

Fallout Equestria: Murky Number Seven

Chapter 16: *The Only Way Out*

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"Will I lose my dignity? Will somepony care? Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?"

"What is it like to be without hope?"

Do you know that feeling? Like, when you're about to have something done to you that you can't possibly hope to change and there's that one horrible moment of clarity when you realise 'this is really happening and I can't stop it?' As though you're strapped into a...a...rollercoaster about to go over a dip you don't want to go on but you can't get out? But worse because you know it's going to be something terrible.

"Not to sound like I'm trying to lessen what you're saying but...yes. I do."

Then you know what I mean. The first time I ever felt it was years ago as a foal, when three slaves held down my legs and pulled my wing across the cold metal of an anvil. Time froze for one horrible second when I saw him raise the hammer and an icy inevitability ran right through me when I realised that hammer was going to fall and something you never think will happen to you is suddenly beyond your will to stop. Then it happens and you just want to wake up from the nightmare that you know is all too real.

It's the knowledge that you no longer have any say in your life at that very moment. That something else is driving you and forcing something to happen and no amount of begging or wishing is going to stop it. Being under him and being his...his pet. It's like that every second of the day...

He was right, it was only just beginning. My Master had broken me in, demanded every facet of my life accept him until I was even bearing him in my journal. Now I was to begin my 'new life' as his, simply accepting what I was told was all I was meant for. To work for his benefit, to be his own slave and to have no choice of my own that was not pre-decided by him. He...he lashed me for waking up too early! I had my food taken away for not eating it in the right *order!* Shift after shift, unending and in the worst of positions under overseers he knew wanted to make me work...his way to instruct my life. Make every moment of it into a living model of obedience. To push me past my limits then order me to go further, just to see me manage it and shock myself that I could so easily become what I was before the Pit all over again.

Rarely was I given any rest. He'd only throw me into that tiny cell in his office that was my true home in his eyes. Leaving me alone in the dark. For me to be cold, wet, sick and on a rough concrete floor all through the periods I was ordered to try and sleep.

I just couldn't handle it, my life was swinging out of control! I made attempts to escape, but he knew where I would be every time. He'd...he'd even let me get away from the Mall sometimes! But he'd always be there allowing me to think I'd gotten away before the chain would snap tight and I'd be halted. I made one last attempt before he began telling me to grow up and accept life as his s-s-son.

Always always *always* ramming it into my head to accept him as a father and...and g-g-grow...

...oh no, it...it was that...

"...was what? Hey, *hey* what's wrong?"

I didn't remember, I don't want to but I can't...can't forget it and it's just *there* and what he...he made me do and what I did...*why did he do that?*

Oh Goddesses! I don't want to remember! But it's always there and it always will be! I just...

No, no no, it wasn't fair...why then?

I...please I...oh Goddesses why...

"Murky? Murky, what happened? What's wrong? Hey, hey come here..."

Just, I...I...I can't help it, s-sorry...

He didn't give me a choice! I...only had one choice left.

One choice...one way out...

"Murky...?"

...I had to.

"Murky! *What did he do?!*"

* * *

The bar locked shut through the handles of the trap door. I knew it wouldn't hold them long.

A violent thumping on the weak wooden and iron cast door signalled that my pursuers rather agreed. They screamed, ordering me to stop and blasted chunks from it with roaring shots of those snout nosed shotguns many slavers carried. Buckshot flew through the air, pinging into the empty studio I'd ran to. I ducked back and galloped away from the lethal swarm of pellets.

Sweat flowed, my brow and muzzle stung as it reached the cracked skin of my radsors. Every leg thumped, aching to be rested, like a thousand needles were being jabbed into every one of them on my inner thighs. I could feel my mane plastered to my head and the searing pain in my eyes from when I had ran fearfully through a chemical smog cloud belching from the factory next door.

But I still ran.

Floorboards snapped, creaked and splintered beneath me as I galloped for the windows, the only way out of this room. I knew that for sure, for I'd tried this route twice already. I only hoped the slavers behind me hadn't been on those shifts to know too.

Crack! The trapdoor sprung open! Glancing back at the dark forms rushing through, I turned and redoubled my efforts with the long chain hanging from my collar dragging and making all a manner of clatter behind me. Sprinting through the building with thick wads of bloody pain in my lungs and throat, I dove through the broken window. I knew what was outside it, a corrugated metal overhang like a ramp. Landing with a clatter, I slid onto my side, skidded down it and leapt from near the bottom. The jump sent me passing over a three storey drop to crash through the scattered glass of the adjoining factory. Shouts of frustration as I heard the overhang collapse and fall behind me almost lifted my spirits enough to ignore the harsh *slap* of a hard metal floor meeting me belly first.

Screaming, I curled up, clutching my bruised stomach. The bruises hadn't formed from the drop. They were old, ones I couldn't even remember how long ago I'd received them. Hours had become like days. I didn't know how much time it had been since the first broadcast about Arbu anymore. No, these blackened shades of skin beneath my patchy and in some places non-existent coat were from when I had taken the liberty of *assuming* he'd wanted his bed made. The imagery of a wooden cane whipping again and again before a horrid stamping of a hoof so hard a rib had snapped like a thin twig. I *did* still remember the shocked silence between us before my mind realised what he'd done and simply screamed in complete shock.

He'd gotten a doctor just to heal me enough that he could finish the thirty lashes of the cane.

Yet, even after landing on my abused underbelly I could not cry. Some things just ran that deep these days.

I reached for the railings of the metal catwalk I'd landed on, almost falling right over the side into a tanning vat beneath as I found no such rails there. (Some things never changed) Beneath me, slaves were still cringing from the shower of glass I'd sent into their workplace among the mill's vats, the falling shards plinking into the thick fatty mixtures. Pulling up my legs, them crooked and shaking beneath me, I stood up to continue my escape. I...I had to keep going, I'd gotten further than last time! My Master had missed me when he'd tried to do his whole 'appear and trap' routine! This was a proper escape now!

My head glanced from side to side, looking at the floor beneath me. The rows of vats underneath the catwalk I was on emanated foul fumes up toward me, but closer to the exit I could see a massive conveyor bringing in carcasses and lengths of leather that cut right from wall to wall. It was blocking all routes to the exit on the far side from me. Two scaffold bridges crossed over it on either side of the room, I'd need to get over one of them to reach the way out!

The stairs shook over a foot from side to side on crude fixtures as I descended to the tanning mill's work floor. Slaves backed away from me, I could see their overseers beginning to shift through the crowd I was so desperately trying to merge into, but they all saw my wings. None of them would let me near. They all knew the standing orders about 'the pegasus.'

I had to...to run. It was the only way out! *Just run!*

Crying out in pain as I forced my body to go one more time, the collar and chain feeling heavier by the second, I fled. Galloping across the floor, around ponies and ignoring the shouts of the slavers knocking slaves aside behind me. I'd heard too many cries to stop to tell them apart now, only one voice mattered to avoid.

I galloped for the closest bridge, but seeing two slavers throwing a mare aside to rush down the aisle between vats toward me, I doubled back. They were already on that one! I...I had to get to the other one! The foul stench of tanning liquid spilled from buckets knocked over in my passing, giving them a horrid slippery surface to catch up.

A slaver mare, as deep red as Brimstone and a gas mask swinging below her snarling face shoved her way past two bucks, leaping between the vats to get me and block the way to the *other* bridge! With the two behind me, they had either side of the aisle blocked! I couldn't go over! I was too short! But if I went under I'd be too slow to crawl on tired limbs!

I was caught with no way out of the factory!

Casting my head side to side wildly and whimpering, I spotted a wheeled slab of metal for letting repair-ponies slide under the conveyor belts. Rushing forward, I started pushing it

toward the conveyors between the vats, desperately trying to get ahead of them closing in on either side. At the last moment I jumped toward the trolley, landing atop it and rolling underneath the conveyor belts at speed with the rusty clanking of the rollers passing inches above my head.

Behind me, the slavers from either side dove to try and grab my tail. Mercifully, for once, their hooves caught nothing. The trolley sailed on past the other side of the conveyor, hitting the loading ramp leading out of the factory and began picking up speed. I flew from the factory on my makeshift transport, rolling onto the granite courtyard ground and whizzing by the guards that seemed more surprised at the sight to realise they should have stopped it. My chain trailing behind whipped around one's ankles, tripping him on the spot.

I had to admit, even under the panic and desperation a little satisfaction crept into my heart at the sight.

Hitting the edge of the concrete pathway with a jolt, I was catapulted to land in the muck from the last shower of rain. Cast out into the dark street under the black clouds and swirling smoke of Fillydelphia I fought to get the air in my complaining lungs and keep putting one hoof in front of the other. The familiar tone of enraged Fillydelphian slavers emanated from the factory behind me, the situation all too memorable by now, I could hear their hooves stamping and galloping onto the hard ground. I just had to go a bit further! Trial and error had got me this far! The sewage outlet was near, one I knew was hidden. Not the closest, not the furthest. It was picked at *random* from me choosing the first number I'd heard from somepony else around me to ensure he couldn't predict me.

Slavers burst from the tanning mill, following the trailing grind of my chain upon the ground. Panicking, I kicked my legs into a mad dash over the road to slip and stumble down the steep embankment that led down to the overflow sewer drains. I fell, rolled, screamed and pushed my hooves beneath me again even as the motley assortment of leather and metal clad slavers appeared at the top behind me. I was so close! He wasn't even close to me, I'd have heard his thick stomping! I just had to avoid this bunch of-

The slurping sound of someone stumbling in mud was my only warning. Leaping to the side, a murky green slaver fell down past where I'd been, his clumsy hooves sending him tumbling down the slope. Swearing, holding his horn where it had struck a rock, I saw eyes promising imminent *pain* if he caught me. Unsteadily descending to the ground myself, we began a slow and slippery chase in which our hooves sank almost half a foot into the ground on every step. Behind him the others slid and wallowed, that red mare trying to hop between rocks to catch up before falling on her side, covering her long trailing coat in goopy greenish mud. Panting, feeling my vision go blurry and my throat swell under the radioactive collar...I knew that this was a death sentence if I couldn't infiltrate back to Weathervane soon after this. But I'd be away!

Just escape. That was *all* that mattered. It was the only way out. The only thing worth keeping in mind...there was something out there beyond the Wall. *Remember it and push on!*

Dragging my chain, trying to keep it ahead of the unicorn. I felt glad the fall had at least damaged the telekinesis he seemed to be trying to use. His horn sparked like Coral's before fading out. But he was gaining. Long legs were so much handier for this terrain! I could see the passage ahead, but it wasn't the one I wanted, it was the false one! I'd done this before in my food run just after the Arbu broadcast, so I had to be sneaky. The one My Master would *think* I was going for was the closest one! But my real one was around the corner, the one to fool his tricks!

Just a...bit...further...

My chain went taut. The sudden stop made my hooves slip and sending me collapsing into the sloppy ground. The unicorn had caught up to me! Reeling me in...coming closer.

"Hah! Gotcha now, kid! Now let's find who you belong to, huh?"

He bent over me, front hooves reaching under to lift me up. Slurping, pushing my hind leg out from under the mud, I shot a back hoof behind me at speed, crashing into his nether regions. The legs around me went limp, a horrid squeal of pain and disbelief hurting my sensitive ears as he fell to the side, squirming and holding himself between the back legs. I winced myself, the strike had felt that much more of a *crunch* that time.

He kept writhing, screaming in horror. But I kept dragging myself onward. Slavers were catching up from being more cautious on the hill. From all sides they rushed. I saw whips, nets and canes. My body ached at the thought (and ached for the same reasons in a more practical manner too) even as I kept going. I just had to make it to the sewers! It was the only way out! The only way to be free!

"He's going for the sewers! Stop him! STOP HIM!"

I *had* to! Sliding on a shallower section of ground, I began to pull the lichen covered nets that had once acted as filters away from the opening. The slimy substance coated my front hooves...even my mouth as I disgustingly bit and ripped away at it with everything I could. Beyond it...the gaping hole with an open cage door lay before me.

I'd made it.

I hazarded a look back before the warm fuzzy joy of relief flowed through me. They were still miles away! Pushing through, tumbling as I got in, I struggled with the caged hatch to close it. Through the bars I saw them approaching, first four, then ten and then *twenty*. A whole crowd of slavers seeking to keep me enslaved. Not anymore!

With them still ten metres away the door slammed shut. I slammed the bolt and clicked the padlock I'd stolen from my last shift in place before trotting backward when they crashed into the bars. They tried to pry it off to no avail. The lead slaver, a huge brute with pitch black coat and mane stared at me with hazy eyes and unspoken threats. Feeling my chest quiver with fear, I turned to gallop into the darkness....

...and ran straight into his embrace.

Tiny wails from my tortured throat barely had time to echo before they were clenched and half choked as one gigantic hoof held me to his stinking and sweat soaked leather barded chest. From the corner of my eye I saw the lanky grey mane, the thick brown coat, yellowed teeth and my own eyes looking down to me from the darkness.

My Master only grinned, leaning down close to my ear as he sat back and stroked my forehead with his own hoof, tracing across my scar. *Our* scar. I just stared away as best I could, feeling sick. How...*how?! I'd been so close.*

It was like he read my mind, whispering gently even as I saw him.

"A random direction...surprising routes...deliberately taking the harder paths and yet still you come to me all over again just when you'd thought you were free, eh? Come back to complete your punishment shifts? There's *lots* of overseers want to see *you* in their workplaces these days."

He slowly clicked the chain into place again. I struggled, but without even a word he hurled me into the side of the sewer, striking me across the mouth repeatedly until a wet line of blood trickled from my lip. I begged, but he only brought his hoof down one more crushing time. Under it, I heard a crack. Howling, feeling my eyes water from physical injury than from choosing to cry I fell back. My...my snout *moved* under my hooves! I howled again and again through my hooves, a muffled scream that led to me falling forward toward him. I hugged his nearest hoof, nursing my broken nose and pleading that I was sorry. He simply stood above me and began to drag me by my chain toward the exit and the grinning slavers.

"By this point, son, after so many tries you really should be asking yourself if you aren't finding your way back to me all on your own without even realising it."

* * *

"Murk? Murky Number Seven? Where have you got to? Hey, Murk, get those skinny hooves trotting and get out here!"

I was leaning against my workbench, my hooves idly tracing across multiple large brass

casings for anti-machine rounds to fit them into the heavy metal boxes for transport. Clicking the last one into its slot...I groaned as my aching neck took the strain and lifted the box in my mouth by a strap to carry.

“Where in the blithering hell are you, Murk?! I said get over here!”

One of my legs wasn't working right...my nose felt stuffy and swollen. Shifting a few inches at a time, I wearily carried the box to a large crate, feeling my teeth throb with pain at the weight in my mouth. But I worked on, passing through a roiling cloud of dark red ashy smog that blew through the factory. Chemical burning tinged in my half open mouth, burning my nose and stinging my eyes. Coughing and choking, I dropped the case of ammunition to the floor and fell upon my side.

No-pony working at their own benches around me paid any heed to the little pegasus, naked and bearing his broken wings at their hooves as they morosely trotted to and fro like little cogs in the great war machine of the factory. Just like me. Groaning, I dragged the ammo box the last few feet, pushing in alongside a mare with little coat left and choking up yellowed spit as she placed her own box in. I'd have complained about the chemicals saturating the air, but the truth was the ambience in Fillydelphia alone was toxic to the core. Even outside, you could still taste the rusty tang at the back of your throat on each strained breath.

“There you are! Murk, why didn't you respond?”

Whimpering at the effort, pushing my tired hooves up I slotted the ammo box into the last remaining space before the guards began to close it up and mark it for delivery. Finally, my ears picked up on the words. Other ponies...they were becoming distant compared to the only voice that mattered. Slumping against the crate, my mouth hanging open in the far stages of exhaustion I saw the overseer coming through the steam clouds wafting from the forge and acid wash machines with a cloth tied around his mouth.

“So...sorry. Didn't hear...” My voice was quiet, little more than a whisper interrupted by a harsh hacking. My body was weary beyond measure...a dozen crates of a dozen ammo boxes each filled with a dozen heavy rounds for hours upon end in the sweltering heat of a forge had drove me to the edge of stamina. I didn't even feel my movements...I just slaved away until it had all become a blur...

The overseer...he was the one I'd worked under before, a scrawny earth pony who had given me the forge socks that were now our waterskins in waiting. He wasn't so bad if you did the work right. He trotted over to where I could more properly see him and his cutie mark of a candlestick with multiple wicks either side. Casting careful eyes at the finished crates he turned and nodded approvingly.

“Good work, Murk. Now come on and *get*, your shift ended ten minutes ago. Time for

you to go back to the Mall, it's your rest period."

Horror struck through me. No...no not yet. Please not yet! I abased myself before him, shivering and only adding to his confusion.

"M-Master, pl-please can I work one more shift? Just one more! I...I don't want to go back there! I want to keep working..."

The overseer sighed, looking away. "You've worked four shifts in a row here already Murk, well beyond what I allow ponies to do before the chems start to kill them. You can't spend all day here. We've been through this three times already and I don't think he'll-"

"*Please!*" I begged, moving forward, my front hooves resting on his. "I want to keep working *here!* A...away from-"

"Me, Number Seven?"

Even in the stuffy atmosphere of this factory, I felt my blood run cold. Through the smoke I could see his gigantic silhouette looming there. Every slave scurrying around him with their heads lowered, afraid to accidentally make eye contact with him. Shifting and coiling around him, the smoke drifted past to reveal My Master. Standing amongst the other slaves, he had already seemed to exude authority and become the very nexus of this workplace regardless of whether it was his or not. The overseer beside me gulped, trotting forward.

"M-Master Shackles. Murk has offered to work another shift here, he is doing good work once you find something he can manage. If you would loan his services to me for just one more shift. Just one more-"

"Silence your weakness of *care*, List Seeker. Don't think I can't see what you do. Trying to find and take in slaves to just 'get by' and 'meet the quota.' Finding those who could perhaps *survive* in your factory in their time here. I've humoured your requests for Number Seven purely as a means of allowing him to find his own realisation that *wanting* to work is the mindset of a true slave. Isn't that right?"

His eyes glared down at me, almost hidden behind List Seeker (had I only just got his name?) and shivering. Please...please just go and let me get back to my work. Let me work away in peace...

The overseer took a second to consider his options. But really, with My Master above even his gangly height he had no choice. My squeak of horror as he sadly trotted to the side was only matched by the one I made as my chain was removed from the bar I'd been attached to at my workplace. A hard tug and once more I was tied to My Master's harness. Exhausted, with every joint aching and stiff I found myself dragged up to his side again with my head hung

low. I...I wanted my workbench! I could lie on it while I worked. Just cease to exist for another few hours, please!

But as I was dragged away, my brief hope that Glimmer or Coral Eve might be back from their shifts on my rest period was shattered when I was pulled in the opposite direction of the exit leading to the Mall. Looking stern, Overseer List Seeker turned to look at us departing through his arms manufactory.

“Hey, the Mall's in that direction, back there!” He pointed a hoof.

My Master simply cackled and patted my head.

“Number Seven asked for another shift. I'm giving him what he wants. Just not under you.”

Limping and staggering out into the surging wind of the ever present dark storm above us, I could only see List Seeker's concerned look turn to a dejected sigh as he turned back to his own factory and the workers inside. The crashing sound of machinery faded away as I limped in step beside My Master, the ground turning from smoothed stone to gravel below me. Light rain misted all around, giving rise to the sense that this storm that had wracked Fillydelphia ever since Barb's riot was not going away any time soon. A darker Fillydelphia for darker days.

But for all its changing atmosphere I quickly realised where I was being led. Right into the past.

* * *

“Well would you *look* what got dragged before me.”

I sat before a desk, sniffing from the damp rainwater dripping off me and stinging my burns and radsors. A miserable little sight in the eyes of the pony who sat looking over her desk. Not that she would ever need any reason to hate me.

Wicked Slit moved from her chair, trotting around the desk with her eyes never leaving me. But I could only try to keep watch on her knife while it flicked around and rubbed against the floor near me. I could still hear My Master moving away down the catwalks outside her raised office in the foundry after he had simply thrown me in the door and left. Now I was trapped with the most neurotic slaver in Fillydelphia all over again, just like old times, just like-WHA!

I was being dragged. My chain was still attached and Slit had grabbed it in her magic to pull me to my hooves and out the door.

“One shift, Murk. I'm *not* going to let you waste seconds of time you could be *failing* to meet quotas sitting here looking sorry for yourself! You brought all this on you the moment you made a run for that wall. This is *far* too long overdue. **Move!**”

Her hooves lashed out, striking me on the side, flanks and face. Anywhere possible, really, as she began forcing me from her office. I couldn't even reply to her or say any words in return as she began slapping and striking me onto the catwalk. I tried to move ahead of her, but my legs felt triple jointed and mixed up. I reached the stairs and tried to move...

“I said **get moving!**”

Her magically enhanced voice stunned me before the vicious full buck caught my shoulder. Sharp pain flared and I was sent tumbling down the catwalk stairway to land on a searing hot concrete floor covered in still sparking fragments of metal. Howling and squealing, I pulled myself up and began backing away from her while trying to pat down my smouldering coat and the pain of the small burns.

“Please, Ma...I mean, sir I...I mean Ma'am! I'll work! *I'll wooork!*” The last word stammered and warbled from my mouth like a long plead. The resistance had been battered from me. I was too tired and sore to properly think and...and just let me do something I can switch off for...

