

In an instant, the back of my neck is electrified again, along with every other inch of my body. Chestnut swears and jumps back against the window, and in the ambient green glow of the ocean that filters in from outside, I see a dim white aura envelop his horn as he yanks a blocky metal object out from under his vest and points it towards the entrance hall we just came through. Once I look closer and see what it is, another shock wave sweeps through me. The stock may be silver instead of black, and it's certainly a lot smaller than any I've heard of before, but I've flipped through enough military history books to know a cannon when I see one. The firing mechanism is set behind a rotating chamber embedded in a wooden handle, though, and judging by the way the air seems to shimmer around a flattened metal trigger beneath it, it looks like it's not fuse-fired either. I could just write it off as another amazing invention born inside an extraordinary city, but as the temperature in the hallway dips and the window rivets creak, I can't help but wonder something I don't think I want to know the answer to: in a city built miles under the ocean and filled with the kind of technology most ponies can only daydream about, why would anypony need to be armed?

For about ten seconds, nothing moves. I'm stuck facing the window with one forehoof raised halfway off the floor, Link stands two feet to my left and just a hair outside my range of vision, and right in front of me Chestnut has lowered himself into a fighting stance and holds his firearm dead level with his eyes, his aim never wavering even for a second. The world narrows to a tunnel that ends with a long silver barrel and a brown finished grip, and I start counting my heartbeats under my breath, if only to give myself something else to focus on.

When I get to twenty-seven, Chestnut's left ear twitches. Six beats later, he lets out a slow, cautious sigh and lowers his weapon to his chest, though he doesn't loosen his grip for even a second.

"Okay," he whispers without looking at us. "Quiet as you can, turn 'round and go down the hall. Stop at the end and wait for me there. If I don't...if something hap..." Chestnut swallows hard, and a dark circle of sweat blooms on the carpet below his chin. "I-if something happens to me, turn left, go up the stairs, keep turnin' right till you get to the plaza, then take the elevator down and follow the signs for the market. Don't stop, don't make any loud noises, and for the love'a the sun, don't go anywhere but where I told you t-"

I barely even hear the thump at the end of the hallway, but to Chestnut it may as well have been a bomb going off. He jerks his weapon back up and stares at the foyer, his mouth forming a flurry of words that I'm not close enough to hear. A second, louder thump follows a second later, and once I turn my head again and start listening with him, I can hear something else too, a scratching, scraping, shuffling sound like somepony is dragging their hooves across a sheet of rough plywood. Except there's no wood down here besides those mahogany doors, and I can see them both from where I'm standing, and now the noise is louder and closer and almost sounds like rattling. Like wheezing.

Like breathing.

*Stop it, a voice in my head suddenly scolds. You're panicking. You're all just panicking. There are all kinds of things that could be, and none of them have to be anything alive. Maybe it's some kind of machine. Maybe it's just the building settling. Maybe you're just imagining things.*

And for a few blissful seconds, I almost believe it. I almost believe I'm just making this whole thing up, that there's no shuffling and no thumping and there's no pony down there and there's no abandoned city at the bottom of the ocean. And then the shuffling stops and one last thump rings out, and all the air in my lungs is sucked down the hallway towards the foyer and the terminal and whatever the hell that noise is. I can still see the doors, closed tight and motionless. I can see a hundred shadows splayed out across every surface in front of them. I count off four more heartbeats, one by one.

And then somewhere close by, I hear a loud, leathery buzz.

And at the end of the hallway, one of the shadows moves.

Chestnut's reaction is instantaneous. Before my body even knows to send a flurry of goosebumps across my skin, his face pales to a ghostly white under his fur, and his eyes go black with horror. "Oh, shit..." he breathes without moving his lips. Then he lowers his cannon and hooks his foreleg around my neck, and takes off in the opposite direction.

"Run!" he screams as he shoves me forward. "Go, now!"

I don't need to be told twice. The hallway blurs around me as I sprint towards the opposite end. Two pairs of hoofsteps follow close behind me, and far in the distance the buzzing noise returns, interspersed with heavy thuds of metal against carpet and the same scraping sound from before. My heart is heaving and I'm running faster than I ever have before, and yet every step just makes the angry drone louder and louder. Something is in the hallway with us. Something is chasing us down.

