

Objects and Images

[Losing a friend's trust is the fastest way to lose a friend forever.]

“Breeze? Breeze can you hear me?” Naiara, with me struggling behind her, was racing around the hotel rooftop, trying to re-establish contact with Breeze through the device held to her ear.

My tired and confused self couldn't keep up with her. “Naiara,” I puffed out, “what's going on?”

“I don't know.” Her jaw was set firm as she moved. “I was talking to Breeze and it just cut off. Do you think she's in trouble?”

I'd only caught the tail end of their conversation, but that didn't seem unlikely. “Did she say what she was doing? Was anybody with her?”

Having explored every inch of the roof for the best position, Naiara finally stopped and shook her head, worry evident on her face. “She didn't mention anyone, and I didn't hear any other voices. There was a lot of noise, though, and it just stopped mid-sentence like that.”

A chilling thought came to mind, given the last few times Breeze had been with Naiara and I. “You don't think it's Plottawa? Or the Rangers?”

Her jade eyes darkened at the idea, but she finally shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I don’t think I heard gunshots. It was more like rumbling. Plus, remember what she said at the end? ‘La Buque’. It’s a series of smallish canyons. There isn’t even anything there, I’m not sure why she’d go in the first place.”

“So why was she alone? Why didn’t she take Cassie, Wings or Schwarzwald?”

Still looking at the silent device, the zebra just shrugged. “I don’t know. She could have called me, too. La Buque isn’t that far from Lethbride. It’s to the southwest, but not so far as to reach Undertow’s lake. We were only a few hours outside of it at one point.”

I blinked, surprised at the proximity. “Really? Should we ask Undertow about it?”

Naiara made a face. “She probably won’t know. She isn’t the travelling type. Breeze probably knows it better than she does.”

“And she definitely didn’t mention what she was doing there?”

“No, but it must be important. Even if it is out of the way, she might still get caught on her own and end up in trouble... like now, basically.”

Finally an easy decision. “Then let’s go find her.”

Barely hiding a smirk, as if she’d expected this all along, Naiara looked up. “Even

though she said to stay away? Probably trying to warn us of some danger?”

I smiled back, happy to be doing something straightforward for once. “She’s your friend. We can’t exactly leave her if she’s in trouble.”

A measured stare was given. “She’s not your friend?”

I twisted my hoof back and forth in a ‘yes and no’ motion. “She’s... getting there. I mean, we’ve literally fought each other hoof and nail in the past.” I began ticking things off with my hooves, “She’s tried to mug me, electrocuted me, hit me with magic, but... on the other hoof, she’s saved me at Grindstone, and Neighlway, and wasn’t there when her sister stole my Pipbuck and Memory Orb...”

I shrugged, the scales weren’t tipping wildly in either direction. “Eh, she’s your friend. That’ll do for now. Let’s go rescue her.”

“And what about Undertow?”

I airily waved a hoof. “Well of course Undertow’s my friend. She can be Breeze’s friend too.”

Naiara facehoofed. “No, I mean what about Undertow’s ‘diving lights’? She’s not going to leave without getting them back.”

Whoops. “Oh, right. Yeah, that’s a good point. We can always come back though,

Breeze needs us right now. We've got time for the Raider stuff. I'm sure Undertow'll understand."

"Well alright, I'm glad we're going quickly, but just to be sure... you can tell Undertow that she'll have to wait,*Lady Ice*."

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A dozen bottles of irradiated water rose off the table in the hotel cafeteria. "We... are not getting my diving lights back, Lady Ice?"

As one, Bosco, Naiara and I eased back from the table. "Easy now, Undertow, remember that the rest of us still get sick from that water."

The bottles, thankfully still sealed, very slowly descended back to the table. I'd said one line and it'd set her off immediately. "My apologies, Lady Ice, but you promised to help me get my diving lights back."

"I know," I soothed, "but you heard Inbox. He's not going to get rid of the Orbs any time soon. Breeze needs us now. I'm really sorry, but this can't wait."

As she looked at each of us in turn, Naiara sweetened the deal. "Look, 'tow. If it helps, I was talking to Breeze about you, and she thinks she can help with your diving lights. She's really good with all sorts of technology. She might be able to help you find another set of lights. I mean, those ones do kinda belong to the

ghoul.”

“Oh yeah, they do...” I muttered.

The zebra continued as if she hadn’t heard me. “Breeze can make all kinds of gadgets. She might be able to make some lights for you that aren’t those Memory Orbs. If she does, you can get the Deep Divers back on your side again.” She tactfully neglected to mention the Raider alliance I was trying to create, which would have muddled the issue even further.

It tore at my heart as her shoulders slumped, and I thought I saw her lip start quivering. If her eyes weren’t permanently hidden behind those goggles, I was sure I’d be seeing her eyes watering. “But... my lake... the Deep Divers...”

“Will not hurt you,” I stressed, “I won’t let them. If you want to go back to your lake, I’ll make sure you get back safe and sound. Please, please just wait a little while longer.”

After several seconds, Undertow wordlessly rose and began packing the bottles of water into her saddlebags. Taking that as an affirmative, the rest of us stood up too. “You’re the best, Undertow.”

There was the tiniest unbunching of her shoulders. “We... should hurry.”

As she left, I pulled Naiara and Bosco back slightly. “Listen, when we find Breeze,

just... try not to mention that Undertow's kind of a Raider."

The two exchanged glances. "Why?"

"Um..." regardless of my feelings towards Cassie, this wasn't the sort of secret I just went about blabbing. It wouldn't be fair to Breeze, "I can't explain now, but Cassie hates Raiders. Like *really* hates them. I have to think that Breeze might too. We don't want any... overreactions."

I received two pointed looks. "From who?"

"... Let's just say we shouldn't tell her."

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Undertow, while still not straying far from me, had been acting sullen and disappointed ever since we left Lethbridle, despite my repeated assurances that we'd be back to get the Memory Orbs as soon as we could.

When we stopped for a rest, hours into our brisk stride, I'd seen a golden opportunity to mend some fences, as well as prepare for the upcoming situation.

As Bosco was grilling Naiara for some information about Breeze, who he'd be meeting for the first time, *hopefully, at least*, I called out to the Deep Diver as she laid out her possessions. "Undertow?"

She stopped working, but didn't turn around. "Yes, Lady Ice?"

I'd noticed that she hadn't once called me 'Lady Snow' since I'd given her the bad news, when she'd broken her silence at all.

On the plus side, since it seemed like she was mostly blaming me, Bosco and Naiara were treated with the cautious, but growing, curiosity and general politeness that she'd always shown them.

I hoped she would soon open up to them properly. Naiara already loved to see her acting adorable, and Bosco wouldn't last long if Undertow turned on the charm. "I need your help."

Now she did turn around, giving me a look that, even while hidden behind goggles and damp turquoise mane, came off as surprised. "My help?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I need to become a better fighter. I'm useless with guns and can't fight hoof-to-hoof, so I need to be able to fight with my magic."

I absent-mindedly reached up and rubbed my horn. "Right now, my magic is not strong enough to allow me to fight well enough that I can avoid... the worst outcomes."

She cocked her head to the side, confused. "I do not understand, Lady Ice. You are

extremely strong. If not, you would not have defeated me at the lake.”

“Undertow,” I hesitated, trying to find a diplomatic way to word what I would say next, “... I got lucky. My magic is ice magic, and you are a water user. I had a natural advantage. Even so, you’re still a far stronger magic user than I am. The only reason I was able to use my one single spell on you was because of Naiara’s agility and Bosco’s smarts.”

The Deep Diver was fully facing me now, sitting with her hind legs spread, like a foal. “Lady Ice... what are you telling me?”

I rubbed a hoof into my tired eyes. “I’m telling you that I’ve survived longer than I should have, and others have not, because I’ve been very lucky several times, and very fortunate that I have strong friends. I always end up needing my friends’ help... and I can’t do anything for them.”

I felt a small pang when I imploringly reached out a hoof to her and she shied away from it slightly. “I’m a bad shot, and useless with my hooves. My magic is the only way I can fight, and I can’t use it well enough to protect everything I want to. You, on the other hand, can control all that water without getting out of bed. I need you to teach me.”

Her jaw dropped. “You... need me? To teach you?”

I nodded again, unable to hide my shame. “Yes. I’m so sorry that I didn’t tell you

earlier. You asked me to protect you, and I acted like I could. However, the truth is that I don't know if I can. Bosco told you before that I have caused him a lot of trouble, and he's right. I've caused him trouble, I've caused Naiara trouble, we're going to see Aqua Breeze, and I've caused her trouble too. Clearly, I've caused you lots of trouble..."

"That's not true, Lady Snow!"

"Thank you, Undertow, but it is. All the friends that I've made, you included, I've put in danger, again and again. All the enemies I've made are stronger than I can handle. Just ask Naiara or Bosco what happened in Plottawa with a stallion named Peanut sometime, it's a really good example, especially since it's when I became Red Ice."

I stepped forward and reached out again. She didn't move away from my hoof this time, just watched it, dumbfounded, as I lay it on her shoulder. I put the other hoof under her chin, to draw her goggled visage back to mine, wanting her to see truth of the matter in my haggard, awake-for-days, bloodshot eyes. "I'm begging you, Undertow, please... teach me how to use better magic. You are the strongest Unicorn I know. You control water, I use ice. There's a connection there, and I have to, *I have to* become stronger so that I can protect you, Bosco, Naiara, Breeze and any others that I need to."

She needed to know the truth, now, before this went any further. As soon as we find

out what happened to Breeze, Undertow will need to make the decision about the Raider alliance herself, with all the facts. 'Lady Snow' is not the one to make her decisions for her.

“I... I’ve never taught another. I only know how the water moves for me. The Taint made it so that the water is part of me. I-I don’t know how I would help you with your ice, Lady Snow!”

I hated seeing her looking so trapped, she was even quivering! But I couldn’t stop now, this was my best chance. *She* was my best chance. “Please,” I stressed again, begging, “I trust you, *Lady Undertow*. You’re more than capable of this. Can we please just try?”

I’d shaken her deep to her core. I could almost see the thought process: This wasn’t the way it was supposed to go. She thought I was stronger than her, and I’d promised to protect her. If it turned out that I wasn’t strong, then what protection could I offer?

I’ve made her vulnerable. She knows this isn’t my territory. I don’t have authority here, and therefore my protection is worth nothing. I’ve taken a girl from her home, her place of strength, and dropped her into a big, bad world with nothing but lies and false promises.

Heh, and now I’m asking her for help.

A helpless glance was sent towards Naiara and Bosco, who'd long since ceased their own conversation and had been watching us.

Naiara, somehow, gave a bright smile. "Your big sister needs help, Undertow. You're not gonna say no, are ya?"

I frowned at that. The joke was cute at other times, but milking it right now seemed unfair.

Bosco took the more pragmatic approach. "Don't listen to Snowflake, Undertow. We need her, and she needs you. Please give her some help."

We were ganging up on her, and it wasn't fair. I made to take my hoof from her shoulder, but a pair of sea-blue limbs shot out and grabbed it as it withdrew.

Startled, my balance was disrupted, and I instinctually pulled the hoof towards me, dragging the other unicorn with it, so we ended up with her face buried in my chest, and my hoof wrapped protectively around her.

"-dy Snow?" She'd been mumbling into my chest, but that was all I'd made out. It was similar to how she'd acted in the crowd at the market.

"Undertow?"