She dragged me by knife point toward the yard of her foundry along rows of the all too familiar carts. Of course she'd want me to work on them. I was shoved, shrieking as her knife prodded my hind quarters toward one, I began the soul crushing task of chaining and locking myself into the harness of the item that had defined my life, feeling the familiar weight of a cart resting ready to be lowered onto my back.

“You probably think you're lucky. I made a few threats last time, little Murk.” She trotted around me, pacing back and forth. “Told you what I'd do to you if I caught you. Well, Shackles wants you working, so I'll put you to work. But don't think you're getting away without a little something from me!”

I stood stock still, now locked in place by the harness. Oh Goddesses! She could do *anything* and I couldn't run or dodge anymore. The sweat trickled from my face. I saw slaves watching, grinning. A bit of free entertainment in their ongoing slow days. What was she going to d-do? I'd seen her *kill* ponies without meaning to when she got lost in the frenzy of anger.

Wicked Slit backed off, suddenly grinning through her long and sweaty red mane. Then she began to chuckle, then laugh and then *howl* like the banshee she was at the sight of me held in place by an as of yet locked in place cart.

“Oh just something to make you remember. To make you *regret* daring to run from me!

To kick me *there*. You had your fun hitting on me.”

I saw the slaves glances to one another, a mixture of confusion and dark humour leading them to be unsure if they should laugh or look afraid. Wicked Slit turned side on, stamping a hind leg.

“That *hurt* you little fucking weasel! That little sharp hoof of yours down there. Thinking you could do that and you *wouldn't* pay?”

Slit began to trot toward me, her knife moving in to my cheek and sliding across it just enough to lightly break the skin. I whimpered, trying not to notice some of the slaves chuckling. At her words and misinterpreting it all or simply at me I didn't know. But I felt her knife slid back over my neck, heading down my body. No...please no...

“Eye for a fucking eye, Murk. You buck me there, I'll leave you legless.”

I felt a crunch, the impact of her knife's blunt hilt bring propelled by her strong magic. A few moments of quiet, cold pain...before I yelled at the feeling. Falling, clutching myself from the blunt trauma that my shrill voice carried across the courtyard. They...they *laughed!* Laughed as tears streamed from my eyes and laughed as I felt the blade rest on my back, feeling the whip scars that were still healing...

“You better fucking *remember* why you once feared me so much you'd come in crying and begging for me not to kill you every single day you were assigned here. You better *remember* what it was like to be the slave who would gallop on a sprained hind leg to finish in time so that I wouldn't *remove* his leg. You better remember, runt...just what you are to us. You *aren't* some fucking hero who's going to escape. You *aren't* somepony different from all those other slaves in my factory. Now you're going to remember it every step you take for the next few hours.”

White hot pain slid across my back, I screeched and writhed as I felt hot blood trickle down my sides. She...she'd slit open one of my whip scars! She-

I howled again and then a third time, her knife opening three wounds all over again before slamming the harness down on my back. Coming close to my ear with her psychotic voice dropping, I couldn't cry to let out the fear but I could cry in pain, moaning and choking in equal measure.

“You're a slave, Murk. *His* slave. But for the next few hours you're *my* fucking slave. Now Mistress Slit says...*gallop*. Gallop...so that you'll feel every tug, pull and shift upon the back you are to spend your whole life breaking for us.” She paused. “For Red Eye.”

There was no choice, no argument. I simply had to weep and gallop even as my back

stung and bled behind me under the harness. Gallop, be loaded up and then gallop again. Always galloping even when it hurt too much to carry on. She or somepony else would always be there to push me onward. Even if it fell to exhausted tearless sobs, I didn't stop crying the entire way. Journey after journey, load after load. Every time returning to be met by her gleeful and satisfied stare at the pony who'd dared to defy her. Filled with scrap, cut metal or discarded refuse, I was sent on my way. Trips to the Ironshod Outlet, to List Seeker's munitions depot (Seeing the tired overseer watch on with almost pity) and even back to the Wartime Ministry Hub.

Until finally, as some sort of twisted mercy, My Master was there waiting at the end. Collapsing, my back crusting over and my chest pitifully trying to raise and lower for breath, I fell at his hooves. My throat was swollen. My disease catching up from the workload and my collar steadily pushing my life's countdown onward...

Please...RadAway...now...I...I couldn't take much more...

He only grinned that one grin at me, and slowly spoke.

"Get up. Time for your next shift."

* * *

The crate behind me finally slid the last few inches, pulling it into place.

"Good, laddie! Very good!"

My 'overseer' clapped his hooves in delight at my first job completed for him, grinning to a pony he was bartering with. Sooty's desk lay near the front door, behind us two huge curved staircases ran to the upper level on either side of an inside fountain beneath a recently repaired chandelier.

"Just my new little worker, my friend. Now, what shall it be? A quick fix? The whole experience?"

I fell against the crate, seeing through unfocused eyes the shape of that most hated trader laughing with the sick minded client. Around us lay a nexus of debauchery. An abandoned mansion in the residential district hastily converted to operate this newer venture. Sooty's new trade in ponies and in selling time with different acts involving them to the slavers (and sometimes slaves) who could pay for the opportunity.

Across the hallway, there were various bucks and mares, slaves all, chained to the wall with a crude board above detailing their costs. I was somewhat glad I couldn't read the various crude lists of 'tiered' acts each was expected to market. But not one of them had anything

approaching any will in their often blackened eyes. Some were crying, realising they were consigned to this as their life from now on.

I had long since forced myself to ignore the sad sounds from the closed rooms upstairs...

My Master had dropped me here to work as Sooty's assistant. My crates were heavysset, but empty. Designed to accommodate the varied manners of payment Sooty's 'clients' brought with them. Anything from spare clothing to weapon parts was exchanged after a brief haggle with Sooty Morass himself to attain their 'credit.' I'd seen him sell a pony for an hour in return for a good set of cooking pans he'd wanted. Is that what a pony's dignity was worth to him?

I felt sick. Even beyond my current heightening disease that saw me blacking out for a few seconds every couple of minutes.

The trader trotted toward me, tapping the crate with a hoof before grinning down to me, those little braids bearing *my feathers* swinging to the right of his face.

"Now might I ask what ye are doin' resting, lad?"

"I...I...why..."

The trader seemed to sigh a little, patting me on the head in that far too friendly manner.

"Ye know, laddie. Here's a generous wee gift of info. In this world, you use *everything* you can get to find a way by. Me? I just do it better than anypony else. Ye think I care what I sell or who I exploit if it helps me make me way through life? Just accept it, lad. The ones who know what to do to survive succeed in this world while the ones who don't, like you? Nothing more than a means to an end. Ol' Red Eye gets it, I get it, Shackles gets it. It's not personal, just business."

How could that be how *my* world had to work? I'd seen Equestria, seen the green fields and beautiful colours.

But back in the real world, my captor simply sighed at my lack of agreement and spun away.

"Come on! Get the back to work or Shackles will no doubt be interested to hear about you taking *unordered breaks*. Shift yer arse and get the rest!"

A command.

I obeyed.

The rest ended up being *twelve*. Every time dragging them upstairs from the basement, inch by painstaking inch that ground on my teeth from the bit or tugged upon my scar from Barb. I passed slavers taking poor ponies upstairs to an assigned room. Some fought and were dragged while some simply morosely trotted with a resigned depressed look. Every time I came in, he lorded over me, taking the chance to abuse this moment of power with an 'assistant' from My Master being sent to him. Finally, as the last crate was shoved into position and I leaned back against it to try and dig a large splinter from my right fetlock, Sooty Morass trotted over. With all clients satisfied and left to make their 'choices' behind him, he had a few spare minutes for me.

“Does good to repay your debts right, doesn't it? For all yer scamperin' around ye still come back to be here with me. Coulda saved yerself a lot of trouble by just taking up my offer back at the skyport, huh?”

I couldn't muster much of a response, simply looking back up at him with a quivering jaw. Seeing his hoof reach out, I shrank back against the crate, unable to hide a little shrill squeak of fear.

His face lit up as he heard it.

“Oh...oh now that, that's just...”

The smile turned to a deadly fiendish grin.

“...marketable.”

I'd felt the sensation many times but never had it been more true now as my blood turned to *ice*. Hearing the arrogant little chuckle as Sooty saw the look in my eyes, I just shook my head.

“Oh don't give me that, little laddie. Don't ye remember I asked ye before? I'm sure something as, heh, exotic as you...”

I felt him stroke my feathers poking out from my bandage. I...I wanted to throw up.

“...would attract *quite* the attention.”

His voice was different. This was no longer the carefree and arrogant marketeer. He *smelled* money from me and the greed and ambition to grow and prosper was all too visible. Tugging me away from the crate to the centre of the giant entranceway, he stood me upon a large fragmented mosaic beneath the domed roof and chandelier before beginning to trot around me. I kept my eyes front, trying not to whimper too loudly at the clacking hooves and beady eyes on all sides.

“Good and small. Not many bucks your size. Lots of interest for that from the male persuasion...”

No...

“Bit sick looking, but we could help that with a lil'RadAway. We'd still make a profit..”

No...no...no...

I felt a tug on my tail. Yelping, I scampered forward, falling over myself in exhaustion to land upon my side on the mosaic, turning back to see Sooty laughing and stomping a hoof upon the once beautiful mosaic. I curled up, trying to keep every inch of myself protected. He'd...he'd lifted my tail!

“Haha! Oh, they'll love that attitude.” He trotted forward again. “A high earner for sure!”

Leaning down over me, a hoof tapped the side of my hips. I bit my lip at the greedy look of the potential income in his eyes.

“Perhaps a little small framed to really *do* anything with you in the hind quarters, so don't *worry* lil'Murky...we won't have ye doin' that.”

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. I...I wanted to wake up. Please, let this just be a nightmare.

“But I'm sure we could still find a use for you. Put some other little things of yours to good use in my 'lower expense' range, hmm?”

He lifted my front hooves, tapping them before raising his other hoof under my jaw and gently patting the side of my mouth with a knowing grin. I knew what he meant, I just didn't want to think about it. All I could do was squeak and hide under my own front hooves to quiver on the floor even as the thick stomping from the main door started.

He'd come back.

Sooty turned, laughing as he stood up away from my huddled body.

“Master Shackles! Your timing as ever is perfect, he was just finished his work!”

The mosaic's broken tiles jittered loosely and trembled out of their sockets as My Master strode into Sooty's sick business. I could see him *smiling* at the sight of it. Slavery within slavery. No wonder he liked it.

But he represented, for once, a way out of here. I scrambled across to cling to his hoof. He hadn't even spoken a word yet but Sooty only laughed at me moving so quickly.

"Was just discussing a business deal with the little pegasus here. Me doors are *a/ways* open if you ever want him to grow up a little. Got *more* than enough clients who'd pay a good amount for a little submissive pegasus like him."

My Master cackled. My heart skipped a beat. Was he? Was...

But as I looked up, he only shook his head.

"Get up. Next shift."

* * *

"Ready up! Cycle's coming again!"

Nostalgia. Horrible, horrible nostalgia. To be forced into work at the very places I had once gathered my items to escape from. My life told in reverse. To be back the threshing mill amongst the small ponies forced under its whirling blades.

"Go!"

A sore body, a near delusional mind...I saw only the lint and frayed threads ahead of me...the scything machine just beyond. I charged, scooped and then fled the impending doom. My back was a mess. The little strands were catching in my scabbing wounds from Wicked Slit's tasks, my leg still didn't feel right...

"Ready up! Cycle's coming again!"

Dropping what I had I felt the light cane whip over my ears, as it did every slave. Their new theory. We could never get enough. We would always be pressed for more. Till our very blood became the price they paid for the small scraps of thread. It...it didn't make any sense...

"Go!"

I dove in. I cried out...snatching what I could and scuffled with another slave who tried to take *my* quota. We retreated, feeling the hiss of cold metal at our tails. Falling out I felt the cane whip over my ears...then the next...and the next...

"Ready up! Cycle's coming again!"

This was so pointless! Why didn't they just use unicorns?! Why us?!

"Go!"

Why us?! WHY ME?!

Again and again..unceasing. Bearing new slashed cuts on my hind legs, as shallow as they were, but still another addition to my gradually breaking body over this day of hell.

Lying amongst the thread, choking and spraying my lifeblood across what I had gathered from my mouth, I simply let my consciousness begin to slip. My throat was thumping, my lungs were tightening...but I looked up to see him there...

"R-RadAway...M-Master please..."

He grinned.

"Get up. Next shift."

* * *

Sliding...galloping...screaming...I clambered from cart to cart, terror forcing me to make one last effort despite my injuries and despite every inch of my body saying no. I wouldn't let them eat me.

My leather suit had come undone from an auto-axe cutting the threads, I could have sworn on purpose. Now I fled through the underground nightmare that was Hive's pits. They swarmed around me. Beasts in multicoloured winged form that fought and rushed and pushed, all trying to get in through the hole in my chest. My goggles were steaming up! I couldn't see! I couldn't *breathe* through the mask! I fell...

Dusty rock met me on the way down. I beat my hooves, feeling their scrambling bodies around the hole. Then a horrid stinging pain as I felt tiny teeth rip a small half inch chunk from my chest and gnash in again and again. Its comrades joined it, shoving to get into my breast. Crawling and likely invisible under the swarm I felt my chain catch on something, jarring me to a stop. I...where was the exit?! Where did I go?!

My body failed me. I fell. The spasm came, my chest convulsed. The coughing fit hit me like a sledgehammer to the ribcage. Swelling over my collar, the painful seared skin of my throat from such constant radiation rubbed and chaffed on every wheezing kick of my body. Blood splattered from my mouth, coating the inside of my hood and vision slits, blinding me. I felt a sting on my chest, a nibbling before I rolled over to put the hole to the ground and ride out the sickness.

I lay there a long time, hearing the sound of the parasprite pits around me. Eventually the little demons left me be, sensing their hole was covered. But I didn't move. Blind inside the foul armour, exhausted beyond motion I simply lay. I...I might have passed out, I didn't know. Every so often I tried to move a hoof, only to feel the muscles complain and respond slower than they should. Inch...by...pain...staking...inch...I...pulled...myself...toward...yes!

Reaching up, I felt the handle of the locker room, used by those who needed a quick repair. Pushing the first door open to the area, I slipped inside and fell upon the floor, finally tugging my hood off.

I couldn't move. My legs were...were gone. I couldn't feel my body. I was spent...

I knew he was there, watching me from across the locker room. I knew he would be. He'd have known when to return. Looking up, opening my eyes, seeing through a fine red haze (Oh Goddesses...I'd turned bloodshot in my sickness...) I coughed up another thick wad and shivered, pleading with my eyes...please let that be enough...

"P-p-pl..." I couldn't even finish the word, my throat was...was dying...

He only shook his head.

"Get up. Next shift."

* * *

Helping repair the Mall. Kept away from the cells and my friends amongst the higher levels to sledgehammer a wall down. I didn't even *know* why. Just an old back room of a shop they wanted connected to the corridors. I didn't know what shop.

I could barely tell who was around me, but the buck to my left was crying openly. He had made the mistake of trying to beg the overseer. One of My Master's most brutal. An obese and slimy wretch of a stallion that kept his saliva smeared clothing on only through crudely tied rope. But the slave beside me? He had begged, saying this wasn't what he was meant to be doing, that his life was being ruined from the slavery.

They'd taken him and...and...

Oh Goddesses preserve him, they'd cut his *cutie marks* off. Just held him down and ignored the pitiful, humiliating screams that stripped his pride and strength as the serrated knife dug and slit. The overseer's way of showing him that he wasn't meant for *anything* anymore. They'd caught me looking and...

I was just lucky they hadn't done the same.

It was just one faded blurry mess. Like I'd scrubbed a hoof over fresh charcoaled drawings and ruined all the clean definition. In the same way I could no longer draw, I could no longer see my own life. No longer feel the clarity I'd spent so long honing and achieving through hardship and the joy of friendship.

Just one exhausted, painful and useless tap of a hammer after another...

I'd be knocked on my side if I dropped it. Every single time. I was useless! I had no idea how long I'd been here but I'd managed only six strikes that didn't even chip the wall. My rump was red raw from the whips meant to motivate me. Nearer the end I couldn't even shriek in pain.

I was dying, but something made me keep moving...

Again...

"Get up. Next shift."

* * *

Taking his clothing to be cleaned by my own hooves, feeling the stinging chemicals burning my hooves and making my muzzle's radsore swell with the toxins emanating from the tub. Of me being found lying on my side simply moving my hooves with not enough energy to move the rest of me...

And again...

"Get up. Next shift."

* * *

Carting refinery fuel, somehow trotting still because I was *told* to...

Past every limit I should have stopped at...

"Get up. Next shift."

* * *

Cutting scrap in the junkyards...

What he commanded, my body obeyed...

"Get up..."

I couldn't...I looked up...this was it for me, I knew it. Blood dribbled from my lips, I bled from my back...pain covered every aspect of me. Every place, every intimacy and crevice of my frail and mortally sick body. I had...had given more than I knew I had...give, give, give...now with nothing left but my life that he owned.

The orange sachet appeared before me. A sudden last lifeline. Getting up, I suckled on its tear off straw even while feeling his hoof stroking my mane gently.

"...good boy."

* * *

The door had slammed shut, locking me in the shop cell. I hadn't trotted in, I'd been carried 'home' on a slaver's back after being dragged by My Master back to the Mall.

Now I lay on my side, wheezing as my skeletal little chest fluttered and tried to raise as best it could. I lay in the one stream of light that entered through the cage from the Mall outside. In the diagonal rays filled with dusty air broken only by the shadows of harsh faced slavers trotting on patrol outside.

But she was there.

Coral Eve had been waiting. She always did when I was out on shift. Every chance she had she was here waiting and hoping that I'd be returned before her own shift came up again. The mare was limping from a savage cane lash to her front left leg and hazy eyed from a fever brought on by chemicals ingested in her own shifts...but she still did what she always had in these last few desperate times. Without words passed between us, I felt her gentle touch lift me onto her back and begin to trot into the back room. Purely by instinct, I found myself clinging around her neck along the way until I was lowered onto the mattress and covered with a ragged blanket for what rest I could hope for until it all began again.

* * *

The orb shone, glittering brightly and illuminating the room as it hung in the air before Glimmerlight's horn. With a splash of radiance, it split apart and the shards of sparkling magic wrapped around her horn.

"Alright, Murky, just lie there. You know this doesn't hurt."

I had little choice, my failing leg had, well, failed. All while my snout and chest ached to even move. But Glimmer's sole remaining healing orb she had stolen back during the riots was our last possession to keep me going, working its powers as she traced her horn an inch from my body. Up and down, the gentle and easing warmth spreading through my body to restore strength and vanquish pain.

It said a lot that Glimmer was using this on me. Her face bore numerous new bruises. Without Brimstone around she'd had to fight off the attentions of those who saw her as 'vulnerable' now and had tried to take her food. At least that's what she *told* me they'd been trying. Thankfully, she'd stayed as safe as could be despite the injuries earned in her own defence, I knew she could take care of herself. But for her to endure an infected cheek wound to instead heal me, I was so lucky to have her.

Glimmerlight had joined us more properly earlier, somehow wangling her way to a cell transfer. I'd managed to push out a wheezy question of how. It seemed that we still had at least one friendly face in here as Blunderbuck, the junior armoury assistant, had been ordered to take away her scrap pile to the armoury and new workshops of the Mall then evict her from our old cell. He'd managed to get her in with Coral to be closer to me.

It was perhaps the only piece of good news all day.

I groaned on the spot, feeling the painless but nonetheless uncomfortable sensation of tendons re-knitting inside my leg as the tension of muscle power returned. Glimmer's hoof reached over to gently stroke my mane, calming me.

"Not far now, Murky. It won't do it all but it'll help you rest better and let you move again. The better you move, the less they'll hit you. Don't worry, help's coming, I heard somepony talking about the punishment detail returning later today. Brim'll be back! It'll get better with him here. Promise."

There was a little snort from Coral's direction before the grey mare stood and trotted over while Glimmer finished up, the spell fading from her horn.

"Th-thanks, sis..." I stammered, still wary of the term even after the apology. We *really* needed a chance to talk about it, I could see it in her eyes. The brahmin in the room, the 'talk' we'd need to have sometime soon about...about what happened. But not now...things were too bad right now and we both knew it. We'd both been angry, both been hurt...but right now we needed every bit of strength we could muster between us.

Shifting up, I still hurt, but the sharper cuts, burns and strains were gone and replaced by a dull ache that accompanied most muscle movements. That and my tooth still felt loose even as my hoof felt the raw skin around my neck. Always related...

"I mean, thank you. I...I hope he's back soon."

"You're telling me, sooner he's here, the sooner he can bully some slave into getting his own shop cell back and the sooner he can buck that welded door clean off its hinges and get you out of here away from *him*. Heck, we'll all go, I thought we could tough it till Protégé got back but..."

There was an odd silence, broken only by a light and dry attempted sob from me. I'd seen him stable in the Fun Barn, but the sight of that black dagger piercing out through his neck and chest still horrified me.

"But I don't think he'll be coming back." Glimmerlight finished quietly while Coral nodded lightly, reaching out to incline Glimmer away from me.

"I don't want that beast anywhere near me, but if his strength to knock a door loose can get Murk away I'm not turning it down. Now let him rest, it can't be too long till they'll come again."

