

(Small note - This is a rather long chapter, around the same as Chapter 12, the last act finale. For the ease of pacing yourself, I have included breaks where you will see two layers of the * * * page breaks. There are two, please consider these “natural breaks” and feel free to take a rest there! You won’t lose momentum if you do, I’ve written it to work like that. This is a big undertaking and a huge milestone, this chapter, so the level of content had to be high. Now dig in and enjoy as the stage is set here for the third and final act of our journey...)

Fallout Equestria: Murky Number Seven

Chapter 23: The Legacy of Aurora Star

* * *

"Ever dance with the devil in the pale moonlight?"

“What's it like to be so close to finding a long sought truth?”

It's hard to get the scale of how it felt into words. I'll...I'll try.

This had started long ago, when I stumbled across a PipBuck while being chased through the FunFarm and...wait, no...before that even. Shackles had been hunting since before I'd even come to Fillydelphia. He and Grindstone had plundered the Ministry of Arcane Science's secrets, its inventions like tools and salistoosers-

“Sanitisers.”

Yeah, them too. This had pre-dated any 'story' of mine but for me this began the same day I'd learned to think for myself! Every time I'd wondered about what that Pipbuck meant or any small curiosity that had caught my attention in the Stable or...or in records that Glimmer read I'd felt something building. Then of course came Pinkie Pie, who slotted it all together for me, told me that I was right! That I'd stumbled into being involved in something that had been going on for a long time...so much longer than I'd ever known. Or lived.

Something that had been going on for two hundred years through the ghouls who were once involved and others who had picked up the pieces before me. Chance or fate had placed my life at the end of its journey to perhaps have a chance at knowing everything. Just ahead, I thought, lay every answer and I...I...just couldn't help but feel I'd missed something. Some vital clue.

There was the refugees disappearing into what I now knew was Ministry Station. Taken there by Doctor Heartcare, the pony who would become a maniacal magister of zebra-obsessed ghouls.

There was the memory machines found in Aurora's office replicated in some abandoned

asylum and integrated with the same memory learning technology found in the spell orbs from Stable Ninety Three.

Skilled arcane workers like Aurora and Sundial had been drafted and forced to build...something for the zebras who were entering through a secret portal.

This all fitted together somehow. I could see some threads, I had some ideas, but the whole grand purpose remained so tantalisingly out of reach. Red Eye's slavers wanted it for their master while Shackles' loyalists wanted it all for themselves to snatch power over Fillydelphia!

Within all that, there was us. Six ponies, six slaves who wanted nothing more than to escape. Pinkie had assured me that the way out lay in what we found there. Maybe she meant the portal, maybe something else. Whatever it was though...we had to own at the very least the knowledge for ourselves! We had to get to it *first* and take it.

Of course...there was a problem with that plan.

"Protégé..."

Mhm. We *were* still slaves. Protégé still *owned* me. By his allowance and by his aid I had rescued my friends but only at the cost of having to help his side of the conflict! He'd be with us every step of the way to an end that both he and I knew were at odds with one another. He fought for Red Eye, we fought for our freedom.

He, Grizzly and Ragini were with us on this...right beside us. Already once on the train we had shown how close we were to fracturing between 'slave' and 'master.' I knew where Protégé's loyalties lay.

All the same, I couldn't help but feel I had to somehow...I don't know...change how Protégé saw all this and to get him to see the potential it held.

He *knew* all this was wrong. I knew he did! No-pony could go through that in the metro and I could see the denial on his face whenever confronted on the realities of the city he saw his dreams in. I just hoped I could get him to see there was another way. Increasingly, I began to pity him.

This wasn't our final 'battle', there were grander events to come. But this would be one of those defining moments. Us six slaves had to work together, like the legends of those six ponies in the past, to achieve something any one of us alone could not. I had Unity back, now I wanted to do what I'd always said and truly *help* her! She was a tougher mare than she looked but I couldn't help feel a deep caring for her. Unity and I would have to stick together in this as the two ponies that weren't as strong as Brimstone, Shackles or Grizzly. Who weren't hotshots

like Glimmer and Ragini or dangerous magic users such as Coral Eve.

Yet even if everything around me was riddled with huge ponies, massive numbers and ancient powers I still just felt like that tiny slave tentatively sticking his hoof out the door. I just kept praying I wouldn't feel a slaver looming over me, telling me what not to do when the time came for us to make a move.

"You mean Shackles? Grindstone? Old Grizzly?"

Nope...

"Oh..."

* * *

Beep!

Beep!

...click.

"I've got to try and leave this on as much as I can. Anything from now on is worth recording, anything could be some...some sort of evidence to take back to Pinkie! They're taking us in at last, down into the...well...whatever this place is. They still haven't told me why they want some of us here."

A sound of curious accents, distant shouting and harsh tones.

"That's them...the zebras. There's three of them, but I've seen at least twelve so far between here and the metro hideout! They've got two dozen of us or so, just kept us waiting in here for so long in the dark off the mountainside. It's...it's so cold...I still can't feel my hooves and my clothes are soaked through. There's an odd warmth from up ahead though. I hope we move soon, for all my fears."

A gasp, before the shouts passed down closer. Somepony sternly ordering them to move.

"I...I hope it still picks me up. They're moving us in! There's metal platforms in this cave, just off the ground. Like a maze unto itself! Wait...is...is that...?"

A female voice, young and nasal.

"Must you so stiffly order them around? They aren't slaves, they are still ponies. Ponies

who volunteered for this, I might add. They're helping you, why not show them a little respect?"

Then another, heavily accented.

"They will get reward, Aurora pony. Until then are workers. Until then are tools by own wish. Cannot have dissent. Be quick. Be clean. Be efficient. They will do purpose. As will you, as agreed."

"Don't forget what you need me for...you couldn't hope to do this without me. Nor without them and their skills. They are as essential to this as anypony. Perhaps you should show a little more gratitude to-"

Sundial gasped at the sound of a hoof striking somepony accompanied by Aurora's yelp of pain. Sundial shuffled forward, coming closer to the sound of Aurora.

"Zebra do not show gratitude to ponies. Zebra do not show gratitude to traitors. This was your choice. Now live with consequences. Until reward, you ours. Will find another way if you need removed."

"All right...fine..."

A long period of heavy breathing and somepony reasserting themselves. Then slowly, Sundial's voice. Quiet and careful.

"Aurora Star..."

"You know of me, then? I can't imagine what you think of me for this."

"I..."

It was all too obvious...how much he wanted to help her. To let her in on it and his purpose.

"I know of you...yes. Are you all right?"

"I'll survive, hopefully. Whatever drew you into this, whoever you are, I am so very sorry..."

"It's, um, Sundial. I kinda got dragged into it, I really don't want to be here."

Aurora was silent for some time.

"Perhaps once I thought differently...stay safe, Sundial. Keep that PipBuck with you if

you can. Just do what they want...what they tell you to. With enough work maybe we can all get out of this. I...I just can't believe I...

"You what?"

"...nothing. Thinking on what's been done only makes me keep questioning one unfortunate thing."

They were clearly back on their hooves. The sound of a pony trotting on metal was all too clear near him. The procession was moving again...going deeper, further in.

"What's that?"

"I only need wonder what Twilight would think of me now..."

From the sound, she clearly moved on ahead. Sundial lightly called after her and the memory scientist seemed to halt.

"Sundial..."

"Y-yes?"

"Just be ready. Please...no matter what happens in here, no matter how crazy things get...no matter what I end up doing...keep your head down and get out of here. Get back to your dancer in the sky."

A sudden sound of galloping. She took off. Sundial started forward, his hooves sounding like he was really rushing.

"Wait, how did you know?"

"Get back in line, pony!"

"But-"

"Get back in LINE!"

He stammered...sighed...and no doubt shrunk back. A zebra huffed somewhere in the background. Entire minutes passed, the longest recording thus far by some distance. Then finally, he spoke again with his words tinged with light sobs.

"Now I'm just scared all the more...how did she know that?"

He sniffed.

“Seriously, how did she know?! Look, whoever's listening to this? Somepony either tomorrow or...or in the far future or whatever...I don't know what's going on. It's like I'm playing with forces I don't understand! But...but...”

He took a deep breath.

“But her saying that made me feel like I can do this. I always knew I was doing it for Sky but just having somepony say it...urgh what am I even talking about...this is freaky. Can she read minds? I...oh my...wait, we're coming up to something.”

Hooves clattered to a halt. That same zebra voice barked some commands in their own language and the sounds of pistons was heard.

“There's...there's a door up ahead! A big one! Not like a Stable door from what I saw in those horrid drills, it's square and lined with brass. I can see gemlights on it...we're coming to something...something big...they're opening it! I swear, I'll find the truth about this. For Sky. It's...it's...”

“Hey! What are are you doing?”

“Ah! I...nothing! Noth-”

Click.

* * *

Slowly, I put down the Pipbuck, biting my lip. I felt Unity place a hoof on one of my front legs as she saw the worry on my face.

“That poor buck...he sounds only a little older than us.”

“H-he is...”

We were sat against the cave wall. This journey was only taking us higher since the train...further away from the world I knew. Even inside I could sense the sheer scale of the mountain around me, like an ancient warden of the world itself.

“I found his messages just after I first met you, he's been trying to help the pony he loves. A pegasus called Skydancer. They kept calling him to rush to the Stables with the Balefire sirens in drills and...and it made him worry. Every time he thought it meant he was being taken away to live while she died. It drove him to do this...to...to try and get her a

ticket...he didn't feel he had a choice, he-”

“It's all right, Murky.” Unity interrupted me with a gentle smile. “Of all ponies, I'm one who'd understand doing something like that for a pony you care about, remember?”

We shared a little smile then and there. Unity was right...she did know. Goddesses help me, I knew it a little too when it came to my friends. I'd help her help him. She didn't have to be alone like Sundial was...

“Aaaaaand got it!”

Behind us, Glimmerlight pumped a hoof with a 'Yes!' when the gemlight lantern she'd found on the way through these caves finally sprung into life. A hazy red formed and spread across the walls, reflecting from wet rock and casting back shadows. I saw the forms of the others waiting around us and couldn't help but see the lush depth it seemed to give Unity's similarly coloured mane.

Frankly...it made me wish I could draw in colour. I had to turn my head to cover my blush.

Yet turning my head was what led me to see it.

Before us, hidden in the dark until Glimmer's lamp had given more light than any of the unicorns could alone, lay a gigantic square door. Heavy, lined with dull rusted brass and bearing the indents of gemlights that no longer worked across it...we saw the doorway that Sundial himself had once gone through. I felt Unity stand up beside me and heard the others move up.

“Like a little turn of fate itself for him and us to find it, Murky?” Unity muttered quietly.

Behind us, Protégé marched up fairly quickly and cast his eyes over it. Leaning down, he began running a hoof along the edge.

“This looks important, to state the obvious...” His voice was quite thin. “Brimstone, Ragini, Grizzly, can you get it open? It seems we may have what we're looking for.”

The two biggest ponies and the large griffin with us moved up in the darkness. It took them a good five minutes, straining and tugging hard to get the rusted hinges moving. As it opened, I saw a strange glow emanating through the hole they made that grew and grew! It lit the passage we were in, showing Coral lying at the back and resting with her son cradled in her hooves. It downplayed Glimmer's proud new lamp and cast across Protégé's face, glinting off his eyepiece. Slowly, the three opening it pulled back as it finally swung open fully, revealing what was behind it.

Unity and I stood right before it, just beside Protégé, to get the full view of what lay within.

Sparkling and multicoloured light danced and played amongst a *titanic* cave. Hundreds of feet high and wide enough to fit an entire small town in, it stretched so far that it fell into darkness before any end could be seen! I felt my mouth hang open even while we all trotted into it, the hour or so spent in cramped darkness suddenly and shockingly being replaced by such a vast space filled with a warm and gentle air.

Every wall, every ceiling and floor was riddled with jagged crystals of all colours. Rubies, sapphires, emeralds and...and...whatever the purple ones were called! They pierced the rock, standing higher than a pony and glittering in the light from strung up lanterns hung long ago. Twinkling, they formed a starlight sky above us in the darkness of the far ceiling that cast a haze like moonlight itself around the cave.

Yet what lay at the clear centre of it all was what drew every eye.

We'd heard it was a gem mine. That had been right...

They hadn't said what *e/se* lay in here.

Ahead of us lay a stone platform suspended on a terrifyingly thin strut of rock leading down the massive chasm within the centre of the cave. Upon it lay gold. Gold and silver and gems mixed with treasures, jewellery and chests. A pile larger than an entire house splayed across the entire platform and spilled over the sides into the deep crevices on every side haphazardly.

Atop this pile lay a pile of bones bigger than any creature I had ever known. Bigger even than the balefire phoenix that had so terrified me at the very start of my journey. A ribcage I could have *trotted* into along a serpentine spine that led to a mouth capable of devouring a pony in one bite, Brim-sized or not! It spread over the gold and gems of its final resting place, startling every sense I had.

This wasn't just a gem mine...

It had been a *dragon's lair!*

"By all that is good in Equestria..." Protégé wandered forward and I found myself following him almost on automatic, my eyes wide as I simply stared at the spectacle before me. Looking down into that chasm where the golden pile spilled, I could see the pit was filled beneath us. Like the dragon's storage for whatever wasn't on his own pile.

Glimmerlight couldn't keep herself from looking almost longingly at the pile in the middle, pulling Chirpy to her side with a hoof and patting his head. The foal was mimicking my own wide eyed look.

“See that, lil'rascal? That's the treasure you've wanted in all those adventures we played at.”

“This explains quite neatly why Shackles and Grindstone are so interested.” Old Grizzly shuffled up near us, combat rifle hung ready by his neck. “Bits aren't worth as much as caps now but...this all adds up.”

No, it didn't. It might explain why in a simple sense why Grindstone originally took an interest in this place but this wasn't the answer to it all. Not immediately anyway. Along the outskirts of the cave I could see more huts and buildings. Minecarts lay near the pile, filled to the brim but clearly not moved for hundreds of years. Mining tools lay in piles while a vast array of overhead beams and pulleys looked like that were once used for lifting ponies carts to the dragon's platform. There was an entire mining camp in this place, just as Protégé had said. The perfect cover for Aurora's work no doubt deeper in.

Speaking of which...I could see a rather large entrance just before the cave's size faded into darkness. It bore the symbol of the Ministry and had carts of gems only waiting outside it.

I'd bet my front right hoof that had something to do with it. (Not literally of course. I liked that hoof. It was my favourite one!)

I saw Ragini creep forward to the edge, before perking my ears up and realising why. Both her and I waved at the others to get down around the same time as I heard shouts and sounds coming from somewhere.

Below us...

Shuffling up beside her, I poked my head over and squeaked lightly at the massive looming drop below. Ragini merely rolled her eyes.

“How would you *ever* cope with being in the sky with fears like that, flightless?”

“I...I'd learn?”

“Sure. Now, you seeing what I do?”

I sure was. Below us, down toward the dragon's pit full of gems and gold, I could see more platforms leading into it with ramps and track systems. There was another entire campsite down there on a lower level! Yet around it, I saw ponies start to march in and take up positions

for a shift. Slavers organised it, many of them seemingly wearing trinkets they'd found.

Suddenly the reason why Shackles commanded such respect from slavers made a *lot* more sense. I imagined 'bonuses' for those in his ranks were pretty high.

"Right there, laddies! Lets see that get movin' fer the next train. Ye don't got the time after all that ruckus back there!"

I felt my skin *crawl*. I hadn't sworn much even in my mind, not even as much as I used to. But I couldn't help the thought of 'Oh *fuck*' internally at that voice. The sneering accent that I had come to associate with grief about to strike me.

Below us, Sooty Morass was directing things. The marketeer was no doubt *very* interested in all this. Beside him, I saw Grindstone and...

Oh no...

Shackles...

"Your profit is permitted, trader. However it is not our primary concern. That **runt** and those carrying him along are up there somewhere!"

The massive slaver pointed up and I curled back quickly from the edge. I felt a hoof on my back, turning to find Glimmerlight near me. Unity stood nearby too, biting her lip.

"Aye, Mister Shackles...but lets not miss out on a wee opportunity if I says so? Ye see, dragons store the best under themselves, so's I reads last night, y'see? I got a mind to head up there meself anyway, if you're going."

Ragini motioned back, signalling to Protégé and Grizzly rapidly with a talon that they were coming up.

"**Fine**, trader. Accompany myself and Grindstone, bring your workforce. They will **not** reach that place before we do. That and I have a slave to reclaim..."

Grindstone's voice sounded so distant...so old. He truly was growing weaker by the day. "I will have Brutus go with you. He has been eager to work with Wildcard again to hunt down the old Warlord. He will prove a capable asset...everything he's done when not in my service has been to become the beast to kill Brimstone Blitz. I don't think I can order him to stay back much longer. Just be sure to bring the mare. She *and* that buck are important."

I felt myself shiver. Brimstone was the only pony strong enough to take on something like that monster...now I simply felt in fear for Brim's life. He still wasn't as strong as he once

was after the Pit...

Shackles nodded slightly, turning back to the slavers behind them.

"Then get moving. Trader, do not delay...we cannot lose that runt. On your head be it if you get in the way..."

He stomped off, bellowing for slavers and slaves to assemble. Immediately they began to move out to a ramp leading into a curved way around the chasm. One I could see would eventually lead up here. Fear began to creep down my back as I saw Sooty giggle with glee at hearing me mentioned and call for his own assistants. The force they had coming up was not small...I saw perhaps fifty ponies...slavers and indentured slaves.

Protégé saw them too. He made a quiet sigh before sitting back.

"I suppose that's it then..."

He looked to the same Ministry door I'd seen earlier.

"...the race is on."

* * *

'She *and* the buck are important...'

What did he mean by that? I knew Shackles wanted me but...it didn't sound like he meant that as simply as it seemed. The sinking feeling of what Shackles had said in Ministry Station settled home, that he had more reason to want to own me than just for his personal amusement.

It didn't take us long to traverse our way across the mining camp. Ragini led the way, bounding much faster than a pony could canter and climbing atop obstructions to check the way ahead. Twitching her head side to side with that freaky method of griffin staring, she watched for anything untoward before waving us forward each time. As we moved around a giant crystal springing from the rock floor and clambered over raised wooden platforms it became clear just how large this chamber truly was. A dragon's lair...big enough to contain such an impossibly huge beast. My eyes kept drifting to the side, onto the massive skeleton that seemed to be looking this way.

I wondered what had killed it. The thought of perhaps being caught in a balefire blast and limping home to recover, before dying of its wounds atop the riches of a thousand year long life came to mind.

Gradually, however, that Ministry door was nearing. I could see it had remained open when it had last been left; just enough space for a pony to squeeze through and get a grip. Brimstone didn't hesitate, galloping up to it and putting his back into widening the gap for the larger members of our group. Even while he strained, I could hear the slavers moving closer, coming higher. They were still some time away, but voices carried far even if they sounded tiny in this vast interior space.

"We don't hesitate in here," Old Grizzly stated as he turned to us all, "we go in, we look around rapidly and we get out again however we can. This is on the clock now and we can't come back this way. I'd say if they don't stop we have at most fifteen minutes before they make it up here. Hopefully there's another way to the mountainside we can find to escape and get back to Fillydelphia. Everypony helps look...but if you find anything do not remove it, only myself, Ragini or Protégé will take anything. Call us over first."

Glimmerlight cocked her head to the side, raising an eyebrow. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you are a slave," Ragini quipped behind us while scanning with her rifle, "Don't think we don't also know what you all really want. We're not stupid. Anything found in here is for Red Eye's purposes. One of us three will take them. If you try to take anything...well...just don't."

I saw my sister merely roll her eyes. "You've got two memory magic capable unicorns and you want to restrict them helping in a situation like this...fine fine..."

I glanced at Protégé as we went in; surely he understood that we could help!

Yet I saw him merely look back at me and nod. He was agreeing with them...

"Let's get moving. Time is of the essence."

The door finally shifted further open. Brimstone cracked his neck and stood aside to reveal the dully lit rooms beyond and-

I heard something. Somepony *talking!*

Waving my hoof, I tried to warn them. Everypony rushed to the sides of the door as I crept up beside it and poked my mirror around. Hazy blues and purples flickered and throbbed from ancient gemlights across a sort of reception crudely built into the cave. Behind it, a more proper tunnel had been built, curving around out of sight.

"What's got you, flightless?" Ragini had crept up to me, standing over me to poke her head around. "I don't hear anything."

"I...I did, I swear!"

There was nothing now. It had faded away almost as quickly as I'd heard it. The noises of Shackles, Sooty and Brutus approaching from behind with their small army of slavers wasn't making it any easier. Sighing, I shook my head.

"I don't have anything on E.F.S. There's no-pony in there, Murk."

"We can't wait." Old Grizzly motioned inwards. "Better a possible threat than sitting in the open when that lot comes up behind us."

"I'd been overruled, but Grizzly was right. With Shackles' slavers gaining ground, we had little choice." Truth be told...I'd have preferred if it were just Protégé with us. Briefly, I wondered if Grizzly had come because he didn't trust just Protégé and Ragini alone with so many of us...especially with ponies like Brimstone and Coral.

Protégé led the way, turning and moving into the reception with his revolver already drawn. With us all following him, I found it to drop sharply in temperature compared to the stuffy warm dragon lair behind us. Perhaps the constructed walls offered some sort of air conditioning system through all those vents that still ran? Arcane systems could last a *long* time, I had discovered in the past. Heck...I wore one on my right foreleg that had survived a balefire explosion. Yet this felt stingy on the skin...a deathly cold. Little bits of frost twinkling on the walls told me that this was more than just some fans someplace. This area was open to the outside world in some way.

That meant a way out ahead of us...yes. Who said I was stupid?

Ragini brought up the rear, taking a second to pull the loosened door shut behind us. Unfortunately, the lock was long destroyed. Instead, Brim pushed the reception desk in front of it. Anything to delay them a bit more.

I trotted beside Unity, taking a little comfort in her presence. No matter how out of depth I felt, knowing she was there helped me at least feel like something was going right.

Going by the look on her face, she felt the same. That similar look of nervous anticipation. I'd filled her in on most of everything that was going on, leaving out only the part with Pinkie Pie. I wasn't too keen on making her think I was some crazy pony just yet...

Wait! I had heard something! I knew it! Waving to the others, I ducked into the side of the corridor. Despite not hearing anything before, they all followed my lead. Ragini again cocked her head to the side, before finally nodding. She'd heard it too.

"It's like...faint buzzing and voices in the distance. Around this bend." She spoke quietly, unslinging her rifle again.

More voices...some overlapping one another or going silent. They were so faint, clipped with buzzes and rasping gargles of sound. I heard one cut out mid sentence, another broke into a long droning hum. The hairs on my neck lifted as Ragini and I crept forward to look.

The curve of the cave didn't last long before we came to another opening. Yet only when we got closer to it did I see that it opened out widely again into another large chamber. Not as large, but filled with a tinny scent of metal and crisp air...like that of a workshop or machinery floor.

The colossal room was crammed with arcane technology. A fully equipped laboratory, easily on a par with Ministry Station's cruder constructions, with rows of worktables, terminals and numerous large machines the purpose of I could only hope to guess at. The sparkling glow of memory orbs lying across the floors and surfaces glinted into the cave's dimmed light beneath a pale blue aura that descended from above. Gemstones littered the walls, while large hanging lights were chained to the ceiling far above. I saw memory machines of varying designs and sizes. Long blackboards were covered in symbols and words that I in my limited knowledge could never hope to read. Around the lab's edges, I could see further doorways leading into tunnels.

This complex went on much more than this main room. At the back I could see a spiral stairwell heading upward to a ringed balcony lined with bookcases and desks, a central supporting column going all the way into the roof itself. Towering above all other machines, at the centre there lay a kind of...of altar? It was made of metal and wood, holding numerous orbs on arms that looked as though they could turn. Maybe it was-*Auurrrgh!*

I screamed, leaping sideways and clambering behind Ragini. A pony appeared from the side of the entrance, galloping right to left! Shimmering like static, barely a comprehensible form, it faded into nothing before it reached the end.

"They're coming!"

Turning into sparkles, the form faded, the lights that had made it up falling to the ground. It...it had looked like...no, it couldn't be.

It had been like the projection orbs. Twilight, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie...the ones I'd found. This was like...like something really similar to that but really dirty and crude by comparison! It-

The pony ran by again! Appearing from the right like static feedback in the air itself, it fuzzed and broke in the air from the movement. Only the vaguest shape was there, but I could

see a terrified face looking backwards before it exploded once more into nothing.

"They're coming!"

"Murk, that's like what we found at the orphanage." Coral moved forward slowly, her stamina still low and her eyes sunken.

Ragini half kicked me out from behind her and advanced inwards.

I bit my lip as I saw the ghostly pony once again, desperately trying to do something at a table. Whatever they had been touching was long smashed on the table below...but allegedly when it had been recorded the table had still been in the same place. After a few seconds, they yelped and sprinted toward us, phasing through Ragini as they went into nothingness.

"They're coming!"

I couldn't help but swallow and try to contain myself as I now saw an old and gooey looking preserved skeleton lying not ten more feet away from where the form had been running.

'They', had gotten the pony.

Unity wandered closer, seemingly more intrigued than immediately repulsed, before pointing at something. Near the table, there was a little shimmering orb. It was a projection orb! Its light was much weaker than the ones I'd seen, but the sparkles returned to it and ejected every time the poor pony played out those moments it had seemingly captured. Either side of me, I heard both Glimmer and Unity gasp at the sight. Of an epic display of memory science.

Gradually, I felt my ears perk up a bit. Against the static of the pony, I could hear other voices faintly. Little blue glows from within the machines or in side rooms hinted at others out there too...eternally repeating over and over...

Old Grizzly cast his eyes around.

"Beyond my ken, this is. Right then, split up. If you find anything, call one of us slavers. We *will* be searching you before we leave. Make it quick, we don't have long to discover what all this is and how we get whatever it is you think we need, Protégé..."

Behind us, I heard a sudden shout. A whooping howl...Wildcard's raiders. Everypony jumped around, looking back the way we'd come. The noise had been far off, but much closer than we'd ever thought they'd be by now.

"Fifteen minutes was a bit optimistic, I think..." Brimstone rumbled, turning his head around to let his eye see Grizzly.

“Agreed, warlord...” The old slaver hummed for a second, before stamping. “Everypony go now, get into twos. You all know this stuff better than I do, so I’ll go hunt for a way out while you search. We *need* to know we can get the hell out of this place if we have to. Don’t dither.”

As if to accentuate that another scream warbled up the tunnel, echoing off the walls and finding its way into us, followed by a snorting bellow. That of a minotaur.

The orb phantom rushed ahead of us, away from that tunnel entrance.

“They’re coming!”

* * *

Ragini stuck with Protégé. They hurried off among the machines, apparently happy for us to look on our own at least. Old Grizzly insisted on remaining near Chirpy, yet allowed Coral to carry her son upon her back as they took the opposite direction, galloping off toward the spiral stairs. Glimmer was rather more excited to dig into this, cantering forward with a grin into the centre of the room to quickly disappear behind a huge spark generator. Brimstone went with her, the watchful protector.

That left myself and Unity. Picking another way aside from Glimmer and Brim, we began our own hunt.

Really, we both felt small amongst these big machines and long rows of tables. Neither of us were the largest ponies around and (by my estimations) pre-war ponies must have been bigger anyway, for everything felt slightly too large for us. The fear of a ghost image suddenly appearing near to us played on my nerves for every single step. Something about it just...just didn’t sit right.

Were these ones just prototypes? Earlier models? Aurora had mentioned they were hard to make. I couldn’t have imagined those six she mentioned to Twilight just came into being without a few hiccups along the way.

“Where do we even begin?” Unity cast her head around, picking up some schematics with her magic. They didn’t show much other than how to create a random part for something neither of us knew.

