish anything. They may paint a normal pony as a grand and powerful figure, but if none other ever follows in their hoofsteps then what's the point? Legends have a magic all their own, but it's ponies who have to make that magic real.

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Rain fell upon the broken asphalt of an ancient road, pooling where the road had buckled and collapsed. Rivulets of water flowed across the dark purple glow of my shield, forming a small wave which was pushed before me with each hooffall. Beside me the tiny form of Silent Requiem cowered slightly near my legs, the distant sound of thunder completely obscuring the soft sound of her hooves passing over the damp ground. The rain had been falling for the last several hours, the sky having turned completely black until only the pale glow of my shield gave any light to the surroundings.

Lightning flashed across the sky, casting long shadows and sudden brilliance before darkness overtook us again. In that brief moment of illumination I could see a large structure, slumping slightly to one side. Once it had been fully four stories tall but now it seemed only the bottom two survived. Blackened wood and shattered stone sat amongst reflective glass shards at the top of the building, burned and twisted from years of exposure to the elements. Below I could see where there had once been great metal letters mounted into the side of its grey stone construction, worn so badly by age I could barely make out the name. My PipBuck chirped and provided the missing information for me, "Blueblood Central Library".

For a moment I peered off into the distance down the broken road, barely able to see five feet through the thick sheets of rain. My horn was aching slightly as I looked up towards the library again, hours of maintaining my shield through the rain beginning to wear upon me. Thankfully the rain was just rain, maintaining it for that long under actual threatening combat situations would probably have been impossible. The darkness before us and the length of the rain made it clear to me, we needed a place to stay for at least a short time and this place seemed to be the most convenient.

Parts of me were nervous as I stepped forwards, reminding me of all the potential problems in some ancient building like this. If it were safe, surely some other ponies would be staying here, wouldn't they? On the other hoof, the building looked mostly intact in its lower levels. The stone and glass construction of the lower floors seemed to have survived the centuries since the war with little difficulty, weathered but unbroken for their age. I stepped forwards and gently pushed the doors open, creating a horrific squealing sound from long-rusted hinges. Silent entered the building before I could, creeping low to the ground and remarkably quickly. For all I hated the rain, she seemed far more uncomfortable out in the open. I followed her inside with trepidation.

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As I stepped into the ancient building the scent of ash and smoke filled my awareness. Long ago this place must have burned badly, the charred remains of bookcases filling the large central room of the library. From the ceiling a tiny handful of still-functional lights hung, casting pale white illumination across the long abandoned racks of burned books. I could see Requiem already curiously nosing her way through the burned books, most of which seemed to disintegrate the moment she touched them.

The foyer of the library was filled with the twisted, skeletal metal remains of chairs and couches around a blackened wooden table. Once there had been space here for ponies to gather and read beneath the lights of the library, to partake in the knowledge of the past and the stories freely shared here. Now, all that remained were a horrible mockery of that one-time enjoyment, burned and lost to time.

Across the room I could see the broken remains of a checkout counter, three terminals sitting silently upon it their outer casings charred black and screens partially melted. Behind the counter I could see a large poster, half burned, which depicted the strangely familiar form of a purple unicorn with slightly greying purple and magenta mane, an owl perched upon her back. Something about her image was distantly, horribly, familiar and a feeling of dread and shame crept over me as I realized I couldn't remember why. 'Reading. It's a hoot!' was written along the top and bottom of the poster, the charring around the edges making it difficult to read. It seemed a small miracle that the poster had survived the fire at all, and briefly made me wonder whether whomever had created it had woven some kind of protective magic into its creation.

Slowly I followed Requiem deeper into the library, walking between the great book cases with gentle care. The aisles were built for ponies much smaller than me, the space small enough my wings wouldn't even get half way to being spread before touching the shelves on both sides. The bookcases themselves were a massive affair, easily half-again taller than I was, stretching from floor to ceiling. Dozens of them filling the main room of the library, many of their shelves having collapsed long ago and spilled their burned books into haphazard piles upon the charred carpeting.