"You promised to protect me. Do you promise to become stronger than anypony

else, Lady Snow?”

It was incredible how small she looked just then. I hadn't been exaggerating before. She was an incredibly gifted unicorn, to move water with such power and ease, but all I could think of at that moment was that she looked so much like my brother, Lo, back when we were very young.

The day he finally understood that his mother wouldn't wake up again.

I'd have promised Lo anything then, and I would have meant every word. For the rest of my life, I'd have kept the promise I made then.

I'm gonna mean it just as much now.

“Yeah, Lady Undertow, I'll become stronger than anybody else, and I will never let you come to harm.”

With misting goggles, she finally gave a short nod. “Very well.”

We were all silent for a few moments, as Undertow and I each managed a soft smile.

“Although,” Bosco's flat drawl began, “that's gonna mean that Snow's gonna have to be stronger than Un-OW! Than Under-OW! OW! Why are you kicking me?”

Naiara kept on kicking, staying on him as he jumped away. “You totally ruined the

moment, you jerk!”

“OW! Naiara! Leave me alone!”

“Yes, Undertow.” I answered her unspoken question, as we watched the zebra chase the colt around the clearing. “Naiara and Bosco are friends. This sometimes happens between friends. When it does, just go ahead and laugh.”

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We were in a hurry, so there was no time to sit around for a protracted learning session. That made Undertow’s first lesson a mobile endeavour. “What magic do you know, Lady Snow? You mentioned that you only had one spell.”

“Right.” I sighed, embarrassed, “My Cryo Serpent. It’s a sorta ice trail that spreads out from what my horn is touching. I... can’t really control it too well yet.”

“This Cryo Serpent was the spell you used against my water shield?”

Shrugging, I tried not to act like I’d done anything special, which I hadn’t. “Basically. I fired it point blank range when I fought you, so I didn’t need to control it. I just let it spread across the water anyway it wanted.”

“I... see.” *Yeah, you got beat by an idiot caster with a half-formed spell. Sorry about the damage to your ego, Undertow.*

“So what do you think? Any ideas, Undertow?”

“Let me think for a moment.” She turned her attention inward, focusing hard on the task at hand, though still taking care to watch where she was going. Keeping her awareness at all times was probably needed if you wanted to dive underwater.

I left her to her thoughts and trotted a bit faster, catching up with the others.

“How’re we doing?”

Naiara had been periodically testing her communicator for any word from Breeze.

So far, there’d been nothing. “Not far now. Maybe an hour.” She clicked the device again. There was only static.

After a few seconds, she switched it off, and we lapsed into silence. Naiara kept walking, increasing her pace ever so slightly.

“We’ll find her.” Bosco’s usual business-like tone was gone, and in its place was a soft, comforting rumble. He sped up to keep pace with the zebra girl. He was being pretty tactful about the whole thing, not trying to cover up any doubts with a wall of words, which was hardly his style anyway, but instead just making sure that Naiara always had somebody to talk with in case anything occurred to her on the way. Since I’d been so absorbed with Undertow, I’d not been available too much.

I owed the colt a few drinks, for making sure Naiara wasn't fretting about her friend alone.

Naiara herself managed a nod at his words. "Yeah. Cept'd never forgive me if I didn't. He thinks she's cute."

"Oh yeah?" Bosco was no gossip by nature, but the enthusiasm in his voice wasn't the least genuine I'd ever heard.

"Big time. I think it's the wings. We don't get those back home." She bounced up and down a little bit to accompany her words. It was apparent that she was still worried, but seemed to appreciate the distraction.

Quickly checking that Undertow was still with us, even with her inward contemplation, which she was, I weighed in. "So tell us a little bit more about Cept."

Surprisingly, she shook her head. "Nuh-uh. Not my place. Cept'll show up sometime in the near future, you can ask him then. I'm not telling you anything until then."

"Except that he's got a crush on a tech head Pegasus." Bosco's deadpan was practiced.

“Well yeah, but that’s really juicy. Besides, that’s not something he could hide if you ever saw the two of them together.”

Sensing that it was unlikely that he’d learn much more about the zebra in the Wasteland right now, Bosco wisely let it drop. “Fair enough, his secrets are his own. I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

I had to roll my eyes at that.

“So tell me a little more about Breeze,” he continued, quickly throwing up hooves in an ‘easy now’ motion at her questioning look, “Just enough so I can help find her quickly. Looks, what she might have on her, what she might’ve been doing, stuff like that.”

“I would like to know too, so that our chances are the best they will be for finding Aqua Breeze.” Undertow’s liquid tones were slightly robotic, as if she was still focusing attention elsewhere. Still, it put to rest any doubts I had about her concentration.

“For all we know, she’s wearing the Steel Ranger armour she got from Cept. Best bet is look for blue feathers, she’s a blue-on-blue Pegasus, or some random tech lying around. We’ll try to find her quietly first. If she’s not alone, we don’t want to tip them off. Still, as soon as we think we’re safe, start hollering for her at the top of your lungs. Just call out Breeze, it’s faster.”



“I understand. Um... Naiara?”

“Yeah, Undertow?”

“Would you like a hug?”

*Oh, that is precious. Just look at Naiara, she doesn't even know whether to laugh or cry.*

She elected for half of both. Letting out a chuckle as she discreetly wiped her eyes, Naiara spoke up without turning back. “Thanks, Undertow, but I’m oka-” she stopped suddenly as a thought struck her. Whatever the thought was, it brought a sly smile to her face. “Tell you what, save that hug for Breeze, when you meet her. It’ll make her day.”

“Oh... very well.” The Deep Diver turned back to me, “Lady Snow, shall we begin the lesson?”

“Just a second, Undertow.”

I gave a quizzical glance to the grinning zebra, before dropping my voice to a whisper. “Breeze isn’t going to know who she is. She’ll freak if Undertow tries to hug her.”

“Hah, I know!” At my disapproving frown, she relented, “I’m not gonna let either

of them get hurt, big sis, it's just for a laugh.”

“ ... ”

“Lady Snow?”

“Oh, right. Coming, Undertow.” I stopped to wait for her to catch up, while Bosco and Naiara continued on, talking quietly among themselves.

“Think she wants her for a sister?”

“Which one?”

“Either.”

“Well...”

Undertow caught up, diverting my attention to her. I fell into step with her as she drew level. “Did you think of something for me to try?”

A bottle of irradiated water floated out of her bag in an aquamarine haze, and the top began to unfasten. “I believe so. You mentioned that your horn must be touching whatever it is you wish to affect with your serpent spell. I believe it best to work on your magical range first.”

The bottle cap popped off, and was swiftly pocketed, while a small volume of

water rose from the bottle, undulating like a snake, before turning and moving towards me.

I looked up, almost going cross-eyed, as the watery sliver spun into a ring around my horn, never touching, but following as I moved my head. The inner wall of the ring was less than an inch from my horn itself. “What’s this?”

“It is a way for you to practice. I will hold the water so that it will never touch your horn. You will try to freeze it with your magic. If you can do that, I will widen the ring. It will get wider each time. I am sure you will master it immediately, Lady Snow.” I’d never ‘mastered’ a single piece of magic in my life, even back before I had a magical blowout in the Stable.

*Although... there have been times when I managed something different. My first fight out of the Stable, and that chubby guy outside of Vanchoofer... Huh, come to think of it, those both happened with Raiders around. Undertow’s... kind of a Raider. I’ll take any straws I can grasp at here.*

*Okay, here we go...*

I closed my eyes... then almost immediately opened them again as my lack of sleep brought on a wave of nausea. I kept my pace, but hesitated at first, taking several deep breaths.

Matching my step, Undertow said nothing, merely kept her horn glowing, and the

ring of water slowly revolving around my horn, never faltering.

Marvelling at her control, and keeping the aquamarine haze in my peripheral vision, I concentrated, slowly but surely working my horn up to full force, with my own glacial glow emerging in the centre of the sea-blue circle.

Holding that glow for a moment, I made no move to actually attempt to cast a spell. I had no spell to cast. I wasn't trying to use my Cryo Serpent, I was trying to form new magic, albeit on a basic level. I thought about nothing but the ring around my horn, trying to focus everything I had on it.

"Freeze." I muttered.

It didn't. It just kept slowly revolving, still as liquid as ever.

"Freeze!" I pumped more effort into my magic. The tip of my horn began to glow brighter than the rest, and the air began to cool, but still the water remained unaffected.

I glanced over at Undertow, but I couldn't read her face behind those goggles.

"Don't stop, Lady Snow."

"Alright." I ground out, my horn pulsing brighter and brighter. I was giving it everything I had.

“No, wait, that’s not what I…”

A rolling mist burst from my horn, travelling back down my body, instantly soaking every inch. “Gaah!” My concentration faltered, as did my walking pace, and the glow from my horn faded, leaving just Undertow’s aquamarine aura.

The water remained entirely unaffected.

At my disgruntled grunt, Undertow’s water ring lifted from around my horn and rolled through the air between us. “More power is not the answer here, Lady Snow. That will come later. First you must train your magic to recognise your surroundings, and have your unicorn abilities interact with them.”

The water ring returned to my horn. “Look. You see that the ring is not your horn, correct?”

“Right…”

“Nor is it mine. We recognise that it is separate from either. Just as it floats in the air, but is not the air. Your eyes see that they are different, yes?”

“…Yes.”

She reached up a hoof and tapped her own horn. “As your eyes can see, so can your magic. I am not attempting to move all of the air, just that water within the air.

Your magic need not travel through all that air simply to reach the water. You merely have to notice the difference between them, and choose which you wish to affect.”

“I... have never thought about it like that. How did you think that up?” *She’s got a point. It’s like how my horn glows when I use magic, instead of my entire body.*

Undertow’s rebreather shifted as her hoof rubbed across it. “It was a lesson I learned soon after reaching the lake, the first time I went under the water. My magic aids me greatly when I dive, but it cannot bear the weight of the entire lake at once.” Both her head and the corners of her mouth drooped downwards as she relived the memory, “I almost lost my life that day. My magic was overwhelmed through the effort, and I only survived through my rebreather. I did not attempt another dive for weeks.”

*Reminds me of the medical bay after the Memory Orb. I’d say I’d been overwhelmed.* I hadn’t really considered the possibility that I might not have woken up from that cold snap until now. My own out of control magic might have killed me.

Covered eyes rose again. “I, and my magic, love the water, but I couldn’t do nearly as much as I can now. It took practice, and thought, and time. I believe that you will learn faster than I did, and I will try to aid you in sidestepping the mistakes I made, but it will not happen all at once.”

Despite the gravity of her words, I couldn't help but smile. "Even though you said I'd master it immediately a little while ago."

Blushing, she flashed an embarrassed smile. "I... merely meant to bolster your confidence. You truly are strong, Lady Snow, I just...um..."

*It is impossible to stay mad at this girl.* I grabbed her in an affectionate hug. "Don't worry, Undertow, I really appreciate it. Come on, help me get strong enough to protect you."

Relief flooded over her features. "Of course, Lady Snow." She pointed back to the water ring, "As I said, try to focus on the water itself, separate from the air around it."

"Aye aye." My horn lit up again, but much gentler this time. Trying to force the magic had done nothing but gotten me wet and given me a headache. It wasn't about strength yet.

I was finally getting some basic magic teaching. Any help I might've been given in the Stable was years and years ago, and had long since been forgotten through lack of practice. All I'd been able to do back then was make ice cubes, and that took months of self-'teaching'.