“I...um...I really don’t...” I felt myself stammering, put off by the quiet of this place. It felt like I was disturbing it by speaking. Everything was so still...so ancient and without understanding. That huge altar at the centre just did nothing other than loom in the dull light, offering no explanation for its presence. Even the occasional noise of a phantom pony in the next row, obscured but still hissing in the air without any voice working didn’t seem to break up

the silence as much as make it worse.

Every so often, the sounds of that small army approaching behind us was merely a reminder that we had to speed up. The quiet lab mixed with a feeling of being hurried was more stressful than I might have imagined. I could pick out individual voices and words now. Grizzly's estimate had been *way* off.

The mere fact that we occasionally stumbled across the remains of somepony didn't make things any easier. Shivering, I stepped around where a pile of bones lay below a table. I wanted to...to be respectful, not rush around them! They had been hiding from something...

Our search found lots of tools, empty memory orbs and workbenches for cutting gemstones. Many of the precious stones *gleamed* from where they'd been polished and shaped into all sorts of wondrous things. Other tables seemed to have been used in the process of putting them into constructions of metal worked out at a load of crafting machines near the wall. I could see lathes and drills, all bearing the marks of the Ministry's of Wartime Technology's construction. Briefly a pony appeared and bent over a lathe.

"Mark four? I said Mark three! It needs to be smaller to do this safely, one crack and we lose the range on-"

They cut. It didn't repeat. The glowing orb laying on a small shelf beside it went back to vaguely glowing. Maybe they didn't all restart instantly?

"Creepy...but it looks like you were right that they were stealing from all the ministries, Murky. There's even an old spritebot over there!" Unity was looking over at the same things, before turning back to move deeper in. "Kind of feel jealous I was just sitting in chains while you went off and found all this old stuff out..."

She cast me a little grin over her shoulder and I felt myself blush as much as shake my head. How could she grin *now*?

"It...it wasn't worth being jealous of. A lot of it wasn't nice..."

"You had your friends though, they saw you through it. That's what friendship's for." Unity slowed down until we were trotting side by side. "Call me old fashioned, but I still like to believe that a good group of friends can accomplish *anything* in this world. I think my mother brought me up on too many stories of a certain six ponies..."

That made me giggle. So had mine. I just hadn't been free of thought enough to really understand at the time.

"I...I think so too..."

"Then let's put our trust in all this. As friends, with the others too...we'll find everypony we want to. My buck, those two fillies you mentioned and...Sunny Days, was it? Surely if we all work together we can find a way out. A way to go home."

That made me smile, I really liked it when she spoke as positively as she did. Unity had a way with words that just made my heart lift. A certain innocence. She really had been born in the wrong era...more than *any* of us.

Then she actually laughed, wiping a tear from her eye.

"Sorry, I'm so ridiculous. Listen to me, like something from a child's storybook..."

"It's...it's not..." I bit my lip, before hesitating to ask, "but why are you uh...crying?"

Unity paused, raising a hoof to her eye as though surprised to even realise there had been a tear. Gradually, I saw her look almost ashamed or...or embarrassed.

"I...I didn't realise, sorry." She looked around. "Just this place...there's so much magic in it. I...I normally don't notice it but..."

I saw her hesitate, looking back toward two phantoms that huddled in a corner, looking terrified and not speaking...simply clutching one another.

"I can...can *feel* them..."

Huh?! Twisting back to look at her, I could only look confused, presumably prompting her to answer my unasked question.

"Murky, I can create replica signatures. I've told you that, but to do that I have to be able to recognise them. But a pony's own magical signature...it doesn't just end. It...it remains in all the things they do. All the things they've touched. I...I could pick up a librarian's favourite book and I'd probably know how to recreate their signature from it for my special talent."

Okay, *that* was a whole new level to Unity's magic I hadn't even realised. I found myself looking around in bewilderment to check if anypony else heard.

"You can sense ponies?" The question felt dumb, but it was my first thought.

"Oh...no. No...I could never know that much for sure. It's just a...a feeling...like a subtle taste on the tongue. Just like the signatures I create for trinkets, it's a subconscious thing. Just, there's so much in this place...so much magic used...so many signatures all melding together that it's so strong and...and..."

She suddenly whimpered as she saw the phantoms again. Unity was a tender but strong mare...I'd never seen her make such a childlike sound.

"These orbs...they give context to it! I can see what I'm feeling! Their signatures left behind with just enough to show me who they were...it's terrible..."

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

"It's...it's all right, Murky. This is worse but I've had to deal with it before out in the wastes. Abandoned homes and old public places mostly. I'm just glad there's all of you here. Your friends are good ponies with strong hearts. Even in just a few hours all this has shown me that. I know I'm among those who'll support me as much as I'll try to help you all too. Let's...let's just keep going. Sooner we find it the sooner we can leave, right?"

Unity made a weak grin and tapped the bump of the statuette she'd made for me in my chest pocket.

"Just hold on to the feelings of those that mean something to you and we'll get by this."

I couldn't help feeling how incredible what she could do was. Her talent was so subtle, yet so amazingly meaningful.

Just like her.

Even as I went to reply to her, my eyes caught something. Behind her, through a row of memory extractors, I saw a flickering light in one of the side tunnels around the edges of the big chamber. Pointing, I got Unity's attention to it as well, before we both cantered over. Taking it cautiously...I poked my head into the tunnel, waving to Glimmerlight before we went. I wanted somepony to know where we were going. Three or four small rooms lined the sides, two to my left and two to my right. I could see one was an office with a simple desk and terminal. But the light was flickering from one to the left. With a look to one another, we moved in.

It was a small room, but every wall and ceiling had been cut from the stone to a smooth finish. Below us, the floor became tiled and I realised that a sliding glass door could close it off entirely. At the back were shelves of folders and bottled stones. In the middle there lay a single table with precision cutting tools on it. One crystal sat there...the most *beautiful* crystal I'd ever seen in my life. It shone with multiple colours refracting out of it, casting a rainbow across the side of the room every time the light flickered through it. Sitting upright, it had a few spires of its own and was rough around the base, like it had just been cut from the cave wall.

There was an orb on the table. I was about to say something when it suddenly flared right in our faces. I heard Unity yelp in shock at the two ponies appearing right in front of us. I

cried out as well, a higher pitch than her.

We took a few seconds to let our hearts calm down. Only then did I realise we'd both grabbed hold of one another. With a little nervous grin, I let go.

"Better me than the griffin, huh?" Unity smirked at me, "Least I don't kick you, she doesn't seem very nice."

"N-nope...she isn't."

"Really?"

Our eyes shot forward again to the two ponies stood before us around the table, whether mares or stallions I couldn't tell. They seemed to flicker in and out of reality, their shapes indistinct and constantly changing colour or even location by a few inches. Translucent and jerky, the shape made rather horrifying gurgling noises that pitched and squeaked...before settling into more normal voices.

"Why this thing?"

"Aurora said it'd be handy, we need to test them anyway for her project. Might as well do it here."

I could properly see it now on this longer recording! It was like the memory projection orbs, only much less refined and...and really bad quality compared to the stunningly lifelike ones of the Ministry Mares. I could barely make out the features and the voices sounded...robotic. Movement barely worked, if the ponies made any more than a slight turn, then the entire picture faded into a wreck of magical sparks that fizzed and popped until they stopped again.

Really...it made me feel quite unsettled. Two phantoms standing where they once did...a replaying of the past. The chilly air was making our breath visible on each exhale and the mist was interfering with the memory projections.

"Okay so...so entry number what?"

"Doesn't matter. Recording first crystal resonance testing. We've discovered some of the most pure forms of crystals we've ever seen in this mine. Normally gemstones all have some degree of contamination in their makeup, but these ones are remarkably genuine. The magical amplification we're getting from them is astounding! The possibilities for orb research with this stockpile of crystals are endless!"

"Endless? Hardly a scientific term. Now, connecting the charge plates...shall I do it?"

"Feel free, my friend. We shall make history someday."

The shapes fuzzed out of focus, before juddering and reappearing near the end of the table. They were working around something that didn't exist. I presumed that the crystal in front of us was not the one they meant...the position was different.

"Casting a basic light spell and...woah..."

"Woah, indeed...the orb won't pick this up, but the crystal has lit. It has amplified the light spell's potency! Common gemlights would be nothing if crystal this pure was used instead! See, gems make up the basis of Equestrian magical technology. Think of them all, spark batteries, gem packs for energy weapons and talismans. They all use gems. But what if these gems could boost the power of something?"

"Now now...you know it won't work on a wide scale. It's too impractical to-"

"Never mind, Aurora has to know it worked. She'll want to get started right away...this technology is too great to miss out on. Those ideas she had? What our benefactors want? This could let them create new, more powerful orbs! This little recording one might actually work someday! Imagine, not using this for what they want but...but proper projection orbs and-"

Unity suddenly yelled and leap back. Turning, I joined her, as another form suddenly walked into the radius of the orb, passing *through* Unity on its way. Static and wild glimmers solidified into the shape of something a little different from a pony...a zebra.

"Has it worked?"

"Oh...yes...yes, sorry! We were just excited, it...um...never mind!"

The orb suddenly flashed again...and they seemed to reset.

"Really?"

"Why this thing?"

"Aurora said it'd be handy, we need to test them anyway for her project. Might as well do it here."

Gently, Unity reached out with her magic and plucked the shard up. The deep red of her magic sent the crystal into a wild cascade of colour that shone off our faces and reflected all around the room, passing through the light forms before us and warping them even more.

"Higher yield crystals for those fancy orbs you told me about...that makes sense. It

would take something greater than any normal substance to do such a thing. It's a special talent of mine just to even give a feeling of somepony from an item...to make somepony actually *appear* takes..."

She shook her head.

"Aurora Star must have been somepony truly amazing to have created such a thing..."

My mind thought back to the memory orb I'd experienced in her office. Sitting near those masses of light green or cream orbs that strewn her floor, I had seen life from Aurora's perspective. Seen her brilliant but naïve presence as a Ministry Hub leader. Nasal voiced, forgetful without orb help...she wouldn't have been somepony I'd have clocked for a revolutionary memory magic scientist. All the same...life had taught me the most unusual of ponies could do things you didn't expect.

"Well...we can't take every crystal in the mountain with us. Think we should just move on, Murky? I don't really imagine we have time to waste..."

Snapped back to reality, I found Unity had trotted nearer the door. Nodding a little, I followed her back into the side passageway we'd found. I noticed some of the gemlights were growing dimmer or more inconsistent the further they got from the main chamber by the darkening light around us. The air got cooler for every foot we travelled, the frost on the walls growing thicker until I was shivering all over again. We kept going, exploring this abandoned part of the laboratory, seeing the roughly mined out caves formed into crude rooms and areas containing many shards of crystal.

"H-help...somepony...help..."

We both stopped. Just ahead, I could see a dim light from the door on our right, near to the end of this hall ahead of a large frosted over door that likely led to an open cave. Weak and spluttering, it made the same fizzled sounds as the other phantom projections. Near it, a vent was blowing icy wind into the corridor that set both of us to visible wince at its chilly cutting drafts.

Below it, drawing my eye, there was a long stained blood that ran from where somepony had pulled the grate off into the room with the light.

"They killed us...they killed us all when we were done..."

The light faded, before springing back into life. We shifted forward, knowing it was just an orb but all the same...feeling a dread creep into the air.

Within the room, there lay a skeleton collapsed against a bookshelf. Covered in white

frost and fallen tomes, it clearly had been knocked back into it. A dark stain covered the floor around it, leading to a silvery orb between its legs. The orb flickered, before sparking into being. The shape of a pony gathered around the skeleton in the same precise shape of how it had been lying, reforming the poor thing over and over for centuries across its own corpse...

"H-help...somepony...help..."

"Oh, Goddesses preserve them..." I muttered to myself, a hoof on my mouth and struggled to keep my eyes dry. I could *feel* them welling up as I saw the dark stain across the bookshelf behind them and could recognise the punch of bullet holes snapping through ribs. They had been sitting there helpless when someone had stormed in and...and...

They'd left this pony to *bleed to death*...

"They killed us...they killed us all when we were done..."

Unity gasped quietly as she saw it, stopping in the doorway while I passed inside.

"I'm so sorry..."

"Huh?"

She silently slid past me, kneeling near the figure with a look of mourning.

"I...I can really *feel* this one...he activated this orb himself."

Her magic gently picked up the orb, momentarily setting the image to warp out of position before she dropped it right back in the same place with a gasp. She fell back, falling onto her rump like she'd just been shocked. Quickly I moved over to her, seeing her face white.

"Fear..."

"What?"

"So much fear...like I could feel what he went through when he set the orb going...oh goodness...I could feel it so clearly. Seeing him, sensing it all...I just...I need to do something else!"

Unity pushed up, stopping short of shoving past me as she went to the rest of the room, clearly looking to distract herself. I was left for a few seconds gazing at the last orb this pony ever used before regrettably moving away.

Carefully, I tried to see if there was anything worthwhile around the one primary desk in

here, but with Unity reading for me it became clear this was nothing but a pony involved in keeping track of logistics for the mine. Just some innocent low level worker who'd gotten swept up in all this.

"There isn't much, Murky...the most I can see is some papers detailing how they tried to hide the findings in this mine. They must have made any special orbs here before sending them to Ministry Station for...well, whatever they were doing down there."

She read a little further, biting her lip as she went as she clearly tried to fight past what she'd felt in here. I felt distinctly unhelpful, poking my head back out to the corridor. I could hear Grizzly shouting for an update on anything. Time was running out...

The thought of what it felt like to be her in this place of ancient death gave me a whole new respect for her ability to push through that which troubled her. How had she ever withstood Ministry Station?

"They keep mentioning components...comparatively few orbs. Components for...something. It's never mentioned. It used a lot of crystal though. Any ideas?"

"H-help...somepony...help..."

"N-not really..." I gulped, "Probably whatever it is at the centre of Ministry Station. The crystals let them store more power though? Does any of it say it went elsewhere?"

Unity looked over more, before lifting a paper with a symbol of three butterflies on it.

"Yes, actually. The Ministry of Peace signed for some...a Doctor Weathervane? Pre-organised deliveries of orbs for megaspell research? It was Aurora Star who signed this one out...and another for six ordinary memory orbs."

That *had* to be the healing megaspell that had saved my life! Aurora Star had sent some to the Ministry of Peace and tried to give one to Twilight and all the Ministry Mares too. They hadn't been 'ordinary' at all. One made a megaspell with the purest crystal and the other created six *functioning* memory projection orbs!

Why was I getting the feeling that she'd been trying to cry for help this entire time? Trying to get somepony to see she was hiding something? Sweet Goddesses...what kind of maniacal surveillance did the zebras have that she had to hide them in the logistics footprint just to try and hope somepony saw what was going on. That she had to rely on them going to ponies who might realise those orbs weren't normal without her saying a word. Had it been that bad she couldn't have just told anypony? Did they really watch her that closely?

Or...maybe she was just trying to hide the paper trail from Pinkie...was I giving her too

much credit? Sundial seemed to think she was just a scared pony like all the rest of us.

We didn't stay there long. Taking the papers with us, we slowly and respectfully made our way out, before cantering as fast as we dared back toward the main room.

I didn't need a special talent to feel the sadness she was trying to keep down the entire way.

"They killed us...they killed us all when we were done..."

* * *

"Come on! Hurry up, all of you!"

Ragini's shout carried across the room as we emerged. I could see the griffin by the entrance we'd come in, watching the corridor. Seeing the pair of us enter, she waved a talon.

"You found the big fancy secret yet?"

"N-no!" I shook my head as Unity kept going, moving into the centre of the lab.

"Well then get moving, they're on this level. The dragon bones distracted them but we've got a couple minutes at most before they come this way!"

"They're coming?!" Grizzly voice boomed across the room, he was up on the balcony above us. "There's a way out up here, I believe! The stairs keep going higher. Everypony, find what we need and then *get up here!* Murk and Unity, you two get onto the balcony and start hunting those rooms opposite me! *MOVE!*"

He proceeded to shout out to Glimmer and then Protégé from his vantage point, I couldn't see them but I heard their responses. Glimmer appeared briefly carrying a small bag of orbs along with her lever-action rifle readied up and pointing. She gave me a quick grin before darting off toward the back of the laboratory.

"Hey, Unity!" she called, "Keep him safe!"

Gee, thanks sis...

"Oh, I'll keep him out of trouble! Had to do that enough with my own buck." She laughed, nudging my side. "Aww, doesn't she love you?"

"Oh great, there's two of you now..."

Just hearing a friend laugh was such a welcome relief in this place. “Oh, us mares gotta stick together after all. Say, Murky...think your grapple could reach that balcony?”

Unity was right, with a little aiming, I managed to nail the overhanging room above and whizz us up to it. Ragini stayed below, watching the tunnel entrance. With no safety railings in place (I stifled a groan) it wasn't particularly hard to get onto the upper floor and see the many research chambers laid out before us.

We were on a clock. Slavers, minotaurs and raiders were coming. We were in a creepy lab filled with orb phantoms. Yet somehow...we found time to smile to one another.

Sticking together, we advanced into the rooms here. This was no longer time to edge about carefully. I could see everypony starting to hurry below and we did just so too. Tossing books carelessly aside, we hunted the workbenches and drawers to find *anything* that might tell us just what all this was! What that thing in Ministry Station was!

Two offices...three, then another lab of crystals and orbs. I almost screamed as a phantom appeared in the middle of the table the moment I ran in. It was more broken than any thus far, glitching around and moving its head as though writing in thin air. Behind it was a massive blackboard, the chalk long fading from it. Casting my eyes over it, I saw sketches of the altar at the centre of the main room surrounded by orbs and numbered ponies. A line was drawn between them and a machine that looked like the one I'd seen in the Ministry itself, the one with the buck stuck in it. Another line went to the machines that extracted memories...that then led to the altar again...then back to the ponies and...urrrghhh...

This was all so *hard*.

“Hey, what are you doing in here?!”

Shrieking, I spun with my back to the board. My shout and the female voice startled Unity, making her drop an orb from her magic. It rung on the floor like a tiny bell, rolling beneath the table. Before us, an orb phantom shimmered and fizzled its way in through the door. Just a wash of static in the air before forming into a surprisingly high quality for these older things.

It was Aurora.

The one we'd been near already perked up, sparking.

“I'm...I'm recording what we've been doing today, Ma'am!”

“Sparkler, you know what I told you...don't record too much on paper. Use the orbs I gave you all. But you should be gone by now!” She advanced closer to the table.

I shivered as she looked directly at me, before realising it was at the blackboard behind me.

"I...I am, Ma'am! It's just over there. But I find it easier to write, gets it all straight in my head. This is all such complex stuff, it's like we're advancing years in a few months. How could I leave?"

"I know. The team downstairs still hasn't gotten the memory nexus to focus enough power to really activate it, so we're looking into some sort of tandem power source. If you want to stick around then you'll have to tell the zebras I demanded it. You know what they think about not sticking to their plans."

Unity trotted near to me, mouthing the words, 'Memory Nexus?'

"Hey! I can hear them coming, you all!"

Ragini's words shouted up to us.

"Get down now! Get to the stairs! They're *coming!*"

Unity and I looked to one another. I saw the same look on her face. This recording *could* maybe find something! Without a word, we both nodded. A few more seconds...

"But, Ma'am...do you really think we'll get what we want now? I'm getting scared, Aurora...they are getting more eager, more aggressive. I know you told me you wanted to-"

Aurora's form hurried forward, a hoof going to Sparkler's lips.

"Hush. Not on an orb. You've been saying too much on those audio diaries already. Listen, we finish this quickly, we get back to Ministry Station and we'll take care of it, okay? This can still be saved, for all our mistakes. Now get down and help them. The Nexus is projecting on its low settings, but its lacking...something. The test spell we put in it just isn't sticking in anypony's mind longer than the old spell orbs so it's just one big inefficient method...as usual. Maybe a-"

"A signature!"

Sparkler interrupted so loudly his phantom warped and distorted. That wasn't what made both of us jump though. Below us, we heard a gunshot.

Ragini had engaged them. They were here.

"Get moving! Over here!" Grizzly screamed to everypony. We wanted to go but...but

this was so close to telling us!

“Aurora, I had been thinking on that. Everypony has a signature, you know that. A magical signature to their bodies. Well...you know how you were toying with being able to replicate that once? I thought...the Nexus isn't projecting properly, right? Maybe it's because the memories we put in it for those spells...they don't have a magical signature, they're just orbs. Nothing but a copy. With a real magical signature or...or even a replica of one, maybe it'll-”

“Watch out!”

A deafening bang sounded from below, shaking the floor beneath us and making the phantoms go haywire. Ears ringing, I realised I'd fallen. Unity galloped outside, looking over the balcony. This room we were in, it was directly above the entrance to the lab Ragini had been watching. Unity turned and shouted back to me, a sudden look of worry on her face. Holding my head, I waited till sound started filtering back in.

“-a grenade, Murky! They're coming in! Right below us!”

Staggering forward, I saw a black mark on the ground floor right beneath where we hid, around the entrance. Ragini was *sprinting* away from it as slavers poured inside. I could see Old Grizzly hoisting a thick metal desk near the top of the stairs to use as cover, firing down at them. One slaver cried out, going down and being trampled by the raiders coming in behind him.

They clutched mostly melee weapons, but a couple sent a chattering hail of sub-machine gun fire toward Grizzly's position while on the run. Wildly inaccurate, but still making the big slaver pull his combat rifle back into cover behind himself as shots sparked off the surface. Just what did they make that table out of? Well...Grizzly wouldn't have chosen it if he hadn't been sure it was thick enough...

Behind me, I heard the conversation continuing. Against my better judgement, I spun to look at it again as I saw it begin to fade off.

“-genius, Sparkler! We'll get right on that. This could do so much...so so much. I know that's not what they want. They don't want to stop at spells...”

“I know...”

“Come find me in my cottage upstairs if you manage anything. I...I need a little time.”

Aurora moved away, her form passing into nothing. Sparkler seemed to sigh, before breaking up on the spot and vanishing.

Cottage!

Upstairs!

That was something! Her own place! We had something!

Below me the skirmish was unfolding dreadfully as slavers stormed the entire laboratory. I saw Ragini taking what cover she could behind the altar, snapping shots with her energy rifle at the slavers and raiders. One raider took a hit that burned the bottom of his jaw off. He kept going until Ragini had to pump another shot into his face. Even then I saw the corpse twitching. Madly, trying to crawl.

By the Goddesses...

The return fire was intense. Driving Ragini back, they forced her to take cover and relocate immediately, scrambling and diving to get behind a memory machine with a ricocheting bullet pinging past her tail. A war cry howled into the air and Brimstone emerged from the left side of the lab. In his huge hooves he held what looked like a...a safe? Straining, roaring, he hurled it toward the slavers and sent them scattering as the heavy item crushed down among them. I heard multiple voices wailing out. A quick glance saw their legs trapped beneath where it had landed.

The unusual attack gave my friends time to fall back, find better positions and meet up.

From behind the slavers, Wildcard charged into the lab, laughing maniacally at the violence erupting around him. With his presence, the firepower they started to put out below us all became overwhelming. Grizzly was pinned, Ragini I could see huddled down as the gunshots and energy sparks flew around her. The noise echoed around, becoming a crazed firestorm as more and more slavers hurried in. They crouched in cover, using mouth held guns and magically lifted weapons. Raiders started rushing around the flanks, their muscles straining and desperate drug fueled eyes glinting with delight. I saw three of them meet Brimstone and break into a melee as they swarmed onto him without an ounce of fear. Coral Eve appeared near the back, trying to get her son up the stairwell before shots clattered into the spiral's metal frame. The unicorn yanked Chirpy back, falling in beside Grizzly. I even heard Sooty Morass shouting orders to the slavers, trying to get them to avoid hitting some machines.

This was madness, a whole battle condensed into such a cramped area.

My friends needed help, somepony in a better position. They needed something to, uh, what was the word? Cover them?

Apparently, Unity could think faster than I could. I blamed my head ringing from the sounds hurting my poor ears...

"F-follow me! I've got an idea!"

She galloped back into the lab, her telekinesis widening out to every one of the cabinets and tables, grabbing every orb she could. Phantoms went wild as Unity picked each one up in her magic, activating them. I noticed that even as she moved them, the angles at which they projected went crazy as the alignment of the orb was disturbed. One ran upwards through the ceiling.

"Murky...help! This is...this is a lot!"

Her voice sounded strained. I thought it the limit of her telekinesis...before I realised. She could feel every one of them! All the signatures. All the sensations of a pony's individual unique magical taste on each orb brought to life around her as phantoms whirled, screamed, laughed and cried all around the two of us. It was overwhelming her. Hell, it was enough for me alone!

"*Murky!*"

I rushed over, finding Unity staggering with watering eyes. Her magic seemed to flicker a couple times as I helped her over toward the doorway, a great mass of phantom orbs following us in the air.

"Right ahead, Unity! The balcony is right there!" I helped her through the door, before feeling her hoof push me back. Her face was pained, tear stained and hurt...but her eyes bore a harsher glare.

"They hurt you all..."

The phantoms swept and faded, odd impossible angles they walked at from the orbs being turned and spiralled around her.

"They *killed* you...I feel it! Your fear, your regret. They wanted to use the beautiful things you made for *evil!*"

Slowly...I backed off. This wasn't the Unity I knew...it...it was almost like she was embodying it all, letting the feelings wash into her and push her to this limit!

"These ponies want to do the same two centuries later! Just replicas or not, let this be your chance to fight back as you once couldn't! Give those who want to save your legacy a *chance! GO!*"

With a great cry, she flung every single orb. They careened out onto the balcony, over

the edge and rained down. The orbs went *everywhere*, falling, bringing with them an invading storm of ghosts and ghastly static images. I heard slavers suddenly scream, never having seen these strange and disturbing sights now dropping on them from above. From my hiding spot, I saw the terror in their eyes as dozens of ponies ran around them, fizzing in and out of reality. They flurried around the slavers, reaching toward them and failing to fall when shot or swiped at.

Faced with the ghostly attack, many of Shackles' band turned and outright *fled*. Others fell to the ground wailing. Some slashed and shot at them, hitting their allies. The first phantom we had seen also ran across the entrance once more.

This time, it wasn't the zebras who were coming.

Amongst the chaos, their fire lessened. Protégé appeared near Ragini, firing into their ranks with six quick shots from his revolver even as I saw him looking with astonishment at what had happened to the slavers. His eye caught me looking over and he quickly waved toward the stairs.

Wildcard appeared below us, chasing after phantoms. Swearing and screaming at them he slashed and turned into a frenzied blur as they refused to react to his attacks. Stopping amongst them, I saw him screaming with them, rolling onto his back and kicking his hooves into the air as he fell into the madness of the ghostly barrage even as his raiders became disarrayed around him and even as slavers howled and ran into alcoves or back the way they'd came.

I saw Glimmerlight able to get moving out of cover from the distraction. Brimstone got her moving toward the back, followed by Protégé. Unity's idea had worked...it had worked perfectly. Grizzly had gotten up the stairs, followed by Coral and Chirpy. It had-

Below me, the ground suddenly splintered up. Gunfire from below sheared through the wooden balcony floor and sent both Unity and I dancing back and forth to avoid it. I felt her pull me, before we were galloping away. I caught a glimpse of a pony far enough into the room that he'd seen us and was pulling the trigger again and again on a long rifle pointed at us. I screamed, running just ahead of the furious gunfire until both of us leapt through a broken window into a darkened room.

The solid stone floor I landed on stopped my thoughts rather harshly. Unity fell in afterwards, landing atop me and knocking the air from my lungs. Every part of me stung, my chest most of all and I felt my right eye swell a little again. Behind us, the fire washed across the window as we held each other down, being peppered with glass and bits of broken stone and wood. Finally, it stopped, yet at Grizzly's bellowed command I heard more fire going out. Glimmer's weapon's distinctive *crack* going out every few seconds along with the *blam* of Protégé's revolver. Thanks to our distraction, they'd managed to mostly hold them at the cave entrance...at least I thought. I heard Wildcard's laughter turn to a blood curdling and animalistic howl. Brimstone shouted back...were those two fighting?