"Left!" Chestnut yells as we reach the end of the corridor, and I've almost finished the turn before a spray of water soaks me to the bone and reflex makes my hooves lock up. There's a massive block of stone about two inches from my nose, and fresh horror dawns on me as I realize why it's there. I can see the stairs we're supposed to take not even five yards away, but between them and us is at least two tons of fragmented concrete and jagged metal pipes still spewing their contents all over the walls. Chestnut lowers his shoulder and shoves it against one of the smaller chunks of rock, but nothing gives even a millimeter. Our escape route is blocked. There's no way out.

I lock eyes with Chestnut, and just one glance at the look of despair rolling through his eyes is nearly enough to make me give up hope too. When he looks down

and sees the dark maroon stain oozing from the fresh graze on his foreleg, something even darker seeps into him, pooling on his face as an amalgamation of pain, terror—and resignation. In the same instant, something else passes through him too, something that makes him set his jaw and suck in a hoarse but steady breath, even as fear still has its way with him behind his glassy gaze. He looks at me with lifeless brown eyes, and through my reflection in his irises, I see him come to a decision.

“Right,” he wheezes. “Go right.”

I spin around and make it three steps before I realize the other end of the hall ends ten feet away in a plain wooden door. Before I can tell Chestnut there’s no way out over there either, the door glows white and swings open of its own accord, revealing a storage closet that doesn’t look big enough for two ponies, let alone three. When I look back again, I’m met by a little golden box floating in midair in front of me. Without a word, Chestnut shoves it towards me, only pausing to make sure I’ve got the strap threaded through its top looped around my neck. When he sees that I do, he puts one foreleg on my shoulder and the other on Link’s, and starts pushing us backwards. His eyes are red around the edges.

Comprehension dawns on me far too late. “Chestnut!” I yell into deaf ears as we cross the closet’s threshold. “Chestnut, wait!”

But Chestnut doesn’t wait. He doesn’t even look at me. He just gives us one final push and turns around and steps out to the middle of the hallway, and watches as the carpet darkens in front of him and the lights fizzle and flash overhead. I have just enough time to watch him draw his weapon, watch something dark and amorphous rocket around the corner, force my teeth apart and scream after him.

“Chestnu-”

And then he lets out a despondent grunt and kicks out with a hind leg, and the closet door slams shut. The last syllable in his name tears a hole in my throat, and the room goes black.

In that first instant after the light vanishes, it’s impossible even to draw breath. Someplace far away, my hooves are still pressed into smooth, bare concrete, but between that place and the rest of me are a hundred million miles of freezing cold and burning skin, and a darkness so thick I can feel its weight bowing my back and locking my knees. I close my eyes and open them again, and for the briefest of moments I feel the sting of salt peck at my tongue. Before I can figure out why, though, the tinkling chime of an activating spell reaches my ears, and a heartbeat later the closet is bathed in wavering green light emanating from Link’s horn. His cocky bravado is gone, replaced by an almost juvenile expression of confusion and unease, and the shadows dancing through the room throw deep lines into his eyes and cheeks that make him look about a

hundred years old at the same time.

A gentle thump against the door draws both our attentions back towards it, and once my head clears a bit, I can hear voices murmuring outside. Or actually, now I listen closer, just two of them. The first I know pretty well, but the second, a low, ragged voice that just keeps on muttering no matter what the other says, is one I recognize far too quickly.

“We don’t want any trouble,” Chestnut says, with the tone of a pony trying to keep calm and gradually failing at doing so. “W-We don’t mean no trespass. We just...”

A furious hiss slices off the end of his assurance, and Chestnut’s shudder vibrates through the whole door. The thump I heard before must’ve been him backing into it. “I promise I won’t do nothing,” he whimpers. “You can have my gun, just d...just d-don’t hurt me. Just lemme g-”

The thing on the other side of the door growls and screeches, and then a bone-jarring bang sends me clanging back into an empty metal shelf as the room goes dark again. I hear Link curse as Chestnut cries out in pain, and a moment later a second violent blow makes the door squeak on its hinges, the impact paired with another grunt from the chocolate-brown colt two inches of warped wood away. When the green tint returns to my vision, I still can’t see anything of what’s going on outside aside from the horrible images flashing across my mind’s eye, but at least I can finally see what made the lights go out. Link has part of his magic still channeling light into his horn, but the rest of it is occupied with holding up a black iron crowbar six inches in front of his nose, the curved end tilted towards the door. He and I look at each other, and shining in his eyes I can finally see the fear that’s been clawing at my stomach ever since I woke up surrounded by flames and the endless depth of the sea.

