

Chapter 20: Mirrors And Roses

[Killing is personal - so's vows, promises. Last bit's more important to me than the first.]

On shaky legs, I followed Wings up the stairs into the bar. Her grumbling, as she fiercely scrubbed her claw with a towel, barely registered.

I didn't even react when a snarky voice piped up from the other end of the countertop. "So she lives." Breeze was tinkering with... something or other, it didn't seem important at the time. She didn't seem important. *I* didn't seem important.

After a quick rinse in the sink, Wings' claw settled around my shoulders, guiding me towards a booth. "Come on, Snow. Sit down and breathe it out for a little while. Then you need to tell us what you saw."

There was a *clunk* behind us as Breeze set down whatever she was working on. "What's wrong with her? Three days with no food leaving her constipated?"

Irritation laced Wings' response. "Knock it off, Breeze. Whatever she saw in the Orb wasn't easy to see."

"What wasn't?" A clattering of hooves accompanied Bosco's question, as some or all of the others, I wasn't able to tell, strolled in.

“Snowflake?” A familiar face moved into my vision. I saw it, but didn’t really register it. “What’s wrong, Sister?”

A hint of anger bubbled through the worry as she growled at the chocolate-furred griffon holding me up. “You were supposed to be watching her! What happened?”

“Easy, Undertow,” Naiara stepped in. “Snow’s fine. Look, no broken bones or bruises. She’s probably just had a little fright is all.”

“She does look somewhat nauseous. Naiara, can you brew her something to settle her stomach? Before anything unpleasant happens.”

A feather brushed my eyelid. “Too late for that, Cass. She already let rip downstairs, all over my claw.”

“Again?” Chorused Bosco and Schwarzwald.

“Again.”

“Sorry.” I mumbled, startling Wings and Undertow.

“Ah. You are back with us, Snowflake-dear.”

I just nodded mutely.

“...Or close enough.”

Undertow's comforting warmth pressed against me from my free side. "Snowflake, what did you see? Was it the Stable?"

"...Yes... and no."

"Helpful."

"Breeze..."

"Alright, alright. Come on, Snow. Tell us already."

Mercifully, nobody said anything as I looked at each in turn, marshalling my thoughts. Their expressions ranged across concern from Undertow and Naiara, focus from Wings and Bosco, intrigue from Schwarzwald and Cassie, and mild irritation from Breeze.

I took a mental deep breath to match my physical one. *Here we go.* "...My h... where I grew up, Stable 61... there's always a blizzard around the mountain it was built into. It didn't stop, ever. Every second of every minute of every hour-"

"I think we get it, Snow. The blizzard never stops. Keep going."

"Well, according to the Memory Orb, it's... actually not a blizzard at all."

And then I told them. I told them about Chrysalis, and Cadence, and the Windigoes. About the Changelings, and about the balance between love and hate. I didn't hold anything back, though my cracked and parched throat forced me to stop at some inopportune times. By the end, though, even Breeze was giving me nothing but rapt attention.

When I finally wound down, the room's atmosphere weighed heavily on me. I looked first to my sister, whose orange eyes were wide, and then to Wings. She wasn't really looking back, not at first, but I could see her Blue Fire eyes dancing a thousand ways at once. After half a second, she caught me staring, and the twin blazes settled a little as she nudged my shoulder. "Wow, Snow. Never thought I'd hear a tale like that all the way out here."

Her forced cheer broke the tension, and suddenly everybody had questions.

"How can a blizzard be a... a 'Changeling'?"

"Yeah, and what is a 'Changeling', anyway?"

"You're sure that's what you saw, Snow. The Orb wasn't still broken?"

"I didn't know Equestria had another Princess. Where was she back then?"

"This Shining Armour, what role does he play in all of this?"

“And where are these Changelings now?”

My tale told, I found myself quite exhausted. Stepping down onto the hard floor, I slowly and deliberately stretched, relishing in the pops and bursts that ran along my awakening muscles. I was quite happy to do this for a while, and let the debate go on without me.

Schwarzwald ambled past me. “Please excuse me, dahlings, but I must consult with my sources on this. It might take some time.”

Going to ask Watcher, huh? Good call. I had just enough self-control not to say that in front of Wings, but it was a stretch.

Breeze, Undertow, and Bosco were deep in discussion about the magi-mechanical implications of maintaining a blizzard like that for two hundred years, and I’m sure I would have liked to join in any other time, but for now I just wanted some air. Wings and Cassie followed me out, but held their own conversation as I took a few minutes to face north and just *stare*.

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After a break to digest this new information, we reconvened. For the first time, we all sat together on the floor, with no obvious barrier between my sister and I, and the twins. Everybody was too preoccupied for that.

“So...” Wings began, “...I guess we can add that to the list of things we need to look into.”

“AFTER all the other crap we’ve already got to take care of. It can wait.”

“Can it?” Undertow challenged Breeze. “You heard my sister. If nothing is done, the Windigoes will overrun Equestria eventually.”

“It’s been two hundred years, and the blizzard’s still going strong. It can wait another few weeks or so.”

Undertow’s brow furrowed over her goggles. “I don’t think you are giving this the attention-”

“So what SHOULD we look into next?” Bosco broke in. “Now that we’ve got Naiara back, I vote for finding my other two Memory Orbs. I’ve already lost three more days because of Snow’s vision.”

Not having a counter argument, I stayed silent. He’d earned my help a few times over, so I’d just go along with whatever.

“Do I get a vote?” Naiara piped up. “I wasn’t here when you guys were making your list. Don’t get me wrong, I’m really thankful to you all for coming to get me

at La Buque, but I still need to find my clan. They have to know by now that their plan for Latvi and the Raiders failed.”

“They do.” I supplied. The full details hardly needed to be stated at this point.