*Still, I didn't need to dip my horn in the damn tray to do that, so I must've figured*

*out a way somehow. With Undertow helping me, I'm sure I can do it again. And I'm gonna, for her sake, and everybody else's.* Buoyed slightly by the magic I'd once wielded, however little, I set to work again.

What did my magic feel like? I'd never thought about it before. It was difficult to pin down the sensations I could feel in my horn, especially as weak as they were now. Still, there was a definite feeling there, and I lapsed into silence as I tried to pin down the experience. Bosco and Naiara were still ahead of us, but Undertow stayed with me as I walked, since little of my concentration was on my hoof-falls.

*It's... um... flat? No, that's not right... jagged? No, still not right. It's... it's like a crystal, except... more fluid. Sort of. There's cold there, and it's crisp. It's... like ice. There's no other way to describe it.*

I gasped as I felt my horn pulse in response to my thoughts. Happy as I was to make even that simple tautological breakthrough, ice magic being like ice, I still had a more difficult task ahead.

I still had to recognise the water.

Forgoing my horn, where the glow had faded to a dull imbue, I tried to focus outwards. As soon as I moved my magic sense away from my horn, I fell into nothingness. I almost panicked right there. I knew I was looking at the air, but it was so empty from my horn's eye. I couldn't find anything, it was like a void,



empty of all purpose.

*No, I realised after more probing, there IS something there. It's different from the air, and my magic. My ice is... harder, more solid. This is... it's like it keeps slipping through my 'hooves'. It's free, and wild, but also calm. There's... um... I dunno. It kinda feels like there's more there, but it's not obvious how. It's close too, really close.*

*IT'S THE RING! I found it!*

“Excellent, Lady Snow!” Undertow’s excited and encouraging voice came in from outside of my sight, which had fallen into tunnel vision as I looked inward, “Now try to touch it with your magic. Don’t attack it, just reach out.”

Buoyed by her words, I fell back into the magic sense, seeking again for the sensation of the water. However, in my excitement at finding it the first time...

“It was right there! I had it!” ...it was proving difficult to re-locate the water ring.

“I know,” she soothed, “stay calm. It will come.”

“But it was right theeeeeere.” I was whining, but I didn’t care.

“It is *still* right there, lady Ice,” The slight rebuke made it clear that my complaining wasn’t productive, “Don’t think of your magic and your other senses

as separate. Use your eyes. You know where the water ring is. You can see it. Your magic can follow your eyes. Just keep trying. You already succeeded once, you will again.”

Following her advice, and mindful of her warning, especially since she was the one with a magic ring perilously close to my horn, I blinked away tears of tiredness-fueled melodrama, then glanced upwards at the shining ring.

*Hokay, so it's right there. I can see it. Sooo, that's the way I need to send my magic through the air void. Simple enough... I hope.*

And, comparatively at least, it was. Instead of fumbling blindly in the dark, I had a direction for my fledgling magic sense to head. It took only seconds until I found the change again. It was like recognising when you move from walking on soil to walking on stone, similar but different.

I'd found the ring again, and let my magic sense explore it as much as possible. The influx of sensations I got back were far more than I could really understand, but the basic gist was becoming clearer.

*Now for the tricky part...* Taking my own crystalline-tasting ice magic, I imagined it stretching out, reaching, from the familiarity of my horn, through the blind emptiness, until it reached the liquid circlet. I was almost there, just metaphorical and metaphysical inches from my ice making contact with the water, when

something strange happened.

I found I could probe no further.

I had the location down pat, both in my eyes and with my horn. My magic *had* reached the ring. It had travelled away from my glowing horn and found something to touch outside of my immediate influence.

Except... it couldn't touch it. Wherever I probed, the magic sense reached no further.

My heart sank as I tried to withdraw my touch, disappointment swallowing my desire to continue.

"No, Lady Snow," Warmth existed in those words, but it was definitely an order, "we are not yet finished here."

"What? Why? I can't go any further. I've tried all over and I can't get through."

My companion would not be dissuaded. Her one-word answer brought me back to the matter.

"Why?"

*Hell if I know. I really thought I had it. I mean, I can see the water just fine, it's running around and around my horn. And my magic can feel it too, even away from*

*my body. But for some reason, I can't touch it. It's like there's something in the wa-it a minute now. Is she hinting at what I think she's hinting at?*

Once again demonstrating her incredible poker face, Undertow gave nothing away. I opened my mouth to speak, but her brows creased in a frown the moment I did. Back to the magic sense I went.

Curious now, I was so focused on the water that I felt my nose growing wet. Finding it again took a full minute, which worried me slightly. I was so close to doing this right, and I didn't want to stop since Undertow's lesson was going so well.

Reaching out again, my magic found its way to the ring for a third time. As before, I probed around the edges, looking for an opening. And, as before, I found none. There was definitely a barrier around the water.

Withdrawing my focus from the liquid itself, I turned it back on the area around the water, seeking confirmation of my growing suspicions. The feel of the water was strong, far more so than the feel of my ice magic. It was like it was more... concentrated.

Stymied, I relaxed slightly, and let my magic follow the flow that the water was creating, like a wake, or a slip stream,

*Or an undertow.*

There it was. I knew there was something going on. Extra information filtered back down my magical connection, surprising me: The smell of wet pony, the slippery elusiveness of the water, but not only that. There was something else there, something reminiscent of how my ice magic felt, but still very much the water, too. A bridge between them, between mystical ice and physical water, neither one or the other, nor both at once, but borrowing from each and forming its own identity.

There was a resonance with my magic, as if the two were connected somehow.

It reacted to my touch. While maintaining its hold on the water, the ‘barrier’ seemed to open voluntarily, as if inviting me in. Reminiscent of how our after-battle first meeting had begun, it was clear what the barrier really was.

Undertow’s water magic was inviting me in.

Cheered, I moved forward eagerly, which proved to be disastrous. I got only the faintest touch at the physical water before the entire enterprise collapsed. My magic shut off like a closed valve, and my eyes refocused on the world around us.

The water splashed down onto my forehead as my knees buckled, its levitator having abandoned her task to rush forward and prevent my fall.

Blowing drops from my lips as I leaned into her, I looked up gratefully at the Deep Diver. “I felt you.”

You could have read by the light of her smile. “And I you.”

Gingerly, I reached up and brushed some of the water away from my fur, it was still irradiated after all, and I didn’t have Undertow’s natural resistance. For a moment, I thought I heard the snap of ice breaking around my horn, but some probing provided nothing but more water.

*Must have been my imagination.* Still, even as I sniffled my wet nose, I felt rather pleased about the whole thing.

“Shall we keep going, Undertow?”

She didn’t meet my eyes. “Um... perhaps not, Lady Snow.”

“What, why?” I thought I’d been doing pretty well.

Gingerly, a sea-blue hoof wiped fluid from my nostrils.

The fluid was red. My nose had been bleeding.

That would be just about the time my temporarily ignored exhaustion re-announced itself.

Ow. “Ow.”

“What’s wrong now?” Gruffer than Undertow had ever been, Bosco seemed

nonplussed that we'd stopped moving. What was strange was that he had his gun drawn, with his knife ready if needed.

"I'm fine," I blew some more blood from my nose, "Just overdid it a little."

"Yes, I believe this is a fine place to stop for the day. I am pleased with our progress."

The colt just nodded. "Good timing, considering we're here."

*What?* "But Naiara said we had an hour to go?"

"She did say that," he agreed flatly, before smirking, "an hour ago."

The whites of my eyes were very visible. "We were at it for an hour?" I turned in shock to my tutor, "You kept that up for a full hour?"