More horrifically, I could see places where charred skeletons lay leaning against those darkened book cases, burned to death when the library had caught fire with nowhere to run to. I could see corpses piled up near the windows, as though the ponies trapped within the building had sought to break them down and flee, yet the glass remained unbroken. It seemed some small miracle that anything here had survived at all. Whomever had built this place had built it to last, perhaps too well for those unfortunate enough to be trapped inside.

In the distance, near the back of the main room of the library, I could see the signs of a staircase rising towards the second floor. Near it was a door which seemed to have been jammed open by age and decay, the slight green flicker of a functional terminal illuminating the distant room. Requiem had stopped in her explorations, sitting near the edge of one of the book cases with ears raised as though listening to something. That should have been my first warning, but in my curiosity about the green light from that room I barely registered that she'd stopped moving, blundering out into the open area between two rows of bookcases.

Several things happened almost simultaneously, throwing the entire library into chaos. The sound of gunfire filled the air as bullets tore into the remaining shelves, hurling burned books, ash and torn pages into the air. My E.F.S. filled with nearly a half-dozen red dots where there had been nothing moments before. Dark purple light filled the surroundings as I cast my shield even without thinking about what had happened. Bright Lines of fire traced through the air where bullets passed close enough to me that had I kept moving I would surely have been hit. The library's security system had activated, and suddenly the seemingly peaceful and sedate surroundings were a sea of dangers. Turning about to retreat closer to where Requiem had been, I could see that several more red marks were waiting near the entrance of the library. Even retreat would be dangerous now.

Levitating the combat shotgun I had recovered from the remains of one of the raiders who had attacked Requiem's home I slowly stepped around the corner again. Instantly the security turret swiveled around and began to fill the air with bullets once again. It was fortunate that the targeting spell of my PipBuck slipped into a state of suspended time when activated or I would never have reacted fast enough. I returned fire with the large scatter gun shots, even as inaccurate as I was it was difficult to miss a stationary target with a shotgun.

**\*BLAM!\*BLAM!\*BLAM!\*BLAM!\***

The roar of the combat shotgun cut above even the ongoing cacophony of automatic weapon fire. Peppering the turret with a shower of tiny pellets, cutting into its gears and loading mechanism. A moment later the turret exploded in a shower of sparks and scrap metal, tearing itself apart as it suffered internal breakdowns. The last guttering shots dug into the flooring near me, all save one which punched through my shield and grazed across one of my forelegs. Shooting pain ran along my body for a brief moment, my PipBuck's medical spells thankfully confirming it was only a minor injury.

For a moment I believed myself safe, protected by the book cases blocking the line of detection on the turrets. That is, until the sound of bullets tearing into flooring filled my ears from behind. A searing pain suddenly slammed into my perception as one of those bullets tore its way through one of my rear legs, passing dangerously close to the bone. All at once I lost my balance and collapsed to one side, the voices in my head a chorus of pain and fear, urging me to find cover or teleport away or do something, anything, other than lay out in the open like that! I swiveled my head around, my shield thankfully remaining intact despite the pain, focusing carefully upon the weapon wrapped in my magic I began to fire as quickly as I could even as my vision was tinted dark around the edges.

A half a dozen shotgun rounds filled the air with slugs, the gun beginning to seize up by the final shot. The turret returned fire, with thankfully typical poor aim, three shots grazing across my flank and a fourth punching through the wing I had spread by reflex in an effort to balance myself. The darkness around the edges of my vision was getting worse as it blurred, but the turret sparked and detonated much the same way its companion had. Quickly I activated the inventory management spell of my PipBuck, pulling three of the last four healing potions from within and downing them without a second thought, hoping they would work faster than I would finish bleeding out.