Slowly, I got up and helped Unity to her hooves. The poor mare was already tired from her time with Shackles and Grindstone, looking as shaky as I felt. I couldn't see well in here, just the vague shape of...of piles of something on all sides in the corners and against the walls. Something about it made me stop and stare.

"Oh...oh no..." Unity's words were quiet. So quiet I was surprised I heard them against the gunfire going on just outside.

Turning, I saw her eyes wide, looking directly ahead but not at anything in particular. Around the edges, I could see the glint of tears. She had been heavily drained by the effort of that move back there...left vulnerable.

"Unity? What...what's wrong? What is it?"

"So many...so close...I-I can feel them all..."

A blue light flickered around us. An orb at our hooves lit to form shapes.

Oh...oh *Goddesses*...

It wasn't just a pony this time. It was *ponies*.

Many ponies.

Around us, it lit piles stacked in corners. An orb sickeningly left active where ponies had been...been...

I heard Unity retch, almost throwing up. I nearly joined her, my mouth dropping open and twisting into a horrified grimace with unblinking eyes.

All around us, there lay piles of corpses. The zebras had gathered them here...executed them in corners and rows. A dozen...two dozen...all lay lifeless in suspended orb magic. Some with open eyes, lifelessly caught in their last scream. Slowly, the orb flickered, leaving nothing but piles of bones and blank skulls staring back at us from every side in the same poses. It lit again, covering their bones in illuminated flesh to reveal the sickening sight. Then back again...and again...never ending.

My mind reeled as I staggered against Unity. I...I didn't know which was worse. My mind just couldn't adjust. Couldn't comprehend it!

Corpses...bones...corpses...bones...

A massacre held in perpetual imagery for all eternity.

Every which way we looked, some new face looking back.

"There's too many, it's...it's like they're all screaming, all at once!"

Screaming faces.

"They just crammed them in and opened fire!"

Dead bones.

We found ourselves together in the middle of it, all. I could see her face lit every time to orb played and knew she could see the same horror in my eyes. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to break down and cry at it all. Just...just let the nightmare that had happened in this room for the dozens who had been massacred play out until I finally found the strength to flee.

"Murky...lets get out of here..."

"I...I..."

I felt her hoof take mine.

"Murky, I don't want to be here. *You* don't want to be here, let's *go*."

I'd thought she was the one feeling it worse, but I realised I was frozen. My eyes locked on each of theirs, changing as the orb lit and faded each time. I felt her tugging me, pulling me along.

"I'm sorry, we can't help them now! We can still help your *friends* though!"

That did it. I blinked, gasped and turned back to her. She was weeping openly too, but trying to move me toward the window again now that the incoming shots had died off. She looked oddly calm for a second.

"I've always felt it bad, seeing these things. I...I always felt it more than others. My buck...he always felt sad for me whenever it happened...but he helped me as much as I helped him to get by it. Let's...let's get out of here now. I don't want to see this...feel this..."

My breathing heightened, I knew that feeling all too well myself...

Trying not to look around once more, trying to keep ourselves from thinking about leaving them all behind, we turned and made for the exit. Tripping over the window frame, we

got back onto the balcony rather surprisingly out of breath. Just leaving the room was like stepping back into the land of the living.

I hadn't ever grasped the scale of it. This wasn't just a few scientists and workers in isolated rooms. The zebra extermination had been a slaughter, a massacre of ponies who'd been forced or coerced into this.

Very quickly, the idea of just how much of a horror all this in the final days before the balefire had been. Somehow I found myself hoping Aurora or Sundial hadn't seen this...

Gradually, I sneaked up to the edge of the balcony and peered over to gauge what was happening, trying to fix my thoughts back on the present.

Below us, the battle for Aurora's Lab was falling heavily in favour of the slavers. I could see some of Wildcard's raiders stamping on orbs and smashing them. Crazy enough to not care for the voices they likely already heard anyway. With phantoms popping out of existence, the distraction was beginning to falter. Wildcard almost looked disappointed, almost hurt at them disappearing before a fury came across his face. I saw his expression snap, changing to a childlike glee as he looked at the battle in front of him, not fit to rejoin.

I...just didn't get him. Not at all. He scared me as much as he confused me.

They had the numbers. They had the raiders. They had Wildcard pushing into fire, strangely seeming to dance and bounce gleefully around shots while...while *singing*. He would get around a flank, trying to distract my friends in a terrifyingly sane tactic. Out of a side room, Brimstone launched at him, tackling the insane raider so hard his machetes skittered out of his magic. They brawled, Brimstone slamming Wildcard's head against a table. Merely laughing harder, Wildcard turned and *bit* at Brim's neck with frenzied abandon. Crying out in pain, the old Warlord hurled Wildcard away from him, back toward the slavers.

I could swear he shouted '*Wheee!*'

A shot flew near Brim, forcing him to rush back while holding onto his bleeding neck. Protégé and Grizzly gave him some cover. I could see Coral Eve now up beside Grizzly, sheltering her son behind that thick table at the top of the stairwell. Below us perhaps a dozen slavers lay dead, their casualties even I could tell were simply because they had little cover coming in here. Even as I watched, Protégé leaned out, took aim and fired a superb shot that struck a slaver on the back leg even while galloping between cover.

Slavers or not, a couple of his comrades laid down fire on Protégé until they could get out and pull their friend back into cover. These ponies weren't all merciless...they were trying to survive much as we were. That meant they were fighting hard, taking shots at anything they could while the raiders provided a distraction with their big pushes. The combination of sane

tactics and reckless madness was rather terrifying to behold at work.

Unity and I simply remained where we were, mostly hidden. Neither of us were combat capable, not in that below us. A firefight channelled into a cramped lab was brutal and quick. I saw Sooty waving at slavers, sending them running up to the right where none of my friends could see. I tried to wave to them, but they were all too busy fighting for their lives and poking out of cover only haphazardly!

Finally, Grizzly spotted them from his position at the top of the stairs, before trying to hold them off with several shots in their direction. The slavers dove into the same side tunnel we'd explored earlier, getting away from him.

"Flanking! *Flanking!* Everypony get over here quickly, we have to get up! The stairwell won't hold!"

Protégé made a break out of cover, fired twice as he went and cried out as a shot hit the ground before him and bounced up into his side. His momentum carried him into cover during the fall. Before he disappeared I hadn't seen any spurt of blood...I hoped his armour had saved him like it had in the Mall.

It proved it though...the stairwell was going to be a nightmare. The fire from the slavers now surging around the flank Sooty and Wildcard had opened was just too heavy. We had some good fighters, experienced ones even...but we couldn't force them back. There was just too many and they had even bigger reinforcements coming as soon as Shackles or Brutus caught up to this party!

The thought of Shackles approaching was like a wash of ice water over my head. If they fought hard as it was now, with him in the room...

He was coming...always pursuing, always there. I...I could almost *feel* him coming closer.

Off to our right, a huge bang sent my ears ringing, a part of the balcony collapsed entirely. Wood splintered and fell, dragging girders from their sockets on the rough rock wall. Shaking terribly, I cast my eyes around to try and get an idea on what to do. My friends were pinned, struggling to pin down enough slavers till we could get up the stairs! We had no way out! The stairwell would get us all killed with no cover and...and the slavers had the only entrance!

Grizzly poked his head up, casting a glance around the slaver positions.

"Ragini, fire on the right! Protégé, pull over a rifle with your magic and get shooting on the other side! Glimmer, spot anypony taking shots at the stairwell! You'll all die if you don't get

up here, so *take the chance!* GO!"

They obeyed, I saw my friends coordinate their fire under his direction from up high. He had a better sense of it all. To my astonishment, I saw what a few ponies working together could achieve against a larger but undisciplined force. One well placed shot could make half a dozen slavers duck, so if they spread *just* enough and if Brimstone could hold off those raiders who kept getting too close...

We had a chance.

I heard Protégé's voice shout out, sounding tired, "Into the cave! Unity! Murk! Where are you?!"

If Unity and I were going to cross it all to get over there, we'd have to go now!

That meant...going down into it...

Oh dear.

My eyes looked around for any other method, before finally coming to rest on that huge lighting rig above us even as Unity waved to Protégé, getting his attention.

Or...we could go over it!

"Unity...um, you probably won't like this but we could...um, y'know? R-remember getting out the FunBarn?"

The look on her face said it all. 'You *have* to be joking.'

I shook my head and started readying up my grappling gun, twitching my hoof to flick out the mouthpiece. "If we go down we'll be in even more danger. This...this is just a quick, um...whoosh over and they won't have the time to aim at us!"

Unity sighed and shook her head, putting a hoof to her face slowly. "I swear...if you drop us *again*."

"I've been practising!"

"Sure."

All the same, she moved closer and held onto me. Rearing back, I fired up and hooked it onto one of the heavy hanging lights before standing ready at the edge. I could see a big long stretch of a walking space between the machines near my friends. I'd have to aim for that. Aim

for that then sprint to where Protégé was!

Yes! So...simple. Yes...

"That bit there." I pointed to it.

"It's not a straight swing, Murky. How will you turn? In the middle of this?"

She was right, the bit I was aiming at was slightly to the side and pointed away from us...if we landed without turning to properly face it in mid air...there was every chance we'd just hit the metal machines too hard to risk...

How to turn? How to turn?

I remembered back to the train...Glimmer's words. Ignore what Weathervane said...flying didn't just mean flapping...

I remembered falling in the crash, how my wings caught the air, no matter how unsuccessfully then.

Taking a breath, I told Unity to hold tighter and flared my wings out behind me. She gasped in surprise, the first time I'd let them out since finding her again. I was going to prove I could make something of them, making something of being a pegasus for once in my life!

"Murky...your wings, they're..."

I just smiled to her briefly. "I've come a long way since the FunFarm...trust me?"

Unity didn't even need to respond, the small smile she gave was all I needed to know she did.

I took a few steps back, before galloping forward. With a leap, we cast out above the lab. A horrible moment of freefall from which I felt my wings being tugged and whipped at behind me before the rope went tight and we *swung!*

We both let out a shout as it sped up, pulling our bodies and soaring over the battle itself! Shots flew by us as we went, phantoms flickered by near us and I felt Unity nearly choke me with her legs to hold on. My puffy eye making it hard to see in the middle of all this! Slavers looked up, I saw Ragini looking up with an open mouth as we soared above, my wings open.

I saw the open stretch and felt us start to move up again at the far side of the swing, off centre! Gritting my teeth, I tried not to scream in pain as I shoved one sore wing out, the weak muscles and fragile bones responding like they had always known how. Stiff, it spread and

caught the air, setting us spinning wildly as the grapple rope swung and sent us spiralling toward the gap. Struggling to see it on each spin, I tried to control it, my other wing flaring out too! Briefly, I saw a glimpse of it...straight on!

Releasing the mouthpiece, I dropped us! Hopefully not too high!

...well...one can hope.

We fell a lot further than I expected. I held onto her. I don't know why I thought it would work...I just don't know. But my wings tried to curve out, to catch the air and slow us. Instead it just sent me into a flat spin again, hanging in the air for but a millisecond before falling again. Yet even that little lift...

Glimmerlight's words rang very true from on the train.

The harsh ground threw any thoughts from my mind. We landed *hard*. Rolling over one another, crying out from the impact we thankfully rolled behind something before coming to a stop. We...we'd made it!

I lay on my back...so sore and breathless. I could feel Unity's hooves still around me as she groaned in pain. No...wait...that was me. Damn my thin voice.

"Murky...that...you've really..."

She tried to stand up, her hooves helping me up as my wings dropped a little, still out to the sides. There was just this little moment...away from the battle.

"I knew they'd be there for you someday."

I felt myself blush. "Thanks...I'm just glad we made it."

"Hah! Thought you'd made it, laddie?"

The voice cut into me, forcing aside the odd tranquillity of the moment before a hoof struck across my face. Hard. Pain swelled throughout my entire head as I collapsed to the ground, wings splayed out by my sides. My tooth felt loose and shaky in my mouth.

"Murky!" Unity cried out before I heard her yelp too. The sound forced me to turn and open my eyes.

"Two for the price of one, the best deal in the house, me old da' used to say, lad. Hah! Now I got you both.

Before us stood Sooty Morass. The trader wore leather armour and carried a shotgun by his side. For all his mercantile background he had always still been a rough and weathered pony. Amongst this madness in the lab, he had us alone! Unity lay by his side, unconscious near to his hoof.

“U-Unity!”

I tried to rush forward, but Sooty reared up, slamming down and kicking me back again. The impact on the side of my neck jarred my whole head. This time I didn't get up...I just lay in pain, struggling and whining as I felt his hoof come down and pin my *wing* to the floor.

“I knew I'd get somethin' if I came in this little excursion of sorts, lad. Didnae think it'd be ye, eh? I had ye cheated from me once, laddie...not again.”

I tried to move, I really did. But with his hoof on my wing, he only needed to *lean*. I cried out again, held onto my belly. The...the slavers must have moved up this side of the lab without me or anypony else seeing! My friends were shouting somewhere nearby...they were under fire. I heard Ragini cry out as something hit her, Grizzly shouting to Brimstone to help her. I couldn't see anypony, just Sooty.

“Now get up, lad.”

That was his mistake.

He still took me for a broken slave.

The moment his hoof lifted, I spun, trying to whip the mouthpiece up and bit *hard* on it. The grapple line hadn't retracted yet and it began to cycle back in quickly. Quick enough that before Sooty could do a thing, it crashed into the back of his head. Its hook tore a wicked chunk of flesh from his shoulder, sending droplets of blood over my face. Over all the gunfire going on as my friends engaged in the skirmish with Shackles' forces...Sooty screamed.

I desperately tried to swap the trigger mechanism, to get *Rarity's Grace* up. But my head hurt...my hooves were clumsy. Before I managed it, I was virtually immobilised by Sooty screaming at me, the sound straining my already sore ears from the mass of war sounds in this enclosed place.

“YE THINK YE CAN HURT ME, EH?”

His hoof slapped across my face, before going back to holding his shoulder.

“WE'RE ALL ALONE, LADDIE!”

I screamed as another hoof hit me. I...I couldn't move. My body was aching too much. I kept seeing Unity stirring, but unable to stand. Sooty leaned in, pinning me on the ground so hard that I cried out, his braids hanging down either side of my face.

"YES!" His bloody face leaned in. "SCREAM ye wee runt! *Learn* to scream! Cos yer comin' with me! I got a line of *customers* waiting for you!"

No...

"They'll want to *hear* that scream! With wings that *work* I can get a fortune from you, laddie! A FORTUNE! YOU'LL BE THEIR LITTLE BITCH TO SQUEAL WHEN THEY HOLD YE DOWN OVER AND OVER! I got a stallion who was *waiting* for you to arrive! *He'll have you now ye little bastard! I'll let him have **all** of ye for doing that to me shoulder! I-*"

"Hey! Goldilocks!"

Sooty looked to the side, furious. His anger quickly drained from his face as he saw somepony standing above him on the side of a tall machine. A lever-action rifle pointed directly to his head.

"If anypony is gonna be the one to set him up with a hot stallion, it's going to be *me*."

Glimmerlight pulled the trigger, blowing the back of Sooty's skull clean off. The merchant's body fell off me, lifelessly dropping to the ground amongst a spreading pool of blood.

My sister quickly leapt down to us, calling behind her as slavers started to move closer. Ragini appeared, as did Protégé. On seeing the scene, he galloped forward, quickly checking Unity with great concern on his face at her dazed struggling. Without a word, he lifted her across his back. My sister helped me up, helping me onto hers as they struggled back toward the stairwell.

Everypony else was putting fire down, trying to hold off the massively superior slaver force as we headed upwards, using every barrier we could for cover. Everypony took turns covering as the next would take the vulnerable run upwards, working together to spot or shoot and move under Grizzly's commands.

Gradually, we all got upstairs. I saw that Ragini had taken another hit to her armour while pulling us up it. She now fell into cover at the top, winded and sore. Glimmer had a ricochet in her foreleg as she had carried me up, but my sister had pushed on, carrying my limp body before dumping both of us. That stairwell had been totally exposed, it was a miracle of Grizzly's tactical thinking and direction that we'd managed it.

I tried to shout to them that we had to go up to the top...to find Aurora's cottage,

presumably outside again. To tell them what we'd learned. It was Protégé who ended up near me to hear it, pushing me back in behind Grizzly's table and cramping himself into the same small space to avoid fire.

"Upstairs! Aurora's Cottage! It's upstairs!"

"Impossible!" Protégé had to shout to be heard, even to me, "They'll follow too quickly!"

"But-"

"Murk, we're completely outgunned! The best we can do is get away with our lives right now! We can't delay that many, we're all running low on ammo here!"

I could only watch as Brimstone effortlessly picked up a fully blown machine gun that Ragini had somehow dragged up here with his *mouth* and blazed away with his rather historic inaccuracy. I saw rounds go wild all over the place and somehow manage to even go into the roof. The sound at the very least kept the slavers down as he handed it to Grizzly and turned to the stairwell.

"You say we need to delay them?"

Pushing forward, he started moving back *down*. Protégé looked aghast. To be fair, so did I.

"Cover him! Cover him!"

Looking downward, I saw Brimstone halfway to the lab floor again, galloping down the shaky stairwell before he started pulling at the stairwell's supporting structure. The entire thing swayed, held up only by that central column. Shots pinged around him before one slapped home into his back leg. His face contorted in pain, half falling.

He was trying to rip the stairwell off to stop them following us! Glimmer reloaded and fired with almost psychotic effort, shouting down at him.

"Brim! Hurry it up! You're exposed there! *Come on!*"

I saw Wildcard poked his head up from behind the nexus, grinning. His raiders were clustered around.

"You heard her, my lovelies! Come on, the fun's getting away! Get them!"

A slaver looked up. "B-but-YAAAARGH!"

The machete cut down from behind, Wildcard not even ceasing his grin as the slaver squirmed on it, wailing as he was pinned to a table.

"I don't like repeating myself...it makes me **BOOOORED!**"

Wildcard's mouth drooped open, screeching the word like an impetuous foal! Yet the raiders around him whooped and dragged the hapless slavers with them into a gigantic headlong rush.

Everypony opened fire on them, only for Grizzly's big gun to jam. The others didn't have enough mass fire to deal with it! Below us, Brimstone was forced down. He had to duck behind the supporting column of the spiral staircase below us to hide from the fire coming in from all across the lab. Open on all sides, it wasn't much cover. Oh Goddesses protect him! The raiders were going to reach the bottom any second and push up to him! The big raider tried to smash the rusting metal, grunting with pain every time he moved.

Yet then I saw Coral. She moved wearily, but summoned enough power to her horn to set it crackling. She galloped down to Brimstone, hopping her front hooves up on the barrier. With a steely expression, she looked down the last couple of flights at the charging raiders.

"Oh for goodness sakes...such a big nasty pony and you can't even rip apart one little metal thing! You deal with that you and leave them to me, you big baby!"

Brimstone's look would have been priceless if I weren't for how dangerous this was. Coral cried out, her horn flaring brightly, its energies uncontained and raw. I saw a few slavers go into a shocked look, trying to rush away. She terrified them more than *Wildcard*. Clearly Coral was building something of a reputation among slavers.

"As for you all...get BACK!"

Her telekinetic wave surged forward, uprooting tables and blasting the front ranks of the slavers and raiders over one another, throwing them into an immobile heap. Weapons flew from telekinesis or from mouths. Even Wildcard I saw bowled from his hooves and buried beneath a couple of unfortunate slavers.

Coral Eve slumped over the barrier. Breathless, her horn sparking, she was picked up by Brim and pushed to get back upstairs. Grizzly, the only one of us uninjured and able, helped pull her back up as brimstone continued to wrestle with the column. It was looking loose...I could see the bottom side of the whole thing beginning to sway.

Yet ahead of us, I heard a bestial roar. At last, as though having come from further back, Big Brutus charged into the laboratory. Without hesitating, he sprinted across, trampling slavers in his rush to get to Brimstone. The big Warlord looked back and snarled.

“Don't any of you dare shoot him! Hold your wretched fire! Under the altar of times past we shall fight, Warlord! Come over here! Be the alpha male you thought you were! FACE ME!”

The minotaur didn't pause. Glimmer stood watching for her protector, allowing me to see. Behind us the rest were rushing up into the cave. As I finally saw that minotaur properly...I felt the fear grow for Brimstone. Two massive claws replaced his hands, his whole body filled with cybernetics and I could now see his back riddled with injectors of combat chems and healing potions. Those baleful eyes glowed as his movements were as thunderously organic as they were mercilessly robotic.

“Stay here and we shall end the tale of the Bloodletters, Warlord!”

“Oh shut up.” Brimstone muttered and *wrenched* at the stairs far harder than was probably necessary. The flimsy rusted metal came apart, dropping below him with a thunderous crash. The column tipped from half way down all the way to the ground, sending metal and wood tumbling atop the raiders and slavers still trying to get up again. It hit a lighting panel on the way down, ripping the hanging gemstones from their wire before the whole lot slammed into the ground like some sort of metallic tree. Galloping back up the waving remnants of the upper section, supported only by the roof, Brimstone got away before the section he'd been on fell as raiders scattered below the falling superstructure.

Below us, the roar of anger from Brutus made me actually cry out with pain. The massive claws on those cybernetic arms snapped at the rubble or even the walls, trying to pull at it and climb up by digging into the rock itself, but his sheer size could never allow it.

“You run! You old fool! Ancient coward! You are no Warlord! I will find you! I WILL FIND YOU!”

Brimstone stood and watched him, before again turning his back on the beast, sending Big Brutus into a frenzy of screaming. Over and over again, echoing the entire way as we fled.

We left him there, having put some distance between us and Shackles' group. Left the furious minotaur and the insane Wildcard amongst the phantoms of the past and the dazed forces they'd brought. He bellowed and screamed, slamming the ground as we passed further and further away to send tremors arcing down the cave we found ourselves in. An icy chill passed through it amongst the sleeping areas and offices. Dead...cold...empty...

There...we collapsed as a group. Wounds were treated with the few materials we had. Ragini had her head bandaged while Unity helped Protégé take his armour off to check below it. Thankfully, he had at most a bruised rib. Painful...but not crippling. Brimstone held a swathe to his neck and rested...looking very solemn. More than usual. He refused to accept a whole

healing potion, taking only half for his gunshot wound.

I sat briefly and watched as Protégé thanked Unity quietly for her help, offering her a small smile through the pain. She thanked him in return for being the one to carry her out of there before moving away. His eyes followed her briefly, before moving away to sit down and check what we had left.

Briefly, he saw me looking and raised an eyebrow. I just looked away.

Really, we all had to ration out a bit. All of us could stop any bleeding or get out of being in dire need but no-one, even after using our last supplies, was entirely healthy. Everypony was aching while Glimmer's hoof simply had to be bandaged up when we ran out of the potions. I'd felt her hooves tighten around mine while she bit a bit of cloth at the moment when Brimstone tightened her bandage to put pressure on it.

No-pony had said it yet.

We'd come out in front, but we'd lost the battle.

They were just...just overwhelming. We'd been lucky to survive while on the defensive there and while we had fought well it was impossible to fight them head on. They'd find another way. They had the numbers. This wasn't the end, all we'd done was delay them and next time we'd never be able to hold them off like that again.

If I weren't surrounded by so many who would have seen me...I might have still cried. Instead, I tried to hide the quivers as shaking from the cold. I saw everypony checking. We didn't have much ammo left. Protégé had twelve shots, Glimmer ten and Grizzly twenty five. Ragini's bullet fed rifle was spent while her energy rifle she carried on her back at least seemed to have a significant charge left. Coral looked exhausted, I knew when she was past the point of casting magic and this seemed to be it. Brimstone meanwhile...

I was afraid for him. Seeing him fight Wildcard, it wasn't the Brim I knew. He'd looked...hazed. Slower. Older.

Compared to the mechanical hurricane that was Big Brutus, who looked like he weighed twice that of Brim and moved with mechanical precision backed up with murderous rage, I really worried for my big friend. His injuries from the Pit either hadn't healed yet or it had permanently affected him.

On top of all this it was just beginning to hit me how much of a one way trip this was. There was no way back down now. They would be watching everything.

I felt so helpless, a sensation I'd not felt in so long now. We were so close and yet I was

beginning to worry if it would even matter.

Protégé looked despairing as he settled his barding back on.

“Everypony get up.”

“Protégé...” I started to say it myself.

“We cannot stay here, we still have a mission.” He turned. “The cottage is just ahead...we're under-equipped, but we cannot fail. Master Red Eye himself gave me this task. I will not disappoint him! We can rest there, not here! Aurora's cottage can't have been far from here, if what Murk says is true. After that, well...maybe there's a way down the mountain again. A trail or something if we're lucky. There has to be a way to get back! If we can push a little further...”

I sat there, wondering if anypony was going to chip in the last part of that sentence in a rousing and dramatic fashion.

No-pony did. I just saw tired faces of friends and unsure allies looking down or at their pitiful remaining supplies. Only slowly, did Ragini get up. Then Grizzly after a long sigh. Brimstone nodded slowly before the rest of us, one by one, joined them.

Before long, I realised that I was the only one still sitting. Even Chirpy had gotten to his hooves, climbing up onto Glimmer's back to sit and hug her neck for warmth. Gradually, I saw him look back at me.

“Mister Murky?”

His voice made the others turn too as I hastily scrambled up, stumbled as my chest and throat ached and tried to look even partly dignified.

“Always...always when there's maybe even a chance, right? If it's g-gotta be done, we'll do it together, right?”

To one side, I saw Unity smile and wink at me. I was glad she remembered just who had taught me that lesson even as everypony else made to leave, throwing winter clothing over themselves. Maybe...just maybe we could find a way down the sheer cliffs of the mountain to try and get back after this. Maybe we could get away.

No numbers. No supplies. No advantage. No plan. No chance.

But never no hope.

* * *

* * *

The way out was just ahead. I could feel the icy grip of the outdoors wafting into this place. Chairs and desks to the offices on either side were coated in a thin layer of frost that looked as strangely beautiful with its twinkling glint as it did deathly in its cold stillness. I limped beside Glimmerlight, feeling comforted to be near my sister for now. Sooty's words had...had brought back a bad time and thoughts that I knew had once made me do something very stupid.

"You know Murky, if you're cold you can just give me a good snuggle. I won't mind." Through her own limp, Glimmer smirked at me as I realised I'd been leaning against her without meaning to.

Standing more upright, I tried to laugh it off. Instead my voice just sounded thin and fake.

"Thanks, sis...for saving me again."

Glimmer ruffled my mane lightly through the wool I had wrapped around my head.

"S'what I told you. We're a team. Ponies who look out for each other. Isn't that what siblings do? We'll get through this."

This time, I smiled more genuinely. Not out of reassurance but because I saw how far she'd come. The Glimmer who'd once cast away harsh memories to only retain the happy was now doing it without the orbs. Staying bright even in this mission where we knew that coming out of this not dead or in chains was virtually impossible.

Yet behind her, I spotted something above an office door that made me stop.

"S...Spa...Spaaaaaaa..."

"I could use one too, lil'bro but I don't think-"

"No! No! Look! What does that say? Is that an 'S'? I...I'm not sure..."

Those around us stopped and turned. Oh great, just *everypony* look at the dumb born slave who can't read!

"It says 'Sparkler' Mister Murky..."

Thanks...Chirpy...

Above the office door was a name plate. Sparkler! Aurora's assistant I'd seen back there. Aurora had said he kept 'too much' on audio diaries in his office. Maybe...just maybe it was worth looking!

"Um, everypony just...just head on. I'll just check in here, I heard something about it."

I waved lightly, seeing Grizzly grunt and nod. He, Protégé and Ragini moved onwards, eager to keep moving toward the door that led outside. Coral Eve and her son went with them, Unity tagging along a few feet behind. The young mare stopped and hesitated, taking only short trots before slowly following the others, not quite staying too close to them.

Or *someone*. I cast my eyes to the front and saw Protégé narrowing his eyes back at us at the pausing. Quickly, he glanced to Unity and turned away again.

