

Sapphire cut through the sky outside Fillydelphia, flying madly just above the ground. In her wake, the sand leapt up, obscuring her pursuer without deterring him. Ralek glared angrily at the grey furred pegasus, his tail lashing furiously in the wind.

"I gave you a fucking gift! All you had to do is stay over the workcamp," Ralek spat angrily.

Sapphire glanced up and saw the shadowy griffon now flew above her. Fear motivated the young pegasus to fly faster, the fear of what alex would do to her, and the fear she might just live through this. Ralek was unable to match the lightweight mare's speed, and slowly fell behind.

Ralek was however not hoping to catch her, he needed only to get close enough. Ralek unholstered the Tekna 12.75mm pistol from his waist, took aim at the ironic crosshair cutiemark and fired. The dense projectile lost a great deal of energy catching the fleeing pegasus. It lodged in the meat of her flank, blood spurting in time with her wing beats from the mangled flesh. Sapphire's response was delayed, her determination to escape kept her going a few futile seconds longer before her body convulsed and reacted to the injury. Her wing beats slowed and stopped as she grunted in pain. She had felt worse but her body was not less resilient than her mind. It was enough however, Ralek closed the distance, angling down toward the pegasi. His hawkish features were emphasized in the dim sunlight as he dove down wings closed, talons outreached toward Sapphire.

Ralek fell on the small pegasus, hitting in the middle of her back and wrapping an arm around her neck. Sapphire flipped her head back, failing to duck out of the chokehold, but the impact was too great. Instead her attempt sent her flying into the ground. They crashed and skidded. Sapphire landed first unable to brace for the impact in time. Sapphire tried to flare her wings at the last second, but all it earned her was a sharp spike of pain in her left wing as it hit the ground first. The bone snapped from the impact and was driven through the flesh during the tumble across the ground.

Eventually they slowed to a halt, a matted mess of bloodied fur and tattered broken feathers. Ralek had landed on the bottom with Sapphire's neck still in the crook of his arm. He opened his beak to speak only for Sapphire to ram her head back and slam into it. His arm dropped as he was dazed by the head butt. Sapphire slipped out and tried to take flight, still trying to escape back to her old life, back to her friends. She didn't manage more than 4 steps before Ralek recovered and leapt, pouncing on Sapphire with a roar, only to realize Sapphire had been expecting it and she planted a firm buck into his breast, the wind knocked out of him. Sapphire carried through the pounce and buck, her body acting as a fulcrum as she flipped on her back and flung Ralek into the ground. Getting up Sapphire saw that Ralek was still, she hoped he was dead, but she had no interest in sticking around to find out as she staggered toward the horizon, her destination anywhere away from Filly.

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She managed to make it to a nearby dune after few hours before she had to pause, her injured leg and wing were slowing her. There was no civilization here, no decayed remnants of the old world to hide in. It was just her and the swiftly approaching 400 grain copper jacketed soft point round aimed at the seeping wound in her thigh. She was already dropping to the ground before the report caught up to her, Ralek having followed the trail she left behind and the tracker in her slave collar. Bravely Sapphire tried to crawl on, a hoof stretched to the horizon while Ralek angrily sent the sand flying with his paws and grabbed her in a headlock, once more putting the pistol to the underside of her mouth.

"Just shoot me, Ralek. Just put an end to my misery once and for all. I-I don't want to be slave! I'd rather be dead." Sapphire was icy in her delivery, she had been planning this talk for a while. Ralek just stood there, prepping the slave collar in his off hand. "Just fucking do it. I can't take this anymore. I won't be a slave, I won't be your caged bird. Fucking do it, put that collar on me and blow it, shoot me in the head. I don't give a shit anymore." Sapphire drops her jaw down onto the muzzle, tears pouring from her pleading eyes. Ralek merely flips the collar up and slides it onto her neck with a click. The internal talismans hum to life on the collar, a small beeping sequence plays to announce its readiness. "Just kill me already! End my suffering, please." Sapphire finds herself released, the arm holding her up gone.

"Go on!" Ralek bellows, "If you want me to do this, at least give me some sport in killing you." He holds up the control box to the collar, a worn red handheld unit with caution stripes. A dial is set to 20 meters on it, a small toggle switch in the armed position showing its owner's intent. "It's your choice, hobble away fast enough for the collar, or I grow bored and shoot you. But first, first you just need to say the 4 words, the four little words I taught you." Sapphire froze mid trot, her mouth reflexively admitting the truth. "I deserve no freedom." "Good, now make this interesting." The tanned griffon gestured her forward with his pistol, the control box slipping back onto his belt. Sapphire takes the opening and speeds off, her tearing eyes open, ready to see Luna.

Instead she quickly sees the clouded sky again as her body convulses and contorts on the ground, gurgled screams of pain trapped in her throat. The collar had not been set to detonate, rather it had been set to turn the pegasus's intrinsic lightning magic on herself, dropping her more effectively than any stun baton.

