

Fallout Equestria: Murky Number Seven

Chapter 28: Duty of Care

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“So? What then? Come on, don't hesitate now, tell me! What happened next? You got Xenith's letter telling you when to go, you'd defended everypony who came to Protégé's message, so...did you? Was it time?”

Almost, within hours it would be, yes. We'd won. The war barely noticed our struggle and it raged on a massive scale all around us still, tearing the entire city apart, but we had won our small part. We just had one last thing to prepare before, as you said, 'it'.

“Small part?! It was a miracle what you all did. The Miracle at the Mall, huh? So what was next? The foals?”

Yeah, they were the final piece of it all. Chirpy Sum, Starshine Melody, Lilac Rose and all the others torn from their parents were not going to be left behind. Coral and the other parents with us would never stand for it. Neither would Protégé. Nor any of us, I suppose.

This wasn't our first plan, as you know. First we'd tried to escape after Stable duty. We'd gotten caught. Then we'd planned to try and use the metro tunnels to get outside the walls, until we found that the Outer Metro was just...no. It wasn't possible. Then we had tried to use the portal in Ministry Station, get out of Fillydelphia the way that zebra infiltrators had once gotten in, except Shackles had stolen Aurora's orb from us.

Now, we had another plan.

Get the foals, get to the Wall with enough ponies to work together, blow a hole...and be free. Friendship and hope had carried a group of weary slaves this far, driven by inspiration and a will for freedom. Protégé had given them back their reason to try and soon he would lead them to the barrier that held them in. Now it was just a matter of collecting those that hadn't been able to come to us.

“If you fail...try, try and try again, huh? There's a lot of ponies could do to remember that sort of example when things go wrong. But hang up a tick...you said the foals were being kept in Shackles' slave den in the Inner Metro. That's right beside Ministry Station, wasn't it?”

Shackles' Den was connected to a sealed off portion of the Outer Metro, which led to Ministry Station, that was how they set up shop there after they found it. It's where he took the

ponies he wanted to...to...put into his plans for the Station and the Memory Nexus within it. Where he wanted to try and influence them with Aurora's memory research, teach them to be perfect slaves by imprinting it from a projection orb into their minds...

“The den of evil. This...this isn't going to be a pleasant recollection, is it?”

No.

We were walking into a place where he had free reign. Somewhere hidden away from prying eyes where he could do whatever he wanted, to anyone. This was his dream. Our nightmare.

I'd been horrified on the mountainside when I'd realised his plans for me. How he wanted to use me as his template for the others, break me and store my slave mind on an orb to project to every other slave he brought to the Nexus for 'programming'. It wasn't just the foals, we knew there were dozens of slaves down there, trapped beneath the city in Shackles' madness. If we were getting the foals, we wanted to get them too. Doctor Weathervane felt he had to, his friends were amongst them, he couldn't stop mentioning them over and over about how he had a duty to bring them home.

Foals and slaves who were stuck in hell. The most vulnerable of all ponies in the city. We knew we couldn't leave them. It wouldn't be right.

Yet in doing so, I was about to see the reality of what I'd feared. It would push one of us right to the brink and...and another...well...

If we wanted to save the foals and any other poor souls still trapped in there, then we'd have to go through the darkness he'd created before we could go for that Wall. If we failed in *any* of this, then we'd have a terrible choice to made, because time was running out. Our window was closing to make the attempt.

These were the last hours before we had to start the escape.

This was the deep breath before the plunge.

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No pony would have been shamed for not choosing to go, yet there was no shortage of volunteers.

Parents, siblings and even one grandmother gathered in Protégé's old office. About a dozen in all, backed up by another ten ponies who simply cared enough to want to help. Most of them had firmly tied dressings or hastily washed bandages. Most limped. Yet the fire in their

eyes made it clear. These ponies were the willing ones. The ones who would go to any length to get those foals back.

And I was proud to stand with them.

At the head of the office, Protégé laid out a map of Fillydelphia upon his desk. He had to clear debris from it, for the room was strewn with holes from the heavy machine gun that had battered the Mall. Through the gaps you could see the entire spectacle of the war played out across rooftops and streets in all directions. Every so often the room would light up as something in the distance erupted, or a gust of wind would race past us in the wake of some skyship roaring overhead at roof level.

Truth be told, replace the rocks with books and it didn't look too different from how tidy Protégé normally kept it. The thought managed to bring a weary smile to my face as I hopped my front hooves up to see the map on the tall desk. I only felt slightly put out that Unity was just tall enough to not need to do the same.

Only *slightly*.

"We aren't looking for a firefight." Protégé spoke gently, his voice hoarse and (as I had learned) his head thumping hard from the throw Wildcard had given him. "We raid them. I spoke to Brimstone Blitz on this, and he recommends making an intimidating push to get past any defences and then leaving as fast as possible before they have time to organise themselves. We go in, rush the doors, get the foals and anypony else still trapped down there, then we get back here in time for, well..."

"In time for the zebra's signal."

To my left, Coral Eve and Weathervane stood amongst those slaves determined to reclaim those they had lost to Shackles' dark lair down there. It had been Coral who spoke up, her eyebrows lowering with doubt.

"I don't know what she was trying to think, what kind of clue is that? Why even a clue?"

"I believe she was being literal." Protégé cut in. "I don't know what exactly she meant, but the way she spoke, it didn't leave much doubt that whatever it is, they have big plans that she couldn't dare pass along to us. Whatever it is, she said we'd know. Then she handed me the note and left. First time I'd ever heard her speak, so I was too taken aback and exhausted from the battle to ask questions."

"Hmph..." Coral snorted and continued, "so long as you're sure. You've seen us right this far."

Anyone who knew her couldn't help but turn in surprise. I was sure if Protégé hadn't taken his eyepiece off, it would have popped off in surprise to hear that from the same mare who had not too long ago threatened to liquefy him with magic on a train car.

"My little boy is in there, Protégé..." Coral's voice was dangerous, "I know you can plan well. I'm not going to disrespect anything now. Not when we're so close."

"We'll get him, Coral Eve." Protégé nodded softly. "We'll get them all."

There was a half-hearted round of cheering. They were willing, but they were also all exhausted.

"I'll bring three of my best with me, along with some nurses," Weathervane spoke up, "if what I hear about that underground slave den is true, many of them may not be able to make the journey without help. I know you're all keen to get your foals back, but everypony's going to have to help to carry the sick and injured out of there. If your foal can walk, they walk. Yeah, call me the cold bastard if you want, but I have my own friends in there to bring out, so don't dare think I'm pulling your dicks about this."

The ghoul snarled on the spot, his leathered and cracked skin crinkling and stretching into a hideous mask of pain and anger. Those around him quickly backed off in worry, as his eyes slightly glazed for a second.

"I will...save them...last thing..."

The memory of his friends, the old hospital workers, was still fresh to me after seeing their broken bodies in the metro mines, held to life only by the eternal death of their ghoul state. No normal pony would have survived what they'd been through. Now I saw a pony who knew his last remaining friends were finally within his reach to save.

"If there's a pony in there who isn't in Shackles' service. They're coming out." Protégé spoke up for Weathervane in the silence after the ghoul shuffled away from the table. "Coral, you have made it clear you'll be going, so we'll need you to kick the door in if we can't make a quiet entry. Murky, Unity and Weathervane have also elected to come. Sunny will lead the Mall while we're away."

I knew he'd have preferred it to be List Seeker or Brimstone, possibly Glimmer. Unfortunately, those three wouldn't be in action for a while.

Protégé briefly glanced at me with a thankful smile as he pointed out the route on the map to the others, an old pre-war aerial shot of Fillydelphia marked with my charcoal to show post-war changes. I'd been asked to go because I knew the entrance tunnels there and what to

expect, even if I'd never been inside the place. I'd been sat with Unity when he asked and told me I could say no and he wouldn't think any less of me, but there wasn't any way I wasn't going.

I felt dearly about foals. I knew Starshine Melody and Lilac Rose were in there, the two little ghouls I'd helped save from slavers or fanatical crater ghouls. Not to mention Coral's son. I wanted to help. I'd spent enough days as Shackles' plaything to want to help any other slave he had for himself down there. They didn't deserve to go through what I had.

From beside me, I saw Unity shivering. She had volunteered, saying she felt guilty to be one of the more able bodied ponies left if she didn't, but I knew she was scared. Anypony would be.

This was Chainlink Shackles' personal lair.

The cold shot of terror passed down my spine. I imagined him chasing us out of there as we fled, coming right up behind us as we returned to the Mall and had to make a desperate flight for the Wall, hoping we got out before he caught up.

I looked out the hole in the office, watching Fillydelphia consume itself in war between sky and ground. Amongst the shattered buildings and slowly toppling metalworks, amongst the crashed ruins of skyships and frantic firefights...he was out there.

Chainlink Shackles was out there.

And for once, we were going to *him*.

Somehow, it didn't feel heroic at all.

"We'll leave in an hour. Gather what you can from the armoury and bring any medical supplies we don't need here. Until then, get some rest."

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While there would always be distant sound in Fillydelphia or the ambient noise worried slaves surrounding us, there was for once at least a sense of quiet in the aid station. Ponies rested and recovered, either asleep from Weathervane's magic or simply wanting to appreciate a hushed moment to let the horrific rush of the last day finally ease off.

Between Glimmerlight and myself, sitting back to back on her bed, there was only the sound of clicking mechanical tools and the soft rub of charcoal on paper.

That was just the kind of moment of comfort I needed. To feel my sister at my back, and the drawing before me and imagine there was nothing else in the world for just a little while. I

couldn't have slept even if I wanted to. Instead, I drew pictures of what I remembered the world outside to be like. Tall and thick lines captured the sky-rises of Manehattan, while lightly-strung curves and long motions created the rolling expanse of the Equestrian heartlands. After a moment of deliberation, I leaned forward and softly drew lines from the sky beaming down. What I imagined sunlight to be.

When the sky returns...

Behind me, Glimmer groaned as she flexed her legs out and caused her thickly bandaged torso to bend at the wound, before she settled and I felt her rest her back against mine once more, avoiding the side with that recently closed gash from Wildcard's savage attack.

"Whatcha' drawing, lil'bro?"

"Outside."

I felt her shift again, carefully turning her body to look over my shoulder.

"Looks like home."

"Really?" I looked up at her face, my eyes widening slightly. I'd just been guessing what out there might look like these days.

One of her front legs hooked around my shoulders to tap the page of my journal over the Manehattan skyline.

"I used to see that every morning. Even when I had left, I still saw it in the distance all the time. Hard to miss. Seeing it again there, at this time? Makes me think we'll make it."

That brought a warm little feeling to my gut. It wasn't often others saw my drawings, less often that I heard someone really connect to them.

"Hey, Murky?" Glimmer spoke while facing away, but I felt her lean backwards, the back of her head lightly touching the rear of mine.

"Yeah?"

Glimmer hesitated before speaking quietly, "It's been a hell of a journey for us, hasn't it?"

Placing down the charcoal, I nodded, "Mhm."

"Never would have thought it when I met that little defeated colt of a pony sitting on a sofa beside me downstairs. Damn...all the stuff we've been through together. Glimmer and

Murky against the world, huh? The escape attempts, the moments when each of us started losing hope, the battles and digging into the past to find a way to our own future...and now here we are.”

My sister sighed and continued, “It all just kept getting worse for a while. I lost count of the amount of times I thought that was it, but now we can see the finish line. We're ready to escape together, ready to be free at last.”

Her voice sounded disbelieving on those last three words. I could hear very clearly the pang of emotion or dire want. We all felt it, the wish that slaves rarely dared to think might actually happen. To finally escape all the pain. Every time I thought we'd made it before, the doors had slammed shut again. But every time, I'd had her to come back to, and know I wasn't alone.

A momentary worry shot through me. Out there, we'd all be free but what then? One particular worry seemed silly, and I regretted saying it the moment I did, but still the words came out.

“Will...will we still be around one another when we're out?”

Glimmer perked up, before lifting up from our 'back to back' sitting and giving me a shocked look.

“Murky...we're friends. Beyond friends. Hell, we're basically family now.”

She leaned in and clasped a hoof around my shoulders.

“And friends don't leave one another. We're the dream team, remember? You and I. It's gonna be like this long after Fillydelphia is just a bad memory. Just think, we're still both young. Sure...Filly really fucked up the first quarter or so of our lives, we can't ever fix that, but there's still the whole rest of them to go.”

Her cheek rubbed against the top of my head.

“Just imagine how we'll be making good memories. Better memories than these ones, and I promise it'll be a wild ride. Big sis' is gonna make sure you see it all! La vie Equestria! Nights on the town. Building our new homes. Seeing the world. Trying all the foods. Meeting mares...and stallions. Enjoying *life*. We've got *all* that to look forward to and catch up on...and we're gonna do it together.”

She held her hoof out, a sincere but goofy grin on her lean and bruised face.

After a second, I smiled and knocked my own little hoof against hers.

“BSBFF?”

“Always, lil'bro.”

Carefully, wary of her injuries, I leaned into her light hug. There were a lot of things that I'd come to realise I should be thankful for, but Glimmer really was one of the most important.

“What are you two chatting about, hmm?”

We separated, as I turned and saw Unity trotting her way toward Glimmer's bed. Behind her, Coral Eve and Brimstone were trailing along.

“Funny thing is,” Unity began, “we all were coming to see you separately, Glimmer. Just met in the corridor. Guess Murky just got here first?”

For a moment, I genuinely thought Glimmerlight was going to cry on the spot at seeing her friends gather around her while injured, before she sucked it up and dragged some cushions over with her magic for the others to sit on.

“We...” she had to pause and sniff, “we were just talking about all the crazy stuff we're gonna do afterwards. I was gonna start telling him about all the plans I had for a new home too. Was speaking to Brim and everything about it, find a place he knows raiders won't bother with, but hopefully close enough to be a part of the main settlements this time, not isolated like before.”

“New home, huh?” Coral genuinely smiled, a rare expression for her. “A chance to start from scratch, that feels right after all this. I don't think I could go back to Creaky Hollow and rebuild. After this is all over, a clean break is the right thing. Start all over again.”

Coral smiled at me, “And do it right for everyone this time.”

I felt myself blush a little, being surrounded by the warmth of friends. I coughed and raised my hoof to talk.

“So what...what would you do, Coral?”

“Me?” She raised her eyebrows. “Well, you haven't gotten to know half of me yet, dear. I used to care for the foals if their parents were away, help them learn. I could set up a small school. And as Glimmer can confirm, you'll want me cooking for the town.”

“Oh...my...goodness...Coral you evil pony now I'm thinking of your fruit stew...” Glimmer exaggerated holding her stomach in dire want, a cheeky smirk on her face.

Coral chuckled, she looked slightly awkward, still trying to get used to communicating with her old friend again. "I could certainly set up a cook house, attract traders and caravans with the promise of hot food on the road."

I couldn't deny it, my stomach fiercely rumbled at the thought. Proper food. A lifelong dream to want regularly. A town with no more slop or scraps.

"Get that set up, you'll have all the slaves wanting to join you there." Unity giggled to herself.

"They can come. Five isn't enough to start a town after all." Coral patted Unity's hoof. "So what about you, little miss?"

Unity suddenly looked very on the spot, her cheeks flushing, before composing herself, "Well...I...I'd have to go home. Friendship City, I mean. My parents will probably want me to stay there a while but...I'd...well...I'd love to come live with you all."

If I wouldn't have felt too awkward with it, that awesomely cute 'nervously asking' smile of hers would have made me launch myself across the room to hug her. I couldn't even deny that thought slightly.

"I can make trinkets, ones that make you feel like somepony's there. It's my talent, a little memory magic. Especially now Aurora Star's given me, well, spells she knows...I feel like I could make them better than ever. Oh, I think I explained it before though so, sorry...I mean, I could set up a shop of them? I used to sell them to long haul traders who missed their family on the road. Murky?"

On cue, I brought out the Littlepip statuette she'd made me. Unity's magic lifted it away from me to show.

"I know it's silly, but I do like little unquities and odd things. I could make a little shop of random items and run it to help contribute?"

"That'd be lovely." Coral Eve held the Pip statuette in her hooves. "Your talent is a beautiful thing."

"Oh...thanks." Unity blushed a little, before floating the trinket back to me.

I couldn't *not* feel Glimmer making a not-so-subtle elbow jab into my side, before she looked at Brimstone.

"So, big boy? What's your take? Retirement home?"

“Funny.” Brimstone slowly and flatly responded. “Feel like I want to give back. Something simple. Farming.”

“Yes, I can clearly see those dinner plates you call hooves gently pressing seeds in.”

“Earth pony, Glim. Just you wait and see. You think those dumb bastards in raider clans knew how to farm without us smarter ponies showing them?”

Brim winked. Or blinked. Come to think of it, I couldn't tell any more with him.

Regardless, without saying it specifically, he'd answered my question from before. The big guy was coming with us.

“How very practical, Brim.”

“Sure, Glim. And I imagine you'll be repairing my tools and being the town mechanic?” Brimstone smirked on one side of his cracked jaw.

“Nah, think I'll be mayor.”

There was a sudden outcry of laughter that set nurses hushing us from around the aid station, with Glimmer at the middle raising her hooves.

“What? Whaaat? Hey, if we're dreaming here, I'm gonna dream big! Just you all watch! This town's gonna be huge. Mayor, sheriff, something! Sure, I'll build all the contraptions you need to cook or farm or for water...but I told you *all!* I'm a pony everybody should know, the type who knows all the little things. Any one of you know how to get news onto the radio from afar? How to admin a caravan stop? How to make Brahmin moo louder? Thought not! I'm gonna go get myself elected! First rule of Glimmerville? Less rules! All ex-slaves get a free drink every second Tuesday while Sunday will henceforth be known as 'Cakeday'.”

I had to hold on to her to not slip and fall from my aching body laughing. My cheeks hurt, but yet somehow I didn't disbelieve her.

Besides, that drink rule sounded good.

Unity smiled at me, struggling not to keep laughing and looking like she was genuinely interested in hearing my thoughts. “Ahaha...hey...hah...Murky? What would you want to do?”

Of course. I was the one in here who'd never gotten a chance to make anything of it before.

“I...”

Suddenly I noticed everyone else looking at me.

“I...I'd like to...help everypony.”

There was a moment where they didn't seem to understand. Gathering my words, I sat upright and held my journal to my chest.

“I've always had a job, all my life. Someone telling me what to do. I want to...to be able to choose what I do each day.”

Gulping, I continued.

“I'd like to just have no plan, s-sorry if that sounds not as...as helpful and dedicated as any of you. But it's what I want. If I wanted to come help sell things in Unity's shop or...or help make the evening's meals with Coral. I could help Brim plant seeds or gather the food or even help Glimmer with whatever trouble she gets up to each day.”

I snickered slightly at that, trying to make a joke. The others giggled slightly, and I felt Glimmer nudge me from behind.

“Lil'bro...not a single pony would look down on you for that. It's a big step for you. You do what you want until you feel settled and safe, and if you ever think of what you want to do...we'll all support you in doing it.”

There was a brief, almost embarrassing round of nods and muttered agreements from the others. I felt like I'd just killed the mood, so I pushed myself to comment on something else.

“Well...I mean...I could always draw pictures to put around town or sell in Unity's shop? I could decorate the houses or sew or...things, you know? Maybe even an art gallery...”