Even with a permanently wet mane, and eyes hidden by goggles, pride radiated from the Deep Diver. "And so did you."

~~~~~

"Dig ib Wa Buque?" We'd joined Naiara at the edge of a ravine, and were taking in the sight stretching out in front of us. My bleeding nose was temporarily plugged with some tissue, which had the charming effect of distorting my speech.

In front of our eyes, La Buque lay open. From our perch, at the tail end of a snaking crevice, we took in the surprisingly unique layout. From how Naiara had described it earlier, I had been expecting an empty valley in the ground, but the truth of the matter was very different. It was almost certainly uninhabited, but it was far from empty.

Stretching from one cliff face to the other, and running along every bit of wall we could see, were dozens, maybe hundreds of walkways. Seemingly hewn from stone and reinforced with rope and mortar, and equal parts cut from, dug into, and hooked onto the walls, the crossings zigzagged and crisscrossed through the ravine.

At the end of each crossing, on the rock walls, were hollows, possibly homes, and eroded stairways between the suspended bridges. Each bridge was connected to two or three others, and formed a maze-like back-and-forth for travelling through the canyon.

“I’d forgotten it was like this. It’s been too long since I last saw it.” Naiara was wowed by the architecture, as we all were, but her eyes were still roving back and forth, searching for her friend.

“Too bad it’s dead around here,” Bosco began, an appreciative smile on his lips, “In its day, this place must’ve been...”

“...Amazing.” Undertow finished. I spared her a quick glance, which turned out to

be too quick as it made me dizzy. My nose must've bled worse than I thought.

Still, she's only really seen Lethbridle and Sprinkles Supplies since coming with us, really built up and as modern as can be for the Wasteland, coming to a place like this, no other ponies around to scare her. This place must be almost a playground for her. I neglected to comment on her restrained awe at the design, mostly for my own dignity.

A small *chk!* sound drew all our eyes. Breaking off from a high walkway, a fragment of stone tumbled downwards, colliding with, and bouncing off, other walkways in its fall, until finally we heard it strike something solid, far below.

Looking a little closer, we all saw that many of the bridges were in various states of ruin. Many were missing chunks, like some gigantic creature had taken bites out of them.

I really hope, for Breeze and all our sakes, that there isn't a monster around that can do that.

Other signs of time became apparent as we stared. Cracked fastenings in the cliff walls, collapsed stone littering the area, and some crossings simply ending in dead ends, or requiring leaps of faith to traverse, with little or no hope of catching a lower bridge if you messed up your jump.

Maybe the monster's unnecessary. "Be shubband sday lungah dan be neet."

Bosco and Undertow just looked at me in confusion. Naiara grimaced, still scanning the dilapidated city. “We don’t have time for your games, Snow. Breeze is here, and the place doesn’t look too stable. We’d better find her quickly.”

Naiara was right. We weren’t here to see the sights. There would be time enough for that after we found Aqua Breeze. I stepped back so that I was in line with the colt and filly, putting Naiara squarely in our sights. This really was her mission more than anything. She was closer to Breeze than I was, I just wanted to help.

Plus I’d rather not talk until I get this damn tissue out of my nose.

Our lack of argument spurred her on, and she turned back to La Buque’s maze. After a few seconds, her jade eyes narrowed, and she pointed. “There.”

We followed her outstretched hoof with our eyes, while she continued. “That’s the best place to start. Looks like it’s stable enough to walk on, and it seems to have plenty of connections.”

Bosco nodded his agreement. “Alright then, lead the way. You’ve got the surest hooves. We’ll follow you.”

“Okay, but remember that if I say stop, you stop. I say move, you move. Got it?”

We gave three nods. Satisfied, she set off, circumnavigating the edge, until we

reached the starting point. Said starting point still required a two-meter drop to reach the first walkway, which was unforgiving on my tired, sleepless, fresh-off-a-marathon-magic-session limbs.

My four knees screamed in protest as I landed, which almost made them buckle and faceplant me into the stone. If Bosco hadn't steadied me, I probably would have broken my nose, which didn't need another reason to bleed.

Once we were all safely down onto the walkways, we set off to find Breeze. Naiara led us, single file, along the first walkway, stretching perpendicular across the canyon.

Our progress was not smooth. Naiara stopped at every creak, or groan, or whistle of wind, to make sure that we were safe before continuing. Bosco was behind her, almost as alert, and stopped himself just fine when she did. I, being third in line, and not possessed of particularly impressive reflexes, found myself bumping into Bosco's backside more often than not, for which I was increasingly equal parts embarrassed and annoyed. The fact that Undertow walked so close behind me didn't help either. If she were further back, I'm sure she would have been fine to keep herself separate.

I just don't have the heart to tell her to move away. The end result was that Undertow ended up just as jostled as I was. She didn't seem to show any annoyance though.

After thirty minutes of this, however, and no sign of Breeze, Naiara certainly did. “Uuuagh! This is taking too long!” In frustration, she kicked out at the barrier of our current walkway. Her kick caused the stone to fissure, and the cracks slowly began to spread outwards.

“Uh oh.” Didn’t matter who said it, we were all thinking it.

“MOVE!” Leading by example, Naiara bolted for the nearest wall junction, with the three of us close behind. As we galloped, the rumble of cracking masonry increased.

Undertow, bringing up the rear, barely managed to get her hooves onto more stable ground before the section of walkway we’d been on shattered, throwing up dust and throwing down debris, which tore and blasted huge chunks out of lower bridges as it fell.

“Ah boo awwighd?” I fussed over the other unicorn, making sure she wasn’t injured from the close call.

“Y-yes, I am fine,” she shakily responded, “thank you for your concern, Lady Snow.”

Bosco was examining the broken bridge, which now bore a gap that was far too long for us to cross again. He gently knocked the butt of his pistol against the

jagged edge, and a few slivers were knocked loose. Shaking his head, he stood up and faced Naiara. “No good. This stuff’s pretty weak.”

She gave another grimace. “You’re right. If we walked together we’d have to take it slow to avoid causing any instability. We should take a couple of different walkways. We’ll cover more ground and it’ll be less strain on the stone.”

“Well... alright...” Bosco didn’t look terribly thrilled at this, “...But we should try to make sure that we always have one of the others in our eye line, so we don’t get too split up from each other.”

“Yeah, fine.” Her reply, and her demeanour, were distracted. “I’m gonna head down and look around closer to the bottom. Why don’t you three move a little further along, check out the next bend?”

“What did I just say? That’ll separate you from the rest of us.” Bosco was indignant at the zebra’s lack of attention.

“I’ll keep an eye on where you go!” She shot back with rolled eyes. Taking the nearby stairs in a single bound, she landed lighter on her hooves than I would ever be able to.

“Naiara!”

She ignored him and kept going, disappearing out of sight.

A grumph emerged from the colt's throat. "You're not the one who pulls this kinda impulsive crap, Snow is!"

I clipped him around the ear for that. "Bowoah!"

"Ow!" He looked like he was gonna keep arguing as he rubbed his ear, but let out a long breath instead. "Yeah, okay. Sorry about that. I just don't want anypony going alone."

"I umbers... ugh, hoeb on." I reached up and gently pulled the tissue from my nostrils. It came away red, but the blood didn't look fresh. It'd closed enough in the last half hour that I wouldn't need it.

Taking a few experimental sniffs, I was quite happy to discover that there were no breathing issues, nor was any more loose blood expelled. I couldn't help but smile in satisfaction. "Much better. Anyway, as I was saying, if you're so bothered about this, then go after her. Undertow and I can check out the next bend. If there's no sign of Breeze, you two can catch up faster than we can."

"Why don't you go?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but Undertow beat me to it. "I-I wish to stay with Lady Snow," she interjected rapidly, before just as hastily adding, "her magic instruction is not yet complete."

I took pity on the nervously fidgeting filly, turning to Bosco. “What she said. I’ll look after this one, you go look after Naiara. Besides,” a thought suddenly struck me, “you two have never met Breeze, so it’s best if Naiara and I split up, it gives us a better chance to find her without her going hostile on us. I’ll tell you right now, Breeze is dangerous when she’s scared.” Thoughts of the beating I took from her when she was searching for her sister resurfaced in my mind.

If Naiara hadn’t been there...

“Alright,” Bosco grouched, though he also seemed relieved. “I’ll go after her. You two can head over to the next part of the ravine. We’ll meet up later.”

Reaching up, I gently tapped his shoulder with my hoof. “Keep yourselves safe, alright?”

He returned the gesture. “You too.” Undertow received a reassuring smile. “Both of you.”

Hesitantly, the goggled unicorn reached up and bopped his other shoulder, a small return smile showing in the corners of her mouth.

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The next bend proved just as fruitless as the first. Undertow and I spent the better

part of an hour travelling its byways back and forth, up and down, in and out, and came away with very little. The remainder of the hour was spent trying to find a way to meet up again, which became an exercise in frustration as the layout of the walkways proved aggravatingly disordered.

After walking up to the bridge I believed Undertow was on, for the third time, only to find that she was on a completely different bridge, also for the third time, I found myself wishing for the magical prowess to solve all my problems, for what must be the umpteenth time.

*What I wouldn't give to be able to just make a damn route straight to her. We're not there yet though, not even close.*

“Undertow?” I called out, after a few more attempts. She wasn't on the same walkway as me, but maybe she was close.

“Lady Snow?”

*SUCCESS!!!* I spotted the Deep Diver a few levels down. She was rubbing her ear strangely.

“You okay?” My concern grew as she continued to rub, and then tap her ear.

“Undertow?”

“I am... okay, Lady Snow. I think the air here is affecting my hearing. There is a



noise, almost like I am underwater.”

I cast about, trying to make sense of what she was saying. “What do you mean? What noi...”

Then I heard it.

It was subtle, like any other background noise, you’d barely register it unless you were looking for it. A hissing, static-y sound that was chillingly familiar.

“Undertow, get under cover!” I forcefully yelled. “Right now!” The distance between us seemed to stretch as the new danger approached.

“What is it, lady Snow? What’s wrong?” She was standing on the tallest part of her bridge, as if the extra few inches would allow us to reach each other.

I waved her towards one of the hollows in the cliff face. “Get out of the open and get your water ready! Whatever you do, don’t let them bite you! I’m coming to find you!”

“Please, Lady Snow, *what is coming?*” I hated the raw emotion in her voice, it matched the feeling I had in my heart. She was scared for me, and I was scared for her.

“Hissyflits! Their poison is deadly! Don’t let them touch you!” I had to raise my

voice now. The static was much more pronounced. “Button up your barding, tight as you can! Goggles on, rebreather in. Expose as little as possible!”

I raced towards one of the hub points in a vain attempt to find a way down to her, all the while that she was calling out to me. I just wished she would get out of the open. I’d fought these things before. Hell, I’d been *poisoned* by these things before, I knew what I was up against.

Undertow was a far superior fighter to me, but I didn’t want her taking unnecessary chances. Hissyflits were lethal. One bite could be deadly. There weren’t any miraculous, antidote-wielding Steel Rangers around La Buque, and we were too far from anywhere else for her to get help in time.

“UNDERTOW, GET OUT OF SIGHT!” I screamed as I ran, barely heard over the static hissing.

Then the six cat-bat hybrids came around the bend.

*Shit!* I was exposed, in the middle of a crossing, too far away from either side. As soon as they noticed me, I was screwed. I didn’t even have the Power Hooves that I managed to kill all of one Hissyflit with outside Neighlway.

*If I keep still, they might just pass b-*

“Lady Snow?”

My eyes shot wide. *I told her to get out of sight!*

Whipping off my Molar hide cloak, I waved it over my head, as big as I could make it. Doing everything I could to get the attention of the flying creatures, whatever it took to get them away from Undertow. “Over here, you poison jackholes!”

The motion caught the eye of the lead Hissyflit, which changed course towards me. The intensity of their static cries ramped up as the other five soon joined it, announcing their hunt.

With the monsters screaming down on me, and lacking any real plan, I turned and ran. I didn’t know, or care, which path I took, so long as it took us away from Undertow.

