

# All Paths Lead Home

by Mystic

## Chapter 10: Darkest Before Dawn

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Like all things, the night ended, and dawn arrived. The mare, lost in a sea of unrelenting shadow, reluctantly woke with it. She forced her eyes open and found her vision blurred and disorientated. The world was silent without the wind. She shivered slightly in the ash despite the relatively warmer air temperature. Her body had nothing inside of it. It was empty, devoid of energy, and useless. She was going to die. She was sure of it.

“Mama?”

“I... I’m awake...”

“We should go, Mama.”

The mare finally moved her head in the direction of her daughter’s voice. The small pony was already standing, already wearing the worn-out saddlebags. She examined the mare with a controlled expression.

“Go...?”

The filly frowned. “Home, Mama. We are home. Don’t you want to go home?”

The mare tried to roll onto her hooves. Her body shook, and her vision started to fail her, but she did it. She inhaled deeply a couple of times, fighting for breath. “I... Yes. I do.”

“Then we should go. But you need food first.” The filly gestured to a small piece of newspaper on the ash piled high with a pile of seeds. The water bottle sat next to it, the lid already loosened.

The mare crawled over, nudging the ball of newspaper open with her muzzle. She bent down and greedily consumed a mouthful of seeds. They were dry, and got stuck to the inside of her parched mouth, but they were food. After a mouthful of water, the mare found that the empty weakness in her stomach had subsided somewhat.

“Thank you,” she murmured, finishing the last of the seeds.

The filly’s expression softened, and she watched her mother tenderly. “You’re welcome.” The small pony walked over and tucked the water bottle into a pocket on the outside of the bags. “Come on, Mama. We need to go fix you up.”

“Fix me up?” the mare said, struggling to stand.

“Yeah,” the filly replied, moving over to help pull her mother to her hooves. “We’re going to make you better.”

The mare didn’t reply. What could she say?

Leaning heavily against her daughter, the mare and the filly staggered up the ditch and back up the road. They were almost home.

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In the light of day, the mare was able to get a proper look at the city. It clung to the sheer rock-face of the mountain behind it like a fungus. It was a sprawling mess of towers, arches, turrets and walls, all held together by a foundation of stained white marble buildings, connected by a maze of wide thoroughfares that wound their way down the metropolis. The mare could only see one side of the city; it stretched around the mountain and out of sight, filled with tiers of residential blocs and suburbs.

The majority of the palace still stood. It was cracked, missing sections, and irreversibly stained, but the walls that held it upright remained. The once majestic structure sat like a shattered toy, abused and neglected by its owner. Just like the Statue of Harmony. Just like in Manehattan.

The waterfall near the palace had broken its way out of its normal path, overflowing the designated course with a deluge of dirty white water. It plunged off the side of the mountain with a roar and poured into the desolate ashen valley below. Huge piles of rubble lay slumped against the bottom of the mountain, and the mare could still make out partly intact buildings trapped within the decay.

Canterlot was in pieces.

The air was utterly still, and the mare stood there, watching the ruined city. The white had been replaced by a wash-over of grey, stained by black streaks around empty window frames. Numerous buildings had crumbled and lay as piles of rubble in the streets below. It was empty. Silent. Dead.

“Are you ok?”

The mare turned to the filly before replying, “I am fine. Are you?”

The filly nodded.

“Do...” The mare paused. She looked away briefly, inhaling as she did. Her eyes burned. “Do you want to talk about it?”

The filly tilted her head gently to one side, her expression unchanging. “Talk about what, Mama?”

Another glance to the sky. Another deep breath. “Do you want to talk about

Heavens?”

This time, the filly looked away. “No, Mama. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“How come?”

The filly looked back to the mare. Her façade had cracked, and the small pony stared up at the mare with large, pleading eyes. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Ok,” the mare whispered. “Ok.”

A ghost of a grateful smile appeared on the filly’s face before she turned back to the city in front of them. “Come on, Mama. We should keep moving. We’re almost there.”

“Yes we are,” the mare replied softly. “We’re almost home.”

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The two ponies wound their way down the mountain toward the city. The buildings grew as they moved closer, the empty windows and stained, crumbling walls becoming all the more menacing. Dead trees stood as sentinels in the streets; some were bleached white, and others were charcoaled and burnt to the point of collapse.

The mare fought to keep her balance. Her body was trembling, and her skin felt hot and feverish. She was empty inside. She stumbled forward, occasionally leaning on the pony beside her for support. Her side felt like it was on fire, and each step sent another knife of pain stabbing into the wound.

Eventually, the dirt path transformed into a cobbled one, and before the mare could look up, they were met by a wall of buildings. They began abruptly, the ones on the right built directly into the mountain side, the walls rising out of the stone.

The city just started without warning. One moment there was nothing, the next there were buildings.

The mare paused directly in front of the buildings. She stood there, willing herself to enter. To step forward. To go home.

“Mama?”

The mare exhaled and stepped into the shadow of the houses. She took another step, and then another. The buildings almost seemed to lean over her, swallowing her into their embrace. She looked up to the ornately carved decoration along the window

sills. She gazed at the empty door frames, the wooden doors long having since disappeared, leaving dark, open wounds in their place.

She was home.

The streets were clogged with ash. It was everywhere, filling the gutters, resting between the cracks in the street. It seemed to almost hang in the air, despite the lack of any wind.

They walked down the deserted streets, staring around at the world around them. Neither of them spoke, and the mare walked on. She ignored her shaking muscles and just walked. She knew where she wanted to go.

They were making their way around the back of the palace. Apparently the city used to be much smaller than this, and the royal castle was the only substantive thing visible from this side of the mountain. Now the city itself soared above on several different levels crawling up the cliff. The mare and the filly were heading down and across – towards the palace, towards the other side of the mountain.

The remains of shops filled the buildings on other side. Shattered windows revealed darkened interiors crammed with smashed shelving beyond. Occasionally, the floors were littered with broken wares, cutlery, dinnerware, appliances, toys, books. All burned, most unsalvageable. All forgotten.

The street in front of them had been filled completely by a collapsed building. It looked like the top half of the two story building had tipped over, crushing the street below, yet leaving the innards of the lower floor intact. The damage had torn open jagged holes in the walls on either side, providing a way through.

Carefully stepping over the broken masonry, the mare and the filly entered the building. It was completely open to the elements, but the remains of the walls meant it was darker here than out on the street. The room was filled with square tables arranged into rows. Small, dirty plastic benches sat on either side of every table, and a commercial kitchen dominated the back. The counter was covered in a thick layer of grime and dust. The floor was filthy, stained black with a combination of ash and water damage.