And despite everything that’s happened, despite where we are and what we’ve been through and the soft, pitiful groans wafting through the lightless crack below the door, something about that look in Link’s eyes puts me at ease. I can’t explain it, but in that moment just the thought that somepony else feels exactly what I’m feeling right now is enough to comfort me and shore me up a little. And so in that moment, just that single moment, the claws loosen and fall away, and I can breathe again. But just like the trip in the bathysphere, the fantasy has to run its course, and the moment has to end. Another low hiss out of sight sets the talons of the beast inside us drumming against my ribs again, and the trembling, nearly incoherent plea for mercy that I hear spill out of Chestnut’s mouth makes them intertwine between them. My spine tenses and locks up, Link raises his crowbar, and we wait for one second. Two seconds.

Three.

Unlike most mares my age, I’m no stranger to injuries. When I was a foal, our living room might as well have been a triage ward for all the cut, bruised, and battered

miners that would file through every evening at seven. I've seen ponies with everything from headaches to hernias to ugly gashes in their backs that glistened crimson under the dusty overhead lamp my mother always used when she needed to take care of a patient. Once I was about twelve, I even broke a bone in my own leg when I fell fifteen feet out of a tree. I can still remember the jarring, nauseating crack as I hit the ground, still feel the white-hot pain that flared up from my forehoof all the way into my neck. I know what it looks like when ponies get hurt. I know what it feels like to get hurt myself.

Nothing I've ever seen at home, though, prepared me for what happens next. I hear the strike whistle through the air, and when it makes contact, a wet ripping sound—like somepony tearing a soggy burlap sack in half—soaks through the door and seems to pool around my head. Instead of screaming, Chestnut only lets out a long, low moan that echoes in the hallway and in my mind, like what I know was the sound of flesh being rent apart did just moments ago. Vertigo rolls over like a fifty-foot wave, and for a long moment I'm almost positive I'm going to be sick. I try to think the dizziness away and force my hooves to keep holding me up just a few seconds longer, but even after Chestnut and the monster that just killed him fall silent, the gentle splash of liquid—of blood—of *Chestnut's* blood—against the floor is impossible to block out. I'm no stranger to injury, and now that I've survived a zeppelin crash in the middle of Eternity's Crossing, I'm no stranger to death either. But there's one thing I haven't experienced, was never meant to experience, never would've experienced if I hadn't gone into the tower and climbed into that bathysphere and let my stupid, brainless pride talk me into pulling that lever, and that is murder. I just heard Chestnut be murdered. And now-

"Pl..."

My skin prickles, and the breath I take in seems as loud as a cannon shot. Did I really just hear...

"Plea..."

"He's still alive," Link whispers. Chestnut is still alive. Still moving. Still breathing.

"*Please...*"

Still pressed up against the door, begging to be let go. But the thing holding him doesn't answer, and the hacking cough that rattles out of his throat tells me he doesn't have long to wait. Doesn't have long at all, actually. Just a single moment that will run its course and, like all other moments, inevitably end. I get maybe two seconds to silently apologize to Chestnut for what's happened to him because of us, and then the room is filled with shouts and tearing skin and smashing, splintering wood. And after that, all I can do is stare, because staring back at me is the barbed tip of a yellow metal hook, its whole length clouded by the haze of dust from the door it just smashed through

and coated with the viscous remains of the pony it had to go through to get there.

The hook pauses, twitches, and then jolts down slowly towards the floor, and the abused wood shrieks and shatters in its path. Chestnut retches out his last breath as something heavy splatters against the ground, and when the gash in the door reaches a foot in length, the hook catches in the grain and, after a few twists and jerks, is yanked violently back out. With the last thing holding it up removed, the body outside is left to crumple in front of the door. I catch a glimpse of red fabric as it slips by the cut opened in the door, a flash of brown fur as the pony I followed blindly into this place collapses and doesn't move again, and then the city is at peace once more. The light from Link's horn throws a ghastly pallor over everything in sight. A bitter metallic scent hangs around my nose, and the edges of the gash in the door gleam dark maroon.