My random path took me along the wall at first, which gave me nothing to look at but the incoming pack as they bore down on me, sharp fangs glistening with dripping venom.

Reaching the end of one walkway, I took the available stairs, heading further down into the ravine, desperately seeking a way to escape from the situation. This desire only increased as I heard wing beats at the top of the stairs behind me, along with a keeling cry as one swooped over my head, my blind ducking being the only thing that saved me.

Still, I could still hear them as they came around again, and it was clear that I couldn't outrun them. I had no plan, and couldn't escape. What was I gonna do?

Skidding around a corner, I lurched forward along the next bridge, just as something thudded into the stonework I'd just passed. Looking forward, my heart sank.

This path was collapsed in the middle, and the gap was not short.

Still, given the flapping terrors behind me, I had little choice but to go for it. Putting whatever speed I could into my burning, running-solely-on-adrenaline limbs, I gained the smallest sliver of extra speed, just before my hooves left the solid stone and my body arced through the air towards the other side.

Slamming chest first into the broken edge, all the air was driving out of my lungs as I scrabbled for purchase. *Come on, come on!*

Something ploughed into me from behind, a Hissyflit, but thankfully I felt no sting of icy venom, as the Molar Hide cloak kept the fangs from penetrating. Still, it dislodged one of my scraping hooves.

*Nonononono!* With my lungs still empty, I could only think my despair, rather than speak it, as I hung weakly from my one hoof, which was racing towards the edge anyway.

Another Hissy struck my toughened hide cloak, right behind my shoulder, turning me just enough to rip my last grip from the bridge.

My mouth opened in a soundless scream as I dropped. The half dozen hybrids were much more vocal as they dived to follow.

Well, at least for a moment. Almost immediately their howls turned confused and frightened, as watery tendrils shot in from all sides. The light played across the surface of the water as it thrashed back and forth, battering and tossing the Hissyflits back and forth.

Watching with the detachment of somebody who knows they're about to die, I marvelled at the sight. The water moved from striking the beasts, to trapping them in liquid spheres.

My attention was reattached as I felt something wet wrap around a hoof, and suddenly I was not falling straight down, but rather swinging in a smooth arc, as another water whip had snagged me mid-fall, and was not guiding me towards a lower walkway.

*I'm... uh... I'm still going really fast. Like this-is-gonna-hurt-so-much really fast.*

It did.

I slammed down hard on the walkway, my already suffering muscles spasming and seizing. I had no time to catch my breath, though, as a liquid voice flowed past the bubbling interference. “You cannot rest yet, Lady Snow! I require your assistance!”

*U-Undertow?* I was so exhausted and hurt after days of no sleep, travelling and fighting, that even my thoughts were skipping. “Where are you?”

“There is no time. Please, Lady Snow, use your spell. Touch the water with your horn.”

Raising my head painfully, I was greeted to a strange sight. Each Hissyflit was encased in a ball of water, fighting to get free, and a thin string of liquid ran from each sphere, to join together a few inches from my horn. It was like a bunch of living balloons. As I watched, the balloons shook as the Hissyflits inside beat their wings to escape before they suffocated.

Undertow’s voice sounded out from another walkway, I couldn’t tell which one. “Hurry, Lady Snow. I can’t hold them for much longer. You must use your ice now!”

“O-okay.” Rolling slowly to my hooves, I focused only on the water ‘balloon strings’. After a few false starts, my horn finally began to give off the glacial aura for my magic.

I tiredly nodded my head forward until the horn found the strings. I couldn't manage to find the strings away from my horn in enough time, and Undertow had known that, so she's positioned the trap as close to my horn as possible. She was most certainly a good teacher.

The spell fired as soon as my horn made contact, and the strings began to freeze solid as the ice tore along them. In the balloons, the Hissyflits redoubled their efforts when they recognised the new threat, but it was too late. The ice found the balls, and began freezing them one by one. One flyer got a wing out before the cold took it, but the rest didn't even manage that.

Like at her lake, Undertow's magic lost hold of the water when it turned to ice, and the preserved monsters dropped like rocks down into the gorge. I heard them shatter when they found other walkways, or the hard stone floor of the ravine.

Slumping against the side of the bridge, I was just glad for it to be over. I didn't move from there until, minutes later, I heard hooves clattering along the stone towards me.

Reaching me, Undertow crouched down so that she was within my field of vision. I couldn't see her eyes under the goggles, but she looked anything but relaxed. "Why did you do that, Lady Ice?"

"...Didn't want you to get bitten. You'd die."

Her frown only increased. “The same is true of you. You could not have survived against those creatures without my assistance. Did you promise to protect me, only to throw your life away for nothing? There was no guarantee that I would have survived without you. That is not protection, Lady Ice!”

That was another bruise to my battered heart. I tried to stand, but found that I was barely able to hold my weight up. “Undertow, I’m so sorry, I wasn’t thinking. I won’t do that again.”

Relenting, she slung one of my front legs over her shoulder and began slowly walking me along the bridge. “I am glad, Lady Snow,” she nuzzled me as we walked, her damp mane cool against my cheek, “I do not wish to see you hurt.”

*I promise, Undertow, when I’m strong enough, there will be nowhere in the Wasteland where you will not feel protected.* I wished I could have said that out loud, but I didn’t feel worthy of it at the time, with her taking most of my weight.

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It took us another two hours to get back to where we’d last seen Bosco and Naiara. We slowly made our way down towards the canyon floor, being mindful of any uninvited fliers.

There was no sign of any Hissyflits as we walked, for which I was very thankful.

I'd recovered enough to walk unassisted, but I was genuinely troubled by Undertow's words, coupled with my absolutely wrecked body.

I needed sleep. I didn't know how I'd get it, since I felt no better about the whole ghoul fight than I did days ago, when my insomnia began, but I was physically falling apart, heavily bruised, finding it harder and harder to use the little magic I had, my nose had bled again for a short while, and I was absolutely certain of some jarring notions.

If I didn't get fixed up, and soon, I wouldn't be able to learn magic properly, and in turn, I wouldn't be able to protect Undertow, and my friends.

That was not acceptable anymore. As soon as we found Breeze, we'd head back to Lethbridle, and I would find some way to sleep.

Really glad there're no Hissyflits around right now.

SPANG! A bullet cracked off the masonry besides us.

Oh what now?

"Raiders, here?" Undertow pulled me down, as the unseen shooters began hooting in delight.

"Raiders," I repeated, deadpan, "here?"

Taking a few breaths, I turned, still in cover, so that I was facing towards the Raiders. “Knock it off, I’m Red Ice, and I am NOT happy that you idiots are shooting at us. Go away.”

I did not get the response I was hoping for.

“Who’s Red Ice?” One asked.

“Don’t know, don’t care. I want me a couple of unicorns since you lost the damn Pegasus!”

They were after Breeze? If they lost her, does that mean she’s okay?

“Fuck you!”

“Fuck YOU! Bring me those girls!”

Crouching next to me, Undertow was nonplussed. “I don’t believe these Raiders are part of your alliance, Lady Snow.”

“Great... freelancers.” I muttered. Red Ice’s name wouldn’t get us out of this. We’d have to fight.

POP! POP!

I eased an eye over out of cover in time to see one of the Raiders, a yellow earth

stallion, tumble over the lip of the bridge they were on, dead from the bullets Bosco had just put into his chest.

From a walkway above us, the charcoal colt had a perfect angle on the Raiders, and their return fire did nothing but strike the stone he stood on.

Still, it was five to one, Bosco would need help. “Undertow, get ready.”

“Nope!”

Flipping onto our platform with practiced equine grace, Naiara landed in our cover.

“They’re ours. We need you two to help Breeze.”

I woke up more at those words. “You found her?”

Naiara was still keeping an eye on the Raiders, but managed a nod. “We did. She’s over there,” we followed her hoof, “but we need Undertow’s help.”

“What’s wrong?”

She began shoving Undertow towards the direction she’d pointed. “No time, you’ll see when you reach her. We’ll keep these guys off her, but if one of them gets past us, Snow’ll have to look after the two of you.”

That doesn’t sound too good. Still, we can finish this quickly, so we’ll risk it.

“Alright, we’re off then. Be careful with these guys. They only need to get lucky

once.”

“Just go,” she flashed a confident smile, “we got this.” Then she was gone, bounding across to another platform, acting as a lethal distraction for at least one Raider, who got a bullet through the neck the moment he turned to look at her.

Leaving the battle behind us, Undertow and I stayed down, shimmying along under cover while heading towards where Naiara had been pointing. She’d indicated the ravine floor, so maybe Breeze was hiding out somewhere?

When we reached the floor, I saw why Undertow was needed. What I’d originally assumed to be dry rock turned out to be, in fact, a shallow but fast-moving current.

If I’d known this was here when the Hissyflits were around then I’d have just let Undertow take care of them from the start.

Looking around, I saw no sign of the missing Pegasus. “Breeze? Are you here?”

I heard no reply, with the only sounds being the quiet river and the far off gunshots. Nodding to Undertow, we began following the water, heading further down the ravine. It stayed mainly to the centre of the expanse, but snaked back and forth as we went, occasionally forming small reservoirs at slower points, before picking up speed again after.

Around a corner, we came across an obstruction. A pile of rubble and stone had

fallen, and the water disappeared into the centre of it. A cursory glance didn't reveal any way around.

This was the direction that Naiara had pointed in, so Aqua Breeze was probably nearby. "Breeze? Can you hear me?"

Both of us jumped as a voice seemed to emerge from the pile. "Who's that? That you, Naiara?"

"Breeze!" I exclaimed, cheered, "It's me, Snowflake. Naiara's busy with some Raiders right now."

"What?" That wasn't good news for her. "Those guys are still here? I thought they'd give up by now. It's been a whole day!"

"What can I say," the Raider stallion's words were fresh in my mind, "they were really interested in bagging a Pegasus."

"Ugh, great. Well, can you get me out of here?"

I looked around again in confusion. "That depends. Where's here?"

"Oh yeah," she sounded both sheepish and impatient, "forgot you weren't here before. There's a gap on top. Climb up and you can get in. You gotta hurry though, the water's rising!"

“Water?” I turned to Undertow, who’d been examining where the stream disappeared under the stones, “Right, we’ll be just a second.”

I trotted up to the pile, setting a hoof on it, testing for stability, and began climbing. For the most part, the collection of fallen rock was stable enough, though smaller fragments shifted occasionally.

Grunts behind me showed that Undertow was following.

Reaching the top of the pile, I gingerly picked my way towards the hole Breeze had mentioned. It was dark inside, almost too dark to see, but I could make out basic outlines, faintly, within the dankness. “Breeze?”

A flash of lighter colour shifted back and forth, accompanied by splashing. I recognised the white stripes in her mane, though looking wetter than usual. Just beneath, a pair of orbs glinted. “Snow, good to see you. Think you can help me out here?”

“I can’t really see much from up here. What’s wrong?”

The navy blue eyes looked away. “I’m kinda stuck. My wing’s pinned, courtesy of those bastard Raiders out there. They came after me with grenades, which blasted all this rock free. My wing’s pinned, and water’s coming in.” I heard, more than saw, her spit in disgust. “Fucking Raiders.”

Oh yeah, telling her about Undertow, and all that I've been up to, is gonna be so much fun.

But that's for later.

I looked around the pocket where Breeze was trapped. The drop didn't seem that high. "Alright, I'm coming in."

Before I jumped, I turned to the 'Raider' with me. "Undertow, stay up here, and see if you can move the water out of here, use this hole to pull it out. Um... well, I don't really care where you put it, so long as it isn't in here."

Her horn was already glowing. "I understand, Lady Snow. Please be careful."

I flashed a sure smile. I wasn't about to put myself in danger again if I could help it. Knowing her power, there really was no danger of drowning with Undertow here.

Without another word, I hopped down into the hole. I splashed down close to Breeze, with the water cushioning the fall. "Hi again."

Before the trapped Pegasus could respond, the water in the pocket began drawing towards the centre, funnelling upwards against gravity, as the Deep Diver boss magically ignored gravity. Breeze and I watched in silence and, even in the low

light, I could tell she was impressed. “She’s good. Who is she?”

I smiled proudly. I certainly agreed. “That’s Undertow. You can get a proper introduction later. Suffice it to say, she’s really great with water, and she’s teaching me magic.”