The mare paused. There were skeletons in here. Not many, but a few. They were all small, except for one large pegasus skeleton, around whom the smaller bodies were crowded around. The bones were black, chunks of mummified and charcoaled flesh still hanging to them. Plates of completely rotted and destroyed food sat on the tables nearest to the bodies. A few had fallen off, smashing on the floor. A large silver platter sat amongst the plates. The mare looked closer and spotted small pools of faintly-coloured wax sitting amongst the decayed food matter.

The mare looked away, her stomach sinking to the ground. A small pile of boxes was piled on the table next to her. The pink wrapping paper was still visible inside the creases.

The mare stumbled through the building, barely avoiding the tables and chairs. She staggered against the jagged hole in the wall and stepped back out into the street. The air seemed clean. It seemed fresh. She inhaled and exhaled shakily, letting her lungs stretch.

“Mama?”

“We should keep moving,” the mare said, trying to hold her voice together. She couldn’t stop shaking.

“I... ok.”

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*“This is the best birthday ever!”*

*“Well, I’m glad you liked the present, S-”*

*A sudden crash breaks out across the crowded kitchen. All of the colts and fillies assembled turn to stare at Spades who has dropped a large platter stacked high with daisy sandwiches cut into triangles. “Oops...”*

*Everypony stares at him, and the colt shifts awkwardly from side-to-side. “Heh... Heh...”*

*The mare laughs. Soon, everypony else joins her. They laugh and shake their heads. Tulip, smiling, walks over and helps the colt pick up the platter. Even Spades is laughing now.*

*It is a birthday, after all.*

*“Can we have cake now?!” the mare cries out. “I’m hungry!”*

*“Why don’t you have some daisy sandwiches?” her mother calls back to her from the other room. “I spent an hour on them and Spades should be bringing them in any second now.”*

*The mare bursts into raucous laughter, and the colt blushes looking down. “Uhh Mom...” the mare says, trying to breathe against the laughter. “I think we are going to need some more food then.”*

*“What? Why?”*

*The mare looks to Spades and winks. “I may have accidentally dropped the platter of sandwiches.”*

*“You what?! I...” The mare can practically hear her mother deflate. “Fine. I’ll see if your father can pick up some hay fries.”*

*The mare pumps a hoof triumphantly in the air. "Sounds great, Mom. Thanks!"*

*"You're welcome," her mom calls back wearily.*

*Around the mare, the guests are all starting to talk and laugh normally again. The sandwich fiasco is already a vague blur in their memories. The mare grins as she takes a sip from her drink. Soda. Nothing beats it.*

*"Uh..."*

*The mare turns. Spades is standing next to her, still looking incredibly awkward. "Oh hey, Spades. What's up?"*

*"I... thanks for that." He half-smiles at the mare.*

*"You're-" she begins, boisterously like before, but she stops. "You're welcome," she says again, this time softer, kinder. She smiles at him, and he smiles back.*

*"It's a great party."*

*"Heh. I know, right? I love it."*

*The mare takes another drink, and the colt starts shifting awkwardly again.*

*"Hey listen," the mare says, suddenly serious.*

*"Yeah?"*

*The mare's smile changes. "I want to say I'm sorry."*

*"Sorry?" Spades is confused. "What for?"*

*"For the race. The Running of the Leaves," the mare explains. "I left you behind. I left you and you got hurt. I should've turned around. I should have stayed." She scrunches her face up in frustration. "Because... because that's what friends do..."*

*Spades looks away shyly for a moment, and then he looks back, smiling. "That's ok. I knew you wanted to win, and I am glad you did. You worked so hard."*

*"Yeah... but still..."*

*The colt reached out and bumped her shoulder lightly with a hoof. "Don't worry about it. I am glad you won. And plus, we're still friends. We always will be."*

*"Yeah?" she replies, smiling again.*

*“Yeah. Friends forever.”*

*“Spades. That’s kinda lame.” The colt opens his mouth, a faint blush spreading over his cheeks. The mare laughs. “But I reckon you’re right,” she continues. “Friends forever.”*

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The closer they got to the palace, the more dead there were on the streets. Dozens of them laid scattered along the hoofpaths, reaching out towards something long since vanished into the ash. Most of the bodies were just skeletons now, small piles of bones with outstretched legs. Every now and then, the mare saw the shattered remains of pegasi.

A wind started to pick its way through the streets. The mare pulled up her collar in a vain attempt to prevent the wind from chilling her. Looking up, the mare could see that the buildings already protected them from the brunt of the breeze; light clouds tore past, rolling and breaking over and through each other, all racing somewhere only they knew.

They descended a level, the palace now directly on their left. The mare was angling just past it, though, heading towards the residential blocs. The filly was silent. She just watched her mother carefully, reluctant to break the quiet.

The city was lifeless – a cemetery of crumbling masonry, ash, and decay. Streaks of soot running down from the corner of every window looked like tears as they faded into nothing. Even the buildings were crying. Home, the mare thought. Home.

A gigantic mall, built into the side of the foundations of the tier above, stretched out across the road. It used to have been built over the road with a glass overhead, shops lining both sides. The left side was completely collapsed, and the buildings on the right had been gutted by fire. Glass that had once stretched across the road, joining the two sides, was now gone, the spiderweb of metal supports lying twisted and bent on the street below.

The mare walked along the hoofpath, peering into the interior of the mall. Giant, unmoving escalators swept up the middle of the centre to the floor above. The wide open space in the middle was filled with piles of rubble or rubbish. Melted plastic benches sat collapsed in on themselves, and empty storefronts revealed nothing but scorched shelving.

She remembered the bakery that had been on the corner. Or at least, she thought she did. There weren’t any specific details now. Her mother used to take her there after school for treats. They would sit on the chairs and tables outside and the mare would watch all the ponies going past, shopping, talking or laughing. Their usual seats were bare, the plastic only just retaining enough shape for the mare to recognise them beyond twisted blobs.

Treading her way as best she could through the piles of broken steel, the mare continued onwards, not looking back.

They were nearing the edge. The mare was sure of it. As they went, the mare could see the huge levels of structural damage on the buildings around them. Jagged fissures had been torn across the walls, often causing entire sections to collapse, filling the interiors or the street with debris. The streets were cracked and broken. More and more bodies littered the streets, unmoving, unseeing.

A multi-story building that looked like it had once been a bank had slumped forward onto the street, blocking the road. The mare stopped in front of the wreckage, surveying it.

“Go around, Mama.”

The mare turned to the filly, a questioning look in her eyes.

“There,” the small filly said, pointing to the inside of the bank. “We can just go around.”

The mare followed the filly’s direction, stumbling under a piece of fallen rebar. Her hooves clapped loudly against the marble floor, and she stepped her way through to the other side. The ground was strewn with countless bits, the golden-coloured metal now stained and dull. Paper and small, cracked gemstones filled the rest of the floor space. The filly nudged one of these with a hoof, and then walked on, ignoring the rest.

On the other side, the mare followed the street. They were almost there. She knew it. She could hear the wind whistling in front of her.