Glimmerlight stayed outside the office waiting for me. If she was there, naturally Brimstone was too.

Wandering into the office myself, I shifted across to the threadbare chair before a simple desk. Sparkler had a very low tech looking terminal that had long since stopped working. To my surprise, the frost had preserved many papers and quills in startling new condition, but they weren't what I was after.

"Murky, the time for clues is over. We gotta go...Aurora's cottage will have the answers for sure. What are you looking for? We don't have time for this!"

Honestly, she was right. Maybe I...I just wanted to try and guess before I got there. I'd been on all this too long, too many little facts and theories. I wanted to figure it out! Rifling in his drawers, I broke the frost to pick up various things and even looking in a filing cabinet.

"*Murky!* Those slavers won't be held long if they find another way! Let's go!"

"Come on kid," Brimstone joined her at the door, "don't be afraid of what's up there."

I saw Glimmerlight look to him with surprise. So did I, looking up from the cabinet.

Was...was I just...afraid?

It'd been so long, knowing the truth felt so alien. I wanted more clues, more journeying. I was with friends on a big adventure and I'd...

...I'd never felt so important in my entire life.

Looking at Glimmer and Brimstone, I saw that the warlord was right. He'd seen it. I was

just delaying.

"I'm coming..."

Slowly, I grabbed just one audio diary of Sparkler's, strapped it to the ruined slab of metal that was my Pipbuck and trotted out toward them. My best friends stood waiting for me, Glimmer smiling as I emerged.

"Don't feel bad about this, lil'bro. Hey, when we all met in a slaver cell did you really think we'd end up here about to find answers to something really special that might even give us a way to escape?"

Brimstone allowed himself a grin, the shape curved weirdly as the scar tissue from his Pit injuries wound across his mouth.

"Still a little ways to go. Aye, we'll make it out of this one."

Encouragement? From Brim? Boy...

I hugged both of them, turning to continue after the rest of the group. Together, we slowly caught up as I turned on the audio diary. To my pride, I managed to piece my way through the commands to transfer the file onto my Pipbuck itself. Inwardly, I wanted to thank Protégé unendingly for helping me be able to even read a little. I kept the volume low, just enough for just me to hear without disturbing the others. I heard Sparkler's voice, tired and stressed.

"Overtime something something...I've lost track what day it is without sleeping for a couple nights up here. Too darn cold. We had some progress but...not quite what we intended. We had another nexus test run. Went a little...uh...awry."

I perked up. What did it do? Was this something?

Really, I *really really* wanted to figure all this out before we got there! I could see the others up ahead, clustered around a door. If this was to be my final clue, I wanted to hear it.

"We tried a simple one using the new signature concept. Everypony was on standby for emergency shutdown. Aurora's the only one of us good enough with memory magic to do that on her own safely but the Ministry Mares wanted to see her in Fillydelphia today. In hindsight...performing a nexus experiment without her present maybe wasn't a great plan but these zebras are insistent. They're actually threatening us now. Anyway, we had four volunteers, all ready to see if they could learn the spell. Last test had minimal subconscious ingression so we felt confident about upping the number from three."

Sparkler sighed deeply.

"Not a good move. Up the power to account for more ponies and you make it harder to shut down...of course. It didn't go right. It projected too much of the memory, lots of subconscious ingression. We had to shut it down. Dazzler was on shutdown duty and...well that's the problem. It backfired. Shut down the nexus sure but...it took his memory with it. All of it. Absorbed into the damn orb!"

I trotted slowly, trying to let this pan out. Up ahead they were struggling with the door to the outside and, presumably, the cottage. I had time to listen. Brimstone wandered up, lending his strength to ripping the thick door open.

"They whisked him away to the medical bay. He was awake but unresponsive to anything. So I went up to the orb. I could feel a kind of connection between him and it, the magic was still connected to his body's mind as though he'd become linked with it. I regret to say it, but to help him we had to use his own signature to draw him back and then destroy the orb, one of only six made. Wasn't apparent at first but he's making a slow recovery."

The thought of that sent my whole body shaking. So this was to do with stripping out memories? Was I right? Was that it? But everything had been about teaching ponies things. Wasn't it?

Come on...this would be my last clue.

"So I think we'll wait till Aurora's back before we install the last orb. She won't be happy...she won't be happy at all. I just don't get what we're missing...the zebras keep telling us to continue but we're not getting what we need results wise! The spell orb style of teaching just isn't sticking! All we get is higher levels of subconscious-oh...I...I need to go. Now. I need to speak to Aurora. I just had a bad thought. Sparkler out."

Click.

I wanted to throw the damn thing down. Aurgh! That wasn't enough clues! I hadn't understood a lot of what he was meaning. Signatures and...and subwhatsists and spell orbs and stuff was all for unicorns! If I'd had time I'd have gotten Glimmer or Unity to listen. They could maybe help.

Until then, I was on my own to guess.

"Three, two, one...pull!"

The door sprung open. Immediately, the mountainside wind slapped me in the face with its chilly bite. Snow collapsed in through the door where it had been piling up. Outside was

clouded in thick fog or low cloud to the point of almost no visibility amongst the whirling blizzard...but I could see vague lights dotted in the snow. Gemlights on fenceposts to presumably guide ponies.

“Wrap up and stay close everypony.” Grizzly pushed himself out into it. “Keep an eye out, it must be nearby.”

Into the snow we went again. The gradient of the land went upwards as I realised there was a thickening dark. Night was falling on the mountain and taking visibility with it rapidly. I tried to stick behind others, letting them tramp down the snow for me to try and keep me from sickness, but the cold alone was seeping in. Unity stuck beside me, both of us helping push the other on or picking one another up if we slipped.

Another gemlight up ahead...that way...

Then another to the right...follow the path, follow the light!

The snow below had been powdery and soft. Like a wet sand dampening me. Up here it was harsh. Like a thin layer of ice that snapped and cracked beneath us. Hard and sharp, it scratched at my hooves as they slipped and staggered. To my horror, I saw this brief path went past a cliffside to our right. In a brief letting up of the cloud I saw it fall away into eternity.

The wool was blown from my head. I saw Chirpy climb inside his mother's saddlebag to get out of the cold. Brim and Grizzly smacked the snow aside, ploughing through it ahead as we all fought the wind to keep up. Annoyingly, Ragini was running atop the snow with her light flyer's footing to locate each gemlight as we had to push through it.

“Look up there!” Protégé was suddenly pointing the way, “There, about fifty metres!”

Unity and I turned our heads rather in unison to see where he pointed, my heart in my mouth. This was too cold, too radioactive. I didn't want to spend much longer out here. *Please let it be the cottage!* There was a dull light in the cloudy fog, barely visible.

“Another gemlight?” I muttered. Unity shook her head.

“No, it's...it's a window.”

We broke up, moving closer to it. Without really thinking, I moved in beside Brimstone. Bigger pony made for a bigger shelter from the cutting wind.

Hey, I wasn't proud.

Ragini had moved ahead, to which I saw her bounding back down through the snow.

Her talons have her quite incredible grip in comparison to hooves, the griffin grabbing a rock poking out of the white floor and bringing herself to a halt just above us.

"You were right, Protégé. That's it!"

Shivering, trying not to think about the massive cliff that was just downhill from us, I tried to get a better glance at the dull shape appearing. If I slipped and fell...what if I just slid all the way down and off the edge behind me? Please...just let me go a bit further! Unity held onto me, us sharing a little warmth as we waited. Although I partially guessed it for mutual comfort at this treacherous icy rock below us. Ragini looked around before pointing us to move on, closer.

"Cloud's getting thinner up there too...must be nearer to the top layers."

She seemed almost happy. I wondered if the height felt good to her after being so grounded since the Mall riot.

Wait...cloud? Top layers?

Were we nearly *above the clouds*?!

I went rather wide eyed at the thought. Not just myself either. Glimmer, Coral and Protégé all looked rather astonished to think we were just that high up now.

"Let's get inside, quickly please!" Unity, surprisingly, made her voice heard to the whole group, "We don't have anything to treat frostbite and most of us aren't clothed right! Chirpy, was that his name? He shouldn't be out in this!"

It almost felt odd hearing Unity speaking to everyone. Up until now she'd only really addressed a few of us at a time and mostly just myself or Glimmer. Yet I could hear the wishing in her voice. It wasn't just Chirpy that needed to get out of this, Unity had just been the first to speak everyone's worries out loud.

Protégé looked at her intently as she spoke and nodded, waving Brimstone on ahead.

"Everypony get up there quickly, but don't rush," he muttered, trying to stave off shivering himself, "I don't think Murk will be the only one suffering the radiation soon if we don't get there...but we don't need anypony falling."

Slowly, we waded into the thicker snow surrounding it, feeling the gradient slowly increase until it flattened off sharply, reaching the cottage's level. There was a wall around it, made of loose rocks about ten metres from the building itself. An old smashed gate lay before us. Not far...not far...

I saw Ragini holding her talon to the bandage around her head. Coral was having to lean against Glimmerlight. Unity seemed to be taking smaller and smaller steps each time, looking very blank on her face out here. I was feeling my knees going numb in all this snow. Even my chest started pounding harder. Please don't be anything...please don't be anything...don't let that metallic taste be what I think it is...

My canteen was empty. Quietly, I whimpered to myself while we passed through the gate.

I saw it...a little hovel with a chimney and a single lit window from some light source within. Rock walls, strong glass and wood windows with a mass of snow covering whatever the roof was made of. Piles of timber laid outside for use in a fire. Just like any quaint little dwelling I'd seen in the wastes from before the balefire.

Ten metres away...so close...probably so warm inside. Out the wind...

Yet my mind kept thinking. Trying to guess on every step I took as I limped forward.

I sought out all the little things I knew and had seen.

In Stable Ninety Three, they'd been making spell orbs that could teach a pony something.

In the Ministry of Arcane Science, they'd talked about a machine to let non-unicorns use memory orbs that had been made obsolete almost immediately by something else.

Five metres...it was right there. Protégé was at the door and pushing it aside. Think, Murky, think!

Refugees had been taken in by the zebras via Doctor Heartcare to work on something, along with skilled Wartime workers and Arcane Scientists...yet Sundial had never seen the refugees ever again after he entered.

The zebras had a portal they used to come in and out of Fillydelphia in secret, building something beneath the city using Aurora's research that included those memory machines. Was it like that nexus thing? To teach more than one pony?

I slipped and fell. Unity caught me, before she and Glimmerlight helped me up. I was...so cold...couldn't think.

That place, in Ministry Station, had a strange ambience that subconsciously affected ponies to do things against their will.

The lab I had just visited spoke of a 'nexus' for something greater than just spell orb learning. The lab had been to build something the zebras wanted.

Some...some sort of...of thing to teach zebras how to fight better? To give the zebras magic abilities? Maybe to let them strip out information from ponies and project it directly into their generals to have them exploit pony tactics? I could think of a dozen ideas that memory could do but...but couldn't orbs do that anyway? Did they just want Aurora's machine to be able to use orbs? To use them faster? Was Aurora just leading them in a giant circle to try and confuse them? But if so...what happened to the refugees? Where did they factor in through all of this?

Then the big question, why was Aurora working for them in the first place?

I felt the step of the doorway beneath my hooves, as I realised I was there. I almost fell inside, my friends helping me in. Sighs, gasps and muttered relief filled my ears as the door slammed shut behind us.

All the clues. I had theories. Ideas. But I just didn't know if they were right. Yet now I'd finally come to Aurora's own hidden place and...and somehow I just...

I knew that in there lay the answer to everything. No more waiting. No more confusing clues. The answers were all here. They had to be! I couldn't entertain the notion that they weren't.

Gradually, I let my eyes open again to look at where we were.

Below me was polished wood while the walls were made of chiselled stone. Within the entrance room we'd come into, I could see my friends leaning on cabinets or sitting against the wall. A rather threadbare rug covered much of the floor and it was all lit by a swaying lantern hung from the ceiling.

So very peaceful. So at odds with the howling wind outside on the top peaks of the mountain. It was almost possible to forget I was almost past the cloud level in here. I sucked in warm air, audibly forcing it as my lungs tightened and squeezed inside me. I coughed badly, feeling my throat burn. I...I could hold on. I had to. Maybe there was...was something in here.

Over the sounds of heavy breathing and chattering teeth around me, I could hear a distant crackling. A cosy almost homely sound of fire.

Wait...fire?

I rolled over and tried to get my protesting body up. Why would there be fire if there wasn't anypony-

Ahead of me, I saw Protégé with his revolver stood ready. His head was tracking something.

E.F.S has spotted something alive in here.

“Everypony, get up. We're not alone.”

Trotting forward, I realised I could hear no-one past my friends. All were still exhausted, sitting and looking more surprised at hearing Protégé saying what he did. Brimstone was first to his hooves as Protégé and I slowly moved further in past the first open door. It was hard to stay steady, my knees wobbled and I was still making so much noise just trying to breathe.

The smell of peat smoke hung in the air like a fruity taste at the back of my mouth as we went in. Ahead, it seemed to be some sort of front room with several thick plush chairs draped in old woollen blankets. A desk sat near the shaking window bearing a huge tomb atop it. Walls were covered in bookcases while past that I could see the fireplace itself, thick clumps of bog earth burning within it with a richer orange than any wood could ever give. Casting a warmth across the whole room, I could feel it seeping into my numb joints.

“P-Protégé?”

“Somepony's in here...just through there.”

He nodded toward what looked like an old pantry's entrance with a grey tiled floor across the back.

“Hostile?”

“No.”

Brimstone thickly trod in behind us, shaking snow from his mane and waiting ready. Protégé advanced, his weapon held before him. I stayed just behind him, creeping up to peek around his body when he finally looked in...

Allegedly, we were not the ones tracking them. I heard something drop as somepony in there was surprised.

“Sundial? Oh my, is that really you out there?”

A mare's voice. Ragged and rough like a ghoul. Elderly yet...nasal and higher pitched.

I *knew* that voice.

Pushing forward, I shoved my way past Protégé, knocking his gun away as I stepped into the pantry. Ahead of me in the dark, somepony's shape slowly began to turn away from the assorted shelves I now saw glitteringly full of memory orbs. That weak looking shape of a pony I saw only by their glow as a vague outline trotting slowly toward me. I felt my mouth stammer, trying to say something.

"I...I'm not...S-S..."

Clad in a thick brown robe, she moved slowly toward me until the fire lit her face at last. I saw her horn and those milky eyes that I'd only once seen for real so long ago.

"You are...not? I felt his signature...there. You aren't him but yet you wear something of his. The Pipbuck, it led you here?"

The hood was drawn back and I felt myself merely gasp the words almost in reverence.

"Y...yes..."

Before me, defined only in the flickering glow of memory orbs and a fiery hearth at the very peak of the wasteland's height...stood the Ministry of Arcane Science's Fillydelphia leader. The 'traitor' who I had sought to learn about and pursue the knowledge of. Here she stood. Alive. A survivor of the balefire as a ghoul.

Aurora Star.

* * *

Explaining this had not been particularly easy to Grizzly.

We'd moved back into the rest of the cottage. Aurora had stoked another fire in an old dining room surrounded by shelves crammed full of plates that never seemed to quite match one another in design. Here, she had bid us to settle in the warmth of her home and brought a small amount of Radaway. Presumably useless after she had become a ghoul, she liberally allowed us to use it. I was still finishing the sachet I'd been given. The first half I'd poured into my canteen...the second half helped my chest die down for now. Everypony else seemed fairly all right after some to ward off any small effects.

I couldn't ever not feel hurt by the 'condition' I had that made it worse.

The old Ministry leader moved slowly and with great reservation below that heavy cloak she wore. Across its sides I saw the emblazoned emblem of Twilight Sparkle. An old work uniform for being up here, perhaps?

Regardless, it was clear that Aurora was very weak. Her steps were short and every movement shaky and careful. Coral Eve helped her get the fire going as everypony (and griffin) settled on the wooden chairs around the room.

There we had explained to Grizzly why this mattered, the old slaver had been in the dark for too long simply believing there was some sort of weapon or magic spell up here to find. While Glimmer spoke for the most part, I kept finding my eyes glancing back to Aurora and a rather frightening amount of the time saw that she had been watching me back with those piercing eyes. The old unicorn sat in an old chair nearer the back of the room, simply waiting on her sudden guests to finish their internal chattering with a patient demeanour.

Yet as she saw me looking, her mouth moved slowly.

"You found poor Sundial's Pipbuck. Where?"

Something felt odd. It took me a second to realise she'd spoken lowly enough that Aurora would have had to have known about my hearing in advance. How had she?

"In...in Fillydelphia. Behind the FunFarm on his...his..."

I found it hard to say, but Aurora nodded lightly.

"I had feared as much...such a small pony caught up in a world he didn't understand nor want. Yet when it forced upon him trials to do the right thing he didn't hesitate to come with me."

Turning in my chair, away from the others, I spoke more directly to her. Coral and Chirpy were beside me, but only the little foal was really paying attention to what the two of us were saying. I could feel him leaning against my side and put a hoof around him.

"You knew him? I...I heard on the Pipbuck that you'd met him at the entrance to the mines but you make it sound like you two did something."

"That we did."

Aurora didn't say any more than that. She simply stared at me as though looking right past me.

"You look like he did. You have the same will. Something that seems impossible is what you want more than anything. When I instructed him on how to encode his Pipbuck I had always hoped somepony more sentimental would be the only one to really follow the pattern and go to the efforts needed to return here. I can see that in the end it was the right thing."

Her mouth creased into a smile, her eyes shifting to the colt beside me that I was protectively holding close. Only now did I realise Chirpy was actually asleep...everything had just been too much for him.

"But...but why did-"

"Then it's settled."

Grizzly's voice overpowered my own as he got up. Trotting forward, he moved around me and held out a hoof to Aurora.

"Aurora Star, it pains me to rush upon this to somepony so clearly isolated for this amount of time. Yet whatever secrets your research in Ministry Station held is now under threat. There are ponies on this mountain, coming for you. We must get you to safety."

The old mare sat in her chair and stared right back at him without even blinking.

"I can assure you, 'Old' Grizzly, that I am going no-where. Not only because this is now my *home* but for that it is quite impossible. This snow, the radiation...it's the only thing holding this wasted body of mine together with what it does for me as a ghoul. Yet that's hardly why. Don't think I can't read the fear on all your faces..."

She cast her eyes around each of us.

"None of you have a plan. It's clear as day. The waves of fear and hurt are glowing on every one of you. You don't know a way out even for yourselves, do you?"

"Miss Aurora, I insist that-"

"You insist nothing, slaver."

Aurora slowly stood up, her limbs shaking as she did so.

"I may be old and falling apart...but that doesn't mean everything I studied and learned under the greatest unicorn Equestria has ever known has devolved too. Get good enough with memory magic and you can *feel* it on each of you. To see the signs, the little clues and the subtle auras of magic surrounding every pony to those who can sense them. You want to take me into the service of the monster that turned my home city into what I look down from on high to see and weep at. I see the park where I would play as a foal turned to a pit where corpses are thrown. I see the house I grew up in become the lodgings of a pony who kills in what used to be an ice rink to decorate my room with his victim's skulls."

Aurora shook before him and staggered to have to sit down again, scowling.

"I will have no part in your efforts. You will not take me back to that place. If I am to die...I will die in a place of my choosing where I have been comfortable. Not surrounded by the violated ruins of my old life."

Grizzly looked about ready to speak again, but Protégé held his hoof against the old slaver. Moving past, he sat before Aurora, taking her fierce stare.

"Miss Star, the ponies who are coming up here seek to corrupt what you made in Ministry Station. Chainlink Shackles is a pony you may even have heard the name of in your time watching the valley below. He and those who follow him know of your research. They are inside Ministry Station and they need only something they are sure is up here."

"And you think that's me, do you?"

To my surprise, Protégé shook his head. Weak, shaken inside...but he was still the intelligent pony I'd always known it seemed. He actually smiled.

"I have visited Ministry Station. I've seen that it's repairable and I have seen enough evidence to suggest that you aren't simply a key. I believe there is something else up here that they are after...something they want. I will not ask you to move but I do ask you to tell us what that may be. You seem perceptive...well look me in the eyes and see that this is the truth! I seek to deny Chainlink Shackles the ability to abuse your legacy. Please...at least help us do that. Help us stop him. Don't let him turn your research to the evils the zebras wanted too..."

There was a long silence between them. The fire crackled on my left as everypony stared at the two. Gradually, Aurora Star looked away and smirked. The smirk grew to a short nasally laugh as she carefully balanced a hoof on her head.

"You all have found quite a lot of clues to guess such a thing. It's somewhat admirable. Yet you presume too much about my 'legacy.' I am not some innocent pony who fears her designs being turned to 'evil'. You are two hundred years quite too late for that. My research was 'corrupted' long before even the balefire scourged this land."

Aurora stood up, limping her way slowly to the centre of the room. Her horn slowly began to glow a pale white.

I thought my eyes were beginning to falter with exhaustion as I felt them haze and blur at the edges. Everypony else I could see doing the same. The only two I saw relaxed were Glimmerlight and Unity. They both knew memory magic in some way, was this something they understood?

"I've had two hundred years to perfect my theories. Two of you I can feel have particular

affinity with the art. Settle...and relax if you want to see what you think my legacy 'is.'

The world seemed to rush and blur in all ways around me. I tried to get up and was almost surprised to still feel the floor under my hooves. Every sensation of a memory orb flowed through my mind yet I still felt like...like me. Colours sprung up, the kind of vivid nature that could only be Old Equestria. I was standing upon white marble near a lawn of freshly cut and unthinkably bright grass. Above me, flags of all designed flapped in a slow wind while ponies wearing shining gold as armour lined the verges of the marble causeway. Dizzily, I looked up to see towering white battlements and spires, each seeming to sparkle in the sunlight below a cloudless sky.

I knew this place...I'd see it in books. This was Canterlot.

An excitement flew through me, the massive artistic marvel that was Equestria's capital was finally here to see! Spinning on the spot, I saw the huge vista of all the land out before us over a cliff where a waterfall slowly trailed into the long drop. It stemmed from a pool at the centre of this place, with six enormous buildings flanking the edges with their carved stone designs. Each bore a symbol of the Ministries.

I almost cried out when I heard Aurora's voice in the back of my head.

"The start of my real career."

The entire world seemed to shift, drawing my eyes down. To my astonishment, I could see the floor of Aurora's cottage below my hooves. My friends were around me, all equally astonished. I wasn't really *in* Canterlot...Aurora was just projecting it around us. Yet it was so easy to forget, so immersive in its depth, sights and smells. I could *feel* the wind from up here on my coat. Only when I looked closer could I see the familiar sparkles of light constructing everything like I'd seen on the orbs before. Just on a much wider scale all around us...

It was like the ultimate evolution of her memory projection magic, one that would have taken two hundred years to master...

My eyes fell upon a younger Aurora Star, standing in line with numerous other unicorns. I saw two identical twins with green coats. All looked like well learned types. Before them stood the familiar form of Twilight Sparkle as she moved down them, pinning a badge to each of their identical uniforms.

"Twilight Sparkle made us her second tier. The leaders and chief scientists of the Ministry of Arcane Science. I'd been given this position after my work to help bring memory orbs to a more affordable and practical level. Twilight thought I would be able to continue that research with the resources of an entire Ministry Hub for my home city of Fillydelphia. I was so proud...one of the youngest Hub Leaders and also one of the first. I swore that day to defend

Equestria by any means I could and to end the war as quickly as possible. The same thing Twilight herself had promised in her ascension two days beforehand to command the new Ministry."

The entire projection shifted, zooming across without me trotting at all until I could see Aurora Star face to face. A young (and uh...rather cute) mare with the biggest and goofiest grin of pride.

"I had dreams of inventing the things to give us an unrelenting advantage and I had ideas even that day for new memory orb technology to help us do it."

The world shifted into itself, colours stretching as they relocated and reformed into something else. The twinkling stars making up the projection whirling around me before reforming elsewhere into a new location. I knew this place, the Ministry in Fillydelphia itself. This was the workshop just outside where her office had been! I could see Aurora working with dozens of unicorns as they cast spells onto orbs or tested various forms of crystal.

"Oh how we worked. The glory days...breakthrough after breakthrough."

In the background, I heard a dull shout, before somepony held up a glowing orb. The others cheered, rushing across to see. Aurora herself took the orb from them to study.

"It all seemed so easy. We only had to think of an idea and we had the resources to make it happen! What scientist doesn't dream of a world where they can think of a concept and be in a position to get everything they need for it? We crafted longer orbs, developed storage that became the standard carry case for orbs all over Equestria to keep them safe and worked with the Equestrian military to help develop simulated orbs for battlefield acclimatisation and intelligence gathering."

All of the projections changed, placing me in her office. I was once again staring out the window I had once done so before as her beside Twilight. The same sounds filtered through it of the park. The stoney silence of that building felt so calming...

With her hooves up on the railing, I could see Aurora gazing outside.

"Yet I had a dream yet unfulfilled. To go further. To use orb technology for learning. A unicorn who could utilise an orb to perhaps gain a new spell to their knowledge permanently or be able to quickly study a new subject by using the memory of a leading expert as a template! Imagine the possibilities for an Equestria where education could pass on everything a generation had learned to their children for them to build upon! Imagine how quickly the war could end if we could make every pony a combat veteran the likes of Macintosh on their first day of training!"

The entire projection spun, reversing to see who stood behind Aurora. I could now see her with tears staining her face, looking distraught and heartbroken. The figure behind her was Twilight Sparkle...slowly trotting away. To the side, I could see her memory machine project that I unfortunately knew would someday also be cancelled in a similar visit.

Aurora's voice turned weak, cracking.

"Yet...war was at our doorsteps and resources grew scarce. The Princess wanted surefire projects, reliable ideas...not the childish dreams of one Hub Leader who thought she knew everything. I saw my projects shut down and felt the weight of demands on what I was to help make. I lost my freedom to innovate. I...I don't blame Twilight. She had to do what she thought was right and I knew th-that she wouldn't seek to harm anypony..."

Dizzily, the entire projection spun where I was standing once more, placing me near to the corner of the room. Just beside me...barely visible, I saw a set of eyes looking out from under a nearly invisible cloak as the Ministry Mare left. Devious...dangerous eyes.

"That's when they came to me. They'd been watching me for over a year."

With a flicker of light, the entire projection seemed to cut briefly. I could see her dining room again and witness all of my comrades standing transfixed by it. Slowly, it all reformed on one end of the room before us. A zebra's face below a hood filling the room and staring down at us directly. It looked horrifyingly lifelike, ready to harm me any moment.

"I woke to them in my bedroom. They told me that they had seen my unfair treatment and wanted to 'help.' They desired my research in a way that Equestria didn't, were willing to get me the resources to do it and could keep it all a secret! I'd been terrified...more than I'd ever been. The dream in my heart had been shattered and now this?"

It all drew out, filling the room as I saw a still image of Aurora in her bed, surrounded by the zebras, bearing wicked knives and long barrelled rifles.

"They didn't say it but I knew if I said no then I would have been a victim of 'assassination' that night. I wish I could use that as an excuse but I can't. I didn't agree because I feared for my life...I agreed because I wanted my research to be made in my lifetime. I wanted to see a better world even if I had to work with demons to get there."

Aurora herself walked through the projection, reappearing to us as a ghoul that strode around me. Yet her voice still came into my mind, the magic taken hold.

"So we went to work. They brought me skilled workers from the Wartime Ministry. I told them of something I'd never been able to get funded, a mine on this mountain where I'd known crystal caves existed from my family's treks to this cabin as a child. We got that too. They

persuaded me to buy out Ministry Station under a guise of keeping secrets from zebras...I hadn't realised it had been theirs since before I'd ever known them. I helped them open a portal with my sway in the Ministry, which thought I was doing research on weaponising portals for battlefield deployment. That's why Ministry Station went unnoticed. It was like the golden age of the Ministry all over again. I didn't realise they were just buttering me up...getting me working until I couldn't help but do it."