I bit my lip nervously. Coral and Glimmer always seemed on the cusp of a debate or argument, but I only saw Glimmer nod, clearly not wanting to do anything right now that might invoke harsher emotions.

"It's...it's alright. I'm just tired..." I muttered, trying to smile at Glimmer, probably failing, "I just need to get my head down. I'm...I'm used to this life..."

It was a terrible lie and perhaps the worst attempt to reassure someone not to worry about me I'd *ever* made. But the fact that Glimmer seemed to know that and still run with it to hug me close meant the world to me. She was putting on her best, comforting me all she could while clearly keeping her eyes averted from the bruised eyes, hastily bandaged wings and marked body I had before her. She simply looked at *me*. Into my own eyes, reminding me that she saw a pony, not a simply physical tool.

That alone reminded me that I wasn't lost yet. I may have been broken around My Master but...but with my friends I could manage.

...barely.

She clearly *had* noticed the weakness though, biting her lip even as Coral coughed politely for her to give me space to try and sleep. Her hooves seemed a little slow on wanting to leave me, nor mine from her. Finally, I saw the sudden horror of her stifling a sob behind a smile, leaning her forehead on mine and speaking so quietly. I knew it was just for us.

"I'm sorry this happened, Murky..."

"I know..."

"We'll live. I swear to you we'll *live*. Someday...someday soon, we'll make a home for ourselves, far from *anypony* and just live how we want. Please...*please* keep believing in that. No matter what happened to...to my parents, or your Stable Dweller. *We* matter, Murky, don't let them take that away from you, *please*. You've worked so hard to become who you are."

"I'm trying. I...I still want to get out, promise."

She ruffled my mane, choking a little smile out.

"Go dream of that mare y'want, lil'bro. They can't take your dreams. I'll be just outside."

We parted, Glimmerlight reluctantly leaving me to finally rest while trying to dream the dreams that would see my life better.

Somehow, it didn't quite feel so different from a single night in a pigsty once so long ago.

* * *

"What's that?"

"Huh?"

"What is...what were you going to do?!"

I shifted in the blanket, my body feeling crashed out from the healing and exhaustion. Sleep had come when I least expected to feel it, a slow and creeping relief after the comfort of knowing I'd at least been left with my friends. But my ears picking up the sounds drove me to crawl through the blanket and lean up, the shallow snooze leaving me groggy eyed and disoriented as the sudden shouts rippled through the cell.

"I...I was just-"

"You were going to do it again, weren't you?! I can't believe you! All of this and that's what you fall back on? How many?"

No reply.

"How *many*?"

"Four..." A sniff. "My shifts. To try and stay happy, for him."

"Now a fifth? When does it end, Glimmer? Let go of it, give it to me. Put that blasted thing down now!"

Coral. It was Coral shouting, arguing with Glimmer. I heard a brief scuffle, before something clearly fell, pinging off the ground and bouncing away from them. My eyes finally adjusting, I saw something roll into the back room with me.

An empty memory orb.

"What were you going to get rid of, huh? Caduceus? Forget what he tried to do for you all just to rest easy not seeing what happened? Today's shift? A bad screw with that mare in the other cell? What will it take to get through to you!?"

"It wasn't that!" Glimmer shouted back at last, silencing the air between them. I'd heard them argue many times since Glimmer had 'moved in' to our cell. The two of them in close proximity was just drama waiting to happen but they'd at least found some semblance of order in taking care of me.

Somehow, I felt a little guilty about that.

"I...I was going to...to strip away what his radio told me. About my parents..."

I could just imagine the look of fury building on Coral's face, unable to properly express the anger as I heard her voice low and unerringly steady.

"You were going to forget your own parents' deaths? Just throw away that they died because *you* couldn't handle thinking about it like anypony else has to in this hell we call a world?"

A hoof stomped at Glimmer's voice rising. She was crying. I could hear it.

"Not for me! I swear it! It...it was for Murky..."

"What?"

"I thought that, if I didn't remember it for now we could get on just fine like before, none of this awkward tension where we both know we see different things right now. He needs solidity, Coral, now more than ever with that monster killing him day by day! I just want to *help* him! Be the the big sister he *needs*, the best friend who isn't constantly worried about wanting to tell him off for believing in the mare who *killed my damn parents*, Coral!"

There was a brief silence, interrupted only by Glimmer's occasional sniffs. I wanted to

desperately gallop out, grab her and tell her...tell her...

I didn't know, what was I *meant* to say about her mom and dad?

Coral replied for me.

"Do you know why Shackles is letting him stay with us, Glimmerlight? Have you thought why he's permitting him to not be kept in a tiny cold cell on his own?"

"I..."

"It's because putting him here with us makes it *worse*, Glimmer. He's out there every time breaking him to the point of death before healing him *just* enough to rest up until the next day. He's putting him with us because he *knows* we'll comfort him. We'll take care of Murk and treat him well all so Shackles gets to drag him away from us every single time to break him all over again."

I gripped the blanket, cuddling it tightly as I listened. I'd...I'd begun to suspect it but...

Oh Goddesses. He was using me to hurt them...

"We're his counter, Glimmer. Part of his sick little game as much as those slavers are whether we want it or not. If he left Murk alone without us, he'd break and likely die in a day. You and I both know it. By caring for him...we're making it hurt longer but he knows we won't be able to just let him go. It's unfair and cruel beyond measure and you know what? We don't have a choice. There's no victory to be had here in trying to make it all seem 'alright' every time he comes here with some stupid 'consistency' because there's no end out *there*."

"Please...Coral." I'd never heard Glimmer's voice so weak. "I...I don't think I can cope...it's like going cold turkey on an addiction! I keep wanting to just get rid of something to make it hurt less so...so I can be happier for him and for you. But for all I keep telling myself we're working toward something I just don't see it. We've only become further from escape than ever."

Coral Eve stomped a hoof, snorting.

"If you want to do anything for him, Glimmer, you need to stop trying to pretend it's all fine and that you can just forget the bad things. I want out too, I want my *son* but just wishing for some impossible heroic race outside the walls isn't going to work. Maybe...maybe something will happen. Maybe your raider 'friend' can do something, maybe Protégé will come back who's easier to get away from."

Her hard tone eased...I heard her sigh.

"But if you want to help him now give him something to hold onto. A hope no-one can take away no matter how many times they try. I've had to see the faces of my friends and family screaming and begging as they were humiliated and torn apart before my eyes every night that I sleep. I see my son alone wanting his mother. You are...you used to be stronger than I was. If I could manage it, so can you..."

Gripping my blanket like a foal with his stuffed toy, I leaned back on the mattress, surprised by the sudden change of tone. She sounded like she had in Glimmer's memory orb...

"Swallow your grieving, Glimmer. If you want to help him, talk to him about what *he* believes. What matters to him. Go on, there's not much time before they come again. If you want to talk to him do it now."

There was silence between them. I only heard the outside Mall...of the crying, banging and moaning that perpetually filled the air of sick and weary slaves. But then slowly...the sound of somepony getting up and trotting toward me. I threw myself under the blanket again, pretending I was asleep. Only after I heard the hooves entering the back room did I allow my eyes to open...as though her trotting had woken me.

Glimmerlight was in a real state.

Her eyes looked sunken and red sore from crying, far more than I'd obviously heard. Her mane straggled about her head, caked in grease and mud soaked down by the rain from wherever they had her working. Seeing me looking up from the bed, my big sis only gave a sad smile as she wandered over to lie on the bed beside me.

"Hey there, Murky. Sorry to wake you..."

"S'ok..." I muttered quietly, rubbing my eyes. But somehow I got the sense she knew I'd been pretending, she had that look in her eyes that told me she could tell.

"Listen, I..." She paused, her eyes flicking to the door, as though trying to think what to say from Coral's words. "I just wanna' say something and I don't know if it'll come out right. I'm sorta' making this up as I go along."

Truth be told, I wasn't sure what she was going to say either, but I could understand that fear. I felt it in every conversation.

"It's okay. I...I don't mind that. I'm no better, right?" I tried to smile, tried to forget what every shift meant, tried to forget the demeaning life as a 'pet.' Right now I was simply her friend, shifting across to lean my head against her shoulder. Slowly, moving away the blankets in the hazy darkness of the cell I felt her hoof wind around me.

"I just wanted to say...it doesn't matter what you heard Littlepip's done out there."

She must have felt me jump. For the last day all contact had been harsh and unfriendly, despite hugs earlier I still flinched. But she seemed to guess what was going on. It was partly anger, partly a void of sadness and misery at everything involving Littlepip, because she held me tightly and stifled my protest.

"Don't say it, Murky! Please, hear me out! It doesn't matter what she's done out there, why did she inspire you?"

"B-because she was...was free and good and...and...really strong to d-defy slavery and...and escape..."

Glimmer nodded, biting her lip. Where was she going with this? I didn't want to have her tell me to just accept the truth again, that wouldn't help! I...I needed the real truth, that this was all some lie...

"Because you saw her escape to be free. That's what I mean, Murky."

She turned, her hooves on my shoulders.

"It doesn't *matter* what she did or didn't do out *there!* You have all the proof that she *got there*. She inspired you because she escaped, never ever forget that! That's the important thing! No matter how bad it is, no matter how much we hurt or argue or...or lose. She's done what she needed. Proved to us that it's *possible*. For now, that's enough to give us hope to hang in here."

That was true...

That was *so true*.

I sat there, her hooves resting on me, just staring and thinking. Every aspect of this nightmare of my hero becoming something I refused to believe was ignoring the biggest thing.

She had *already escaped*.

Glimmerlight smiled, seeing the look on my face as my eyes widened and mouth clearly gaped open a little, knowing she'd stumbled onto at least one way to find some form of compromise between us.

"We'll talk it *all* over later, Murky. I *promise*. But for now this has to be enough for both of us. No matter what she is, what she did or what's true or false she gave us hope of potential.

Now we just need to hang on, Murky! Brimstone's coming back, Protégé will recover eventually, we...we have Coral with us now and I still managed to hide our stuff in the wall cavity before Blunderbuck came!"

She wiped my sweaty and drooping mane from my eyes, seeing my own terrified gaze behind it.

"We can *still* do this, Murky. Just don't let them beat you. You're strong, lil'bro. You've so much more than you think. Now please, please *hear* me when I say this. No matter what's happened between us or...or them, don't let them win. They can't break who you are because somepony's already proven it's possible from in here! Don't let them ruin who you became since I met you. Just don't..."

I felt a twinge in my eyes, the feeling so familiar I never even noticed it. Part of my mind rebelled, I hadn't been told I was allowed to cry! I hadn't been told!

But I dared to rebel a little.

I cried with my sis as we held one another.

"Just a little longer, Murky. I know you're feeling weak right now, vulnerable. I know what he's doing to you but *please* just hold on. I...I couldn't bear to see you go back to what you were, you're such a beautiful little pony that I don't want to lose! No...no matter who you want to believe in, I'll still love you, lil'bro..."

The tears properly came at last, shift after shift of them held back released by the care of Glimmer.

"I love you too, sis... I...I won't. It just hurts so much..."

"I know, Murky, I'm sorry."

"But I...I'll try and hold on for that better day when we can all leave together. All of us, Littlepip got out, she...she did it. They can't take that away from me! N-no matter what they do to me there...there's still that hope, right?"

She smiled, ruffling my mane. "There always is."

We both jolted upright as we heard the cage door lock slammed open and the door wrenched across the ground, creaking and scraping as it went.

"Murky Number Seven! Next shift! Come on, Shackles is waiting!"

I couldn't help the little whine escaping me. It...it was starting again! But Glimmerlight pulled me tightly to her.

"Just hold on, you've got that little core of hope. They *can't* take that away from you, you always have that over him, just stay yourself. Don't turn back to the slave. You're more than a number."

A harsh trotting step gave way to a slaver barging into our back room, invading our safe haven of peace. I didn't even pay attention to his shouting as he took my collar and chain, dragging me away from Glimmerlight. She followed as far as she could to the door of the back room where all the other slaves in with us were instructed to stay. A couple were grabbed too, a cull for the workforce. I was simply dragged away from her.

"Hey, you too! Get over here, mare!"

I looked up, seeing the masked slaver pointing with an armoured hoof at Coral Eve, sitting morosely against the wall. With a brief glance to me...she didn't take more than a second to get up and join the movement, giving Glimmer a brief look. I could see the unspoken words.

'I'll take care of him.'

Even as I was brought outside. Even as the chain was taken up by My Master with a sick grin and an all too intimate stroke of his hoof across my face at seeing me somewhat recovered I knew she was there. No matter what hellhole they had planned for us, at least I wouldn't be alone this time.

* * *

The scream cut the air around the Mall with such a sudden cold shock that I almost joined it.

The thud that followed however only took whatever fear I had and converted it to a sudden and hollow kick to the gut.

We had just left the Mall when the sound had made almost everypony spin to look as we all saw the shape fall from the roof and crash into the hard gravel path around the Mall. Just out of no-where. Now everypony was silent, gradually moving closer. I couldn't see anypony on the roof, had somepony pushed him? Was it an...an accident?

My Master strode through the crowd, me being pulled in tow. With slaves parting ahead of us...we saw the reality of what had happened.

Before me lay a young buck with his cutie marks sliced off.

...I...

I didn't...

A single moment on a control tower long ago was in my mind, one inch away from leaning too far off the edge on purpose while scared and hurting...

My Master snorted, ordering a couple of slaves to dispose of the body. I remembered he'd told me this long ago, that slaves used the roof of the high Mall to end it when they saw no other way to escape the pain. No other way out.

He was just like me. But he hadn't the same hope. The same sight that I'd seen that there was a way out from inside the city. That somepony had managed it. Without that he'd...he'd...

"Do not cry." My Master did not shout. He simply spoke firmly, simply turned and dragged me away as I saw the lifeless body dumped into a cart.

Nothing more than a means to an end.

Sooty Morass' observation on life of the enslaved in our world bit deep as I saw one more unknown and lonely soul disposed of as a simply tool that had reached its final use before breaking.

Meanwhile all around, the slavery went on.

* * *

At the very least, it wasn't raining.

Sore of hoof and stiff of body, I trotted behind him with my head low at the front of the process of two dozen slaves. We had all been quiet. Whether in simple submission or out of emotion for the poor buck we had all seen I did not know, but My Master seemed content with it as he led us. We had left the Mall headed in the opposite direction from Hearts and Hooves Hospital, toward the Ministry of Arcane Science and eventually taking a turn that led us somewhere else entirely.

I'd never been to this area of Fillydelphia before...

It felt isolated, barely used by Red Eye's empire from a lack of the colossal factories around. Instead it was populated by cold grey homes of hewn rock and thick pillars. Lining the streets past soggy dead gardens they seemed silent and untouched. There couldn't have been

many resources to be gained from out here but I still saw some individual ponies sifting through them with maps hanging around their necks. I knew that job, they were slaves pushed into exploring the city to find potential areas that could be stripped of anything useful and help prioritise the places effort was made to salvage properly.

This must have been the only significant area left within the Wall these days so untouched.

Large tenement buildings, single floor shops and abandoned diners passed by us on either side. This had once been a crowded neighbourhood. We had to sometimes weave around crashed and ruined chariots or wagons. The entire place looked bustling but none of it particularly wealthy. Likely the reason why Red Eye hadn't dealt with it other than to wall it off for eventual expansion into. I had to give him credit, that sure was thinking ahead for the long game.

Curiously, many of the buildings had large unfinished upper floors that seemed to jut out of already existing rooftops. Had they been trying to expand the housing around here vertically? Much of the work in progress had been decimated by the Balefire to leave girders and long poles of metal hanging or having tumbled into alleyways or over the road. But many still bore wooden platforms up high. Desperate building for cheaper expansion when the funds were going to the war effort, I supposed.

"We're here, get in the gates you wretches! **Move!**"

My Master stamped and pointed to the next building at a cross junction. Surrounded by high metal fences, what looked like an old school or mansion seemed to jut out from within. Most of the fence was melted, fallen upon its side from the heat that had warped the shape or bent it toward the ground. Crunchy dead grass went underhoof as I trotted into its grounds.

Behind me, Coral stopped briefly and turned her head. To our right there was a sign, leading me to simply glance at her for the literary aid.

"Cross Street Orphanage..." Coral didn't dare speak too loudly, you never knew when The Master was ready for any excuse.

We were led up before the pillared entranceway. Casting my head up, doing my best to stay as far from My Master as my chain allowed without pulling, I got a good look at the building. Above the way in I saw an old mural of the Goddesses. Twisting around one another.

Protégé's cutie mark. The symbol of peacetime Equestria. Only at the centre of this one lay a small sleeping foal protected by the will of the Goddesses either side. The dream of better days for sure.

Going higher, I saw high angled terracotta tiles on the roof punctuated by musty windows. But above that again was another of the girder and wooden panel extensions intended to add another half floor to the already tall building. They hadn't even gotten around to cutting through the roof before everything ended.

I could see several slavers waiting around and inside the main oaken doors. Thick and reinforced, they must have been a real security barrier along with the iron bars across every one of the tall windows. They looked tacked on, wartime paranoia affecting a once idealistic building. Trotting in behind My Master, we were brought to a halt in the dark reception. A huge staircase swept up before us covered in a thick blue fabric that ran down into a muddy carpet of very old hoofprints. Old furniture bearing brass decoration and edges flanked us, the sort of thing I'd once seen in stuffier rooms within Manehattan.

"Your task, slaves, is twofold." My Master looked around, before staring across every slave in turn. "Red Eye wants the girders from the roof, they're of a rarer alloy metal to melt down that they need for special factory components. After that you are to search the entire orphanage, Red Eye wants, hrm...toys, for the foals."

The slaves distinctly seemed to contain their relief. This was an easy task as far as things usually went. The chance to spend a little time hunting toys in an enclosed building for a little? Even with the girder job this was a...relief.

Part of me couldn't quite shake the horror that *any* form of slavery felt like a relief. But even as I kept my head low, hearing the slavers start organising the rest into teams to complete the job on the roof first, I felt a tug on my chain, pulling my head up to look at him.

"All ready to begin again, Number Seven?"

I cringed, feeling myself lean against Coral to my side even as he stared down. Those light green eyes, *my* eyes, glinted with joy at a job for his little pet.

But I had a little more strength. Glimmer was right, just look forward and keep going. N-nothing he could d-do would stop me believing. J-just be s-strong and...and be yourself. So looked up, trying to see his big sweaty brown coated shape before me with anything but fear. We could beat this, we could beat him and-

My chain tugged, pulling me from my hooves to lie on the soppy wet carpet trodden by so many hundreds coming in from the mud and rain. A hoof stepped on me, pressing down and holding me to the floor.

"Do not **dare** look upon me with that kind of face, Number Seven! You look to me only as your **Master** and **nothing else!**"

I tried to move, but his weight pressed down. That huge body exerting just enough to give my imagination a thought about what would happen if he leaned his weight upon me properly. I cried out, my ribs on fire from the one was still healing since the last time he'd snapped it! My bruised underbelly felt like it was swelling!

"I-I...auuurgh! I'm sorry, Master!"

I choked, my chain lifting me up by the neck, his voice roaring and drawing back a large bony hoof.

"I did not tell you to speak, slave!"

Surging, driven by his huge body, the hoof crashed across my snout, swinging me like a piñata on my collar while held up. The pain of my recently reset snout sending a lance of agony through my skull and down the back of my neck to the choking burn of the collar holding me.

"He was just apologising! Leave him alone!" Coral rushed forward, before being thrown back with the flick of that same abusive hoof that had so recently struck me. Struggling to keep my eyes open, clutching at my collar to keep myself breathing, I saw her knocked back into the rest of the terrified slaves. Their Master's fury was not one they wanted to be caught up in.

"You do not dare believe you have the freedom to *speak*, Number Seven...now get back in line and don't ever look upon me with those rebellious eyes again!"

I couldn't breathe! The blood from my snout was running down the back of my nose into my constricted throat, drowning in my own fluids! I couldn't even nod!

The hoof struck one more, propelling me into the crowd of cowed slaves. The example before them of what happened to slaves who 'resisted' bring them to huddle and cluster away from me. All except a black eyed Coral Eve,

Whining, I nodded rapidly to My Master after keeping my mouth shut. He...he hadn't asked a question, I wasn't to respond. It wasn't my place, I was just a slave, what had I been *thinking?!*

I wasn't free to think. I'd forgotten that.

"Good! You're learning..."

Standing in the light of the exit, the darkened red haze of Fillydelphia casting a blood red glint to his eyes through the many doors, My Master instructed the slavers (who seemed more than hesitant to speak themselves) to get us onto the roof. Reaching down, he detached my chain from my collar before chuckling and turning. Walking toward the outside world away from

our task, I could only presume he was to wait outside or deal with something else in the meantime.

“Come on, Murk, I’m here, my dear.” Coral whispered, her hooves around me. She tore a section of her shredded blouse to hold against my snout. The light blue fabric dulled and turned a harsh darker red as my bleeding nose seeped into it. I...I wanted to cry. To cling to her, pretend she was my mother and just let it all out.

But the command was still standing, he’d reminded me to follow it again.

“You will not even cry.”

“It’s okay...” She coddled me, stroking my mane as each slave was raised by the slavers for the journey upstairs onto the roof. “It’s okay, you’ll be fine...”

I wouldn’t be. This was too much, every time I healed I...I got this treatment. My snout was broken again, I could feel the bones shifting. My ribs hurt, my neck burned, my cold stifled my thinking and hurt my head. My lungs were...were...swelling and burning like my throat...