And standing just beyond it, visible only in the thin stripe of Link's light that manages to slip through the door, is a thin, brick-red pegasus mare with matted fur and crumpled wings. Her legs and chest are swathed in tattered red fabric, and even in the state it's in, I can tell the dress it used to be was beautiful. No amount of Manehattan fashion, though, could've redeemed the head sprouting out from beneath the rags. One side of her face is pale and dirty but otherwise normal enough, and the eye that pokes out beneath a thinly lined brow is a vibrant, almost luminescent shade of green. The other side, however, is mangled beyond all recognition by a bulbous white tumor that twists her snout unnaturally to the left and covers her entire cheek and most of her forehead. The weight of the growth tilts her whole head over to that side, and the stench—an invasive blend of stale antiseptics and rotting flesh, layered over by the slightest scent of roses—sends my stomach spinning off into the deep again.

It takes the mare a moment to notice me, but once she does I can see the revelation ripple through her whole body as she blinks her one eye and lets out a low, throaty wheeze. She spends at least ten seconds—twenty-five heartbeats—staring at me before she blinks again, and the moment I start to feel like she's looking straight through me, she lifts her head back up, takes a half-step back, and stands up straight without ever turning away.

*"Is it someone new?"* she croaks. She waits for a moment more, opens her mouth as if to speak again, and then throws her head back with a blood-curdling shriek that numbs every inch of skin I own. The hooks on her forelegs snap out and lock into place when they've even with her hooves again, and before I can even blink, she leaps forward and attacks. The cleaner hook smashes into the door and tears a hunk of wood free, and then a pinkish blur around her opposite hoof takes another chunk with it as it passes by the same spot. The door squeaks and tries to resist, but the mare keeps hacking away at it, dismantling it piece by piece in a mad attempt to reach me.

And yet even as instinct takes over and a burning, primal urge to flee fills me out from head to hoof, I still don't move. Part of it is just cold, emotionless logic: there's no

point in running because there's nowhere to run. Link couldn't keep quiet enough and Chestnut couldn't protect us, and now we're backed into a corner waiting for the last few seconds of our lives to fall away like the thin wooden door that's, for just a few finite moments, prolonging it. Beneath that, though, there's the other part: the one that's nailed my hooves to the ground and that's forcing my eyes to stay open, the one that gritted my teeth in the terminal and ground me to a stop on the runway and nearly drowned me in the middle of the ocean. Some ponies can look death in the face and laugh, and that other part is what makes me one of the ones who can't. Because it's that other part that chokes me up and strikes me dumb every time I'm surprised by something, every time I have to think on my hooves to get out of a sticky situation. It's that other part of me that controls me now. That always controls me when I get scared.

*"Ruby!"*

I turn around slowly, blinking like an idiot. Link is hunched over by the wall, right in front of a short vertical crack in it that wasn't there when we came in. He works his forehooves into the gap and arches his back as he wrenches something away, and then the crack widens into a hole. It's a square air vent, barely big enough for a pony Link's size to squeeze into. Once the crawlspace is open, he spins around and turns his big, green eyes on me again.

"Ruby, come on!" he hisses, but the words quiver and ripple in the air. I stare at him for a moment with my mouth hanging open and splinters peppering the small of my back. *Move, a distant voice says. Move, you idiot. You're acting insane.*

"Ruby, come on, get in!"

*Ruby, you're acting insane.*

"Stars abo...*Ruby!*"

I shut my eyes as tight as they'll go, and suddenly the world becomes real again and a bolt of lightning blasts through my spine. I reach the vent in two steps and dive in headfirst, just in time to hear something buck the closet door clean off its hinges. I hear a shout and the soft crunch of metal against bone, and then a moment later another body enters the tunnel and another set of hoofsteps intermingle with mine. I don't have enough room to turn around and see who it is, so I don't bother to try. I lie flat on my belly and scramble through the crawlspace as fast as I can, bouncing and banging off the ceilings and walls at every turn and T-junction I come to. All that's left of my mind is white noise, and all that's left of my pulse is a sickening vibration that sweeps through my limbs and prickles down my back and screams at me to move move move move *move*.

By the time I reach the end of the vent, it's anypony's guess how long I've been in it. I'm hardly even aware enough to catch myself when I stretch out my forelegs to pull

myself forward and instead find them flailing around in open air as I fall towards a musty red carpet. My focus returns pretty quickly once I land, though, because it's then that I look back up at the vent and realize I can still hear hoofsteps echoing out of it, too fast to run away from and too close to hide anywhere their owner wouldn't find me in an instant. For a second or two, I think about trying for it anyway, but when I listen closer and the sound of ragged, heaving breaths reaches my ears as well, all my strength drains away, and I burn every ounce of what's left taking a single step back and locking my eyes on the tunnel's exit.