We were inside Ministry Station. Its familiar walls loomed around us as uniformed workers ran here and there with tools and advanced looking components. I saw Sparkler near Aurora, checking off something from a clipboard held in his magic.

"Eventually, we opened the lab in the mountain too. Everything hidden under the massive veils of secrecy in Equestria. Every Hub Leader seemed to have their own secret project or magnum opus waiting to emerge so this was no different. Few questions were asked and if they were I'd just bring out something we were working on to show that seemed innocuous. We developed a machine that I kept in the Ministry as a cover, a machine that lets ponies share memories as different participants with a moderate level of influence in the memory itself that the military were very interested in for team building exercises. That was our external cover and it worked flawlessly."

Everything darkened, as the projection slid and moved like a tapestry or a mural until I saw Aurora lying in her bed, hooves covering her crying face, her mouth frozen at the moment of screaming out. Around her, almost like other viewpoints, I could see zebras whipping Wartime workers. Aurora being screamed at by one who wore an elaborate cloak. A memory machine with a ragged clothed pony being pulled against her will toward.

"Yet it all came crashing home eventually when they started to take control of the things we'd made in our progress to the final goal. They wanted us to be traitors and damn it we'd given them just that. I didn't sleep for weeks as I saw what I'd done. I'd turned some of my staff into slaves, allowed the zebras to prey on my fellow ponies and refugees. They'd even gotten into the Ministry of Peace, bringing Doctor Heartcare into all this after threatening his family. He brought them the refugees upon which they tested what we made."

She was right beside me, the Aurora of today, only from the corner of my eye I could see her pained face. Straining every word.

"I...saw...them...hurt...ponies...with...my...research..."

Almost abstract, it changed to another pony, one strapped into a machine and whose mouth was distended far further than it should have been, like a painting stretched to impossible levels. I felt a shiver down my spine, hearing a distant and unearthly shrieking in my subconscious.

"Then they started trying to do their own thing, bringing their fetishes and their shamanism to try and take advantage of what we'd made thus far. Those things that let them grow wings and alter their shapes. Not everything works first time! It destroyed their minds and turned them to blanks. They corrupted the magical signature that every pony has, forcing upon them memory orbs of death and torture to try and find out how much a pony could take in a single orb of mental conditioning. Using their fetishes to try and change their body's ability to act as a testing victim. Using them as nothing but...but tools! Organic matter that was altered! I remember seeing one...it didn't even resemble a pony anymore. Their testing destroyed them or...or turned them to something much worse."

Slowly, it all condensed back into the Aurora I had seen crying in her bed. All the images flowing through the air and around us into her head. One after another. Screams, dread imagery and worryingly familiar scenes of forced labour. Then suddenly, she moved. Standing up with soaked cheeks, she looked in her bedroom's mirror for some time. I could hear so little...just her gasps and her heartbeat growing steadily faster. Her breath made the mirror steam up before her shaking stopped.

"I'd betrayed my country and now I couldn't help any of the ponies who'd agreed into this because they trusted me to get out again. I'd thought they wanted my plans for orb based learning. No...they wanted my orbs because they could use them to mentally condition ponies. After that they only wanted more. The larger orbs, the projection line...they all have a subtle subconscious signature they emit. Unity, you know of the kind of feeling I mean. The zebras learned of this and wanted us to amplify it. Expand it until it could affect somepony's subconscious. They wanted us to be able to do this on a wide scale."

Suddenly, it all filtered back to a more recent sight. The mountain lab with the nexus at the centre.

"The Memory Nexus. This was what they wanted in the end. A device that could project an orb's contents to mentally condition everypony nearby. They had plans to make it spread wider, to use megaspell technology in it from the medical megaspell research Doctor Heartcare brought them. Weathervane would have gone mad had he known they were used like this. Their grand idea was to turn ponies to the zebra cause with it. Up here we tested a weak one...while another was build for real operation in Ministry Station."

The ghoul stood before her old self, staring blankly into her own eyes. Slowly, she turned to us.

"That's what's in Ministry Station. That's the 'secret' that you all were seeking. My dream of learning progress turned to a nightmare of forced thought."

Yes...yes I could see it all falling into place. Memory magic of the projection orbs that brought its contents out into the real world. The disappearance of the refugees into that asylum.

The reason behind the ambience in Ministry Station. My mind hurt at how far back I suddenly made sense of.

Doctor Heartcare...no, Magister Heartcare. He was a zebra worshipper against Equestria when I'd met him.

They'd used even him as a test subject...

Aurora was looking into my eyes, clearly seeing my mind piecing it all together. They'd wanted to turn Fillydelphia against Equestria! Gradually, Aurora nodded as though looking right into my mind. Maybe she could...a master of memory magic was quickly beginning to sound like a very scary individual indeed.

"That was when I started trying to sabotage this. I sent all the projection orbs I could to the Ministry Mares in a hope that one of them, Twilight especially, would see it! I sent one to Doctor Weathervane's research team. The zebras thought I was just covering our tracks with older tech now they had the Nexus being built to project their conditioning field. None of it worked...we'd done too well at hiding ourselves. If I could have told her...but if I did then everypony involved would have been murdered at a hint of betrayal from me! They were always watching..."

The darkness around the projected form of Aurora in the part, wrapped over her, zebra eyes among it, dragging her away higher and higher as I saw the entire living tapestry fly to the sky and soar toward the mountain.

"They carried me here, far away from it for they feared my sentimentality would lead me to do something rash! In the end they kept me here while they finished off in Ministry Station with Heartcare, their first successful convert. Yet up here...that's when I met what could be my only hope to stop all this."

A young buck slid across the wall in a line of ponies all waiting in a tunnel. I recognised him in a heartbeat.

Sundial.

He stood next to Aurora in that cave, quietly talking. I realised this was the conversation I'd heard!

"I knew from the moment I laid eyes on him that he was a sleeper agent for Pinkie. I could feel the determination in him because it was the same as mine. Trapped in something he didn't understand but wanting to help for a cause that now mattered to him. I'd always been good at judging other ponies, my magic enhanced it over time. The more we researched memory, signatures and the pony mind the more I could tell about somepony at a glance. I saw

that he had a connection to Pinkie. Maybe, just maybe...I could get the word out from him."

An eruption of gunfire made me shriek. I wanted to run to the window and check, but my hooves felt locked to the floor. Flares of orange and red surrounded us as I saw glimpses of scientists and workers bleeding out up or burning around wounds. Each flash brought another scene. A group in a corner. Poor Sparkler hanging off Aurora with sadness in his bloodshot eyes. Three on the floor, lifeless as their bodies were slowly torched. Within it, I saw Aurora standing over a terrified Sundial, pulling at him.

"I got him out of there alive! Got him to the trains. We were the only two survivors of the massacre up here. When our escape got back to Fillydelphia it felt like we were being hunted around every corner. Desperately, I tried to find somepony of authority but they were all unreachable! Something was happening, there was a threat in the air. I knew that Sundial and I had to do this quickly...I was the only pony left who knew the spell to shut down that Nexus they must have been looking to use! They were removing all threats before its activation!"

A frenzied rush through Fillydelphia's streets flowed around us. Hiding. Running. Gunshots. The flare of magic. Then we were underground. I heard a bestial howl and smelt a tinge of mint...around me I heard many of us stammer and shift on the spot.

"What they'd done down there...it was beyond thought. All we knew was we had to reach the Nexus. Sundial helped me...we had others with us, part of the Equestrian military we'd met in the metro who had been investigating and we fought our way in. Just in time...I cast the spell and backfired the entire conditioning orb they had installed upon it.

I felt almost proud, wishing Weathervane could see the image before me. Sundial...wounded but determined, ripping an orb from the nexus and shattering it against the stone floor.

"Sundial destroyed it himself. We'd won...prevented them releasing a spell that would have turned so many ponies to the zebra cause. It left a horrid ambience in its wake from that event, forever damning the station to manipulate those in it who were weak and vulnerable, but it was better than the alternative. Only one of the soldiers with us survived as we got out. I thought...I thought I could find Twilight and hand myself in. We'd done it, but the cost had been so high."

They were outside. Massive crowds had gathered around a metro that gouted smoke from its entrances. I saw Aurora and Sundial carrying a familiar looking buck between them down the street.

"Only...the world moved on. It ended."

Even as they moved, I heard it. That low drone, the sound you never wanted to hear

then. The crowds looked up and around as it began to blare. A deathly wail that grew and grew as the sirens signalled the end coming. Some rushed, others fell. The pictures moved on, the inside of the Ministry. I saw them placing the buck inside the pod where I'd met Mister Peace. Yes! That had been him!

"We did all we could to save the wounded private by placing him in my old memory sharing machine. Its systems would keep him safe and preserved. To reunite him with his team. He'd lost everypony he'd cared about down there. To take his memory and use it for the machine seemed the best I could do to let him be with them again. I implored Sundial to stay with me in the protected Ministry building, yet he had other things he had to do. We parted ways for the last time."

Slowly, I saw the image of a long maned pegasus almost ghost over Sundial's form. I knew he would never leave her...

Green fire whirled around us, burning the images she had conjured and slowly fading Sundial away. Wreathing flames rose to the ceiling, flying between us all and carrying with it the death scream of Equestria. Slowly...I realised that my cheeks were rather damp...

It cooled, the green turning to white as I saw a cloaked figure striding in the snow.

"The most I could do as a survivor was return to this peak. To attempt to escape the madness that overtook Fillydelphia as things escaped the metro and other survivors descended upon the city's corpse. A hell brought to life...a place of insanity...I could not bear it. So I came here to find the zebras gone. Thus, I passed into exile from Equestria to my old family cottage here to watch the world die around me..."

Gradually, everything faded around me. Returning us to the cottage that we now stood in. I was more than damp at the cheeks...I could feel my entire face stinging as I cried openly. Looking around I was not the only one. Coral and Unity too...Protégé I saw wipe his eyes. Glimmerlight was stoic.

Aurora Star stood among us.

"Projections have a subconscious feeling...it's what they used to create the conditioning. What you all feel is my guilt. My pain at the part I played in my nation's death. Uninvolved with the balefire or not my efforts killed dozens, if not over a hundred who had been dragged into this because I was too afraid to see my dream stopped."

Her eyes met with Protégé's. Her voice turned steely.

"Don't think I am unaware of the broadcasts your master makes. I've heard all the same justifications before and look what they did to those around me."

No-pony spoke. How could anypony hope to say anything after that?

There was simply an uncomfortable silence. Finally, it had all been laid on the table. Aurora Star stood still, before weakly making her way out of the room. Limping the entire way, it took her some time as her shaking and thin legs carried her.

Without a word from us, she went back to her study, leaving us alone with a dying fire.

The wind blew outside as some of us sat down. Chirpy still slept, huddled into his mother. It seemed Aurora had spared him the horrifying images she'd shown us.

His mother looked up, glancing at Grizzly, Ragini and Protégé. Slowly, Coral spoke.

"I believe that it is beyond a doubt what Shackles wants with this now. You all know it."

She looked around, we all nodded. Coral was right, it was just Glimmerlight was the one to say it.

"He wants slaves. Total slaves. *Indoctrinated* ponies who could not ever hope to think of escape. It's what he's always tried to do. Every time we saw him in that Mall. Always speaking of it...wanting his 'Eternal Chain'."

Coral inclined her head back to Glimmer.

"What Aurora made...it's beautiful but so easy to abuse. No-pony deserves what they wanted to do with it."

Protégé interrupted anything else she was going to say.

"It wouldn't work."

Everypony looked around at him, even Grizzly. The unicorn stopped and stared, on the spot, before continuing.

"Aurora said it projects someone's subconscious to affect others. Without somepony who *is* a slave like that, he can't hope to ever use it. The same way that he requires Unity to activate it...without that second pony to craft the orb's programming, if you will, off...it's useless."

Unity sat up at the mention of her name, having been silently looking out the window. I could see her looking more than a little scared at being hunted for this.

"Unity?" Glimmer shifted over slowly, "Could you...do that? I know you said it before

but...do you really have enough power in that horn of yours to create a signature that strong?"

Slowly, I saw the mare nod. "It...it doesn't really matter how big or small it is. I've always kind of hid what it could really do and...I just...I just didn't want anypony to be afraid of me being able to sense and...and create things like that..."

My sister put a hoof around the smaller mare's shoulders, holding her close. "No-pony's afraid of you. Murky and I, we'll keep you safe...promise."

I saw my sister's look at me and took the hint. I nodded a few times. Gradually I slowed.

"B-but the other thing? Needing a slave who's so broken they can't even know otherwise? Where would he f...fi..."

I stammered, a sudden shock of cold going through me.

A folder of ponies crossed out in his locker in the Mall.

"Find...find a..."

His bedside in Ministry Station with a picture of a broken looking pegasus.

"Oh...oh Goddesses..."

I could hear him. Hear what he'd said when I hid from him in Ministry Station.

"It won't take long to break you back in. To rend those hopes and crush those dreams till they are but a long remembered *mistake* of a past long dead. The born slave, the servant who knows his place. You were meant to come to me, none of the others...just you. Just you and that lovely broken mind...hehehe..."

I fell off the chair, staggering to the side as my stomach turned and my mind filled with panic and fear. I threw up, falling against a cabinet to set plates crashing to the floor. I started to hyperventilate. Hooves went around me, Coral's and Protégé's, pulling me up. Breathing fast, eyes wide and looking around in terror, I now realised how trapped I was atop this mountain.

"The perfect slave in the heart of Fillydelphia."

"Murky Number Seven..."

* * *

Quietly, I curled myself up on the softest chair in the room and tried to stop shaking. Outside I could hear the wind slapping the windows and setting the whole cottage creaking under its assault. Every slam and sound set my heart leaping...what if it were the slavers arriving?

Everypony else sat around me. Most of them were debating or even outright arguing about what to do or how to get away from here safely. The only ones who remained quiet were Chirpy and Brimstone. The foal huddled between Glimmer and Coral, while the big raider sat beside the arm of my chair. Truth be told, his presence was a significant calming influence keeping me from entirely losing it right now. I knew he'd be there, protecting me. That's why he sat beside me, he was playing guardian after hearing the same as everypony else. The days of seeing him as a wary and unnerving force were long gone as far as I was concerned.

Shackles wanted *me*. I'd always known that but now I knew why and it scared me to my absolute core. Put that together with knowing he was coming up that mountain right now...

"Murky has that grapple of his, could we not attempt a climb? It's better than just waiting here and letting them get Aurora!"

"You heard her, she can't go anywhere in her current state. Aurora Star is elderly and would not even survive the trip."

Glimmer debated with Grizzly. On the other side, I heard Coral enter into it.

"You don't think we should perhaps simply tell her what will happen? Aurora would not want to work for them."

"She wouldn't need to." Protégé looked back from the window, where he kept watch with Ragini. "Grindstone has the Ministry, he has the means to extract memories in there."

"The same goes the other way, though." Ragini, surprisingly, spoke against Protégé. "If she cannot survive the trip down with us in her state, then she will not survive with them either."

"What makes you think he hasn't brought that equipment with him?"

"You have any proof of that?"

"We have to *try* to stop this! At least get her away from here and-"

"And go where ourselves? They'll comb the mountain!"

It had gone in this circle numerous times. I was actually getting a headache from the raised voices and quickly held my ears down with a whimper. I hated arguments...I really did.

Especially ones when no-one knew the answer. Not after I'd just learned what I had about Shackles' intentions. Not after all this sudden 'knowing' of everything. Every raised voice was like another harsh thump on my head. Each exasperated slap of a hoof on the ground a nail in the skull. Damn these ears.

I had to get out of here.

Hopping off the chair, I had to wave a hoof to get Brimstone to not follow me. Trotting quietly past everypony else to the door, I left without really being seen or heard amongst their endless...what was the word? Mind thundering? Brain lightninging? I'd heard Glimmer say it once.

The dark and cold entrance hall felt strangely isolated from the very room I'd just left, its dark stone and creaking wood a sudden drop in temperature from the warm room behind me. Crossing it, sighing in relief as the voices faded a little, I made my way to her front room. There was a fire in there...soft seats and peaceful books where I could draw in silence. The door was already open, a flickering orange light spearing out into the chilly hall. With a hoof I nudged it open and trotted inside to feel the satisfying ambience of the room's large fireplace at the far end. Gently closing it behind me, I advanced inwards, moving to the biggest, fluffiest chair I could see.

"Murky?"

The voice might have startled me, but it was soft and calm. Turning to the side, I saw Unity sat in the corner amongst a small pile of books piled up near the already crammed shelves. She had a particularly large one open before her. Far from the fire she was lighting it with her magic, casting a relaxing and cosy pale red over it all.

"Sorry," I bit my lip, "I just-"

"Needed to get some peace and quiet?" She answered, inclining her head toward the room I'd come from through the wall. Her voice wasn't much above a whisper, tinged with a little anxiety.

I simply nodded twice, a short movement as I looked around the room.

"Me too...I'm really not one for crowds of ponies. Never was. Call it introverted or unsocial if you like, I just-"

"No, I don't. Think it is, I mean." I quickly added, waving a hoof as I trotted over to sit with my back to the chair she was behind. "Do, um, you mind me sharing the room? I was just going to draw in my journal. I can move to the other side if you'd-"

Now she interrupted me.

"It's okay. I just needed to be somewhere more peaceful. I'd like to see what you do anyway."

Unity smiled, before settling back with her large book again. Neither of us really spoke as I pulled out my journal, seeing its battered and frayed edges...barely held together with string and tape along its uneven pages. It had come through a lot, weathering it all. A bit like all of us really...

I had something that needed adding to a certain picture though. Somepony long overdue.

Well, there were a few ponies that needed adding to this still...but I could check one off now.

Carefully moving the yellowed pages, I shifted through my earlier drawings till I found the one that mattered. My friends...or some of them. With me in that bottom left, happy and with spread wings (It had happened for real!), Glimmer off to the middle, cheeky and charismatic. To her right, Caduceus as earnest as ever. Behind them both, Brimstone loomed as a heavyset presence, that wry and sardonic smirk I knew meant more contentment than many would think. Gradually, I shifted to Caduceus' right, and began to set charcoal to paper.

Yes...it'd been some time since I'd been able to do this. To relax and just let it all flow forth in creating the two ponies I knew I wanted to right now. The mantra had long become repeated...but it felt good to feel that process move through me. I could hear nothing but the crack of the fire, the distance wind and the occasional turn of a page from the quiet mare near me. Slowly, as I felt my head fluidly shifting and turning into the ceaseless depths of artistic bliss, this whole cottage became...peaceful. Welcoming. Far from danger.

For now...that was all I needed.

Strong lines for a strong mare. Defined, constant and yet bearing a caring touch that my charcoal reflected in small subtle looks in her eyes and mouth. Criss-crossing as I drew the plaids, I felt the beat and rhythm move faster and set me smiling as I moved down to the bottom and began a new pony shape near her legs, in front of Caduceus between Glimmer and the new additions. A little shape, a happy one bouncing up on his hind legs and waving with an unthinkably wide grin. No, missing something, I let the edge of my hoof rub at an edge, before moving the mare's front hoof to settle on his back. The connection, the care and the pride now reflected from her eyes as though I'd always meant that.

Coral Eve had found her foal, Chirpy Sum. Now, I ensured they were found on my collection the way those two always should have been.

Together.

With us.

Sitting back, I smiled enough that my charcoal fell out of my mouth, dropping into the spine of my journal. Coral had been a solid pillar in my life for so long now. Saving us, carrying us all without anypony ever asking her to. Yes...this was *right*.

"Oooh, I remember that one! You've added more to it!"

I looked up, finding Unity leaning over under the light of her horn, gazing at my drawing. Her face looked delighted as she gently shifted the journal around to get a look at it. I felt myself flush a little...I always liked it when ponies enjoyed what I drew. Until I'd met Unity for the first time no-pony ever had...

"It's...uh...it's the one I want to put all my friends on." I leaned backwards, against the rear of the chair.

"That's a lovely thought, Murky. This way, we can all hang this up where-ever we get to when we all get out of here. Put it on the wall and see it forever." Unity looked up, her weary face showing a brightness to it. "What can I say? I'm a dreamer..."

Oddly enough, I found myself giggling a little. "We all are. I...I don't think any slave isn't in some way. Fillydelphia's ruined all our lives since it caught us. I was born a slave but that doesn't mean I'm the only one suffering..."

I looked at my picture, seeing within it my friends smiling in a way I never had seen them in reality.

"Glimmer and Coral lost their entire home, this city pulled them in and took their lives away until both were having to cope somehow. Coral lost her son...Glimmer lost the freedom she'd left a safe place to have in the first place. Shackled it all down and told them their life was over now. Chirpy taken from his mother...I...I know how that feels, Unity. Brimstone may have been what he was, but he thinks he deserves this place and I just know that isn't true! Not any more, it's made him think he should stay here after we all get out. Caduceus *lost* his life before we could even try. I don't just want out for myself...I want out for them too. To take back the life stolen from us all by slavery and Red Eye's creeds."

I wiped an eye, feeling her hoof on my shoulder.

"While I can't help but feel even Protégé has been hurt too deep by this place to ever know who he might have turned out to be had he not been born the way I was. Then you too, of

course..."

Looking up, I saw Unity nod slowly. It made me think, I knew precious little about her life before Fillydelphia. She shifted round, sitting beside me in our quiet little sanctuary behind the chairs, surrounded by books.

"It all happened so quickly for me. Just on the road and...and their wagons went by and just picked me up, before I knew it I was in chains and being taken away. I want to go home too, Murky...let my parents in Friendship City know I'm still alive. Did I ever tell you?" She looked at me, but continued anyway, "I grew up in Friendship City's bookstore. My parents made a decent living off them, enough to stay in that safer settlement. But they did history too, collected old journals and learning annuals that I got really attached to."

Her magic glowed brighter, lifting the book across to sit between us. I could see what it was now. A collection of maps and photos from all ends of Equestria. The real Equestria, filled with bright fields, lush forests, sparkling rivers and mountains below a clear sky. The towers of Manehattan looked so sturdy and everlasting. Canterlot shone as a beacon of grace. Small towns were filled with a rural comfort.

"Probably why I turned out like I did...grew up sheltered in my little room reading books of a time period I'll never see and learning the ways of ponies that no longer exist as much as they used to. I was only to head to the old hunter's shack just outside Tenpony to pick up some...some food to take home, it was cheaper than in the statue. I should have only been gone an hour...all they know is I didn't come home."

To hell with nerves, I could hear the strain in her voice. Leaning over, I held onto her very tightly, feeling her hooves wrap around me as well.

"We won't let Fillydelphia win again, Unity." I tried to keep my own voice straight, forcing myself to not think about that sort of situation, so stupid and simple to ruin somepony's life on the spot like that forever. "We'll...we'll all get out, I...I don't know how but we'll...somehow...I..."

"-would do anything?"

The raspy, nasal voice slid into my ears sharply. We split from one another quickly, both our cheeks tearful as we glanced around the couch. Before us, standing lit between the hazy blue light of the window and the fiery orange of the hearth was Aurora Star. Her eyes, drooped with age, held a sudden vigour and intensity that frankly scared the life out of me.

"Y-yes...I would."

There was no hint of lying to sound brave in my voice. Yes...at this point, surrounded by the friends I loved, I would take on any challenge to get us out. To beat Fillydelphia and finally

make true the dream we'd all held since the start of this entire journey.

Aurora was silent, her horn flickering occasionally in a way that made me feel uneasy. Yet to my surprise, it was simply to magically pull her cloak's hood down, revealing the thin ghoulish pony beneath. Her magic floated something out of the pantry. Three small mugs with steam rising. Two were handed to us.

Aurora turned around and began to head to her desk, sitting on the padded cushion before it, facing away from us to briefly sip. I did so myself, finding a thick chocolatey warmth spreading through my still frozen body. Oh yes...

Unity sighed openly, looking at Aurora.

"I thought ghouls didn't need to eat or drink..."

Aurora seemed to scoff. "We don't...but coffee got me through being a Hub Leader. It continues its service to me today. Reminds me of who I am after so long. You wouldn't think this fragile body of mine was only thirty something when the world ended."

I really wouldn't have thought it. Yet she seemed so aged, even as a ghoul. As though the years had weighed heavy on her still. Some psychological thing?

Wait...how come I didn't get coffee? Caffeine had always sounded fun...

The question would never be asked, for Aurora sat her mug down and spoke again once we had settled.

"I listen to you two and I hear the same things I told myself when I realised what was going wrong. The same things that Sundial helped remind me of, that when there feels like no way to make something succeed...you do it anyway for the ponies you love and without feeling shameful about doing it for yourself too. There is no way off this mountain that's not in their chains, young ones. I cannot lie to you about that. It will happen."

She turned back to her desk and began rummaging for something amidst a disorganised pile of graphs, papers and schematics.

"I've sat here and tried to work out what I could have done better a dozen times. How I might have fixed things or tried to make up for what I did. Two hundred years is a long time to offer hindsight...but it's also enough time to come to terms with it. I do not feel sadness, only a longing to perhaps show Twilight, wherever she is, that the lessons she taught us all in her incredible life made me do the right thing in the end."

Gradually, Unity and I got up, trotting toward the ghoul. We exchanged worried glances.

"I don't follow, Aurora. How can you help us up here?" Unity shifted toward the desk, before the elderly unicorn turned around again to face us, holding a small parchment. I recognised what was on it instantly. An orb drawn with a pony being projected from it.

"I can do for you what I could not do for my own friends. I can give you an opportunity, a chance to perhaps escape your own nightmare."

Staring at the parchment, I tried to see if there was anything written or meaningful upon it. There was nothing.

"H-how?"

Aurora laid it down, before leaning back.

"I created six projection orbs. Three were received by the Ministry Mares I attempted to spread them to, the other three were not. One ended up back in Ministry Station, where it was used to activate the Nexus and then destroyed by Sundial. Another was lost in Fillydelphia during the Balefire. The last one I recovered and brought here..."

Unity gasped quietly. "Those power the Nexus! If Shackles and his slavers-"

"Exactly." Aurora smoothly slid back into her speech as she settled and groaned, her joints popping. "The Nexus requires an empty orb to be imbued with memories for use. One already used for simple projection is useless to it. I hid the one remaining empty one on the peak of the mountain under an old weather station the Enclave already stripped for parts. With that, one could power up the Nexus...and in turn fully power Ministry Station..."

She paused, eyeing us carefully.

"...which would in turn activate Ministry Station's portal used by the zebras."

Oh.

Oh.

I struggled to find the words. I didn't want to blurt, not now. Not before somepony who was *handing us the key* to our escape we'd come up here to search for in the first place! A secret of Ministry Station, a way to activate the same way the zebras had escaped Fillydelphia too! I wanted to jump, but my nerves held me. Instead I just stood and shivered with wide eyes until my brain started to register it all.

"But Aurora, if we activate it, then that means Shackles could use it! What if he finds

somepony else who can do what I do? What if he finds another born slave that doesn't escape him! I don't want to leave behind such a horrible thing even if I escape!"

Unity was earnest, for sure, but Aurora merely waved an almost skeletal hoof.

"You forget, I know the spell to deactivate it."

"But you can't-"

"I won't. *You* will."

Unity stopped mid-word, her mouth hung as far open as mine had been. Aurora leaned closer to us, eyeing us both.

"You two, along with your better friends. I've *seen* what you've been through. During my projection, it wasn't hard to read the memories of you all. Decipher who was what. I saw your origins in chains, Murky Number Seven. I saw your kidnapping, Unity. I know you two are good ponies in a bad world. You coming here is a blessing to me...an opportunity I've wished for in every dream I regretted that I had to wake from. Something to offer me closure before my life ends and I face up to those I harmed."

Her hoof snaked out and lifted mine, bringing the Pipbuck up.

"Sundial brought you here, young Murky. Even in his passing...he is giving me one last chance to end this tragedy with something beautiful."

* * *

We gathered once more. The arguments had ceased once Aurora Star led Unity and myself back in. She strode forth to the centre of the room.