My vision was filled with blurry shapes and nonsensical colors as I returned to consciousness less than a minute later. Struggling to get my legs back under me, the audible crunching-pop created when one of my hooves smashed through a charred skeleton brought my mind fully back into focus. The searing ocean of pain which had been my back leg had diminished greatly, now more of a dull throbbing ache as the healing potions did their best with the wound. For a moment I scrambled around to figure out where I had

dropped the combat shotgun, finding it amongst a half dozen shredded books a few feet away from me, a bullet having punctured the loading drum of the gun. I grabbed it anyway, in the hope I could find a replacement sometime later, then began to check my surroundings once again.

With the feeling of a lead weight settling into my stomach I realized I couldn't see Requiem anywhere. I couldn't place just when I'd lost track of her, after all she'd been right there by the bookcase when I stepped out into the corridor! Looking around in panic it was several seconds before I spotted the friendly blip on my EFS. Only four hostile targets remained, but a quick check of my inventory showed I'd run out of shotgun shells and my combat shotgun was no longer functional. I tracked the friendly marker and slowly slipped between the massive bookcases, hoping to get a clear sight of what was going on.

Leaning my head around one of the shelving units I could finally see her. Requiem had climbed up on top of two of the broken book cases, and was creeping quietly along their central ridge towards one of the four remaining turrets. Tiny bits of dust and crumbling pieces of burned wood were dislodged by each hoof fall as she made her way closer to that turret. All at once she crouched and leaped across the gap, grabbing hold of the turret with her forelegs. The way she hung from it a few moments as it began to swivel around in confusion would have been adorably humorous if it weren't for the dangerous nature of what she'd just grabbed hold of. I could see her grasp the wiring running between the main body of the gun and its targeting camera in her mouth, ripping them out in a single violent tug.

Deprived of targeting data, the turret began to turn violently, opening fire in random directions as its simple combat matrix was left with no way of telling where enemies were. Bullets sprayed through the library, sheering off book cases which began to crumble under the continued assault. The spray hit two of the other turrets, sending sparks and whining filling the air as they attempted to track back the source of the fire. For a moment I was terrified they might open fire while Silent Requiem was still grasping tightly to the rapidly moving weapon emplacement. Those fears were unfounded, however, as Requiem was tossed violently from the turret by its continued uncontrollable movement, hitting the nearby window and bouncing off it she collapsed to the ground. Meanwhile, the two other turrets which had received fire sputtered and sparked, exploding like the two I had destroyed less than a minute before. The fourth remaining turret turned in its place, opening fire upon the damaged turret as it registered a new threat, reducing it to scrap metal in moments, before tracking downwards towards where the unmoving Requiem lay.

My mind exploded in horror as the chorus of errant thoughts unified into a single driving force, the glow of my shield erupting into the space around me as distance and time twisted and folded back on themselves. My vision filled with white and imploded, bursting back to full existence just as the turret opened fire upon Requiem's collapsed form. Bullets impacted my shield, ricocheting off in random directions to embed themselves into the floor and ceiling alike. With no weapons left and my anger beyond the limit I wrapped my magic around a nearby table, charred black by the fire, and hurled it with all my might at the stationary emplacement. The glow of my magic faded a moment after it was airborne, impacting with the full mass of its construction, enough to tear the turret cleanly from its mountings, leaving behind just a set of sparking wires where once had been a lethal weapon.

The immediate danger past, my thoughts turned from anger and vengeance to terror and concern. Gaze tracking downwards towards the unconscious Requiem, the friendly marker on my EFS was still in place giving at least that hope that she was still alive for the moment. I pulled the last remaining healing potion from my saddle bag and carefully nudged her over onto her side enough to allow me to pour it down into her mouth and throat.

Thankfully she was still alive enough to swallow by reflex, giving me more hope of her recovery. Carefully I pulled a small length of medical bandages out, wrapping them around where I had seen her impact the glass. I had to hope her internal injuries weren't too much for the healing potion to handle. Slowly my pulse was beginning to calm itself as she began to react to the magical solution, showing signs of stirring in her injured slumber. All thoughts of my own pain had been banished from my mind as I carefully levitated her from the floor, laying her across my back, and retreated into the office at the back of the library. At least we would be safe there for a few moments.