A few more thumps sound out, and then a shadow appears on the vent's inner wall, growing larger and wider and more detailed the closer the pony gets. I see an unkempt mane, an outstretched hoof, something metallic flash out of the darkness, and then Link practically launches himself out of the vent, coated from head to tail in dust and panting like a sun-baked dog. His crowbar is still right by his side and enveloped in his magic, and as he whips around to stare at the vent with me, it swings aimlessly right past my nose, leaving behind it the slightest scent of putrescence and rose petals.

It's a good thirty seconds before either of us has the courage or the strength to look away from the now-silent vent. Both of us turn to face each other at the same time, he with the first few stages of hysteria kicking on in his eyes, and I with a look that probably isn't a whole lot different. Link's lips are moving, and every so often an understandable syllable slips out, but he spends another half a minute catching his breath before he can finally form a few of them into words.

"Ru...Ruby," he says faintly. "Ruby, I...Ch-Chestnut...Ruby, I-I didn't mean..."

Link only gets halfway through our first coherent thought in the last five minutes before the lights in the ceiling, the ones I hadn't even looked at before now, gradually begin to dim. Before the room can go completely dark, though, the whole far end of it lights up and throws a flickering white glare over both of us, and once we go quiet we can hear the distant rattle of a film projector. As the projector warms up and the light in front of me begins to flicker, my gaze shifts towards the thick maroon drapes that surround the screen and cover the walls, and a moment later I finally notice the pair of huge mahogany doors that sit firmly closed behind me. I have one half of a moment to think, the other half to remember why those doors look so familiar, and then a blaring rush of orchestral music blasts out from some unseen speaker, and the screen flares into life.

The first image that comes up reminds me of the slideshow in the bathysphere: plain and unmoving, with just a single line of black text that reads "FROM THE DESK OF RYDER". This time, though, the slide only stays up on the screen for a few seconds before fading away, and in its place unfolds a clean, black-and-white shot of a mostly bare office containing only a high-backed chair, a side table with a small reading lamp on it, and a giant wooden desk set in front of a darkened, unblemished wall. A unicorn



mare is standing in front of the desk, her mane jet-black and the rest of her fur dyed a mottled shade of gray by the film's faded hue, and as the camera pans towards her, she turns her head and faces it with an intensity that makes me wonder whether she somehow knows that I'm here. Déjà vu plays havoc with my mind for a couple seconds, until I realize where I've seen that intensity before, glaring down at me from the cold, lifeless eyes of a monster the size of a freight train. This mare is the same one whose statue was in the tower, and the confidence and authority radiating out from her is exactly what I would've expected from somepony who'd build that big of a monument to herself.

"My name is Onyx Ryder," she begins, her voice loud and imperious with not a single syllable out of place, "and all my life I have asked myself the same questions: what use is talent, when nopony may realize it? What use is vision, when nopony is allowed to see? What use is a gift, when we as a race are too afraid to open it, too afraid of what might find within? For let me assure you, we *are* gifted, my friends, in our minds, in our bodies, and in our spirits. We have the potential to experiment, to build, to create, to overcome...and yet we squander it. And yet we hide beneath the skirts of higher authority, obey every whim of the oligarchy of the elite. We worship those who deny us our gifts, when they are the very same tyrants who would have us crawl back in our holes and choke on their dust, rather than lift our heads above theirs and look to the stars."

The mare takes a deep breath, and moves away from her desk, taking a leisurely pace towards the chair off to the side and seeming to watch as the frame shifts to accommodate her. "In the end, what separates a mare from a slave?" she asks, her gaze pointed off towards the ceiling. "Money? Power?" Now she turns, and fiery passion emanates from her eyes. "*No*," she proclaims, and her next words are drawn out as if she means to brand them onto our memories in a place where we'll never forget them. "A mare chooses. A slave obeys."