“With some of your pictures we'd have half the stallions in the wastes in.” Glimmer snorted.

I immediately blushed as I heard the others chuckle, before my ears quickly picked up someone approaching.

“If you're okay with an art gallery...”

Across the aid station, we saw Protégé shuffling over to us with an apprehensive, cautious look on his face.

“...then perhaps, if you would all permit me, there could be a library too?”

In the short silence, I knew only to do one thing.

I hopped off the bed, trotted over and gratefully hugged him to tell him that yes.

Yes, there could be.

* * *

Within the hour, we had gotten underway with little fanfare.

Leaving the rear of the Mall via our old cell's now unblocked door, we headed out into the madness unfolding around us. The sky was filled with the contrails of passing skyships, artillery shells and glimmering sections of burnt air from energy weapons, all beneath a mixed hue of red and orange. The clouds had turned to a colour of ash as smoke rose and mixed with them. The war had moved to other sections of the city, adding an eerily distant echo to the sounds of fighting, mixed with shockingly sharp reminders as something passed over our heads or the sight of Enclave Troopers rocketing by made us all duck behind the old generators out back.

It wouldn't do to get caught up in all that again. We had to avoid the front lines, skirt the edges of war zones and find a path to the metro entrance unmolested if possible.

Protégé, Coral, Unity and Weathervane were with me, alongside other ponies split between Weathervane's medical team, relatives of the foals and those who simply wanted to help out.

The one unexpected addition however, had come just as we were about to leave.

“Good golly, Miss Fluttershy! Isn't this the most wonderful of holiday treks? Such ambience!”

In the distance, an old radio tower of Red Eye's was cleaved in two by a spinning and flaming skyship torn from the sky by anti-aircraft fire. The ground shook as the metallic pillars crumbled around the hull of the ship and brought both crashing to the ground at the edge of the crater.

I heard Mister Peace make an artificial sound of somepony taking a deep and relaxed breath as the smoke and dust cloud it kicked up washed over us, his monitor on the front displaying a cigar chewing veteran in utter relaxation.

“A museum of natural beauty.”

“You, um, you really didn't have to come, you know?” I spoke as we quickly hopped through the chain fence at the rear of the Mall's grounds one by one. “We're not really going to war...there shouldn't be any fighting if we're lucky and-”

“A NONSENSE!” He thrust an arm to the sky. **“We are IN war, Miss Fluttershy! What kind of a stallion-like-facsimile with three years extra warranty -that I suspect is expired-would I be to permit such a gentle mare to wander alone into this? Why, you could have quite the boo-boo without me around.”**

I bit my tongue at correcting him as to my status as a stallion myself, feeling a little pang of guilt. It had been easy to start thinking of Mister Peace as another friend, an ally. He was. But it was always 'Miss Fluttershy'. Wires crossed to believe I was a Ministry Mare because I'd sounded a bit like her once.

I thought of him as a genuine ally, but that's where the guilt lay. I felt like I was taking advantage of him every so often.

“Why, I do believe all your little animal friends must be terrified, Ma'am. I shall endeavour to commence [ANIMAL CARE PROGRAM NOT FOUND] as soon as we find them. I am delighted that so many have come to join us!”

He grabbed the fence we were slowly crawling under and haphazardly tore it clean from the ground before hurling it across the yard, leaving a shocked Unity lying on her back, having been half way under the fence.

“Thank...thank you?”

“You are welcome, friend of Fluttershy! You. Are. Welcome.”

He rolled onwards as Unity stood up and looked at me with quite the query in her eyes.

All I could do was made a half-hearted shrug and watch the big machine trundle on into the fringes of a city at war.

* * *

Protégé and I gazed at the streets ahead of us in their wrecked glory. What had once been crudely rebuilt and bearing old scars long since 'cleaned' up now lay ruined all over again. It was a subtle, but noticeable difference. More debris lay untouched, bullet holes and energy sears coated walls and great swathes of knocked down homes were no longer all in one direction away from the crater, but instead lay in chaotic patterns. I could have sworn I'd been through this street before, but it was now impossible to tell.

We tried to go to the sewers we'd used before and use them to navigate unseen across the city. Unfortunately, that hadn't ended quite how we wanted. While we had been able to piece our way through quiet areas to the sewer entrance, we had quickly discovered that it had caved in about half a kilometre into the tunnels. It had gotten us out of the area around the Mall and it would help on the way back with the trapped slaves, but it meant we'd have to go above ground.

That meant going through areas with fighting. In the next street over, I could hear the dirty cough of wasteland weapons and the whip-crack of lasers sporadically; while up ahead a group of soldiers were trying to tow a large gun. Up above a V-shape formation of griffins soared and quickly veered away as a heavy roaring of artillery shells passed through their airspace. Like runaway trains, the rounds passed above us and impacted a long way from us. The rumble and sound reaching us long after the flash had erupted from over the rooftops. Distantly, I could hear the shouting of the ponies towing that gun as they passed around the corner.

I knew the metro was in the next neighbourhood over, a ten minute trot without interruptions, but felt like it was as far away as Manehattan when thinking of walking through all that.

"Stick low, everyone." Protégé spoke cautiously. "The longer we can stay unseen, the better. This isn't our war."

Gradually, we crept out from the sewer station we'd come up in and began to work our way down the street. We hadn't even gotten fifty meters before the sound of a skyship made us all flee for the station or nearby shop fronts. I huddled in below an old wagon with Protégé, as we saw the black shape in the sky bank and dive toward the road end. Glittering energy blasts erupted from it with a sound like the roar of a dragon at some target I couldn't see.

"Come on, come on!" Coral pulled herself out of the empty window she'd leapt through and started to rouse everyone. "We're in more danger if we stay still. The faster we get there, the faster we can get away from this place!"

With her authoritative voice, we got underway again. In single files we moved down either side of the street, so that we could quickly hide in the buildings if need be. Stepping over rubble and ducking the fallen lamp-posts and collapsed walkways, as we gradually moved into what seemed to be a market street. The bodies of several soldiers lay scattered around here, and some of the slaves behind me relieved them of their weapons as they ran past. All the sounds all felt closer; every bombing run and firefight being louder and more threatening.

Looking up ahead, one of the burning buildings slowly began to collapse and spill its framework onto the street with a shower of sparks and embers. Past it, the market opened out onto a long square. After a few seconds, it clicked in my mind, I knew that one! If we passed

through it, then the metro entrance was only a couple streets over! We could be there quickly! Hastily, I patted Protégé on the back to get his attention and pointed with a nod.

“All right...” He whispered, “let's-”

Up ahead, we saw figures coming toward us. Half hidden in the smoke that drifted lazily from the flaming household, they came in ones and twos.

“Get cover! Hurry!” Protégé pulled me by the saddle behind an overturned scrap-wagon, the kind I used to pull, one of a group that had been abandoned by slaves in the street.

Peering up, I watched the shapes approach.

They were Red Eye's soldiers, or Stern's soldiers...whichever it was now. Their movement was hasty, before I realised they were fleeing.

They passed the market square we were headed for just as the first burst of energy fire rang out. Ducking down harshly, my whole body reacting to the sound of close gunfire, I realised that none of it was coming at us.

Then I heard the soldiers screaming, and looked up.

Their sources hidden from my view, searing blasts of energy were stabbing out from the market square. Greens and reds lit up the smoke in weirdly colourful hues as the weapons did their grisly work. The soldiers had gotten caught in the open and even as I watched were cut down one by one. I could see the energy shots chasing individuals, concentrating with horrifying precision to make the kills. They all emerged from somewhere off to the left, from an unseen part of the market hidden by the edge of the street we were in.

It stung me to hear their panicked yells as some tried to take cover while others simply put their heads down and galloped. One even tried to surrender, but the Enclave clearly had their orders. The laser fire intensified, more and more joining it.

By the Goddesses, there must have been well over twenty of them out there shooting.

Two of the soldiers made it across, out of the ten or so who'd made the attempt. They fled up the street we were coming down, heading right for us. The laser fire started to angle, as the hidden Enclave started to chase the soldiers.

The soldiers who were fleeing right toward us.

That cold wash of fear dropped down hard, and as I looked around, I saw I wasn't the only one. Our group was starting to slowly back off and stagger backwards. We heard the

soldiers see us and shout for help, thinking us to be allies. They were coming right to us, drawing the Enclave in.

Then we saw the first of the black armoured figures appear at the end of the street beside the market.

And they saw us.

“RUN!”

I didn't even know who'd shouted it, but we turned and fled directly back down the street. I got my little legs firing hard as I put my head down and fought the horrible game that I always seemed to have to play, to be able to keep up with larger ponies when something was chasing us! My muscles felt rigid and stiff and my wings wobbled and twitched in fear as ponies rushed past me, close enough to bump into me in their effort to not get left behind.

The first laser blasts begun to sting the ground around us as the Enclave took to the air and soared after us. Spinning on his chassis, Mister Peace unleashed a furious burst of heavy rounds after them that set the Enclave spinning in the air to avoid it, delaying their pursuit.

Turning back to keep running, I only saw smoke and dust and ponies leaping rubble or veering across one another to not be an easy target. Up ahead, another of those roaring freight train like sounds grew and grew before an old bank down the street from us had its front end explode into the street with a shock that knocked us all from our hooves. Wood and brick fell like rain, and I curled up as heavy bits of debris fell either side of my head.

Staggering, I was disoriented and nauseous. The shockwave had tossed my stomach and I found myself retching on the ground. Two more explosions rippled over us as something hit one block away. With red eyes, I tried to see where I was. The fighting on the street over had only grown louder. Up ahead, I could see battle saddle laden soldiers moving down the other side of the street, pinning us between them and the Enclave. Two or three griffins bounded across the rooftops, firing into the sky. The war front was moving into this zone!

“Get up! This way! THIS WAY! Get into the smoke! We have to get out of here!”

Coughing, finding somepony yanking me to my hooves, we headed into the smoke cloud, praying it might hide us from the Enclave coming up the street behind us. We crammed onto the far side of the street as rounds started to pass either way between the Enclave and the soldiers. A firefight was brewing, and we only wanted out of it.

The pony pulling me pushed me ahead, and I saw Protégé standing beside the bank that had just been annihilated seconds earlier. He was waving down the alleyway beside it, to get us off this street. We passed foul garbage containers and low barred windows as rubble tinkled

around us from the unsteady and tall building to our left, before we emerged into the wagon park behind it. Ranks of long rusted wagons, unusable and rotten, lay toppled on the other side of the alleyway.

“Coral, block the way through!” Protégé fiercely pointed to the unsteady walls of the bank.

The blue haired unicorn looked from the bank to the wagon park, before clenching her teeth. Even amongst the pressure and choking atmosphere of the war, I felt my hairs stand on end as the air around us thickened and I quickly warded everypony away from her.

Then, with a snap of magical force, she unleashed her unsubtle power. A telekinetic wave caught up the wagons ahead of her, hurling them into the side of the bank with enough force to crack the one remaining steady pillar. I covered my ears as they crumbled against it, smashing concrete back into the building interior and removing the last supporting pillar.

A few pebbles became a rushing avalanche of wood and stone. The entire side of the bank came down and filled the alleyway we'd passed through. Air rushed over us as bits of the walls pinged off our sides and heads.

Behind it, there came a furious exchange of gunfire, as the two sides met one another in front of the bank. Already, the air was filled with artillery and air strikes being called in to decimate one another, as the war spread through this area.

We didn't hang around long. We had to find another way to the station. Hopping the fence to an old play park, we decided to try the next street over, hoping to stay ahead of the advancing noises of battle behind us.

* * *

My muscles ached. Not from the numerous bouts of running or diving onto hard floors to hide from passing soldiers, but from the constant unspecified terror.

It was a weird feeling. As though every muscle was clenched so hard, waiting for it all to go mad around us, that I was hurting myself from staying too tense. It was exhausting me, wearing on me to be this close to it all. I could hear mortar impacts coming down just a few hundred metres away in a steady *crump crump crump* pattern, aiming at Enclave we'd seen on a rooftop across the park behind the building we now hid in. The slaves with us were, almost bizarrely, watching as an escaped herd of Brahmin stampeded down the street, aimless and trying to avoid all the noise.

Yet we were almost there. Up ahead I could see the entrance to the metro. Behind us the advancing wall of combat as Fillydelphia's defenders were being pushed back was still

coming, but hopefully would pass over us while we were underground. It made sense to me that the Enclave wouldn't go down there, their strength was the air. The defenders however, were a bigger worry. We'd need to be careful to not get trapped between fleeing soldiers and Shackles' slavers.

I could see the old staff building beside the metro. That was my goal. Protégé had asked me to lead us to that instead, to 'circumvent the main opposition at the primary entrance'. (I was fairly sure he was just showing off with that first word.)

It made sense though, and I agreed entirely. It was how I'd gotten in before.

"Um...okay. Follow me?"

Taking the route through the cafe's old conservatory area, I began to skirt the edge of the streets, giving the main entrance a wide berth. I could see a couple fallen Enclave troopers in the middle of the road. They *could* have just fallen there from the sky, or the whole main metro entrance *could* be a big trap that they got caught in.

I wasn't a soldier, but I also wasn't stupid. So I took everyone on a long route that used the opposite side of the street's alleyways and back gardens to make my way toward the staff building and the little sneaky way I knew in. I knew that-

Freezing on the spot, I slowly lowered myself to the ground.

Protégé's hoof had landed on my back. He'd started doing that to silently alert me if the EFS tracker in his eyepiece picked anything up.

"Ere! Ere! Where you been?" A slaver's rough voice.

They were right above us on the upper floor!

There was a rough crackle of a radio. I looked back at Protégé and mouthed, 'how many?'

His hoof tapped me four times. It was amazing how in just under an hour we'd already started to work out ways to survive in a war zone. Even after all our fighting, this felt different. We felt alien and isolated. Back then we'd had direction and a defended position. Out here we were just another exposed little group lacking many of the good fighters we'd had back then. We'd seen numerous individual ponies out there, pulling away from windows when they saw our group, or fleeing with a bag of belongings into an alleyway. We weren't much different from them, really. Without a goal, we might have been doing the same right now.

Behind me, everyone else had ducked down and was looking upwards with their weapons ready. Mister Peace was staying still as a robot could, almost looking deactivated.

We could easily overpower them, but we'd be giving away the game as to us being here. What if they had a radio to warn those inside?

Grabbing my journal, I started to sketch down words to the best of my knowledge. Struggling, thinking; I scrawled three words down and showed them to everyone.

mov wen xploshun

I felt oddly proud of working such a big word in there (And getting it spelled right, I was sure!), more-so when everypony nodded without needing to ask what it meant. This time, the clap on the back from Protégé wasn't a signal, and the brief smile he had proved it.

Then we waited.

“Aye, the mills are a write off, mate! The pegabastards had too much open skies there, we're havin' to draw them into tall areas where we can keep them from flying far out and shooting down. Force them to come lower to see us, or better yet, inside! That's what Stern's saying to everyone, get them on the ground somehow, but she went dark about an hour ago. Yeah...yeah...no fuckin' clue, mate. We...shit!”

I heard the whistling just before he commented on his radio above us. The roaring of an incoming Enclave air strike. It hurtled above us, burning the air as it passed with that flaring energy power their weapons had. Forcing myself to grit my teeth and pray it didn't land here, I moved forward and stopped when it passed away, aimed somewhere else.

That became my life for the next half an hour. Moving a few feet every time a skyship passed, a bomb dropped or the massive AA cannon on a nearby rooftop opened up. We moved right under their noses into an old greenhouse out back. While it may have once been a glass structure, it was nothing but a ruin of thin metal wire and shards now to creep through. While waiting, I caught myself looking around while holding painfully still, wondering if it had once supplied food to the café.

Time passed aching slowly. Outside, an ambulance wagon went hurtling down the street, carrying wounded soldiers and (to my surprise) even an Enclave trooper. Ten minutes later, a small group of slaves came trotting past, before being startled by something and rushing away into a garden. As we advanced, I crept out of the greenhouse and into the next building to find a general store.

Eventually, slowly, I figured we were far enough away, and we departed for the next alleyway. Passing through it, we made our way to the bridge across the road to use its solid barriers as cover to cross it and eventually, mercifully, reached the staff building of the metro.

Briefly, I remembered the audio-diary I'd found in here once of ponies fearing the balefire siren tests. They'd said if it was a single note then it was a drill, but if it ever rose and fell then it was for real.

That same siren was playing a single note for very real now. Presumably someone in this blasted future didn't know that.

Those noises heralded a world of nightmares was approaching for ponies back then. It seemed worryingly appropriate for where we were going now.

* * *

The miners were gone.

Detaching my saddle from the rope, I immediately rushed to the side of the doorway out into the metro tunnels and listened. On the way down I knew they were gone. I'd have heard them if they'd been here.

Cautiously peeking my head out, I began to descend the stairs to the metro lines. I'd been sent in ahead of the others to check if the way was guarded. The others would follow in a few minutes, giving me time to rush back if we had to call things off. If all was clear, then we'd open the main entrance to the metro and bring the full group in through there. There was no way that frail ponies like Weathervane or massive machines like Mister Peace could handle a rope slide and then these long neglected stairs.

As though to reinforce my point, those same stairs creaked and swayed under even my weight. I could see the small flakes of rust floating off them as I crept my way down to the tunnel levels.

Eventually, after a few levels, I found myself in the small maintenance room I'd hid in before when investigating this place. After a moment or two to collect my breath, I poked my head out.

Just as I'd thought, they were gone.

The twin tunnels that made up the Inner Metro's construction stretched out to either side in slowly sloping arcs. Where once there had been lines of malnourished, sick and slowly dying slaves lining the walls beside the rails there were now only discarded tools and lengths of chain. Every so often, fragments fell from the ceiling from the warfare overhead, slowly covering every

mine cart, train carriage and lonely pickaxe in a soft blanket of fine dust. If it weren't for my recent knowledge, I'd have assumed this place hadn't been touched in months.

Already, I began to feel a worrying grip on my heart. This didn't bode well. This *really* didn't bode well.

Stepping out, I scampered into the nearest and darkest shadow to crouch and hold myself to the wall. Shivering, I peered down the opposite side's tunnels and saw, once again, nothing. No ponies. No sound. Just a dead metro junction filled with distantly echoing sounds.

The entrance to Shackles' slave den lay between both tunnels ahead of me now. Its metal doors were tightly shut with no lights illuminating it like there once had been.

Maybe I should have-

Beep!

I stopped dead, and then bounded back into the maintenance room again, pulling the door shut as fast as I dared without making a slam.

Beep!

My heart pounded. Beeps? No, please no! I smelled the air, taking long sniffs, waiting for that dreaded tinge. I was sweating. How could they have-

Beep!

Click.

It took a second for the panic to subside, before I realised what I was hearing. It had felt like so long, I hadn't even given it a second thought and assumed it was the sound of those horrid things. It wasn't the nightmares from lower down. It was Sundial.

"Hey! Hey! Wait up!"

I spun the volume dial down. I'd had it up because of the hell going on above us, but down here it had been shockingly loud. In this desolate metro, hearing his voice was oddly soothing, like an old friend.

"Phew...Aurora runs faster than I do. We've stopped, she's gone ahead to check something. I don't even know why I'm turning this on now, but I worry it might be the last chance I get...we're going back to Ministry Station."