“Right, that’s what I mean. It was my mission, and I kinda screwed it up. Atesh is gonna want answers, and I need to make things right... somehow.”

Breeze quickly raised her hoof. “I vote for Naiara’s thing.”

“Why?”

Her sister’s one-word question seemed to wronghoof her. “Well, I... I mean, she’s my friend, I wanna help her, and...”

Cassie nodded knowingly at Breeze’s developing blush. “Ah, you want to see your new beau.”

“NO! I just want to help my friend!”

“Of course.” The sniper Pegasus smirked, before affecting a more serious expression. “Unfortunately I cannot agree with you.”

“What?! Cass!”

“I am sorry, Breeze, but Naiara’s tribe should wait until we have retrieved Bosco’s other two Orbs.”

After shooting her a grateful smile that morphed into a smug smirk, Bosco faced Naiara and Breeze. “Your dating life’ll have to wait. It’s finally my turn to get what I want.”

Cassie moved quickly to forestall any heatedness. “I support Bosco because of what we’ve just heard. Snowflake had only one Orb, and yet it held such an important secret. Bosco has *three*.”

“Anyone else got a vote?” Wings looked at each of our remaining three, myself included, as the twins glared at each other over the stalemate.

Without hesitation, Undertow cast her vote. “Bosco’s Orbs.”

And was quickly countered by Schwarzwald. “While I do wish to hear more stories from the past, I think that spending time with some muscular zebra stallions sounds just lovely.”

All eyes went to Wings for the decider. After hemming and hawing for a few seconds, she shrugged and sent an apologetic look towards Bosco. “I swear that you’re next. You can punch me in the face as hard as you want if I’m lying. Hell, you can punch all of us. But I gotta go with the zebras here.”



“Of course you do.” The charcoal colt seethed, “Nothing like being outnumbered, huh?”

Wings didn’t back down. “The zebra interfered at Gull Gulf. McCoy and his Monsters, and probably some other griffons too, will be out for stripey blood. They should be warned, if nothing else. It also moves up the timetable on anything to do with Naiara’s clan. Sorry, Bosco, but your Memory Orbs might end up being around longer than those zebra.”

Shaking slightly, Bosco stood up and stalked out of the room. We all watched him go. The others didn’t look like they thought much of the victory, not even Schwarzwald. I certainly didn’t.

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The mood hadn’t lightened much after we’d set off. Naiara led the way, though she was working on guesswork, as our first outing as a full eightosome didn’t have a definite destination. The zebra moved around often enough that we could do nothing but rely on Naiara’s experience and tracking skills.

Bosco trudged along in the very centre of our not-so-little pack, stoically ignoring any attempt at communication. The way he pulled his neck back into the gap of his barding brought to mind the old detective stories from the Stable, turning their collars up against the rain.

Much more encouraging was the fact that Undertow and Breeze had resumed their discussion on magic from earlier. Each would occasionally catch mine or Cassie's eye, tense up for a moment, and seem to withdraw from the conversation, but soon enough would be swept back in. I should have been listening to what they'd been saying, but couldn't keep up. *Still, Undertow and Breeze don't have to hate each other. It's fine if I'm the only one who Breeze and Cassie don't like.*

Breeze's sister, Schwarzwald, and Wings formed a triangle of lookouts. They tossed snippets of small talk at each other, in between watching the horizons and covering Naiara on point.

I sidled up to Bosco, keeping my eyes ahead, and speaking out of the side of my mouth. "I'm here, if you need to talk, alright?"

A noncommittal grunt was the answer.

Dropping it, I swung around and began walking backwards, looking north. We were heading south and, in the fading light, it was too far to see the mountains which housed Stable 61, or the 'blizzard' which swirled around them.

Two hundred years, Chrysalis. Two hundred years. You and Cadence spent every second maintaining the storm. How... can you possibly be that strong, yet still fear something? Just what kind of demons are the Windigoes, if they require this much

power just to hide from? And how strong is the Crystal Heart, to focus all that love like that? Will it last? Will you?

...What's it like, being a blizzard? Can you still see the world around you, Chrysalis? The blizzard blinded the Stable, but what about you? Do you even see anything at all? Do you hear, or feel, or taste the world around you?

Cadence... Chrysalis... do you know how badly we fucked everything up?

My eyes dropped slightly, imagining the mountains under Chrysalis and Cadence's blizzard. I thought about Stable 61. All the ponies and buffalo and zebra and others who called it home. I thought about my brothers. How long would they struggle without me before they found their hooves again?

They're only as old as Undertow. They shouldn't have to lose their mother AND their sister. Buff will do his best, he always does, but the Overmare better be treating them right after what she did!

I thought back to the last pony I'd talked to before leaving Stable 61. Both times. She'd thrown me out in reality, and then I'd killed her in the Sombratic dream. Quite the contrast. What was her role in all of this? Did she know about the blizzard? Did anyone from the Stable? For all the times I had been stuck with monitor duty, there had never been much supervision, hence why most ponies just

slept through their shift. I had done so a few dozen times myself, being one of the most frequent screen watchers.

They'll be okay. Even if the blizzard stops. Nobody really ends up hated in the Stable. Even I was just an outcast, rather than a menace. My brothers got along fine with tons of people in the Stable.

Yeah, they'll be safe. They don't hate and aren't hated. Just like Undertow.

I loved my family.

“Hey, Bosco, still pouting?” Breeze’s brash tone cut through my reverie. I sidestepped as she dropped back to draw level with the perturbed colt.

“Leave me alone, Breeze.”

“Nope! So anyway, I wanted to ask you...”

Seizing the opportunity, I moved past the burgeoning, though one-sided, conversation, and increased my pace until I passed my sister. As I did so, I nodded forwards for her to follow me. Moving past the others, we kept going until we caught up with Naiara. “Hey, we gotta talk.”

