

Trees went by in blurs as I sprinted through the grey, dead forest. Bare branches whipped me, making it feel as if my coat was on fire. I didn't bother trying to dodge them, though. One scraped my already sore hindleg, but I kept running. If I stopped or tried to work around them, if I slowed down at all, I might never get the chance to run again.

I wanted to look back to know if we could stop, but I didn't. If I did, they would catch me. They would take me down and drag me back, break my legs and beat me unconscious. They would give me more of that potion. The burning sensation in my throat right now was nothing compared to what it would be with more of that vile, green liquid forced down my throat. The bile that started rising in my throat was almost sweet, compared to the bitter nastiness of the potion. My skin crawled just thinking about it.

My hooves carried me faster and further into the forest, but everything looked the same. I ran and I ran, but it felt like I was getting nowhere. The forest didn't thin out, the grey still remained.

The sound of heavy footsteps and labored breathing reached me. I jerked my head around to see what was chasing me. My heart was still racing, and my breathing was still labored, but it was calming to know that it was Chance following me. His normally clean, white coat was now dirty and matted down with blood and sweat. His eyes briefly fixed on mine before snapping forward once more. We once again began to weave through the trees, despite how terribly we felt.

We were tired. Our legs were on the verge of simply giving up. Our hooves felt like they were about to fall off. We had massive headaches. But we wouldn't stop. We haven't stopped yet.

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Chance and I skidded around the corner of a hallway and ran for the nearest door. I mashed the button on it, praying that it would open quickly. It did, and we charged right into the room, shutting the door behind us. I ran to the section of the room farthest from the door and jumped behind a couch, cowering down behind it despite being overjoyed to have found it. From underneath the couch, I saw Chance slide under a bed on the opposite side of the room just as the door closed. I wanted to shout at him to go further into the room... But I was too afraid for myself to say anything. If he moved, they would find me first; if I spoke, they would hear me.

My heartbeat was so loud in my ears that I could swear it was echoing off the walls. I forced myself to take deep breaths in an effort to calm down, but my heart kept racing. Had we made too much noise? Did they see us run into the room? Should we have kept running?

"Come out, my little ponies! We just want to talk."

My heart skipped a beat and the pounding in my ears stopped. I knew that voice. I knew that voice all too well...

"They can't have gone far. Search the rooms."

I shrank down even further behind the couch. The thudding in my ears resumed, drowning out everything but the sound of approaching hoofsteps. Then I heard the unmistakable hiss of the door sliding open. From underneath the couch, I could see gargantuan, hairless hooves approaching me. Each one hit the floor with an impact like a gunshot.

I jumped out from behind the couch with the hope that I might possibly escape and be able to keep running, but I instead ran head-on into a grimy, gargantuan chest that felt more like a wall of stone. I fell to the ground, trembling as I saw the sneering face and huge, rippling muscles of the monster before me. It towered over me and fixated on me with its bloodshot eyes.

I screamed as the world spun around me. I thrashed, punched, and bit, but the creature holding me acted as if I wasn't even there.

"The unicorn's here, too!" one of the monsters growled above my screams. "Get someone down here to take care of him!" The one holding me hefted me onto his shoulder more firmly. Tears started to roll down my face as it set in that my struggles were truly worthless. "I'll take care of this one!"

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I kept running, pushing even harder to try and go faster, go further. There was no sound of someone crashing through the forest. I could hear breathing -- from Chance and myself -- and a kind of swishing sound as either of us passed by a tree, but it was otherwise quiet. I almost forgot why we were running. Almost.

The forest that blurred by reminded me of the monsters that were chasing us. Both were imitations. They were terribly horrifying imitations. Much like the monsters, the forest was ugly and bare. There were no leaves on the trees, nor grass on the ground, nor flowers on the bushes. Anything that was left was just a dried out husk. There simply wasn't any color in the forest.

I remember that running through the forest was supposed to be fun. This was not fun. The branches whipping me were painful. The animals that we used to run with were gone, dead most likely, just as the plants were. The birds' twinkling chirps were nonexistent. The insects' gentle hum had vanished. The forest was completely silent.

Something caused my to trip, and I rolled and rolled until something crashed into my side. I tried opening my eyes, but open or not, darkness greeted me. My head spun. My side ached. The ground beneath me was very soft...

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The monster took me back into the room I'd already escaped from. The chambers Chance and I were in earlier were still open, and the warning lights on them were still flashing. The one section of the floor was still a steaming crater.

My throat burned from screaming. Tears were streaming down my face, falling onto the hulking, rough monster beneath me. They rolled off of it, running from the monster just as I wished I could.

The room spun around once more. I remember looking out of the chamber, seeing the monster off to the side. The door of the chamber was sliding shut, but it was open just enough. I jumped from the chamber and made for the room's exit.