There's a pause as the mare sets her jaw and stares us down again, and I turn to look at Link. The baffled look on his face is enough to tell me what I want to know, and he throws a helpless shrug on top of it just to enforce the point. Meanwhile, Onyx has started talking again, and instead of flaring up with the fervor of her words, now her voice is cold, almost as if she's angry at something. "My little ponies, we are, all of us, slaves. And why? Because we have sacrificed the freedom of choice for the safety of passivity," she derisively declares. "Because the rich and the powerful have told us to jump, and we have asked, 'How high?' Because we have pushed for change and strived for progress, and our princesses and our gods have only pulled our chains tighter, telling us that we have nothing to fear, nothing to want, nothing to desire but obedience and ignorance and *bliss*."

Onyx sighs again and starts to walk again, and in her eyes and the corners of her mouth, I can see the fire start to seep back in. "I rejected those answers. I chose

something different. I chose the impossible. I chose to use my potential: to experiment, to build, to create..."

The image of the screen flickers ever so slightly, and Onyx smiles. "And so," she murmurs as her image begins to fade. "I created a *city*."

The last word is barely out of Onyx's mouth before the transition finishes, and once the new scene comes up, a gasp sneaks out of my mouth. The neat, conservative office is gone, and in its place is a sweeping, panoramic view of the exterior of the city, of all the buildings we just passed by in our bathysphere. "A city," Onyx goes on, enraptured either with her accomplishments or with herself, "where the artist would not fear the censor, where the brave would not be inhibited by the weak, where the great would not be constrained by the small. And in choosing to dedicate your lives to preserving and inhabiting her, you have chosen to become great as well."

The screen goes dark as the camera moves into the same tunnel we entered at the end of our trip in, and a moment later Onyx reappears. "My name is Onyx Ryder," she says warmly, "and I bid you welcome. Welcome to the evolution of ponykind. Welcome to the most extraordinary chapter in your commendable lives. Welcome to a world where anything is possible."

Onyx smiles again, and suddenly I feel like I'm staring into the hungry maw of a shark. "Welcome to my city," she says. "Welcome...to *Harmony*."

The clicking of the film reel shuts off abruptly, and is quickly replaced by a low mechanical hum. The lights turn on and the picture goes dark, and as the hum gets louder, the screen starts to rise into the ceiling, revealing a picture window of the same size that's been hidden behind it the whole time. And I tell myself right then that I don't need to see what's outside, that I'm not any braver than Link is and looking out that window isn't going to prove otherwise, but even as I order myself to turn around and my mind screams at me not to move from this spot until somepony explains to me what the hay is going on, my hooves are operating on orders that go above anything I can tell them from the inside of my head. Even with everything that's happened, some secret part of me has to know. Some uncontrollable part of me has to see.

And I do see. I walk up to the window and I look outside, and I see about ten stories of ornate balconies and sliding glass doors, and far below them a wide open plaza where the floor is tiled with the shapes and patterns of the continents and the center is occupied by a majestic fountain sculpture of an alicorn with both forelegs stretched through the ceiling. But fear is never born from what we see first. We're not afraid of what we know; we're afraid of what we don't know. We're afraid of what we see last, of the little details that don't seem out-of-place until we look at them closer and realize what they really are, what we've truly gotten ourselves into. And in this plaza, those little details are the dark stains splattered across the balconies, and the jagged holes in the glass doors, and the way the statue in the fountain, stained yellow by time

and surrounded by filthy water the color of sewage, doesn't seem like it's reaching for the stars as much as trying to escape from the muck underneath it, trying to get out before it's dragged underwater and suffocated.

And then, before and behind and beyond all that, there are the bodies. Bodies sticking out of windows, bodies crumpled on the floor ten stories below, bodies hanging from balconies and from the fountain and from makeshift gallows all around it, their fur painted violent shades of red and their chests covered by unreadable cardboard signs. Bodies of ponies with twisted necks and broken legs, ponies with sightless eyes that will never close and open wounds that will never heal. The room spins, a cold sweat rushes across my body, and suddenly I can't seem to get enough air in my lungs no matter how hard I try to take more in. My legs are barely good for keeping me upright anymore, let alone walking, so instead of turning away from the window and running until my legs give out and my heart bursts, I just lean my forehead against the cool, clean glass and stare down at the fountain. Every inch of me wants to shut my eyes and block out what I see, but at the same time I can't bring myself to look away.