Her jade eyes on briefly flicked back to us, but the corner of her lips did turn up.

“Sure, what’s up?”

Lowering my voice, I leaned in close. “What’s gonna happen when we find your clan? As far as I know, Atesh still wants the Horn. How far is he going to go to get it? And does he know what could happen if he tries to use its magic?”

I had to pause and turn to Undertow, seeking out my reflection in her goggles.

Good. Normal eyes. I got a bright smile from her out of it, too.

Naiara hadn’t immediately responded, which didn’t fill me with confidence.

“Atesh... will definitely want the Horn back, if you’re not going to use it, or let Latvi use it. It’s pretty much his only shot now.”

“Shot? Shot at what?”

Naiara’s next words made me stumble into Undertow. “For going home.”

“What? What’s that supposed to mean?” Why wouldn’t Atesh be able to go back to the zebra lands?

“Are the zebra lands so inhospitable without the horn?” Undertow had moved to the other side of Naiara. “Were you unhappy there?”

Naiara just shrugged. “I’ve never been.”

THAT surprised me. “You haven’t? I thought your clan travelled to the Wasteland?”

She nodded, pointedly looking forwards. “They did... almost twenty years ago. Technically, I WAS born there, Cept too, but Atesh got us all exiled when the two of us were just weeks old.”

“*Exiled?!*” Breeze’s startled proclamation made us all jump.

At our quizzical looks, the pegasus turned defensive. “What? I’ve got good ears. Told you that the first time I met you.”

Cassie turned away from her sweep of the area to address the group. “Please, Naiara, enlighten us all.”

Grimacing slightly, she relented. “...Fine. Here’s the thing: Atesh doesn’t believe in the stars, and he was vocal about it. Got the wrong sort of attention placed on our clan by the rulers in Roam. Long story short, we all got shipped off to Equestria as punishment. We’re not supposed to return until we repent, or make amends.”

“That’s crazy!” Wings burst in, feathers rippling in irritation. “Why are you all suffering because of what one guy did? That’s not right!”

“He’s the clan leader.” Naiara deadpanned. “He represents the views of all of the clan. At least he’s supposed to. After we got kicked out, plenty of the others found their faith, and fast. Not Atesh, though. He’s still not a believer.”

She waved a hoof at our surroundings. “So yeah, I’ve only known this place in my life. Cept and the others might tell you different, but Roam’s home to Atesh, not me.”

“*Svara...*” My heart went out to her. She didn’t even get any time in what should have been her home. She was only here in the Wasteland because of the actions of another.

Naiara surreptitiously glanced at the others, before shuffling in close again.

“Seriously though, Snow. Keep it out of sight. Things could get ugly if Atesh is getting desperate. While you were under, Wings filled me in on you and Cept trying to capture Latvi, and how it went wrong. Atesh knows how to be patient, but he’s not gonna wait forever.”

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“I don’t see why we couldn’t just go stay at Sprinkles Supplies.”

“Because they’ve got a business to run, and we can’t be dropping in all the time.”

“But this suuuucks.”

We’d stopped for the night at a burnt-out husk of a vehicle. Some sort of carriage, though I couldn’t see any tracks or rails to carry it. Our first job had been clearing

out the bones. Bosco was in his element here, scoping out the place in a matter of minutes, assigning sleeping areas, and arranging a watch rotation.

I was on first watch, along with Bosco, Schwarzwald and Cassie. Still, after only an hour or so I found myself yawning. *I hate monitor duty.* Still, I struggled through it, and was more than relieved when we were relieved by Naiara, Wings, Breeze and Undertow. I pushed as far into a corner as I could, and was asleep in moments.

I awoke again to a hoof shaking my shoulder. Struggling to blink the sleep from my eyes, I just barely made out the stripes running along the length of the leg in the dark. “Nrgh... Naiara?”

The only answer I got was her holding a hoof up to her lips, then pointing outside. Bleary-eyed, I nonetheless got to my hooves and followed her as she swiftly moved through the wrecked carriage. There was nobody else awake in the carriage. *What’s happening Naiara? Are we under attack? The Raiders?*

Naiara said nothing as she disappeared outside. I stopped for a moment to pat the horn, under my barding. *Still there. Good. And there it’ll stay.* Almost fully awake now, I took another step towards the opening.

“Enough is enough, Naiara. Atesh demands the relic.” Cept’s rich baritone banished the last vestiges of sleep. “Step aside.”



“Cept, stop this!” Naiara’s response was full of stress. “Leave her... leave all of them alone! The Horn’s not worth it. It’s not what Atesh thinks it is!”

*Okay, time to go outside now. I can’t leave Naiara to handle this alone.* I hopped out of the opening, quickly seeking out the two zebra clanmates. Cept was standing tall on the ground outside, while Naiara was crouched atop the carriage. *How the heck did she get up there so fast?* “Cept!”

Both zebra turned towards me. Cept’s dark gold eyes were hard. “Red Ice. Give me the Horn.”

“Cept, Naiara’s right. It’s bad news. Nobody can use it safely, and letting Latvi get his hooves on it would be the worst idea.”

The stallion just shook his head. “I honestly no longer care. Atesh wants the horn, and I am tired of putting myself and my clan in danger to get it. I will take it, and I will take it now.” He nodded over my shoulder.

Strong hooves kicked my legs out from under me, and a knee like a rock pinned me down by the neck. Straining my eyeballs, I managed to just catch a glimpse of the zebra, the same who’d roused me in the carriage, in the corner of my vision.

“You’re... not... Naiara!” I hissed out.

“*Mua leija.*” She responded, mockingly.