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The office was a small, almost cramped, affair. Consisting of a work desk with a glowing terminal sitting atop it. Beside the terminal was a spotlessly white coffee mug, along with half a dozen pencils. For some reason I could only pause to wonder what kind of pony needed a terminal *and* half a dozen pencils on a day to day basis. Thankfully the room had been saved from the worst of the fire by its heavy metal door, though the ravages of age had still damaged much in the area. A small cushioned mat, probably once used to relax on during the owner's lunch hour, sat in one corner where I carefully deposited Requiem to allow her time to recover from her injuries.

Left with time to tend my own wounds, finally, I pulled out more of the bandages and slowly wrapped them around my rear leg. The potions had done their job well enough and most of the worst internal damage was already healed, but the exterior harm was still significant. The both of us needed time to rest, let our bodies recover, even if it was only a few minutes.

I shoved the chair away from the desk and moved to sit in front of it. The pony who had owned it must not have been very tall, as the chair had been adjusted quite high, while I seemed to tower over the desk in a way which felt unnatural. Something about the way the whole world seemed to have been built too small bothered me in the back of my mind, a constant reminder that I wasn't what was supposed to be here. Doing my best to put that feeling out of my mind I turned my attention to the terminal, activating its user interface.

My scattered memories guided me far enough to connect my PipBuck and open the terminal's security override functionality, allowing me a chance to guess at its password. Unfortunately that was as far as those memories were willing to guide me and even doing that left me with a splitting headache and nauseous feeling. Like trying to figure out how to answer a question by reading the stripes left at the bottom of a bucket of liquid rainbow. The security on the terminal was fortunately quite light, easy enough that even my lack-of-skill was sufficient to approach it at least. Even then it took me nearly half a dozen tries, backing out and reactivating the terminal twice before I finally found the right solution. The password was 'Read'. It was not my proudest moment.

The terminal had several interesting notes on it. Most importantly, the controls to the automated turrets Silent Requiem and I had just finished destroying. Which according to the information on the terminal were no longer receiving targeting data, implying they had all been destroyed. Some part of me raged at the fact that we'd risked so much to destroy them only to NOW find the easy way to disable them, while another part reminded me that it shouldn't be surprising they would put the controls behind the turrets it controlled. I did my best to ignore both of those feelings and move on to the other things on the terminal.

Attempting to access the terminal's data system returned largely corrupted information, all save for two messages. One dated just over two hundred years ago, the other barely two months ago. A combination of curiosity and boredom lead me to open the older file first. I didn't expect to find anything useful, but it was something to pass the time.

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**From:** Chief Librarian Silent Night

**To:** All Central Library Staff

**Subject:** New Book Shipment

*Today I received notice from the Ministry of Image that a new shipment of revised books will be arriving in the next week. Unfortunately, recent developments have made precise shipping schedules difficult to pinpoint. So, I will need somepony waiting in the loading dock at all times until we make the book exchange. The books they have requested we turn in have already been sequestered in storage in the basement, room 7D. Just show the Ministry workers where they are and officiate the paperwork and we'll be well on our way to having the replacements on the shelves as swiftly as possible. I know many of you dislike the idea of turning over some of the books on this list, but I have been guaranteed that we will be getting proper replacements for each of them. Please show full cooperation, I don't want to see anypony losing their jobs over some misguided beliefs about the Ministry's motives.*

*There's a spare key to book storage in my desk, if anypony has lost theirs ask me and I will provide a new one. Lack of ability to open the storage room will not be an acceptable reason for delaying the replacements this time. Please don't repeat the problems we had last time.*

*PS - Tuesday is Bring Your Foal to Work Day, please don't forget this time. I do NOT want a repeat of last year's fiasco.*

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I wondered briefly whether or not the chief librarian was one of the skeletons out there in the main rooms of the library, or whether they had been at home when whatever catastrophe struck this place occurred. Both possibilities filled my heart with dread and made me feel slightly sick. Somehow, the direct connection to a once-living pony made the disaster here all the more terrifying.