With the volume low enough to only be heard by me, I moved back out into the metro tunnels. Slowly, I started weaving between the train cars, staying hidden as I scouted it out and listened for anyone else in the area, or any sign of the slaves and foals.

"It's crazy. I barely even understand it all. I just...I just wanted to work hard and get a Stable ticket for Skydancer. That's all I wanted! Just some peace of mind, but I just kept falling deeper and deeper, and things only got bigger and bigger."

A pang of hurt shot through me, I knew that feeling. I had just wanted out, but now it was all this too. War and secrets and factions. Swallowing the emotion, I zig-zagged between pillars to check the nearest tunnel, finding only scraps and bloody stains on the walls where slaves had once worked.

"Just...all of it. The zebras wanting me to spy for them, getting caught by the Ministry and being set on this thing by Pinkie to spy on the zebras; finding out that Aurora had been forced or...or coerced into betraying Equestria and...and then learning about what she'd been making. This memory magic, it's crazy. Unicorns are sometimes incredible enough but this is insane, the things I've seen it can do to ponies. The things it can cause them to forget, or make them think. Now I've seen what the zebras want to do with it. Make unwilling ponies into willing traitors and zealots. Aurora says there's worse, when you start changing the very nature of what makes a pony a pony...she didn't talk much about it. Only to say that we had to stop it."

Sundial's voice slowed down from his almost panicked rambling.

"Aurora Star says we can get into Ministry Station. She knows it better than any of the zebras, says we can sneak to the Memory Nexus, that crazy machine she made to implant memories into ponies, and shut it down for good. I see where she went wrong, thinking it could be used for good, to help ponies learn good things or skills from orbs. I'd have thought the same. I can see it hurts her to have to destroy it, but she can always try things a new way. This needs stopped. We're just at the Ministry now, ready to go down to the Station. I'm so scared...I don't feel like a hero. Aurora said I was one for helping her escape the mountain lab, but I'm just so scared..."

Briefly, I stopped and looked at the Pipbuck, blinking away the dust. Alone in the metro, I felt very much like Sundial was giving me a heart to heart talk, opening up to me. It felt oddly rude not to give him attention.

"But what can I do? Zebras have infiltrated Fillydelphia and they know who I am now. If I don't help her, stay hidden with her, I'll just wake up with my throat cut. But I...I want to do this. Look, I can't explain this but just...it's right. Equestria's in danger, or at least Filly is. I've been given a road to help it. To stop ponies from being hurt. My mother always used to tell me about Twilight Sparkle and her friends. They weren't born to save others, they just...did. Now I know what she meant when she told me those stories of the Ministry Mares in their young days. I'm

just your average pony who got a chance to help like they did and I...I want to. I want to help stop this. I'm a part of it. I'm involved. I'm...going to save ponies."

My hooves trembled as I held the Pipbuck. A curious surge of pride shot through me.

"Dad always told me he wished I'd gone into medicine instead of helping build weapons to make money. I argued, I knew why I'd done it. It paid more. But I'd always felt like I disappointed him. Now I'm realising I'm probably never going to see him again and I feel...I just..."

I heard him stutter and snuffle. He was crying.

"Dad...I wish I could just talk to you now. I only ever took that job to help save a pony I love, and I'm still trying to save her now. I was going to propose to her, you know? You inspired me. You always did. Now that I'm about to go do something so dangerous and try to save so many lives that I just...I just wish you were here to give me your advice and so I could...could let you see that I really am trying to be as good a stallion as you are. I'm going to save everybody down there, Dad. Do what you do. I'll make you proud. If...if I don't come back, then please don't worry if you hear this. I'll be with mom, okay? I'll-"

"Sundial? Sundial, we have to go."

Aurora's voice was distant, hushed. She sounded so much younger than the ghoul I'd met on the mountain, closer to the one in the memory orb I'd seen in her office with that nasally tone.

"Okay...okay. This is it. Goodbye. If anyone finds this, please let my family know what's happened. Hopefully this isn't my last entry."

"Sundial, come on! I can feel that it's powered up, we have to go, now!"

"Coming!"

Click.

Slowly, I lowered the Pipbuck and took a deep breath. Wiping my eyes with the back of my hoof, I let it all sink in.

Then I felt the hoof on the back of my shoulder at the same time as the voice.

"It's all empty."

I yelped and leapt backwards, crashing into the side of a tall mine cart. The pony behind me jumped in shock, as I frantically tried to bite for my saddle's trigger.

Then my eyes adjusted to the dark a little, and I saw the dark figure of Protégé.

"How...how did you..." I breathed, sitting down and leaning my head back from the shock.

He let out a breath slowly to calm himself and half shrugged, "I was trying to be quiet, I thought you'd have heard me. You usually do."

"I was distracted, sorry...when did you get so good at sneaking around?"

Protégé tilted his head.

"Well we've had no shortage of practice lately. From watching you, mostly."

"Suppose." I looked away, then back again with a squint. "Wait, you watch me?"

"You're very educational." Protégé smirked and trotted past me. "The others are just coming up behind me. I went ahead just in case you'd gotten into trouble, didn't expect this though."

He cradled the massive padlock on the slave den's doorway with his magic.

Behind us, I heard the others slowly shuffling in. A few ponies started moving up the stairs to the main entrance to let in the others.

Coral Eve entered last, before quickly cantering over to us.

"Well?" Her voice was curt, allowing for no nonsense. I could *feel* the anticipation brewing inside her. I almost felt sorry for anyone who wanted to get in her way right now.

"Place is locked up tight. No guards. All the slaves Murky and I saw here are gone, possibly inside. Like they're collapsing all their operations to the Station deeper in now they've found it. Looks like they've decided to stay defended by offering no reason to think there's anything here. Smart..."

Unity trotted past me and took a glance at the lock. "If you give me a minute, I think I could get this."

"Go to it." Protégé nodded. "The rest of us have to be ready. No guards here, but there's almost certainly some inside."

The wavy haired mare nodded and started opening up her small saddlebag while sitting herself beside the lock to work.

In the time that passed for her to try and pick the lock, the others took a moment to get their breath back in the comparative safety of the abandoned tunnel from the war we'd just come through. I trotted down a couple of the tunnels, even checking in on the old room that Weathervane's friends had once used. Other than a foul stink, I found nothing. The walls of the tunnels were roughly hewn and scarred by the work that had once happened, and I found a few disgusting sights of those that had been left behind, or rather, their remains. A couple of skeletons resided near the corners and dead ends, a reminder of the horrors being carried out down here.

Returning to the den entrance area, I found Protégé beside the mine carts with a hoof to his chin.

“Have you asked the question yet, Murky?”

“Huh?” I trotted up beside him.

“Dozens, possibly over a hundred slaves were in these tunnels. Add on dozens of foals. They don't need miners any more and they clearly weren't released. So, why take them all inside?”

“To...to help do what we saw others doing? Repairing the station?”

“These ponies weren't in any condition for any sort of specialist work, Murky. And the foals weren't taught for manual labour.”

Protégé pulled the dust covers from the mine carts, more out of curiosity.

Then his face betrayed a horrid shock.

Feeling my body shiver with worry, I pulled myself up to see. Behind me, Weathervane's eyes bulged with concern. The ponies with us began to mutter and gasp.

Inside the carts were piles of belongings. Rags, face masks, blankets, bandages and cloth bags. Everything that slaves would normally own had been separated and sorted, taken from all those who had been down here. I could swear one of the carts looked like it had bags of mane and tail hair.

Every possible thing to be stripped from a pony had been collected.

“Why...why...” I muttered.

Protégé's voice was grim.

"When they've outlived their usefulness as manual labour, what is a slave to Chainlink Shackles but a disposable resource to be used to try things no-one else would? Great Equestria...that's why they were all taken in there..."

"Protégé...you're scaring me, what do you mean?" My voice was quivering, I didn't understand. What did he mean by resource? What things?

Then it hit me.

Shackles had said he wanted me to be the 'Heart of Fillydelphia'. The template for the perfect slave to imprint onto others. Of course, he wasn't going to risk me on an untested memory magic process.

Every warning, every nightmarish and twisted outcome of wrongly used memory magic came flooding back to me. Aurora's terror as she spoke of what zebras had done to refugees they'd tried it on was still clear to me.

Protégé seemed to whiten as he removed the last cart's covering. My hooves carried me rather unwillingly to look as he lowered the side panel and it all spilled out to the floor

The school saddlebags and Red Eye designed robes of the foals were piled high. Their stationary, clothing and foal sized items all lay together.

My blood ran cold.

Behind me, I felt the pressure in the air before I even heard Coral's voice, it was brimming with cold fury.

"Unity. Get out of the way."

* * *

There wouldn't have been any stopping her. No-one with us would have dared try to tell her to not do it.

The doors to Shackles' den, inches thick in steel, folded like paper.

I felt myself flattened to my side as the surge of magical power washed back from the now open doorway and blew all of us from our hooves. My ears rung. My eyes were stinging

from the dust whipped up. Coughing the rough particles from my throat, leaning on Protégé with one hoof, I dragged myself up to see what had happened.

Through that now open doorway, I heard the doors finally land on the other side. In front of it, Coral Eve strode in and out of sight, her horn sparking like a frayed cord in a machine.

Protégé retched to clear his throat, squinting his eyes after her. Realising this had pushed everything ahead of schedule, he frantically waved to the recovering ponies.

“Come on! Help her!”

Regrouping, readying out weapons, we galloped through after the furious maternal unicorn. I heard shouting within, the rough and guttural accent of the slavers in Fillydelphia. Warnings and swearing, before another concussive wave washed over us and kept us blind. The shouting turned to screaming. I heard things breaking.

Through all the rock dust and smoke, I couldn't see a thing as we pushed through the doorway and finally came to see the interior of Shackles' own personal den of slavery.

The first thing I saw was three slavers being catapulted across the floor toward the low brickwork arches. One of them hit the edge of it so hard he tore a dozen bricks from it, sending his lifeless body spinning to the ground.

“*Where. Are. They?*”

Coral's voice echoed around the dark chamber. Another blast of her magic shattered a wagon and send slavers scurrying. Two soldiers appeared from one low tunnel to the side and didn't even get their weapons raised before the broken remnants of that wagon hit them like a furious cloud of sharp objects. Another took cover behind one of the many fallen pillars, only to find the massive stone construct launched right over him as the one mare wrecking crew tore through them with the wrath of a vengeful Goddess. Enormous objects flew around like small toys, crushing and smashing off walls. Every one of them in a singular, blunt direction. I could see her in the middle of the large room, bathed in an aura of blue and white magical light, her teeth clenched.

Finally, organised behind her, we joined the effort. Or at least, ponies capable of *fighting* joined the effort. Weathervane, Unity and myself stayed at the back with his doctors. Protégé, Mister Peace and the others swept past Coral on either side. Slavers either put up their hooves the moment they saw them approaching, or were quickly taken down. Coral's onslaught had broken them and sucked their courage dry before we'd even appeared. In just a short time, the slavers had either fled, died or now sat in a close circle, held at guard by our party. They didn't look well armed. It occurred to me they were probably just leftovers to watch the entrance from inside.

Finally, I could get a better look at everything. My first look at Shackles' world.

We'd emerged into a low room. Long and wide, it had numerous arched tunnels from every one of its walls leading into deeper darkness. Lines of chains were strewn on the ground, each dotted with collars from the lines of miners that had once been outside. Wagons were filled with rubble or confiscated objects to the right, while to the left a series of squat pillars held up the brickwork roof. The entire place felt damp beneath my hooves, slimy with mould and dripping brown water from the roof that gathered and ran between the deep cobblestones that made up the floor. It didn't look like somewhere designed to be an entrance, but then the way in seemed to have been built from scratch by Shackles after he'd no doubt found this place...whatever it was.

Yet covering all of it was an oppressive gloom, one that already felt like it was slowly seeping into my body with its claustrophobic darkness of arched walls and low ceilings. Mister Peace had to bend his chassis forward to fit in here. I could see locks on the walls for hooking chains to. Piles of foal's clothes lay scattered in stained puddles, near to rough shears and razors. Below my hooves, thin strands of hair ran in the disgusting trickles of water. Without really realising I'd done it, I found myself slowly moving behind Weathervane as the closest pony to me. The thought terrified me, I'd come so far, but this place struck right to the core of my fears in slavery.

“Coral?”

Protégé approached her carefully from the side. Her horn had subsided, and now she stood unsteadily on her feet and shivering. From the pain of using so much magic or the worry for the foals, I didn't know.

“Coral!” Protégé repeated, making her head suddenly snap toward him. He quite obviously twitched backwards. “You with us?”

Slowly, she nodded, her eyes holding nothing but an intense glare. Then, she stomped toward the slavers we'd captured. They glanced up at her, before as one started to crawl and panic as her horn lit and began to furiously spark with magic.

“Stop! Stop! Sto-yargh!”

The closest slaver was catapulted toward her, before finding himself knocked to the ground and Coral's hoof planting on his breast. He was one of the older ones, they were a source of intimidation to the slaves and even other, younger, slavers.

Beneath Coral he looked like a frightened child.

“Tell me where the foals are.”

“I...I...”

“*Where are my foals?! I have a son and a little filly who I only just told I'd adopt, don't you dare keep them from me now. Where are they?*”

“DOWNSTAIRS!” The terrified slaver didn't even last a second, pointing his hoof toward one of the low archways that dropped off into darkness. “We...we didn't touch em up here! I promise! We was just told to take all their c-clothes and belongings and send em down! We're just the skeleton crew watching the door in case the Enclave came in!”

“WHY?” Her question clearly wasn't about the Enclave.

To my surprise, the petrified slaver looked confused that she'd ask.

“It's...it's Master Shackles, w-we don't ask...we wouldn't dare! Serve and earn! Never ask! Serve and earn!”

Coral snarled, before turning and bucking the slaver hard in the side, knocking him back into his comrades with a yelp of pain. She strode away toward the indicated archway.

“Come on.” Her voice was curt and stern.

Protégé watched her go, before waving a hoof to begin to gather the others near the slavers. The one Coral had questioned was lying in a curled heap, shivering.

“Right, you all heard that. We've got a lot of tunnels, and not much time. Some of them got away, so we're probably going to see Shackles knowing we're here soon, or who-ever is watching this place if he's still outside. Split up and find those foals and anypony else still trapped in here. Understood? Gather them all in the metro outside and we'll escort them to safety. Any questions?”

“What is this place?” One of the stallions, a father of a lost foal, was looking around.

“I don't know, but Fillydelphia used to have a lot of underground facilities even before the war started. We've seen it went as far as the Old Metro and a high security asylum, this is probably something similar, especially if it's connected to Ministry Station like the asylum was. Just be wary, this is Shackles' domain now...”

He hesitated, before speaking once more.

“You all know him. You all know what we found outside. Be careful, he doesn't have any limits on what he might have done down here.”

Quickly, we organised ourselves with Protégé's help, splitting up the medical team and then by what weapons we had available to us. Several slaves began to filter into each tunnel, while the main group with the doctors would move to the biggest archway we could see, one that led to lower levels down a slope. A couple would stay and guard the slavers we'd captured.

The way most of us were going was the one the slaver had pointed to, the one leading into the depths. Cautiously, we began to descend over the lip onto the just slightly too sharp slope. Some of the taller ponies had to duck to get into the very low tunnel.

Feeling my small hooves slipping and bending over the sharp cobblestones, I began to immediately see everyone else having the same trouble. Trot too fast and your hooves began to stumble and slip, put too much weight on a hoof to support and the slimy water would make you skid and slide, as though the very floor was designed to prevent ponies trying to get somewhere in a hurry.

Or to give difficulty to someone trying to escape up here from below.

No, no that had to be me just being panicked about it. It couldn't have been designed that way. The water running everywhere had just worn down the cobblestones over time to make them feel worse than they once were, that was all.

All the same, that didn't solve the thought that Shackles perhaps saw it as an unintended design feature. Every step I took only reinforced that, as my hooves quickly became soaked in foul liquids and sore from constantly rolling over sharp cobbles.

Just ahead, I saw Unity slip and almost fall, grabbing Mister Peace's arm to keep her footing. Not a few seconds after, Protégé hissed as a missing cobblestone caught his hoof and made him stumble.

The ceiling only got lower.

Behind us, the darkness had settled in. I could no longer see the top of the slope we had begun descending. Water streamed between the cobbles, flowing around my hooves if ever I blocked its path. I began extending my wings to help myself balance. Behind me, someone fell and gagged as they got water in their mouth.

That worry, that dangerous little thought in my mind began to get louder. I *knew* Chainlink Shackles. I *knew* how he thought. He wouldn't miss this. Ponies couldn't run up this at any speed, we could barely trot upright. A weak slave would struggle to make it up this at the best of times, compared to the stronger, healthier slavers. The old and worn cobbles were

slowing us to a crawl as it quickly became clear that our main group were the only ones truly entering the real lair. Up above, it had to have just been side rooms. Shackles wanted this to be a place you didn't return from.

Around me, no-pony talked as the tunnel kept going down. It took a good while for it to finally begin to even out.

Then I heard something.

Trying to hold my balance, I waved my hooves at the others, getting them to stop. One by one, the message filtered through. Protégé edged closer to me, tilting his head to ask a wordless question.

Closing my eyes, I let my ears take over. I could hear the slow trickle of water. The distant vibrations and rumble of total war. The scared breathing of the ponies around me.

Then I heard it, underneath all the other sounds. Like a background noise.

I heard a moan.

Close. Unnervingly monotone. Raspy from a dry throat.

Whispering it to Protégé, he drew his revolver with his mouth, not even daring to use magic for the light it gave off. Slowly, he led the party. Every creak of Mister Peace's damaged chassis and every slip of an unsteady hoof sent a shiver up my spine. Protégé waved forward two of the fighters we had with us, ex-Red Eye soldiers. Bearing their combat rifles, they flanked Protégé as the slope finally gave way to level ground. Slowly, we passed through the darkness of a massive portcullis gate to find another low room. The floor had pooled the streams into a long and stinking puddle that felt far too thick to be just normal water. We waded through it into this new and pitch dark chamber.

The moaning was louder. Others could hear it. There were other soft sounds, clinks of metal and the shuffling of hooves on stone that weren't ours from left and right. We all froze as we heard a fearsome retching sound.

"Light." Protégé whispered.

Two high powered torches turned on from the soldiers. Protégé's red magic glowed as he took his revolver in it again. I added my own sickly green glow from my Pipbuck. The combination of colours lent a twisted and unnatural light to the area around us, making it feel almost otherworldly.

We were standing on the same cobbled floor, in a long room with shallow archways lining each of the walls. Above my head, chains hung.

The ex-soldiers played their torches around, before I heard one of them scream.

The light illuminated a ghastly sight of what was perhaps once a pony that turned and shrieked. Dried and baked skin crinkled as it moved.

“FERAL!” the soldier shouted to us, bringing his weapon up. The shot rung out deafeningly loud as his weapon fired into the roof.

Protégé’s magic glowed around the barrel, having forced it away from the creature.

“Hold! Stop! STOP!” He waved to all of us, before looking back.

It wasn’t a feral.

Then my stomach dropped as I realised the truth.

It wasn't even a ghoul.

Cowering, skeletal like legs covering its face, a bone white pony shrieked from the pain of the bright light that had stung its eyes and the fear of the gunshot. Its neck and hooves barely even fitted the collar and chains keeping her held to the wall.