Ralek paces over, delighting in the mare's suffering before dropping on her and pinning the still writhing body under his. "Oh, Sapphire." Ralek leans in, beak just behind her ear, sliding the pistol beneath her chin. "Oh, you silly little pegasus, Sapphire. I'm not going to shoot you." He whispers through the hole in her, breath fluffing the hair tuft behind it. The anger in her eyes has long since fled, replaced by a far more primal fear. Ralek shifts forward, grinding the pegasus into the dirt as he moves to look down into her eyes. Instead of meeting her gaze, he just opens his beak, letting the smell of his breath waft onto her nose. A primal fear triggers, causing Sapphire to try and get away from the predator's mouth, but trapped underneath his

arms there's no room for her to move. Instead of devouring the troublesome birdhorse, the mouth laughs. Ralek just looks at the cowering pony and laughs.

"You're far too valuable to me, Sapphire. Killing you is just not going to happen, escape is not going to happen."

"F-fuck you," she tries to yank the pistol from his hand, teeth biting the fluted barrel to pull it away. Her hope of committing suicide is dashed though when Ralek pulls the gun back with a painful screech of metal on teeth. He holsters the pistol, its necessity now becoming a liability. Ralek gets off the lying mare, and pulls her upright by the collar. Still even after all this, she tries to flee. Her hooves dig uselessly into the sand while Ralek just stands there, letting the blue maned pony exhaust herself.

"No! No, no, no! I won't go back to Filly! I can't!"

"You will do whatever I order you to do, Sapphire." Ralek grabs the base of the broken wing and gives it a twist, earning an exquisite shriek of agony that quells her resistance.

"Sooner or later you need to accept it: You are nothing but a slave now, and not even you dying will change that."

She's full-on crying now as he begins the long journey to Filly, the hellish lights sputtering on the horizon.

"N-no... I c-can't... can't live there..."

"That's because you still struggle, Sapphire. When you accept your place, this will become so much easier."

"I-I'm not a-"

"Yes you are. You are a slave, my slave, trapped and collared just as any other. Like it or not, that is the reality."

She speaks no more, but the sobs of her lamentations continue serenading Ralek. Her refusal to walk succeeding in only minorly staving the inevitable at the cost of lacerating her underside.

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The journey back to Fillydelphia had taken until morning, their injuries were too severe to permit flight. Sapphire had resisted, but the beatings she had received ensured her obedience so long as the collar was on her neck. This forced acceptance did little to stay Ralek's intent to punish her, in fact it convinced him only more so.

"Hey Ralek, Adagio wants to speak with you. He isn't too happy with your little vacation," a tawny griffon spoke. He landed on the steps to the cage, facing Ralek.

"Not now Kalmoor, I have to put my things away first," Ralek sneered back, Sapphire jerking up in fear at what was coming.

The cage was barely large enough for a pegasi to lay on their belly, its walls made of rough iron bars, corroded by the tainted smoke from Filly's factories. On it lay a blindfold and earmuffs, their purpose most sinister. Experience had taught of a certain natural reflex pegasi had when unable to find their way. Instinctively their wings would open to find an air current on which they could orient themselves. But when denied that ability from being trapped in a tight,

claustrophobic environment, they went into a panic, thousands of years of instinct telling them they are about to crash.

Sapphire knew this experience, so too did many other pegasi trapped in the former Ministry of Morale's shadow. It's why she's ceased all attempts to flee when Ralek pulled on her collar toward that opening, her whole body trembling heavily as her breathing came in wheezes. "N-no Ralek, I'm sorry. Please don't put me in the-there. Ralek - please?" She mewled, azure eyes begging Kalmoor to stop him, to keep her from the living hell that the cage will become. Kalmoor turned from the gaze, sadness and feelings of failure flashing across his face. "No. You made me chase you, Sapphire; you can't beg your way out of that any more than you can escape this by making me kill you." Kalmoor shoved Sapphire into the cage, ignoring her sobs and her injuries as he clamped the blindfold and earmuffs on.

Near immediately Sapphire's wings reflexively open, then shut, her face recoiling in pain from where the barely healed wing slams into the wire wall, only for it to then open again as she went through the first stage. Ralek smiled cruelly watching the suffering mare. The second stage came soon after, a worming wriggle where she blindly tries to find her way to a nonexistent exit, her attempts to turn around blocked in all directions. Soon her movements became frantic and fearful, she thrashed about, heedless of her existing injuries or the new ones she inflicts on herself. And then there was silence punctuated by Ralek spreading his hands apart, as though he was hushing a crowd for a symphony. Her movements ceased entirely, except for a terrified quiver when her spasming wings catch on the walls.

Typically pegasi were left in only for minutes as a punishment, the terror lasting for weeks in their minds. But this time, this time Sapphire needed to be taught a lesson, a long arduous lesson. Attempting to escape in death was a desperate gamble on her part, but intelligent. She had hoped that Ralek would have shot her down or blown the collar rather than chase her down. She had failed to consider just how much Ralek would not let her go, and now she suffered for it.

Ralek mindfully erases the whiteboard over the cage before writing a date on it, 3 days hence. By the time she comes out, she should be more willing to accept her lot in life. Kalmoor looked at the date, a shiver of dread fluffing his pinions. He pitied Sapphire, as he did many other pegasi who toiled in Work Camp Fall's Fooly, but he knew well to keep it to himself. He knew very-

"I'm done here, let's go see what Adagio wants now. Unless you want to take care of this bitch?" Ralek spread his wings and braced for takeoff.

"Actually, yes I will take care of her." Kalmoor sat cross legged at this statement.

"Heh, suit yourself, no breaking her though." Ralek took off, leaving the camp and its execution in the hands of his protégé.

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