She stumbled over a loose brick, falling to one knee.

The filly raced over to her. “Mama!”

“I’m fine,” she replied, struggling to her hooves. “I’m fine.”

The small pony stared pleadingly at her mother before looking away. “Ok.”

The mare took another step, and then another. She couldn’t stop her body from shaking. There wasn’t any strength in her limbs. She felt wasted, shattered, broken.

“I’m tired,” the mare murmured.

There was a pause. “I know, Mama. I know.”

The two ponies rounded a corner...

...And the mare stopped. She stared out at the sight in front of her, her chest



aching. The expanse threatened to stretch out in front of them forever.

“Mama...” the filly whispered, horrified. “It’s gone... it’s all gone...”

The mare walked towards the edge. The wind ruffled her mane playfully, feeling cool and refreshing against her skin. She inhaled. “I know.”

The small pony took her place next to the mare, unable to tear her eyes away from the vista. “You... you knew, didn’t you?”

The mare nodded once. Slowly.

“Your home is somewhere down there, isn’t it?”

The mare nodded again. She could feel her daughter’s gaze on her, yet she couldn’t face it.

There was a pause. The mare fought the urge to cry out. For forgiveness. For love. For death. For anything.

Suddenly, a warmth wrapped itself around the mare’s neck. She stumbled, but the pressure held her in place.

“Welcome home, Mama,” the filly whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks, holding her mother as close to her as possible. “Welcome home.”

The mare returned the hug as best she could. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, fighting back the tears. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. This is your home, Mama. And you made it. You’re home.”

“I’m home,” the mare cried out, unable to hold back the tears. “I’m home.”

“Yes, Mama,” the filly said, holding the mare tightly. “You’re home.”

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*The mare is almost literally bouncing up and down on the spot. A huge smile seemingly lights up the room around them, and the stallion can only chuckle next to her.*

*“Well,” he says, gesturing around to the empty, sunlight room around them. “What do you think?”*

*“I love it!” the mare shouts in delight. “I love it! I love it! I love it!”*

*The stallion’s smile threatens the mare’s own. “Well, do you want it?”*

*“Want it?! I need it! This place is perfect! We can set up the bookshelves over*

*there, the sofas can go here. The bedrooms above will be perfect for our children.” She stops, her heart swelling with joy. “Our children... in our home! This is going to be our home!”*

*“Yes, yes it will be,” the stallion replies, his voice filled with the delight that is as clear as day on his face.*

*“We did it...” the mare whispers, sitting down in the middle of the carpeted floor in shock, completely reversing her attitude a mere seconds before. “We got our own home. We actually did it.”*

*The stallion walks over and sits down next to her. The mare rests against his body, breathing contently. “I... I’m really excited,” the mare admits quietly.*

*He wraps a leg around her body, holding her close. “Me too. This place is fantastic. Everything is going to be exactly like we said it would. Everything.”*

*The mare smiles, and closes her eyes, satisfied to rest here a moment. The moment is perfect. She can literally picture the future in front of her, picture the years spent personalising, living in, and enjoying the room around her. She can imagine the memories she is yet to make within this little space. These little rooms with walls, a roof, and a floor.*

*Home. This is her home.*

*And it is perfect.*

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The world fell away directly in front of them. The city just stopped, and an immeasurable void opened up before the two ponies, the world stretching away further than the eye could see. Pipes, rebar and concrete jutted out of the foundations into empty space beneath their hooves. Wires hung limply from the hideous amputation, creaking gently in the wind. Around them, on the edge of the world, buildings had been rent in two, half the structures having slid into the valley, and the other half remaining behind as lopsided ruins.

Far, far below, they could see the bottom of the valley. An enormous pile of wreckage lay against the base of the mountain. The buildings that the landslide had taken with it were demolished beyond recognition, and the structure’s skeletons were fused together in an indistinguishable pile of ruin.

The mare and the filly stood side-by-side, staring out into the abyss. The land seemed to stretch on forever. On their left, the mare could see the grey Canterlot River winding its way towards Ponyville and the Everfree beyond. In front of them lay a few, smaller mountains, but beyond those, there was nothing but an endless expanse of grey. The further the mare looked, the more blurred the world became, losing itself to an indiscriminate haze that threatened to obscure everything from sight.

The clouds almost appeared to be on eye level up here. Or maybe it was just an illusion of standing on the edge the precipice. They were rolling with the wind, stretching and breaking. Down where the two ponies stood, it was much quieter, only the gentle breeze dancing with their manes and tails.

The mare inhaled deeply, ignoring the sudden blurring in her vision. She exhaled, letting all of the air out through her mouth. Standing here, on the edge of everything, she felt numb. Her legs started to shake. Trying to hide it from the filly, the mare turned and walked away. She heard the filly follow her. Neither of them said another word.

The picked her way through the broken and deserted streets. The palace loomed up in front of her, still a mess of towers and arches, seemingly without any order. She focused as hard as she could on keep each hoof stepping over and forward. If she stopped again, she would fall. She had to keep moving.

“Mama...?”

“I’m fine...” the mare said, her voice barely louder than a whisper now. Step. Step. Ignore the body. Ignore the weakness. Just step.

They walked down a flight of stairs cut into the road. Several dead ponies lay sprawled at the bottom. The mare stumbled past them. The road ran its way up a wide boulevard. She could see the elegant steelwork of the gates in the distance. She could see the shattered oak entrance. It was right there. Just down the street.

A step. Then another. Then another. It was a movement she had done so many times that it had lost all meaning. It was nothing. It was routine, habit, instinctive. And she was failing. Her body was shutting down, exhaustion, fatigue and the sickness all crushing her relentlessly. Just a little further. Just a little further.

The gates were so close. Mostly decomposed bodies lay everywhere around the palace gates. It looked like they had been trying to get in. Yet the gates were wide open, calling everypony towards them. There were more bodies beyond, lying in the small courtyard, watched over by scorched and blasted trees.

The mare stumbled past these, heading towards the entrance. The massive oak doors lay in pieces on the floor, almost as if a great wind had blown them over. There were more bodies, all huddled together now.

Finally, the mare breached the palace. Her hooves sounded out loudly into the dusty air, echoing back in the gloom. A huge hall filled the space in front of her, multiple doors branching off on both sides. Shattered windows were set high above in the walls. Huge pillars, some cracked, some broken altogether, flew up from the floor to the ceiling, the blue stone now looking almost black.

The mare looked around, and collapsed. She was vaguely aware of her legs capitulating under themselves, and even less aware of her body striking the cold floor.

“Mama!” the filly screamed, racing over. “Mama!”

“I... I’m fine,” the mare whispered.

“No you’re not, Mama. No you’re not.” The filly held her close, cradling her head between her hooves, pressing her head against the mare’s.