“Fuck...” Weathervane breathed, before making his way over.

My stomach was turning. The pony (I couldn’t even tell if it were a mare or a stallion) was struggling and unable to even stand on their own. A bare remnant of a pony, Missing a mane or tail, more bone than flesh. Lacking even the muscle to lift its chained neck or legs for more than a second or two. A crude line of fabric was tied around their eyes, with the stains of blood surrounding it. The marks of whips on their back were thick, similar to my own.

Gradually, we all used our own light sources. I turned up my Pipbuck’s light, as the two ex-soldiers played theirs around more. Unity and the other unicorns lit their horns, while Mister Peace activated a thick spotlight on his chassis, his monitor locked in as a grizzled veteran for now. Shadows were driven off in bright sparks as Coral strode through the new area, her rage stolen from her in utter shock.

Suddenly, with this new light, I realised what this place once had been.

Either side of us, those arches weren’t just tunnels. They were lined with steel bars and only went back a few feet or so, filled with nothing but blank stone. Each had a doorway in the

cage. At the back of the long room there were newly built metal cages against the walls. As the light travelled, I saw this one poor pony was not alone, as withered heads and thin bodies lifted and shifted in the dark corners, sometimes thickly on top of one another like crudely stored livestock. An office like room was situated far down the right from us next to a thick steel doorway. The low ceilings bore long defunct strip lighting. Gradually, I could see all the cell doors were connected via wires hung from that low, curved ceiling to that office. On the back wall, an unmistakable icon was visible.

This had once been a prison. A horrendous and secret prison of the Ministry of Morale.

* * *

“Unlock those doors! Help them!”

“Watch their limbs, they'll be brittle!”

“I...I can't believe they would do this.”

“Bring the water over here! Oh no...has anybody got a splint?”

“If I catch any of you dickweeds shirking from any of these patients, I'll have you shovelling shit for the sole purpose of my fucking amusement! Organise yourselves!”

Weathervane's team set to work, held just short from panic and revulsion by the ironclad discipline of their lead doctor. Blood packs, bandages, dressings and the sickly smell of medical liquids began to fight with the growing stench of unwashed bodies, blood and filth that permeated the air down here. The more the slaves in the cells moved, the more it wafted around. Most were too weak to move, but struggled and reacted with fear to the doors being opened.

That made me wonder for a moment. I knew that feeling well.

They were afraid of where they might be taken any time that door opened. With the things we'd found and realised in the metro above, that became very obvious to piece together to me. These slaves knew they were being used for things, kept as a living resource. None of them had tails or manes. Coats were short, bearing crude marks of shaving.

“No! No! No no noooo!”

“Sssh, it's all right. I'm not going to hurt you!”

Unity's voice caught my ears, and I trotted toward one of the further away cells where her soft red magic was glowing. She was sitting at the doorway she'd unlocked, a roll of bandages in her telekinetic grip and trying to convince a slave to let her near.

This one was tall and lanky. By his voice I could tell he was a stallion, but his stomach was drawn right in like a racing dog's while his whole face was detailed more by his skull than his features. His eyes, however, were brighter and more intelligent and his coat thicker than the others. He was newer.

"I don't...don't take me!"

"I'm not going to take you there, sssh..." Unity crooned, slowly reaching out to place a hoof over the slave's own. "We're here to get you out, take you home."

The slave wailed and fell away, "He told me that before! They took us! Said we were being released! Train was here. Go to train, go home! No train! There was NO TRAIN! That's how they got us here! With HIM! We're not ponies!"

As I came up beside her, I could see Unity's cheeks were wet as she slowly edged forward, carefully winding the bandage around a horrifically infected tear on the pony's hind leg.

"What did they do to you here?" She spoke, distracting him as she applied the bandage. Leaning in, I helped to tie it off, working together with her to try and aid this poor stallion.

"Just kept us...like pets. T-told not to talk, not to do anything. Just exist, just sit here and wait! Eat when told, drink when told, sleep when told ever since the mining stopped. *He* hurt me..."

"You said to not take you?" I asked, trying to make my voice sound as gentle as possible.

He sniffed, hiding his face and quaking, "They take us. Every day they take some. Slavers or...or guards. They take us and only some come back. Now the work's done, we're their reward for the worst ones! The big ones! Old ones! The Master tells them to pick, and he gives them a time...or...or sometimes he doesn't. Those ones d-don't come back. Don't pick me, don't pick me..."

Shackles' inner circle of slavers. I knew who he meant. I'd seen them enough when he was around, clustered in that slaver meeting long ago. They were the ones he trusted, the ones like him from the time before Red Eye. The worst of the worst. I'd seen them do unspeakable things to ponies during his time controlling the Mall, like they all had some mental disease. It was one I'd long suspected Shackles himself was driven by, as strong as I had been to *being* a slave.

Sometimes I'd wondered about his own dens I hadn't seen. This place brought that thought to light. This stock were the ones kept as *reward* to those slavers by Shackles. To do what they wanted and indulge their psychotic, mentally unstable curiosities. The sick mind of the type of pony Shackles attracted, ones who'd otherwise be known as unhinged raiders out in the wastes, were being given ponies as reward for their services.

It defied belief that this could even exist, even in Filly. I wanted to throw up, to run and scream and scream. *This existed*. I'd been a pet to a master who, despite all this, wanted me with him and not here. He, in all his terrifyingly sick intelligence, knew I was the *type* to be more useful than this.

I felt very small, right about then.

Unity finished the bandage, and was holding a small healing potion to the stallion's lips, gradually earning his trust through her gentle approach.

"Don't let him pick me..." he muttered.

"Who?"

"The Master! If he picks us, then we *never* come back! They all...they all go in there!"

His weary hoof lifted for just a second, pointing to the only exit near the secure office. Rotating metal doors barred it, but they looked long rusted and permanently open.

"They go in there! All the ones he takes, they never come back! Some who came back said they go to a different place if it's him! Deeper! They go down! They go down to where the orbs and the machines are, and they don't come back."

"Murky, Unity." Weathervane's rough voice was close behind us. "Come on, let us work, you've done all you could alone."

Two doctors gently but firmly pushed us out of the cell as they carried their kit and folding stretchers in. Unity and I stepped aside, now witnessing the full effort underway as the slaves were calmed, numbed and healed until they could at least begin to slowly trot. Mister Peace was snapping chains with his hands, while Protégé was assigning ponies to start guiding them up the difficult slope out of here. Many were carried on backs or slung on the cloth stretchers, bearing whip scars, burns, bruises and worse. As each cell cleared, I could see a number of shapes left behind, not moving.

We told Protégé and Weathervane what we'd learned, with Coral intently listening in.

“We thought we'd eliminated all of this when Red Eye won the city from Shackles...” Protégé spoke, his tone dark, “now that Red Eye is gone, that monster is already starting it again. Rewarding the psychopaths that follow him like a cult, the kind that Red Eye fought to get rid of.”

“You never killed it.” Coral narrowed her eyes. “You just put a new facelift on it all and kept trying to pretend they weren't still like that inside, just to get the job done. Now 'great leader' is gone and the only thing stopping Shackles from taking back *his* city is a griffin too distracted fighting a war to see what Shackles has already started down here.”

Protégé clenched his teeth, displaying a rare burst of anger in his expression.

“No. The only thing stopping him now is *us*. We're getting them out before it can happen, and I don't imagine you'll get in my way if I want to put a bullet through his skull while we do it, will you?”

“Get in line.” Coral snorted, and immediately began to lead the group toward the exit to the prison, deeper into Shackles' private den.

I backed away to let her pass before falling in step. Honestly, she was scaring me. I'd seen her angry many times, but this was different. This looked like frustration welling up inside her and ready to explode.

“You, you, you, come with me!” Weathervane pointed out two doctors and one support nurse, before following her.

As he passed me, I fell in step.

“Did you find your friends?”

“No.”

He accelerated toward the same route Coral had gone, bearing a similar intense gait.

All the ponies they'd both looked for had gone in there.

Protégé stepped up beside me, wordlessly nodding for me to join him in going in, to which I followed meekly. Unity elected to remain behind and help with the larger numbers.

Behind us, the stallion Unity had found now gripped one of the soldiers trying to help him onto a stretcher, screaming and wailing.

“Don't take me! Don't take me down there! I...I hear them sometimes!”

“We aren't going to, mate. Calm down!”

“DON'T TAKE ME! They don't come back! Please don't let it be my turn! I hear them!
Ponies shouldn't make those kinds of noises!”

* * *

The metal clanking of the rotating turnstiles sounded deafening down here.

Click-click-clank, the same sound every time one of us passed through them to step into the now ceramic tiled floor of the deeper parts of this prison. The lights were minimal, a dull yellow every ten feet revealing what looked like a sporting court with goals either side. Lines of makeshift cots were set up either side and had been hastily overturned and abandoned by the slavers leaving this place in a hurry.

Yet still, I heard distant hooves.

“Protégé? Do you see any ponies on your thingy?” I asked quietly.

“Only behind us. Why?” He leaned down beside me, as we squatted at the exit to the sports hall. Through the next open cage door I could see a canteen of thin metal tables and benches.

“I hear hooves...Protégé, they never showed up on your eyepiece before.”

After a momentary pause, he turned to me with a look of horror before slowly drawing his weapon again. We both knew what we were referring to now.

“You don't think...” His voice was shaky.

“The other slavers must have come this way so, no, it probably isn't.” I took solace in realising that, before Protégé let out his own breath.

“Yes, that's true. It's very empty now, sound likely carries further than my E.F.S can detect life signs. All the same, keep your ears up, Murky. Let's take a look.”

The two of us, as the smallest and quietest ponies, took the lead. Coral was furious, but not beyond realising that we shouldn't rush in down here. For all we knew, Shackles and fifty slavers could be waiting somewhere, or any sort of escape-proof trap could be waiting. Exiting the sports hall (or 'Internal Yard' as Protégé kindly pointed out to me) we moved through the canteen and into what I guessed were the transit corridors. Huge security doors were held open

by bricks with a dozen small rooms behind them bearing only two chairs and a table, all locked to the floor. Sometimes, they only had a single chair sitting ominously in the centre of the room.

We hadn't gone terribly far. This facility clearly wasn't massive. Past the canteen, we found the corridors quickly looped back to enter the 'Yard' again from another entrance. Sighing, we doubled back to try another corridor.

Then Protégé stopped me as we travelled down it.

“Life signs. Only a few hostile. All cramped together in small groups.”

“Slaves? The foals? Which way?”

He pointed right, a new corridor. Taller than the others, opening onto a higher ceiling, it had much smaller tiles, more of a mosaic style flooring in places that led past rows of discarded wheelchairs with restraints on them. As we trotted down it, I began to feel a heat in the air. A stuffy, foul warmth that hit my nose as though I'd just sniffed deeply on mouldy food.

“Great Equestria, what is that? Urgh...”

“That smell!”

Behind me, everyone with us other than Weathervane and Mister Peace retched and held a hoof to their face.

On the floor, I began to see the dark stains appearing.

Then I began to hear the sounds. Like the cells before, the shuffling and the low moaning. Only this one grew, became more distinct and raised and fell. The sound of ponies, of lots of ponies in grief. As we turned each corridor, beginning to trot down every empty prison hall and passed through workrooms and lecture theatres it only got louder. Everywhere we went, the chains followed. Everywhere slaves might stop, they existed. There was no free movement. Locked chairs, collars and restraining wheelchairs filled this area.

As I scouted ahead, I found a larger and abandoned workroom. It held numerous pushcarts, wagons and mining tools. I could recognise somewhere that slaves had been kept to sleep at their workplace. Briefly, I poked my head into the one office beside it.

Inside was a grungy, scattered mess. All except the desk and the walls. They were neat, precise and straight. On the floor I could see a dogbowl with an open collar beside it.

I immediately stumbled back out.

That was *his* office. I recognised that collar. I recognised the bowl. I recognised the organisation of the tools on the walls and the documents on the desk. Every requirement was etched into my mind. I felt nauseous to even realise I had that much awareness from my time spent laying it all out, knowing that if anything were one inch out of line and he would-

“Come away from there.”

Protégé’s hoof gently fell around my shoulders and pulled me away.

“I...I...”

“It’s not you any more.”

Shivering, I gulped down the fear and quickly moved on. A trail on the floor led us, a foul mark upon the ground from the passing of those being taken this route again and again. As we came to a series of visiting chambers, the volume picked up until every pony in our group was sweating and shivering from the morbid anticipation. I could feel his presence over everything. The cobblestones to keep ponies in, the conditions, the office, the horrified look in every slave’s face as they referred to *'him'*. The low ceilings, deadened sound, dark corridors and thick stuffiness that choked my throat all made me feel restrained and moulded into feeling small. My hooves couldn’t move without having to step around chains or bump against them.

It felt as though I were walking through a world of how it felt to be a slave. The worst part was how familiar it was.

The smell only got worse, while the sound got louder. It wasn’t just moaning. I could hear blubbering and high pitched whines. There was a lot of anguished sobbing. Infected throats were gurgling.

Then we found the source.

A large room, held up with carved columns and better lit with generator powered floodlights. Immediately, I could see it was the prison’s main area, an old processing and interview centre. Cages stood tall in the centre of it, while temporary sealed cells were dotted around the edges. Long defunct monitors hung from the ceiling above dozens of ramshackle desk areas, all of it dominated by a single massive screen on one wall that lay blank and smashed.

The cages and cells were full. My stomach turned as I saw slaves laying upon slaves in the impossibly small areas they’d been squeezed into. Some at the bottom of the heaps weren’t moving at all, clearly dead. Those on top writhed and moaned, crying and struggling to move. Every cell, every cage. They hung from the ceiling from makeshift pulleys looped over rafters, with each containment marked by crude signs and symbols. Others were tiny, barely large

enough to hold a foal, with the slave's limbs being forced through the bars to fit. Like the slaves before, they were bare and withered. Some were chained to the walls, their front legs held unable to rest on the ground. Others lay in rows facing the walls. They were injured, sick and starving, but that wasn't what stood out to me.

They were broken. I'd sometimes seen it in slaves, every so often you got one when a slaver went too far. Yet here, it was almost all of them.

Many of them were performing strange and repetitive movements with their heads or clumsily toying with things with their hooves. I could see many staring into nothing, their eyes wide and their bodies utterly still. They cried out about things they knew, counting endlessly or saying their name over and over. Others lay in a heap, terrified and crying as those around them didn't act, well, normal. The noise filled the room and bounced from wall to wall, and I had to hold my hooves over my ears as I glimpsed into the depth of Shackles' madness in the darkness below the city.

It was only to get worse.

On the right hand side, as I saw racks of memory machines torn from the asylum and placed here to run off of crude generators. Machines designed to let non-unicorns view memories, intended for good, now stood like horrifying monoliths. Adapted with restraints and locks on their helmets, they had racks of memory orbs surrounding them and casting an eerie glow across the entire room of various diluted colours. Many of them were damaged, flickering or faint. Some of the machines still had those ones loaded and ready. Some still had ponies strapped in and currently viewing orbs, quivering with spasms, making mewling whimpers or straining with mindless rage on already broken limbs. Every one of them was built inside a cage, the reasons for why left only to my imagination on why they would need them with an already restrained pony in the crude, bulky and bulbous machines. Even as I watched, one pony made a great spasm and opened his mouth to scream, but it didn't sound like any pony I knew, as though his vocal chords were trying to make sounds they were never healthily supposed to be able to.

Behind them lay enclosed wagons, with one open and ready to make it clear what was inside. Those who had been 'tested' and failed. Near to it, I could see ceramic operating tables, medical tools and canisters of liquid and gas marked with chemical symbols and warnings all under much brighter spotlights.

Behind them, from a side corridor, four slavers emerged carrying utensils.

"Who the...hey!"

On seeing us, they immediately reached for weapons. Mister Peace screeched on the enamel flooring and drove at speed toward them, his heavy weaponry bristling.

“Rules are you stand still, traitors. Move and you will be spanked and then shot. Move toward Miss Fluttershy and you will be shot. And then spanked.”

“Y-Yessir!” All four dropped any weapons they had, crowding together with hooves in the air. The rest of us couldn't help but simply trot in stunned silence. Even Coral Eve's drive had faltered and she stood with wide and horrified eyes. My stomach turned as I heard the frantic whispers of a slave chained to the floor nearby, its back torn and lashed from whips.

“Master...the Master...Master...the Master...always the Master...always call him Master...”

Protégé fell into step beside me, and without knowing when it exactly happened I found us both walking so that our sides were slightly pressed against the other. I could feel him shivering.

This was, even compared to my own slavery, a nightmare. A telling of what dark secrets could lie under a Fillydelphia with Shackles' exclusive rule. We were both from the same start, he must have felt the same.

No-one quite knew what to do.

“Break the spell and start figuring out how we help, staff.” Weathervane pushed us roughly to the side, “Get to work. Save these unfortunate souls.”

* * *

“By the barrels of all the lovely guns, this is not right. Ma'am, we should inform the Ministry of Peace for a repatriation detail and lodge a formal complaint to the Ministry of Morale for the state of their prison.”

“I don't think anypony would see it, Peace.” I muttered, as the horrified doctors with us examined the slaves, the machines or the operating area, their faces wrapped in scarves. The slavers had been forced to help disconnect ponies from the machines, deactivating them all. Not every one of them had survived the transition, and those orbs they'd been in had been shattered with a heavy rock afterwards. One of them had launched at us like a feral beast, snarling and biting until Coral had knocked him out. Their eyes had been bloodshot.

“Hey! Hey can I get some help over here?”

One of the doctors had gone inside the cages in the centre. Slaves had fallen out and lay on the ground or retreated to the corners of the cage, but one was now frantically panicking and shuffling, before grabbing the doctor and hugging him tightly.

“Get me out! Get me out, please!”

“We will! Just hold still-”

“I saw them!” The mare was crying, making small streaks down her blackened and dirty coat. “I saw what they did! They...they strap us into those machines and...oh Equestria...”

Protégé shifted in quickly and helped the doctor support her as he applied some Med-X for a massive bruise on her underside in the shape of a huge hoof. Its size was too familiar for coincidence.

“What did they do?”

“I don't even knooow...” Her voice wailed and died, before coughing and clinging to Protégé's hoof. “They put us in them and...and we would never be the same. They force me to forget things all the time, recording how my mind reacted to it. They'd show others horrible things! Orbs taken from dying people or from Wildcard's raiders. They tried to reprogram them, 'teach' them with memory or...or see how they'd react to it! They replacing our own memories with an animals or...or took orbs from feral ghouls. They made them into living ferals or total blanks!”

She burst into tears, relief flooding from her at our help.

“I was smart, once. I think. I heard Grindstone say it. They wanted to change instincts, he called it 'core level memory', using magic to change who ponies are at the very bottom level of what it means to even be a living thing! Doctors did things. Operations. Brain surgery or...or trying to see how we worked inside with memories or something without a pony's anatomy. The Master kept talking about making the perfect slave forget how to be free, but the ones they put in forgot how to be *anything*. Forgot their lives. Forgot how to speak. Forgot how to *breathe*.”

She hunched over, crying openly.

“They gave the leftover survivors to the bad ones! Goddesses help me, I heard what they did to them in the back! I heard the begging after they'd been strong. Please, get me out!”