“LET HER GO!” Our friends boiled out of the carriage, disturbed by our confrontation. None of them looked happy. Undertow started towards me, horn glowing, but stopped when the nameless zebra mare pushed down harder on my neck, causing a pained grunt.

“Cept?” Breeze floated above him and Naiara. “What are you doing?”

There was only the slightest waver in his eyes, before they hardened again. “I am sorry, Aqua Breeze, but this is a clan matter. Please stay out of this. It is nothing of concern to you.”

Breeze looked between the two, before facing him again with a frown. “You really think I’m not gonna care when Naiara’s pulling that face? This isn’t like you, Cept. What are you asking from her?”

“Her duty to her clan.” Cept was stone-faced as he matched gazes with Naiara, but spoke to Breeze. “The duty Atesh believes she has been neglecting for too long.”

“The hell is THAT supposed to mean?!”

“I haven’t neglected anything!” Naiara retorted. “I did as Atesh asked, even if it meant putting my friends in danger.”

“I wondered when Atesh would lose patience.” Schwarzwald’s grinning cheer was at odds with her battle saddle’s minigun spinning up.

“Please do not do that.” At his signal, the mare on top of me produced a needle from between her lips, holding it to my eye.

“...Poor sport, *dahling*.” Schwarzwald’s weapon spun down, and she no longer smiling.

“Cept, please!” Naiara pleaded, stepping before the two zebra stallions. “Latvi won’t do as Atesh wants. He’ll turn on us again, just like he did the first time!”

“From what I have heard, he only turned on Red Ice.” The stallion snapped back.

“And that is no concern of mine. We will force him to do as we say. What he did to Snowflake is unimportant.”

“It won’t go the way you want.” I called out, still unable to turn my head. “Latvi’s gonna play you, and Atesh, for fools, just like he has with all the others.”

“You mean like he did with you?” Cept raised an eyebrow. “Do not think that we are the same, Red Ice. Atesh has lead this clan for decades. You could only lead your Raiders for days.”

“BECAUSE OF LATVI!” I yelled. “He. Will. Betray. You! Why don’t you understand that?! He can’t get you home!”

Grunting, Cept glared at Naiara. “You told them?”

“I did. Cept, Atesh is too focused on getting out of Equestria. I’m worried about the cost to the rest of us.”

Cept’s golden eyes dimmed. “That is a private matter, Naiara. You should not have revealed it to outsiders. Atesh is concerned about the influence all of your… friends are having on you. He thinks it might be time to cut ties.”

“NO!” Six voices cried out at once.

“LATVI WON’T HELP YOU!” I tried again. “DON’T DO THIS!”

“Well now, don’t I just keep hearing a certain name I’m *very* interested in?” The heavy voice startled us all as it called from out of the dark.

“Who’s there?” Cept demanded, covering Atesh.

Thick hooffalls sounded out in the night, and seconds later large shapes loomed out of the blackness. Bearing battle saddles bristling with ordnance, four buffalo stepped into our engagement. “So all you tiny ponies keep talking about Latvi. We’re pretty interested in finding him too. Why don’tcha go ahead and tell us

where he is?" He punctuated this by racking a round into one of his weapons' chambers.

Another of the buffalo, this one smaller, with a hastily welded metal helmet covering his entire head, leaned in to the first one. "Hey, Crush, there's a griffon here too." the second buffalo's voice was muffled by his helmet.

"What?!" Crush followed his companion's gaze, zeroing in on where Wings floated above the wrecked carriage. "Hey, beakface, get down here and take me to Latvi, right now!"

Wings didn't move, just lazily pointed her revolvers at him. "Why don't you come up here and make me, big guy?"

"Heeey," Breeze murmured. "I know this guy."

Surprised, everybody looked at her as she pondered. After a moment, comprehension dawned in her eyes, and she clapped her hooves together decisively. "Yeah, he's that racist buffalo from Grindstone!"

"Hey, yeah. He is!" Naiara joined in. "What're you doing here, buffalo? You weren't exactly looking to get involved in non-buffalo business the last time we saw you."

“So you’d be the *stripe*,” Crush growled. “and I’m guessing the other one is around here too. The nosy unicorn, whoever she is.”

““Whoever she is’?” I repeated, gritting my teeth in the dust.

“Whatever. ‘s not like she’s important.”

“This fool knows nothing.” Cept gnashed. “Leave us, buffalo. You are delaying us without reason.”

All of the buffalo pointed their guns at Cept, except the armoured one who was still looking at Wings. Crush’s already low voice dropped further. “Don’t you dare talk to me like that, punk. My name’s Crush. Remember it! All of you damn equines, and griffon bastards, are always causing problems for us buffalo. We’re here for some payback. Now there may be more of you but we’ve got a hell of a lot more guns. Tell us where Latvi is, or we’ll kill you all!”

Cept just smirked at the threat. Raising a hoof, he mocked Crush’s bravado. “*All* of us?”

At his signal, six more zebra shimmered out of thin air, on all sides of the buffalo.

“What the hell?!” Wings and Bosco both started, drawing their guns.

“Zebra stealth cloak.” Naiara supplied darkly, still focused on Cept. “Good for ambushes.”

All six new zebra bore powerful looking rifles. The big bovines quickly did their best to form a defensive circle. One of the non-armoured buffalo muttered to their leader out of the corner of his mouth. “I don’t like this, boss. That’s a lot of fire.”

Cept stepped forward purposefully. “We have entertained your foolish notions this long, buffalo. You are not welcome here any longer.”

Eyes whipping back and forth, Crush didn’t immediately answer. It was a tense few moments before he finally spat out. “Them’s fightin words, *stripe*. How ‘bout you back ‘em up? No weapons, just one on one?”

Cept wearily waved a hoof at his clanmates. “Fine. I’ll finish it quickly. After that, if they do not leave, kill them all.” He turned back to Crush. “Drop your weapons, and we will begin.”