As I finished reviewing the message, my PipBuck chirped as a message appeared on my EFS, claiming it had recovered some kind of data list attached to the message. A quick glance revealed that this was a listing of the books which had been stored for Ministry of Image pickup. I wondered briefly what the Ministry of Image was and why they would care about a collection of books which included such distinguished titles as *The Egghead's Guide to Cooking* and *Hoofing Ways: The True Tales of Exploring Everfree*. As I filtered down the list my eyes fell on a particular title which hung in my mind *Legends and Lore: A Complete Collection*. Something about that name sent a surge through my mind like lightning conducted down my horn. I knew I had to have it, even as I failed to understand why.

I wanted nothing more than to leap from where I was sitting, rush down the stairs I was now certain existed hidden somewhere in the main room of the library and deconstruct the basement to find that single tome. Only the pain in my leg and the soft sound of Requiem's breathing reminded me that I needed to remain where I was for at least a few moments longer. Intent to distract myself from my desires I opened the second message, in hopes that it would be better news.

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**From:** Chief Librarian Silent Night

**To:** Error, Unrecognized Destination, please speak with network supervisor

**Subject:** Discovery

*Found more records here, gathered as many as I could carry. Will hire a courier in the next town to carry the books to the usual pickup site. I'll include a list of books with this message and another with the courier, make sure to check them against one another and the delivered books! I know I probably don't need to say this, but I'm always a little concerned about other ponies carrying these things. I've activated the automated security here, which should keep anything I may have missed safe for now.*

*I'm leaving here in the morning, going to visit the Ministry of Peace Hospital on my way past. The Rangers there have been out of communication for some time and I'm hoping to find out why. With luck, the elder there will be willing to part with some supplies for my continued journey. I'll be in touch again as soon as I can be.*

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Somepony else had been here before us, looking for books. Somepony who had decided to activate the security systems. I seethed with irritation at this prospect, that somepony was actually responsible for the state of Silent Requiem at that moment. That they might never know the pain they'd caused to a relatively innocent filly. Some part of me told me that was right, after all it wasn't as though that pony had known we would come here, but I didn't want to listen to that part at all.

Without thinking I raised one hoof and kicked the terminal off the desk, hurling its surprisingly light construction across the room hard enough to crack one of the partially burned walls. The screen split on impact, bursting open with a shower of small sparks and shattered crystal. In my moment of rage I had forgotten my PipBuck was connected to the terminal by a set of rather heavy wires, and so I suddenly found my forehoof yanked out from under me sending me crashing chin-first into the desk. The impact was enough to bury the growing anger in my mind beneath a tidal wave of sudden pain. Nothing like as intense as the pain in my leg had been a few minutes earlier, but enough to clear my mind at least.

Slightly dazed from the impact I slowly righted myself, getting my hooves back under me and trying to stop the room from spinning. A moment of adjusting my jaw told me that I'd at least avoided breaking anything. It only took a moment longer to make my eyes stop pointing in different directions and focus them back on the PipBuck which had just dragged me to the ground. My irritation passed as I spotted that it had downloaded the second book list before I had thrown my fit. A quick check, scanning down the list and... Yes! *Legends and Lore: A Complete Collection* didn't appear on that second list! That meant it was still somewhere here. Well, either that or it had been destroyed sometime in the past two centuries. But, I was feeling optimistic today, so I chose to believe it was simply well hidden.

A sudden, sharp tug on my mane brought my attention back to my immediate surroundings and the fact that my tantrum had woken Silent Requiem from her slumber. As I looked down towards her she let go of my hair and quietly backed away, as though expecting me to react to her presence with the same level of violence I had shown to the now-broken terminal. Carefully I reached out with one hoof to pat her on the head for bringing me out of being lost in my mind.

I spoke up, doing my best not to look directly at Requiem, "Somewhere in that other room is a hidden way down into the basement. What do you say the two of us go look for it? It'll be fun! Like hide and seek!" Only after I finished talking did I realize what I'd just said, and immediately felt the intense desire to mash my hooves into my face in shame. Thankfully Requiem didn't seem to mind, having stood up and made her way towards the door to the office already.