An appreciative whistled echoed around the enclosed space. “You lucked out with her.”

“Didn’t I just? But enough of that for now. How can we get you out of here?”

She gave a few experimental tugs on her trapped wing, but winced after the third, and relented. “No good. It’s stuck tight. I can’t shift the rock from here. I doubt you can either. We need more muscle. We can try when Naiara gets back.”

I hesitated. “That could be a while, and there’s no guarantee that she’ll be in good shape when she does. There were still four of those Raiders alive when Undertow and I left. If they’ve got grenades, Bosco and Naiara could have their hooves full for a while.”

Her frustration was evident. “UGHHH! I don’t wanna stay here any longer. I’ve been down here a full day already! I want to fly again, and I’m all wet. I wanna get out of here and get back to...” she stopped abruptly, which drew my attention back to her,

“Hmm? ‘Back to’ what?”

“...Cassie.”

“Ah.” We lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, the only sound being Undertow’s draining of the water. What else could I say to that? Breeze knew I wasn’t happy with her sister, but I wanted to make it clear that I didn’t hold a grudge against her either. “Let’s... put that aside for now, and focus on getting you out of here, deal?”

“Deal.” The relief was palpable, from both of us.

I put my hooves on the rock that pinned her wing, and gave a shove. It didn’t move a millimetre. Stuck tight indeed. So what could we use to get her out? Undertow was busy, and my magic was basically useless here.

She’s right. We need Naiara, or Bosco. Heh, if I really wanted muscle, I’d call in Schwarzwald. Somehow, I don’t think she’s available, though, so we need a new approach. “...I got nothing.”

“May I offer a suggestion?”

The water mage’s question surprised us both. “Yeah, sure. Go ahead, Undertow.”

Goggled eyes still on the rising water, she didn’t look at us as she spoke. “Aqua Breeze, the surface under your wing, is it stone or soil?”

Blinking, the techy Pegasus went about checking. She finally managed to lever her wing up enough to examine the underside. “Looks like its soil, but it’s probably pretty dry in a place like this.”

Undertow wasn’t dissuaded. “Perhaps usually, but if the water has been pooling within your enclosure, it may have soaked into the soil enough to loosen it.”

I beamed with pride again. “She’s really great with water.” I repeated.

Breeze was already scraping and digging with the hidden blade from her greave, thankfully on her unrestricted foreleg. After a few seconds, she gave a small cry of triumph. “It’s working! I owe you one, Undertow. I think I can dig myself out with this.”

Much happier, I sat back with a splash, as the last few inches of water drained away. “That’s great. Well done, both of you.”

As they worked, I decided to use my few peaceful moments to get some practice in with my magic. Closing my eyes, I tried to recreate the lesson I’d had with Undertow earlier, sensing the water away from my horn, and reaching out magically. I had approximately zero success, as I couldn’t drum up the necessary concentration after all the mental fatigue I’d been through.

I really need a good night’s sleep. I’ll take medicine, or get blind drunk, or

something... anything really. Whatever works.

“Hey, Snow? Think you could send some of that horn light over this way? I don’t wanna stab myself in the wing by accident.”

“Oh, yeah sure. I can do that.” That was about the limit of my magical ability at present, but I could manage that much. Soon enough, a glacier-blue glow was illuminating the enclosure, allowing me to get another look at Breeze. She didn’t look too worse for wear for her experience, considering having been down here for a full day, and soaked to the bone. The filly could definitely use a sandwich or two, though, which we’d fix as soon as possible. Not that Breeze was the most fragile of girls, anyway.

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Half an hour later, after dealing with the Raiders, most likely fatally, Naiara and Bosco returned, and we’d used Naiara’s rope to pull Breeze, who had dug herself free, and I, out of the pile of rocks. Undertow had kept up the steady removal of water during the process. I quietly marvelled at her sustained effort and control.

*I’ve got a long way to go, but I’ll get there, and I’ll go further. Not that I don’t want you to be strong, Undertow, but I think Bosco was right. I am gonna have to become stronger than you.*

Once free of her imprisonment, Breeze had immediately wanted to fully enjoy her

freedom, spreading her wings and attempting to fly. ‘Attempting’ was the key word, as she could only managed a series of bouncy hops, with a gleeful Naiara joining her, before she accepted that it wasn’t going to happen yet. With a mix of amusement and frustration, she scuffed her hoof in the dust. “Guess I’m grounded for a little while. My wing’s not up to flying just yet.”

“Still,” Naiara smiled, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah, me too,” she smiled back, before panning across our gathered foursome, “so now can we get introductions out of the way? I know you and Snow, and I’m guessing this guy’s Bosco, but... the others didn’t mention... uh... sorry, I forgot your name.” She gave Undertow an apologetic smile, which only made her tense up slightly.

*By ‘the others’ I guess she means Cassie, Wings, and Schwarzwald. Of course they wouldn’t mention Undertow, they’ve never met her.*

*Well it’s too bad for them. Undertow’s great.* I stepped up beside the Deep Diver and put a hoof on her shoulder, making sure I showed all the pride I could as I introduced her. “Aqua Breeze, this is Undertow.”

Whenever she looked at me, Breeze’s face turned calculating, as if she was wondering just how to say each sentence, given the complicated relationship I had with her sister and the others she was currently travelling with. The tricky part was

that I didn't actually hate Breeze herself, and I wasn't sure that she hated me either, but if she'd been talking with Wings and Cassie, and had taken their side, then we might have problems down the line. She was studying me, how I looked, how I acted, the hoof on Undertow's shoulder, how I was with Naiara.

*They do say never to talk politics with friends or family...*

She apparently came to the same realisation, and switched to an airy, cheerful tone. "Well, nice to meet you, Undertow, and thanks for the help. That water work was amazing."

I felt muscles relax slightly under my hoof. "T-thank you, Aqua Breeze."

Rounding on the colt, Breeze kept her smile. "You too, Bosco, good to meet you, and good shooting. I could hear you guys down in the hole, and I heard at least one of the bastards die."

He swelled a little under the praise. "No problem. Nice to meet you too. Naiara's been talking about you."

"Oh yeah? What'd she say?"

Smirking at the zebra, whose eyes were narrowing, Bosco definitely intended to cause trouble. "Said you were a worse hoof-to-hoof fighter than Sn- OW! DAMMIT NAIARA!"

Having kicked him again, Naiara said nothing, but turned her eyes away and whistled.

The gist got through though. Breeze exploded. “You think I fight worse than *Snowflake*? Oh, that hurts, Naiara. Sucker punch me one time and think you can talk trash like that?!”

The object of her ire just kept on whistling.

Rounding on me, Breeze put up her dukes. “Come on Snow, you and me, right now! No magic, no gadgets, just you and me.” Playfully jabbing and dancing back and forth, it was evident that her pride was smarting, even if she was kidding. Being trapped in a whole by Raiders for a full day probably hadn’t helped either.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Mused Bosco. When Breeze gave him an obvious ‘Why not?’ look, he just pointed above our heads.

We all looked up. A mass of water was hovering over the Pegasus in an aquamarine haze. Undertow’s horn glowed the same colour.

“Because Undertow wouldn’t like it.” He finished, amused.

Confused, and instantly on guard again, Breeze just looked at Naiara. “What’s Undertow gotta do with this?”

“Well, you know how you’re really protective of your sister?”

“Yeah? What about it?”

Naiara just let the wheels turn.

I took the moment to address the matter hanging over our heads. “Put the water down, Undertow.”

Realisation dawned. “I know that tone!” Followed by more confusion, “Hold on, I thought your siblings were guys?”

The water splashed down haphazardly as Undertow lost her concentration mid-lowering. “I ha- I mean, you have brothers, Lady Snow?”

*Did Naiara just ‘squee’?*

*“Lady Snow?”*

I ignored Breeze’s sputtering, while at the same time noticing just how eagerly Undertow was leaning forwards to listen. “...Yeah. I’ve got three brothers. They’re buffalo,” eyebrows shot up over those goggles, “and their names are Buff, the oldest, Al, the middle one, and Lo, the youngest. They’re about the same age as you and Bosco.”

This time Naiara kicked Breeze, after she laughed at my brothers' names. I wholeheartedly supported the action.

"You... have not mentioned brothers before, Lady Snow," her voice was tentative, almost worried.

"Why does she call her sister 'Lady'?" Breeze was whispering to Naiara and Bosco, who shushed her.

"Where are these buffalo brothers?"

Instantly the mood dropped. Bosco and Naiara found it hard to look at myself or Breeze, while the two of us didn't really look at each other. Since Undertow was still waiting for an answer, now in consternation, I had to respond. "They're... from my Stable. They... didn't come with me."

"Why, Lady Snow? Will they not miss you? Will you not miss them?"

Anger and thankfulness duelled as, to my surprise, it was Breeze who spoke up. "Undertow... maybe you shouldn't ask that right now."

"Why..."

"...Are you here in La Buque, Breeze?" Naiara's interrupt was hasty, and not in the least bit subtle, but it got the job done. We were all eager for a change of subject.



I was glad of the chance to stay quiet while I waited for the lump in my throat to get smaller.

“Oh, right. I’m here looking for crystals for my Spell Shooters. Place’s lousy with ‘em.”

“It is?” We all looked around. I hadn’t remembered seeing any crystals around, and it didn’t look like the others were either.

She waved a hoof disdainfully, snout pointed up. “Ah, you gotta know where to look. They’re in the cliff walls. You need a Pegasus to get ‘em out. This place is my secret stash.” She spread her wings, and puffed out her chest.

“That’s actually pretty cool. Sounds like you are as good with gadgets as Naiara said.”

At Bosco’s words, Breeze turned her smug pose back to her friend. “Oh, so you did tell them I’m more than just a crap fighter.”

“Never said I didn’t.” The denial came with a good-natured smile, matching that of her Pegasus friend.

“So…” Bosco was looking around again. “Where are these crystals? We’ll help you get some more, since you’re not flying right now.”

The reaction to this idea was overwhelmingly negative. “Oh nononono. No chance. This place is dangerous. I even told you guys not to come here. No way in hell am I putting Naiara in danger trying to do this like a dirt pony.”

“Aww, so you do care.”

“Shaddup Naiara.”

“Love you too, featherbrain.”

I felt okay to speak now, so I raised a hoof like I was in school. “Uh, why is it dangerous?”

Breeze sighed. “Look, you guys’ve seen my Spell Shooter in action, right?”

Naiara and I nodded. Bosco and Undertow didn’t.

“...Well, half of you have. It works like this,” she held up the greave with the crystal embedded, “these crystals can absorb magical energy and store it, like a power cell. Then, when they’re full, they... well, they kinda pop.”

“Pop?”

“Like a force-fed Hissyflit.” I was hard pressed to feel pity for such a creature, since its brethren had tried to kill me twice, the second time being only hours

before.

Naiara wasn't smiling anymore, and had joined the charcoal colt in examining our surroundings. "And when they pop?"

Breeze was on the same page. "Right. They pop, while surrounded by rock. That means landslides, like the one that caught me when I was on the run from those Raiders."

"And you do this by yourself a lot?" Intrigued as he was, Bosco was still sceptical about the feasibility of her weapon, and her common sense, going by what she was saying.

"No, course not. I mean I did the first few times, until I noticed what was happening. Usually I bring Cassie. This time she was a little busy, so I came myself. It would have been fine if those Raider dicks weren't there. They're damn lucky the Hissyflits didn't get them!" That last part was accompanied by considerable vitriol. So much so that I had to send a glance towards Undertow, who was technically a Raider, even if I would never think of her as one. I just hoped the Raiders that Naiara and Bosco had fought weren't Deep Divers.

"Hold on," I began, as the memory of her using my magic to power the crystal came to mind. "When you used it against the Hissyflit swarm, I charged the crystal in around a minute. What's charging the crystals in the walls?"

She just chuckled. “Two hundred year old Megaspells.”

“Huh?”

She waved the crystal in her greave around in the air. “Magical radiation? It’s in the air around us, even if we can’t detect it until it gets strong enough. The crystals in the wall can still use it though. Little by little, they drink up the Megaspells’ legacy, one sip at a time.” She tapped the crystal against my horn. “When I sucked it out of you in that fight, your magic was concentrated, hundreds, maybe thousands of times denser than what’s in the air right now. For that level of magic, it only took a minute or so. The background radiation in the air? Two hundred plus years.”

A rock was picked up, and then dropped. “I kinda think that’s why this place is deserted, even with a fair chunk of real estate still useable. Whoever survived the bombs out here would suddenly find their walls exploding. Fun times, right?” We all managed a chuckle. “The ponies’d have to leave. It’s not safe to stay. Each crystal’s a ticking time bomb.”