Crush chuckled thuggishly. “Oh no, boy. You don’t get to fight me. You’re fighting him.” The leader turned to his smaller, armoured compatriot. Hesitantly nodding, the faceless buffalo moved to the front slowly.

Cept just sighed. “It makes little difference.”

With the unnamed zebra mare still atop me, I was dragged back with the others, to form a perimeter for the fight. Cept made no move to attack his opponent, only affecting a fighting stance and staring down the armoured buffalo.

Said buffalo moved back and forth jerkily, but didn't take a step forwards. Cept's patience quickly ran out. "I do not have all night. You will leave us, just as soon as I finish this."

And then he waded in.

What followed was one of the most one-sided plotkickings I've ever seen. Despite the size and strength advantage, the armoured buffalo never stood a chance.

With an array of punishing kicks and bucks, Cept's *Fallen Ceasar* mastery absolutely dominated his opponent, who was clearly no fighter. The buffalo's counter attacks were slow and sloppy, never once coming close to hitting their target. He couldn't defend himself as Cept systematically chopped him down like a tree.

First, Cept took out his legs by chopping and stomping the knees. Then, when the armoured buffalo crashed to the dirt, he worked his way around the entire circumference, leaving rapidly forming bruises and gashes in shoulders, hips, ribs, and finally cheeks.



The whole thing couldn't have lasted more than two minutes. Cept never took his eyes off his opponent, and showed no joy, nor remorse, in his task. The zebra had a job to do, and he completed it with brutal efficiency.

Panting and groaning, the buffalo tried to rise a few times. *Just stay down, you dumb bastard. You never stood a chance. You and your boss should just get the hell out of here before this gets lethal. I wouldn't shed any tears for Crush, but you are just punishing yourself now.* Every time it looked like he might stand up straight, Cept would knife in and drop him again.

Crush was getting angrier and angrier. "Hey, fool, why are you letting this runt push you around?! You're a buffalo! We're the biggest and baddest things around! Nobody does this to us!"

The armoured buffalo in the ring half-groaned, half-cheered, and tried to rise again. *Oh, just end this already, Cept. Slappy there clearly is too dumb for his own good. Maybe getting his flank hoofed to him will knock some sense though that helmet of his. We're all wasting time with this.*

There seemed to be a general feeling of satisfaction when the buffalo finally rolled over, unconscious... at least until the guns came up again, pointing at Crush and the rest of his posse.

Cept dusted himself down, though he was hardly dirty at all. “Now then. Go. Away.”

Snorting and slobbering, Crush had to be dragged away by the two remaining healthy buffalo, with his beaten companion slowly following. The big bruiser just wouldn't go quietly, however. “You think this is over? I swear I'll be back, with more guys, and we'll take you all apart! You don't get to walk your tiny selves into my home, like Dent and his pet pony bitch did! Damn griffons too, bastards came and killed Dent without a word! And now there's Raiders sniffing around! All of you are nothing but vermin to me! I'll wipe you all out! I SWEAR I'LL KILL YOU ALL!”

As they vanished into the night, it became very apparent that not many, besides the stealth zebras watching them go, were giving them much thought.

Even I wasn't immune. *We've all got bigger problems than you, punk. Take a number.*

A water whip sent the zebra pinning me down sprawling. While I scrambled back to the safety of our line, weapons came up on both sides. Cept calmly helped his clanmate up, then turned back to me. “The horn, Red Ice.”

I stayed right where I was. “You know I'm not going to give it to you. Atesh knows a little about what it CAN do, but not all that it WILL do.”

“And YOU know that I will carry out my duty to my clan.”

Everybody bristled at this, zebra, pony, and griffon alike. The mare holding me had rejoined the other zebras, and some of them were laying hooves on their rifles.

“Naiara,” Breeze tried, even as she brandished grenades. “what should we do? Atesh isn’t going to let this ‘horn’ business go, is he?”

Still standing across from Cept, in the gap between our two sides, Naiara shook her head sadly. “No, he’s not. He’ll keep trying until he gets what he’s after. Even if Cept doesn’t get the horn now, more zebras will keep coming after us. And they won’t be as polite.”

“So what do we do?” The question was aimed at both Naiara AND Cept.

It was Cept who answered. “Come with me to meet with Atesh.”

Bosco and Wings hadn’t taken their guns off the zebra stallion. “Funny joke, guy. Want to try another?”

Undertow’s horn glowed. “It would be foolish to follow them. We will be outnumbered if we do.”

“She’s got a point.” I chipped in, while rubbing gravel from my coat and glaring at the mare who’d sat atop me.

“I give you my word that you will not be harmed.” Cept supplied, turning his hooves up in gesture.

“And what value does that have for us?” Cassie snapped. She had the biggest rifle here, but the zebra had more of them. “We don’t know you, Cept. Why should we trust you?”

Naiara wheeled around and faced the rest of us. “Hey! Listen, I know we’re not in the friendliest situation right now, but Cept is still my clan. If he gives his word then he’ll keep it, and make sure everybody else does too. He’s just trying to do right by our tribe. He hasn’t seen what happened with the horn, so he doesn’t know.” She took a step backwards, placing herself between us and Cept. “Please, guys. Let’s just listen to what Atesh has to say. I won’t let him take the horn from you if any of you aren’t satisfied. Trust me.”

I grimaced. “That’s the problem, *svara*. We do trust you, but it’s like you said. We don’t know the others, or what they’ve been doing. Atesh might not let you two keep your words. That’s really not something that I can take the gamble on with the Horn.”

Her tone turned pleading. “Snow... don’t. Please? I can’t fight my clan. I just can’t. That’s what’s going to happen if you say no. Don’t put me in that position.”