“We will.” Doctor Weathervane marched in and took Protégé's place in helping her, his magic holding two of her legs steady while he examined her.

“I don't remember who I used to be!” She cried, delirious. “They kept taking memories. I don't know how long I was here! I don't want to become one of those things, I want to remember who I am, something disappears every time I go into one of those things! I know I was really smart, but I can't remember in what! Please...”

“Murky...come away.”

My eyes were locked on hers. She was crying so hard, so scared and relieved and-

“Murky!”

I felt hooves pull my head away to find the red eyes of Protégé instead, and only then realised I'd been visibly upset by merely looking at her as I felt damp trails rolling down my cheeks. Protégé patted the side of my head with a hoof.

“We've saved her now. Okay?”

“Okay...”

“There's no foals here. We can still get them before this happens.” Protégé paused, looked over my shoulder and sighed. “Aurora Star told us how memory magic could do things to ponies, that all the good of implanting worthwhile knowledge could be abused by a fanatic. I just never thought for one second it was this bad. Take a second to recover, I'll ask those slavers some questions. We could end this *right now* with a bit of luck.”

“Thank you.” I took a deep breath and nodded a second time. “Thanks.”

He smiled, before standing up and returning to the slavers. At least, his mouth had smiled. His eyes simply looked sad.

I began to walk in circles, really. I was restless. We hadn't found the foals, or Weathervane's friends. We were seeing yet another nightmarish result of Shackles' insane quest to control ponies. It felt like every time I thought I had seen the limits he was capable of, he'd move them all over again. I knew his endgame, but seeing the experimentation he'd used to get there, to figure out how to affect ponies best.

To figure out what kind of memories he'd have to give me so he could extract them as a template for the perfect slave and force them into ponies with Aurora's memory nexus in the station.

The one silver lining was knowing I had gotten Sunny out of this before they were taken in here. I was glad she wasn't here to see this.

My wandering brought me close to the rooms at the opposite side of the prison's processing centre. Poking my head into them revealed mostly the filthy belongings of slavers living in close proximity to one another for warmth against the damp cold in the floors, even if the air itself felt stuffy from being so far below the surface. I could barely even hear the war, only

the faint quakes it was causing that juddered through us like some giant were stepping on the city.

The doctors were carrying out the survivors of memory experimentation they'd found from their cages, lying them near me to be far from the machines. They had screamed if they were moved even an inch closer. Perhaps thirty or forty had lived. They didn't waste time in stretchering or carrying them away.

I'd seen a lot of horrors in Fillydelphia. But this somehow felt more insidious. Worse than the gore of the raiders, worse than the brutal hours and poisoned air of slavery. This was, in its own warped way, subtle, despite the obvious conditions. I hadn't seen any of it, but my mind was filling with the horrors of what that mare had seen, of what it would be like to go through this for weeks. How did a mind even work with all that happening? How far could memory magic go to change a pony?

Lost in thought, I found myself heading down the next short line of side rooms, this time barred by thicker doors that were only half open. I had to get away from it.

Curious, I stepped away from the main centre and went into what turned out to be a side corridor. The stink got worse again. Rotten...meat. I felt a shiver as I realised I was trying to identify smells as a survival mechanism down in the dark underbelly of Fillydelphia now. We had to be on the same level as the asylum by now. The same thick brickwork supported this place. A makeshift desk sat in the corridor, like some sort of area to sign in.

Easing myself along, instinctively falling into silent creeping, I encountered a whole new row of cells.

With one sniff, I found it overpowering and had to pull my fleece up over my nose. My eyes watered. My hooves felt fragile to step forward. Rusted bars and darkly stained floors were either side of me. There were tables in the common area, small rooms with single chairs or tables. The tables had...tools. Industrial, medical, slaver styled and memory orbs. On the walls, I could see rows of photographs, all of singular slaves in the same cells I'd once inhabited. Some were scored out. Ten, then twenty, then more. I recognised the collar with eerie awareness, it was the same one Shackles had once put me in when he'd had me as his 'pet'.

Then my memory struck a chord. Long ago, during the Mall riot from Barb, I'd found Shackles' register of his personal slaves, filled with copies of the same photos.

It occurred to me that I'd never found out what happened to them before me.

Curtains hung over areas, like this whole place was a run down private club. It occurred to me what Protégé had said, about the worst slavers, the old and mentally sick psychotic ones attracted to Shackles' style being gifted otherwise 'useless' slaves as payment.

I heard movement from either side and froze. Groans. I saw only shapes in those cells, though. Then in the rooms. And on the tables. Or hung from the ceiling.

Organic...shapes...

I saw eyes open.

Then I screamed.

* * *

I saw Protégé look up as I came galloping in tears out of the private area and cannonballed into him, grabbing him around the neck and wailing.

“Don't let him take me!”

“Murky, what is-”

“Don't let him ever take me!”

* * *

“There truly are no words.”

Protégé spoke quietly as two of Weathervane's team threw up in the corridor.

I stood back near the corner, trembling and wiping my cheeks dry, trying to forget. Trying so hard to not think about what I had seen.

Doctor Weathervane emerged from one of the cells, looking shaken. He growled lowly, his eyes with a far away look in them. His whole body quivered as he fought to suppress something. Anger, sadness, I didn't know what. Those signs were beginning to worry me in him.

“Bloodbank, give me the Med-X. All of it.”

The younger medical worker hoofed over the bag to Weathervane's telekinesis after wiping his mouth.

“Why? Doctor, they won't help on their own, don't you need the dres-”

“Son, sometimes this world can shock even an old fuck like me. I'm not in the mood for you pissing around trying to tell me my fucking job at a time like this and what can and can't bloody well do what. I know what I'm doing.”

Protégé turned his head slightly. “So what *are* you going to do, Doctor?”

Weathervane took the bag of Med-X, and began to trot back toward the area I'd found. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before pulling aside the curtain to go back inside.

“The last duty of care any doctor can possibly give.”

* * *

Protégé caught one of the slavers by the collar of his shirt and yanked him in close to his face.

“You've experimented on ponies and given their broken minds and bodies to those sick psychotics that follow Shackles for their own sadistic amusements. Fillydelphia was a brutal solution, but this would make even Red Eye turn to fury. I cannot even bring myself to the words to describe *any* of you who have aided in this. Have you done this to any of the foals?”

“NO! No we haven't!”

Coral Eve trotted alongside Protégé, “Then where are they?”

The slavers looked at one another, before gulping, “We didn't do anything to them, I promise! Grindstone said they were protected! M-more valuable for other stuff, they said! They left a-about an hour ago, they came to pick them up to take them down that hallway into the cave we mined there, into the Outer Metro. To Ministry Stat-”

Coral Eve's magic tore the entire cage containing the slavers off the ground, catapulting every bar and every slaver twenty feet across the filthy concrete floor. Everyone in the area ducked as the surge of telekinetic power blasted through the underground chamber, looking around warily as the sound of falling metal and groaning slavers filled the air.

She stood with her hooves thickly spread, her body heaving with deep breathes born of a complete fury. That one place name had set her off. He'd given her a location, a time, everything she wanted and then dropped the bombshell.

Chainlink Shackles and Grindstone were taking them directly to the station.

Glimmer had once told me that much like how a pony can lift more than they ever believed and run faster than ever before if it were to save a trapped friend, a unicorn's magic

could work much the same way. It could be amplified by that core loving emotion we all had towards those we cared for.

Coral Eve had been powerful before, but driven by her emotion and her lack of fine magic control, she had become a walking hurricane of magical force. I could feel my mane tingling with the feeling of magic in the air.

Immediately, she turned and galloped toward the indicated corridor.

“Weathervane, get the survivors back to the others!” Protégé shouted as he took off after them.

My mind couldn't stop picturing Chirpy Sum, Lilac Rose or Starshine Melody like these poor prisoners.

I felt *angry*. This had to end.

“Hey! Hey doc, we found another group of them!”

Another door was finally forced open behind us. From within, the doctor's were bringing out a small cluster of ponies.

They were ghouls. Ghouls I barely recognised until I saw the body shapes.

“*Them!*” Weathervane was already moving, galloping over the room. “*Get them topside, now!*”

The four ghouls were placed onto stretchers. They were slowly moving, but their bodies were a ruin. Limbs hung limp or even loose. Huge swathes of them seemed infected. Muscles were thin and their whole structure looked fragile even as their heads moved around, barely understanding what was happening.

Weathervane went alongside them as the group started to move those who couldn't walk, and lead those who could, forcing the slavers to help out.

“Don't you fucking look at me with those defeated eyes! Bedlay, Splint, Baton, Windtail...just hold on! Hold the bloody fuck on, you hear me?! We'll get you back, I'll fix this! I'll fix this!” He leaned over each of the stretchers, rushing between them in horror and panic. “Come on, all of you move! We need them back to the aid station to help all this! Hurry your lazy lead-lined arses! HURRY! *I can still save them!*”

“Doc, I really don't know if they'll-”

Weathervane snarled in a vastly more bestial way than anyone seemed to expect, turning and brutally punching the doctor across the cheek.

“Obey my fucking commands you little shit-stain new-blood! I can save them! If I say I can save them then I can fucking save them!”

The doctor, bleeding from his nose, nodded in shock.

Yet as they all began to leave the experimentation chambers, I saw the look passed between the struck doctor and Bloodbank. I saw the slight shake of their heads.

Yet I could also hear Coral and Protégé getting ahead of me, I couldn't delay.

“Come, Miss Fluttershy, I will guard you against the horrors we face in defence of this land in war. Alley-oop!”

Being lifted by the machine, as he protectively held onto me, we sped after the pair.

* * *

There were only the four of us left to go deeper.

From now, it was becoming a race against time in my mind. We galloped through the empty and falling apart corridors of the prison. I hopped off Mister Peace and ran for myself after we caught up with Protégé and Coral. It only led one obvious way, and we could see the hoof-prints in the dust upon the ground. Maybe it was just my imagination but they *did* seem to be smaller hoofprints. Archway after archway gave rise to higher ceilings and old portraits of Ministry of Morale staff on the walls, punctuated by the occasional grinning face of Pinkie Pie on hung banners.

In the distance, I could hear soft voices and hooves again, wafting through the soon to be abandoned prison. The voices were light, too high pitched to be slavers!

“I hear foals!” I shouted, and everyone instinctively sped up. Coral was hammering her hooves off the ground, powering ahead of Protégé and myself with her longer legs.

“There, up ahead!” Protégé shouted and pointed. A whole wall had been mined through. As we approached, we could see through it to the front end of the prison.

That front end took the form of a metro station.

Barred passages were formed up against where an old passenger train still sat dormant, its red décor faded and rusted away. Prisoners no doubt exited to go right into the barred areas that would keep them under control and separate from guards until they were inside.

Yet far to the left, at the end of the platform, was a white marble passageway with an embossed Ministry of Arcane Science logo upon it.

Below it, I could see the cog like shape of an enormous Stable door lying half open. Thick steel plates connected it to the concrete walls either side, crudely welded into place and held up by massive metal supports. It clearly wasn't something that had been originally placed there, this was a wasteland addition.

“Chirpy! Lilac!”

Coral's voice cut into the quiet air. Quickly, my eyes refocused, looking through that colossal door instead of looking at it.

Behind it, in the well lit entrance of the Ministry Station, the foals were sitting in small groups on and around the benches by the next platform along on the other side of the door. They were all chained to one another, bereft of clothing and with shaven heads. In front of them, two soldiers looked up quickly and waved behind them.

“They've made it to the door! Close it! Close it!”

“Don't you dare!” Protégé skidded to a halt, took careful aim and lit the shadows of the metro with a fiery blast from his revolver. The closest soldier was thrown backwards with a cry, before the second lit his horn and aimed a gleaming new shotgun at us.

Crying out, I tried to dive to the side, looking for cover on the mostly empty platform.

“For duty, medals and celebratory cake!”

With a crash, Peace dropped his whole chassis onto its side in front of me, before the loud roar of the shotgun's pellets reflected off his armour. Lifting an arm, the robot sprayed the Stable door with small, careful bursts. His reluctance to truly unleash with the foals right behind it let the soldier duck away again into cover. He was screaming for help, to close the door.

“Keep moving, you three!” Coral drove past us and ran headlong toward the door. She veered, as a bullet from deeper within whizzed over a screaming foal's head and missed her. Ducking back the other way, she grit her teeth and kept running directly into gunfire. Through the door, I could see the familiar little shape of Chirpy looking up from a group, he was beside the two ghoull fillies.

“Mom! MOM!”

Lilac waved her hooves, “Cor...mom! Here!”

The foals were scattering, running deeper in to get away from the fighting. As I ran out from behind a self-righting Mister Peace, I could see slavers picking them up and driving them in. Grindstone was among them, staring out at us with frustration and anger.

With an ear-splitting wail, a klaxon sounded the powering up of the door. Ahead of us, it began to close.

“NO! Don’t you-” Coral never finished her sentence. She leapt a platform bench, propelled a rubbish bin out of the way with her magic and sprinted directly for the doorway. Rounds sparked off the concrete or past her. Her mane whipped from one passing near. Protégé was right behind her, then myself.

Behind the door, I saw Chirpy throw himself at the soldier and knock his aim off. Lilac and Starshine joined him, distracting the one shooting at Coral, letting her get closer and closer as the door’s gap got smaller and smaller.

Mister Peace surged past us all. Bench in hand, he drove his way to the doorway and threw it. The metal seats wedged into the doorway, slowing its closing as the Stabletec machinery ground and began to bend the thick steel bench apart.

Sweat dripping from me, I tried my best to get over there, maybe I could still slip through! Coral was only thirty feet away, twenty feet, ten! She could-

At the last moment, I saw a grenade drop out of the remaining width.

“Coral, watch-”

She saw it, right at her hooves.

There was an explosion. Then a second one. I fell backwards, curling myself into a ball before metallic arms grabbed me and turned me away from it all.

Then, as my ears kept ringing, I heard the thundering clank of Stable door locks slamming home. Coughing, feeling my teeth rattle and my chest thump hard, I looked out from behind Mister Peace.

Coral was on her side in front of the doorway, slowly getting to her hooves. Everything around her had been blasted away, and I could see the grenade’s blast mark against the metro

tunnel's wall, fifteen feet away over the lip of the platform edge. She'd blasted the grenade away with her magic at the last moment.

Slumping, I finally let in the first breath to my burning lungs.

“No.”

Coral's voice wasn't sad. It wasn't breathy or distant. It was solid, unyielding in its statement.

“No. No no...NO!”

With that last scream, I felt the pressure of the air in the entire station rise up as she confronted that doorway. Coming to all four hooves, her horn sparked and glimmered with power. Her mane fluttered out behind her as she grit her teeth and screamed in pain at the raw, faulty use of her magic. The ground below us quivered and the train on their rails shook back and forth. Protégé grabbed hold of a ticket machine to steady himself as I held onto Mister Peace.

The door itself began to glow. I had only rarely seen an actual telekinetic field from Coral's magic, and only briefly as she focused on something in particular. A faint white twinkle, not even coloured like I assumed her magic once was, that surrounded the circular blast door.

Then, with an almighty cry, she jerked her head and unleashed her magic. An enormous concussive shock thudded against my ribcage. Then another, and another, each punctuated by a cry of rage, of utter frustration and for one insane moment, I thought she was going to pull the entire door out of its socket.

Stabletec, however, had built their doorways to withstand far greater than this. With almost insultingly underwhelmed ease, it remained utterly solid, even as Coral sweated and cried and tore at it with all her might.

Walking as close as I dared, I watched her futile assault. Months of frustration at being separated from her son, other than a brief and teasing reunion on a mountain, were all bubbling over for her. Her face was soaked with tears, as the emotion finally got the better of her. As she realised that we had failed. Shackles and Grindstone had planned things well to defend themselves down here.

The revelation on just how close we'd been was now reflected from Coral Eve as her magic grew less and less powerful. The tugs got smaller. Before long, her horn flashed and then went dead. Defeated, she slumped to the ground and struck the door with her hoof. Unwilling to stop, openly weeping, she banged her hoof time and again, before resting her forehead upon it and slowly sliding down the immense metal construction.

"I...I saw them..." Her voice was simply a mutter as I finally found the courage to approach.

"I know." I didn't know what else to say. "I'm sorry."

Protégé was looking over the control station for the door, before shaking his head and slamming the panel shut. "It's not even connected any more out here. *Maybe* if Glimmer was here and *maybe* if we had spare parts...but we don't. I'm so sorry, Coral..."

Behind us, a second group emerged from our raiding party. The other parents, mostly, who had started to follow our route after word of where the foals were had passed back to the other search parties. Seeing the door, they swore and groaned, quickly guessing what had happened.

For a second, I thought my Pipbuck was playing another message. A small sound of static in the air began to pick up.

"Fffzzzzzz-ought you might have tried, but I didn't realise you knew of this way in."

Grindstone's hollow old voice played through a set of speakers above the Stable door. Beside them, a hung terminal flickered and displayed a video feed. Almost entirely shaded green and with half the screen playing a few seconds behind the other, it pictured the elderly donkey with a hard stare.

"They are quite out-with your reach now, you traitors and slaves. They have a higher purpose than being your fawns. Fillydelphia has a war to recover from, and Chainlink Shackles must ascend to bring us all back to the power we once had in this city."

"You're trying to justify indoctrinating children to be slaves!" Protégé snarled.

"Justify? You imply I am trying to be-" He stammered and coughed, a sickly popping coming from his throat. "-trying to be like your old master, young colt. I don't justify. I simply do. I had power once in this city. I want it back before my end and Shackles offered me that power. Red Eye did not. See, I don't try to pretend what I'm doing is for everyone's benefit and that I'm following someone with good intentions, unlike a certain pony I'm speaking to."

Protégé couldn't hold Grindstone's eyes, even on a monitor.

"Workers, slaves, it's all the same in the wasteland. The strong and the smart use the weak and the naïve. That is survival. Now-"

"I will get them back."

Coral interrupted him. She wasn't even looking directly at him, but the tone in her voice cut into the conversation with ease.

"I hardly think you are in any position to threaten me, slave." Grindstone rolled his eyes.

"You would be wrong, because *you* are keeping my foals from me, Grindstone. I have hunted, striven, suffered and killed to find them. I have been to the nightmarish depths and the *barren heights* trying to find them! I gave my word to protect them both, to their faces, that as their mother I would never ever let them come to more harm."

Her face twisted into a vicious snarl in a way I'd never imagined her even possible of.

"You made a mother break her promise to her child."

Her horn lit once more.

"You sit behind that door and act as the one separating me from them."

I could feel the air-pressure increasing again, as everypony began to back away from her quickly.

"Now you tell me to give up. I. Will. NOT!"

Grindstone sneered on the screen, "You promise that? Like you promised they wouldn't be taken again?"

I had just enough time to get the hell away from her.

Her eyes flared and her horn exploded into being once more, as I heard a deep *boom* of rushing air pressure and massive telekinetic force as she unleashed her magic once more on the door. It barely moved, but the surrounding concrete rocked at least a few inches back as she sent an echoing shock wave into the wall itself. On the monitors, I saw Grindstone briefly fall out of shot, a look of astonishment on his face. Coral walked up to the inlaid camera to the door system.