"These two have convinced me. I shall help you. All things considered, it is better that this Chainlink Shackles does not possess what I created. I've seen his malice in poor Murky's memories to know now."

She stood amongst everypony staring at her quietly. The surprise on Grizzly's face was obvious, while Protégé peered sideways at me...I wasn't sure if it was suspicion or gratefulness.

There was plenty to be suspicious about.

Aurora was not telling them quite the whole truth, not as Unity and I knew. The reality was that she was being taught to permanently shut down the Nexus in Ministry Station with the deactivation spell. We would place the orb in, turn it on to power the station and then

immediately cast the spell. Aurora assured us we would have just enough time to get to the portal and use it before the power drained again.

Exactly where it would lead even she didn't know...where-ever the last setting was. It could be somewhere in Equestria or anywhere else in the world.

Of course, the fact it could turn on the portal was the part we were hiding from the slavers, that was Aurora's plan. Give us the means to escape without letting on about it. She had given me an orb to hand to Glimmer, one that would teach her how to operate the portal based on what she already knew about it.

Gradually, Aurora explained all that she had told us. About the orb on the peak and that it was the only remaining one that could power the Nexus. About where it was hidden below an old grate and how to locate it. Grizzly in particular sat in thought, Protégé nearby. The rest of my friends crowded around to listen, Glimmer keeping an eye on me with a small grin. Was that pride?

"I will teach Unity the spell that is required for deactivation, I'm sure you'll agree that is necessary." Aurora cast a hard glare at both of the slavers. "She is the one who needs to be able to use it or turn it off just in case this monster does gain access. You will need such an asset, for you know he's coming here and that you cannot escape now."

Coral squeezed her son a little tighter at that being said. It was true though, there was no perfect way out of this. We simply had to do what we always did...the best we could to help something afterwards.

"We've waited long enough," Grizzly rumbled from near the window, his eyes looking outside half the time, "If you need to teach her a complex spell I advise you get started. How long will this take?"

"Some time."

"Hopefully not too long," Grizzly seemed anxious, "we'll defend this cottage until you've completed it and then make for the peak. We'll need everypony we have to hold this place down if we get attacked, buy you as much time to do this as you need."

"A last stand." Coral didn't beat about the bush, "If this spell is as important as you say, then we'll have to keep the slavers from reaching you. They don't want you to know it, I'll bet. But what about when we reach the peak? What then?"

There was a brief silence. Everypony seemed thoughtful, trying to just think what we even could do. Eventually, it was Protégé who spoke up, turning to look at his bodyguard.

“Ragini, you're far more dexterous than we are on a mountainside. Could you make it down from the peak alone?”

I saw her eyes turn dangerous, the same look I'd once seen in the FunFarm.

“You would be ordering me to leave you to all your fates.”

“Could you do it?”

The griffin puffed out her feathers, looking distinctly uncomfortable with it. “Being the one to escape...to carry something important? Sure, whatever. Don't expect me to like being the bird who gets to flee, even if it is a nigh impossible climb.”

Protégé nodded slowly, a smile lacking any happiness on his face. “Good, then you'll carry the orb. Get it somewhere safe then find shelter. Take your time and sneak back to Fillydelphia...they can't follow you over those cliffs with hooves. We'll still need you here in the initial defence though. Listen...I'm not ordering you to-”

Ragini scoffed, leaning back on the wall and fixing her master with a stare only a griffin could do.

“You think I'm here following you because of what some dumbshit contract says? Maybe other Talons would but not me. I'm here because you looked out for me and I looked out for you. We fought together long enough that I wasn't going to let you come here alone. If you think that I'm only doing this because of a piece of paper says so then you can cram every inch of that contract, including all formalities and subsections, right up your pony ass...sir.”

That brought a bit of a silence. Protégé looked amazed, his eyes wide.

“Glad we understand one another.” Ragini smirked and went back to the window again, leaving him standing a little in disbelief.

“If that is your plan...so be it.” Aurora seemed nonplussed by the entire thing. She looked around each of us in turn, before slowly coming toward Unity.

The young mare looked up at Aurora, she'd been quite quiet since we'd heard Aurora's plan and had sat near the door when we'd come back in.

“Unity, this won't be an easy learning. We don't have time to study and practice but I've spent enough time up here to refine what I know and what I had hoped to do. Even now...I never really perfected it. A young scientist's dream still, I suppose.” She smiled wistfully, almost nostalgically. “I will directly implant my own memory to yours in order to teach you the spell. This can bring confusion and extreme nausea...it's somewhat rushed and I regret I have not had

anypony to practice on.”

Unity looked around her, nine faces all looking back waiting for the choice. She'd already agreed before but I could see the growing pressure of our situation working up her nerves. Slowly, Unity nodded.

“I...I'll do it. With all I've seen even just today I trust you understand what you're doing, Aurora Star. I just wish I'd had more time to properly learn more about my own talent under you...”

“You'll learn more than you know, child.” Aurora gently patted Unity's shoulder and nodded to the door. “We should go to the study, the walls are thicker on that side of the cottage. Better protected and with a smaller window for if anything breaks out.”

They moved through the door. That was that then...we had a plan. Not the same one as Protégé, Grizzly and Ragini thought (Or any of my friends, thus far) but it was a plan! Grizzly directed us, positioning each of us near a window somewhere. Ragini moved up into the loft of the cottage to peer through a small upper window that Aurora informed us about. Grizzly and Protégé covered the front from the dining room we were in while Glimmer and myself covered from the study on the other side of the house. Coral Eve watched the back, keeping her son safe away from the likely direction of attack while Brimstone was to stand reserve...ready to react to anything. The big Warlord had listened to Grizzly carefully and nodded along. Clearly, his experience agreed with the layout of our defence to the point he said nothing to countermand the slaver.

I settled beside the window, staring out at the drifting mists and lifted snow from the fierce mountain winds. Visibility was terrible, thankfully not as blinding as earlier but we could still only see perhaps fifty metres away from the cottage. I dreadfully wished that we were not about to be under attack...the room felt cosy and warm. It let me imagine what it was like to have your own place away from slavery and I enjoyed that atmosphere for everything I could.

Behind me, Unity and Aurora sat before one another on the floor behind every piece of furniture we could find to give them a little more cover.

“Now, Unity. This is high level memory magic, perhaps the most complex spell you'll ever have known by some distance. You *must* relax and accept it, the learning process is not easy. I won't lie to you, it is untested and will be a great strain on me...so I will need you to be strong for both of us.”

Aurora's voice was cautious, this was as big a moment for her as anything. Her own research after so many years? To do it now under pressure? This couldn't be easy. I saw Unity taking slow breaths, some sort of relaxation technique or something? Her chest lifted and fell with calm regularity before opening her eyes and nodding.

"I'm ready."

They began. From the outside it did not seem to be much at first. Aurora's horn glowed, growing until it lit a part of the room, streaming on each wall and overpowering the fireplace. A second layer of magic leapt upon it as I saw her wince a little. Unity's own horn erupted into life seemingly without her intention, if her squeak of surprise was anything to go by. She swayed, catching herself as a small stream of sparkling light leapt between their horns. The same twinkling one would see on memory orbs flowed around them, whizzing to and fro, concentrating on horn tips as a current built up from one unicorn to the other.

"This will be difficult...Unity..." Aurora staggered her words, clearly speaking through great effort with her eyes firmly shut, "so try to relax! Accept the flow of magic and let your mind wander. The same feeling of an orb. You will dream of my memories. You can be startled out of it, so you must remain calm if at all for this to go quicker."

Gradually, I saw Unity look sleepy, shivering as much as anything else. The more she seemed at ease, the more Aurora let the magic grow until she too seemed to zone out. The old unicorn's gaunt face wore more strain than seemed healthy until finally...with a snap of magic, both of them went rather blank, going limp other than just enough to stay sitting up. Watching it with Glimmer, I felt rather ill at ease when the pair dropped into their 'lesson.' My sister seemed only astonished, having to remind herself to keep watch as well.

We sat ready. Aurora and Unity had begun the process. Slaves and Slavers had two plans against one another in the works. All was set for whatever was going to happen on this mountain to take place.

Thus...the waiting began.

* * *

Aurora Star hadn't been kidding. This was going to take time.

Half an hour had passed. They had stopped twice already after Aurora had almost burned out from the effort of this rapid memory transfer magic, ejecting both of them from the sleepy state the process left them in. Sitting in her own chair, Aurora had managed to recover and go back into working with Unity both times, yet I could see the harm it was doing to her. The elderly unicorn barely had the strength left in her to do this, seeming more drawn and thin than even before. I dearly prayed for her health to last through this...

Unity seemed healthier, but of course she was a much younger and stronger pony. At least by my guessing I assumed it was also due to not having 'all' the memory yet. Even so, she was glancing around during the breaks, looking confused and dizzy. Twice she had asked

where she was. Worried, I had tried to tell her until Aurora assured me this was entirely expected. Yet none of it was obvious, all just subtle 'in the mind' stuff when they were zoned out before snapping awake and looking weaker than before.

Memory magic was scary stuff.

Now they were making their third attempt. The light grew and the sparkles flew around their horns again as they fell back into the process. It was a real fight to not keep watching them, praying for them to open their eyes and say it was done. The experience was clearly not pleasant to have somepony's memory implanted directly into yours in order to learn something. Not as smooth as the orbs had eventually been...

To distract myself, I had sat near the window with Glimmer and quietly explained things to her. The leap of joy on her face had set my heart pounding with excitement to be the one who could break the news of Aurora's plan to help us. Quickly, I had slipped her the memory orb about the portal and shared a tight hug. For now, it'd just be us two, Brim and Coral were too near to the slavers to risk speaking aloud to.

Much as my sis' and I wanted to talk and talk and talk about it...we couldn't for much that same reason. Instead, we sat together and watched the snowfall. I knew how lethal it was but safe inside it was surprisingly pretty in the dying light of the day. Coral brought us some dry blankets she'd found, a welcome relief from the damp I'd still been feeling all over. My chest still felt tight, making me wheeze on most breaths. I'd had to take a regrettable swig from my canteen earlier as the ambience outside had hit me deeper than I'd thought. Now there was nothing but a quarter full. Enough for one more brief trip in that snow at most...

Despite the painful swelling in my sternum and the occasional coughs I dared not take it now. I'd need it sooner or later. Every time I gurgled and retched from it, I felt Glimmerlight pull me tight in, stopping me hurting myself. At least I wasn't alone anymore when sick.

You'll get out...it won't kill you, Murky. Trust in what she said...

To distract my mind I started drawing again while Glimmer watched carefully. Lines, curves, shapes...it all made sense. So much easier to relax and sitting worrying about memory magic, irradiated taint infections, slave indoctrination and Shackles' plans...

I knew what I wanted to draw too. Something, somepony, from a time more hopeful. Somepony I'd seen in a certain way I was sure they might want to see again when I got the chance.

Brimstone visited us briefly, sitting just behind the pair of us.

"Brim." Glimmer smirked and nodded to him, quietly.

"Glim." He rumbled back, not moving his eye from the window, but slightly grinning all the same.

A few seconds of silence after their little 'greeting' dragged on, before he finally spoke.

"I won't let them get to you."

It felt strained, before Glimmerlight turned to him directly.

"Brim, for once...don't think about me for this, big guy. We're all in this up to our necks, you're the only one who can take on that minotaur and you'll need to concentrate on that when it happens. Please, don't let me be a distraction..."

"Mmm..." Brimstone rumbled quietly, absent mindedly tapping me very carefully on the head. "Not what I swore to the Goddesses."

"To hell with what you believe, I don't want you to die!"

That made him finally turn to look at her. Glimmer was clearly trying to hold in more emotion from that.

"He's...he's the first opponent I've ever really feared for you fighting, Brim. You beat him in the past but...but..."

Brimstone's hoof stamped back down on the floor a little too hard. He seemed to look at his hoof as though surprised it had.

"Brutus is a mad beast, I don't know what he's like now but back then I always outsmarted him. If he comes, I will fight him. That's all there is to it. If I have to crush his metal skull off the mountain side, for an hour, I will."

"Brim..."

"Don't, Glim. If he comes, I fight. That. Is. It."

Slowly, heavily, he wandered off, stepping round Aurora's fine furniture with his huge hooves and body with stoic care.

Glimmerlight just looked sadly after him, we didn't dare talk about our fears about Brutus after that.

Protégé occasionally came through too, checking on progress. On his third trip, I heard

him before he even came in and looked up as he came through the door. As he did, Aurora opened her eyes again and sighed bitterly.

“Aurora, how far is it-”

“Not far enough.” She seethed through gritted teeth, not looking over at him.
“It’s...difficult...I’m out of practice, too much theory not enough...experiments...no-one to work with. I can feel it flowing but finding the...the right memory is infuriatingly distant. It was so long ago...eurgh...”

She slipped and fell to her side, yet I saw Unity's hoof shoot out and catch her. Lifting the ghou back up, the younger unicorn held her steady.

“I can feel parts of your memory, Aurora, it *is* working! Tastes...feelings...it’s all there.”

“We need more than just knowing memories, your mind has to *be* me! Knowing how to cast it isn’t enough, you have to be able to cast it with my skill and...and experience. Protégé, I need to concentrate...”

The slaver stood there, nodding silently as once again they faded into that strange unconscious and silent state. I could tell when Protégé was hiding a look of worry. It was clear in his eyes, all too obvious now I knew what to look for. That empty and trying stare he made. Gradually he turned to me.

“Are you holding up?”

“K-kinda...I don't feel too well still...”

Protégé's expression softened a little. “I am sorry to drag you through all this...it’s-”

He stopped. I saw him suddenly stare in a couple of directions, his eye flicking to the eyepiece he wore.

“Protégé?” Glimmerlight pulled her weapon toward herself, glancing at the window.

He nodded.

“They're here.”

* * *
* * *

Slowly, around the isolated cottage, they came.

Hazy black shadows in the mists, nothing more than dull blurs that grew and moved to just within sight. They surrounded us entirely, holding a perimeter at the edge of our vision. In the twilight hours, seeing anything distinctly was getting harder and harder.

Inside, we all clutched our weapons and hunkered down ready. We'd blocked the doors with furniture and at Brimstone's instruction set up a few things to leap behind if anyone threw a grenade in the window. Now, holed up, we waited for it to begin.

Behind me, I could see Aurora slumped to the side while 'out'. The spell was taking so much out of her, with the ghoul looking weaker and weaker by the minute. Unity was tired, lying against a bookshelf as the connection between their horns flowed and sparkled.

We had to hold them off...give Aurora enough time to finish and then fight our way to the peak. According to Aurora we were very near it, just a short gallop away.

This...this could work. Get the orb to Ragini and then just pray we were taken alive...

The horrifying thing was...I knew I *would* be.

He wanted me after all.

"I know you are all in there."

The quiet dusk was shattered. *His* voice rung out as I saw a large blur begin to move forward. It solidified through the mists, gathering in shape until it became a huge earth pony. A form and silhouette I knew far better than I could ever sanely want to.

Chainlink Shackles strode out in front of the cottage. Rattling, grinning with those sick teeth and crushing the deep snow beneath his bulky form like it didn't stop him at all he moved toward our last bastion on this mountain.

"There is no-where for you to run." His eyes scanned the front, I saw his head slowly turn until he faced my window, "This mountain is entirely secured now on every route a pony could take to get down. **You. Are. Mine.**"

As he came into clarity, I began to see a strange gushing below him...the snow was actually parting ways for him as he came right for us! A thin crackling and shine was in the air around him as the blown mists shifted and flowed around him in a sphere like shape. The very weather itself was giving way to him!

A shot rang out above us! A whipping crack of an energy powered rifle that echoed across the entire mountainside. Ragini had fired! Shackles didn't even move as a magical flare

sparked about half a foot in front of him and took the shot entirely!

Now I saw it clearly...he was shielded! That was what was making the snow flow all around him. Somepony back there must have been casting it out of sight in the mist.

“Heh...amazing things that Aurora Star created, spell orbs...but a mere foal's toy to what we know now.”

His voice rattled inward, powerfully speaking until I could almost hear him shouting directly to me even at this range. That overbearing tone right above me.

“Ministry Station will be a new Fillydelphia's heart, the core for the rightful reclaiming of *my* city. You had me as your mere overseer, upstart! You thought me an old veteran, past his prime. You were wrong...”

Beside me, I saw Protégé lifting his revolver in his magic, looking uncomfortable...even pained.

“Times change and power changes hands...but the chain goes on, upstart! **Eternal. Unbreaking.** That city is mine, Red Eye has only made it a greater prize for my ascension. **How does it feel, my old slave...how does it feel knowing your Master is returning to command you once again?**”

Protégé closed his eyes tightly...I'd never seen him look scared of Shackles, ever. But now, after Ministry Station, there was a chink in his emotional armour...one Shackles was exploiting, unintentional or not.

“You will come out or we shall reclaim you. All of you. **Come out now!**”

No-pony spoke. I huddled tightly near the window, only the top part of my head really looking out. I could see Glimmer tense up as well.

“Steady, everyone.” Grizzly growled from the next room. “The more we wait...the less fighting there'll be before we're done...”

Outside, Shackles stood, glaring at the cottage. That shield was like an aura of his will, the weather obeying him.

“No? Heh...so rebellious...so foolishly clinging on to some hope. How many times has it been crushed now? How many more times need you fail until you realise we will endlessly travel on this cycle. You cannot escape...not here. Not Fillydelphia. Not me.”

That grin turned to a lethal sneer.

"Let the cycle continue then. You'll be begging before the end I shatter that pride you like to think you have now."

He turned, trotting away and waving a huge hoof to someone in the mist.

Glimmerlight yanked me down. Protégé ducked. Out in the distance, flares of orange erupted in the fog and the cottage cracked as rounds clashed into it. Glass shattered above me. Wood snapped and burst all around. My ears spiked in pain as the rolling volley commenced. From all sides, gunfire burst forth, the sound reaching me only now before more shots were fired. We couldn't do anything but stay low as bullets ripped into the room through the window. Two or three even penetrated the stone walls, spraying us with stinging shards of rock. I think I screamed as it kept going and going. I heard whoops outside, slavers spraying the cottage with all they had! The sound of a heavier machine gun roared, like someone tearing thick paper that send stone dust spiralling among us in a line across the stone.

We couldn't do anything! It just kept coming! We had...we had nothing! Only maybe a dozen shots each other than Grizzly and Ragini! They had enough supplies to launch a full firestorm on us!

"Everyone! This is it! Hold them!"

Grizzly's voice roared from the next room over, what did he mean?! We couldn't hold this!

Yet despite that, I saw my sister rise, swing her rifle to the window and *fire!* Beside her, Protégé snapped up, aiming for a second before snapping off a shot of his own. Amazingly, the fire from outside lessened slightly, shouts of return fire going out! They were diving for cover!

A shotgun blast tore the window casing away entirely, making Glimmer cry out as splinters dug into her. She fell back, Protégé firing once more before diving down. From the next room I heard Grizzly's combat rifle bark and up above Ragini's own energy rifle flared. Return fire sprayed upwards, giving us an opportunity!

Glimmer, Protégé and myself all rose! I couldn't let them do it alone! Rising, I whipped out my saddle's mouthpiece and took aim. I wouldn't hit but maybe it could scare them!

"Aim for where there's the most, lil'bro!" Glimmer's voice held no humour. "Make em nervous! Stop em firing! Come on!"

I bit hard, the small crack of *Rarity's Grace* bucking my body a little. I fired again. Then a third time to expend the tiny gun. Out there, I saw blurs moving about, trying to move up! Oh Goddesses they were close, they were at the wall!

"They're going to reach us!"

"No they aren't!"

Glimmerlight racked the lever-action, firing again and again, one blur snapped back and screamed, a slaver coming more into focus as the mist degraded. So much snow was getting kicked up, dust from the shot walls flying in front of us. I heard a howl, a guttural and bestial roar as something *big* started to charge across the field. I fought the urge to curl up and scream as I saw the monstrous Big Brutus surge through the deep snow on a collision course with the cottage.

"I...I...what do we do?!"

Protégé aimed carefully, firing at the charging minotaur. If he hit, Brutus showed no reaction, his warcry unending, electronically boosted through what looked like small speakers on one shoulder and given a horrible digital crackling over it as it echoed and continued far longer than organically possible. The ground shook, those massive claws clenched and hissed as he went for the door!

"Murk get *down!*"

Protégé tackled me before the other side of the window frame exploded above me. Glass fell atop us, cutting me somewhere on my back. More shots went through the devastated window, knocking books off shelves and slicing up the room. I heard Unity cry out in fear as one ricocheted past her, breaking the sort of meditative link with a sudden spark of magic.

"Unity, focus! FOCUS!" Aurora shouted at her, holding the younger mare's shoulders as much to keep herself up as Unity.

"It...it almost hit-"

"Nothing except this spell matters, Unity! This all depends on it working!"

"I...I can! I can!"

A stone fell loose inside, crashing near me as that machine gun gutted the structure again. The wall began to fall in, stone after stone coming free until another hole was made. Yet all I could hear now was the unending animalistic cry of Brutus as he charged! I could see through the new hole, his form getting closer and closer and-

Another bellow set my ears burning. Squealing, I covered them in the middle of this fury as Brimstone surged up the hall, crashed through the door and *slammed* into Brutus, mid

charge! The impact made an audible bassy thwump as the colossal minotaur was lifted from his cloven hooves, carried backwards and tackled into the snow. Brimstone fell over him, his weight crushing down before flailing and trying to come upright. Brim was exposed outside!

“Round the back! They're coming in the back! Charging!”

Coral's voice came through the cottage, right as the whoop of raiders cut into the gunfire. Ragini dropped from the loft, swinging into the far room and bounding toward the back, Protégé went with her, galloping past the hole and ducking as shots chased him the entire way.

“Running low on ammo here!” Grizzly called to us, taking individual shots every few seconds.

“Five left!” Glimmerlight shouted back to him. “Murky?”

How many did I have? Oh, I needed to reload! Stupid! Stupid stupid Murky!

There was a crack, before the timber supporting column of the wall was struck. The entire wall came down near me with a rippling crash, dragging the loft flooring with it. Glimmer and I rolled away from it, coughing and clearing the rubble off ourselves.

Reload, quickly!

With a little dexterous hoofing, I got *Rarity's Grace* off and tried to slip individual bullets into it. Briefly, I peered up to make sure somepony wasn't charging me too! Sweat poured off me, growing hot despite the cold winds blowing through the holes as Aurora's old home was completely destroyed. Outside I could see slavers running from cover to cover, hunkering low as they used the stone wall or mounds in the uneven ground to advance. I could see them so clearly now, see each one as they aimed and-

OhGoddessesaiming!

The shot went by me and flew into the pantry, hitting a pot somewhere with a curiously humorous sound. Yet with no laughter, only tears in my eyes, I got the third bullet in and started reattaching the small pistol. I only had six more after this...

The sound of crashing metal caught my attention. Outside there was a ferocious duel going on. Brimstone clashed with Brutus. The pair of them rolling and hurling one another around in the middle of all the gunfire! I finally saw Brutus in combat...

He...it...was horrifying.

Larger than Brimstone, he moved with mechanical strength that whirred and changed

direction of strikes faster than any fully organic being ever could! Accelerating his attacks to unreal speeds that looked about enough to decapitate somepony from the impact alone! Lost to the frenzy, he didn't say anything, only screamed and roared as he swung and swung and swung.

It made me want to panic. Brimstone was on the defensive. He dove and dodged, knocking those massive claws away each time they swung and grabbed for him to slice him in two in the blink of an eye if they ever got around him! The true horror was seeing the look on his face, the desperation, the feeling of being *completely* outmatched in both strength and speed.

Big Brutus snapped out, Brimstone's hoof knocking the claw away before the old Warlord ducked in and surged upwards. A hoof careened into Brutus' face, driving the minotaur back with a blow I knew would have killed a normal pony. Yes! The minotaur's head snapped back, the arms ceasing their assault for a second. Brimstone drove in, striking again and again, heaving a hoof into Brutus' bare chest to go for his ribs before turning and bucking hard enough to take Brutus right off his hooves again! Finally, the minotaur's ceaseless roar ended, winded right out of him as he crashed down amongst the snow.

"They're breaking cover, hit them!" Grizzly shouted from the next room, I saw the three slavers rushing out from behind the wall, trying to sprint at us.

"Reloading here!" Glimmer shouted back, "Murky! Go for it!"

I felt frozen, that hole had rounds bouncing all over it! I tried to poke out and one zipped right past my cheek. Whimpering, I fell back, shaking uncontrollably. Oh Goddesses...Shackles' pet or not, they weren't playing around...I...I...

"He's pinned down, get the bastards!" A slaver shouted, catching my sensitive ears under the withering hail of agonising bangs and echoes.

They were coming to hurt my friends, I had to stand up for them. Trying to fight my fears, I pushed myself up and almost blindly fired the three shots in the last direction I remembered them being. Ahead of me, two slaves dove away and ran back.

"You said they were fuckin' pinned!"

"They were!"

The third one slipped, coming down hard. A shot from across the other side hit him in the gut. He squealed, writhing and only gradually passing away. Old Grizzly was back in the game and I happily sank back down to reload *Rarity's Grace* once more. Six shots and I'd hit nothing...

Outside, I heard a grinding of gears and an electronic whirring. Big Brutus surged up from the snow again to face down Brimstone. The earth pony rushed at him as he got up, not giving him a chance to get ready. One of those claws shot out, parrying Brim so hard I was sure I saw a small sliver of Brim's hoof shear off in the clash.

“Getting old, Warlord!”

The claw slashed forward again, Brimstone had no choice but to dive to the side as it snipped where he'd been, narrowly missing a back leg. The other came down, trying to pin him on the ground. Both Brim's front hooves grabbed it, trying to force it wide open. For a few seconds, they struggled, muscle against machine...until I saw the muscle begin to give.

“Getting weak...”

The claw lifted, taking Brimstone with it. Only after a second did I realise to duck as Brutus swung and bodily hurled the massive form of Brimstone into the wall of the cottage near the doorway. In a cacophonous barrage, the entire front of Aurora's cottage came down. Rocks tumbled as Brimstone was slammed right through another supporting log. We all dove away, Unity trying to pull the by now very weak Aurora into the pantry to restart the spell again.

“Getting SLOW!”

Brutus didn't give him an edge, even as I struggled to find cover in the tumbled down front of the home, I saw him launch on the stunned warlord, one of those massive talons slamming across my friend's face. He was thrown back out, struggling to get to his hooves again. I could see the determination on his face, but his body just refused to cooperate. Everything I'd feared about his condition after the Pit was coming true.

My big friend wasn't done yet. Experience was a powerful weapon and without even looking to know, he pulled his body in the right direction to dodge Brutus' clashing claws to crash a boulder off the cyborg's head hard enough to tear one bionic eye clean out. Using the rock to jam the incoming claw, he swept out the beast's legs and sent Brutus falling over back, giving him a chance to get up and reassert himself.

“Kick his ass, Brim!” Glimmerlight shouted out, raising to fire with a clear view on Brutus.

The round sparked off Brutus' back as he got up, annoying the hulking monster and shattering some of the vials on his back. The distraction made the beast turn briefly. Glimmer went to fire more, before gunfire tore up near her. To my horror I heard my sister scream out, saw a burst of blood! No!

She fell back against a tumbled over cabinet, three or four bloody marks across her

chest.

"Fuck! *Shit!* Fucking...argh...ricochet fragments..." She gasped, holding a hoof to her chest.

I rushed across to her, but she waved me away as two zaps of an energy weapon flew between us and set fire to the bookcases behind us.

We couldn't hold this. We couldn't hope to.

"G-Glimmer are-"

"N-not deep...but it'll stop me moving much." She seethed through gritted teeth, firing blind with her lever-action over the top to dissuade two slavers we could spot trying to make a break for the side of the cottage. "Three shots left..."

Around the back, there was a sudden and close screeching. Protégé's revolver fired twice, Ragini's energy rifle spat death as I heard the unmistakable sound of something *evaporating*.