“I’ll get better. You’ll see.” Even now, here at the end of her journey, she could still lie. Nothing changes.

The filly stopped. The mare tried to look up at her daughter, who was now not even breathing audibly.

Without warning, the filly sprung back up, her body tensed, ready. “Mama! Wait here, ok? I’ll be right back!”

“Wh... what are you doing?”

“I’m saving you, Mama. I’m going to save you. Just stay here.” She had already taken out the last of the biscuits and the canteen of water, tucking them into some of the various pockets on the mare’s clothing.

“You... you’re leaving?”

She watched the small pony soften. The filly walked over and nuzzled the mare gently. “No, Mama. I’m never gone. I’ll be back. And you will be better.” She took a step back, smiling kindly. “Just wait here. I will come back.”

“P-promise?”

“Promise.” And then, with one last smile, she turned and ran out the palace doors and back into the city.

The mare tried to watch her go, but her vision was already fading. She didn’t fight it. She just relaxed and let whatever it was wash over her, taking into oblivion.

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Her eyelids fluttered open. She blinked a few times in an attempt to clear her vision. It worked... to an extent. She was still lying on the cold and dusty stone floor of the palace. Without her saddlebags she felt strangely light.

The mare rolled over onto her stomach, and a soft groan escaped her lips. Her limbs still trembled after every movement. She shivered before raising a foreleg and resting it against her brow. Heat radiated off her body like an open flame, and her coat was saturated at once by the sweat covering her face.

Ignoring the emptiness in her stomach, the mare tried to rise. Her legs shook,

and her balance threatened to give out, but she managed. Slowly, she looked left and right. She was still alone.

Since she had been barely conscious before passing out, she had little to compare against as far as the sun's position was concerned to tell the time. In fact, it almost seemed like not a moment had passed. That couldn't be true, though, for she was standing now.

The mare took a gentle step forward, testing her legs. They held steady with a faint echo as her hoof struck the aged stone. Satisfied, she took another, and another, slowly making her way down the empty hall.

She stumbled, having tripped on a crack in the floor. She righted herself with effort, gritting her teeth to try and fight the wave of exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm her. She was so weak; her body felt like a boiling, wasted husk. She wanted to lie down again, to let the heat and the fatigue win. She didn't let it. One leg, then another. Forward, always moving forward.

Several wide corridors branched off this main foyer. They had once been sealed shut by doors, but these were now left open, some having fallen off completely. The mare inspected a few of these, but the barren passageways held nothing of interest.

At the top of the hall sat a large dais. Small flights of steps ran up to the platform on all sides, leading to an empty stage. Perhaps a throne had sat here, but the mare never remembered seeing one before the end. What ever had meant to go here was long gone, the thick coating of dust that her hooves sent upwards in loose spirals with every step attesting to that. This place wasn't just abandoned... it was forgotten. It had clearly been undisturbed for years. The palace had been the focal point of all of the love and the adoration for the Princesses. It had been the home of the monarchy, and the heart of Equestria. And now it was fading away from memory itself.

The mare just kept walking.

One last doorway led off from the great hall. This one still had one of its doors in place, seemingly jarred shut. The other was completely open, swung as far back as its rusted hinges would allow.

The mare stepped towards it, resting for a moment on a crumbling pillar. She brushed past the closed door, and stepped into the corridor. The passageway reached out in front of her, running a distance of almost a hundred feet. It looked almost identical to the hall behind it; the same bluestone still tiled the roofs and floor, the same pillars still lined both sides of the walk way. Empty window frames still sat in amongst the walls.

Except one.

With cautious, disbelieving hoof-steps, the mare walked down the corridor, her eyes fixed on that singular point. Around her were piles of broken glass, yet she

avoided these without thought. It was the last window on the left, seemingly facing an open courtyard beyond. With an open mouth, the mare came to a stop in front of her target, her sickness temporarily forgotten. She couldn't believe it. There, right in front of her, was a piece of artwork that's existence should not be possible.

A gigantic stained glass window stretched upwards in front of her. It stood over twenty feet tall, and despite the thin, web-like cracks running through it, it was entirely intact. The mare stared at the faded, murky glass in awe. A central yellow circle featured a stone pedestal, just like the one in the castle in the Everfree. On it sat six gems, five surrounding a single purple diamond. They were all linked by blue encircling and protecting the jewels inside. Outside the gems were another six circles, and in each one was a pony.

"The mares of harmony..." the mare whispered to the silent hallway. She reached out with a hoof toward the glass, utterly spellbound by its presence. Several beams of colour linked all of the ponies together. They were all separate, yet always linked. Always.

The mare stared at the window, not willing to reach out any further with her hoof and not willing to pull it back either.

Eventually, the mare laid down where she stood. As she did, she noticed the door at the end of the corridor. It was a huge stone seal, six gems set into its surface. Even in all its magnificence, the mare paid little attention to it. Her gaze lingered on the skeleton lying in front of it. It was curled into a ball, the bones having collapsed into an indistinguishable mess. The mare couldn't tell if it was the body of a unicorn, pegasus or earth pony. The remains were just in too poor of a condition. Even the skull was smashed, fragmented beyond recognition in the dust.

A single, gem-encrusted box sat open next to the body. It was empty – the soft, velvet-looking interior filled with nothing but dust. The mare wondered what valuables the box might have held. Did they find what they were looking for? And was it worth dying for? Was it worth trying to protect it? The mare frowned. Did it even matter anymore? Probably not... probably not.

The glass window watched her silently, and she returned its gaze with devotion. What about the glass? Was it worth anything? Did its survival actually mean anything? It was a relic to an age past, a time when things were different. By looking upon it, she remembered. By looking upon it, she saw beauty. She saw an image from a time long since lost to forces the mare held no control over. Yet here this window was, cracked, dirty and fading... but by some miracle, still in place.

Eternal, surviving, resolute, compassionate. If she wished hard enough, maybe it would be true. Maybe... just maybe...

The mare lowered her head toward the cold stone floor. She sniffed once, fighting the warmth building in her eyes. She wanted to sleep, to surrender to the swirling darkness waiting patiently just outside her perception. It was calling to her,

and she wanted to run toward it, to escape.

*“No, Mama. I’m never gone. I’ll be back. And you will be better. Just wait here. I will come back.”*

*“P-promise?”*

*“Promise.”*

Forcing her eyes open, the mare fought back. Her daughter promised. She would be back. She had to wait for her. Fight the fear. Fight the dark.

The mare reached down with shaking head toward the water bottle tucked in a pocket on her side. Her grip on the lid slipped as she tried to flip the cap. She tried again, this time loosening it before being forced to stop. She tried a third time, and managed to slip the top off. The mare took a slow and measured mouthful, letting the water run its way into her stomach, soothing her parched throat.