"I am metres from finally getting them back, and *you* are the one taunting me. *You specifically*. You'll regret ever coming near my children. I'm going to find them. I'm going to find *you*."

She met his gaze on the monitor directly.

"You had better begin wishing that you'll keel over from old age before that happens."

Grindstone remained silent, his eyes tellingly wide.

“Well then...” he began, trying to restore some authority, “I suppose it’s good for me that you won’t be leaving the Outer Metro this time.”

He reached to the side, pressing something. Immediately afterwards, I heard the klaxon wail a second time. The sound of moving metal came to my ears, as his words began to slam home. The hot adrenaline in my body stopped dead and was replaced by a cold sweat.

My eyes travelled to the side and found the metro line ten feet away from us on the platform. At either end of it, the shutters were beginning to move up.

“The Outer Metro.” Protégé breathed sharply. “An abandoned prison and asylum, connected to the station no longer used to bring in those the Ministry took...of course.”

“Correct.” Grindstone intoned from the monitor. “I always knew I was close finding this old hub down here, just had to find the right wall to knock down. Now it’s no longer needed. I have shut the doors in the prison. It will mean we cannot recover the remainder but...well, since you put it so passionately, Coral Eve, I suppose you’ve forced my hoof, haven’t you?”

The shutters slammed up, and beyond them I could see only the dark brickwork of the Outer Metro. The klaxon’s wails continued, sending jolts of pain through my skull and reverberating and echoing down the tunnels, like a signal.

“Goodbye, Protégé. I had once thought you might be malleable enough to work with us, but I see you never fully matured. I shall let the Outer Metro reclaim you all for how you sought to stop us using its secrets. Yes, goodbye.”

The monitor clicked off as the klaxon wound down as one by one the lights began to cut. With a thick snap of strip lights failing, we were plunged into darkness. The last echoes of the siren travelled down those tunnels, moving rapidly further and further away. Behind us in the prison, I could hear the sounds of slamming gates and cages, along with other doorways opening. Very quickly, I lost sight of the others in the failing light.

Already my heart was racing, I could feel the panic setting in, a sense of being vulnerable, of being trapped in the open. That was the *Outer Metro* open to us, the klaxon’s sound continuing to warp and echo down every tunnel. My eyes felt like they had grown to twice the size in fear as I stared into the mouth of that tunnel, just a vague shape to my adjusting eyes.

Then everything fell deathly quiet.

Behind us, the parents who had come in late seemed confused. They didn't know. But Protégé and I met each other's glances as we stumbled closer.

Then, in the darkness, I saw his eyepiece light up with a single little red line on it that quickly stuttered and failed. His eye behind it widened with terror.

"Run..." He muttered, turning his head to face the tunnels, "Run! *Everybody RUN!*"

Distantly, from deep within the tunnels, past the winding labyrinth of silent darkness and forgotten tunnels, there came a deep and unarticulated howl. A desperate, keening and low wail that pitched and grew and grew with no end.

Like an unseen wind of nauseating force, the tunnel disgorged the smell of rotten mint...and we *ran*.

* * *

There wasn't any order or direction. In pitch darkness we fled for where we thought the exit back to the prison was. Two ponies ran into me and knocked me clean from my hooves as they themselves collided. I could only see vague shapes as my eyes fought to adjust to see in the dark. A hoof landed sharply on my front left leg and I shrieked in pain.

"Miss Fluttershy!"

Attracted by my voice, the huge robot swiftly got me back to my hooves. I could see his glowing screen displaying a gruff looking bodyguard with sunglasses.

"We have to get off this platform!" I yelled, holding my hoof and praying it wasn't sprained. "Can you see in the dark?"

"Affirmative!"

"Then get us out of here! Now! NOW!"

He grabbed me as I relit my Pipbuck's light, holding up my leg to act as a signal. I could hear the others around us at the exit from the platform scrambling and panicking. Someone had already sprinted off and I was certain they'd gone the wrong way.

"Follow Mister Peace!" I screamed again and again. "Follow this!"

Waving my Pipbuck frantically, I saw Protégé's magic light up as he yanked another pony to follow my voice.

Wind rushed over my face as we turned corner after corner, while behind us that sound only grew and began to filter down every corridor. I heard another one from another direction, a supernatural scream from inside the prison. More than one way to the Outer Metro must have opened.

Mister Peace suddenly halted.

“An obstruction! Hold on!”

He set me down almost too hard. Even the *robot* was moving with desperate speed in everything he did. With my Pipbuck's light, I saw that a cage door had descended to block the way back into the main experiments room.

“OPEN IT!” I screamed.

He leaned down, bending those strong mechanical arms around the bottom and strained. Even with his enormous strength, it lifted slowly. Frantically, I went to my belly and crawled under.

“Run, Miss Fluttershy! I shall be able to locate you!”

“But-”

“Go! Equestria needs its most important mare!”

The chilling seriousness of his normally bombastic voice hit hard. Ponies began to arrive up behind us, diving under the gap as Mister Peace kept lifting to allow his larger size through. I grabbed Protégé's hoof and back-pedalled hard to drag him through after me, then we both did the same for Coral. There came a crash from back the way we came and I heard the voice of the one I'd seen go the wrong way.

“Where are you all?! Where are you? Oh...oh no! No...no! What is that?! WHAT IS-”

The voice was cut off in the most horrific of ways, with a grown and strong stallion shrieking until his voice broke like that of a filly. It took altogether too long to stop.

“Murky!” Protégé pushed me ahead of him as the others ran ahead of us. Leaving Mister Peace raising the door, we galloped madly for the operations room we'd left the others in. It was in darkness, lit by a dozen horns and flash lights. Slaves were crying out in fear and screaming, Weathervane was still cursing and forcing some order into the situation, trying to get them to keep moving the slaves out. Some ponies were running back and forth in panic. Broken slaves still waiting to be helped continued to bob and mutter in strained and fearful ways, as they sensed the horrors emerging. Doctors, parents and everyone who'd come with us were carrying

ponies on their backs, dragging improvised sledges and one even had the old corpse wagon emptied to pull more.

“Get back to the metro! Go go go!” Weathervane slapped the rump of a nurse to get him going. “Protégé, what in the name of fuck is going? What did you-”

An eerie roar, punctuated with liquid sounding gurgles rolled through the chamber from the way we were about to go. Weathervane stopped short and looked immediately terrified as a pinging beeping began to get louder.

“The warnings...no! They were all sealed away years ago in this city! Oh Equestria, what have they done down here...”

He was old. He'd been here before Red Eye. *He knew.*

“Where do we go? They're all around us!” A doctor looked hesitant to leave the room after that sound.

“There's only one way out!” Protégé ran past him. “We don't have a choice, just go!”

He went for the door out, stopping to lift a slave onto his shoulders. I did the same, hooking the hooves of what turned out to be the mare from before around my neck. I saw Mister Peace start to enter from the door we'd come through and shouted to him to grab as many as he could. The machine saluted and scooped up numerous slaves in his arms. Many shrieked over and over, with one still nodding his head relentlessly, blank eyes staring into darkness.

“Murky, tell me you know the way! Tell me you know the way back!” Protégé shouted back at me as we stumbled and half-ran with slaves around our bodies into the corridors back towards the-

The-

I panicked. What was the way again? What had we passed?

Cells. Canteen. Yard. What order? Which ways?

Then it hit me, the place had looped! Go for the looped corridor and keep moving whichever way those things *weren't*.

“Follow me!” I screamed, my voice high pitched and fragile. Speeding up, I pushed past the others, before the horrifying sound of the cage gate we'd passed being struck again and again caught my ears. I heard metal bend with frightening ease.

We left the operations room and its horrors in a ramshackle convoy, with me at the lead. Everything seemed to be spinning in the darkness with only small light sources from everyone around me that never stayed still and messed up my night vision. I saw doorways and ceilings, obstacles of wheelchairs and fallen radiators in the way that I had to weave around. We kept tripping on chains that rattled and seemed to leap out at us from the dark, either hanging from the roof or winding on the floor.

Rotten mint stank in the air, growing until I felt myself wanting to throw up and sneeze at the same time from the sickly stench in my throat and nose. The mare's groans of pain from being moved so harshly melded with the screams of the terrified and the cutting sounds of the Outer Metro's worst nightmares beginning to flood into this newly granted area. I could hear them smashing through adjoining rooms, as I dearly hoped their doors were locked.

"This-ARGH! ARRGH!"

The door beside me had bent outwards with a resounding *clang*. I heard scratching as the thick cell door reverberated again as I steeled myself and ran past it. After a second, the pain in my lungs grew before I realised I'd stopped breathing and started to suck in air again.

We rounded onto the long corridor that looped the Yard. After a moment of hesitation, I went right. We weren't moving fast. I saw the doorway to the canteen approaching, but it seemed to take us far too long to get there with all the slaves we were trying to carry out of this hell. We slammed every door behind us and barricaded them with filing cabinets and old brooms. It wouldn't do anything. I'd seen them break through reinforced metal doors before. Grindstone had no *idea* of what he'd properly unleashed if he thought those cages would contain them.

"This way!" I stopped at the doorway to the canteen and bucked open the door. Rushing into the room, I found almost all the tables overturned and broken in ha-

They hadn't been broken like that before.

I felt others crash into the back of me as I screeched to a halt.

"Turn around." I dared not do more than whisper.

"Murky what are you-" Weathervane came rushing up behind me.

"Turn. Around." I hissed, knocking them with my hooves, not wanting to turn my back as I trotted into them and tried to push. "Turn. Now! Now, please! Go back!"

Through the canteen, I could see the kitchens through a security door that now lay open, connected to the wires in the ceiling. A blinking red light announced it had just opened. It had certainly been closed before.

Behind it, I saw the old laundry machines for the prison just as two of them erupted up into the air and smashed into pieces no larger than a dinner plate. Through the carnage, *I saw movement*. Almost just a disturbance in the air, as something moved between two of the old machines.

“RUUUUN!” My cheeks staining with tears from sheer fear, the brief slip of my hooves on something gooey on the ground delaying me for what felt like years before I could get running again.

Protégé reached out with his magic and slammed the security door shut, cutting off sight as something unreal formed in a warped silhouette against a warning light behind it. The door immediately caved in, blasting two of its hinges off, about to break.

Then we were gone, moving back down the way we'd come. I saw the exit to the way to the operations room pass us again and didn't dare to look down it.

The moment I passed it, however, a shriek of desperate ferocious *need* came up it. Briefly, I saw that the door from earlier had broken. I could hear something ripping through the air down there. I wasn't sure if those thumps were from it hitting the ground or something else.

Eyes wet, hearing more and more sounds, I put my head down and sprinted. Any guilt about not watching out for others and how close they were went second to pure survival. Electronic beeping, the 'warnings' that Weathervane had mentioned combined with bestial howls and haunting high pitched wails around us. The sound of the security door being smashed behind us rippled down the corridor. With one scarce turn around, I felt my eyes burn as for one horrific moment I saw something emerge right behind us in the darkness. Indistinct, moving in ways that defied logic, with two burning white lights like vicious eyes that made my mind reel to see.

I turned away, before someone from the back of the column screamed. The yell turned to one of agony within seconds. They'd caught up with the ones who couldn't move fast enough. My heart dropped, but I didn't want to turn around. There was no saving them. Then I heard a second being grabbed, then another, as our convoy was being torn up, back to front. I heard six ponies die, their screams passing into the darkness as whatever grabbed them delayed to deal with their catch.

Suddenly, my hooves were on a sports-flooring. I'd come out into the yard.

Panting, trying to not feel bad about the mare's horrible pain and wounds as I lifted and carried her along, I found myself falling behind as the others out-paced me. They recognised the way out now.

Behind us, I heard a pony scream, then another and another. They were further back, probably having fallen or gotten lost in the darkness. A wet ripping sound like splitting a melon sent those screams into squeals, before they fell silent.

Ponies ahead of me escaped back through the Yard toward the cells. I could already hear them shouting for everyone to get out in there. Protégé and I were lagging behind, being the two with the shortest legs of the group. I could hear myself whimpering as I felt like I was in their sights now. Crossing the sports hall they called a yard, I saw slaves fighting with the massive riot gate on the yard's exit to the cells to try and lower it. They would be right behind us any second now, we had to get through!

Mister Peace rolled under it and dropped off the slaves, before he turned immediately to us.

In their panic, the doctor's at the controls got it lowering on its chains before Peace could come through.

"NO! NO! PLEASE!" I shouted, trying to pull the mare's dead weight with me. She'd passed out and hung limply off me, slowing me down further. Protégé looked back and used his magic to pull me with him, giving me an extra little boost as he stumbled, fell and eventually leapt beneath the dropping gateway. Dropping the slave, he slid back under and ran back to get me.

I could hear something approaching behind me. Sounds of clicking bones or metal mixed with a haunting low drone found their way into the hall.

Between us, Protégé and I lifted the mare and sped for the rapidly closing exit. Throwing her under, we both lay down and crawled frantically to beat the door without being trapped. Going through head first, I heard something running up behind us. The drone turned to a deafening howl, so close that my ears started ringing. I felt other slaves grabbing me to pull me through the thin gap remaining.

Then I felt myself stop dead and cry out in shock as a pressure landed hard upon my back. A nightmare come real dawned; my hips had gotten stuck in the gap as the door came down on me, trapping my lower body in the Yard.

It hadn't hurt or injured me, but I *screamed*. I screamed like a horrified foal. I was trapped and I could feel a warmth in the air growing on my lower body as something approached. Something unnatural, howling and gurgling at the same time, came surging across the floor of

the sports hall as the shriek grew and grew. *What the hell were they?!* My hooves reached out as I grabbed every pony I could, crying to be pulled in with tears in my eyes. Protégé held around my upper body, straining to tug me in.

“Robot! Lift it! Lift it!” I heard Unity's voice.

“No, don't let him! They'll get in!” A soldier's voice.

The ponies argued, but Peace thrust them aside, reached down and grasped the doorway. His enormous power lifted it by two inches. One of the two soldiers with us reached down and put his hoof through to grab my back.

I felt something step beside my body from the yard side.

The soldier was pulled screaming through, what had been grasping for my back instead grabbing his hoof. His body hit me and pulled me back under the door. I had never in my life heard myself make such a terrified scream. My head hit the lip of the door as the soldier cried out in horror sharply from behind me before a wet snap echoed in the Yard. I felt warm liquid pour over me, some hitting my face and forcing my eyes shut. Their noises were all around me.

Kicking and lashing out, blinded and dizzied, I felt myself grabbed and pulled hard across the floor as I heard the door slam shut. My hope went out, I had mere seconds. Please make it quick!

“NO! NOOO!” I fought and struck out. I hit something fleshy, making it fall back with a cry.

“MURKY! IT'S OKAY!”

My limbs were held down as I tugged and tugged, before something soft wiped my eyes to clear the blood. Through blurry vision, I saw red eyes and a black coat staring down at me.

I hardly wanted to pretend what I was seeing was real. I was on the side with my friends.

Slowly, through my terror, I began to realise that the last pull had been them grabbing me, the soldier's death giving them the few seconds they needed. Shaking terribly, I stopped fighting as Protégé became clear before my eyes. After a few long seconds, my limbs eventually stopped feeling so tense, but all I could do was shake and whimper.

Behind me, I could hear them through the riot door. More than one prowling and making their strange noises. The cells reeked of rotten mint, after having been so close, and I could see the streak of blood from where I'd been pulled in. My body was coated with it.

“Get away from the door!” Somepony snapped at us.

“C'mon, help him up.” Protégé lifted my under one shoulder, as Unity got the other one. Between the two of them, I was carried away from the riot door. Protégé pulled his eyepiece up and rubbed the side of his face with a wince.

“Are you hurt?” I had to choke the words out through my rough throat.

“You've got a mean little strike on those hooves.” There was no true humour in his voice.

Oh. Of course. I'd lashed out and hit something while I had been panicking. If I wasn't so beat, I might have found it oddly funny, but right now my stomach was churning as my mind tried to believe that I had somehow gotten out alive from that.

A good ten or so had not. They hadn't had a friend to pull them through at the last second, not to mention any slave's we'd somehow missed in there.

Around us, the survivors of Shackles and Grindstone's madness were being evacuated up the slope to the Inner Metro. It was slow going, with the thick and slippery cobblestones playing havoc with their weakened legs and uncertain balance. Stretchers had to be laboriously carried or dragged. Many times, ponies fell or slid back down. Shackles had chosen this place well to keep them from escaping rapidly. Weathervane was desperately moving between four cloth stretchers, trying to stabilise his four ghoul friends moving them further.

I might have dared to think we'd escaped again.

Clearly, like Grindstone, I had underestimated the Outer Metro.

The riot door buckled.

Across the cell chambers, I saw the thick slab of metal that was supposed to contain any rebellious prisoners bend inwards. A sound like a huge gong reverberated around the low ceilings of the cells, and everyone in them stopped where they were to turn in fright.

After a few seconds, that bulge formed from the first impact was struck again, and the entire door shook on its mountings. Dust began to fall from the connections to the brickwork around it.

“No, that's impossible.” Bloodbank muttered to himself. “That's inches of steel, not even Brutus could have-”

Then a third strike, and a small gap began to form at the top of the doorway, enough that the sound began to filter through. A savage noise, not one any beast or pony could make. After that, the smell began to trickle through and turn stomachs with its sweet rot.

Ponies had stopped and stared out of fright, but now the spell was broken, and they turned to a panic. Slaves who'd come with us and slaves from the prison both began to flee for the slope. Stretchers overturned. Ponies screamed. Hooves cracked and fell as the slimy gradient and angled cobblestones tripped them. Both my front hooves were pulled by Protégé and Unity alike as my hind legs furiously tried to keep my balance. I heard Weathervane swearing himself dry to control his team and get the immobile out first. A stampede of the fearful, all trying to crowd into a low sloping tunnel that couldn't possibly fit them all in one go.

What resulted was a catastrophic and slow moving mess. I lost Unity in the crowd, our hooves being torn apart from one another. I fell into Protégé and almost had to lift him onto my back as a larger pony crushed into him from the other side. My hooves left the ground as the squeeze between filthy and sick bodies lifted me up, before I was sent clattering back down the slope. Curling to not be crushed to death beneath their hooves, I felt a metallic hand grab my sweater and lift me free.

“Proper evacuation is judged impossible, Ma'am!”

Mister Peace put me down by the entrance to the slope. I'd fallen a good ten feet back down it. I could see ponies slipping and limping, barely moving at all, with so many crushed in that no-one could move at all. Behind me, another great crash signalled the riot door being knocked clean away from one of the corners. The chains that lifted or closed it rattled between each growing and falling howl from behind it. It wouldn't last.

“The bot's fucking right!” Weathervane was beside me, staunchly ensuring others got out first. “This slope is a mad slaver's wet dream! It's going to take us a lot longer to get up it with everyone. Even if the crush gets sorted out, they can't move fast enough up those cobblestones with hooves.”

“What do we even do?” One of his doctors was staring at the door as dust began to blow through the gaps. “Even if we lowered the cage door on the slope, it won't hold them!”

I began to pace from hoof to hoof, biting my lip. Behind me, the slow movement of the crowd was barely even a third of the way up the slope toward the Inner Metro. I could feel myself hyperventilating. I felt trapped. All this way and we were going to be torn apart like those ponies back there just because of some stupid cobblestones and...and because Shackles just *knew* how to do the little things to stop escape from his dens! The ponies he'd hurt wouldn't get out. We wouldn't get out!