Too much...

Just *too much*...

* * *

This was a lot higher than it had looked.

The top of the orphanage’s floor expansion project was utterly exposed to the hot winds of Fillydelphia. Breaths of air that stung your eyes and sent the bitter poison of the air swirling into your mouth. Most of the slaves who had any thick fabric had wrapped something around their mouths. We weren’t so lucky.

But the full extent of the project was clear. They had been building three extra floors as wide as the orphanage again onto this wing of the large building. One side of the old walls below us had been sheared away completely, exposing every one of the three existing floors to the wind as well. I didn’t know anything about architecture other than that the world needed more safety railings installed but my best guess was that it was to rebuild the support walls into the new floors on top.

Honestly, the whole thing was just silly.

Oh...and of course we were tasked to strip girders from this whole ramshackle deal...

Hooking another bag of screws, nails and tools onto the harness across my back, I began the journey back up. Carefully limping across wooden planks and trying to avoid going near the edges, I ascended the three rickety floors set between the two dozen loosening girders. My snout had swollen up, blocking my nose with dried blood and giving me a distinctly silly look. Slaves and slavers alike had already renamed me 'Red Nose.'

That wasn't what I needed right now.

"Hey, Red Nose! Black sheep of the Red family?"

I closed my eyes, pushing onward to the top level. Ignore them...ignore them...

"Your big brother Red Eye get all the favour?"

I wanted them to stop, but I dared not speak. My nose throbbed as though in response, tickling inside like I was about to...

Oh no.

I sneezed. My cold catching up with me in the choking air up here. *Writhing* pain speared down the fractured bones of my snout. A sharp shriek from me alerted most ponies around as I fell to the ground, clutching myself and trying to not let my *other* illness spark up too. One hoof pulled the collar as far from my neck as I could, like it'd do anything.

They snorted, turning back to their work and ignoring the little filly sized buck lying clutching his nose as more of my lifeblood trickled out of it. I actually felt light headed. I hadn't had any serious cuts but all these little injuries were adding up, I was just one small pony! One little being who couldn't take this any more.

Yet I got up and moved on. I had my commands and a good slave didn't disobey, even if it hurt to do so. Gingerly I picked up the bags again and continued moving, trying to let my hazy vision stay focussed on the thin planks that formed ramps up between each level. Eventually the relief of the third and top floor lay before me as I offloaded the goods for the slaves and rejoined Coral to work on the long rusted screws that held the scaffold to these girders atop the entire stack.

She'd seen me coming, extending a hoof for a gentle hold even as I approached. I knew it couldn't last, we had a quota to meet.

"Still hanging in there, Murk?" Her voice was soft and very quiet, I wondered if Glimmer had told her I liked knowing someone was speaking so that only I with my sensitive hearing would hear.

"Mhm." I wasn't up to many words right now, so I just nodded as I picked up the heavy wrench I'd been allotted and started the long and hard grind of pushing my whole body weight onto it. We used the screws as temporary holders to stop the entire thing collapsing once we removed the long jammed ones. Some more 'skilled' workers would come later on today and actually do the deconstruction. Our purpose was just to make the job easier for them by replacing the hard to remove nuts and screws with easily workable ones.

The entire thing was just so menial, so pointless. I could think of a dozen better ways to do this. But it wasn't my duty to think, just be a little cog.

My wrench scraped and ground as it tried to find purchase. Working my hooves around it, I fell into the work again, starting the weary process of spending minutes at a time trying to make it move that one slow inch to the left or right. Somepony had told me which way they came off but I couldn't remember.

Just put your head down and work, Murky Number Seven. Do what you always did your whole life to get by.

And so my head was lowered as I leaned forward into the work. It couldn't stop the pain in my body, it couldn't stop the longing and wishing to be able to just spend hours cuddled up to somepony to relax and pretend life was good. I barely cared whom Coral, Glimmer, Unity...the Stable Dweller. But it could make time blur and let shifts flow by, that I knew.

Coral beside me worked as hard as she needed, cautiously watching for when a slaver was nearby. We had to speed up then, look like we were striving our utmost. They listened for us talking, so I simply took comfort in the occasional tap of her hoof on mine. Just to remind me somepony kind was there.

The nut in front of me jammed even tighter. I'd been moving it the wrong way for the last...however long! My legs shivered as the frustration built up higher still. I...I wanted to just hit it with the wrench! Hit it again and again until all this somehow went away...

I'd never make my quota now, because of one stupid little thing.

I was going to be whipped. I just knew it.

Thumping a hoof down, I leaned my forehead against the girder, feeling the sway of the platforms below me and slowly casting my eyes up to look out over the red-lit vista of Fillydelphia. In the distance, I could see the sun just poking over the edge of the Wall. Its hazy light through the cloud cover ever-taunting and full of unfulfilled wishes. Once I'd dreamed of what was out there to find for myself...but now I couldn't think much further than that Wall. Even the little I'd seen outside it recently felt so far away from this.

Looking down, over the chimney stacks and collapsed roofs I saw this dead city leading back into the more bustling industrial sector. I could see the Mall, the helter-skelter, the Wartime Factory Hub and the Ministry of Arcane Science. Lower down still I could see the slaves tramping about just like me. Day after day. I saw one fall and be kicked to the roadside, one more who'd reached the end.

I couldn't escape, not this.

My eyes travelled further down, seeing a few prospectors in the next streets then further down still till I was looking over the edge.

I could see the gravel surrounding the building, between the walls and the half melted fence. Blinking to clear my eyes I could fancy I saw the dead plants among the little trails of gravel. I leaned out a little, peering toward it.

Would...would it hurt? S-six floors, would that do it? Would let me escape?

Eyes wide, I couldn't help but just...*think*...

Maybe...maybe I-

"MURKY, NO!"

A magic field slapped me back, hurling me away from the edge where I'd been hanging over about to fall without even realising it. I tumbled back, thrown into her where I felt hooves wrap around me and tug me safely away. I...I...*what had I been doing?!*

Coral pulled me further back, my nose hurt terribly from her using her telekinetic wave to force me back, but I was in more shock than pain, my wide eyes staring at the edge I'd been slowly tipping over even as she held me.

"What were you doing? No, Murk! You *don't* have to do that! Oh it's that poor little stallion from before putting ideas in your head, that's not the answer!"

Her hooves stroked my mane, keeping me close, ignoring the shouts of the slaver as he heard the commotion. But she was wrong, that stallion jumping hadn't put the idea in my head.

He'd only reminded me of it.

But feeling her there, the realisation only began to slap home of how close I'd been *again*.

"I'm...oh Goddesses, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

My eyes felt wet, not on command, but I looked up at her face, both stern and caring. I could see her horn crackling, it must have hurt her to do what she did to save my life! I just kept apologising again and again.

"I...I didn't meant to! *I promise!* I just...just felt...I can't do this, I thought I'd escape! *I thought I'd be free so long ago!*" Sniffling, I put my head to her shoulder. "I can't do this under him...I want the pain to end..."

"It will! Remember what Glimmer said, Murk. Remember what your, hm...'sister' said. It will, someday. We're with you, we *all* are. Even if we're not all around you, I'm sure they're thinking about you. Even that nice mare you told me about...Unity was it? We'll all be together someday."

She was struggling. Coral I knew was one of the most hurt of all of us with her son out there somewhere. I could *hear* her fighting to even believe herself, but it was obvious, she was saying it for me. Simply nodding, I clung to her and tried to forget the horrible sensation of my body's balance tipping and moving toward the point of no return.

"What's all this racket?! Get back to work you fucks! *You two!*"

We looked up, a masked slaver brandishing a shock rod in his magic had ascended to check on progress. I could just imagine the face snarling beneath it.

"Get back on the line before I-"

He was drowned out. At first I thought, in horror, that Coral had unleashed her magic out of protective anger from the great rock of thunder the shook the entire building. The clouds about broiled and twisted, the flash we had missed the first time flaring once again before the scaffold and girders rocked and swung from the concussive force of thunder above.

Then slowly, we began to feel the drips.

Every slave knew the routine. You got into cover. Coral held me safe through the rush as we all fled to the building below. Slavers allowed it, for slaves losing their skin or getting horrendous infections from prolonged rain exposure were no good to anypony.

The door slammed behind us all in the upper pantry of the building, two dozen slaves cramming into one small area hurriedly. The slaver drew his mask off and spat upon the floor.

"Well, guess the toy collection starts early." He turned, spotting us as I felt Coral tighten her grip on my weak body at his lowering of eyebrows. "Well? *Get going!*"

She helped me up, I saw the others shaking off wet coats with towels stolen from the pantry before beginning their own trudge to search the orphanage. My own wing bandages were sodden already.

“Come on, Murk. Come on. Let's get your mind off such things.”

I squeaked, looking away, feeling ashamed to have had her see that.

“I'm sorry...I...I didn't...I don't...I...”

Out of the door, she stopped for a second, kneeling down to be more on a level with me, placing a hoof gently on my battered face.

“You're scared and losing hope. I know how it feels, Murk. But please, don't do that to yourself. Don't do it to *us*. *Please* promise me you won't ever think of that option. You're *one* of us, Murk, you mean a lot to us.”

Almost hyperventilating, trying to get the breath, I only attempted a shaky nod after four attempts to find the words.

“I...I p-promise...”

One last hug and she looked to the hallway. An old wooden construction with dull carpeted floors and old thick doors leading away from this area at the top of the staircase. The bannisters decorated with a long faded antique finish.

“Come on, let's get some toys for the foals. Something even we can feel a little better doing. You just take it easy and I'll search, okay? Find something to distract yourself with, don't think about it...”

* * *

The doll stared back at me disapprovingly.

I sat on my rump before it, watching it as it sat atop an old pile of towels, perhaps having been cleaned with them before it all happened.

The whole thing was blackened, twisted and bug eaten. But it was the only one we'd found nearby the laundry room. I'd made to pick it up until I'd seen that look in its little plastic eyes, sat there staring back with all four hooves on the ground. I had recoiled a little before glaring at it myself as though in some sort of effort to assert that I had confidence in *some* ways. Even if it was over a foal's toy. (I had to start somewhere!) Without quite knowing why, it had become a contest between myself and the doll for who would look away or blink first.

A contest I wasn't sure I was winning.

"Y...you won't win!" I boasted, stomping a hoof on the ground as my eyes itched.

The doll remained quietly confident.

My eyes narrowed, feeling the strain. It would fall over any time now! That stomping of my hoof on the stone floor totally wasn't to try and make it do it. No, that was just...a...a warstomp! To psych myself up!

It moved not even an inch. Those glinting eyes staring back as I leaned in closer and closer. My cheek bones raised up, trying to push myself, I could push myself to win sometimes! I wouldn't...I wouldn't...

I blinked.

Suddenly, somehow, the doll looked rather smug.

"ARGH!" I picked it up, turned and dumped it on the floor, throwing a towel over it and then an upside down basket over that...followed by jumping on it to sit and weight it down.

Just to be safe.

Crossing my front hooves with a snort I allowed myself a raised chin of achievement. That'd show it! Smug little thing thought it was so much better than me! Well, who was the pony on top now?

Looking at the quiet room around me, it did occur that I was perhaps trying *too* hard to distract myself from what I'd been thinking about up on the roof.

Coral Eve returned from the dryer closet carrying a few layers of cloth on her back with perfect balance normally only seen in earth ponies. With a small smile to me, she began to tear it and work with a little needle and thread we'd found for laundry repairs. Her eyes went to my makeshift stool before

"I see your contest ended?" A sly smirk. "It win?"

I baulked, looking down below me for a second.

"N-no!"

"Of course, dear."

All I could do was blush. "How did y-you know I was, um, doing that?"

"Mothers know these things. Like how I knew you weren't actually sleeping earlier when I sent Glimmer into you. We've got eyes everywhere, Murk!" She looked up, tapping the side of her head. I blinked a few times, blushing rather widely until Coral patted my head and went back to her sewing.

Slowly, I climbed down from the toy's prison and picked up a needle myself to help her. Looking almost surprised that I knew how before we both fell into the brief process of creation. I looped and joined fabric while she shaped and sewed it into a shape and form. Just a few minutes of calm doing something we both wanted to do. We made a saddlebag for the toys! She kept working though, so I kept helping her. It wasn't drawing but it gave me something to focus on. I found myself hoping to maybe sew more things with her.

We'd avoided the topic of what had happened, instead looking to try and use this easier job to give me downtime and a chance to let the scared little buck inside me calm down. But I knew it was all façade, we were just trying to pretend there was anything but the nightmare of My Master to return to the moment this work ended.

All the same I...I appreciated it.

"There we go! It's rough, but it'll help if that rain's still on when we make the journey back." Coral held up *our* creation. A multicoloured and rather garish looking patchwork of various bits of fabric she had found. Tying it around my torso, I felt the gentle comfort of some form of cover for my wings once again.

"Thanks, Coral..."

"You need something in your life right now. But we should get moving, we've got your one toy yet somehow I think they'll be expecting a bit more. Where are the others?"

Shifting about till my bandaged wings were safe and secure under the makeshift cover, I sat and closed my eyes, allowing my ears to do all the work. Slowly, I tried to tune out the throbbing of my own irregular heart and ignore the stinging pain all along my muzzle to simply...hear.

The stomping of hooves...upstairs, to the right...the far wing.

A shout from the front door...the common room.

The crashing of pans...pantry.

Nothing to the left...

"The left wing's not been touched much yet."

I opened my eyes, seeing Coral taking the toy out from under the basket to throw in the crude saddlebag. (I saw that little 'better than you' look there, toy!) Joining me near the door we rejoined the hunt. The others hadn't had much luck...mostly on account of them all rushing the common room first and fighting over the more obvious ones that had been left. We'd stuck to the outside areas...figuring we'd pick up what was ignored in less obvious areas.

Partially, I began to think it was also Coral not wanting me involved with any physical shoving with my broken snout. I could still see her glancing at it every minute or so.

We trotted the abandoned halls. Behind us, the shouts of slaves fighting over toy trains in the common room to add to their quota sounded all too appropriately childish. No, we'd made a good decision to come the quieter path inside the surprisingly large building. The walls were decked with old crayon drawings here, sunny rays beaming down on crude trees and stick figure ponies.

"Orphanages are such sad places." Coral let her hoof drift along the crayon. "In wartime, it wouldn't just be those who never had a mother or father, would it?"

"No..." I bit my lip, feeling the sudden realisation of what she meant come all too close to home for me.

They went below internal windows that looked upon rooms that had the roof collapse down into them. I followed the drawings, before we turned the corner and came to a large wall that had perhaps once been blank.

It wasn't after somepony had had their way with it.

As high as a small foal could reach with a stool, it was *covered* in crayon. Held in stark relief from the thin red light entering through the musty windows, it stood out in the dingy abandoned corridors like a great flare of happiness. Drawings, words I couldn't read, ponies and places all in a grand vista. I saw Canterlot Castle, rising high in thick white chalk upon the once beige wall. Dozens of ponies played, foals mostly. They were defined only by the colour of what the stick body was and some clumpy manes. Some sort of huge garden party under massive streams of thick yellow drawn sunlight that arced down through the drawing.

Everypony seemed so happy.

"Wow, this is some serious dedication from a *foal*." Coral cast her eyes around it.

I had to agree, they had clearly been young, however they really had made this something special for a child to keep adding to. I could even see how some of the chalk was older than the rest, more dry on it.

But then I stopped thinking...and started looking. My hoof drifted on the crayon for a few seconds, before my heart nearly skipped a beat with a sharp thought. (For once...)

"C-Coral?"

"Yes, Murk?"

"If these were wartime, why is the crayon over the top of the dirt and dust?"

She blinked, before reaching forward to wipe at one section with a hoof. The pink chalk of a brightly smiling poofy maned pony looking at me with surprise off the wall smudged off. I could swear she was looking with shock at exactly where Coral had smudged her.

The long maned unicorn beside me took a step back, wiping her hoof on the floor.

"Let's...just keep going, shall we?"

I could hear the sudden uneasiness in her voice. My hooves hesitated, but hearing her trot much more cautiously away, I couldn't help but follow. Glancing back, the pink pony drawing-

It was waving at me.

Hadn't it just been...

But...

I wanted to snort, but it would have hurt too much. Instead I simply turned and stomped as best little hooves could away. I *really* hated pink ponies.

We passed various doors. A simple cleaning cupboard, a staff room for those who ran the orphanage and even a brief first aid station. We hunted for any RadAway...but we found nothing of value. Anything was either long gone or simply had been beyond this orphanage's budget. At most there were some dirty needles from some long forgotten vaccine and a roll of bandage. We paused briefly as Coral tried to clean my snout a little.

For the next ten minutes, anypony might have wondered what all the squeaking from the first aid room was all about. Flinching, trying not to pull away too much, she did her best to clean it out of any infection from the smog-filled air. We sat, still alone in the whole wing of the

orphanage.

Eventually, I couldn't bear the silence.

"Coral?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Do...do you think she'd take me back?"

I yelped again as my nose stung, Coral Eve gently holding me still as she kept up what work she could, before settling back.

"Glimmer? She already-"

"No..." I fixed her with a slightly pleading look. "My...my mom?"

Her eyes went wider, sitting the bloody bandages to one side before setting her hooves on my shoulders.

"Of *course* she would! No mother would ever want to have their foal anywhere else in the world."

I looked to the side, out into the corridor. Through the station's internal windows I could see the crayon, the foals all happily smiling beside one another. No adults.

"They weren't wanted..."

"Murk, dear, you told me she was nice to you from what you do remember. That she offered herself to the slavers in an attempt to make them let you stay? Doesn't that say something?"

Coral brought my head back around.

"She clearly loved you from what I hear. Any mother who wanted a child would want to see them again."

"But it's...it's been so long and...and I was..."

"Was what?"

Plink!

We both startled, hopping to all fours. My head whipped to the side, spotting a thin grate near the floor. The source of the noise!

"What is it? What do you hear, Murk?"

I listened, hearing a small pitter as something moved away down the vent behind it. Lowering myself down, I tried to see but my eyes couldn't see into it even after I let them adjust to the darkness.

"We're not alone."

"Probably a radroach. Come on, let's get going, Murk."

She moved to the doorway, but I stared again into the grate. I could still hear a sound moving further and further away. Standing up, I made to follow Coral, before remembering my unfinished sentence. Nervous and unsure, I ended up just blurting it out.

"I...I wasn't wanted." She stopped, hearing my weak little squeaky voice utter it. "I was an accident..."

Coral's eyes closed as she sighed sadly, holding the door open into the musty carpeted corridor again.

"Many of us in this world are, Murk...but it's not how it happens, it's what you do after it that matters. You're a good little pony below all that dirt, blood and toil, Murk. After all this life you're still so innocent with a beautiful big smile when you really let go, so I hear. If I want that, I'm sure your mother would too. Just keep dreaming about her, dear."

I tried to look up and smile, I really did...but I couldn't seem to make both sides cooperate very well. It was enough for Coral, it seemed, as she smiled back, using a hoof to usher me back out into the orphanage.

"Now, we need to make tracks, the dormitories are down here, I think. They'd keep them near the first aid station."

Closing the door behind us, I couldn't help but glance at that grate once more. But my mind was more firmly on Coral's assurance. Would she still truly want me? Her little colt who didn't even remember *her*, what if she'd forgotten me too? I was the seventh, maybe there were others since. Maybe she liked them *more*...

No! No, keep dreaming, she was out there! She was still a goal. Something to dream about. One more thing to stop my mind going to the edge. It was possible

"I'll do my best, thank you, Coral." I spoke as we trotted toward the corner.

"Just remember she loves you. We love you. We don't want to lose you."

"I'm sorry..."

She only glanced down. "Just don't go off alone if we can help it, okay? Stick where we can see you."

Nodding along a little meekly, wanting to assure I'd be fine, I instead just kept my mouth shut. I could see we were at the front of the building through the windows, the ruined garden behind the fence drooping out below me. Light from the crater washed through the darker twilight of today, casting a glow through the half broken windows. Glass crunched beneath Coral's hooves that I found myself naturally avoiding. I couldn't help but let my ears stay pricked and ready...eyes wary of every single vent. The slaves were still making a huge commotion as they gutted the place from the other end.

We had to step around various items...I saw an old laundry trolley. It had been left when its owner had no doubt fled at the sound of sirens. Tipped on its side, dirty bedsheets had long been eaten by insects, leaving only tattered and stringy remains to identify them.

"Bedsheets, the dormitories must just be down the hall." I muttered to Coral, before looking up, squinting my eyes and gasping. "A toy!"

Outside a doorway ahead of us, I saw a little toy train lying on the floor, strings for the pulling ponies lying loose in front of it. That had to be where the foals had slept! I galloped forward, sliding up to it and picking it up with accomplishment in my eyes, feeling the cheap plastic creak a little. Coral only chuckled, patting me lightly on the head as she trotted on past, laying a hoof to the door to pull the handle down. I could see a few faded flowers embossed on the door alongside a fancy type of writing.

"Looks like the foals liked to keep their toys near where they slept. Well, let's have a look in-"

Her scream as she looked inside was cut short in sheer shock, to instead stand and merely shiver at some sight, tears began forming in her eyes. Through the half open door red light streamed from windows across her suddenly aghast face. Her whole body froze, leading to a trembling and the hoof on the doorway struggling to hold it. I moved forward, but her hoof pushed me back, before Coral immediately recoiled and slamming the door shut before having to steady herself on the wall. Caught by surprise, I had hopped back from her hoof...but now I moved closer, looking up at the older mare.