"They're inside! They're-"

An explosion of pressure blew through the entire house, sending books and dust kicking up, lifting all the snow that had fallen since the front end's roof came down.

"No they aren't." Coral's voice was strained, pained from near the pantry in the back.

"AURORA! HOW MUCH LONGER?!" Grizzly bellowed from the next room, his rifle chattered and then horrifyingly ran dry. I heard the click. "We're getting overrun!"

There was no reply. Held in silent focus between the two, I saw Aurora's face grimace without making a sound.

The fire was spreading from those blasts, contrasting the white of the mountainside that sent embers flying through the snow across the besieged cottage. Looking to either side, I could feel myself hyperventilating at the sight. I could see Ragini in the other room, slashing across a raider's throat with her talons before hurling the body out the window. Her energy rifle lay broken at her side, bend at an angle. Protégé hurled a table at one, blew another's head apart with his revolver and immediately was set upon by a drugged up hunter raider, rolling with the frothing psychopath on the floor. I tried to rush to help him, but gunfire ripped up the wooden floor of the entryway, blocking my movements. Scrambling back, yelled again as my head pounded. That machine gun opening up was like a nail being driven into my skull with its sound!

To my horror, I saw the raiders starting to take the far room. They poured in the windows, singing in unison as they came, a nightmarish war chant fuelling their frenzy. Ragini ripped the raider off Protégé, slammed her broken rifle into its head and lashed out at another. Old Grizzly wielded a length of timber in his mouth like a club and snapped a raider's knee. But three others piled on him. I saw his legs grabbed...they were taking him.

"Murky, head down!"

I heard Glimmer's voice and dropped. A shot from inside range above me, passing through the crumbled wall to impact the slaver who'd sneaked up. Outside I could see them gaining ground.

"One shot left..." Glimmer muttered, lying in the corner and trying to pull a towel from the corner over to cover her wounds.

Biting my lip, I got up with my own weapon to fire but couldn't risk going out. There wasn't enough fire going out now to dare aim. All I could see was the horrible sight of Brutus slamming Brimstone's head over and over with the edge of a claw. My friend was slowing...bleeding...staggering...

In the next room, I saw Coral Eve try to blast the raiders out, but her horn spluttered and sparked before fading to nothing. She fell where she was...burned out, physically beyond consciousness.

Grizzly was gone, pulled through the window and taken, the prize of the raiders.

We were going to die...we really were...

I thought it couldn't get any worse.

Behind me, I heard a scuffling sound from behind the wall. The chimney kicked down a ton of soot atop the flames before finally a filthy white head with multicoloured hair poked out of it, upside down. An insane grin plastered across it.

"Hi, kids! What did you want for Hearthswarming?"

Screaming, in a panic, I opened fire with *Rarity's Grace* at closer range as Wildcard pulled and slithered himself out of a chimney far too small for his thick muscled body. Even as I fired, the shots went wild, almost hitting Glimmer, Wildcard's magic tearing the gun off to the side on my saddle! Ignoring the burns from the fire, he rose up before me.

"They said I wasn't allowed to kill you again, Murky-Murk! But then I killed you once and

you came back so I guess it's fine to *try again, huh?!*"

"Try this, you junkie!" Glimmer pulled the trigger on her last shot at near point blank range.

Wildcard's head snapped back as it impacted right into his face, spinning backward into a chair. For a second I was hopeful, but he growled, sitting back up...grinning as he held the round in his teeth before swallowing it whole.

"High lead diet, little Glimmy...wonders for the complexion!" He stroked his face, smearing the soot over his burns. "Oooh, I remember you, figured out why you hate me yet?"

Glimmerlight lay there in the corner. I was empty on my pistol and finding his magic holding me in place with the saddle. Out the corner of my eye, I saw Coral being dragged off, slavers took her child too, screaming for his mother as he went. They were moving into the back, Protégé fighting back to back with Ragini to keep them away from Unity and Aurora!

"I hate you enough as it is..." Glimmer seethed at him.

"Oh you don't know the half of it, missy. And it's not because you didn't come to my birthday party yesterday *you trumped up too good for me whore of a bitch mother I'm going to FUCKING GUT YOU!*"

His face twisted as he screamed and rushed forward, his machetes sliding down the chimney to join him. I screamed too...Glimmer might have...but in a black blur a huge figure leapt past me and tackled him bodily into the fireplace again.

Ragini scythed at his face, her talons coming in one after the other in a desperate, rabid attack. Wildcard and the griffin rolled out of the fireplace, burning both of them and dragging embers out that caught the carpet and added to the growing blaze. They tussled on the floor before Ragini got her rear claws down, using her far larger size than almost any pony, she wrapped a leg around Wildcard's neck, ramming him into the bookcase. The raider spurted out with laughter, bleeding profusely across his face as his machete's spun wildly, causing me to dive away myself at his mad magic.

"Flightless! Help Protégé! NOW!" She gasped out, before Wildcard broke free and headbutted her directly, his horn scarring across her already reopened face wound.

I didn't see any more, as I rushed through to the other side, given an order at a time of high stress. In the other room, I found Protégé was fighting three raiders after the others had pulled Grizzly and Coral away. I didn't stop, running into one, turning and bucking right up into the nethers as *hard* as I could! The squeal of agony was enough to let me know I'd gotten it before a hoof slapped me clean against a chest of drawers.

The distraction was enough. Protégé got the other off him, firing into its neck with his revolver, before pulling up its knife and hurling it into the one in front of me.

It was about then that Brimstone crashed through the corner of the cottage. Torn away, the room collapsed around us, me being saved only by Protégé pulling me into the back.

The massive weight took away the corner support, bringing down the other side before Brutus chased him, their heavyweight duel turning into a one sided hammering for Brim. He was putting up a heroic fight, but every strike knocked him back. Every test of strength he lost. Every so often I saw him trick Brutus, feinting, faking or baiting the larger opponent but he was never fast or strong enough to capitalise on it.

Big Brutus brought both claws together, swinging them around in a great arc that crashed into a jutting bit of mountain rock when Brimstone knocked and redirected the blow. The crash send a judder through the ground, sending more wood splintering from the ruined attic area. I saw them disappear around the back as Brutus lifted Brimstone up and tackled him out of my sight, happily taking mighty blows to the face on his ruined eye socket that sent a shiver up my spine.

All that remained was the rear with the pantry now. Slavers were swarming up and over the rock wall now the fire had ceased. I could hear the raiders returning after delivering their prizes.

“Murk, check on Aurora, if we're going we have to go now!”

“I...I...”

“Murk!” Protégé screamed, picking up a fallen shotgun and sending two shots across the rubble, the snow falling around us.

“YES! YES!” I hollered and ran back again, finding shots missing me from direct aim. Something went between my legs. Coming back into the first room I saw Ragini and Wildcard once again.

I...no.

Ragini was held down below a hoof. Wildcard bore his machetes above with a grin. She was trapped, Wildcard's meathook of a third weapon embedded in her shoulder.

“It all burns...aaaaall burns! I could have you tonight, burn you up in it! I do feel like some chicken! You taste like that? I wanna know!”

"F-fuck you!" Ragini winced, trying to rise before the hoof stamped her down.

I stood frozen, behind him I could see Unity looking through the door. There was no glow, had they finished?! Oh no...please don't tell me something worse had happened? No...*please no...*

I almost felt isolated. Standing alone in the middle of a wrecked home that had ten minutes ago been a comforting warmth. Shots pinged off the rubble near me. Grizzly, Coral and Chirpy were gone. Brimstone wasn't getting up as the minotaur stamped again and again. Glimmerlight struggled with a slaver, her wound stopping her. Ragini was held down.

"Come to get a chicken wing, Murkie-boy? Haha!"

I...didn't know what to do...

Yet Ragini did.

With a loud shrieking call, she pushed through the pain. Hook or not, she threw Wildcard off and got right back up through nothing but sheer willpower and determination alone. Her talons sunk into his chest, before leaping up and using her hind legs to kick him right into the fireplace, crashing into the flames themselves to writhe and yell psychotically. I saw her rip the meat hook free, hurling it at the slaver holding Glimmer and trying to pull her away. The hook sunk into him, tearing him free of my sister.

She grabbed his sub-machine gun and sprayed over the top, dragging herself back into cover behind the ruined wall.

"Yo, flightless, they're done in there! Let's go and-URK!"

She had spun, about to point somewhere...only to find two machete's speared through her sternum. The griffin stopped dead, beak open in shock.

Before her, quite literally on fire, Wildcard stood wearing quite easily the most disturbing facial expression I'd ever seen him make.

A completely calm and serious glare.

"No."

The machete's sliced outward. She didn't even get a chance to cry out as they slid out of her sides and crossed at her neck...taking her head clean off.

Coming through, bearing the shotgun, Protégé stopped dead with a despairing look as

he saw her fall. Watching the large griffin body go down, the snow immediately settling across it. He looked up, before with a long cry brought the weapon up and opened up. Glimmer did too, her SMG spraying toward the big raider.

Regaining his smirk, the raider bounced and wheeled, diving and rolling like a foal's bouncy toy. Laughing as he went...but not a fun and gleeful tune. A deathly, mocking laugh that faded as their fire drove him off into the mists closing back in again...leaving us with the first of us to fall...

Protégé fell down, knees going weak. He couldn't hide the tears in his eyes. I could see his E.F.S eyepiece was cracked, a piece of it entirely gone from the front glass.

Behind me, Glimmer kept using magazine after magazine to keep the slavers from getting near again. She was shouting that they'd be here any second.

"-urky!"

"Murky!"

"*Murky!*"

Unity's voice hit into my numb head as I realised I was in pain. My side hurt...at some point I'd been hit by some shrapnel and not even noticed. Only now in a few seconds of a lull did I notice. Nothing serious but...it was the spike of feeling that brought me back.

"Murky! We're done! *We're done!*"

Unity was crying out from the pantry, yet I could hardly do anything but just stare as I tried to get it all into my head at what had just happened here.

Only...it wasn't over yet.

Outside, a victorious roar cried out. An electronic clipping came over it as I saw Brimstone barely rising. He somehow got to his hooves, staggering forward and swung an attack even I could probably have dodged. Blurring, the minotaur swept forward batted it aside and headbutted the warlord. The crack even hit *me* with its sound like a knock to the skull. Glimmer cried out as the beast raised Brimstone up, lifting him in those claws effortlessly before dropping him down again, slamming Brimstone's side into his knee.

I'd never *ever* heard Brimstone actually cry out in pain before...

Then he went rather still on the ground. Alive, breathing...but done. Exhausted...battered...injured.

Beaten.

Brimstone had *lost*...

Big Brutus turned, raised his claws to the obscured sky in salute and roared. He roared again and again...screaming his victory...his rivalry done. It made sense, he wanted Brimstone to see him winning. From the ground, dumped in kicked up snow, my biggest guardian could only look at his old rival and do nothing.

Gradually, the gunfire began to die down. Soon, there were no more shots at all.

I took the opportunity to rush into the back, finding myself limping suddenly. Something had sprained near my Pipbuck. The pantry lay ahead and I quickly slid in.

"You're done? Did...did it work?"

Unity met me there, pulling me into a tight hug, crying into my shoulder. The poor mare had never experienced anything quite like all that. I realised I was letting it out too.

"Yes, Murky...it did. I...I know now. I know how to stop it. But..."

That word. The moment she said it, I realised there was no Aurora beside her. Not standing anyway.

Slowly, my eyes fell, finding the now pale and weary ghoul lying against her own fridge door. I felt a heartbreak rising all the more. Oh no...not her too...

"I didn't get hit...young Murky." Her voice was so quiet, weak beyond even her age, thin as newly formed ice. "I...knew this would happen. The spell was so complex...so long...so hard and I am so very old..."

Unity dropped beside her, not caring for ghoulskin as she helped Aurora to sit up a little more. My friend looked tired too, dizzy on her hooves and her eyes kept glancing about as though in confusion.

"Just rest...rest, Miss Star. Please, take it easy and we'll-"

"Hush, child..." Aurora patted Unity's shoulder, "Don't think you can placate me, I know what I did...I calculated it before we even started how much magical essence it would take. Tell...tell me...how to do it..."

Behind me, I heard Glimmer and Protégé peering over. Somepony was trotting up near,

but my attention was focused on Aurora and Unity. Slowly, the cream unicorn recited things I couldn't understand. Magical terms, methods and names I had never known Unity could pronounce in foreign languages...ones I knew she had never learned. Yet as she spoke, I saw the most wonderful thing...

Aurora smiled.

A smile that grew...and grew...with every word those wrinkled cheeks quivered and rose.

"It worked...oh...it worked...it actually worked I...it *worked*..."

Tears fell down her face, mouth falling weakly open struggling to breathe even as she tried to laugh and failed. Yet such contentment in her eyes...

"I...know." Unity spoke carefully. "I don't know how but...I know it. Like I always did, like I was an expert."

Aurora Star wept openly, coughing as she tried laughing.

"It finally worked...I...did it. Two hundred years. A lesson passed on to the next generation to make something better it...it worked after all this time...I did it..."

Her eyes didn't look at us, they simply and blankly stared upwards.

"I...did it..."

Her body began to slump, each breath getting less and less. Unity and I shared a glance, tears in our eyes as we saw the truth. Aurora Star was dying right before us. The pony I'd sought to learn so much about here between me and my first friend. After seeing her home destroyed to bring her research to one last good act...

No, this wouldn't be the last thing she saw.

"Aurora Star? I...I need you to see this before...um..."

Slowly, my hooves trembling, I brought it out. The picture I'd drawn. Holding it before her, taking her hoof to hold it with our assistance I let her see it and saw that face turn to nothing but contentment.

A charcoal drawn image of the Ministry of Arcane Science's Fillydelphian Hub Leader. Her first day being awarded the post. Young, bright and grinning with the optimism of a lifetime. Bright eyes dreaming of the future...a better future for everypony.

Her mouth opened again, a last smile.

"Thank you so much, Murky..." Her voice was probably only audible to me now.
"Please...make the right choices. Let this all mean something in the end..."

Slowly, the old pony's eyes closed, holding my drawing against herself as her whole body settled.

"I did it, Twilight...I did it...you told me to make real what I dreamed to help somepony. After all that happened...here at the end...I finally did it...Twi..."

Her voice faded.

And there in our grasp...Aurora Star passed into memory for the last time.

* * *

There wasn't any time to really do much for her.

There wasn't much time for anything now.

Unity and I trotted back out front with solemn faces to find Glimmer and Protégé huddled behind the last remnant of our cover. Out on the snowy plains behind the mist, I could see the shape of slavers close by. Waiting...just waiting.

Protégé looked up from binding Glimmer's chest in what clean fabric he could find, his hooves slow and lethargic over his own battered body.

"Is it done? Where is-"

He stopped short as he saw our faces.

Slowly, Unity nodded to him.

"I know what I need to know." Her voice was thin, as though nervous about speaking too loudly after what just happened to break the reprieve.

"Good...good. At least you know this now. At least you made it through that."

Protégé wasn't putting it on. I could see genuine relief on his face, more than I might have expected.

"Yes I'm...weak, but I'll make it I think..." Unity muttered, looking away from the slaver

and taking a seat. What she had done was incredible, but it had cost her. She was trotting slowly and breathing hard.

Protégé didn't reply, instead just sinking down against the wall with a hoof on his head. It was clear why...he'd already lost one close ally today. Whether they were friends or not I would never know...but it was clear Ragini's loss ate into him hard, one of the few slavers in Fillydelphia that had supported him was now dead.

With Aurora gone, that left just the four of us.

"We have to...to..." Protégé began, hesitated and then continued with a shake of his head, "just let come what comes. We cannot go to the orb. We have no way to get it down now without Ragini and no way to stop them getting it otherwise other than to hope they don't find it until we can return."

He looked away across the demolished house, through the snow now drifting all over us from the shattered and collapsed roof.

"If we can return."

No-pony seemed to know what to say to that.

Yet it wasn't true. It wasn't right. We couldn't abandon it now, it was our only chance to activate what lay in Ministry Station to give us a way out! We wouldn't get another chance like this...all the other orbs I knew of were already used...Aurora had told us they needed to be empty. This was the only one we knew about.

Maybe we'd just have to look for that lost one in Fillydelphia somewhere...but an entire city was impossible to cover. Not when we were slaves.

Outside, there came the sound of ponies advancing again.

"You are beaten, slaves."

His voice echoed across the front of the cottage's grounds.

"I ordered before, you resisted and lost one of your own with four others captured. **You will come out.** Allow yourself to live and come trotting out with heads held low in defeat. The Master of Fillydelphia is waiting...hehe..."

I saw him emerge through the clouds. Shimmering shield spell protecting him, he carved a way through the freezing ground for his foul presence. Around his neck was slung a heavy looking short barrelled shotgun, while his whip fluttered at his side. His greasy mane blew with

the wind as his head scanned over the cottage front. Behind him there came Brutus, stomping his way with still bruising and bleeding wounds from Brimstone's attacks. In his claw...he held Old Grizzly, hurling the old slaver to the ground beside Shackles, where I saw blood begin to stain the snow. He was hurt bad.

Shackles looked down, before mockingly patting Grizzly's head.

"I know about the orb, little worms. It's incredible how talkative you supporters of your great 'leader' become when your precious 'next generation' is even moderately threatened. The foal will live thanks to ponies knowing when they should respond to their master."

I saw him leer down at the proud slaver and felt my skin crawl. They'd threatened Chirpy to know all this. He knew! Oh Goddesses...give me an idea, please!

"It's true!" I heard the pain in Grizzly's voice as he shouted it, admitting it. "He knows, Protégé!"

Beside me, Red Eye's apprentice shivered and clenched his teeth. Somehow I doubted it was the cold sweeping in as the heat of battle began to wear off.

Grizzly tried to stand before being brutally hooved in the ribs by Shackles. He cried out, falling to his knees again.

"Protégé! Listen...argh...*listen to me, young one!*" Grizzly cried out across the field, trying to muster his strength from a battered body.

Protégé turned, looking out toward one of his old mentors since he had joined Red Eye with worried eyes.

"We can't fight them, Protégé! I've seen how many they've got coming up. There's...there's no way out now. Listen to me closely, that orb...it *matters*, Protégé! It's what Red Eye instructed you to find for him, not for Shackles!"

"Be silent, wretch!"

The shotgun swung out, striking Grizzly's cheek with its metal stock with a sickening crack. I heard Grizzly cry out, falling sideways. Yet even as he fell, struggling to not lie on his side, he shouted again, even while Shackles bore over him.

"Red Eye trusted you with this, Protégé! Don't let him down!"

Beside me, I could see the hurt on the unicorn's face.

"You're the only one left now to stop all this! You know what you have to-"

The shotgun slammed home again, before a hoof stamped down, making his shoulder pop and holding the big slaver on the ground, face side down in the snow. His shout of pain echoed as the shotgun levelled on his head.

"You know what I will do, upstart! Here's your incentive to come out and return to your Master! Now trot along and come back to me, heh."

Shackles glared toward us.

"Don't make me ask again. I'd rather you all alive after all..."

His hoof twisted, causing Grizzly to cry out once more. Beside me Protégé was clearly conflicted. His revolver held low in his magic as he shook, eyes closed.

"Come on now..."

His teeth clenched, tears growing at the edge of his eyes. Grizzly was the last true ally he had left in Fillydelphia, second only to Red Eye in how much he had helped the young unicorn.

Then Grizzly shouted one last time.

"You know what he'd want you to do!"

The shotgun's booming sound echoed many times around the mountainside as Protégé's eyes snapped open with a gasp. He saw the same sight I did, of what had been done. Of Shackles coldly executing Grizzly before us all.

Goddesses help us.

I felt myself quivering with sudden terror, yet beside me I couldn't ignore the stark horror of Protégé. His face was aghast, more so than any of us. His whole body stood on edge, upright and seemingly frozen in place.

"Protégé?" I asked, tentatively moving forward. "Protégé what are-"

His hoof shot out, knocking me back away from him harshly. I fell beside Glimmerlight into the rubble as he stood before all of us, looking halfway between scared and angry. His eyes looked around, at first I thought with nerves until I saw him looking at his eyepiece. Every side of the cottage, swinging his head until he stared toward the back.

"Don't...don't follow me."

"Protégé, what-"

His face snapped toward me, stern and hurt. "*Do not follow me!* That is an order, slave!"

The word hit me like a slap in the face from him. Yet before I could say a thing, he turned and galloped away toward the back, carrying his revolver with him. Bucking the old wooden door open, he rushed out into the mist. I heard shouts from outside, slavers or raiders spotting him. There were gunshots. I heard somepony cry out as his revolver fired back.

"Fuck, he's over there!"

"Where? There's too much mist!"

"Stop him!"

It became clear to me about the same time as it did Glimmerlight. She pulled me around, looking me in the eye.

"He's going for the orb."

I nodded, shaking terribly. Was he just going on a last ditch attempt? Was he trying to save us from dying in the fight? Abandoning us?

Then it struck me. I turned back to the two friends I had with me, shouting even as I heard other slavers beginning to close in.

"*He's going to destroy the orb!*"

The look on their faces was clear, they realised it too.

"What Grizzly said, to stop this the only way he can! They don't care if we don't get away...they only want to stop Shackles having the power to take over from Red Eye!"

"Get in there and bring those two back to me! Move! Get moving!"

Shackles' voice boomed out, before the advancing slavers started to run for us. My heart beat faster, while I suddenly felt unsure of what to do all over again until Glimmerlight grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me closely in the eye.

"Murky, we need that orb to get out!"

I knew!

She glanced to Unity and the pair of them nodded to one another. Quickly, my sister looked back at me. Entirely serious.

“Murky, you're the only one of us who can catch up to him now. You have to stop Protégé!”

“But...but he...I...”

Glimmerlight wasn't giving me a chance to doubt. “If he destroys it then we've lost everything we came here for! Catch him, stop him however you can! You have to go!”

She pushed me away toward the back where I simply stumbled and very quickly felt weak. I couldn't...

“Murky! GO! We'll give them something to think about to keep them off your tail for a little while!”

She tossed a captured pistol to Unity, who caught it in her mouth before crawling up beside the shattered cottage front. Glimmerlight fired a brief burst from her sub-machine gun outward, stalling the slavers who didn't expect any resistance as she leaned up on her bag of memory orbs to support herself.

Her eyes stayed solid on mine.

“Win this for all of our hopes, Murky. Stop him destroying our dreams.”

She didn't need to tell me once more. I turned and ran through the house as incoming fire began to tear at it again until I reached the back. I felt my hooves sink into the snow immediately when I rushed out back into the wind. Near me, I saw two corpses lying with big wounds in them, an empty shotgun lying between them both. I could hear others nearby!

Behind me, Glimmer's weapon chattered again, delaying and annoying the slaves. It gave me the reminder I needed to push onward, she couldn't hold them for long. Into the snow I went, powering through it as fast as I could. Any time a slaver looked near, I'd duck under the thick surface and sneak forward slowly through the trail Protégé had left. Before long, I knew I was past the cordon of slavers and raiders. In the wake of his breakout, it had been easy.

Raising back up though, I now saw what lay ahead.

A massive pass, steep and sharp on either side that rose upward through the clouds. Jutting rocks surrounded it, making a natural path all the way up that bent and fell off. I could

see a trail of broken snow passing into the obscured higher areas. Into this I galloped, trying to ignore my quickly numbing hooves and the biting wind flaring at me. The light was beginning to fail, with me relying only on the fire from the cottage to light my way in the wilderness' all encompassing darkness of the growing night.

She was right, I had to do this. No matter who it was standing before us, I couldn't let him destroy our only hope at escape now! We'd worked so hard, endured and lost so much to let it end like this! Even as the steep slope inclined before me and I felt my hooves slipping and falling atop the treacherous path I felt everything trying to hold me back. The wind in my face or catching my wings that were spread for balance. The cold seeping into my very core. The injuries and painful joints. The sickness growing as the snow worked its horrible magic on my chest that made every breath of the icy air like swallowing glass. I screamed, I cried, I shouted and encouraged myself as much I could as I put hoof before hoof and climbed!

Keep going, Murky!

Climb! Climb!

I fell, my hooves slipping as I collapsed onto the rock and slid on my back further down. Desperately, I spun and fired my grapple hook before I slid all the way back down and broke my leg! With a jarring halt, it caught something above me, before I began to use it in my climb! I was in the clouds themselves, the air thin and my vision going blurry through my goggles! Gritting my teeth before coughing and falling loose on my line, I tried to follow Protégé's path as best I could on the exposed pass.

I wasn't weak. Not this time. I was strong, I had to be. For my friends and *all* our wishes for freedom I had to be! Not after all this! These had been dark days, I had been sunk lower than I ever thought I could be since that moment in the Mall before rising up again.

Grasping a rock, I shouted my frustration at the sky as I pulled myself up another few feet to another ledge. Upward. Ever upward. I'd hit the ground and come back stronger than I'd ever been. If ever I had to be confident, now was it as I ascended. Now I'd gone higher until I was near to the sky itself.

On the plateau, I galloped forward into the white, sticking to his tracks. I saw places he'd fallen. I fell too, here and there. Yet always I picked myself back up to continue the hard trek. I galloped...I galloped...I sped up...

The ground rose up. Taking me up as I saw the clouds begin to thin. My chest was burning and I took what remained of my canteen to help myself be ready for whatever lay ahead. Using my grapple to secure myself, I cut up routes to try and catch up with him before...

...before I reached the peak.

Around me, the clouds finally broke.

A vast blackness overtook my vision. An unending void of beautiful freedom up above me as I ran out of the storm and into the calm.

The ground levelled out to a level peak of the mountain. The top of the world.

Yet my eyes could only stare upwards. The night sky...

Stars. So many stars embedded above me like jewels set in black satin. Different colours, different flares...all dancing in their shapes. Dominant among them, the majestic radiance of Luna's great moon that lit the peak of the mountain. I had glimpsed it but nothing compared to this, a welcoming and reassuring peace above all the nightmares.

Truly, I wished I could have stopped and stared forever.

I never stopped moving, yet my eyes could hardly not wander. Every pain was forgotten now that I saw the place I was supposed to be. The empty space my wings had always been meant to inhabit. Such a tranquil sight above me as I ran across a harsh rocky land in stark contrast. Everything below me was illuminated by the moon's glow, casting a silver sheen to everything before me.

I'd said it many times in my life since I had began to think for myself. Yet this beat them all...never had I ever seen such natural beauty. A strange silent calm resided over this place above the turbulent blinding clouds of the wasteland below.

There...atop it all, I saw the old weather station.

Frozen over, stripped down to its barest structure that had left only rusted metal and rotten wood in the vaguest shape of something that once maybe had a tower atop it stood alone and isolated far from anything else under the unending sky. A little bigger than the cottage, it had not worn the test of time well on its two floors that clearly were falling apart.

My eyes fell to the doorway closest to me.

His trails in the snow went into that. The RadAway kept the edge off, but with a tight chest and thin breaths, I approached it and cautiously stepped in. I was out of breath, limbs aching and many muscles felt pulled or strained. In times gone by this might have stopped me yet now I couldn't imagine lying back now.

With the deepest breath I could manage, hearing him clearly inside as he hunted and galloped around...I stepped inside and cantered quickly toward the sounds.

The interior was entirely covered in a thin layer of ice that cracked beneath my hooves and had spread up all the walls and across the abandoned bits of worthless furniture. Some walls were entirely gone, broken off for salvage that let the wind cast its touch in here and set sharp beams of moonlight to glint off the ice.

With what traction I could manage, I finally rushed into the room I knew he was in. Skidding into the door, I came face to face with my owner.

Protégé sprung up, his revolver suddenly lifting from the floor panel he'd been pulling at. I saw other loose ones upturned around the area where he had feverishly searched.

The one he had just opened though...I could see something in it. A container lying open where something crystal like was reflecting the moon's light. He saw my eyes flick to it, before standing right in front of the hole protectively.

His face scowled, desperation in his eyes clear.