The riot door rattled inwards on its hinges, before rocking back into place by stint of the chains alone holding it. Coral Eve was suddenly beside me, horn charged, ready to give one last blast before the end. I felt her hoof creep around my neck, holding me to her side.

I genuinely, utterly, had no idea what to do.

Mister Peace did.

The huge robot lunged forward, returning to the cell room's floor. I shouted after him, but he spun on the spot and pushed me and anyone else back into the raised slope leading out of here. Reaching up with one metallic arm, he yanked at the cage door above us. With a hiss of hydraulics, he pulled again and again before the whole thing came free of its housings and clattered down like a castle's portcullis in front of us, separating Mister Peace from everyone. He remained in the prison cell area, putting himself and a cage door between us on the ramp out of here and those things on the other side of the riot door.

“Fear not, Miss Fluttershy and her dear little friends! For I shall hold fast the tide of horrors sprung forth by the evil zebra nation until you can make best distance to safety! Depart now, my joyful mare of love! Weep not for your staunch defender, for my circuits glow with excitement to carry out one’s duty in such a manner to defend the mares of the Ministries!”

If I had any lack of knowledge on his intentions, that made it all too obvious. My heart leapt into my mouth, as I rushed forward to the cage door and pushed my hooves through it to grab his arm.

“No! No no! We'll...we'll think of some other-”

His cracked monitor turned to me, the grim sergeant replaced by the image of a more innocent looking young guard.

“You must flee, my shy pony of fluttering grace. This is what I was built for. To finish my duty in a heroic last stand is a most fitting way to say goodbye.”

A rush of guilt flooded through me. I'd always found it weird or sometimes even briefly amusing that the robot genuinely thought I was the Ministry Mare, Fluttershy. Others joked about it to me, but every so often I'd worried I was using him. Now he was declaring that he would have himself destroyed in my defence. No, in *her* defence.

It was too much. I could have sat down and explained it so many times, but he'd kept fighting for us, defending us all and yet at the core it was just because of a mistake!

“NO!” I screamed and slammed a hoof on the bars. “I won’t let you! I won’t let you destroy yourself believing a lie!”

The robot turned away slightly, as that riot door began to falter and slowly be bent in by some inexorable force.

“Miss Fluttershy? Whatever do you mean?”

His voice had softened, as much as it ever could.

My eyes were running, making my vision blurry. I shook as I brought myself to admit it, realising for the first time the real guilt of never having told him before and what it had led him to do.

“You made a mistake when you met me! I’m not the pony you think I am, Mister Peace. I never told you and...and I really should have but I...*I’m not Fluttersh-*”

One of his fingers pressed hard against my lips, stopping me dead.

His glowing monitor displayed a youthful, energetic soldier, staring directly down to me. Then slowly, between two slides, he winked.

I could find no words. Hooves grasped me, as Coral and Weathervane pulled me away from the cage. My hooves bumped over the cobblestones as I was dragged up the ramp, limp and disbelieving.

Below me, behind that cage, I saw Mister Peace spin on his axis. Every weapon door and mounting came to life. Missile racks whirred open. Magical energy weapons glowed. Bullets clacked as they fed into their chambers.

Then, just as I lost sight of the cage door in the darkness, I heard the riot door broken and the blood chilling howls and cries of the Outer Metro’s worst nightmares belch forth into the prison areas.

“Come on ya pansies! TALLY HO!”

His last word echoed again and again as every weapon he owned blasted forth to be met with unnatural roars of lust and fierce savagery. The tunnels shook and flickered from beneath as Mister Peace did his duty, to hold the line. As we slowly limped and slipped our way up the cobblestone slope and out into the Inner Metro, his maniacal laughter met their howls for a long time.

Eventually, just as we passed back to the metro line itself, his laugh finally fell silent, the slowly fading echoes of his voice in the tunnels replaced with only the eerie keening wails of whatever was following us. With the ground bought for us by Mister Peace, we fled out of the metro altogether, back to the surface and immediately got as far as we could from the metro station. For block after block, we carried, stumbled and dragged every slave we'd liberated from Shackles' deepest dungeons.

Behind us, the metro station entrance emanated a singular and terrifying roar of desperate frustration, like the sound a demonic foal would make if held away from what it wanted that grew deeper and more ferocious. It carried into the air, like some horrific announcement to the city. That they were no longer contained below ground.

Hundreds of metres away now, I couldn't see the entrance itself. But upon hearing that sound, I used my grapplehook to lift myself to the top of the nearest building and stare back.

The view was hazy, but twice I saw blurry and indistinct shapes through the smoke coming out of the metro, white flickers from two sources made my head hurt behind my eyes for all the half second I had witnessed them. In the streets surrounding the metro station they had now burst forth to the surface once again. Already I heard the screams and saw Enclave troopers fleeing to the sky from the area.

Fire and war had returned to Fillydelphia. Now too returned the terrors that lurked in the dark as the city continued its steady fall back into the hell it had once been.

Feeling cold, despite the burning buildings around me, I turned away and glided back to the ground to follow the others home. We'd lost allies along the way here to help those most in need. My stomach felt hollow as I landed beside Unity. We'd saved so many, yet I couldn't help but feel empty.

I noticed she'd stopped, and paused myself. Until her hoof touched my cheek I hadn't even realised I'd been still crying over the loss of a staunch ally through so much of this. A few seconds later, I felt her hooves around me as I fell into her shoulder and let it all out.

Fluttershy may not have found his presence likeable, but somehow as I saw the lines of the most hurt and vulnerable slaves in the city being rescued around us, I just knew that she would have been proud of him.

A duty fulfilled, even two hundred years later.

* * *

Crossing the city took a lot longer than it had the first time. The pace was slow with so many of the sick and injured from Shackles' den amongst us. It felt strange to be considered

'healthy' by comparison in that I could still trot and help support another young colt as he limped along on stiff joints, his back a horrid mess of bandages and lash wounds.

Twice, we'd had to get everyone inside a hall or old gym to cower behind treadmills and racks of weights as Stern's griffins moved through the streets, too tired to fly after so many hours of fighting.

We managed to commandeer a small cart from a burning home, the slavers who had once inhabited it lying dead with energy wounds or in piles of ash, before using it to carry more of the slaves who simply could not go further on their own hooves. Not a single pony wasn't helping someone else. Coral set herself to pulling the cart, the strain and physical effort giving her an outlet for the growing frustration I could sense in her. Every one of her limbs shook when she stopped, and I could feel the air prickle around her at times.

That mare seemed ready to explode. Even now, this close, she had been denied *again*. If she found them now, there would be hell to pay.

Weathervane hadn't stopped his role since we started moving. He went from pony to pony, healing, anaesthetising and giving his own unique brand of moral support. Yet he was getting snappy and shockingly physical. Twice I had seen him strike his doctors for questioning him. His eyes carried a wild look that was getting his team to mutter behind his back. I could hear him muttering over and over that they would live. Unity and Protégé carried two mares upon their backs, walking tiredly but doggedly on the last stretch toward the Mall. The journey and the rescue was wearing our diminishing stamina down, while war and an ever-present tension was sapping our mental strength. Now, I was beginning to worry about us lasting until the escape. I needed to sleep, but I couldn't find the calmness to ever consider doing so. I needed to eat, but I felt sick. I wanted to sprint and fight and dig and claw for every inch for my freedom, but my body was feeling sluggish and heavy.

Could we even last?

Ahead, I heard hooves on tarmac. Stopping dead, I heard weapons drawn behind me.

Through billowing dust in the wake of the great winds sweeping across the city, a mare emerged and quickly lifted her weapon, before dropping it.

“Hey! I found them! Everyone, help them in!”

Sunny Days slung her rifle and galloped forward. Her coat was stained black with what looked like charcoal stains and her wound from the defence of the Mall was still taped up tightly, but she pushed herself among us to take some of the weight. Behind her, a dozen others came out to meet us from the Mall, lending their rested strength to help bring us all home together.

* * *

An hour later, as we found our way back into the near wreck of the Mall, most of us collapsed in the bullet hole ridden entranceway to gasp for breath and drink some of the offered water.

Coral Eve unhooked her wagon and rounded on us all. I caught her eye, but after a fierce look, she simply turned and stomped off into the Mall. No pony dared try to stop her. I knew what she would be doing, she would be going to plan and think. She wouldn't leave this city before she had them. I could see the disappointment on the faces of many I recognised as parents. Many were crying. I felt like doing so too, for more than just losing the foals.

I couldn't believe he had done that to save us.

Doctor Weathervane waved the injured in, encouraging their helpers with fierce curses and stinging insults.

"Bloodbank, take the stable ones up to the storage hall and find them bedding! Hurry your fat arse!"

"Yes, Doctor!"

"You! Get that stretcher! And you, stop lying down you lazy shit and pick up those fucking supplies for the aid station! Caduceus, prep Baton Round for surgery first!"

There was a brief pause. Coral and I exchanged looks as the old ghoulish stared at those looking back at him in anger.

"What are you lot gawking at? You think I'm about to perform a magical fairy Canterlot circus act?"

Bloodbank gulped, as he helped an unconscious and withered slave up onto a stretcher, "Sir...Caduceus isn't with us..."

Weathervane twitched, as though not comprehending what the other pony had just said.

"Don't...don't you think I fucking know that? You...err...you..." He pointed at another pony in a nurse's garb, one I knew he'd called by name before. "Get them...get them up and ready. Fuck me, if only he was here he'd be showing all you rookies up!"

As we brought the dozens we had rescued into our fold, I watched him canter alongside his four old friends. I felt sick to look at them. Their horribly savaged bodies that drew my imagination to unthinkable ideas on what the slavers did to them to have them end up like this.

“Get them anything radioactive!” Weathervane screamed and swung a hoof at the rest of us, all of us. “Anything that makes a rad-counter scream like a first timer who got more than he bargained for gets brought to me right now! No doctor gets to rest! *I will save these ponies!*”

They were stirred into action as Weathervane passed to the stairs and began the process of carefully lifting the stretchers up them.

“You hear me? They will not die! Fuck everything! Fuck every slaver and every year since those bombs, fuck what you say! I will not lose them!”

Bloodbank gulped, “Doctor, look at them, I don’t know if we can-”

“Shut up, Caduceus! The afterlife can fuck off! *I will deny it!*”

* * *

Within the aid station, the seemingly hopeless task began.

Unity and I watched from the outskirts of the aid station through a hole in its wall from the battle with Big Brutus.

We watched the surgery, as we saw an entire team of doctors in the city led by possibly the single best medical professional in the entire Wasteland fight to save just four lives.

Ponies came running in with radioactive metal they’d found outside or in storage. Some even began seriously organising a trip to the crater, arguing over whether there would be time. Others squeezed what water remained in the devastated rooftop tanks out to pour and use. The doctors scurried and rushed from table to table, sharing their expertise and what skills each knew.

At the centre of it, I saw a frantic, desperate and very clearly frightened Doctor Weathervane barking orders and trying to do the work of four.

“Get Windtail a splint to reset that before radiotherapy!” He screamed while injecting some form of yellow mixture into what remained of muscle on Baton Round’s right front leg. “Who here knows a coagulation spell? She needs a fucking stop on that fluid! Come on you arseholes, they’re my...just...get to work!”

I felt myself trembling, before Unity’s hoof found mine.

Weathervane rounded quickly, ripping a scalpel from another slave nurse’s own magical grip from having been cleaning it and going right to work on Bedlay Bloom, trying to cut away

what seemed to be seared clothing to find the flesh. The difference between it and skin was small.

Through my sensitive ears, I heard him muttering to himself.

“Come on, Bedlay, fucking live...you four are all I've got left of back then...”

“Doctor, we're not seeing any-”

“SHUT UP! SHUT THE FUCK UP!” His hoof came down hard on a work tray. “You will obey and you help me save these ponies!”

His face rounded on them with a furious snarl, giving me a look into his eyes.

I hadn't been aware ghouls as old as him could still cry.

The grip between Unity and I became closer, as we leaned against one another and held tightly.

* * *

After forty minutes, Bedlay Bloom died.

There was no immediate downturn, no sudden rush. The horrors done to her simply could not be fixed. With almost insulting lack of event, Bloodbank pronounced that any sign of life in the ghoul had ceased to be.

After a long silence, Weathervane held his head down to the table beside Bedlay's and shivered.

I hadn't really known his friends. Having met them only briefly a long time ago, they weren't immediately close to me, but it was their connection to a pony I respected so highly that hurt me deeply. I could see the wave of anguish that shot through Weathervane.

I thought how I would have felt if that had been Glimmer or Unity there on the table. Emotion grew inside me in a horrible way as the mental picture played out, and then I knew how he felt. I hiccuped and sobbed, gripping Unity tighter.

Weathervane drew himself up, looking pale and tired, before raking his threadbare mane back and turning back to the others.

“Take her to the back of the station and cover her...we still have work to do. We're not done.”

No-one in the medical team dared to contradict him now, but I saw their wary glances to one another.

* * *

“Come on! *Come on!* Just give me a damn sign that it's working!”

Weathervane held Windtail gently in his hooves as he kept his horn close to the 'youngest' ghoul's skull to apply subtle healing magic directly to the brain.

“It's swollen! Someone get me a surgical cutter, we need to drain the fluid gathering in there, prep him for ventriculostomy, have the Fillydelphia General Hospital on the line and ready, we'll need their IC unit after this!”

Bloodbank looked up, concerned. “Sir, Filly-General was destroyed two hundred years ago...”

“It...what?” Weathervane looked up, disbelieving, before shaking his head, “Stop...stop fucking telling me what I know!”

“Sir, we don't have the tools for a ventri-”

“Then fucking find some! Now get over and help me, deal with his spine!”

Bloodbank waved to a nurse, and took one look before just shaking his head. He genuinely had no idea what to do with ghoul biology. Weathervane shoved him out of the way and started trying to apply something to the badly twisted back of the lithe ghoul.

It was all for naught. Five minutes later, any indication of life ceased as Windtail passed away.

Doctor Weathervane could only step back from the table and sit down, his front legs resting on his head and clawing down his cheeks. His eyes were turning a more milky hue than normal, tinged with red at the edges.

“No...no...”

One of the doctors looked up from Splint and seemed apprehensive.

“I...I think we've lost her too...”

The old ghoul surged across the aid station, grabbing a dozen tools in his magic at once to descend upon the body. His magic sparked, closing around Splint's torso as he sent pulses of healing spells through her. A warm feeling tinged with hair raising static charge became notable in the air. He surrounded her in enough radiation that the others had to back off.

None of it was to any avail.

“Come on! LIVE! Splint, please! Please, come on! COME THE FUCK ON! ARRRGH!”

He lashed out, sending a trolley of medical tool scattering across the floor. Letting out an incoherent and raspy cry of rage and anguish, he sank to his haunches with his forehead on the edge of Splint's bed. His breathing was ragged and bestial.

Cautiously, Bloodbank, the most senior of his doctors, approached.

“Doctor...?”

Weathervane didn't look at him, but moved his head by inches to see Splint's lifeless face. His voice was quiet and broken.

“Centuries ago, I delivered her into this world...”

Bloodbank had no idea what to say.

* * *

If he was desperate and hostile before, he became downright fanatical with only Baton Round left. The strong stallion who had once been his hospital's security guard was still moving, but only barely. How, I hadn't a clue, but who knew how ghouls worked?

As a testament to their duty of care, and to my utmost admiration, the other doctors downed anti-radiation pills, set up drinks of RadAway and worked even as the radioactive metal surrounded them on the operating table to help stabilise the ghoul. It only seemed to empower Weathervane, who moved with a speed and dexterity I'd rarely seen in his old frame.

Yet it was his speech and his eyes that terrified me. His commands were becoming growled, his tone more fera-

My heart skipped, I didn't like even thinking that word.

He was fighting to save the last pony he knew from before the balefire. The one living remnant of his life then and who had become his anchor to prevent the fall of his own sanity.

Long ago, he'd told me he had been falling toward turning, but hearing these four were alive seemed to have given him a reason to keep holding on.

He was fighting for his own mind.

Shouted commands perked me up to look and see. The same static charge spell was being used around Baton's body, the doctor's moving backward to allow it every time, before continuing to try and stitch, splint, tie off and heal the endless problems they were presented with on a body that wasn't truly alive in the way we knew it anyway.

Yet, he was fading.

I didn't want to see him hurt. He had given me back my wings. He'd saved my life more than once. He'd told me how to help stave off the sickness in my lungs from slowly killing me. My friends too owed him their lives.

Yet now I watched him unable to save the ones he cared about, after two hundred years doing it for everyone else.

My cheeks were wet and my eyes sore, yet I couldn't help but sob.

It was a cruel sight. An immortal trying to save something that would also have been had everliving, had it not been for Chainlink Shackles, this city and its sick inhabitants.

Then they stopped. My heart felt like it did too. Any second, I expected the fatal announcement.

"I think we have him..." Bloodbank spoke quietly, finally taking a breath. His clothes were stained with rotten colours. "He's stabilising."

Weathervane stepped back, shivering and growling lowly. His old eyes were locked on the motionless ghoul upon the table, before his shoulders finally sank in what seemed to be relief.

"Doctor, what's our next move?"

The old ghoul didn't move, but his eyes stared endlessly from pony to pony. He squinted, as though not recognising them.

"I'm..." he began, "I'm going to get something to keep my magic going strong and to help him long term. Watch him, he should be stable."

Weathervane turned and slowly trotted past the others toward the door. His legs moved jerkily and without any real pattern. Ponies backed away from him as he neared, his teeth baring behind the breaks in his skin.

Gently standing up, I told Unity I'd be back in a second, just as the nurses called her in to help with some of the others they were bringing in for treatment. I moved out into the corridor after Weathervane.

He didn't deserve to be alone now.

* * *

"We're all here for you, you know?"

Weathervane spun on the spot from the cabinet in the storage hall of the Mall. His eyes sought me out with a worrying look of hunger, before something prevailed inside and he settled. All the same, I'd still hopped back a few steps.

"Murk..." He fought the word out, like he was talking through a mouth that wasn't sure how to work right.

Swallowing my fear, I approached him.

"I just wanted to say, we're all here too. We care for you."

He didn't reply, but turned back to the cabinet to take out various small bottles. I moved up beside him and wordlessly started to help him, picking them out based on the ones he was already picking up.

After a few minutes, I gulped and spoke again, not looking at him.

"A lot of us haven't really got much to go back to out there. I don't even know if my mother's alive, I don't have a home or any other family. There's no friends waiting for me out there. They're all the ones I met in here, not before."

The doctor paused briefly, before resuming his work, sniffing the contents of one vial.

"Did I ever tell you, Murk, that you...remind me of him?"

My heart skipped a beat as I looked up to him. The ghoul tilted his head enough for one eye to stare down at me.

"Really?" I gasped as the meaning of that really drove home. "I'm sorry..."

He slowly shook his head, looking wistful. "Don't be. Every father wants his children to be a better example than they ever were. That day you first hold them in your hooves and all you can think about is the mistakes you made before this moment...and how you want to ensure they don't do the same. You want to help them not suffer what you did, you want them to do better, help them make their own mark, so that when you die, you leave behind a fine child. Then all this happened..."

He closed his eyes, shaking lightly.