As I stood, my eyes passed over a small shelf on one of the walls away from the door, a collection of objects I hadn't noticed before. A small bronze statue of a rearing pegasus mare, what looked to be the cue ball from a billiards table on a small stand and, finally, a picture frame containing a photograph. The picture frame was surprisingly well intact given both its age and the state of the rest of the building. I could only assume that it had been enchanted in some way to resist aging, likely extended to the photograph inside which seemed to have not faded at all despite being over two centuries since it was taken. The image was of a pegasus mare with a sky-blue coat and rainbow colored mane, her cutie mark obscured by a slip of paper with the number 15 written on it. She was grinning with the kind of excited look one only got when they were certain that was the greatest moment of their life. Behind her I could see, though severely out of focus, the signs of seating and a crowd. At the bottom was written "Never fear yourself. - RD" in black marker.

Something about the figure in that photograph made me feel deeply nostalgic, sad and overjoyed all at once. As though I were staring at something which once upon a time would have been a prized possession but now barely seemed to be recognizable. Carefully I levitated the picture frame and folded it up, tucking it into my saddle bag. Two hundred years of isolation made it unlikely anyone would miss it from this place, after all. Maybe I would find somewhere nice to put it until I could figure out why I felt that way.

Finally, I made my way out of the office after Requiem. By the time I made it outside she had already begun shuffling around the edges of the room, coming to a stop near the stairs up. The area under the stairs was walled off with what had once been a carefully carved design resembling pillars, something of a contrast to the rest of the building's large windows. Some part of me protested that it was a throwback to more traditional designs and was always in style, but I did my best not to think too hard about it. Requiem was digging around the edges near one of the columns as I approached.

In the space between each descending column was an arching area with what had once been a flat white surface. The heat of the flames had scorched these areas darker with soot and twisted them with heat, leaving them pockmarked along the surface. As I approached I could see what had Requiem's attention, the particular arch she was searching around had a slight crack between it and the column. Before the fire it would certainly have been impossible to see, but the warping of the column and surface left it just wide enough to be visible.

I gently shooed Requiem back from the wall before rearing up on my hind legs and slamming my forehooves against the blocked door. The door was neither locked nor barred, though it was sticky, as the impact began to force it open. The sound of the door opening was far more hideous than that of the front doors had been, filling the silent room with squealing. Within moments, however, the obstinate door had been forced aside, allowing a clear view into the metallic hallway beyond.

Past the faux marble exterior the hallway was unpainted metal, obviously designed for functionality over appearance. I stepped over the edge between the exterior and interior and could feel Silent Requiem



move in behind me, hiding behind my rear legs and part way beneath my tail. Only a short landing existed level with the library proper, before it began to descend along a narrow staircase which turned inwards slightly, mapping to the exterior wall. As I descended the staircase I could see a metal door with a rotating handle on it, the type built to lock in place once it was closed all the way. Carefully I grasped the handle with my magic and rotated it until the cross-bars slid free of the door frame, the door itself sliding downwards into a hole in the floor below. I took the first step into the book storage basement, intent to find the one book here my mind absolutely insisted I must have.

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“Please present employee identification. Thank you and have a nice day.” The obviously mechanical voice echoed through darkened hallways beneath the ruined library. Accompanying that voice was the sound of metal stomping against metal, more echos of similar sounds coming from further within the halls of the storage basement. Silent Requiem and I were taking refuge in a small side-room, what had once been used for storing newspapers at a guess from the large filing cabinets lining the walls of the room.