"C-Coral? What's wrong? What's in there? Was it...the...the..."

She didn't respond, eyes tightly held shut as she pulled me into a tight embrace...for her benefit no doubt. What...what was...

"There was a fire."

That was all she would say as she led us away from the dormitory, one I now remembered faced the crater from its windows.

* * *

Coral was silent for some time. Trotting behind her, I could hear her trying to conceal occasional sobs. Twice, she had stopped to rest against the wall when we had found any remnants. A little blanket or a bathroom with so many tiny toothbrushes along the line of sinks...

Normally, I was the one who reacted worst to these ruins of the past, but Coral Eve's maternal instinct was not enjoying this place. I couldn't imagine what I'd have done if I'd seen what she did.

We moved further down the wing toward the back end of the orphanage, away from the dorms. A wide canteen had been long stripped of food by those long ago more caring for survival than catering for foals. The mess they'd made so long untouched since that it was already covered in deep dust when I smoothed my hoof along a table. I wondered if they were ghouls before the Stables had opened or just those lucky to survive the blasts.

Tnk tnk.

I swung, hopping up onto one of the low foal-friendly tables to look around. Coral spun too, trying to spot any vents. But the sound had stopped, even after a minute of only hearing two slaves crashing into the same dorm we'd passed there was nothing more. All that I saw was a small bowl spinning from where it had dropped, near the corner of the tiled canteen. At least two doors led away from it.

"Still think it's just radroaches?"

Coral breathed out, placing her two front hooves on the table I'd leapt onto. "I just think I want out of here. Come on, let's check the kitchen. Even if we don't find toys I think they'll appreciate any tools. Hopefully."

She turned toward the canteen's work tables near the back. I still stood on the thin metal table...watching the doors with narrowed eyes. I'd been in too many places with hidden secrets by now to believe in simple radroaches. Slowly, watching the doors, I trotted over to them and pushed one aside.

Behind lay a musky room, dust falling from a hole in the ceiling through to the attic. Two slabs of wood had crashed down here and destroyed a terminal that was embedded into the desk itself, like they'd been built together. Some form of small office...maybe the cook's? Or somepony who helped organise the orphanage? One large poster hung on the wall beside a rewritable board that bore scrawled writing. The poster held the yellow Ministry Mare, Flutter...shine, was it? Yeah, Fluttershine. She was proudly waving to a little cartoon foal being led away by two wonderful looking ponies, one stallion and one mare. Behind Fluttershine many other foals were waving goodbye from a building's windows. Even I could guess this was advertising some sort of adoption service even without reading the little speech bubble coming from the child. Those lucky foals.

I hoofed through the small shelves of books and folders, seeing a lot of carefully written script and graphs. They had to have been a unicorn to be this neat. I sighed and replaced it carefully before turning back to look at the drawers upon a filing cabinet.

They held little, just a few inkwells and a calculator alongside an empty bottle of alcohol. But I did notice a few rolling bullets near the back, big and thick ones that I'd never have been able to shoot. Hoofing one out, I wondered where the weapon was. Probably taken whenever this pony abandoned their workplace in the sirens.

My eyes fell to the ruined desk, finding something much more valuable. Another audio diary! Without so much as waiting, I hoofed the play button I'd long come to recognise by shape alone and sat holding it.

Click.

No...oh no, this wasn't going to be happy.

For the first sound I heard was that of distant sirens and the shouting of adults over scared children. But then the stallion's voice, mature and of good birth cut through, speaking close to the microphone.

I knew I should have pressed stop.

"I failed! I...I failed! Miss Fluttershy, I'm so sorry! Please, forgive me!"

Huh? Even as I shivered, hearing Coral Eve poke her head out of the kitchen to check if I was alright, I simply watched the turning tapes inside the recorder. I heard someone hammer on the door, screaming for them to 'get their butt out and help', but the voice overrode it.

"I'M SORRY! You asked me to find them parents that could afford the tickets but I couldn't do it! They're just so rare in these war strapped times and I turned away so many good

parents because they would never have afforded the Stable tickets! I thought I could save the foals but now they're all still here! I told you that you could count on me, I'm so sorry..."

Sundial wasn't the only one trying...the idea of just how hard his task to acquire a ticket must have been cut *hard*. If an orphanage couldn't get ones for foals that they had to selectively pick rich families...

In the background, the siren kept droning. Somepony swore and galloped away, presumably from the door. Turning, I could see how it had only opened for me to pass because the falling wood had broken the lock.

"I didn't deserve your trust, there's no way out. Only one. I'm sorry, Miss Fluttershy, you should have chosen better. They're all still here, the four minute warning went out. Oh Celestia and Luna, how disappointed they must be, I swore to protect the foals. I swore!"

A brief pause.

"I won't hurt them anymore."

I pulled away as the sound of a gunshot blasted through the microphone. It fell, clanging on to the desk before the sound of somepony slumping to the ground played out just before the device clicked to a halt, spinning on a broken wind of tape.

I knew I shouldn't look. I *knew* I shouldn't, but heart in mouth, I bent over to see behind the desk before twisting and falling with my back to it, head in hooves. Yes, that was where the weapon had been. I just shook my head, feeling for all the world how it hadn't even been the balefire that had been the start of this world falling apart. Twilight had been right.

Coral Eve found me there, casting a brief glance to the decayed skeletal remains before laying one of the lengths of blanket over it.

"Come on, Murk. There's nothing we can do for this place now."

"They just wanted a mom or dad..."

"I know, dear...I know." She helped me up, turning to the poster at the same time as I did. "I'm sure at least some of them found what they wanted."

"What does it say?"

Looking at me almost in surprise, she raised her hoof to the words, letting me follow it as she read.

"It's 'The Ministry of Peace Orphan Adoption Service'. Then the foal is saying...heh, cute. It says 'I was lonely, but Miss Fluttershy's ponies helped me find my Forever Mommy.' I'm sure many did. Now come on, Murk, I found something."

We left the office, leaving the blanket covering the poor orphanage head's remains. I made sure to close the door behind me. Breathing deeply, trying to force myself to take heed in that at least that pony hadn't suffered in the balefire, I followed Coral as she led me through the canteen toward a far set of double doors that had half fallen from their hinges. Smiling to me, she pressed open the doors.

Before me lay *all* the toys.

They'd been gathered here, what seemed to be a playroom they could come to after getting their dinner in the canteen! I saw a few low foal size tables with stuffed toys and little plastic figures. A desk for a supervisor sat near the window, bearing little excerpts of crayon art all over it on paper. Near the fireplace some socks were hung up, while the floor had play mats and board game strewn around, still set up to play.

"Jackpot." Coral smiled to me, before setting down the saddlebag to start taking what we needed. "This should see us a comfortable way back for tonight."

I nodded, still looking around at it. Normally, I would have been struck by all this being abandoned, imagining foals laughing and playing. While I did imagine it, the sight wasn't sad because of the past...

...it was sad because I'd never gotten anything like this.

I felt selfish, these foals had been killed by the balefire and here I was jealous of them having a fun playroom to grow up in and ponies who took *care* of them, not force them to work! I felt terrible for thinking it, but it just didn't feel fair. Morosely, I passed Coral to see if there were any drawing supplies on the desk. The same stick figure styled covered all of them, many of them with Fluttershy. (Shy, not Shine...urgh) But I found the desktop itself to be a little bare other than one last thing.

Not an audio recorder, but it was a link to the past.

One of Aurora Star's special memory orbs.

I reached forward, picking it up along with the stand I knew activated them. The larger than normal orb held under one leg, I hobbled to the centre of the room.

"Coral! Look! I...I've seen one of these before, it makes a pony appear and...and they talk and it's the Ministry Mares and-"

“Woah, woah...” Coral held up a hoof, somehow silencing me with a look, darn mother abilities. “It makes a pony appear?”

I was already drawing out the space to use it. Setting the stand down, I held the orb above it, feeling a slight pulse of magic in the air as it neared.

“Just watch!”

Slowly and ever so carefully, I lowered the orb. Clinking like glass into place before the magical snap flickered around the point of contact, making my ears pop and Coral's eyes go wide. I hurried back, almost clinging to her leg as I felt even a little nervousness creep in. I hadn't even thought of who it might be in this one! A growing swell of energy within the orb coiled and swum before shooting outward, little glittering gems of light that flew and circled in the air in all directions around the orb. More and more, before they arced inward, passing by one another and joining, gaining strands of light that grew into lines and then curves that bent into shapes that joined and grew and grew and grew...

Coral's eyes widened alongside my own. For before us, translucent and twinkling like a star shape in the night sky full of an almost golden yellow and soft pink stood Fluttershy, the Ministry Mare of Peace itself.

“Oh...I do hope Aurora doesn't mind me using it for this, but I couldn't leave without saying this to you, little...is this working? Oh my, it is?! I'm so sorry, can I start again? I can't? Oh dear...”

She crossed her front hooves, that still longer pink mane in her more mature body still floating down to cover one eye.

“I...I'm so sorry I couldn't come see you, Lilac but they absolutely needed me in Canterlot so very soon! But I couldn't leave without being able to say this to you, you poor thing, I really hope Aurora isn't angry I used her super special few-of-a-kind memory orb to send one message but I couldn't bear to go without making up on my promise. I hope you don't mind this...please, come and stand in front, so it'll be like I'm actually looking at you? Can you do that, please?”

To my surprise, I felt a hoof nudging me. Coral was smiling, pushing me forward.

“Coral?”

“Go on, Murk.”

She nodded to the briefly paused and thinly smiling form of Fluttershy, trotting forward till

her eyes were looking directly at me. Apparently I was small enough.

Somehow, I found myself trembling as though she could actually see me.

"Now, I've left this with the orphanage master, okay? He'll let you have it whenever you want to listen to this as many times as you want, Lilac. Mister Ferrous is very sweet, he'll take care of you and find you a family."

Her face changed, becoming harder, like this wasn't easy for her to say.

"I wanted to help you settle in myself. No little filly has to go through what you are, but you aren't alone. Many of the foals here had mothers or fathers that went to serve their country too. When I heard they'd both been...I...the chances of it were just...I just couldn't help but come out myself and see you, you poor poor thing. I know your daddy wasn't in the army but a zebra spy was caught at the war factory trying to sell plans to them and...and some zebras tried to help him escape. One of them had a gun and..."

She paused, looking up, as though hearing somepony else talking. I could only imagine saying that a filly didn't need to hear this much.

"You're a strong filly, Lilac Rose. I remember when I found you and you just asked if you had to step in and do your daddy's job because he couldn't anymore. But you just need to play with the fillies and colts here now till somepony comes along to see you safe. You can do that, can't you?"

She smiled at me, turning her head that the mane fell away and let me see two big and innocent eyes. She had me *totally* outclassed in that department. But then they closed as she knelt down, coming onto my level.

"I know you're sad. I know this must all feel like life has spun out of control and there is no way to fix it. I'm so so sorry this happened to you, but there's always somepony out there who'll care for you. Don't give up, dear...this'll all be over someday and it won't hurt anymore. You'll be cared for and grow up into a wonderful pony yourself. Such a sweet little innocent mind is just what this world needs right now and I *promise* it'll all be okay...it *will* be okay. You've got your friends here with you, stay close to them, okay? They all worry for you too but they understand what you're going through."

I hadn't even realised when it had changed, but I wasn't looking at Fluttershy talking to a filly anymore...

She was talking to...to me.

"You were kind and gentle even when your world got turned upside down. Don't lose

that side of you, because you're a brave little pony more than you probably feel. You shared what *you* needed to get by with others and even drew your little pictures for them. That's why I know you're a wonderful pony who I'll bet the ones around you love dearly. Not because they pity you, but because you helped them even after all you'd lost."

Those eyes glittered, they were wet and the little sparkles making up her body twinkled to show it...

"Your mother would be so proud of you..."

She...she...

That line did it. I felt the tears flowing over my cheeks as I looked into her eyes, before the entire image of Fluttershy shifted, bending forward...and hugging me. She couldn't touch me, but the sparkling form wrapped around me, her hooves holding just over my back as she leaned down to embrace a foal sized pony she'd asked to stand before her.

"You'll get there, my little pony. Just keep looking forward. There's always a way through. Other ponies have shown you that, right? Trust in that."

"I will!" My voice cracked, but I didn't care how embarrassing my shrill little voice sounded. "She did show it was possible! I'll...I'll not give up so long as I know that!"

Fluttershy leaned back and let off a beautiful smile full of innocent and almost naïve hope for the kind of world she'd existed in.

"I'll always be around, wishing the best for you, all of you, no matter where I am, alright? I just want the best for *all* of you sweet little things. Now on you go and keep that little chin high."

A transparent hoof partially passed through my mane, before her form became vague...fading as the little blinks of light gently shifted...swirled and clustered together back into the orb before fading entirely. I simply stood still, one hoof on my own somewhat heaving chest. I...I knew it wasn't for me, that she had given up a priceless orb just so she could help a little filly feel nice. But the sheer kindness of the act, for somepony else or not, simply wouldn't leave my heart of what the message truly was.

So long as there's a shred of hope, you can't ever give up.

Coral moved across, her hoof laying across the back of my neck to avoid my tender back. No doubt she had some kind words or follow up to what we had just seen, but my ears twitched.

Tnk! A toy being knocked over.

I took off, scampering across the floor and leaping the toys toward one of the larger couches for the foals. Throwing my pained body over it, I landed in front of the vent even as the small figure crashed into me, screaming and flailing. I *knew* I'd been hearing something! Radroaches didn't make such noises! But I felt tiny legs kicking at me, struggling and wailing in a rough high pitched voice. We rolled out from the couch before we separated. Her leg caught my nose, leaving me to fall back with a cry and the figure to scramble back into a pile of toys.

"D-d-don't hurt me! *Please!* I wasn't spying! I wasn't!"

Wet eyes from as much the strike on my broken nose as any heartfelt message from the past, I forced myself to sit up and look.

Before me lay a quivering little earth pony filly. A ghoul. Dressed in an often repaired uniform and with a coat that was still surprisingly intact, at a distance you might still have thought she were a normal foal but for the horrid rings of broken skin around her eyes and mouth. She was visibly *terrified* of me, twitching every time I moved. I...how, but I wasn't going to hurt her! What did I do with a little filly to tell her not to be afraid?

The answer was, I wouldn't. The expert was in the room and it wasn't me.

"Ssh...sshh, it's alright my dear, we're not going to hurt you, we were just scared too." Coral Eve trotted across the moth eaten carpet, holding up a hoof passively before sitting nearby. "Are you alright?"

The shivering ghoul looked from me to Coral, large eyes bearing small pupils and a yellowed complexion. Quickly, she nodded. "I...I'm fine, miss! I'm sorry about your nose too, miss..."

Wait, but she hadn't hit Coral's...

...oh come on!

"*He'll* be fine, dear, he's a tough little pony. Tougher than he knows, like you to be out here as well. Are you all by yourself?"

"Mhm..." The foal nodded, fiddling with her uniform. Her stranded light purple mane bobbing about over a coat that had clearly once been a brighter yellow. "I...I live here. I got scared by all the ponies so I did what I always do, I hide in the little places and watch them to see when they go home. But...but then I heard you talking to Miss Fluttershy so...so I came to see if you were going to take her away."

Coral and I shared a glance to one another, my friend leaning forward to the foal.

"Hun, what's your name?"

She bit her lip, sitting up and looking a little bashful.

"L-Lilac Rose..."

There was a brief moment of silence...before Coral simply surged forward and swept the poor filly up into a tight embrace, ghoul or not.

"I'm so sorry. Oh by all the gods and goddesses of this damned world, *you poor thing...*"

* * *

I kept watch. Or rather, I kept an ear out for anypony approaching by sitting near the double doors. I'd closed them over to give us a little more cover from anypony who wandered into the canteen. Coral meanwhile sat beside the couch, the little filly right beside her as we tried to piece together the story behind this long lost orphan.

"I went outside a few times, Miss Coral. But it's all nasty and the ponies shouted a lot so I just galloped back here and hid. I felt safer here with Miss Fluttershy." Lilac's tiny rasping voice made me wince from the absolute crime such a thing to happen to a foal was.

Coral, if she felt the same, didn't show it. A different side of her, gentler and offering more smiles than I'd ever seen from the often pained mare.

"So you just made this your little hidey hole, huh? Did you do all those amazing drawings on the walls?"

"Uh-huh. I was afraid Master Ferrous would come tell me off, but it was getting so dark and dirty and it made me feel sad and I haven't seen him in a long time...so I made it happier!" Her voice pipped up, squeaking through that worn throat. "So that any ponies who come here later will feel happy too! Look, I even put stickers on the fireplace to make it pretty!"

Her tiny hoof waved excitedly up at the small flowers and suns that were scattered all over the marble sides of the fire. I couldn't help a little smile myself. Coral stroked the back of Lilac's mane, bending down with a great big smile I'd never thought I'd see on her face.

"Those are so pretty, dear! Aww, we *loved* the crayon drawings, didn't we Murk?"

I could see that look in her eyes. 'Disagreement will bring harsh words later on.' But I just chuckled and nodded, they had been nice to see a little more innocence in an unforgiving

world. Even if she did make silly pink ponies.

Lilac Rose seemed delighted by the response though, her eyes beaming almost as wide as the smile. She immediately started picking pieces of paper up to show to Coral.

"I've got lots more! This is my old house! And this is my mom and dad! And this one? That's Mister Ferrous, he was really nice to me but he was very strict! This is the cat that sometimes came in the garden, she was smelly but I fed her the bits I didn't like eating. I've done lots of Fluttershy but I just use the ball she gave me if I want to see her. And this one?"

She had a wealth of pictures, so much so I saw Coral struggling to keep up with them but giving the foal abject attention she had clearly been needing for a long time. Something was bothering me though, she was so childlike still. No, she *was* a child.

"L-Lilac? Can I ask you something?"

"Uh-huh..."

"Do you know how long it's been since the bale...I mean, the big boom?"

Coral's eyes flickered for a moment, before she caught on and realised the same thing. This child was over two hundred years old, anypony should mature in that time frame, even allowing for a lack of adults around to aid them.

Lilac bit her lip and looked in deep thought, before shrugging. "I dunno. I don't really remember it much. I...I heard the nasty alarm in the city and then the matron started screaming. But then there was a *really* big green flash and I felt really sick, but I hid and didn't come out for a really long time."

Coral's hoof drew her in a little. "It's alright, dear, you don't need to remember all that. What did you do after it?"

"I...I think I fell asleep for a *long* time, because it was snowing when I woke up. I was afraid I'd get shouted at for not waking up so I got out but everything was like this. Some ponies chased me when I went outside. There was green flames like, huge ones! I couldn't see the sky and I didn't recognise anywhere so I came back here to wait for Miss Fluttershy to come pick me up again like last time. But I think I fell asleep again..."

The filly toyed with her front hooves, looking up at Coral.

"Do you know where she is?"

"I'm sorry, dear. I don't. It's...it's been a long time."

She was clearly trying to keep her own tears in for Lilac's benefit. It made a little more sense, the feral zombie ghoul janitor had seemed to almost sleep until my presence had woken him up. It stood to reason that other ghouls might be capable of the same long drawn out sleeps too. In Lilac Rose's case for so long that she hadn't aged mentally in the time she'd been alive nor physically from the effects of the balefire.

It didn't take much time of letting all this sink in before Coral once again let Lilac snuggle up beside her. My friend's limbs wrapped around the fragile little pony protectively, as though by some manner of sheer will and wishing she could hold this one poor filly safe from the world she'd been cast into.

"Did anything hurt you? You were safe in here, Lilac?"

"Uh-huh. I didn't go outside much. I had a sore tummy so I didn't really eat but lots of ponies came here shouting to find food. Some of them didn't say words, they just shouted a lot and looked really slimy. They didn't take food either. I hid from all of them in the little places, but even when one trotted by me they didn't seem to care about me. And this one time not long ago? I heard a lot of ponies shouting for help and galloping away. I went to look but this really icky smell was coming from outside like mint, so I ran away..."

"Good girl. You've been so brave, you know that?"

"But they scared me. There was this beeping and-"

"Hush, dear..." Coral stroked her mane. "Being brave isn't about not being scared, it's being scared and still doing the right thing."

I saw Coral's little wink at me. Despite myself, I actually blushed a little.

"But the scary monsters are gone now. It's alright, I'm here."

Lilac seemed to fall all too naturally into Coral's embrace, the little orphan seeking comfort and reassurance from the older mare. As though looking for any maternal and caring mare to be their...

It seemed all too quick and simple a solution that I found myself not quite believing it. It couldn't happen, we were *slaves*, foal's couldn't stay with us. If My Master saw her he'd-

Oh no...

"Coral, can I talk a bit? Y'know, just us?"

She looked up, hearing me from her whispered soothing calms to Lilac as the filly told her about how she'd been lonely. I could see Coral didn't want to move away from the filly, but seeing the look in my eyes, she calmly let her down.

"Do you think you could make me a crayon drawing, Lilac?"

"Sure!" She bounded away to the paper, taking up her worn crayons as Coral and I met nearer couch.

"What's wrong, Murk?"

Scuffing the floor with my hoof, I didn't really know how to break this. But swallowing the lump in my throat, I looked out the window at the girders in the rain above.

"She can't stay here. The slavers are going to tear this whole place down for resources eventually. In a day? In a week? If...if it's *him* who has this job now, who's to say he won't be on the job when they find her? You know he will."