“And you willingly harvest these things?” Bosco had definitely shifted from thinking she was a techy Pegasus, to thinking she was a *crazy* techy Pegasus.

She snorted. “Psh, course I do. I know what I’m doing. The more magic they’ve got in ‘em, the more they glow. I take the ones that are still dark.”

I remembered the intense light that the Snowflake-charged crystal had given off just before she'd fired it. The results were powerful. The explosions here must be impressive. I didn't think that whoever survived here after the bombs would have stayed for very long.

"How do you know all this, Aqua Breeze? Though your wings are lovely, you are not a unicorn."

Breeze had jumped as the previously silent Undertow spoke up, as if she'd forgotten that she was there. "Uh, you can just call me Breeze, Undertow. And as for how I know? Well, I was just kinda trying out new stuff. I love to tinker around with machines, and when I found out what these crystals could do, I started tinkering with them too."

When Undertow didn't respond, Breeze saw that she was still looking at the wings. When the Pegasus unfurled them, and wafted them back and forth, the goggled eyes followed them, mesmerised. Clearly, Undertow had never seen a Pegasus before. One of her hooves twitched forward, like she wanted to touch them.

"That's kinda adorable." Breeze mentioned this to Naiara, out of the corner of her mouth.

"I know, right?"

Even I couldn't help myself. "Undertow," I snapped her out of her trance, "why not give Breeze that hug?"

"What hug?" Breeze's wings snapped back to her sides.

"Well she owed it to me, but I'm gifting it to you." This might've been the most common thing in the Wasteland, going by how the zebra filly said it.

"Collect on that later, Breeze." I'd decided enough was enough. "Right now we need to start heading back to Lethbridle. We've got things to take care of. Do you want to come with us until your wing heals up?"

Though miffed at her fun being interrupted, Naiara still answered before Breeze could. "Actually Snow, that's kinda why I called Breeze in the first place. Since you made sure that I can't just steal the Memory Orbs from that old ghoul, because of that stupid promise you had me make to him, I figured we'd need an alternative to the Orbs for a diving light."

"We're not going to get my diving lights back?" The hug forgotten, Undertow was somewhat more than miffed.

"Stay calm." I prompted, before frowning at Naiara, willing her to make her point quickly.

“What ‘diving lights’?”

“Well, you see, Undertow is... an underwater salvage diver. But the Memory Orbs she uses to provide light when she’s down there got stolen by a ghoul, apparently they were his memories, so I was thinking you might be able to come up with something else.”

Breeze looked at the sea-blue unicorn with new awe. “You bring stuff up from underwater? That’s incredible!”

Her words were a little too enthusiastic, as Undertow shrank back towards me a little. I gave her a quick nuzzle before responding. “It certainly is. So, can you help us, Breeze?”

Crossing her hooves, Breeze fell into silent thought for a while. I stayed close to Undertow, while Naiara kept her attention on the Pegasus. Bosco watched the surroundings, perhaps anticipating another crystal explosion.

*I really hope Breeze comes through. I don't want to have to deprive Inbox just to save Undertow.*

I would, however, if it came down to it. I was sure of that. She had asked for, and was under, my protection.

Finally, Breeze's head rose and fixed on the Deep Diver. "You really need this?"

Undertow nodded. "It may mean my life."

Breeze's eyes softened. With an I'm-not-really-happy-but-what-can-you-do shrug, she tweaked something on her greave, and it opened up. Inside was a mass of wire and circuits, with a crystal set in an inlay, for use with her Spell Shooter. Turning the greave over, she popped open a smaller compartment, and reached in. Two more crystals were withdrawn, each had a faint glow to them. "These'll work for diving lights, so you don't have to steal the Memory Orbs."

"They'll explode!" She couldn't be serious about giving those to Undertow.

Glaring at me, she turned the crystals this way and that. "I'm not finished. I have a notion to fix that too. I actually got it from looking at your Me..."

"My Memory Orb?" I finished, accusingly.

"Yeah. That scratch along it, to be precise." A hidden blade shot out of her other greave, which she then sliced across each crystal, leaving the shallowest of furrows along their surfaces. Each crystal gave off a momentary flash as it was struck. "Undertow, you can thank your sister for this."

Examining her work at eye level, Breeze nodded at last. "I've done some testing,



and if I've done it right, which I totally have, then these furrows will allow the built up magic to drain off naturally. It won't explode, but it'll leak out steadily over the course of around a day or so."

"How does that help?"

She held out one crystal to Undertow. "Try charging it with your magic."

Looking first to me, I nodded, and the Deep Diver's horn began to glow. Nothing happened at first, but soon, the aquamarine glow began to lengthen and distort, being drawn into the crystal.

Undertow kept this up until the crystal was glowing bright and clear, at which point Breeze pulled it away. "Whoa there, that's enough. Okay so it's near full charge right now, and it'll give off hours and hours of light, but after a while the light'll lessen as the magic runs low, and it'll be completely gone by the next day. Then you just charge it up again whenever you want to use it. Easy and reusable."

She swirled the light back and forth in the air, leaving a fading trail behind it. "This crystal'll break down eventually, like in a few years eventually. Heh, come find me before then."

She held out both crystals to Undertow, who took them with shaking hooves. "I... I do not know how to thank you, Aqua Breeze."

Breeze just smiled. “Just call me... ah, whatever. I owed ya. If you weren’t around, I might’ve drowned. I’ll take that hug if you’re still offering.” To illustrate the point, she spread her front legs and her wings.

Moving faster than I’d ever seen her move, Undertow jumped forward and wrapped her hooves around the Pegasus. “Hehe, it tickles.” She giggled, as the feathers brushed her nose.

Even Bosco smiled at that.

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“And you’re totally sure this is safe?” Breeze’s voice was muffled behind the diver’s helmet she was currently sporting.

“Fear not, I will keep you safe.”

With Breeze having developed new diving lights for Undertow, we’d returned to the lake to present them to the Deep Divers. I made sure to send Undertow and I had gone on ahead to deal with the group and settle things down before we brought in Breeze. I wanted her to have as little contact with the rest of them as possible, in case she got upset.

Luckily, they followed Undertow’s lead, and were isolationists by nature. After

satisfying them that Undertow had brought new diving lights, which requires her, the only unicorn present, to work, they'd instantly accepted her leadership again, and returned to their homes, their 'territories'.

That gave us almost free reign of the makeshift village's common ground, and we were able to reach the boathouse without incident, where Undertow had offered to show her appreciation for all we'd done for her by allowing us to dive with her.

Safety issues aside, we were all very excited.

If I wasn't trying to save my energy for the dive, I'd be bouncing around like the other three.

Naiara and Bosco were checking the seals on each other's suits, their helmets already clamped in place, as Breeze and I did the same. Undertow hovered around us all, making sure that nothing was amiss.

With one last *thunk*, my last suit seal was shut. Instantly, the noise levels dropped by half, meaning I had to strain to hear the others over my breathing, which was suddenly amplified in this enclosed space.

Undertow was sealing Breeze in, though the Pegasus was looking less comfortable with the apparatus. Her wings couldn't be opened while she wore it, and the idea of being totally encapsulated probably didn't sit well with a pony that was used to having the entire sky to move in. Still, that couldn't override the anticipation of

seeing the underwater world for ourselves. Without Undertow and the Deep Divers, spending that long in radioactive water would be suicidal.

Bosco and Naiara clomped over to stand beside Breeze and I. With a final once-over, Undertow seemed satisfied, and nodded to the pump operator, who would feed us air while we were down in the lake. “Let us begin.”

“What’s next? What do we do?” The words escaped Naiara in a rush, her thrilled impatience entirely on display.

In lieu of words, Undertow held up the new diving crystal, and fired her magic into it. In less than a minute, it was glowing bright enough that we had to turn our eyes away.

Clipping the light to a chord tied around her waist, Undertow took hold of her rebreather. “Follow me, please.” That was all she said before fitting her breathing aide in place.

Turning, she began walking down the jetty to the water’s edge, with us stomping along after her, thick breathing hoses trailing behind us. While our Deep Diver guide took a running, graceful dive into the water, there was no way we’d be copying her with the heavy dive gear, so we simply walked into the water.

Breeze was at the front of our foursome, and there was definitely some hesitation as the water rose to neck level, her recent entrapment still fresh in her mind. But,

with a shake of her head, she pushed through it and disappeared under the surface.

I had no doubts that Undertow wouldn't let me drown, so I didn't miss a step as I walked down the incline.

I'm just blinking, not keeping my eyes shut because there's water in front of this thin sheet of glass that's the only thing between me and very wet death.

Yep, blinking.

“AAAAAGH!” I screamed as I bumped blindly into something, my eyes snapping open, “AAA-oh, it's just Breeze. Hah, okay. For a second there I thought that I...”

That was as far as I got before my eyes took in the scene before me.

Bathed in the light from the crystal lazily drifting in Undertow's take, a whole new world opened out before us. We stood on a shelf at the end of the dock, looking out into the underwater landscape below and before us.

It was incredible. Blues and greens and browns and purples and greys coloured everything. Strange plants swayed in the undercurrents as bubbles danced and broke and shifted around us. So very different from the harsh, dirty arid land above us, the water held an entirely different experience.

A cloud of sand and tiny rocks drifted in from my left. Turning my head, I saw one

of the others, though I couldn't tell who, slowly pushing off from where we were standing. As soon as they left their hooves, the water took them, sending them drifting along, until they ever so softly landed again, further than they could jump.

Undertow swam up from over the edge of the shelf, beckoning to each of us in turn to follow her, before disappearing back beyond down. My fatigue forgotten, but still outpaced by the others, I all but ran over the side.

I was sooo glad that I did. The view was even better the further we went down. Slowly rising into the light were structures and machines of all sizes and shapes, claimed long ago by the water, and now a submerged playground for a lucky few.

One of our four was drawing ahead, kicking their legs frantically in a bid to reach the sunken treasures.

Probably Breeze, she loves all this stuff.

Maybe-Breeze was drawing close to the first half-covered heap, still kicking hard to reach it, when a bubble formed around her and dragged her back. Panicking, the encapsulated pony didn't stop struggling until they caught sight of the glow that Undertow's horn was giving off.

We were all confused as to why she intervened until she pointed, and we followed her gaze. Coming around the bend, a shoal of fabulously multi-coloured fish appeared, heading for the spot where maybe-Breeze had been a few moments ago.

As they passed us, scores of glassy eyes swivelled to observe us briefly, before turning away disinterestedly, taking us in and forgetting us in the space of a moment.

Real fish! I don't believe it! "I've only seen them in pictures and videos." An awed whisper was the loudest that I could manage.

Having released... whoever it was, Undertow's horn glowed again. We all watched as another, smaller sphere of denser water formed in front of her. With a push from her front hoof, she sent it racing after the group of swimmers. Once it caught their tails, the water orb exploded in a rush of bubbles and pressure. The result was instantaneous, with the entire shoal bursting like overripe fruit, each individual fish swimming to escape any way it could, careening and colliding with all the others. Some even shot past, over, under and between the five of us in their panic, causing us to gasp and duck and flinch, though I soon began to laugh after realising there was no danger.

A new eddy formed behind the pony who'd been dragged back, this time giving him or her a shove forward, back towards the construct poking out of the river bed. The other two and I soon followed.

As we reached the object, I soon realised that it was far larger than I'd originally thought. Swimming down between a strange cross of thin blades, I found myself looking into an opening with seats set out in rows.

After making sure that the way was clear, I kicked and swam in, until I found myself floating above one of the seats. Pushing off the ceiling, I dropped down, and found that I could sit down, for all the world as if I was riding in this vehicle, whatever it was, myself, rather than whichever poor souls had been inside when it sank. I was soon joined by the others, who all began poking around the vehicle bay.