And there it was. As I exchanged glances with the rest of our group, I couldn't help but feel that that was the problem in a nutshell. I had the Horn. Atesh wanted the Horn. His decision to take it, and my refusal to give it up, had put all of us, Naiara and Cept included, in an impossible position.

"What do you want from us, Naiara?" Bosco kicked at the dirt with his hoof. "Do you want us to just surrender and come quietly? We can't do that!"

"I-I know, but..."

"But what?"

Her next words were a child's whisper. "... but they're my family. This could get them home." She looked up, morose. "I know the danger. I know what you went through, all of you, but this could be Atesh's last chance. *He wants to go home.*"

A long, tense silence followed. Nobody seemed to know what to say, while Naiara looked more and more unhappy as she found no support from us.

Grunting, Breeze face-winged. "Damn it, alright, alright! Stop looking so sick, Naiara. I'll come with you."

Some of the shine returned to the zebra's jade eyes. "You will?"

“I will.” Breeze’s feathers teased apart, revealing the half-smile underneath. “I still don’t think that Atesh should get anything, but I’ll hear everything out. You deserve that after all you’ve done for us.”

Scratching the back of his neck, Cept took a half-step forwards... until glares from Undertow and I drove him back. “Thank you, Aqua Breeze. I am truly grateful for your assistance. You are a great friend to Naiara.” The hard look behind his eyes was gone as he looked at Breeze and Naiara standing together.

Breeze’s feathers twitched closed, in an effort to hide the red in her cheeks. “Yeah, well... I trust Naiara, and she trusts you. I want to trust you, Cept. However, I *really* don’t want to end up regretting this.” The two stared intently at each other for a moment, before being interrupted.

“If we are to do this, *dahling*, then it shall be done on our terms.” Schwarzwald’s gatling was spun down, but she hadn’t relaxed.

Reluctantly breaking eye contact with the technophile, Cept switched back to all-business. “Name them.”

Schwarzwald smiled a familiar smirk. “At this meeting, Atesh will be in our custody until we are done.”

Instant alarm shot through the gathered zebra. The unnamed watchers rapidly began jabbering in zebra tongue, while Cept choked on his spit. “What?!”

Bosco stepped up to support Schwarzwald. “We’re walking into enemy territory, and all on YOUR word that we’ll be safe. We get Atesh in our custody for the talks, and release him when it’s all said and done. Try anything funny, and I’ll put a bullet through his skull.”

“You cannot think that I will agree to this!”

Bosco remained stone-faced. “Take it or leave it, Cept.”

Schwarzwald’s smile grew at the zebras’ unease. “How can we trust your word if you will not take ours, handsome Cept?”

Battling every emotion, Cept looked to Naiara. Eyebrows rose, jaws tightened, cheeks puffed, and foreheads creased as the two went through a rapid, utterly silent back-and-forth. It was only when Breeze pressed her cheek to Naiara’s, and the two gave a simultaneous stare, that Cept gave in.

Gritting his teeth, he looked to the ground. “Very well. It shall be done.”

Bosco and Schwarzwald nodded their agreement, bringing the total up to four.

Cassie swiftly made it five. “I am still unsure as to this ‘horn’ and its importance, but I will support Breeze, and Naiara, if they believe it to be the right course of action. But,” her rifle whipped up and fixed on Cept, “I will not accept you putting my sister or her friend in any danger. This is your only warning.”

To my surprise, Undertow backed Cassie up. “I know Atesh’s plan for the horn, and it will not work. We shall convince him of this. For Naiara’s sake, do not make us do it lethally.”

And that left Wings and I. All eyes looked at us. We looked at each other.

She shrugged. “I don’t know the guy, Snow. Can’t say more ‘til I do.”

I snorted, unsatisfied. “...Fine. Just remember what else is at stake here, Wings.”