"I told you not to follow me, Murk!"

I was shaking still, I don't think I'd ever stopped but I refused to back off. I stood in the doorway of the room, what was left of it anyway as two of its walls to the rest of the station had long been taken away to leave only a skeleton of structure around us, dripping with icicles.

"I...I won't let you do what you want to! You can't destroy it, Pro-"

One hoof of his stamped forward, breaking the ice. His eyes glared through that half broken eyepiece. They were hard...yet I saw a fear at their centre.

"It's the only way left! Shackles is coming, he knows about it! Destroying the orb is the only way left to stop *him!*"

I had no choice. If that were all that was at stake then it would be the right idea.

It wasn't.

Breathing hard, I stepped forward again.

"Protégé, that orb is the only thing that can activate the...the station..."

"Which is why-"

I scrunched up my eyes, before simply shouting it.

"It's the only thing that can turn on the portal to let us finally get out of Fillydelphia!"

My words carried around the empty weather station, disappearing into the great sky outside it. Taking short and sharp breaths, I stared at him. Pleading with my eyes. Please realise!

Slowly, Protégé backed off and shook his head.

"Then I'm sorry, Murk..."

"No..."

"I am truly very sorry. But there will be other ways. You...you can work two years and-"

I screamed at him, frustration and anger on every syllable.

"Listen to yourself! *Listen!* You're saying everything he's wanted you to say, always! You're...you're no better than you ever were! *Please!* That orb is our only chance! We can't survive it...not now. It's the only thing that can make this all end for all of us, Protégé! You don't want us to die in here! I know you don't!"

Here under the moon and stars, I confronted him. I wasn't going to hide words now.

"You were born a slave, too! You never escaped! You never earned your freedom, you just became Red Eye's own little pet! He told you to do this, so you're doing it! You know it, Protégé! *You know it!* In Ministry Station you saw you were still a slave at heart! Saw how vulnerable you were!"

I saw his face contort and turn away from me.

"I earned my freedom...I....I earned the right to choose and work for-"

"You've chosen nothing! After all this you're going to condemn me to slavery *again?!* You're going to stop me and say to me that I just have to go back to working in chains! Say that to every friend I have! After you've seen what it's done! You saw the metro, you saw what Shackles did! It's time to end it forever!"

"I won't abandon my dream, Murk!" He stormed forward, moving closer. "A better Equestria! I will see those green fields and those...those wonderful buildings as we all live in peace through Unity again! The world rebuilt! I'll see it before I die and Master Red Eye is the only-"

“Stop lying to yourself!” I interrupted him, trying to get myself to my full height. “Didn't you see what I saw when Aurora Star told us what she did? *What she said directly to you?* She thought the same thing! An impossible dream, a road through a nightmare paved with hopes and wishes she couldn't let go of no matter what it cost anypony else! Let. It. Go!”

I stood rock still, before stepping forward, lowering my voice.

“Let it go, Protégé...leave all this and come with us...please.” I felt tears in my eyes as I spoke. “You're somepony better inside...choose to come with us and we can stop this all going back to the way it was...”

He looked shocked as I said that. Stepping backward from me until he was over the orb. I saw him look at it, his magic still holding that revolver ready.

Then he shook his head slowly and deliberately, eyes blank. The look of a slave in utter thrall to a master.

“We're so close now, Murk...”

“You're not...”

“We are. Master Red Eye has left for the final stage of Unity. It...it will bring us all hope.”

I fixed him with a stare, delivering a short and sharp question, my voice low.

“Do you even know what Unity is?”

There was silence.

I could see his breathing become forced and stiff. His eyes tried to look away, they looked to the orb, to his eyepiece, to me. Before he made a sudden and angered scowl.

“I...I trust him...”

“You don't have any reason to.”

“I believe in him!”

“You've only been told to!”

“He gave me my freedom!” Protégé screamed at me, fanatical, his mane lying loose around his head and his eyes wild. “He took me in, healed me, educated me and gave me a new purpose! He gave me a meaning in a life that had only ever taken it from me in chains!”

"Then come with *us* and do that for so many other ponies!" I yelled back, moving to advance, one hoof in front of the other, slowly inching forward nearer to the orb and him. "We can all escape forever, live somewhere better! We're both born slaves, Protégé...both our lives were ruined at birth! We can *change* that now if you just *come with us!*"

I reached out to him, raising a hoof to try and place it on his shoulder to get closer. That eyepiece, it was symbolic to him. I wanted to take it off him...let him look properly at me as I spoke.

"NO!"

His magic stopped me, forcing me back as I tried to move forward. Turning, he pulled the orb from the ground as I saw his magic pull the revolver over.

"Ragini and Grizzly died for this! Not when we've come so far and sacrificed so much! Not now! Not when we're so close!"

He looked up briefly, looking me in the eye.

"This...this is my duty. Master Red Eye gave me it...I...I must..."

I saw the revolver moving toward it. I couldn't let him destroy it! With a deep breath I rushed forward until the barrel of his gun pointed directly at me. Standing just across the room, I skidded to a halt as I saw it wavering in the air, aimed directly at my chest.

There was a pause as I looked at it, as Protégé held the orb close, shivering all over as it cast incandescent rays of reflected moonlight over him.

"Don't move, Murk...please...don't move. Don't make me. We've been here before."

Taking deep breathes, I nodded at him.

"You stood before me once when freedom was metres short of being mine. You shot me to stop me."

"And I'll do so again. This is more important than both of us, than your freedom."

"So you're telling me that to my face? You'd sacrifice *me* for Red Eye?"

He paused.

That was the pause I needed.

My leg kicked out, activating my battle saddle's mouthpiece for it to fly up in front of me, aiming reticule before my eye as I aimed back at him, *Rarity's Grace* levelled at his neck.

"My friends deserve this. I'm not the only slave who wants out. Protégé, I'm not the little buck you once could talk down and hold back without a fight. Not when you stand in the way and tell me 'no' once again."

I knew I was shaking, my aim wobbling about just as much as I saw his was. Protégé matched me eye to eye, I saw his E.F.S blink me from green to red.

"After all we've done. After all the times we've fought together, shared terror, confided secrets and saved each other's lives...this is what it comes to, Murk?" His voice was oddly calm.

My heart was accelerating, a cold aching uncertainty flowing through my every vein and making me feel incredibly uncomfortable.

"It is."

"You've changed."

"You haven't."

We both went silent. I saw the blank look in his eyes, he was being driven by order. I was being driven by love. Please, Protégé. Just see...see now what it's costing you.

"Murk..."

His revolver moved back, still pointed at me. I didn't move.

"We are generous souls...sacrifices must be made..."

"Don't."

His revolver started to turn.

"A better Equestria."

"*Don't!* Don't make us do this!"

He just gaped at me for a second, his eyes looking strangely hurt and lost.

"I don't have a choice like you do, Murk..."

The extra glow on his horn was the warning. The orb flew up to nearer the turning revolver as I bit down hard on my saddle's mouthpiece.

Rarity's Grace didn't fire. Instead, the whoosh of released air kicked my body back as the grapple gun fired. It flew forward, slamming into Protégé's chest and knocking him backward into the flimsy wall of the station. It came apart, rotten wood splintering as he fell through it. The return shot from his revolver went wild, aimed for me or the orb I didn't know.

I didn't have time to retract the grapple. I simply rushed forward for the orb where it now lay on the floor. Out of the fallen wall, a length of wood slammed into my side and impacted upon the grapple gun. It protected me from harm but knocked me over to skid across the ice as Protégé pulled himself from the wreckage. His magic flung more objects at me, to which I rolled away from only to see him rushing for the orb.

I had no choice.

Switching triggers, *Rarity's Grace* snapped its curt retort and blew a section of ice and wall near his head away. I saw him stop and leap behind the main supporting pillar of the station, his revolver raising to-

Oh Goddesses!

The **BLAM** of it hurt my ears as it sent a heavy round slapping into the floor where I'd just leapt away from. A second round chased me as I fired back to hit the column he hid behind and drive him away from aiming at me directly. I rushed behind one of the walls before a little inkling in my head made me duck.

A revolver round smashed through the rusted metal above me. Of course, E.F.S! A thrill, a fear, a sadness all coursed through me as I tried to come about and get my last shot on target. I was aiming at *Protégé*...he was aiming at *me*.

I felt a tug, before I fell and slid backwards. The still extended wire of my grapple gun glowed red as his magic used it to reel me in. Skittering across the floor, I instead ran with it and dove out, sliding along on my side to fire my last shot toward him while also bucking the orb away into another room, clear of his sight.

Crushingly...my shot missed. It made him drop the wire though, giving me time to jettison the grapple gun from my saddle now that it was too tangled to retract and start galloping before his revolver snapped its fourth shot at me. I swung behind a thicker column, out of sight.

"Stop this, Protégé!" I screamed, suddenly feeling so very hurt and emotionally drained. "Look what it's leading to! You'll never be free like this! *Ever!* It's what I've learned all this time since we first met. I know! I can help you!"

"You're only wanting for yourself and your friends, Murk...Master Red Eye is thinking of a wider scale for everypony!"

How many shots did he have left, two? Yes. I quickly dove into my saddlebag.

"He's forcing you to believe this! You *know* this is wrong! Think how many ponies you've sent to their deaths by his orders to you! How many did you want to save? How many others like me that you promised you'd look out for and show a better world? *How many of them are still here?!*"

Finding what I wanted, I quickly activated it. The E.F.S blocker that I had brought. He didn't reply, presumably as I suddenly disappeared from his eyepiece's vision. Now I could do what I did best. Silently, I moved away and tried not to squeak in shock at the fifth round that slammed through the metal as he tried to catch me while still knowing vaguely where I was.

The orb was in a room between us, he had to know I was out of ammo but he didn't know if I could reload or not. I had a few seconds grace when I made my move. Creeping around the side, I heard him moving forward cautiously.

"I told you when I first met you that you weren't ready for it, Murk..." I heard him scanning just through the wall from me, through a thin single sheet of insulation. "You've still never tasted freedom, never felt what it is to go free, only within these walls. Even if you went away the victor, you *still* wouldn't know."

Maybe not, Protégé.

I moved backward from the wall I knew he was behind.

But I've got friends who do and who guide me every single day.

I charged. Mustering my strength, I careened right into the wasted wall, powering through it and right into Protégé. His revolver went wild, firing its last shot before it skidded across the floor out of his magic. I tackled him, knocking his smaller weight than most ponies over with my momentum as he collapsed to the floor. I saw the orb just through the door, the bullet hole near it from where he'd just tried to shoot it before I hit him.

He grappled back at me, throwing me over him to land on the frozen floor and crack the full layer of ice. My hind legs bucked out and hit him in the chest before I ran at him again. A hoof of mine was pulled away in his magic, tripping me in front of him before he stamped down. Rolling away, I kicked out at his legs, bringing him down too and leaping atop him to try and pin him down, I had to talk sense into him!

“Stop this madness, please!”

He choked as my foreleg pressed into his throat. I leaned down with all my weight before a dizzying strike on my head knocked me off him. Roaring in a more brutal anger than I'd normally known from him, Protégé stood and rushed at me. Knocking me up and carrying me to smash through two metal panels into the old control room of the station. The orb lay nearby as we collapsed against a long stripped out terminal desk and my head struck its edge hard. I cried out as I felt him over me, striking down as I covered my head and tried to weather it. I felt cold, some blood ran from my head but I realised I was in snow that had washed into this room through the sides that no longer had any walls to the outdoors.

I tried to hit back, but my hooves were knocked aside. My sore eye went blurry, my ears stung horribly and I cried out before throwing the edge of my hoof into his bruised rib from before. With a cry of pain, he fell back and off of me. Slowly, I tried to stagger up in the hard and cracking snow that had frozen into a single solid mass.

“Arrgh...we can all go home together, Protégé! All of us! I don't want to see you held in a chain to Red Eye!”

Protégé struggled up beside me, using the table to get to his hooves and hold his side.

“You...don't understand...he is-”

“Still your master! Break the chain!”

“This *is* my life, Murk!”

“You can't bring yourself to lie that you aren't still his slave!”

I ran at him, but his magic threw the terminal ruins off the desk and into my side. Falling hard, breathless, I saw him rush for the orb. His magic reached out, picking it up.

Picking up a shard of the terminal, I flung it at the orb as it floated toward him. Striking it dead on, the sphere flew up and through one of the bare walls and out into the snow. My yell of exultation was cut short as he turned and bucked me clean in the chest. I fell, coughing up blood as my lungs were flattened before crying out at the agonising surge of burning pain it sent through my ribs.

“You lie there...Murk...” He gasped, trying to steady himself. “Stay...down...”

I gurgled, my lips stained with my own lifeblood. “That's what they've always told me...”

“We all have our place.”

He turned, limping away toward the outside.

"This isn't yours."

He stopped briefly, before continuing. I tried to get up, hacking and spluttering as I closed my right eye. Across each desk, I moved after him.

"Stop getting up, Murk.." He say me keep coming. "*Stop!*"

I fixed my still open eye on him. "You don't want to hurt me...you're being forced to. You could be...better!"

I saw him turn to run and surged forward. My ribs ached, but I got close enough to catch his hind legs. We fell, tired and sore together as we rolled and threw each other against the tables and barriers. Yet every time he kept getting closer to where the orb lay outside. I dove up and over him, pushing him to the ground and sitting my full weight on him.

"Protégé...stop! You want better, I know it!"

"I...I do..." His eyes looked soft for just a second, before hardening. "But...I have my orders to the one I follow. I...I must obey them! Master Red Eye told...gave me this mission!"

"Listen to your-"

His horn glowed, I looked for what I needed to dodge before realising my mistake.

The stun spell caught me unawares. I'd forgotten he'd learned that! My ears cried out in pain as my vision was blinded. Everything went white as the snow all over this mountain and my hearing died to a painful throb and hum. I felt myself thrown off as I screamed and screamed, holding my ears. It was agonising, only growing as the full weight of the audio shock landed home. I rolled on the ground, losing track of where he was.

Gradually, I felt my vision return through tears and blood. Hazily, I saw him outside, limping toward the orb slowly, a trail of blood behind him. A large rock held in his magic.

I'd...I'd never catch up to him with enough strength to strike him when he was armed. My legs were sprained and my torso bleeding from shrapnel.

I moved...spotting stairs to the upper level. One by one, I climbed them until I was stood atop the station. I couldn't gallop, I only had one other option. Yelping in pain as I pulled myself near to the ledge, struggling to stay upright...I waited for the wind.

Glimmerlight...I trust you're right...

The wind changed, its fierce and cutting blow from behind me. With that, I gritted my teeth and endured the pain as I moved the short distance as fast as I could. Moved and *leapt*. Flaring my wings open, I felt the wind catch them and tug horribly upon them. It was painful, less than I'd expected but more than I wanted as the feathers spread and fluttered. My leap from the surface carried me out, falling...falling almost straight down. I felt a vertigo, a fear as the night sky grabbed me in its powerful gales, hurling me away from the station by the surface of my wings. A mere plaything to the whims of the weather. I felt terrified, yet excited. Helpless, but more in control than I was while on the ground.

I flew out, not truly gliding or flying, but simply using my wings like a sail to throw me further as I soared out. The feeling was like a dangerous thrill, mixed with my determination as I saw that rock ahead raise up. No!

I drew my wings in, now falling...I tumbled down, not from high, but enough to accelerate me into a collision directly at Protégé. I *crashed* into him, both of us crying out as my momentum sent us both spiralling over one another across the frozen ice layer of the peak. I felt something in me pull, heard a crack. I was up, then down, then up again. We kept rolling, a horrid impact that dazed us both as we kept falling and sliding...picking up speed as the mountain's peak angled downward. I screamed out as I saw a horribly sharp edge approaching, clawing at the ground with my hooves.

With thankful providence from the Goddesses, I found a rock and clung to it, jarring my shoulder joint as I halted. Protégé slid past and without thinking I reached out to grab him. His hind legs cast off the edge as I felt my shoulder again pulled painfully at stopping his weight.

Our slide stopped...there was a brief moment of silence as we both stared at one another. He knew I'd just saved his life. I knew I'd just stopped him doing what he wanted.

Gradually, he began to climb. Using the rocks to hold his hooves, he started to push onward and upward without so much as a word to me. His teeth gritted, face matted with blood, he pulled himself back toward the orb.

What could I do but follow? Body protesting, a race between two exhausted and weak ponies began as we slowly crawled and pulled our way toward the prize.

"This...can be better, Protégé..." I gasped, trying to reach his hoof before he pulled it out of reach, ahead of me.

"Not...not if Shackles destroys all that Master Red Eye wants..."

"Red Eye will use it himself!"

I gasped and threw myself forward. Edging closer. The orb wasn't far...

"Only...only for the best! I will fight to do what he feels we need!"

"What about *you*?"

He didn't reply as he cried out in pain, his ribs striking a rock before he rolled sideways, trying to get up and get closer to the orb. He staggered, fell, rose again. I limped and heaved my way forward behind him. We were only ten feet away.

Slowly, I saw him slow, his rib giving him bad problems. I used that, pulling ahead, my hooves pulling on rocks. I had endured so much, I could endure more than *him*! My hooves got closer...protect it, take it and force him to see he'd have to kill me to ever dare take it!

His hoof crashed into my head.

I fell back, not even crying out now from pain. It was too far gone. I simply hit back. Throwing my body weight into the strike that knocked him back too. Over the orb, we fought. A fight of long coming, slow and weak blows to two battered bodies.

I wouldn't lose, not now! Not with everypony depending on me!

I rose up, shouting what kind of aggressive roar I could as I crashed into him and knocking him away. He wanted to stop me! He wanted me to be a *slave*! How could I have ever thought him a friend? Right now I *hated* him!

"*How could you?!*" I shrieked at him, "All that intelligence and you're nothing but a follower! After all we've been through this is what you choose? To ruin your life!"

I struck him again, right across the jaw so hard I fell myself.

"You're such a smart and strong pony! You've put your life at risk for slaves! You *tried* to be better! What could you have been if you'd not been his slave? *What could you have been if you weren't here?!*"

He tried to block, I knocked his hoof aside and struck again. Protégé cried out, falling down on his back below me. I stamped on his chest to keep him there, knocking him onto his stomach.

"You took all the Goddesses gave you and you *wasted* it on being a slave to a monster! You could have been a *hero* to the wastes! Doing things for the better, trying to change things! The Stable Dweller, Littlepip...you could've been like her! I always saw that side of you from

when you first fought to help those in danger...”

I cried, I cried out of sheer hurt and rage.

“You could have been so much more with that heroic heart of yours! You could've helped so many! Made a *real* difference! But instead you follow him! You did your two years, you could've escaped! Why did you have to follow him? Why *him?!?*”

He threw himself over, coming off the ground as his face turned toward me. To my shock, his bloody cheeks were run with tears. A painful voice, lost, lonely and weak as he screamed right at me in answer.

“BECAUSE HE'S ALL I'VE GOT!”

He threw himself forward. I fell back from his assault, falling as he clambered over me, his hooves landing on my neck to choke me. I felt fear crawl as much as the revulsion that he felt so lost in this world that he had to sub-serve just to find a meaning! I tried to croak out to him, get him to stop. My hooves flailed, trying to hit him.

They felt something. Something heavy.

I felt my vision darken with his weight above me on my neck. I choked, coughed and stared at him with panic ridden eyes as my hooves clutched the item and brought it surging up until the rock I'd grabbed struck his forehead.

Immediately, he fell off me. The dull *thwock* of the impact sounding terrible to my ears as I choked and threw up in the snow, trying to get air in.

In front of my, Protégé slumped, looking dazed. I found myself glad the blow hadn't done worse.

“I don't...I don't have...”

Moving slowly, I lifted his head up to help him from lying with his mouth in the snow. He was dizzy, looking everywhere, likely losing consciousness.

I trembled. I had hated him...I should have felt no pain for him. Yet I knew that look in his eyes that told me everything.

“I know...”

Slowly, he looked up at me, before his eyes rolled back and he blacked out, leaving me alone to think on the mountaintop.

I fell back, tired beyond measure as my hooves felt the orb and held it close.

"I know..."

* * *

I wasn't going to leave him. For all that had happened I could not bring myself to just leave Protégé lying on the mountainside. With great effort, I dragged him behind me back to the station for at least some shelter. The orb was in my saddlebag.

It was only a short journey back to the station...but it felt like climbing the mountain all over again. My mind was a whirling ball of emotions and confusion.

I hated him. I cared for him.

I wanted to escape him. I wanted him free.

He was an enemy. He was an ally...or so I had maybe liked to think. I wasn't sure about that now.

All I knew was that I didn't want him dead. I couldn't do that to someone who was where I'd been. Gently I left him propped up in the centre of the station and resisted the temptation to pass out myself.

So there I waited until I heard the voice...

"Murky!"

Out in the snow. Not too distant.

"Murky!"

Getting my bruised and pained body up, I hobbled to the door and glanced out into the night air before feeling my spirits lift and fall almost simultaneously.

Out there, I saw Glimmerlight slowly trotting toward me through the snow.

Behind her, I saw the slavers waiting...along with Chainlink Shackles at their head. Big Brutus stood beside the dragged form of Brimstone Blitz while Wildcard and Grindstone flanked him. I saw my friends chained down entirely other than Glimmerlight.

She saw me, her eyes changing to that of relief as she caught my eye. They'd stripped

her of weapons, leaving only her saddlebag to have to cart up to this peak.

"Thank goodness, you're alive..." she spoke somewhat weakly, no doubt the trek up here on her bandaged chest had been hell, "Murky, I'm so sorry...they've sent me forward to...to..."

Glimmer looked pained to say it.

"To get you...to bring you in without a fight. If...if you don't they'll..."

Behind her, I could see Shackles with that shotgun hanging ready. A flash of remembering Grizzly below it sent a wave of panic through me as I trotted as best I could toward my sister. No...no I wouldn't have them threaten her, not now.

I give myself up...

Reaching her, I fell into my sister's grasp. Both of us hugged as tightly as injuries allowed.

"Did you get it?" She whispered.

"Y-yes...Protégé's hurt in there..." I whispered back, my hooves falling on her saddlebag briefly. Holding myself close to it. "I got it...it's safe..."

She sighed and leaned against my head. "Then that's something."

Behind her, I heard the stomping as *he* approached. Slowly, I pushed myself away from Glimmerlight and meekly moved his way. He stood so tall...the smell overpowering of wax, grease and filth as he grinned and loomed over me on his approach.

"Murky!"

Glimmer snapped at me, drawing my eyes away from him.

"Doctor's orders...trot like a pegasus." She offered what smile she could.

I knew what she meant. Turning, I put my head high, proud and confident as I trotted toward Shackles to meet him. He didn't strike me, I was in no condition to be hit right now. Instead he merely cackled as I felt the collar snap hold.

Yet this time, I did not let it weigh me down.

"Welcome back, little slave, heh...we've got a lot of breaking in to do."

I looked upward, seeing his eyes before his hoof roughly pushed mine away. I expected anger, I only got laughter.

“So proud of yourself...we'll see how long that lasts. Hand over the orb.”

I didn't hesitate. Learn from Sunny, Murky. Play the part...

My hooves drew it from my saddlebag, holding it up to him before Grindstone took it, trotting around us.

“Very good, all intact. Seems my first impression of you being useless when you were first dumped with me wasn't entirely true.”

Shackles smiled at that, while Grindstone merely coughed and put the orb away in his own bag.

“I hope you won't mind lending him to me, Shackles. After all...we do have something I think their little band might be useful for...”

Glimmer and I shared a glance as another slaver chained her up again. Wait, what?

“Only as long as it takes, Grindstone.” Shackles turned and roughly patted me with a hoof.

I squinted in pain, whimpering at my injuries were knocked.

“Do not look upon your *Master!*”

His hoof struck a little harder, knocking my face down. The reminder of his strength after I'd struggled so hard to beat a small injured unicorn was terrifying. A pony I couldn't ever fight. A monster of slavery I could only run from.

Then I'd run. I'd never see him again at the end...somehow.

Yet now I felt him grab me, tilting my head up as I was lifted from my hooves. The sweaty thick goat of his sliding across me as I was crushed and held tight to his cheek, looking to the beautiful stars so far away.

“Take a good look at them, Number Seven.” His voice was so quiet, dripping with satisfaction. “You got so high, but you're going down now. You're coming down with me, down this mountain. Down the valley. Down into Fillydelphia and back to the ground you crawled up from.”

His hoof squeezed me until I whined in pain. It was so big, crushing my face.

“Then down even further. Below the surface. I'll drag you from this freedom above until you never see it again. Once Grindstone's done and you're back with **me** you'll never even see the clouds again, little slave.”

Turning, sliding across my cheek as his forehead pressed against mine he gave me a rancid smell of his breath as he looked into my fearful eyes.

“Down...down...down...deep into the heart. It's all ready and waiting for you now...”

He dropped me. I fell to my side and curled up, wiping my face and trying to fight the fear of his hoof crashing down from that monolithic presence he bore above me.

That presence that if I looked up, barred my way to Luna's elusive night above.

Yet no matter how ignominious this was to be taken away as prisoners, we had done it. We'd gotten here. Through violence, the elements, strife, loss, pain and tragedy we had come here and I had gotten to the sky. I had seen it. That alone was a prize.

Then my collar was tugged, making me choke as it was pulled forward.

“Number Seven and I have much work to do. The circle continues...heh...”

We were led away. Myself humiliatingly dragged or pulled behind him. I knew what he was doing. He wasn't going to be rough or brutal now. He was letting my mind worry, letting it build up the fear of what he would do when we got 'home.' He thought me all ready to be broken and accepting of his ways all over again.

Let him think that.

Aurora, I won't let you down.

* * *

I was thrown into the train carriage and the door slammed shut behind me.

I'd been somewhat treated and wrapped in magical bandages after a nearly forced serving of RadAway. He'd been there every time, slapping me back into line. Knocking my head down every time I tried to resist. He seemed happy...happy to have me, happy to see that he could break me all over again.

The thought of my rebellious nature now being broken was as humiliating as anything to

imagine.

In the dark, I heard a movement, before hooves wrapped around my neck.

“Murky, I'm so sorry...”

Unity! I happily shared the hug back, as she led me through the dark into a corner where we sat together. She supported me as my tired body collapsed below me.

“Where...where are...” I mouthed, still trying to get my strength back.

“In the other carriages. I saw them loading Protégé on too. Is...is he-”

“No...”

She held me a little closer and I felt no shame in letting my head rest on her neck. We were equals, both the kind of pony that needed a little reassurance in somepony else occasionally. I knew she'd understand.

Below us, the rattle of the train starting up to return us to Fillydelphia sent an uncomfortable vibration through the carriage. There in the dark, we simply sat and rested. As the steep gradients began, I felt her sniff.

“I...I guess we were wrong...” she sighed, “Fillydelphia wins again...”

That hung in the air for a few seconds, before I felt a small rush of belief and creaked the edges of my mouth upward.

“No...it didn't.”

Her eyes shot open, barely visible in the low light.

“What? But...but they-”

I smiled to her, the best smile I'd given since we left.

“All they have is one of Glimmer's old memory orbs.”

Atop the mountain, being stared down by every slaver, they had made the mistake of trying to upset me by having my sister come collect me. He'd been trying to break me by playing his usual mind games to make it all seem worse and instead gave me the exact tool I needed for keeping the orb out of his grasp. It now lay in Glimmer's saddlebag amongst dozens of similar orbs, too similar for them to know. They'd never seen it, never known what it looked

like to realise the difference.

We'd come up here and we'd gotten it. Against all the odds, we had actually done it.

"We won, Unity...we...we won. When we get back we're going to finally get out of here. Whatever Grindstone has for us, we'll get through it as one and then we'll make it happen. This...this is it. This is what Aurora's legacy will be."

I coughed, but I still smiled afterward.

"The escape starts now."

* * *

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Child of the Sky – When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk Equestria with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been and there you will always long to return. While you have not truly flown, it is a beginning, a feeling to want more. Your wings double their base resistance to crippling.