She weakly set the bottle down after loosely screwing the cap back on, resting it next to her. She sighed and closed her eyes.

It started slowly, like she was slowly being emerged into warm water. It spread from her head all the way to her tail, bathing her completely with its delicious warmth. It was soft and gentle, but resolute, pressing down gently onto the mare. She scrunched her eyes in reaction to the feeling, but she could still see it – she could still feel it – through her eyelids. It was pure gold, filtering through the air and embracing the mare with all the love and adoration she remembered.

She opened her eyes and saw the sun.

Shafts of light streamed through the broken windows all throughout the hallway. They poured in from every crack, illuminating a sea of dust motes floating lazily through the air. They were golden specks of inanimate life, dancing and twirling in joy under the sun’s spotlight.

The mare gazed up at the stained-glass window and gasped. Under the gentle support from the light, the whole thing had erupted into a tapestry of colour, the gems all twinkling with their new-found glory. The faded colours were gone, replaced instead by perfect shades from all spectrums of the rainbow. She could almost swear the elements were smiling now.

The warmth was all-encompassing. It washed over the mare with the most beautiful sense of serenity, leaving her muscles relaxed and tranquil. She smiled as she stretched her head out, revelling in the warm touch down the length of her neck. Breathing slowly, the mare closed her eyes and rested her head back down on her forelegs. Subconsciously, she wrapped her tail around her body, trying to trap the warmth within her body.

It felt so good just to lie there, breathing easy, and drifting away into peace. The darkness was starting to creep back now. Even though her eyes were already closed, she could feel it encroaching upon the glow still permeating through her eyelids. She didn't mind it, though. It felt good. A numbness had started to spread from her centre, creeping through her body, filling out through her extremities. It was peaceful. Easy. She was warm, and she was comfortable. The stone didn't feel cold anymore. In fact, she couldn't feel a thing. There was just the warmth, and just the darkness.

"Mama! Mama, please wake up!" The sound was distorted, almost slowed down. The mare tried to stir, but found she couldn't. She could only lie there, letting the peace seep through her. "Mama! Please! Mama! Wake up, Mama! Please!"

Fight the fear... Fight the dark... Embrace the warmth... Embrace the light...

"Mama! NO!"

---

*The air seems to almost crackle with an unspoken energy. The courtyard is overflowing with ponies, all them fidgeting patiently, bodies pressed together like stacks of firewood. The mare is standing on her father's back, and her neck is stretched out as far as it can go as she peers at the stage at the head of the plaza.*

*The fact that she was woken up super early for this didn't really spoil her mood; to her it almost made it more special. She is sleepy, but filled with a warm and jittery sense of excitement keeping her from staying still.*

*"Sweetie, could you please not jump on my back for a second?" her dad asks with a level voice.*

*"Oh... sorry, Dad," she replies as she stops hopping down on the spot. "I just wanna see the sun already..."*

*"Patience, my dear," he says, still a little frustrated but also with a hint of a smile, "is a virtue."*

*"A whatue?"*

*She can practically feel her dad roll his eyes beneath her. She knows it's best not to press him when he's like this, so she falls quiet.*

*The sky is awash with a sea of subdued shades of blue, purple and black. The mare can make out the faint outlines of fluffy clouds as they hang suspended in the pre-dawn sky. She can still see the barest hints of the stars, faded almost completely to a new day.*

*Suddenly, the stage at the head of the plaza, initially illuminated by several lanterns, falls into shadow. A hush washes over the audience like a wave, silencing the buzzing of the crowd with ease. The stillness that follows sits like a blanket over*



*the ponies assembled. They wait with baited breath, expecting... expecting something.*

*The mare hears a loud gasp. "The stars!" somepony calls out. "The stars are going out!"*

*She looks up, and sure enough, one by one, the little diamonds are flickering violently before disappearing into the void beyond. A murmur runs its course through the crowd. Why are the stars going out? the mare wonders.*

*But then, just as the last light fades out of sight, a new one appears. This one is larger, and it glows brightly, even brighter than a full moon. The crowd whispers excitedly, all pointing towards the glowing star.*

*And then, it starts to fall.*

*The light races towards the ground, and the mare notices the darkness falling away with it. A faint glow is building on the horizon. The star streaks overhead, racing towards the mountains framing the city. As it falls, it grows larger and larger, burning ever-brighter.*

*The mare wonders where the star is falling. Is it going to hit the mountain? Or maybe it will hit the city! The star is so large now; it literally dominates the night sky, sending silvery shadows sprawling out from every standing object. And then, just as the star reaches the city, it vanishes, sucking the light from the world. A few ponies scream in the darkness, unable to see a thing. The mare shrinks down on her father's back, hugging his neck as tight as she can.*

*The crowd gets louder and louder, and the mare can feel her dad getting knocked around as ponies around them try to move in the darkness. She can hear her heart thud inside her chest.*

*"Dad?" she says. "Dad, I'm-"*

*With an almost literal explosion of colour, the light erupts back into the world. The crowd falls completely silent as wave after wave of light rushes out from a singular ball of pure-white on the horizon, illuminating the world from the darkness. The ball of light starts to rise, becoming larger and more golden as it does.*

*"It's the Sun..." the mare whispers. "It's the Sun!"*

*As the sun nears its apex above the mountains, the crowd starts to cheer. They scream and stamp their hooves onto the cobbled ground.*

*"The sun! It's the sun! Long live the Sun!" somepony screams, one voice barely distinguishable above the rest.*

*The golden glow finally slows to a stop, bathing the land in a warm caress, framing the few lingering clouds in silver halos. The mare squints up as close to the*

*sun as she can. Suddenly, she sees it: the black dot racing down toward the city, leaving a tail of white, blue and green light behind it. The speck twists and twirls as it flies, leaving a glorious pattern of light lingering in the sky.*

*The mare looks around and sees a similar shape moving from the opposite direction, this one leaving a shadowy trail that seems to dance like solidified smoke in invisible air currents. The pair of fliers meet directly over the city and begin to twirl downwards, creating a double-helix of magical light in the air behind them.*

*“The Princesses! It’s the Princesses!”*

*Sure enough, the two shapes solidify into two majestic alicorns, one pure white, the other as dark as midnight, each one more beautiful and terrible than the other. They land simultaneously on the stage, their wings thrown upwards, their royal finery glinting in the newly created sunlight.*

*They smile benevolently at the ponies assembled before them, and they bow low, their manes twinkling around their bodies ethereally.*

*The crowd roars, before sinking into a bow of their own. The mare tries to lower her head like the grownups do, but she can’t tear her eyes away from the Princesses. They are so beautiful... they are so perfect...*

*“My little ponies,” Celestia begins in her firm, compassionate voice, still smiling down with a gaze filled with nothing short of pure adoration. “Welcome to a new day.”*

---

The filly ran through the broken streets, her gaze dancing over every large structure she could see. She knew exactly what kind of building she was looking for, but yet it did not make it any easier to find it. In a city constructed out of almost everything but small, nondescript buildings, she was completely lost.