Breeze, I was sure of it this time, as I saw the back of her suit twitching around wing-level, swam further forward, through a small opening. I could see glass through it, and another seat. Once she reached it, Breeze started briefly, drawing back, before looking at us. Confused, we looked back, watching as she swept a suited hoof around the seat, which revealed what had startled her.

Floating back through the small opening was a pony skull, followed by several bones. The bones bounced off the walls, ceiling, seats, and our suits. I barely felt a thing when the skull contacted my sternum, but when that caused it to float and roll up in front of my visor, I couldn't keep looking at the empty sockets where the eyes once were, I had to brush it away with my hoof.

Another shadow fell across us, and we looked up, expecting Undertow again, or at least I was.

But it wasn't Undertow.

Drawn by the floating bones, and the bubbles that were buoying them upwards, a

quartet of fish, half again the size of any of us, swam by overhead. Even discounting their size, these ‘fish’ were far and away different from their smaller counterparts. While the little ones basically looked like the pictures, these things were far more nightmarish. Thick sheets of shell covered almost all of their bodies, tip to tail, with the only exception being the trident-like protruding teeth at the front.

Even their eyes were covered, if they had eyes at all. I began to suspect that they didn’t when Undertow showed herself, as she and the light swam between the four fish without incident, and came to rest at the opening to the vehicle, making ‘stay still’ gestures until the behemoths went past.

Once the coast was clear, and I could hear over the beating of my heart, our voting was unanimous. As one, we all pointed a hoof towards the surface.

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“That was amazing!”

“I know, those fish!”

“And the colours!”

“And that sweet Vertibuck!”

“The what?”

“You know, the vehicle we were all sitting in!”

As Breeze, Naiara, and Bosco talked excitedly amongst themselves, I sat quietly to the side, waiting for the fifth diver, the one who’d shown us this wonderful world, to resurface.

I didn’t have to wait long, only a minute or so, before a jet of water burst from the lake, arched downwards, and slammed onto the jetty with a voracious splash, leaving a unicorn with a turquoise mane standing there.

Smiling at the display, and glad that she’d been showing more confidence as we returned here, I wiped some spray from my eyes. “Show off.”

“Forgive me, Lady Snow. I just love the water.”

I got to my hooves and shook my whole body, trying to dislodge the droplets all at once. “No need to apologise, Undertow. That wasn’t a complaint. I want you to enjoy yourself.”

Before she could respond, she was mobbed by a Pegasus, zebra, and earth pony.

“You were great!”

“I’d never seen anything like that!”

“Can we go again?”

The last question, from Breeze, made her hesitate, and look over to me. “Do we have time, Lady Snow?”

Had I been smarter, more alert, I might have spotted the danger here, and moved to correct the course that the conversation would take. Alas, none of those things happened. “Why wouldn’t we?” I responded in confusion.

“Because,” Undertow began, already beginning to look crestfallen, “you have provided my Deep Divers with diving lights. Do you not have to visit the next group for your Raider Alliance?”

Undertow couldn’t have known the effect of those words, nor why the four of us froze, so I couldn’t blame her for being confused.

Seconds ticked by, with nobody moving a muscle or saying a word, until...

“Your *what* Alliance?” I’d heard that tone before from Breeze. Right before she nearly killed me, thinking I’d kidnapped her sister.

“Now... now stay calm, Breeze...” Standing next to her friend, Naiara’s good cheer had evaporated. She was looking desperate to avoid a confrontation here.

“Just hear us out...” Urged Bosco, though he was surreptitiously reaching for a weapon.

“Snowflake,” Breeze spoke slowly and deliberately, “what is she talking about?” Her eyes grew darker every second.

*This won't end well. Not Undertow's fault, but that was really the wrong thing to say.* “I'm... trying to unite four different Raider clans.”

“What the hell for?!”

“To change them! Make them better. Stop them from being just another threat in the Wasteland. To stop what happened to your parents from happening again!” I was hoping that speaking to her on a personal level would help me get through to her.

The erupting pain in my cheek from her thunderous slap dissuaded me of the notion. Slamming down onto my back, I had to brace myself as she began shouting. “How DARE you mention them! Do you have any idea what they went through because of the Raiders?!”

“BREEZE!” Naiara's desperate imploring was ignored, but she had to turn away and deal with another matter.

“Put that gun down, Bosco! I won’t let you kill her!”

“And you’ll just let her kill Snow?” He shot back, eyes hard and focused on Breeze.

“No, of course not! I just... nopony’s killing anybody!” She was almost in tears, torn between friends.

Blinking away stars, I sat back up, gently working my jaw until it popped. “Breeze... I heard what Cassie said about your parents. How they ran into Raiders when they came to the Wasteland for the first time. The first thing they saw were killers, but that doesn’t...”

A harshly barked laugh cut me off. Breeze’s pupils had shrunk to pinpricks, and a manic smile lay across her face. “Is that all you think happened? My parents just found Raiders and were almost killed? Is that all she said? Maybe that’s all she wanted to say, because she thinks I don’t know, but you really think that’s the whole story?!”

I frowned. “What do you m-”

“NINE MONTHS!” She bellowed, “They kept my parents captive for *Nine. Fucking. Months!* They suffered every single day! The things those monsters did to them... what happened to them... to me and Cassie...” Her heart-breaking revelry

only fuelled her ire, “HOW DARE YOU SAY THEY CAN CHANGE!!!”

As she started towards me, any response I had died on my tongue, as two thick whirlpools slammed into her, and pinned her to the boathouse wall.

“Undertow, no!”

Undertow’s voice was hard. “Yes, Lady Snow. This is MY territory, and she is an intruder. I will not let her attack you again.”

Even while subdued by the water, Breeze fueled her defiance with rage. “Is that what you are, Undertow? One of them? A Raider? A *monster*?”

She turned to the colt, who’d lowered his weapon, but hadn’t holstered it. “Are you a monster, Bosco? You cut my sister with that knife of yours. Did you enjoy it?”

Finally, she turned to Naiara, who was openly crying now. “And why, *svara*,” the world was delivered with as much venom as she could muster, “are you helping them? Why are you helping monsters?”

With tears pouring from her jade eyes, the zebra opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

I didn’t have that problem. “That’s enough Breeze. You don’t get to blame them. Any of them. Not Undertow, not Bosco, and definitely not Naiara. She, and they,

are just trying to keep me alive. All of this was my idea, and it will stay my idea. I'm Red Ice, not them."

I didn't turn my head as I addressed my friend. "It's okay. Let her down, Undertow."

Gradually, as if reacting to the reticence of the caster, the water funnels died down, allowing the soaking wet Pegasus to get her hooves under her again.

Coughing and spitting out what she'd inhaled, Breeze stood tall, unafraid despite everything that had happened. Her eyes bored into me as she began to quietly and calmly stab me through the soul. "You know, I almost didn't believe her."

"Who?"

"Cassie. My own sister. I almost didn't believe her when she told me what had happened. I thought she'd gone too far, that maybe she was wrong. Naiara thought you were okay, so maybe you weren't so bad. Maybe you didn't deserve it."

She turned to the zebra, a mix of pity, anger, and apology in her eyes. "This just goes to show that my sister knows better than a *stripe*."

Looking like she'd been slapped harder than I had been, Naiara couldn't say anything as Breeze spread her wings, shook off the water, and took flight.

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We stayed at the Deep Diver camp for three days, to make sure that there was no attempt of an attack by Breeze's group. I didn't really think they would, but it was as good a place as any to stay and take stock before moving on to the final Raider group. Plus it made Undertow happy to be back at the lake. Bosco certainly didn't mind getting to dive again.

Naiara hadn't gone in the water. She'd barely spoken over the two days. She slept in Undertow's cabin with the rest of us at night, then disappeared during the day, only returning long after dark.

I still wasn't sleeping, but I didn't disturb her during the times she came and went. It didn't seem the time.

On the morning of the third day, however, there was a marked difference in her demeanour. She slipped in the door, marched silently up to my bed, and shoved her communicator, the one Breeze had given her, in my face.

Gingerly, I raised it to my ear. "...Hello?"

Breeze's tone was flat. "If you hurt Naiara, or Cept in this foolish quest, I will kill you."

“Breeze, please listen to-”

She ignored me and continued. “I just wanted you to listen to this.”

The device gave off an almighty burst of static, harsh enough that I had to tear it away from my ear. Bosco and Undertow were awake in moments, looking for danger.

“GOOD MORNING, EQUESTRIA! DJ PON-3 here! Coming to you with some breaking news, no matter how bad it hurts.” I hadn’t heard the DJ since he’d spoken on the Grindstone massacre, back when I still had my Pipbuck.

Oh joy, what now? I don’t think I actually remembered a time where he’d given good news.

The DJ’s exuberant tone turned slightly more sombre. “Well, all you pony folk out there, I’ve got some good news and some bad news for you today.”

The four of us looked at each other, wondering just how ‘good’ this news would be for us. “First, here’s the good news. Looks like the northern Wasteland is down one more murdering bastard today, as the body of a Raider was dropped at Lethbridle’s Eastern gate this morning”

Naiara had been frowning since she came in, but now we joined her. The DJ

continued unhindered, his bass tone cheerful. “This Raider supposedly goes by the name Four Fields, and is the leader of a particularly vicious group of pillager villagers known as the Barnstormers. An outfit that is usually seen to the Northeast of Lethbridle, the biggest city of the area.”

My heart had gone cold. Four Fields had been killed. What was this gonna do for the alliance? Was Breeze behind this? Cassie? Wings? What would it mean if they were?

“Four Fields had been drilled straight through by a bullet the size of my... well it was damn big, that’s all I’ll say on that topic. Stuck in the hole where the bastard’s heart would have been, if a Raider can have a heart, was a note. It’s real short, so I’ll read out what it said now. This, unfortunately, is where we reach the bad news. The note reads:

From Blue Fire, because Red Ice didn’t.”

Oh Breeze, did you have to do it like this?

Naiara still said nothing, she just stared at me. Undertow stared at all of us, confused. Bosco put his hoof on my arm, but I didn’t respond. “Snow? You okay?”

The DJ wasn’t done. “And there’s the rub, listeners. When Red Ice, or Snowflake, as she’s really called, revealed herself to us a li’l while ago, we all thought that she was another light in the darkness, a pony who was standing up against the

unsavoury parts of the Wasteland. She called out the Steel Rangers... Plottawan slavers... hell, she even called out Red EYE! I'll tell you right now, faithful listeners, this DJ thought it was a given that she was anti-Raider, but according to a reliable source in Lethbridle, which I damn well won't reveal now, in case Snowflake takes it badly, apparently she did a lot more than fail to shoot Four Fields. Not only did she not shoot the guy, but she's even working with him, and tons of other Raiders, to build up an army for herself!"

"What?! That's not true!" I yelled into the device, not caring that he couldn't hear me.

"I don't know what Snowflake, or Red Ice, or the Raider Queen, as some have started to call her, is up to, but I want any and all little ponies out in Lethbridle, and the surrounding area, to stay away from her. Neighlway and Plottawa might not be her friends, but it doesn't look like anypony else is either."

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*Level Up!*

Perks gained: *Teach Me Ms. Witchy* – Undertow's teachings mean an extra boost to magic each time you level up.

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Author's Note:

Well, that took a long time. Damn B.U.C.K. messing up my schedule, though I did get to meet a fair few bronies from Fimfiction, and beyond.

Which was nice.

Still, that was two weeks ago, and the chapter should not have taken that long, for which I apologise. I'll be working super hard to get the next one knocked out one week after this one goes up.

As always, a big thank you to Hasbro, [Kkat](#), [Y1](#) (his story, [Conviction](#) is definitely worth a read too), and you, the readers. Please read and comment, and pass the word along if you like the story. Another thank you for [Cascadejackal](#) for the title artwork. Click on the links to see more from these lovely people.

One thing before next chapter: I'll be posting [some ideas](#) I had about Snowflake's design for people to comment on. Nothing's concrete, and if anybody's got their own notion and wants to send it to me then I'd love to see it, but I'd just like to hear people's thoughts.

Alrighty then, that's it.

Toodles.