At some point, I hear Link step forward and try to look out over my shoulder, and in the corner of my eye I see him recoil and stumble back once he does, his chest heaving and his eyes wide as saucers. After that, my eyes drift around of their own accord, lazily shifting from one corpse to another until they land on a lone one on a penthouse balcony no more than a dozen yards away. The pony there—I can't even tell whether it's a mare or a stallion—is lying on their side. A few patchy spots of orangish-yellow fur still cling limply to their flanks, but the rest of their skin is a sickly shade of grayish-green, save for the crusty black scratches and cuts peppering their forelegs and most of their face. Their eyes, glassy and empty though they are, still seem to sparkle and gleam in the light filtering in from overhead, and the longer I look at them, the more they seem to grow, until the only thing that fills my vision is the heartless, bloodless, soulless gaze of terror, of agony, of death in those eyes.

Death. Dead. Everypony from the zep is dead. Everypony in this city is dead. I *should* be dead, and yet I'm not. I *should* be in Haywahi drinking fruit punch by the sea, and yet I'm here, trapped twenty thousand feet under it in a nightmare that refuses to let me go, a nightmare that I have no help of escaping from.

"What is this place?" I whisper so quietly I can barely hear it myself. I can't help asking, because I have no definition left for it, because all the little details and all the big ones have convinced me that I can't, won't, and shouldn't know what to call this place, what to think of this place. And so I close my eyes, and I let my words float off through the window, and I stand and I wait for somepony to answer, for somepony to say something in return.

And just a few moments later, somepony does.

“Chestnut, security’s lightin’ up like the Summer Solstice. Where are you?”

Even with the viewing room being big enough to hold the screen that had covered the window a second ago, Link and I nearly bounce off the ceiling for how high we jump at the sudden intrusion of a voice that doesn’t belong to either of us. But when I whip around with my heart thudding like a hummingbird’s, all I see is Link standing right behind me, his eyes darting around the room just as mine are.

“Chestnut?”

Except now, Link’s eyes are on my chest, where there’s a little golden box hanging on a strap that’s all of a sudden digging into my neck. I still have Chestnut’s radio. Until now, I’d completely forgotten about it.

“Chestnut, you all right? Talk to me, sugarcube, what’s goin’ on?”

It takes me a second, but after a bit of examination, I find the button on the radio that Chestnut pressed when he wanted to talk to the mare on the other end. Once I shake my head and get my thoughts unscrambled a bit, I bend my leg around and reach up to touch it. Before my hoof’s barely even left the carpet, though, the radio launches up from my chest and nearly smacks me in the nose as it flies away, the strap yanking through my hair and sending my braid flopping over my shoulder. It doesn’t take me long to figure out where it’s headed, because it doesn’t have very far to go: by the time I look up, the radio is floating in front of Link’s mouth, with a tendril of the aura surrounding it wrapped around the button on the side.

“Who are you?” he hisses, turning his head away from me when I try to grab the radio back. “Where are we, what the...what the *hell* is this place?”

Even though Link still has the button pressed down, Applejack is still able to talk over him. “How’d you get this radio?” she snaps back, her frustration giving way to anger. “Where’s Chestnut? What did you do with him?”

“Please, we just...” I try to say before Link cuts me off.

“We didn’t do anything to him,” he growls, his voice a lot louder now than it was before. “What the hell do you want from us?”

“I don’t...what in the hay are you talkin’ about?” Now the mare sounds almost offended. Link’s having none of it, though.

“Don’t bullshit me, not again,” he growls back. “Where are we?”

“Would ya just hold up for a sec-”

“No, I don’t wanna hear that shit...” Link mutters.

“You-“

*“I don’t wanna hear that shit again!”*

The mare goes silent, and once his scream echoes itself out, so does Link. The way his eyes are closed so lightly makes it look like he’s calm, but the way his chest shakes every time he takes a breath and the way I can see his jaw clench straight through his cheeks say otherwise. He holds the radio pressed up against his forehead for a moment, and then opens his eyes and lets out a long, quivering sigh.

“No more holding up, no more explaining everything later,” he murmurs through his teeth, his voice gaining strength with every word. “I want some answers. I want somepony to tell me where we are, I want somepony to tell me what the hell we’re doing here, and I’m not gonna sit here for one more second waiting for everypony to quit jerking us off and acting like we don’t need to know!”