She pushed herself down another street, this one filled with various small businesses. The ruin of a fire station sat on her right, several destroyed moveable water tanks with pumps attached laying in the street near it. There were a few bodies, but the filly tried her best to look away from these. The mare couldn’t find the strength to mention the change in her attitude.

As she ran, she tried not to think of her mother. She had to help her, she couldn’t worry. She had to help her. She couldn’t stop.

On the corner of the street, a huge clock tower soared up above the general skyline. One of the sides had a great puncture ripped into its side, revealing a set of decaying steps rising to the top. The filly gazed up at the tower and smiled. She knew exactly what she could do.

---

*“Why are we climbing the hill, Mama?” the filly asks, breathing heavily into her face mask.*

*“We have to get higher, little one,” her mother replies, her voice muffled by her own mask.*

*The ash is swirling around them, tearing at the filly with tongues of heat that threaten to slash her clothing away. Her mother always makes sure to tie her clothing around her body really tight so the hot wind couldn't get inside it.*

*“But why?”*

*“Because you can see further the higher you go, and we have to look at the town to see if we can find food.”*

*“Oh.” Her stomach growls. “Is there a higher hill near here?”*

*Her mother laughs, a hollow sound, but still a laugh. “No, little one. This is the tallest.”*

*The filly sighs.*

---

After carefully making her way up the crumbling stone staircase, the filly stood on the edge of the balcony that ringed the tower. The clock face was gone, lying in pieces on the street below, as was a significant chunk of its roof. Despite this, the filly could still stand on the gallery, staring out as far as she could into the abandoned city.

Even with the majority of the city lying in ruins on the bottom of the valley floor, the tiered system of the city still meant that there was plenty of space left. The small pony peered in amongst the wreckage, looking for anything that vaguely reminded her of the hospital back in Ponyville.

After staring at the destroyed city for what felt like ten minutes, she spotted it. A building complex two levels down sprawled out around a central courtyard. The main building had a flat roof, and the filly could still see the faint outline of a gigantic red cross painted on top of it.

Unable to contain her smile, the small pony bolted back down the stairs, making a mental note as best she could of the hospital's location. She could save Mama. She would save Mama.

Trying to waste as little time as possible, the filly sprinted through the deserted streets yet again. She wove her way towards the flight of stairs at the end of each level as best she could. They were framed on both sides by tall towers, so she just had to head towards those.

She paused once to catch her breath, but beyond that, she didn't stop.

Once she was on the right level, she took a moment to grab her bearings. The hospital was near a big concert hall, one with a roof that looked like a shell rather than a building.

When she spotted it, she took off towards it, winding her way between piles of rubble strewn over the streets like the playthings of a careless child.

After winding her way through the streets for about another half-hour, the filly finally reached her destination: the hospital. It stood tall and imposing, the wide double doors smashed open in front of her, shards of glass lying haphazardly in the foyer beyond. The rows of windows set into its walls were all empty like vacated eye sockets; they were staring down at her, watching, waiting. The filly suppressed a shiver.

Taking a deep breath, the small pony trotted purposefully into the hospital. Inside, she was greeted by an expanse of grimy linoleum, cluttered by a carpet of rotting paper. The walls were all swollen and stained, having suffered years of neglect and weather damage. A long bench-top hugged the wall on her right, and the filly could make out the word 'reception' stamped in red along the wall behind it.

The filly poked her way through the hospital, picking corridors on random. She moved past the signs that said things like 'maternity' or 'x-ray' without thinking and instead found herself heading into a wing dedicated to surgery. She'd heard Mama use that word before.

Here the floor was broken into series of small rooms, each one filled with tables, chairs, and cabinets, surrounded by tall machines with more wires than the filly could count stretching out like tentacles.

In one room, the filly stopped, her eyes wide with horror. The body of a pony lay on the central table, the flesh almost entirely rotten away. Despite this, the filly could still see the dried flaps of mummified skin cut away from his stomach and the rib cage above. Faint rust-coloured stains splattered the floor around the table in a grisly abstract masterpiece. The filly lingered for a moment, her gaze mixed somewhat between horrified and saddened before moving on.

Mama needed her.

The filly kept moving. She briefly entered a series of laboratories but quickly found that she probably wouldn't find anything she could use here when she accidentally knocked a vial filled with a strange liquid, and it started smoking when the glass shattered on the floor.

Beyond the laboratories was a collection of rooms labelled 'general examination'. The floor was separated into a number of cubicles, the ones in the middle constructed by walls of faint-blue curtains, most of which had been destroyed or had fallen from their hooks. The rooms flanking these on both sides of the floor

were self-contained units, separated by their own walls. The filly poked her head into these, rifling through containers and drawers. She took some rolls of bandages and stored those within the bags. A few of the storage spaces held bottles of pills, but the labels said things that weren't what she needed. She needed antibiotics. Just... just like Heavens told her.

The filly entered another of these cubicles and paused. A cupboard stood in the corner of this room, the doors covered in eye charts and 'brush your teeth!' propaganda. However, the door was open slightly, and she could see something lying inside.

Slowly, carefully, the small pony approached the cupboard, making sure to keep her hoof-steps as quiet as possible on the dirty floor beneath her. When she reached the door, she extended a tentative hoof... before tearing at the wood in a savage pull, swinging it open in one fluid motion. Her body tensed, but relaxed as soon as she saw what was inside.

The body of a small pony lay curled up in the bottom of the storage space. The filly could see its bones poking through the decaying flesh, and she saw how it didn't have a horn or wings. It was just like her.

The filly stood there for a few moments, just staring at the body of the dead pony hiding within the cupboard.

She took a deep breath. "I hope you're somewhere happy now," she whispered. "I hope there are lots of trees and grass and birds where you are."

The filly smiled softly, and reached out to touch the foal goodbye. She stopped. She looked just past the body, and there it was. A small pile of bottles, knocked down from the higher shelves. The filly reached in and grabbed these out. The first two were useless, but the next two... She almost cried in excitement when she saw the words 'magically imbued antibiotics' printed in bold letters along the labels, underneath the brand name 'Health Stop' written in fancy lettering.

She gasped. Mama! She had to get back to Mama!

The filly shot up, trying to stuff the medicine inside the saddlebags. With one last farewell smile at the foal, she took off back through the doors and out into the hospital proper. She wound her way back through the various corridors, remembering her route as best she could.

Finally, she burst back into the entrance foyer, skidding slightly on the stacks of paper covering the floor. Recovering her balance, she ran out the door and back onto the street.

She had to get back to Mama.

The filly ran through the streets of Canterlot as fast as she could, ignoring the

steadily growing burn in her muscles. With the medicine, she could fix her. With the medicine she could make her better. She just had to get back to her.