*Can’t mention the Orb out loud, but for pity’s sake get my meaning. We can’t start the old war up again. It will literally kill us all.*

~~~~~

The walk to the meeting point was tense. No sooner had we decided to move then the other seven zebra, my harasser included, had melted into the night. That left us with Cept and Naiara as the only two zebras that we could see.

Nobody was happy about that last part. Wings, Cassie, and Breeze were keeping constant surveillance overhead, while Bosco, Undertow, and Schwarzwald refused to leave my side. Naiara kept pace with both our group and Cept, holding position between us and him.

As we walked, I found something kept nagging at my mind. After the third time I'd drifted into Undertow, she perturbedly shrugged me back into position. "You are not watching where you are walking, big sister. Are you worried?"

"Huh?" I blinked, startled. "Uh... no. I mean, yeah, I am, but that's not... y'know, actually, forget it. It's not important right now.."

Her goggled eyes twitched towards the two zebra for a moment, then turned back. "We have time, Snowflake. Please, tell me what is bothering you."

Her open, earnest worry sailed straight through any resistance I might have had. *I'm never going to be able to say no to you, am I?* Ducking my head to hide my smile, I spoke quietly. "I was thinking about those buffalo."

"What about them? Their anger is not your fault, Snowflake. It was not you who ordered the attacks on them."

That wasn't what I was worried about. "Yeah, I know, that was all Latvi. We'll settle up with him later. It's just..."

“Yes?” After I didn’t answer immediately, and she simply continued to wait, I had to finish my thought.

“It’s just... my brothers- sorry, *our* brothers are buffalo too.”

“In your Stable, yes?”

“Yeah.” *Safe and sound*. “I was just thinking, that with...” I gave a dirty glare all around, hoping against hope that none of the cloaked zebra were still within earshot. “...with all that we’ve learned from... my ‘little trip’, I was wondering whether I would need to go back to the Stable.”

She cocked her head quizzically. “Why would you need to go back?”

“Well I found the... thing in the Stable in the first place. It kicked everything off. What if they’re connected?”

“But what does that have to do with *our* brothers?” Her obvious delight in saying that was infectious.

“Well, I’ve been out here for so long now. There’s so much that I’ve seen, and been through...” I glanced skyward, at our feathered friends. “...and had taken from me. I guess...” Once I realised exactly what it was I was about to say, my breath caught in my throat.

“You guess...” She pressed.

Gulping, I pushed through. “... I guess I kinda stopped thinking I’d ever go back.”

Heh, I really did start thinking that, didn’t I? Wonder when that happened?

Did I ever think I’d get back?

“Especially after what happened at the Raider summit. I saw a vision when Latvi... did what he did.” Having to censor my words from fear of eavesdropping was getting aggravating. “I was back in the Stable. I saw, well, everybody again. I saw my three brothers, just as I remember them.”

“Tell me about them.”

Gladly. I couldn’t remember exactly how much I’d told Undertow so far, so I just started talking. “Well, they’re three triplets. Probably a little older than you and Bosco. Buff, Al, and Lo. All of them different, but all of them my little brothers. They had a mother, Mrs. Doublehorn. She was the sweetest mother in the world, even when she struggled with things. She loved those three with all her heart, and always made room for me too. I guess they adopted me just as much as I adopted them.”

My sister smiled her beatific smile. “I want to meet her someday.”

My return smile slipped a little. “Sorry, Undertow, but she died a long time ago. We were all just kids, not even old enough to get a Pipbuck yet. Still, I kinda took care of them after that. Made sure they did their homework, kept ‘em from fighting, saw that they didn’t stay up too late. The usual stuff so that they were good boys.” My reverie began to fade, so I sniffed back my moistening nose. “But that kinda brings me to my point. If what I saw really is connected to the Stable, then it might not be a matter of *wanting* to go back, I might HAVE to go back.”

The weight of my words evidently weighed down on both of us, as Undertow’s response was tentative, unsure. “That’s good, isn’t it? The Stable is your home, big sister. You can see your family again.”

Somehow, that didn’t ease the load across my shoulders. “One thing at a time, Undertow. Going back to the Stable would be nice, but I meant what I said before my...” I sighed. *This is so stupid.* “...’little trip’. I’m... not really a Stable pony anymore. I’m different now. I wouldn’t be normal, even if I did go back.”

Playfulness laced Undertow’s words, even as she nuzzled me comfortingly. “I am not sure that you really could claim to be normal, Snowflake, even as a Stable pony. Still, for what it is worth, let me say this.”

She rested her forehead against mine, whispering. “I didn’t know you as a Stable pony, but I know you now. The pony you are now, Snowflake or Red Ice, is my

favourite person in the entire world. You are not perfect, in fact you are a long way from perfect.”

Ouch, little sister. Ouch.

“But if WE go back to the Stable, then I won’t let anybody try to turn who you are into a bad thing. You are my sister, and Buff’s, and Al’s, and Lo’s. You are OUR sister, and we all love you for who you are.”

The weight across my shoulders was forgotten in light of the lump in my throat. I couldn’t even speak for the joy I was feeling. *Chrysalis, I feel like I could keep you fed forever right now. Even with all the hate coming my way, it’ll never be enough to overtake my family.*

Undertow had definitely earned herself a Stable visit. If I ever got the chance, she was coming with me, without question. *I should probably talk to Cassie about getting my Pipbuck back.*

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The day was half-lit by the time we stopped. Cept excused himself to fetch Atesh, accompanied by Naiara, and shadowed by Cassie in the air. Bosco had us check our weapons were ready to go while we waited for them to return.

We weren't waiting long. Naiara and Cept emerged from around a grey, lifeless hillside just as six other striped equines shimmered into view with them. Upon seeing them approaching, in equal numbers to those we wielded, everybody tensed up. Cassie would react before any of us, should she spot any danger with her sharp eyes, but we'd still have a fight on our hands if things went rough. Cept was no slouch as a fighter, and all of the others still carried their powerful rifles.

"Come on, Cept, be on the level." Breeze bit her lip as she muttered to herself, rolling a grenade between her hooves.

"If he's not, I'll put my knife through his chest for doing this to Naiara." Bosco's growl was lower and colder than usual. Ever since his capture in Whinniepeg, he'd been harder, less eager to trust.

*Works out well right now, though. He's looking out for Naiara, same as always, but being serious about it.*

The eight zebra stopped a hundred yards from us, and we watched as they huddled up. Snippets of rapid zebra speech floated across to us, but I couldn't catch enough of what any of them were saying, as the words of the other seven clouded the sounds.