Pain shot through my left hindleg. Turning around, I saw it caught in the chamber's opening. I yelped in pain and fear, straining and jerking about trying to pull it free. It twisted and it pinched and it burned, but it didn't come loose.

"That was unexpected..." growled the monster. "Aren't you tired yet? Aren't you going to stop trying to run?"

I tugged even harder, trying to break free from the chamber. The pinching force of the door came to a head and I heard a yelp accompanied by a tearing sound. Blood started sliding down my leg, but it was still stuck. I pulled even harder, screaming and crying against the pain and struggling regardless.

The monster snorted. There was a crackling sound, and it spoke once more. "I need someone to bring more of the potion down here before this idiot gets himself *really* hurt."

*"You're going to have to wait,"* came the static-ridden, snively voice of another monster. *"This unicorn is giving us trouble. He's already knocked two others unconscious."*

The monster before me growled. *"Fine! I'll get the potion. You!"*

I turned to meet the creature, who was now face-to-face with me. "Leave me alone!" I spat in his face, screaming weakly and tugging at my leg once more.

Suddenly, I was shoved up against the side of the chamber. My leg was twisted to the point that it felt like something was going to break, and I could hear another tear. I cried out in pain -- a cry that was muffled by the monster's hoof, which was shoved in my mouth.

"You are just going to stay here and wait for me to return! If you go anywhere, you won't have to worry about getting your legs getting trapped in doors anymore!" And with that, he let go,

dropping me back onto the floor. His steps echoed through the rooms as he stomped away.

I hadn't even waited until his hoofsteps dissipated before I pulled on my leg again. Minutes passed. I kept pulling, tugging, turning -- trying anything to break free.

Hoofsteps echoed through the halls once more. I screamed, still frantically trying to pull the leg free. I would do anything to not have more of that potion forced down my throat. Even if I had to hide down here, constantly trying to avoid those monsters, it would be better than that potion.

A hoof -- a normally sized, white hoof -- came around the doorway, followed by an equally white unicorn.

"Chance!" The unicorn jumped at my exclamation. "Chance! Oh, thank Celestia! You have to help me get out of here. They're coming back with... With more of that green stuff!"

He nodded, his horn glowing. I felt the pressure of the door disappear, but it only allowed me to realize the extent of the pain I was in. I was past the point of shock dulling anything. The pain was a piercing, sharp pain. I gritted my teeth and turned to look, nearly getting sick as a result. I quickly turned back and bit down on my hoof, screaming into it to stop myself from announcing my freedom to the whole Stable.

Chance moved over to my leg and started messing with it. I bit down harder on my hoof. Blood started coming out from there, too. I pounded on the floor with my other hoof, forcing my injured one to lie still and not fight it all the while.

Then, in a rush, the pain dulled. It was still there. Something still hurt, but it wasn't as bad. Chance helped me up. I winced as I put pressure on the leg. I looked again, but this time, it appeared not to be damaged. That would have to do.

We left the room in the hopes of finding some other way out, while I still had legs to stand on.

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My head was still spinning, my vision dark. There was only one thing on my mind; I was afraid, and I was running from something. I staggered to my hooves... Or did I just push myself along the ground? I... I couldn't tell where I was. It felt like I was swimming in something. Someone was shouting at me, but it was all muffled, as if I was underwater.

Something touched me. I staggered away again. I couldn't get caught. I didn't want to go back to the Stable. Something touched my face.

A white face broke through the darkness, as did a voice.

*“Odd Job!”*

I could feel things again. There was ground beneath my hooves, so I wasn't swimming. My body was sore and numb all at the same time. I... I felt like I was going to throw up. I could see things, too. Something bright flashed in front of me, pushing the darkness away.

“Keep your eyes open for a second,” said Chance, his voice no longer muffled. The bright light returned, and I squinted, fighting the urge to turn away completely and keep running. The light moved. I followed it. It abruptly disappeared, being replaced with Chance's face. He nodded. “That'll have to do for now.”

We kept moving -- not running, but moving. The forest was quiet, save for our hoofsteps, but we had no idea if those monsters were still chasing us. I kept my head down, making sure that I wasn't constantly looking over my shoulder. If I did, maybe I would see the monster and be able to escape before it got close. Or it would end up being right next to me, stalking me, matching its hoofsteps with mine...

There were no birds in the forest, or squirrels or snakes or bees for that matter. It went hoof-in-hoof with the lack of live plants. Both facts were disturbing. When I was a kid, you had to watch your step because there were so many things crawling around in the grass. It was too quiet with the birds and the insects being gone. No chittering, no chirping, just the soft sound of our hooves.

Neither Chance nor I spoke. I wanted to, though. The silence was getting overwhelming. But if I said something, one of those things would be on us in an instant. I turned around.