The realisation on Coral's eyes hurt me to the very core. I saw her look at the humming foal, happily scratching away with crayons across the room.

"We can't just throw her out into Fillydelphia, Murk. She wouldn't last a day! We have to take care of her." Her words cut hard. I didn't *like* confrontation, but I didn't like the thought of My Master getting another ghoul to throw in his mines. Foal or not. I remembered him saying how valuable they were to him.

"What about Weathervane? He's got a hidden basement and he was a father!"

Coral's face twisted. "A dank basement she can't ever leave is no place for a child to be raised, never mind that Weathervane is close enough to turning feral as it is."

"She might help him hold on to life..."

"No, Murk." Her words were stern, silencing me. "Lilac needs somepony to take *care* of her, to help her adjust to this world. Do you really think being cooped up in a scary basement with a zombie pony who swears more than the rest of the wasteland combined is a good place for such a sweet filly?"

This was heading toward the only other option I knew, the one I knew she wouldn't like even more.

"Well, then..." I cast my eyes to Lilac Rose, talking almost to herself about which colours to use. "There's only one place in Fillydelphia that takes care of foals."

I could see it sinking in. See the rage of a tragedy still all too soon before building inside her. She outright scowled, a hoof stomping with the authority of, well, a mother.

“*No!* I will *not* let that monster take her. After taking my *son* away from me? You can't seriously say-”

“Where *e/*se can she go, Coral?!” I surprised myself with the interruption. “I don't want her to live the life I did! If she stays here then she'll be tied to a chain gang in a tunnel till she's rotten and falling apart! I've *seen* it! I've already seen somepony I want to save taken there, seen Weathervane's friends from the world before hurt every day. They won't last long. I don't want that to happen to *her* and it will if we don't find her someplace safer, the *one* place that's safer.”

I wiped my mane from my eyes.

“Look I know it isn't the best but she'll have other foals, an education and proper care. Yes, I know they are taught under Master *Red Eye* but I don't know what else to do! I'm sorry, I know you hate what they did but I don't see anything else for Lilac.”

Coral seemed as taken aback by my outburst as I was, simply lowering her head. I stepped forward.

“Protégé visits the foals. He told me they're safe and happy. There's even another ghoul there, Lilac and her could help one another. They...they couldn't even maybe tell your-”

“Stop.”

Her hoof raised, the bottom held toward me. I could see the tears drip from her eyes. This was such a harsh decision for her, more than anypony I knew.

“We'll...we'll do that. But promise me, Murk. Promise me when the time comes for you and Glimmer to try your plan. We won't forget them. I *will* not attempt any escape unless I know my son and Lilac will be safe.”

“I promise.” I said the words, but I had no idea how to make it happen. We had to get into the metro for ourselves, find Unity before that and then get Sunny out of the mines down there en-route. But we had a mission to rescue the foals, at least her son and Lilac now too.

It seemed impossible. But part of me held that hope. Two rescues...at least Sunny was already in the metro. We could do this. Once Brim was back, we could make a try.

Escape was possible. We'd make it happen.

Drawing me from my thoughts, my ears twitched, sounds!

I spun away from Coral, surprising the upset mare as I looked at the door just in time for it to slam open. Two slaves, scuffling over a teddy bear, fell into the room. Lilac screamed, pushing herself back against the wall. The pair of bucks heard her and looked up and around.

They saw all the toys and then they saw Lilac and us.

“Shit! Shit, dude!”

“Yeah, shit! We hit the mother load! And a foal!”

Coral was between them and the filly before I could so much as move, stomping her hooves with her horn sparking.

“The *mother* is going to make you into a red *smear* on the wall if you come any closer to her! GET OUT!”

A wave of overpressure blew much of Lilac's paper drawings up as she let her magic rip. Ocean blue flickered from the telekinetic wave surged into them. The pair didn't even get a chance to respond before they were blasted backward into the canteen, spiralling end over end before smashing through the flimsy rusted tables and out the far door into the hallway followed closely by the doors that had been blown clean off their hinges.

Staring with wide eyes at the power that had sent two fully grown bucks over twenty feet, I took a careful mental note. *Never* treat a foal with anything but abject respect when Coral Eve was in the area.

Horn sparking, eyes watering from the pain her fault magic inflicted for using such a strong spell, Coral staggered for a few seconds before righting herself to look for Lilac Rose. The filly had dove behind the desk and was peering out with wide eyes at Coral defending her.

I glanced out the door, hearing the slaves pick themselves up and gallop dizzily, calling for My Master. Oh *crap*.

“Coral, we've got to get her out of here. Now.” I looked around, but clearly this room had been chosen precisely because it only had *one* way in or out to watch the foals more carefully. I even checked the fireplace, but it only went from this floor to the roof. There were two storeys below us to the ground.

The grey unicorn was already whispering to Lilac.

"Listen, Lilac dear. There's some very bad ponies coming to here. We're going to take you someplace that's like an orphanage, alright? They will be lots of other foals to play with and...and..." I heard the hesitation, "*nice* ponies to take care of you. But you've got to be brave, alright?"

The filly was clearly terrified, holding onto Coral's leg and shivering. "Y-yes, Miss Coral. I'll try..."

"Good. You'll be fine, I *promise*. Is there any other way out of here?"

"Yes!" Lilac perked up, letting go and running behind the couch to reach up and pull a bit of the wall out and away, a hidden door! Behind it lay a thin staircase. "Sometimes the helpers used this...they said it was an old...old...um, servants way! That was it!"

"Good girl, Lilac!" Coral cast her head down it before nodding. "This will do, now quick, grab a couple things and lets get going!"

I had already fetched the Fluttershy orb, holding it ready for the filly. She gasped and pulled it into a little foal sized saddlebag, hugging me for the help. A feeling a little too natural kicked in to gently hug her back. It was rare I ever was the one doing the comforting. After that, I helped her grab a few of her drawings and a very muggy looking soft toy pony doll before we met Coral on the stairs.

They were a bit of a squeeze, filled with cobwebs and shockingly steep. But Lilac Rose tore down them with practised ease while Coral and I blundered about behind her. Passing two doors we kept moving to the basement and carefully edged out into a somewhat less fancy kitchen than the pantry we'd been in before. This must have been where the servants of whoever owned the mansion before it became an orphanage cooked meals that weren't for special occasions.

Briefly, I felt struck by the odd nature that some ponies would willingly choose to be slaves to rich masters in such a time of apparent freedoms and light.

All the same, it was empty. Perfect! At the far side, past a bank of ceramic stoves and long emptied fridges we found an entrance they must have brought in the food by once, a trap door that opened outward. Already above us I could hear a horrid stomping sound that could belong to only one pony. Others scampered around, before muffled bellows as they no doubt discovered an empty room started to sound out. We had a head start, we had to move!

The dark sky met us when climbing out, Lilac sticking close to Coral as she felt the outside world's air on her body. The rain that fell through the trapdoor the moment we opened it made her recoil a little. The filly might not have left this place for a *long* time.

"Ssh, it's okay, dear. Stick beside me and we'll keep you nice and safe, alright? It's just a lot of galloping and it'll all be fine."

"Y-yes, Fillydelphia's scary now..."

"I know...I know, just stay with us, you don't need to look at anything. Here, I'll carry you."

We had finally all climbed out, me first then reaching back to lift the tiny ghoul out from Coral raising her up. Lastly, Coral herself joined us and we began to canter over the dead grass. This place had a huge garden with branches from old bushes still showing the form it had once taken. Across the back past the ruined fence lay the fouled back ends and delivery doors of old shops. Perfect cover. The rain that fell lightly, a mercy from the thunderstorm earlier, stung and burned at my wounds. But Coral's newly sewed cover would be invaluable now, for keeping the worst off me. I tried to let my mane fall to cover my eyes, noticing that at least Coral still had some of her own ruined blouse. Lilac didn't seem to notice any pain. Probably a ghoul thing.

I led the way, using what sneaky instincts I'd been honing to find a way back. If we stuck to the back streets in this lonely part of Fillydelphia, we could throw them off then sneak through the shift changes to get to the Alpha-Omega Hotel where the foals were kept!

"Move!" I whispered. We broke into a gallop, Lilac on Coral's back. We had to move fast! Get away from the orphanage as quick as we could! Get to cover, out of sight before-

It was then I heard the window smashed open from behind us.

"Stop right there, slaves!"

Coral kept galloping through the slick ground, but I felt my hooves jar and deaden beneath me, almost tripping into the mud. I turned, looking back and seeing My Master staring down at me with furious eyes, his huge bulk having broken the entire thick window upstairs. Behind him I could hear the slavers rushing to the stairwell, aiming to catch me. My Master snarled, a look of displeased anger the likes of which I wanted to cower from passing across him toward his pet out in the rain against all orders.

"I demanded you bring anything you find to me, Number Seven. You disobey even now. Stay where you are."

My legs trembled horribly. My mind in two directions. My...My Master was commanding me...

I turned, looking as I saw Coral and even Lilac eager beckoning me to get moving!

I...had...to...obey...My...

Very slowly...one hoof moved.

Away from Chainlink Shackles.

"I COMMAND YOU TO COME HERE, SLAVE!"

The voice tore at my ears, harsh and sudden the moment he had seen that tiny glint in my eye. Seeing the brief inch my hoof had moved. I could feel his slaver's instinct washing over every aspect of my existence, seeing the rebellion and the conflict inside. But gritting my teeth I looked back up. Glimmer...Coral...*Fluttershy*...they'd all been telling me the same thing. Look to the one hope, so long as I had that I could keep going! For my freedom, for a foal's safety and life and for my friends.

I could...resist.

"COME TO YOUR MASTER, NOW!"

Sucking air through my teeth, I looked up. The rain pattered either side, hurting my ears and I felt every drip of blood from my nose...but I was focussed, drawing all that hate and will to be free up through my body and through my sick throat, before uttering perhaps the most important word in my entire life.

"No."

My heart lifted, my mind came back to me. Remembering the soaring of the Stable Dweller as she did the same, I turned and galloped away, seeing just for a second the surprise on his face. Before the fury settled in. Terrified, feeling I was doing wrong, but resisting all the same with every hoofstep on the rotten ground, I felt his words slap at my mind and pull on every little twitching nerve I had to shut down and ignore.

"YOUR MASTER COMMANDS YOU STOP, NUMBER SEVEN!"

Not a chance, not now! I fled with Coral and Lilac, splashing up puddles as I went and trying to not listen to the individual words beckoning my name, my status as a slave or appealing to the part of me that *wanted* to obey. I would pay for this, I knew it. Terror lurked in my mind of my punishment for doing this. But it had to be done! I wouldn't let this foal be dragged into the nightmare of the Fillydelphia metro mines.

I caught Coral's eye as we bounded into the alleyways between the large shops. She saw the fear in my eye but her look said it all. Or rather, repeated what she'd said before. Bravery wasn't about not being afraid.

It was about doing the right thing, no matter how scared you were.

Looking into the shivering little filly's eyes as her tiny enclosed world spiralled out of control. I knew I was doing just that.

The hard concrete brought us into a large courtyard of old benches, food shops and collapsed decorative trees. An old foal's playground lay nearby half collapsed into the ground but I could see the gaps between buildings ahead of us...just the thing to use to get away! Whipping my soaked mane from side to side, I checked the flanks of the courtyard before moving out.

"This way!" I swerved, passing beneath an old gazebo in the centre for even a momentary relief from the downpour. My hooves were searing as they went through puddles and splashed the acidic water up onto my fetlocks. But we made it to the thin street, populated either side by kiosks and high rise tenements above the shops. Behind us, I could hear the slavers spread out. Goddesses, how many times had I been in this position of fleeing?

The trouble was we weren't moving fast enough. I'd been in enough desperate chases by now to notice our progress. Or lack of. I was limping and staggering every time my barely-healed ribs were jolted or stressed upon. Coral was bearing the weight of a foal on her own frail body. Her route was swaying...that fever she had wouldn't be making it easy under the hot rain and stuffy atmosphere. This wasn't working...no sooner had we gone twenty feet down the thin street did I hear slavers charging into the courtyard behind us. If we could speed up I...I...

My vision swam, my legs deadening a little. I could *feel* the exertion catching up to us...there was no way I could make a sudden sprint. I'd just been beaten and abused too much. This short run was draining on my body and the adrenaline from resisting *him* was wearing off fast. Before I even knew it I tripped onto the cobbles, rolling on my sides and crying out from my wings and battered body striking the hard rocks. I staggered and pushed myself up, seeing Coral stop to move back for me.

"In here!" I spun, pulling at Coral and trying to hop over a kiosk's blown in window, my back legs dangling as I kicked at the air and pushed my short frame up. "We can't outrun them."

Seconds later, I felt Coral simply push me in and climb over herself. Landing inside the dusty outlet on several empty tins and crushing them below us, we pressed against the back of the serving window's ledge and all huddled close. I could feel Lilac Rose gripping one of my legs incredibly tightly, her tiny heart thumping fast. My own heart instead felt like it stopped as eight sets of hooves tore by the kiosk window less than a couple of feet from us with such aggressive force in their pursuit that the ground shook.

Then the horrid thicker hoofsteps I knew all too well.

"I know you're hiding, Number Seven." His voice seethed out, barely restrained anger. I could almost imagine his smile, the smile of somepony beyond fury. "You couldn't gallop too far. There's a shout going out. They'll find you."

Feeling exhausted and dizzy, I still clung to Coral as much as Lilac clung to me. I...I could resist! Just don't cough by 'accident' to lead him to you, it doesn't work that way! Don't...don't...he'd never find you in this mass of hiding spots!

"You'll be back with me before the day's out, little slave! I **know** you can hear me! You'll come back when that collar starts to drag the life from you...start to get the blood and taint within you forcing you to return to your birthright! **You can't escape, slave!**"

My neck stung. I could feel the heavy collar rubbing my blistered and cracking skin in a ring around my neck. The stomping on the cobbles continued.

"You've got no place to go you won't be seen, don't think I don't know what you're doing with that foal..."

He stopped again, ten feet down the lane.

"I'll see you there to reclaim you."

Then he was gone. The sounds faded. I knew I could evade a cordon in such a maze of alleyways as this but the fear had settled in now. He was right, but all that mattered was this one proof that I could resist and take the punishment, prove to him that I was a free pony who believed in escape.

Lilac Rose was my challenge to prove it now. Between me and the hotel lay a network of alerted slavers waiting to keep her from Red Eye's more protective gaze.

Please be proud of me, Littlepip. No matter what happened to you out there. I'll do what you did.

I didn't even know when I passed out against Coral, falling against her side from the spotted darkness in my vision and the pain of exerted ribs clouding my mind. The exertion of the run too much for my weakened body as I fell into a troubled unconsciousness of lonely foals and eternal chains against the sunset itself.

* * *

The trek across the quieter areas of Fillydelphia was not difficult. We had to have that

rest, but before long I had been gently woken by Coral and bid that we continue. Groggy eyed, my hooves feeling like lead weights, I'd nodded and glumly set out for the efforts ahead.

I'd expected it to be grand, adrenaline rushing and heroic. It would likely still be, but the first hour for us to return to the busier areas while aiming for the hotel was mostly quiet. Occasionally, we'd had to shelter again. Either to rest and catch our breath or to dodge patrols and slave columns.

Coral had taken care of Lilac Rose en-route. Whispering between them, asking her what her favourite colour was (Red) or what age she thought she was (Nine and three quarters) to help the filly relax. She even played a little hoof clapping game accompanied by a quiet little sing-song in time to the claps once with a delighted smile on her own face. So strange that both Coral and a two hundred year old filly knew the same rhyme. Some things *never* changed, I supposed. Here I was, seeing Coral Eve as the mother she'd always wanted to be, the one thing she loved being that had been taken away from her.

But now we'd come to the stretch that mattered.

About three hundred metres away from us as the bloodwing flew, the Alpha-Omega Hotel cast its lights into the dark haze of Fillydelphia. Protected by magically charged fencing and a newly dug ditch, it was also guarded by *far* more soldiers than I normally would have expected to see any time I'd passed by it. This was near the FunFarm after all.

I knew why. Many of those slavers and soldiers were...*his*. My mind was caught between names, what to call him? But I knew that they wouldn't hesitate to drag us off to the mines and back to him. We couldn't trust *anypony* to simply throw Lilac at them and hope they would recognise she *should* be in the hotel and not simply take her back to him.

No, we'd have to deliver her ourselves.

But between it and us there lay other obstacles nearly blocking the view. We'd had to approach from the more clustered areas among abandoned buildings that were taking the slaves years to dismantle. Lacking the massive equipment of the past, these firmly constructed places were proving a nightmare to bring down. I knew. I'd tried. Eventually, we'd been told to leave them alone and been sent to other more important jobs. They would return once excavation equipment or more surplus supplies of explosives were made available to finish the job. For now they were our hiding spot and our route among the variety of structures. Other competing hotels mostly, there were a square of them around one courtyard. The Alpha-Omega Hotel lay beyond this square.

Three hundred metres. Five buildings in a square. Lots of guards. A ditch. A fence.

And somewhere out there, *he* lurked.

To deliver her into safety, we'd have to overcome all of that. After that it didn't matter how we were caught.

Very briefly, it occurred to me neither of us had told Lilac Rose that we wouldn't be joining her in there. I'd decided to leave it to Coral Eve, she knew what she was doing on what to say and what to keep quiet. Lilac had spent much of the way staring wistfully back toward her orphanage or around her at the suffering ponies in abject confusion. Between her long sleeps and the bewilderment of anything outside her orphanage in a city she no longer realised I could see the underlying terror in the filly's eyes. Yet she just kept moving with us.

Fluttershy was right. This was one brave little pony to take all this in and not break.

"Do you think you can sneak us toward the gate, Murk?" Coral whispered beside me. We'd been poking over a low window from the farthest away building to judge our route in.

I glanced forward again. Two buildings, one on either side, formed the closest ones of the square courtyard beyond. Behind them the other two at the far side. I concentrated on the farthest one, closest to the hotel.

A tall building of thick pillars and overhung windows was being dismantled by a swarm of slaves with grapple hook harnesses to hold them up. A pang of loss for my own saddle struck through me at the sight. They must have been just told to take anything from the rooms and rooftops that were salvageable. To strip out the places before leaving the undefeated foundations for later. Slaves might be a handy group to merge with.

Before that though, we had to get up to those two front buildings, we'd *have* to sneak through them first. I could see the patrols in the courtyard guiding slaves or watching the surrounding area. Huge piles of rubble offered some cover alongside a crashed skywagon nearer to us. If we could bunny hop from cover to cover and stay quiet...

"I think so. But this could turn nasty. R-real quick..." I stammered, mostly from my throat. I'd had to swallow thick wads of metallic tasting bloody spit to clear it. I hadn't wanted to spit in front of Lilac.

"Nervous?" Coral cast a look of concern to me.

"Terrified."

"Glad you were the first one to say it, you know we're likely not getting away from this one, right?"

"Y-yes..." I nodded. "But it's worth it..."

Coral lay a hoof over my shoulders. "I heard what you told him. That's more important than anything that happens now. We should get going. They're going to patrol back here sooner or later and she needs to be safe."

I nodded, hearing her turn back toward Lilac as I studied the layout of the rubble ahead. Once that patrol moved past...we could make it to the skywagon...then that pile of broken up chairs behind...then the rubble...then the building...

"Ready to go, my dear?" I heard her speaking to Lilac.

"Uh-huh, is that light over there the place for colts and fillies?" Her voice was tired; the journey hadn't been easy for her.

Coral stroked her mane away, nuzzling the little pony with a grin. "They're all just waiting for you, but there's some bad ponies in between us and them. So stay quiet okay? Murk's going to lead us past them. Just stay behind him, I'll be right behind you. No-pony's going to hurt you. I *promise*."

The patrol moved away. I spun back to them again and nodded firmly.

"Alright, dear. Go!"

We burst from our hiding place, one by one galloping as quietly as we could around the edge. Under the red sky again, we rushed for the skywagon, twenty feet away. The patrol had just moved past our building but we still had to stay low. Any over the rubble ahead could spot us if they turned-

I saw one mare move her head and leapt behind the wagon. Lilac galloped into me and Coral rolled herself in beside us. I clutched myself and curled up tight to hide. Had they spotted us?

Horribly exposed from almost every angle, we waited, uncomfortable and fidgeting to move.

Nothing.

I took out my one trump card. A shard of a smashed mirror in the building we'd just passed, using it to check around the side of the wagon, waiting for the chance to gallop forward another set of cover. We only had to get close...close enough for one mad gallop to the fence gates. The guards *inside* the gates had to be safe to give her to.

Squinting, rubbing the dusty mirror clear of muck, I watched and waited. There were

three groups of them. One on a balcony, one at the gap between the buildings and one I knew was out of sight but lying down against the back of the rubble. Had to wait for the first two groups to look aw-

Now!

I hissed to the other two, springing out low and rushing around the wagon. I watched their heads, listening to somepony shouting in the courtyard about their shift times. We made it in plenty of time, pressing in behind the stack of broken and discarded chairs. I had to take a second, get my breath back. My lungs felt tight, leading to me sucking air in with my front hooves low on the ground. Sweat poured from my body at the exertion, I couldn't go much longer. The only thing keeping me going was that one little fact, one little knowledge that escape was coming eventually.