"That's why you remind me of him. This world never gave either of you a chance to be the pony you wanted to be. The war forced him to make weapons and survive to accomplish a total of jack shit in some underground bunker leaving behind a mare I knew damn well he loved. It's kept me going that I thought I was doing the right thing but...fuck...if it's not tainted. Murk, I hope the same thing he went through never has to happen to you."

He took the last of his vials, before swigging down one of them and testing his horn on a nearby box with telekinesis. He finally stopped and looked at me. For a moment, I dared to think he was coming back to normal.

"You've got his eyes."

I felt distinctly out of my depth on how to respond to that, other than to eventually utter "Thank you."

The old ghoul nodded and moved for the door to return to the aid station.

"Will he be okay, now?" I asked quietly, trotting alongside him. "I mean, Baton Round?"

"He's stable now. We will have to see. There was an old rule, never work on family or friends. The loss can kill you too. Height of grand fucking irony for it to be me now. No choice here..."

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry."

He stopped and clenched his eyes shut. I saw that same shudder I'd seen on other ghouls before, that slight raising of the back and lowering of the head. I had to fight the urge to back away.

"I...no. It isn't right that a doctor should imagine death upon even those that committed this. I have work to do to help him. He's all I have left now, Murk. He saved my life once, then I saved his from what he suffered to do it. That bonds you, our lives are linked. Maybe together, we can-hmm?"

He twisted his head about the same time I did. Galloping hooves approached, as an exhausted Bloodbank came to the storage hall doors and leaned on the door to get his breath.

I saw the look in his eyes.

Then I heard what he had to say about what had just happened.

With those words, my heart shattered; just as Weathervane recoiled, screamed, dropped every vial and ran for the aid station.

* * *

By the time Bloodbank and I caught up with the frantic ghoul, we found a scene of chaos. Stretchers were being wheeled out of the aid station ahead of screaming slaves. I saw Glimmer pull a young mare out with her, before crying out in pain and collapsing from her injured back. Slaves with guns were trying to get near, fighting with nurses and shouting at one another in frantic angry tones.

Finally, I saw Brimstone reach over everyone else and slam the door to the aid station shut. I hid against the wall as ponies stampeded past me. I heard the same word over and over.

Feral.

The medical team were in tears. They huddled near the door, blocking ponies trying to shout about the danger, about how it 'had to be done' as they brandished rifles and shotguns. Inside, I could hear things crashing and being thrown or smashed inside. Horrid snarls and howls emerged. They sounded agonised as much as furied and beast-like.

Dropping alongside Glimmer, I helped get her out of the way of the others.

“What happened?!”

“He-argh!” She steadied herself. Her voice sounded disbelieving. “He snapped. It was like a switch, he saw the body and then just...just started shaking his head more and more and screaming and then just...”

She shivered, trying to help the young mare calm down with a hug.

“I managed to pin him against the wall with a stretcher in my magic till we got out. He was snarling and drooling. It wasn't Weathervane...I just...I don't even know.”

I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it.

Bloodbank paced in circles, tears streaming from his eyes.

“Baton just left us. We thought he was stable but he just, well, I don't know. Something we missed, some unseen complication I...I-I don't know. The doc is just...I don't know.”

I heard that term a lot in those few minutes. 'I don't know.'

Slowly, I approached the doorway and pressed a hoof against it. Those wanting to take him out were backing down for now that he'd been contained.

Every time I'd been happy to see him passed through my mind. The comfort there was in knowing he was around. How he'd snort and treat you with a sharp tongue, but you always knew that if anything happened you were safe with him.

From my lungs, to my wings, my neck and chest to stab wounds. My body was a visual history of what he'd done for me. Now I heard the sounds of a feral ghouel behind that door and my mind simply couldn't imagine it as him.

We couldn't just lose him like this. We couldn't! It was so unexpected! After Mister Peace had carried out one of the most heroic things I had ever seen, and saved us all with his sacrifice, this was just horrible and unfair to witness. Weathervane was greater than this. He deserved more for everything he'd done for probably hundreds of ponies over his long life. Not to become just another feral.

I wasn't going to give up. He cared for me as a patient. I'd care for him as a friend.

Glimmer spotted me looking at the door handle and started to move over. She knew the signs when I was contemplating something by now.

“Murky, don't. I saw him. I'm sorry, but he's-”

“No, he's not!” I spun my head around. “It...it can't be that instant! Something has to take time, right? There's gotta still be something! He said I have his son's eyes and...and he once mistook me for him so maybe he'll...he'll think? I don't know, I just need something to spark his memo-”

I stopped my thinking aloud, as I looked down to my Pipbuck.

My sister saw clearly what I was looking at.

“Murky, you know what he believes about Sundial.” Glimmerlight whispered to me, leaning down to my level. “You'd be telling the truth that his son never made it.”

Sniffing, I shook my head, "We already lost one friend today who I never told the truth to until right at the end..."

Desperately, I toyed through the recordings I'd heard from Sundial. I knew what I was after. Squinting, struggling to read the controls, I finally clicked it onto one. Then I looked up into Glimmer's eyes. The thought of Mister Peace was still too fresh.

"I...I may not have time to explain before he's too far gone. Please...we all would be dead without him."

Her face turned stern, before she bit her lip and sighed.

Behind the door, the snarling had gone quiet.

* * *

Everyone else had left the corridor. All that remained as I stood at the door were my friends and the medical team. Glimmer and Protégé had their weapons ready to burst in if they heard me scream.

My heart in my mouth, I slowly opened the door.

The aid station was dark. Someone had knocked over the lights on their way out. With everything cast in an unusually dark blue from the sole remaining lamp on a medical tray, I could barely see into many of the shadows.

Shivering, I closed the door and took a step further in, mentally rehearsing every motion to reach the Pipbuck in a split second. Every movement of a hoof felt daring and nerve-wracking. Every instinct said to turn around. Memories of the ghoul janitor were still clear.

I could see the operating table where Baton Round's body lay covered in a sheet. Around it, everything was torn apart. I had to step over sharp tools and move around overturned beds. In the dark hue, the stained sheets of empty beds and long used tools almost seemed indicative of the world he had existed in for centuries.

Slowly, as I neared the body at the centre, I began to adjust to the dark and spotted the hunched form at the opposite end, facing the corner. A cold shiver shot right through me as I saw the distinctive periodic spasms and sharp growls of an idle feral.

"D-Doctor...?"

I came around the bed, holding onto it with a hoof to try and propel myself for the door if anything happened.

The head shot around. Milky white eyes stared at me, as his back arched up and let his half ruined doctor's coat slip away. A throat rumble started to pick up, a bass level noise that shot a spike of fear right to my core.

Now. Now Murky. Do it now. I willed myself over and over, as I tried to move my frozen hooves to the Pipbuck. The ghoul's hooves shifted forward, jerky and unnatural. He made a horrible shriek.

My hoof fumbled, hitting the wrong button and toggling the light on and off. Whimpering, I couldn't take my eyes off him as I tried again and again. He got closer, as I finally hit the play button.

Beep.

I took a sudden breath as I realised that it still had to play through the beeps before the voice would cut in.

The ghoul began to prowl forward, picking up speed. I backed away on instinct, too scared to find the breath to scream. My hooves found slippery floors and tools as I fell to my rump and then rolled onto my back. I felt paralysed.

Beep!

Scream or wait? Scream or wait? If I screamed they'd shoot him!

The ghoul surged forward. He leapt up onto a bed before diving toward me.

Click.

It took all the willpower I had, all the trust I had in him. If I had learned anything about trusting ponies through my short time since I'd learned to think for myself, I had to believe in it now. I held the scream in, closed my eyes and held out the Pipbuck, biting hard enough on my lip that I felt my own blood enter my mouth. My entire body tensed harshly as I felt four hooves descend on all side of my body and rear up.

“Hey! Hey! Wait up!”

Shivering in a ball, there was a few seconds where I didn't know if it was just pausing, waiting or if anything had worked.

“Phew...Aurora runs faster than I do. We've stopped, she's gone ahead to check something. I don't even know why I'm turning this on now, but I worry it might be the last chance I get...”

As seconds ticked through, I felt something nudge my Pipbuck. Daring to open an eye, I saw the ghoul's hoof prodding at it, as its head tilted and stared. Its eyes were wide, seemingly caught unaware.

“It's crazy. I barely even understand it all. I just...I just wanted to work hard and get a Stable ticket for Skydancer. That's all I wanted! Just some peace of mind, but I just kept falling deeper and deeper”

In that moment, I knew that I was right. Shifting slowly, I backed away against the wall, my Pipbuck held out in front of me as he followed it, listening closely. He looked confused, shaking his head and knocking at his own skull with his hooves. Once, I could have sworn I saw him holding his head.

He was still in there. I wanted to shout out, to encourage him, but I feared anything would break this spell as Sundial's voice filled the room, explaining all that had happened with the Zebras and Aurora Star, meeting the ears of his father for the first time in two hundred years. Glimmer had once told me that a parent would never forget their child and how to recognise them. Coral had reaffirmed that was true.

Now I knew, as the message from Sundial earlier on in the metro played out, that they were right.

“But I...I want to do this. Look, I can't explain this but just...it's right. Equestria's in danger, or at least Filly is. I've been given a road to help it. To stop ponies from being hurt. My mother always used to tell me about Twilight Sparkle and her friends. They weren't born to save others, they just...did. Now I know what she meant when she told me those stories of the Ministry Mares in their young days. I'm just your average pony who got a chance to help like they did and I...I want to. I want to help stop this. I'm a part of it. I'm involved. I'm...going to save ponies.”

The ghoul's face softened, as those cream eyes widened again. I saw muscles relax as he stared at the Pipbuck endlessly, like a lost foal.

“Dad always told me he wished I'd gone into medicine instead of helping build weapons to make money. I argued, I knew why I'd done it. It paid more. But I'd always felt like I disappointed him. Now I'm realising I'm probably never going to see him again and I feel...I just...”

A hoof landed on my leg as the ghoul brought itself closer to the Pipbuck, leaning his forehead against it. I could see tears forming, slow and coloured, but tears all the same.

“Dad...I wish I could just talk to you now. I only ever took that job to help save a pony I love, and I'm still trying to save her now. I was going to propose to her, you know? You inspired me. You always did. Now that I'm about to go do something so dangerous and try to save so many lives that I just...I just wish you were here to give me your advice and so I could...could let you see that I really am trying to be as good a stallion as you are”

They were flowing, as the spasms I saw were not that of a feral, but that of a sobbing, nostalgic and emotional stallion.

“I'm going to save everybody down there, Dad. Do what you do. I'll make you proud. If...if I don't come back, then please don't worry if you hear this. I'll be with mom, okay? I'll-”

“Sundial? Sundial, we have to go.”

“Okay...okay. This is it. Goodbye. If anyone finds this, please let my family know what's happened. Hopefully this isn't my last entry.”

“Sundial, come on! I can feel that it's powered up, we have to go, now!”

“Coming!”

Click.

As it ended, I was left alone with him. The oldest pony I knew held onto the Pipbuck like a lost foal, as two centuries of pain and emotion passed through him.

“Rrr...Murk?”

I could only gasp as I heard him speak.

“Weathervane?”

“My son...died in the balefire, didn't he?”

Worrying of another slip into the feral side, I could only tell the truth. To deny it now would only be worse. Gulping, I nodded.

“Yes. I found him. But he died doing something incredible. We'd have known if he failed. Sundial did it. He saved them. Just like we did today.”

Weathervane pulled himself up. He looked horrifically frail, his expression twitching as though he had gone through a stroke, or were still riding the knife-edge of falling to the feral side.

“Somehow I always knew, after I found the stable. It was empty. The ponies inside had left it years before I got there. I didn’t find anything of his. But I knew he had the ticket so I...I needed something to hold onto...but now I know what he did.”

I tried to get to my hooves, moving cautiously and carefully as I spoke again.

“I’ve heard it all over the past months. Sundial was a good pony. He saved me a few times too.”

Weathervane only nodded, before gently reaching over with his now sleeve covered leg to gently wrap it around me.

“He would have liked you, Murk. I would have been proud to welcome you into our home. Fillydelphia always was my home, Murk. I grew up here. I raised a family here. I died here too. Only now...”

He glanced around, seeing the rows upon rows of stained beds, the hopeless unending struggle to heal slaves in a hell city, the bodies of those unfairly treated and the darkness of a half ruined building. He paused as his eyes found Baton Round, before sighing.

“Baton, my dear friend, be at peace at last. With all this, I have found closure, I believe. My old life is finally over.”

Letting go of me, as the door opened and the others began to creep in and see us together with disbelieving eyes, he leaned down to my eyes.

“Please allow me to join you all in a new one.”

* * *

I stood with Protégé at the window overlooking the war torn city in his office. He hadn’t spoken much after I’d entered and found him alone. I’d just trotted over and stood alongside to watch the skyships passing by and the enormous pillars of smoke from entire blocks burning.

A few more minutes ticked by. We saw the trails of artillery shells soaring through the smog and blinked as bright sparks of energy lanced from the sky. I followed the dives and spins of Enclave troopers as they flew rooftop to rooftop in the distance. No-one seemed to be bothering with the shelled out Mall any more.

Protégé removed his eyepiece, sitting it on the windowsill.

“You know it seems silly, Murky. But I miss our talks we used to have in here.”

Turning my head, I lowered one eyebrow, a little confused.

“Really? But we were-”

“Master and slave? I suppose you are right. Only that's not how I remembered it from my side. To me, I was trying to see if you would be like me. Someone who wanted better, even if we had different perceptions of it.”

My head already hurt from today, and the adrenaline leaving me was giving me a hard crash of energy levels. I wasn't sure how well I could keep up with this.

“I suppose there was something about them, you were nice to me. Sometimes.”

Protégé winced, clearly remembering the 'other' times. “I was just thinking, after seeing you with Weathervane, what is it about you that seems to stir this willpower in others to find something else?”

“I don't do it on purpose...” I muttered, looking away.

He briefly chuckled, “So you have noticed it.”

I believe I may have blushed. He smiled and sat down on his old chair. It creaked before one of the arms fell off it entirely.

“Those talks we had made me realise something of the same, even as far back as then. I saw it again with you and so many others since. I believe I've finally identified what it is. Forgive me for saying Murky, but you're small, you aren't muscular, you can't aim a gun, can only read basic words...”

“Hey!” I rounded on him, to see him wave a hoof in apology.

“But you shine with an inner strength. I've read a lot of books, some of them talk about how strength isn't in doing, but doing in spite of. I think many of us may have become attached to that, possibly even inspired by it. You don't lead us, Murky, but you represent the heart of what we are doing.”

He got up and returned to the window. “And now we've all, together, accomplished this. We inspired ponies to help everyone escape, defended innocent lives, rescued the most

mistreated slaves in the city from Shackles' own den and now we sit atop a plan to escape, possibly in the next few hours. And yet here I stand missing our talks.”

He laughed tersely and shook his head. “When the sky returns...fitting, isn't it?”

“Mhm.” I muttered. “It's weird. I feel a little bit uncomfortable. We're about to go for it but I just feel...I don't know, like it's-”

“Sluggish around the hooves?” He finished.

“Sick in the stomach?” I added.

“Homesick?” We both spoke at the same time.

Protégé put a hoof on my shoulder, “It's a strange feeling. To feel nervous about leaving the place that's hurt you, I feel it too.”

I gulped. “The only friends I ever had ,I met here. It's weird to say but...but Filly was the first place my life started. Really started, when I got out of the Pit and saw her escape. Or even before that when Unity and I...it's hard to explain.”

Protégé nodded, “Like in some weird way, it's home. I found the father figure I'd lacked and a purpose I never expected to have from a life of servitude. Filly gave me meaning. It gave me...yes, you said it right. A life.”

He sighed, “Now we're looking at the unknown.”

“The fear that we'll get dragged back in again...”

Protégé shook his head on that one, but then he had always been more confident about plans, and hadn't been through the same failures I had.

Then he stopped before saying anything further. I saw him lean forward and quickly push his face near the glass remaining in the window.

“What is...”

I shuffled up beside him and saw it.

Across the sky, amongst the black shapes of the Enclave ships and between the cascade of projectiles and energy beams above the fire, I saw the light.

Like when I had first escaped the Mall and saw an enormous Balefire Phoenix, I felt the same sense of scale kicking in. Like something was about to happen, something larger than what I thought I knew.

A green flare, streaking across the sky. It curved slowly, glittering as it went and leaving a long trail that wafted and slowly broke apart seconds after the flare's passing. It was moving fast, so very fast, coming in from the mountain ranges as it entered the city limits and streaked upwards in a rapid climb.

Protégé was silent, as I heard shouting from around the Mall begin to pick up.

With a cloud clearing thump, it shot through the cloud barrier from below. Then, for almost half a minute, I began to feel like I'd just imagined it, if it weren't for Protégé being there.

"What was tha-"

All voice. All sound was cut off.

It returned, travelling faster than anything I had ever seen. Seconds after coming down in a vertical dive from the clouds, the sound hit me like a sledgehammer. A colossal BOOM, overriding everything else in the city making noise. It drowned out a war as my eyes felt like they burned on witnessing a star's light that expanded and grew and grew.

Then my mind realised what I was seeing. The radioactive green, the speed, the explosion. It was a Balefire Missile, it had to be!

The ground began shaking. I saw all the fighting cease, as I saw dust and smoke being blown aside by the approach of the shock wave. We barely had time to dive away from the window before it hit the Mall with a force not felt since the Enclave ship had strafed it. Yelling aloud, I felt myself tossed up as the floor shifted and rocked. Smog and smoke blasted in through the open window as it was forced away from the explosion, forcing us both to squeeze tightly together into the shelter provided by the desk's gap for the chair. I held my ears down as the wind howled and whistled. I saw glass on the floor. My bones were shaking. I screamed over and over, expecting the surging flames to come crawling through the window any second.

Clasping tightly in a ball, I waited for it to be over.

And yet, before I could even imagine it would continue, I felt it begin to die down.

There were no green flames. No horrid burning.

Slowly, I untangled myself from Protégé and the pair of us crawled back into the office. I turned my eyes to the window before crying out in pain as something burned my eyes.

A searing light struck me, as I felt my skin grow warm. Were there flames yet to come? Did they come later?

“Murky...look...”

Protégé was slack jawed beside me as I squinted my eyes back open. Held in a sharp ray of bright light that made the office glitter and showed me how bright the colours in the office really were, we approached the window. My own coat felt like it was gleaming, Protégé shone as his eyepiece reflected light. Book covers of all a rainbow of colours stood out on the floors under this beautiful glow.

Outside, skyships fell. Some lay in heaps upon the ground, others limped away. There was so little sound. The war had ceased in wonder.

In the skies above, there was a hole. A great hole, larger than could be imagined. It cast light upon this blighted city, chasing away the red darkness and fighting with the lingering smoke and smog that slowly begun to raise again. Several fires had been blown out entirely. Shining beams of light cascaded down, more fragile and strong then anything I had ever sketched in my wildest dreams.

Yet I didn't care. I barely even thought about them. Both Protégé and I made noises, the starts of words, but neither of us could find a way to end them or continue. The awe ran too deep. Xenith hadn't been lying or using a metaphor. It was time.

Above us, I could see the sky. The clear sky.

The clear sky...and the sun.

* * *