Nothing was there.

We kept moving.

“Odd...” muttered Chance. “Do you think this is a dream?”

What was happening right now was too terrifying to be a dream. It was too *real* to be a dream. Dreams were never this vivid. Dreams didn't hurt, or feel, for that matter. When you hit something in a dream, or when something in a dream hits you, you wake up. You never *feel* inside of a dream; things just happen.

“No, I don't think we're in a dream,” I answered, my voice only slightly more than a hoarse whisper.

“Do you think this is real at all?”

... I didn't want to answer. Everything felt so real, but I didn't want it to be real. This place was

terrible. Everything was dead. *Everyone* was dead. I hadn't seen my parents. Chance hadn't seen his parents. There were only those things -- those monsters. And they were still chasing us, but I was too tired to run. I kept thinking that they were behind us, matching their hoofsteps with ours.

I turned around, but I didn't see anything.

My throat was sore.

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My vision was blurry, and my legs felt like they were asleep. There was something soft beneath me... Or under me. I wasn't lying flat on my back, but at some sort of angle. For my legs being so sore, I was oddly comfortable. I felt like falling asleep again.

There was a hissing noise, and fog flooded into the space I was in. The whole cloud started blinking, from white to red, back and forth. There was something ringing in the background. It was a throaty ringing -- high-pitched as it should be, but jarring as someone hacking up phlegm, all at the same time. Some of the fog dissipated, and the ringing came through more clearly. It sounded like an alarm. For what, I had no idea.

A face appeared through the fog, causing me to jump. It wasn't a normal face. You could say that it was a pony, but that would be a *huge* stretch. And that was only based on its appearance.

A hoof -- a hulking, distorted hoof -- reached through the fog and yanked on my shoulder, violently pulling me out of the... Thing I was in. I put my hooves out to steady myself, but they collapsed under me, and my face collided with the floor.

"I *told* you there was something in this room!" said a snively, whiny, guttural voice. "By Tartarus, look at him! Is he still alive?"

"Oh, shut up, you! You're going to scare him! He looks fine to me. Couldn't have been in that thing for more than ten years."

"How would you know?"

"Because I'm about to find out."

There was a stomping sound. I turned my head to see what was happening, only to be flipped roughly onto my back. That thing that was talking moved its face towards mine.

"How long were you in there?"

“Oh, Celestia...” I shrank back, my head colliding with the floor. We were still too close. I fumbled with my legs, scrambling away from that thing. It cocked its head and moved towards me again. “No! Stay back! Get away from me!” I shouted.

“And you thought I was going to scare him,” said another.

The one closest to me turned to other and shouted again. “Shut up!”

They were nearly twins. Ugly, bloated, hairless, monstrous twins. The one that was further back nearly took up the entire doorway. Its eyes were now locked on me. We were getting further away -- oh. I was apparently still scrambling away from them both.

“What... What are you?” I asked, coming to a stop against a wall.

“That doesn’t matter right now,” said the one closest to me. He moved forward in slow, powerful, confident steps, each one ringing like a gunshot in my ear. “Just stop moving. All I want to do is help you!”

“No... *No!*” I shouted, quickly but awkwardly standing up and stepping back to the wall. “Leave me alone! I don’t want your help!”

The monster snorted and shook his head, continuing at a steady pace towards me. Before he could get close enough to touch me, I ran to the left of the room, pushing aside tables and equipment to get to the wall once more.

“Stand still, damnit!” it growled, stepping on -- not over -- and crushing everything I had put in its path. As it stepped onto the sturdy metal table I’d knocked over, it buckled under its hoof.

I panicked and fled around a square metal column that stretched up to the ceiling. The one monster following me around shouted for the other to grab me, and as it moved forward, I made to duck around it and run into the corridor.

I could still feel myself running, but I wasn’t going anywhere. The world was suddenly flipped around. I landed hard on my back, the wind blowing out of me. One of the monsters had pinned me onto the floor, and its face was nearly shoved into mine.

“We didn’t have to do this the hard way!” it shouted, blowing spittle and rancid breath onto my face. It turned, likely speaking to the other monster. “Go get the potion! This one’s not going anywhere!”

I turned my head as far as I could, trying to see where the other monster was going. All I could do was hear his hoofsteps start to fade away. I struggled against the force of the monster pinning me down.

“Why do you keep trying to escape?” it growled. “Did you not hear me say that we were going to *help* you?”

My heart skipped a beat. “Wh... What are you going to do to me?”

It cocked its head to the side for a second. “We’re going to give you a mixture of ours. It should make you... Feel better,” it said, snorting and chuckling weakly.

“I-I feel fine. I don’t need your potion.”

It chuckled once more. “You think you have a say in this. You’re not really in a position to be telling me what I can and can’t do to you.”

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