“Sugarcube, you’re panicking,” the mare on the radio says slowly, once again returning to that motherly inflection I remember from the influence. “Just calm down for a second and let me-”

“Oh, I’m not calm?” Link shouts. *“I’m not fu-”*

“No, you’re *not* calm, so just shut up and listen before you set off every splicer in the city!” the mare shouts right back, and this time Link finally pays attention. He huffs out another sigh and lets the radio fall away from his mouth, and then the little tendril of magic lying over the talk button lifts off and dissipates. Over on my end, though, I’m starting to wish I’d been a little more careful about who I let monopolize the radio. What the hay are “splicers”? Is that what the thing was that killed Chestnut?

“You want answers? Well, I want ‘em too,” the mare says. “And until I get mine, you ain’t gonna get yours. Got it?”

After a few moments, Link nods, but it takes him a few more moments to realize that the mare can’t see him. “Yeah, I...I got it,” he replies, his voice thin but still quiet and respectful. He hasn’t completely recovered from the peak of his panic, but at least he’s not teetering on the very tip of it anymore.

“Good,” the mare says. “Now where is Chestnut?”

For the first time, Link looks like he almost doesn’t want to reply. “He...” he tries to say. “S-Something got him, I don’t...”

“Is he dead?”

Link lets off the button again, and soft static fills the room. His eyes are closed again, and much tighter this time.

*"Is he dead?"* the mare repeats forcefully. Link still isn't talking, though, and between his outburst and the one I'm about to release all over everypony in earshot, I've officially had it with this little standoff he has going. I grab the radio back from Link before he has a chance to strengthen his grip on it, and when I've got it hung safely around my neck again, I lift it up with my hoof and, after a moment's hesitation where my mind replays the sight of a patch of brown fur sliding past a jagged red hole, press down on the talk button.

"Yes," I say to the mare, my eyes locked unblinkingly on the floor. "He's dead."

At first, I think the mare's gone silent too, but when I bring the radio up to my ear, I can hear her muttering to herself from what sounds like a far distance away, and somewhere in her mumbling I hear that word again: *splicers*. Link's lips are still sealed, but now I've got enough questions of my own to make up for lost time.

"You're the ponies from the bathysphere?" the mare finally says nearly a minute later.

"Yeah, we..."

"Yeah, we are," Link interrupts. He doesn't seem to notice that the radio strap's still around my neck when he pulls it towards him again, so he also doesn't notice the fact that I'm glaring at him. "I'm Link, and she's Ru-"

"So it works, then?"

Once again, Link trails off in mid-sentence. "What?" he asks.

"The thing you came here in, the bathysphere," the mare clarifies. "It worked, right?"

Link shakes his head and gets his tongue tied in a knot, and I take the opportunity that presents itself. "Yeah, it...it worked fine," I tell her. "What does that mean?"

I hear a relieved sigh crackle through the radio, but I don't hear an answer to my question. In fact, I'm not entirely sure the mare on the other end heard me at all. "All right, listen to me," she says in a commanding tone. "I don't know either'a you from apple stalks and I reckon you don't know much about me either, but if either of you wanna get out of there with all your insides in order, you're gonna have to trust me. I promise I'll tell ya anything you wanna know once we get you someplace safe, but right now I ain't got time to talk, and you ain't got time to listen."

"Why the hell no-" Link starts to say, but the mare isn't about to be cut off again.

"Because the longer you stand there shootin' the breeze, the closer the splicers

get to sniffin' you out!" she shouts. Link's teeth clack together as his jaw slams closed, and judging by the way the mare's voice has softened by the time she speaks again, I figure she heard it on her end too. "Look, I know y'all are confused and I know y'all are scared, but I've been down here long enough to know that there's times for standing your ground and fightin', and now ain't one of 'em," she says. "Just do exactly what I say, and you'll be fine. I ain't about to leave you twistin' in the wind."

Link doesn't answer, and I'm pretty sure I know why, because I'm pretty sure we're both thinking of the last pony who told us to do only what he told us to do.

"You still there, sugarcube?"

Link lifts the radio slowly, and I duck my head and let him pull the strap off my neck again. "Who are you?" he asks one last time, his voice barely above a whisper. "What are you trying to do?"

The radio stays quiet for just a bit too long, enough that I'm about ready to be convinced that we're never going to know anything about what or who is down here with us. Just as I start to turn towards the entrance doors, though, a faint crackle slips out of the speaker, and for the first and only time since we first saw this city, somepony answers one of our questions.

"My name's Applejack," the mare says, "and I'm *tryin'* to keep you alive."