The filly ascended to the next tier and turned right, heading towards the gigantic palace in front of her. She could see the arches and the spires. She could see where Mama was waiting.

The filly turned another corner, breathing heavily. A sudden wind started to grow and the filly looked up. She felt her muscles lock up and she screamed. Almost every sense in her body seemed to explode in one moment; her skin felt warm, her vision was blinded and the whole world suddenly lit up like it was on fire. Keeping her eyes clenched shut, the filly tore into a nearby building. She collapsed onto the floor, breathing heavily as her eyesight slowly returned to normal. She blinked as several small stars refused to leave.

The sky was on fire! The sky was on fire again!

The filly crawled over to the window and looked out. The street was illuminated by a soft gold glow, making the stone walls almost look clean. She poked her head a little closer to the hole and gazed up at the sky. She gasped as she saw... she saw blue. A huge hole had been torn in the clouds, and the filly could see a huge expanse of the most brilliant blue she had ever seen stretching on seemingly forever. Through this hole, shafts of light streamed down onto the land, all originating from a single golden circle that burned her eyes when she looked at it.

The sun.

She could see the sun.

The filly stared at the sky for what seemed like hours, completely unable to close her mouth. It was so empty... So... blue.

Eventually, she plucked up enough courage to step forward and back out onto the street. She closed her eyes and smiled as the warmth from the light hit her again. It hugged the pony completely, warming her whole body through. She sighed, leaning into the light's embrace.

Her eyes snapped open. Mama. Mama had to have seen the sun too!

And without another thought, the filly continued to sprint, the sun firmly in the back of her mind.

After a few minutes, the filly past through the gigantic wrought-iron gates and went back into the castle grounds. She ran straight past and into the entrance hall.

She skidded to a halt, her eyes searching frantically. She was completely alone in the hall.

Panic rising within her stomach, the filly sprinted on, poking her head into every single one of the hallways branching off to the sides.

“Mama!” she screamed. “Mama, where are you?! Mama!”

The filly dashed past the stage, completely ignoring it. There was only one hallway left.

Sprinting past the half-open wooden door, the filly ran into the corridor, and there she was: her mother, lying bathed in sunlight, in front of a gigantic, colourful window. Her eyes flickered shut, and she rested her head onto her forelegs. The filly watched a tired smile break across her lips.

“Mama! Mama, please wake up!” Her shout didn’t seem to do any good as the mare flinched but did not open her eyes.

“Mama! Please! Mama! Wake up, Mama! Please!”

The filly watched as the older pony exhaled slowly. She watched as her body relaxed, her head slowly falling to the side.

“Mama!”

---

*The mare opens her eyes. She is standing on nothing, but yet her hooves are telling her there is something there. She lifts a hoof off the ground and slams it back down, feeling it jar, but hearing no sound.*

*She looks up and freezes, her pupils shrinking to pin-pricks. She is not alone. “You,” she hisses.*

*Her husband looks at her sadly, not quite able to hold her gaze. “Me.”*

*She stares at the stallion. He is not wreathed in shadow like the others she has seen. He is exactly how she remembers him from before he left. His coat was still that powdered light-blue. His mane was still in that rough, wind-swept style. His eyes were still warm. Kind.*

*“What are you doing here?” she snaps.*

*The stallion looks at her confusedly for a moment. He shrugs for a second before speaking. “I am here to say sorry.”*

*The mare blinks. “Sorry?”*

*“Yes. I... I was wrong.”*

*“You left me... you left me and the baby alone!”*

*"I... I know."*

*"How can you be sorry?! You made that choice when you left us! You decided to choose yourself over the ponies you loved. You became that monster! You became what you swore you would never be!" The mare starts to yell at the end, shouting at the stallion who merely looks away, the pain easily recognizable in his eyes.*

*"I... was... wrong."*

*The mare stops. "Pardon?"*

*"I..." He looks up at her pleadingly. "I was wrong."*

*Now the mare can't hold his gaze. She looks down at the nothing beneath her hooves, hating the fact that she can feel the anger slowly ebb from her body. "But... why...? Why did you leave me?"*

*The stallion takes a deep breath. "Because I was weak."*

*"Weak?"*

*"Yes... I... I wasn't good enough. Wasn't strong enough."*

*"You left me..."*

*"And I am sorry. Please... please believe me. I am so sorry," he pleads, his eyes begging for some kind of response from the mare.*

*"You're sorry?"*

*"There is so much pain. So much guilt. How can I be a part of that and not be sorry?"*

*"What? Your pain? Your guilt?"*

*He shakes his head gently. "No... mine is there. But yours. Your pain. Your guilt. I started that. We all started that. The second the world burned it started. And I can't take it back. It's too late for that. All I can do is say I'm sorry. It's... all I can do."*

*The mare is silent, but she looks up and stares the stallion in the eyes. He holds her gaze, unflinchingly. His eyes glisten, and the mare can't help but feel her own start to warm.*

*"Do..." he says, breaking the silence. "Do... you still love me?"*

*The mare forces her eyes closed. How dare he ask that! How dare he assume that after everything he has done to her that he can still ask that question! How dare*



*he make her want to answer it truthfully... no matter how much it hurt.*

*How dare she have the answer she does.*

*The stallion smiles weakly. It is a ghost of a smile, and the mare can still see the uncertainty raging behind his eyes. But it is a smile, and as much as she hates it, she loves his smile. "I am sorry... I truly am. I don't know if this will ever fix anything... but just know that I will stop at nothing to earn your forgiveness."*

*"I... thank you."*

*Her husband sighs. "I guess I will be seeing you soon then?"*

*"You will?"*

*He smiles. "Perhaps. We shall see."*

*"So... this is goodbye?"*

*"For now."*

*"I... goodbye," she says weakly. The image starts to fade. It's a warm feeling, and even as the stallion's outline starts to blur and unravel itself, she doesn't find herself minding. It's peaceful. Easy.*

*"And yes..." the stallion says, "I still love you. I always did."*

*The mare allows a small smile. It isn't much... but it is something.*

*"Thank you."*

*"Goodbye, my love. Rest easy."*

*And then the image disappears completely, slipping into easy darkness.*

---

*"Mama! Mama! You're awake, Mama!"*

The mare forced her eyes open. The filly stood in front of her, a smile lighting up her eyes. The mare noticed she was not wearing her protective clothing. "I... I'm alive."

*"I saved you, Mama. I saved you."*

*"H- how?"*

"I got the medicine, Mama. I got the medicine and then I cleaned the wound just like Heavens told me. I lit the fire and heated the knife and cleaned it with water

exactly how he told me. All the infection is gone now, Mama. I just have to keep it clean and you have to keep taking the medicine and you'll get better again!"