Requiem was busying herself digging through the cabinets in search of something which had caught her attention, meanwhile I stood beside the open door with a section of heavy metal piping grasped in my magic. Outside I could hear the stomping growing closer, a passive blip on my EFS marking the robot's movements cleanly through the walls. “Non-Employees are not permitted in book storage. Please leave the area if you do not have your employee identification. Thank you for your cooperation.” The way its obviously synthetic voice had been worded to be so polite only seemed to add an extra layer of disturbing to listening to its approach. I raised the pipe higher into the air, readying myself for the moment it rounded the corner

Finally, the form of the robot came close enough for me to actually see it. The thing looked like some kind of bizarre mockery of equinity, the shape was right but the details were all wrong. Colored a dull grey, a few shades darker than the hallways, it had a bulbous body which seemed to be constructed of three interconnected spheres. Where a pony's legs would normally meet the body were large spheres from which overly wide and stumpy legs extended, knees similarly over-large and instead of hooves it had pyramid shaped feet. Its neck was set only slightly up from its main body and its head lacked any of the normal shape of a pony, instead being rounded with a pale white light which illuminated its surroundings. The mechanical voice spoke again from right next to me, “All employees are required to wear their identification at all times. Please stand still so that this unit can scan for identification.”

I paused for just a brief moment, the machine before me looked so strangely familiar and horribly wrong at the same time that it was nearly comical. I wondered briefly what pony had thought this was a good visual design for an automated defense system. My moment of distraction was all the machine needed to finish its scan, however, as it spoke again, “Unidentified personal on the premises. Security alert. Employees should evacuate area. Please surrender and all just law enforcement will be used.” As it spoke I snapped back to reality, the passive blip turned a bright burning red as the light where the machines head should have been glowed brightly a moment before a bolt of magical energy lanced across the room to carve a partially-melted path across one of the filing cabinets.

In a mixture of panic and surprise I whipped the pipe I had been levitating around as hard as I could towards what passed as the machine's head. The crunch of metal on metal filled the air as paint was

smashed aside and the machine's armor dented noticeably. Again I swung, smashing the machine hard enough to throw it slightly off balance, sending its return blast wide of me and into the overhanging light which exploded in a shower of sparks, casting the small room into shadow. Desperate now I kept beating on the thing, until the glowing lamp on its head cracked open. A moment later it turned that distinctive color of red briefly before exploding, a fine spray of shrapnel digging lightly at my coat and skin as I had been too surprised to even cast my shield spell. The robot slumped to the floor in a sparking heap as I looked around frantically to be certain Silent Requiem was okay, spotting her peeking out of a drawer where she had taken refuge.

For a moment danger seemed to have passed, until I heard the distant sound of metal on metal and the now-familiar mechanical intonation of another of the machines, "Alert. Security protocols engaged. Lethal force authorized. Civilians should seek cover. This unit cannot be held responsible for accidental death or dismemberment." Turning my head in the direction of the sounds I could spot five more red blips on my EFS, and my pipe wasn't very happy about being used to blunt-force trauma a machine to death. It was going to be a bad night.

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**\*CLANG\*CLANG\*CLANG\*CLANG\*CRUNCH\***

The fourth metallic not-a-pony fell to the ground in a broken heap. The pipe I had been wielded was, at this point, looking distinctly more like a boomerang. The poor accuracy and slow speed of these machines had at least made stopping them relatively simple. A few lost feathers and some minor clips to my mane weren't going to kill me, and a good night's sleep with the last of the healing bandages would be more than sufficient to make up for it.

More worryingly, in every room we'd passed there was no signs of left over supplies. Ammunition boxes were empty, medical boxes cleaned out, as near as I could tell whomever this R was they were no slouch at scavenging. Even the shelves looked like they'd been cleaned with a dust broom, not even a single empty bottle! Who does that!? It was slightly infuriating, I'd been reduced to using a chunk of metal pipe as my only weapon. The voices in my head kept complaining that this was completely and utterly beneath me. For once, I unequivocally agreed.

At least, though, we had finally made it to storage room 7D. A large door frame stood open before me, the small yellow lettering which declared the room number stenciled upon the wall in light yellow paint. Silent Requiem squeezed past me quickly into the room, not that I could blame her. With the energy discharges and metal coating of our enemies all she'd been able to do was take cover behind me since we entered the basement. At least this was the room the book we were looking for was supposed to be in.