The mirror went out again. Coral held Lilac Rose protectively close to her own underbelly. The filly was shivering despite the heat. She was so scared. I knew the feeling.

Angling the mirror, I watched the two groups I could see. We had one more rubble pile to get to and we could get around the back of the building before getting inside. If they saw us they'd cut us off long before we got there. Thankfully, they were all still listening to the voice.

"Way's clear, go." I whispered in Coral's ear before creeping out. We had to go slower and quieter. Low to the ground in single file, we made the achingly slow journey in plain sight behind them. Yes...we'd done it. The first wave was-

My entire hoof found no ground to stand on. My front right leg disappeared, falling down a hole I hadn't seen! I bit my lip *hard* to quell the shriek as I looked down. A drain! My hoof had fallen down a drain while I'd been looking up at the guards! I tugged at it, but the muck and dirt had fallen in with me, jamming the hole smaller than before. Oh no! No! NO!

Coral bent over me, her much stronger limbs wrapping around my leg. Even Lilac put her tiny hooves on mine as we pulled and pulled and pulled. The pain from being dragged up through the tiny hole made me grit my teeth, squeeze my eyes shut. I couldn't scream! Don't let that tickle in your throat make you cough! Not now! *Not now!*

Suddenly, a release. My hoof popped out and we fell back. I clung it close to me, favouring the scrapped skin. Looking up, I saw the guards still looking away. Coral put a hoof to my cheek, her face bearing concern, mouthing the word. 'Broken?' I shook my head and we got up to creep the remainder, thank the Goddesses.

Thinking the word 'crap' earlier must have displeased them, however.

The drain cap slid, came loose...and fell. Clanging, a full two foot square of metal

crashing and tumbling down and around as it broke up from the rust that we had loosened getting me out. Hearing the noise only grow and echo, I looked up with horrified eyes.

That same mare from before was looking right back at me. We met eyes for four long seconds before I saw the scowl growing into the scream of alert.

“RUN!” Coral shouted! We took off, heading for the building! Around me, I heard slavers shouting for confirmation, the mare shrieking and pointing. The third group came into view, immediately galloping forward.

This was it. One last rush to get her there before we were caught.

Coral swept up Lilac again as I tried to keep up. Hooves pounding on the soft ground we tore for the back of the building, we could find a ditch! Lose them and go around!

To my horror, I saw a *fourth* group emerge from behind the very place we were trying to go from the far end of the building. If we went around, they'd just double back and catch us! I stopped, pacing, probably praying, looking around. There had to be somewhere!

Coral thought faster than I did, stopping and looking at the half crumbled walls of the building bearing some old wooden stopgap over the concrete.

“Into the building, we'll lose them in there!”

“How?!”

She answered with her magic. With a great *WHOOM* of sound that blasted back off the building wall and flared my mane back, Coral blasted the crude makeshift wall into the room it had once protected. Splinters flew inside, shattering old paintings and remnants of windows like shrapnel as my ears rung terribly. When she was pushed, Coral's magic was *terrifying*. I briefly underlined that mental note to never anger her. Just for extra emphasis.

She and Lilac were first in, with me following. Breaking into the corridor beyond the front room we'd smashed our way through. I could see Coral swaying, that spell having taken a lot out of her. Even through the shouts from outside, I heard her whimper. That faulty horn of hers sparking and bleeding magical energy in a method even a non-unicorn could imagine the pain of. We didn't even look at what our path was like, we simply chose random doors in the effort to lose them. A set of double doors to a restaurant...another kitchen...a freezer with a broken wall to a bedroom...back to the corridors until we found the front door.

There we stopped. Slavers were swarming the building after us, seeming far more efficient than I had ever wanted them to be as they spread out to cover every eventual direction we could have taken. That wasn't fair!

Even worse, the front door I could see was being watched if I poked my mirror around it. I ran to the only closed door not leading backwards. It lay beside the reception's thick glass window with only one small area to hand money through. Wishing hard, I pulled on it. Locked! NO!

Slamming my hooves against it, Coral shoulder barged the heavy wooden doorway, but only bounced.

"It's a staff door! The keys could be anywhere! Where are-"

Before she could even finish, I saw her eyes go wide. Spinning myself, I saw Lilac's tail disappear through the reception money slot. Ten seconds later, the door clicked and it swung open to a shaking but smiling filly.

"Is...is this better?" Her voice sounded painfully innocent given our situation.

"Good girl!" Coral beamed, sweeping her up. "Such a quick thinking clever filly! Now come on!"

I locked the door again behind us as we entered the office. A face appeared at the reception window, then a gun muzzle through the hole!

"Down!"

Buckshot tore into the office, blowing old papers off a desk and shattering the screen of a terminal. Coral had fallen. My terror of her being hit was relieved only when I saw her gallop on. There were three doors in here. We tried the first to find a dead end office with two clutching skeletons draped over the desk. Recoiling, before screaming from the buckshot that tore into the room again and shattered the far window, I almost fell through the second. There had to be a way out!

Behind us, a second weapon fired on the door but missed the lock. They wouldn't be held long.

Looking up from falling, I pushed the second door open while Lilac and Coral took cover behind a further back desk. I made to run inside before finding it to only be an identical office. *Oh come on!*

Another sharp rifle blast blew splinters from the locked door. They wouldn't miss again.

Almost crying out in frustration, I bucked the third one open. We all dived into it without even looking as the main door burst open and the slavers rushed through. We scavenged, not

seeing anything other than a desk that we threw against the new blocked doorway. I knew it wouldn't hold, it was too light.

And this room had no way out.

Not even a window.

It was another identical private office.

I stomped, bucking the wall and screaming at the door. Frustration, anger, terror and adrenaline all fighting for attention in my head. Lilac hugged close to Coral, who simply looked around and bit her lip. I saw the same realisation. We were trapped.

As if to merely remind us the door was rammed, already starting to list on its hinges.

"Get out here!"

"Master wants you!"

They were *his*.

"Murk? I...I don't see a way out. Any ideas?" I couldn't imagine how hard it was for her to admit that around Lilac Rose, but I only shook my head while stepping back into my natural spot. The corner.

"I...I'm sorry! I...I thought there'd be a way."

I stopped, an unusual feeling on my hind leg. Why was my leg feeling a breeze?

Looking down, twisting back on my body to the point my ribs protested the movement, I saw one little hope. Emphasis on little. A tiny vent. One I could barely squeeze through if I had to. Bending down, hearing Coral questioning me and Lilac pushing her nose beside mine (I might have found it cute any other time) I cast my gaze through it and saw the outside world.

"Wait, there's a vent, it goes outside! But it's tiny..."

I had never saw Coral as anything but strong, but the speed with which she made the decision reminded me more than any other moment I'd known her in till now just how strong a pony she was inside.

The unicorn gently pulled me aside, smashing it with her hooves to get a purchase...and began to pull the vent upwards and off. Even as she pulled, I felt and heard the slavers *push* on the door. One hinge fell off.

"Coral! What are-"

"Shh, dear." She put a hoof to my mouth carefully. "This is as far as I go. I don't regret it."

"They...they might h-hurt you bad..." I stammered, my mind only now catching up to the horrible realisation of what she was asking of us.

"I know, dear. I know. But you said it yourself." She nodded toward the quickly confused filly, wondering why I was looking sad. "For the life of a child it's worth it. Lilac, honey?"

Coral turned, her hooves resting on the filly's shoulders.

"M-Miss Coral? Why aren't we g-going? You should go first! Your leg's hurt and...and..."

"I'm sorry, my dear. But you're going to have to keep going. Murky will get you to the safe place, alright? You stay with him." Lilac opened her mouth to protest, but Coral cut her off. "I know we only just met, but you're one of the sweetest, bravest and wonderful fillies I've ever met to have done *all* that you have. We'll see each other again, I promise."

Lilac's eyes went very wide, throwing her little hooves to Coral's shoulders.

"B-but I l-like you, Miss Coral! Y-you're nice! I've not met anypony nice for...for really long!" I felt my own eyes dampen...seeing the filly shed her own tears.

Coral simply hugged her close. I could hear the door breaking in but I couldn't break them. The look in Coral's eyes showed conflict though, as though she was trying to decide on something. Eventually, she let Lilac go, but held their heads close to one another.

"When you get there, Lilac. If...if you meet a little colt..."

I saw her glance at me. I only nodded. This was hard beyond words for her, the closest she'd ever come to her son knowing she was only bringing another foal to the same fate.

"A little colt called Chirpy Sum. Tell him his mommy loves him very very much, can you do that for me? Please?"

Her voice cracked on the last word, but the filly only nodded, grabbing the older mare again. I shoved the desk back against the door once more. We didn't have long!

"Coral!" I shouted to her, holding the vent open for the filly. She nodded...gently pulling

Lilac from her to go to the vent.

"I will! I promise I will! You're really nice, Miss! I'll do it. I've not met anypony nice for a long time and I've been really lonely..."

"I know, dear."

Lilac seemed to look hesitant, before biting her lip. "They told me they'd find me a nice mom to take care of me but they never did. M-Miss Coral, when you come to...to pick us up? C-can..."

Her tear struck eyes looked into my almost grieving friend's.

"Can you t-take me with you? To...to be my Forever Mommy?"

For just a few seconds, even the banging at the door seemed silent and pointless in comparison to the wonder that was the expression upon Coral's face as a little orphaned filly asked that one question. As though nothing else mattered in the world to her but the plight of one child.

Matting down Lilac's mane, hooves seeking to find all the ways she wished she could comfort the poor filly, Coral simply leaned over to kiss her forehead and held her tight to her breast, Lilac gripping around her neck with those tiny little forelegs.

"Yes, my dear. Yes, I'll do that for you."

A hoof crashed through the breaking door. I hated leaving her but we'd both known this would happen in some form or another, I just had a bit to go first. I let go of the desk, galloping to the vent. Seeing them coming, clearly not wanting to let go, Lilac had to be gently pushed off by Coral. With one last hopeful glance she disappeared through the vent. I started crawling through, turning back only briefly.

"I'll get her there."

She smiled, the door falling to pieces behind her.

"I know. That message orb she carries, you understand it means a lot to you as well, right? Don't forget that."

"I won't. G-good luck."

Even as I pulled myself through, I saw the door crash, either side of Coral I witnessed the slavers rush into the room. The last sight of her before I pulled my head free was her horn

lighting and her face hardening, aiming to give us as much time to move as we could. Ignoring the pain on my back, I let Lilac ride me as I tore off away from the building, hearing the furious pressurised slams of Coral's magic and the cries of slavers caught in it.

Lilac's hooves hung around my neck tightly. Burying her face into my mane as we ran. We'd come out the opposite side of the building. There was one more building ahead, the huge tall one with the slaves all over it in grapple saddles. Just past that one and I could make a mad sprint to the gates! Somehow, anyway. Just...just *somehow*. I had to get her there! I'd promised!

"There they are!"

How many guards *were* there sent by The Master?! Glancing toward the shout, another group of four were rushing across the courtyard from where they'd been waiting to guard the front door. I couldn't outspurt somepony that far!

"Mister Murky!" A hoof above my head pointed to the tall building, seeing one door ajar as a slave limped out on a bad leg to see what all the noise was about.

"Good girl!" I changed direction, dodging and hopping over the rubble. Two slavers were in the way, but in all the mud and in their vision restricting gas masks I could weave around their stumbling efforts. Was this how Littlepip felt? Free to escape and go and dodge and not care about what they shouted!

The slave leapt aside as we went in. In one end, out the other! I arced around the old food trolleys in the hotel's main route and sent a few slavers to the ground from bumping past them. Not too far! There were slavers behind me, slavers either side in the common rooms that tried to leap through doors! I managed to keep away! We were getting there!

Up ahead the far side's door opened. A bulky soldier stepping up with a full battle saddle primed. I could see the radio on his helmeted head, he'd been told to cut me off! Feeling Lilac grip tighter as we skidded to a halt, I spun on the spot. Exhausted slavers in air restricting masks lashed their whips behind me. The big brown and dark blue soldier grinned, knowing he'd been the one to trap me. Either side, the slavers watched their own flocks, casting me foul glances.

"Come on, now slave. Give up the ghoul."

I could feel those terrified limbs around me. No...no I couldn't let her go to those pits. Not turn into one of the unfortunates like Weathervane's friends. Falling apart with broken bodies...

"Sh-she's not going with you!" I tried to sound brave, I really did. But they just laughed. I

kept looking my eyes around, but the only way was upstairs and there was no other stairways down I could see! If only I had my...

Oh yes.

I gave them no warning or one liner, I simply bolted upstairs. They were slow about pursuing, presumably knowing I had no way out. But I went up floor by floor, tramping the thick carpet until I found what I wanted. A whole ton of slaves around their equipment stash. I grappled one of their grapple saddles and kept running upstairs.

"Where are we going, Mister?"

"S-safety!" Was all I could think to say. Opening a door on the top floor, we were at what I'd hoped...an open walled room, blasted by balefire or torn down long ago I didn't know. But ahead of us, only thirty feet away I could see the illuminated Alpha-Omega Hotel. Its thick and protected windows well lit from powered interiors while I could see the air conditioners on the top even functioning properly! On this side I could even smell the food. Good, warm and healthy food...

But I had no time to savour it, taking every piece of furniture I could, I started barricading the door behind me as thumping hooves neared our room. Shoving a desk, a chair and, with far too much strain, an empty chest of drawers against it I bought us a little time. I even had to grin as I saw Lilac grunt and lift a tiny desk lamp onto the pile to weight it down a little more.

"Is that the place that's safe?"

"Yes it is!" I looked over it. Partially, it occurred to me that had I been brought to Fillydelphia a few years earlier I might have been eligible for its comforts and an educated life. "That's where you'll be fine."

Sitting on the bed, startling and squeaking just as much as Lilac, I heard the door thump behind me. Picking up the grapple gun I aimed as best I could with this larger model at the Hotel near to the ground. I had to make sure this was just right, too high would be a disaster and I only had one shot.

Careful...careful...

"Mister Murky! They're getting in!" The furniture was jumping, being pushed back.

Now!

I pulled the saddle firing mechanism with my hoof, knocking me on my rump as the grapple sprung off from compressed air and shot right across the fence. It struck the wall about

seven feet from the ground...and stuck. Yes!

I wished I had time to answer Lilac's questions, but I quickly pulled the gun apart to get at the remaining wire before tying it around a segment of rubble. Behind me, slavers swore and were chanting numbers to time their smashes on the door.

"Lilac! Come here." My words were not the carefully chosen ones of an experienced mother, but she approached me as I started fiddling with the saddle itself, beginning to tie it around her.

"I...I kinda didn't tell you before but...if I go over there, they'll kill me. Th-that's what they do to slaves who try and break in..."

"Slaves?" She looked at me even as I fastened the saddle to accommodate her smaller frame.

"You...you don't know what a slave is?"

She shook her head, looking perfectly innocent. I just stood and blinked.

"A...a slave is...me. Like...somepony like me."

"You just look like a normal pony to me."

Somehow, those words meant more to me than I could conceive right now.

"Thank you. You've been more than I could ever tell you in the time we have. Helping me to realise a few things. But I'm sorry, Lilac, this is where you go on yourself. They'll kill me if I go there, it's only for foals."

The door pushed another few inches in, they were screaming at me. Screaming *my name*. Lilac looked horrified, shaking her head and clinging to me. But I held her back to finish my work.

"Listen, Lilac, this is very important! There's another pony you have to look for too, when you get in! She's called Starshine Melody and she'll tell them that you're supposed to be there, alright?"

"But she doesn't know me!"

I pulled the last fastener taught, eliciting a yelp from the foal, but I wouldn't have her slipping.

“Just tell her the little pony sent you.” I tried to smile. “She'll keep you right. Keep Fluttershy hidden from them though, okay?”

“Uh-huh...” She looked at me, before her lip quivered and she leaned in to hug me tightly. “Why can't I stay with you and Miss Coral?! Why? I don't want to leave you!”

Feeling the cold wetness on my cheeks, I held her back, as comforting as I could be.

“I know this must feel like your whole life's just went upside down, Lilac. But we live in a very bad place. The world isn't what you knew it was. We just need to keep you safe right now, Lilac. Somepony like you doesn't deserve what's out here. I know it's confusing and even I don't understand it all! But you can go to a good place till we can come and take you to a *better* place. We will come, escape from this darn city is possible. Because somepony's shown me it...because I know they can, I know we can and that's what keeps *me* going. So don't worry, we'll get you back to Coral. Now come on, you have to go now!”

She didn't understand. She just didn't understand, but the world of post-balefire Equestria simply couldn't be explained in such a way so quickly. I helped her up, hooking the back of the saddle onto the wire.

“Gallop around to the front and they'll let you in, foals always get in. Stay safe, Lilac...”

“Bye-bye, Mister Murky...” We touched hooves...before I let her go, the filly building momentum and sliding down and away from me to safety. Just as I'd promised Coral.

The door broke in behind me. I saw Lilac's horrified look, but I simply waved to her, tried to comfort her that I'd be alright. But the slavers were not kind. They threw me, struck me...dragged me away. But I simply watched as I saw one foal saved. One who didn't have to ever become a born slave like me.

Like me *or* somepony else I knew...

Manacles slammed shut, a chain went onto my collar...and I was dragged away.

* * *

My tender underbelly slapped onto the drying muck, tripping over my chains when pushed. Groaning, I rolled to my side, clutching my own chest before finally opening my eyes.

A thick pair of huge hooves stood just before me. He was here.

I'd been tugged outside and thrown before him in the courtyard. Surrounded by slavers in weather that looked ready to unleash another downpour any second, I was one lonely little

slave looking up at his Master come to reclaim him.

"I told you I'd be waiting, Number Seven, yet you came anyway. Galloping right into the trap I'd *told* you was here." His voice was quieter than normal, calm and arrogant. "I told you that you'd always find yourself galloping back to me no matter what."

"I...I didn't come here for *you*. For...for her, to get her safe."

I screamed, thrown five feet at his hoof lifted me up and *hurled* me. My nose stung and bled.

"You forget your place, slave! You will call me 'Master'!"

I should have been scared...I should have been begging. But after all this, after turning my back on him before and after knowing what I knew in my heart, I could not. My delay led to another fierce yank on my chain, flipping me over. I heard slaver's laughing at one little pony bearing the attentions of such a huge leader in their chain of command. Whether at me or simply the appearance of it I didn't know.

But I *wasn't* going to call him that.

"Not...not going to be here."

"What was that, slave?"

"I said...I'm...not going to be here forever!"

The chain pulled, I lifted from the ground, swung another ten feet to crash through a bench, impacting on a pavement's concrete. I was sure I'd heard a slaver cry out 'Look, he *can* fly!' before more laughter kicked in. Just the sort of mindless kind he attracted.

The skies broiled, wind blew. Looking up from the ground, my body hammered and exhausted, I could see the clouds. They didn't look quite so dark anymore, the storm was almost over. Then his face appeared above me, furious. I took heart. It *angered* him to see me resist, to realise I wasn't going to be in these chains as long as he'd like!

"Oh, I'm afraid you will be, Number Seven. You need only look to your own skinny rump to know that."

"I'm not going to be your slave forever!" I choked the words out, rolling to my hooves. It hurt...oooooh it hurt, but I stood on my own power, looking him in the eye. "You *won't* own me!"

A silence. The slavers cut their laughter. *No-pony* had ever talked to the Master this

way. His anger was still visible, but he only glared back, daring me to go on, *daring* me to do this now.

"You...you want me as your pet! Like some slave that never ends! Well it won't last!" My throat felt raw, but I cried out with all the volume I had, stomping a hoof before the colossal pony. "*You won't own me forever!*"

The chain clanked as I kicked it aside.

"You can punish me! And hurt me! Shout at me and chain me up and put me on enough shifts to almost kill me but you won't ever make me feel like I'm going to be your slave anymore! You hear me!? *Not anymore!* I'm going to...to get over that Wall! I'm going to live my life how I want to with...with all my friends and find my mom and strut into that radio pony's studio and *tell everypony how I escaped you!*"

Tears were in my eyes and my mind *whirled* in terror. Every instinct I had being fought against. I was riding the knife edge here, but as I looked at those lowered eyes...that simmering look upon his face...I knew I couldn't stop.

"You...you know why?! Because I know I can get out! I've *seen* somepony do it! I've seen somepony tell Red Eye that he wasn't going to own her! It doesn't matter what I've heard out there because that one sight is *all* I needed, that proof to always give me that one hope that no punishment you could ever dream would make me forget! This is where you lose! Because...I...I won't lose that!"

Turning, I looked to the nearby Wall, the same section I'd once run at...

"I'm going to be free and you'll never win because all I need to do is keep in mind what I saw and I'll know that there's a way out. One hope, even if it's the *only* way out, I'll nurture it. I'll dream and wish and hope. But someday, *someday*...I'll dare! Maybe not make it...maybe I'll need to be hurt and cry and need picking back up again and again and again but I will *do what she did!*"

I took a rasping breath, screaming with all my life's hurt and desperation into his face.

"I WILL BE FREE!"

I collapsed, chest burning and trying to keep the hacking and coughing as small as I could, lying on my side. The effort had taken what remained of my physical strength. I couldn't move...but I...I had won.

The Master furrowed his brows, looking down at me. I anticipated the scream, the shout. The hoof to crush my head and sentence me to unending shifts.

I didn't expect him to smile.

"You really believe that, slave?"

Hesitantly, my head juddered to nod. He only laughed, shaking his head as though it were some half-joke shared over a drink.