"I..." the mare looked down and saw that her side had been wrapped in fresh bandages. It was a crude effort, but it was doing the job. "You did... you saved me."

The filly smiled. She smiled and the mare wondered if she had ever seen the filly look so happy. She was practically glowing with excitement. The mare smiled back.

"How long was I gone for?"

"About a day and a half," the filly replied.

The small pony offered the mare the water bottle and the mare took a small sip. The water soothing her suddenly parched throat. She was hungry now, too, but she didn't want to say anything.

Looking around, the mare realised that she was still inside the corridor with the stained glass window. Every now and then, the hallway would be punctured by multiple shafts of golden light that streamed through every hole or crack it could find in the walls. And then they would disappear, the cloud cover moving back across, only to reappear moments later.

"It's the *sun*, Mama," the filly murmured. The mare sighed as the warmth from the light soaked through her.

"It is."

"But why, Mama? Why is it here now?"

The mare looked to the filly. "I don't know," she admitted. "I really don't know."

The filly was silent for a moment. "I... I really like it, Mama. It's warm, and it makes everything so much... cleaner."

The mare smiled again. "I like it too."

"Are... are you hungry, Mama?" The mare looked at her daughter questioningly, and the small pony flushed a little. "I am taking care of you," she explained.

"And you're doing great."

The filly smiled. "There... there is one more thing, Mama."

The mare frowned. "What's that?"

“I...” The filly turned, showing her side.

The mare gasped. There, sitting on her daughters flank like some great artist's masterpiece, was an image. Great rolling clouds covered the top of the picture, but from it, streaming forth like rivers of gold were two brilliant shafts of light, illuminating the clouds around them with a warm glow.

The filly looked to the mare with an expectant look, biting her lower lip. The mare looked at her, and back at the image, and then she started to cry.

“Mama?!” the filly yelled, taking a hesitant step towards the mare.

The mare reached forward and pulled her daughter into a hug, holding onto the small pony's body with all of her strength, feeling the gentle warmth radiate off her, soaking her like the sun. She buried her head in the filly's mane, sobbing as her heart sang, filled to the brim with joy.

“It's perfect,” the mare whispered at last. “It's just perfect.”

The mare had to correct herself with a shaky laugh. *Now* she wasn't sure if she had ever seen the filly this happy.

---

They spent the afternoon lying around in the stone corridor. The mare still couldn't find the strength to stand let alone move too much, but the sweat had broken, meaning that the fever was hopefully on its way out.

When night fell, the filly made dinner. She cooked a small tin of beans and split it with the mare. They ate hungrily, devouring the food with enthusiasm. When they had finished, the filly cleaned the utensils with a splash of water and some newspaper while the mare watched patiently after taking her dose of medication.

Packing the supplies away, the filly came over and sat next to the mare. She rested her head on the older pony's shoulder. “Mama?” she asked quietly.

“Yes?”

“You... you're home, Mama. You're home.”

The mare nodded once.

“So what now, Mama? What do we do now?”

The opened her mouth, but closed it again. She had no idea. She had absolutely no idea. “I... I don't know.”

“Oh... Ok, then.”

“But as long as I have you,” the mare continued softly.

“You will always have me, Mama,” the filly replied.

“Always?”

“Always.”

That night, the mare fell into an easy, dreamless sleep, while the filly slept next to her, lying together amongst the ruins of the palace.

---

The next morning, the mare found she could stand. Not well, but she could stand. She took a few exploratory steps around the corridor, and found she could walk. After she got some food in her, she felt even better. She didn’t know how far they’d get, but she knew it was time to leave.

After the filly cleaned the wound to prevent any kind of reinfection, the two ponies headed out of the palace. The mare whispered one last goodbye to the stained glass window, and one last goodbye to the skeleton with the gem encrusted box. Perhaps it had been worth it. It didn’t matter whether it was worth it to her – as long as it was worth something to the skeleton, it was enough.

They stepped out of the castle and retraced their steps back to the edge of Canterlot. If the filly wondered why they were headed back there, she didn’t say anything.

The precipice soon ran up to meet them. They stood on the edge just liked they had done two days previous. The mare looked out to the horizon, staring across the barren fields of the ash, the sparse and blasted mountains, the cemeteries of dead trees. She watched as the cloud cover shattered once more, and shafts of pure, unadulterated light pierced their way down from the heavens, illuminating the valley below. Just like her daughter’s mark. She felt the warmth of the sun bathing her in its embrace, and she smiled. She knew where they had to go.

“So where now, Mama?”

The mare turned to her daughter, still smiling. “Home, little one. We are going to go home.”

The filly looked at her bewilderedly for a moment. “But... but I thought...”

“To a new home,” the mare said. “We need a new home. A home together.”

The filly thought for a moment, but a smile broke across her face. “We’re going east, aren’t we? Heavens said there were good ponies out east.”

“Yes. We’ll go out east. We’ll find a new home. Because that’s what Heavens

would have wanted.”

The filly smiled again. “I like the sound of that, Mama. I really do.”

“Me too,” the mare replied. “Me too.”

The mare turned away from the edge of the world, now facing east, her smile unbroken across her lips. And so together, the mare and her daughter walked side-by-side, watched kindly by Celestia’s sun.

They were going home.

## All Paths Lead Home

by Mystic

The End

Author’s notes:

Well. Here we are. Done and dusted. All 107k words. That’s so insane to me. 107k words. Far out. It feels like just yesterday I wrote my first story ever.

And I’m just getting started.

A big thank you to Paladin3510 for his awesome work on the cover art! He is a real bro, and I recommend checking out his sketches here: <http://paladin3510.deviantart.com/> Seriously, some of his stuff inspired by Assassin’s Creed or Brent Week’s work is amazing.

A thank you to my BFF, dacaz5: the kind of guy who is always around to bounce ideas off and tell me that I am stupid. Which, if you know me, you’d know that is appropriate more often than not.

Next, and I cannot begin to thank this person enough, a sincere and genuine thank you to Sessalisk, a person who has sacrificed an obscene amount of time fixing up my

terrible writing and making this story readable. I owe her everything as an author, for without her I would be nothing. If you see her around, be sure to say thank you!

And finally, a massive thank you to everyone for reading. I cannot begin to describe how much every view, every like, favourite or comment meant to me. You guys made this the experience that it was, and I owe you for that! If you haven't done so already, be sure to head over to the EqD page and drop us a star rating!

<http://www.equestriadaily.com/2012/02/story-all-paths-lead-home.html>

As for the future, if you have seen my blog posts on FimFiction (<http://www.fimfiction.net/blog/26001>), you will have seen a glimpse of what's around the corner. And what's more, that's only the beginning. Onwards and upwards, my friends, onwards and upwards.

So, in conclusion, thank you. I hope you enjoyed this little tale of mine, because I know I really enjoyed making it.

Till next time,

– Mystic