The interior of the room was much like the exterior of the room, a boring metallic grey color with pipes running along the ceiling which had once carried water and air to the building above. The room itself was semi-circular with shelving units along every wall except for a single large table against the back wall. The shelves had been cleaned with the same meticulous care as everything else in the basement. On the table against the back wall was a safe, its door hanging open and a key still sitting in the lock.

As I stepped into the room Silent Requiem was busily climbing over the shelves searching them for

anything worth taking. My heart sank at the state of it, not a single slip of missed paper. The other listing hadn't had the book I wanted on it, but there was always the possibility that the ponies due for the delivery had removed it from the list later, or that it had been taken by them and replaced. The thought of losing that tome to the fire which had destroyed this place settled into my stomach like a cold metal block. Some part of me wanted to cry over the loss, while other parts were telling me to chase down this R and find out where the books had gone. Right at this moment, though, I just wanted my wings to stop hurting so much.

Carefully I pulled out the last of our medical bandages and wrapped them around the scorched remains of half a dozen flight feathers. Burned when I had been just a bit too slow getting out of the way of one of the energy beams. I hoped they'd grow back properly, without them I wasn't going to be flying any time soon. Somehow that disturbed me, despite the unnaturalness of my body the idea of having part of it taken away from me forever was still horrifying to contemplate.

A gentle tug on my mane told me that Silent Requiem had finished her searching. Looking up from where I had secured the bandages, poorly but better than nothing, I followed the filly across the room. She leaped from the ground up on top of the table against the back wall with remarkable effortlessness. Evidently, she wasn't just good at hiding. She shoved her head near the wall, digging at the back of the desk with her forehooves then looked up at me hopefully.

For a moment I was confused. I certainly couldn't move the entire desk, it looked like it was bolted to the floor, and trying to move the entire wall seemed like a wonderful way to have the whole of the library come collapsing down on us. Requiem meanwhile began to look annoyed, tapping a hoof against the back of the desk and the wall behind it, motioning at it with her head.

Approaching the desk I reared up on my hind legs and leaned across it, trying to get a closer look. There was a small gap between the back of the desk and the rear wall, where part of the desk's top had cracked and collapsed from age. Now, with my attention brought to it, I could make out a faint golden glint in the darkness behind the desk. Carefully I concentrated my magic to grab hold of the corner of the gold and begin to pull it free of the rear of the desk.

A few moments later I was floating a relatively large book with a brown cover emblazoned with a golden unicorn head and bound with golden hinges. *Legends and Lore: A Complete Collection* one of the voices in my head repeated quietly to me. It looked familiar, like something pulled from my most fond memories, a secure and happy feeling of a time I could no longer remember which I desperately wanted back. Silent Requiem was practically beaming with pride at having found such a treasure, and I certainly couldn't blame her. Even the meticulous searching of our predecessor in this place had missed it, after all!

By this point I was feeling exhausted, between all the fighting, the stress of keeping my shield up in the rain and the emotional roller coaster which this place had been for me so soon after finding anything to hope for, I wanted to sleep for a month. But we didn't have time for that, "Come on Requiem. Let's go find somewhere to rest." I smiled happily at the prospect, "I'll read you a bedtime story!"

Requiem leaped down from the desk and practically pranced out of the room, so proud of her discovery and her chance to have fun. For the first time since I'd met her, she seemed genuinely happy and without concern. Somewhere in my mind that felt perfectly right, just the way a filly should be. I knew it wouldn't last, but for that one moment I felt glad I could do anything for her.

We returned back up the stairs and into the office where we had stopped earlier. Requiem laying down on

the edge of the mat in the corner, I settled down beside her, only half-way onto the cushion. Another reminder of how unnatural I was, but at the moment it didn't matter. With care I extended a wing over Requiem, holding her close to my side. I slowly opened the book, a wave of nostalgia sweeping over me as I began to read, the words forming in my mind almost faster than I could see them on the page, "Once upon a time in the magical land of Equestria..."

Notes:

Aurora Borealis (Level Up! - Level 3)

Silent Requiem (Level Up! - Level 2)