"You really do...well, well." He barely muttered, turning behind him to nod and then incline with his head. Through the smog, a couple of his aids drew something up, big and bulbous with fluttering wings.

A sprite-bot, one of those strange ones with a screen on the front. The master tapped it with one hoof.

"These things, they see everything, you know? The Ministry Mares did their work all right, they still work. They still respond to the same triggers to watch for ponies talking and then observe what they're saying. The eyes and ears of the Ministry of Morale...such a wonderful tool. I had a feeling this one would come in handy today after you said 'no' for once."

Turning back to me, his face hardened.

"Now you resist and tell me that you'll always want to be free? Because you saw her escape? Perhaps you should see something."

A tap and a spark, a few buttons beneath a hatch pressed made the sprite-bot jump and flicker, that screen springing to life and turning to static multiple times before stabilising. Black and white by appearance, it began to show moving images at last. Confused and wary, I watched it with wide eyes.

A rooftop, wait, I knew that one! It was the Ministry of Morale! The FunBarn!

Amongst the flickering bars, I saw figures run out onto it, two of them. Leaning closer, I squinted before feeling my heart beat faster.

It was her.

Unmistakable, surging out onto the roof with that zebra in tow, Littlepip looked quickly around her...judging her location. Wait...I knew this, I'd seen the balefire phoenix fly to there! This must have been when it happened!

Sure enough, even as I saw Red Eye's cybernetic terror dog, Winter, creep out of the door after them I saw the glare on the screen. The light approaching as that colossal flying

beast came to play its part in her escape!

Flaring to and fro, catching glimpses of it as the sprite-bot watched the encounter, it burned the balloons trapping her! Sending them crashing to the ground with immolating fire that I remembered all too well, I had been lying just below it all in the mud! This was it, I'd see her when she escaped! That dog even fled!

She simply stood there, looking around, scowling.

Was she just gathering her energy? When was she going to move on? What was it she was waiting for? A gap in the pursuers? To let the zebra get her breath back?

I felt my hooves quiver, I leaned closer, wide eyed as I saw her just stand there. Guards ran out of the stairwell and guns pointed. Come on, Pip! Take them out! When was she going to do it?! Do the...the thing that let her...

At gunpoint she was led away.

The screen began to flicker again, turning back to static. Beside me, I felt My Master lean down, a hoof across the back of my neck, speaking almost oddly calmly A voice I'd never heard.

"You really thought she escaped, didn't you, Murky?" I didn't turn to look at him. "Right to your little core. But the truth is, no-pony escapes from in here. Her capture was as ignominious as it was inevitable."

No...my mind seemed to slow, become clouded and fuzzy and hard to process anything. I just kept staring into the screen as the shiver spread over my body. No...no no no...

He reached out, tapping another button. The picture changed, highlighting another scene...that of the main gates of Fillydelphia from the outside. Hovering about, the black and white recording paused and turned to face a gathering of ponies as I saw her led out under guard to the drawbridge and two waiting ponies, one a Ranger and the other a lithe mare. I saw Red Eye himself behind Littlepip, smiling calmly from behind an alicorn shield.

"She didn't escape. She became just another agent of Red Eye, little Number Seven. She *joined* him in doing work for him."

The recording let out a buzz of noise, the sprite-bot's sensitive spy microphones picking up one line through the haze as I saw him lean down to her, whispering in her ear.

"Remember my offer, Littlepip..."

I closed my eyes, shaking my head to clear the well of tears building in them. I heard the machine click and turn off. With a little hoof bump to its chassis, it bleeped and continued on its merry musical way.

I had no words. All the courage, the belief...the proof and *faith* in my heart...it simply died. The energy to speak up and know I was going to be alright just flowed right out of me. Suddenly, I realised just how small and vulnerable a pony I really was amongst the strong and intelligent slavers.

My Master sat down, patting my back.

"You really thought you were something special, didn't you? The next in line to be like her? The slave who would break free? But the truth is you're just a pony. She was a legend, Number Seven and she didn't even come close to a way out. But don't worry, this isn't something unusual."

From my hooves over my face, I peered up to him, his light green eyes staring into my own. He stroked our mutual scar.

"Every slave rebels at some point. Every slave comes to that point when they fight back and make a try to be free...they either die or they get over it. It's like a form of adolescence, a rebellious stage. I've seen it happen to *hundreds* over the years...you're no different from them. But it's over now. You can go back to the life you know."

Around us, I saw columns of slaves forming, being led to various places. I recognised a few, ones from the Mall. Within them, I saw the battered body of Coral Eve being thrown in, barely able to stand. But there in the line I caught the wonderful azure eyes of Glimmerlight watching me. A slaver was having to repeatedly push her back in. I saw Sunny Days too...

All of us slaves.

"This is just how it goes for ponies like you, Number Seven." My Master stood up, pulling the chain. "There is no way out. No grand escape. Fillydelphia is your home and your place is by **my** side."

His voice was returning to its strength.

"Now you **know** it, she was caught and joined us as much as any other pony. She is out there working **for** Red Eye now."

Arbu...Bucklynn Cross...it made so much sense, he...he was *right*...

"So now we'll simply see about returning you to a crash course in handing away control."

You are a **slave**, Number Seven. It's time you remembered that. Your punishment will teach you this more than you would ever need to have us direct your life from now on. **Wormtail!**"

The retched aid of My Master crept over. He cast me a smug little grin as I sat shivering...wide eyed and barely thinking. No...I...I was thinking, just not what I wanted to think and see and...oh Goddesses. I'd been believing in a lie all this time...

There was no way out.

"Take this disobedient slave for his punishment before returning him. He'll work a shift somewhere to help him get rid of feeling like he's anypony that matters. Perhaps at the old merchant's new place..."

"At once, Maste-"

"NO!"

The scream wasn't mine, I turned to see a slaver simply belted across the face onto his rump with his nose bleeding, before Glimmerlight galloped out of the line of slaves and skidded to between me and My Master.

"Can't you see you're breaking him enough already! You don't need to do that!"

He snarled, raising a hoof. **"Get out of my way, slave!"**

She did not. "Please! He's barely hanging in as it is! Don't do *this* to him! You...you can..."

Her body quaked, but I saw her raise a hoof, resting it on her own chest.

"...you can take *me* instead...punish *me* at that horrible place...not him! I filled his head with all this, helped turn him to making attempts! Please, just let him go back to the Mall with Coral and take me for this punishment. I won't fight..."

There was a silence, My Master bearing down, staring into her eyes from far above her height. Behind her, I simply gazed on in amazement...my head hurting, the scar thumped and my cutie marks itched...the feeling of the chains shutting all too clear. But to see her do this...*offer* this in my defence...

"WHORE!" Without warning, he raised up and crashed his buck to her face, knocking Glimmer clear to one side into the mud. I saw blood streaming from her burst cheek. Striding over, he kicked her.

“You have no say! If I wanted you to be there to be punished, *you would be!* You have no bartering chips! No say in matters! You are a slave like he is and you will not attempt to ever believe you can change my mind!”

He turned, twisting back to me.

“Take him back to the Mall and throw him in the cells until I arrange his presence for Morass. He’ll want to get the customers lined up. It shall become his new place of work after *my* shifts for him are done. After today he will be split from other slaves entirely. You will learn what control is by the hoof of those that could seek it over you, Number Seven. You will serve their pleasures as the obedient slave you always were.”

Slavers grabbed my legs and chain, dragging me through the mud and over concrete. Glimmer struggled from the ground, trying to move toward me but being held harshly in line, kept away from me as we were dragged and returned to the Mall. A journey that I spent quaking and crying as Wormtail spoke of how I was but a slave, a crude imitation of his own Master.

Of how I was about to be a slave to every pony that could afford the meagre caps or trade to do as they willed with the one innocence I had left in this world.

* * *

“Oh...oh Murky, they weren’t going to...”

That was his plan. Like he’d said before he...he wanted to take the chance to 'market' me. To remind me that I was the bottom of the pile and always had been no matter what I'd believed before I was shown the truth.

I'd been thrown to rock bottom. Hitting the floor hard and being cast into a grey neutral world in my head that just didn't make any sense anymore. Like I'd gone back to sleep even as the word went out to prepare for me. To teach me how to be below everypony else like I should have been.

“I'm so so sorry...”

I didn't even feel anything...just...just...

Numb.

I lay in Glimmerlight's gentle grasp, feeling my shoulder wet from her own tears. I hadn't cried since we got back. I simply couldn't bring myself to. I just lay still and gazed at the wall, at the markings of generations of slaves beforehand and feeling nothing at all.

I didn't know what exactly was going to happen any more. But I didn't need to for it to make me feel sick. Sick and worthless.

They were taking everything away from me. My hopes, my dreams, the mare I'd so shamelessly admitted I'd had a stupid crush on and now they wanted to take my dignity itself just to remind me of my place.

My Master had seen the potential Sooty offered with me. Feeling me tighten and whine, Glimmer tightened her grasp, whispering that it'd be okay, choking on her words as she looked into my vacant eyes. I didn't really see her. I simply looked through her, feeling my body settle into its old routine and tell me 'I told you so.'

"We'll sort this, Murky...s-somehow...we always do..." Glimmer muttered again, she'd said it a dozen times. "Brim's coming back soon, hun, he's going to be at the next shift, we'll see him there, okay? M-maybe he can get to you in time or...oh Murky, I'm so sorry."

Why did that matter? Even he couldn't fight all of Fillydelphia.

Even with him, there was no way out. Protégé hadn't offered me one. Red Eye hadn't given me one. Littlepip's way out had closed. The plans wouldn't work, you couldn't escape this city as a slave, not from behind the Walls. Not even from outside them for me.

My life was here now. No way out. No way out at all.

I could see Coral sitting quietly against the wall, her head buried in her hooves and looking shaky from that fever I knew was burning strong inside her. Glimmer's usually so attractive looking face even through the grime was covered in dried blood. We were failing, we couldn't manage it.

No, my life wasn't here...it was in the hooves of My Master. He owned my life.

They were going to take me away. Drag me to where some sweaty stallion or harsh mare would pull me crying to a small room and lock themselves in with me. Even when I juddered and whimpered, terrified and praying under my breath I felt Glimmerlight hold me as though she could somehow stop them from doing it.

This was it. The moment my life hit rock bottom.

It was *going* to happen. But I couldn't even muster the energy to fight back, what was the *point* now? No-pony could escape slavery...

But there was one little thought in me, one last little glitter that refused to go out. One

train of thought. One desperate realisation.

There was *one* way out.

Half an hour later, our shift began. All of us were marched from the cell by the slavers, out of the Mall. It was there I took the chance, slipping away from the line like a ghost before we reached the place I'd be split off for Sooty's. Only one pony saw me go, the pony who had been holding onto me and felt me leave.

Even as I sneaked away, blank faced and grey of mind toward the one avenue of escape left to me I heard Coral Eve shout, scream and beg as she tried to make me hear her...she'd seen the look in my eyes. But she was dragged back in, chained down along with Glimmer and taken toward their shift, unable to follow me. Unable to do anything but try to make the slavers hear her pleas to catch me.

* * *

"Generous souls of Fillydelphia, I thank you. I thank you for your sacrifices. That day after day you place your own lives down to help prepare this world for a better generation. Further from our next scheduled event in the Pit I offer a day of rest very soon that I would see you understand my gratitude for this effort. Even now, as I hear the reports of progress on all fronts, I feel indebted to the work you, as better ponies, have done."

Hoof before hoof, I trotted my way through Fillydelphia, taking the route I now knew. Down toward the Ministry of Arcane Science. Master Red Eye's voice boomed from the speakers lashed to signposts and lamps all over the city.

"Let it never be known that there is not good in the world. By being here, in Fillydelphia, you are doing a greater good than has been done in two hundred years of fruitlessly wandering the wastes outside. This great spectacle, the majesty of your blood, sweat and tears...it shall be your monument to the future, the one place when you found your purpose."

I turned off the street...headed to the quieter areas of Fillydelphia. The voice faded as I moved away from his infrastructure, coming into the silent grey streets.

"Yes, some may ask me, 'Why? Why do you keep us here?' Because this is the only place that anypony need be. There is nothing outside these walls but misery, spite, betrayal and pain to be found. Only in the future, through your sacrifice of time and energy, will we make..."

It became a mumbling, passing beyond the distance I could discern individual words. I stepped onto the one particular street before one building.

Cross Street Orphanage.

The doors creaked, an entirely empty interior meeting me with nothing but dark shapes and grey dust floating in the heavy warm air. What passed for twilight in Fillydelphia streamed through windows, tinted grey by the muck sapping colour from its strands. With each hoof making naught but a tiny click, I began to trot through it. My body felt so weak, my broken nose, diseased lungs, head cold, bloodshot eyes and so many whips, scars and lesions along my body that I felt like a ghoul. Every step was shaky. My mouth hung open and my vision swam. Anypony could take me and have their way with me. They were *going* to. No freedom...with no dreams to dream in any cold cell that would warm my broken heart.

Almost a ghost of what a pony should be, trotting alone in the abandoned halls of the past.

I lifted my PipBuck. Reacquiring it and my journal hadn't been hard, I knew the way to sneak into his room now. I wanted them with me for this moment. They had to be with me. Clicking through channels, I set it to the only one I cared about.

"-far be it for me to guess, my ponies of the Wastes, but I'm afraid I cannot say that we can expect any information readily any time soon. The warning stays on the airwaves. Just avoid the Stable Dweller until we know for sure that this travesty is nothing but a falsity."

I'd seen the proof myself, I knew that there would be no truthful information coming.

Stepping my limping way through the halls, I passed crayon drawings of a world I'd never see. Happy smiling stick figure ponies laughing and sharing time together in fields, slowly darkening off to a ruined wall where balefire had scorched the pictures clean. The good had been *purged* from Equestria long ago.

"It hurts me more than I can say that our hope is faltering, wastelanders. Just...just wait, please hold on a little longer and-"

Click.

I turned it off. That was all I needed to hear.

I reached the stairs, moving up flight by flight, steadily approaching the way out to the new floors of girders that had still been left unbroken. Covered in damp puddles, the sheet metal and sodden wood creaked and plopped beneath my hooves.

Shaking, I began the ascent in the suddenly cold wind above the Orphanage. They...they wouldn't get me. I was going to escape. They weren't getting my *life*. Not to abuse and...and send me back to that place again to be broken into and violated! The thought of what I had fearfully imagined. Of a life consisting of sweaty bodies, seething pained gasps and

controlling hooves forcing me to do things. Of what I'd be every single day from here on if...if they got me.

My heart thumped hard, my head aching and my teeth chattering, I reached the top of the unsteady construction. The nut I'd been trying to remove was still there. Sitting my ragged, untidy and damp self down beside it, I sat and waited with my journal. There was...was just one last thing to...to maybe help me. While I sat quivering...crying...I tried to draw.

A shaky line...led to a wobbly curve...and a stupid shape.

I hit my journal with a hoof, leaning my head down. I tried again. Raggedy figures and terrible sketches that made no sense and had no direction, I almost drew things by accident. The only times my subconscious led me to draw was when it was something about him.

Wanting to scream, I very nearly threw the journal from the top. Instead I just clutched it close and tucked it into my saddlebag.

Beep!

I almost screamed in fright, I was so on edge. My limp mane, still so sore and messed from just...just earlier when somepony had...had done something I didn't remember and...oh Goddesses why me...

Beep!

I'd been jumping from the very thing I'd waited for...please, Sundial...*please*.

Click.

"I...I...oh no, I don't have long!"

I could hear shouting, a fumbling with the PipBuck and a desperation born of exhaustion in his voice. It sounded...wrong. Sundial was in a better world! He wasn't meant to sound like this!

"They got me! I was going back to my desk and they were waiting! With their cuffs and their batons and...oh help me somepony, they're going to take me away as soon as they get through this door! I'm so sorry, Equestria! I...I just wanted to protect her!"

I clutched the PipBuck close, feeling my own tears double up for him. No..oh Sundial no...why now, why you? I wanted him to get by and be happy and have a family before the end!

"So please, if you find this, please tell her I love her! Skydancer, she's the best thing that

ever happened to me! Please! I'm so sorry Mom...Dad...I just don't know what's going to happen to me now! I'm-"

A crashing sound!

"Suspect, come here!"

"I'M SORRY!"

"Get down of the ground now! NOW! Get down or I'll-"

Click.

I simply sat and held the PipBuck. It had been the first thing I'd found that really became, well, mine, in this city. The first thing in here that mattered to me. It had *a*lways been there for me, but that was it. Just...done.

There was no happy ending...not for Sundial...not for Littlepip...not for me.

Rock still, I began to shake, worse this time. Not from the cold...but from conflict. Fear of...of what lay ahead.

Slowly...I stood up, trotting forward. They...they wanted to hurt me every day, I wouldn't let them...

My front hooves stopped at the edge. Before me, the sunset...it must have been the risen earlier then. Casting my quivering head down I saw the same hard gravel and thickened mud below.

I was alone atop the only world I was ever going to be allowed to see...alone, cold, wet and scared. I turned, looking behind me as if to expect to see somepony rush up to stop me, but I knew no-pony was there. No-pony would be there for me now that I'd come out here. I was just the lonely pegasus as I'd always been...some may want to help me, but they couldn't save me.

No-pony could.

Slowly, I closed my eyes, entering into my own mind and my imagination. I heard every thump of my heart, a thick and deep sound in my ears. I had only one thing left to do. Please, Goddesses, answer my prayers and deliver me unto a better place than this. Please take me away from the hell I was born to. Because I simply couldn't take it anymore. It was too bad...too without hope...

Please...make it not hurt...

Hesitation...fear...

But one little realisation, a memory that pipped up. P-Pinkie had told me about this, hadn't she? In the creepy letter...

"When the time comes to make a choice, whether to leap or not...you'll know what to do."

The time was here...I knew what I had to do to protect myself.

I felt myself edge forward, the tips of my front hooves rested over the edge. I couldn't look down. I just clenched my eyes shut, shaking...crying, whimpering and trying with all my might to think of all the pain that would end. They wanted me to be taken into that place and...and abused by stallion after mare after slave after slaver...then put on shifts to bring me to death only to keep me alive for his amusement...*I didn't want all that!*

They had taken my freedom.

They had crushed my dreams.

I'm...I'm sorry, Glimmer...Brim...Coral...Protégé...Unity...I'm so sorry...

I...

I...

I didn't even feel myself lean forward past the point of no return.

Simply a motion, a whisper of wind against my body and the loss of all solid ground as I fell.

There was no dramatic last thoughts as it happened. I simply...went.

My little body left the rooftop, not even turning as it plunged, one last escape from the nightmare. No-pony to witness me or find me. I would just disappear with as little celebration as I had been born.

Nothing but a Number.

The speed picked up, every minor detail somehow finding its way to my mind in the short seconds of my fall.

My eyes saw the ground move, tumble and spin, a whimper growing to a scream...a scream for all of my pain.

From being torn from my mother, to the horrid anvil and hammer, through every lash, cane, slap and stomp...to the carts, back breaking work and shock rods. Through every single insult, push, attack, bite and drop of blood spilled in each cut and burn. From the unfair punishments to the gunshots stopping me being free, knives piercing my body to the horrible and sick brutality bore upon my body. Remembering every hope being stripped from my mind after any moment of clarity and into the condemning reality of what my life was to merely consist of from now on. For my whole life...I *screamed*.

A simple and anguished long cry of sadness that grew and grew as I saw the end and the harsh ground of Fillydelphia again and again as I spun and tumbled, those broken wings plastered to my sides.

It would all be over! One little pain I'd had the courage to face! My only way out of this city to be with the Goddesses at last to await my friends in their merciful embrace!

But the scream grew, beyond what I could. A roar...a brutal cry as something exploded and shards of wood and brick flew all around me. My vision clouded with red and my body slapping into something I felt hooves grasp me in midair, crushing me against a huge chest...

Brimstone Blitz caught me. Diving *through* the wall of the orphanage, he had thrown himself with that mighty cry, hooves out to catch me. Thrown off course, we tumbled. A slam and shock of pain as we hit the adjoining building, crashing through flights of scaffold and bouncing from loose brick we fell together, over and over...

Before crashing to the ground. Pain overcame me...and my vision turned to black.

But the pain didn't end.

Slowly...growing, that spark of life led my eyes to open. He was there, lying still and breathing light as his hooves held me against him tightly...stopping me escaping...stopping me crying out and running away from what he'd done.

Even as we were surrounded by the slavers that had chased him, he held me tightly. I struggled, beating at him with my hooves and crying aloud for stopping me! I wanted out! *Why, Brim?! Why?! There's nothing left for me! Nothing fucking left! I don't want to live anymore! I DON'T WANT TO LI-*

"No!" He hissed, a more emotional tone than I knew he possessed when he saw the struggle in my eyes to run away from the slavers, to try again! It was the only way out!

Cradling my head and shivering as I broke down crying and hollering in his hooves, I was completely stopped from moving, restrained even from choosing my own end.

“It's not that bad...it's *never* that bad...”

His eyes shifted up, to the slavers.

“This will end for you. I'll see it.”

A low and ebbing growl emanated from his chest.

“There will be a reckoning for whatever or *whoever* made you come to this...”

* * *

Footnote: Perk Lost...

Lucky Break – Sometimes a break only lasts so long. Whatever item gave you that luck to just scrape by time and time again has lost its meaning now. Your Luck characteristic has been reduced by one. Guess you're just an unlucky number...