Seemingly reaching a consensus, Cept and Naiara detached from the huddle, walking towards us, several yards apart. They kept glancing at each other as they crossed the gap between us, watched by both sides. Both halted ten yards away.

Naiara spoke first, cautiously stepping forward. “Okay guys, don’t freak out. Be cool. You’re gonna be cool, right?” There was a playfulness in her words, but the tightness around her jade eyes betrayed her worry.

Cept hid his better. “As promised,” he gruffed out, “I surrender Atesh into your custody.”

The space between the two distorted, momentarily reflecting an image of Wings’ beak on Undertow’s face, before Atesh removed the Stealth cloak. He hoofed it to Cept, who accepted it without breaking his stare. “Should anything happen to our Elder while in your custody, we will not forgive you.”

Atesh stroked his tuft beard for a moment before moving towards us. “Do not worry, Cept.” There was no sign of the calm he’d previously shown. If anything, he looked bored. “This is not a clash of enemies. It is a negotiation between mutually interested parties.”

We spread out in a hexagon, allowing Cept to walk to the centre, where he gathered his robe around him, and lowered himself to the ground. If he was angry at being held like this, it didn’t show past his uninterested visage.

Wings clicked her talons in irritation at Atesh's behaviour. "Undertow, Schwarz, watch him. You know what to do if he tries anything."

"Of course, *dahling*."

"Yes."

Nodding, she turned back to Cept and Naiara. "Let's get things started already."

"Yes," Atesh suddenly became much more animated in our midst. "let us start. In fact, I will begin: I am here today to negotiate the return of the horn of King Sombra, currently in Snowflake's possession." He locked eyes with me as he said the final two words.

The reaction from the others was mixed. Naiara went pale. Undertow didn't react. Schwarzwald's smile remained, though shrank slightly. Wings, Bosco, and Breeze just looked confused.

"The hell's King Sombra?" Breeze's blue and white mane swished back and forth.

"I thought there were only Princesses in Equestria?" Bosco's grey eyes flicked between Atesh and I.

"Snow, what's this horn?" Wings' look blazing blue eyes were relaxed, but expectant.



Mock surprise bled into Atesh's speech. "You have not told them, Red Ice? You carry a dangerous relic of the Old Empire, one which might change the entire world, and you do not tell your companions? Why ever would you keep this a secret?"

Three pairs of eyes came to rest on me. Possibly four, if Cassie was watching from above. None of them looked impressed. *It's not gonna be that easy, Atesh.* "And WE are here to convince Atesh, and his clan, that doing this would be a bad idea."

Atesh grinned victoriously. "And what do-"

"Not finished." I snapped.

His grin vanished.

"So let ME tell you who Sombra was." *Yeah, I'm taking this away from you. You can thank Watcher for filling me in. You aren't the only one who knows about Sombra.* "Sombra was king of the Crystal Empire. It was an ally to Equestria, and home to the Crystal Ponies. Sombra, the Crystal King, was an absurdly powerful unicorn who specialised in crystal magic." *Among other things.* "And Atesh here wants the horn to grow crystals for his homeland, since he *claims* that was what the zebra were fighting the war for, two hundred years ago."

Now, Atesh displayed some of his old ways. Drawing himself up haughtily, he affected an air of insulted dignity. “I do not just ‘claim’-”

“BUT, here’s why Sombra’s Horn shouldn’t be hoofed over so easily. King Sombra was a bastard. He sealed his entire empire away for a thousand years, and tried to kill one of the Princesses of Old Equestria when he came back. He’s bad news.” I pointed at my face. “My weird eyes? Compliments of Sombra. It’s the reas... It’s PART of the reason I went off the rails with the Raiders.” *How easy would it be if I could blame the whole thing on the horn?* “Crystal magic wasn’t his only power.”

“A power which only corrupts the weak-minded.” Atesh was standing again now, openly ready for an argument. “You have just confessed to being a puppet to a ghost. You are not fit to hold that horn.”

“And who is? Latvi?” I ground my teeth at his barbs. “That’s who you’re planning to give the horn too again, right? The pompous unicorn who thought it was a good idea to steal a Raider army from a known criminal.”

“You.”

“Unimportant! Latvi has memory magic, and no morals. If he gets the horn again, he won’t use it to grow crystals for your homeland, he’ll dig and dig inside the horn until he’s found every dark little secret Sombra had, and he’ll use them to

further his own goals. Hell, if Latvi figures out how Sombra hid the Crystal Empire, he'll bring it back and take it over himself!"

I froze, stunned into silence by my own sentence. "Shit, that's exactly what he'll do, isn't it?"

Atesh said nothing, but from the grimace he wore, it didn't seem like he really disagreed.

The elder zebra soon found his voice again, though. "Whatever Latvi wishes for the horn is simply a fantasy. He will not have any choice but to use it for the purpose that *I* decide. We will take him by force, and renew our homeland. That crystal spell will be mine!"

"...At any cost, is that it?" Wings questioned airily.

Incensed though he was, Atesh didn't bite. He still had some politician in him. Before speaking, he gathered his robe around him. "The horn represents the best hope for my people. I am not comfortable leaving it with Red Ice." His sunken hazel eyes met those of my friends, one after another. "And I do not believe that you all are either. What will you do, now that you know the truth?"

Unsurprisingly, Breeze was the first to voice her opinion. "Snow's a damn idiot for messing around with a magic she doesn't really understand, especially if it made her go full Raider." Her single blue-white bang whipped back and forth as she

fixed Atesh with a pointed stare. “But all you’ve done is try to discredit her. You haven’t answered any of the concerns she raised about Latvi.” She spun the grenade on her hoof. “Snow can suffer with the horn, if it means others don’t go full Raider. We can handle her, but I don’t want another one.”

*Um... thanks?*

Bosco wasn’t any more enthused about Cept’s proposal. “What she said. Snow’s our problem. We’ll deal with it.”

“...” For once, Atesh and I reacted the same way.

A warm, familiar chuckle drew my gaze to Schwarzwald. *Ah, hell. She’s got that damn smile again.* “I see no evidence for what you say, Atesh. Snowflake has always made questionable decisions, even before she picked up this little trinket. From what I can see, it is equally likely that she hid it from us because it is merely a stallion stand-in.”

Atesh looked revolted at her words, while I was left choking on my own spit. *You lying bitch! Did you have to go there? My little sister is standing right next to you!*

Recovering sooner than I did, despite the snickering coming from all sides, Atesh moved on to Wings. He bypassed Undertow entirely, no doubt having heard about her from Naiara. “And you? I do not believe it will make much difference either

way, but I will ask regardless. In your opinion, is Red Ice truly who you wish to hold possession of the horn, knowing what it is capable of?”

“I...” She began, before faltering. The sapphire blaze in her eyes flickered as she looked at me, evaluating.

*Well, shit.*

Taking a deep breath, she tried again. “I think that the horn should-”

“INCOMING!” Cassie shouted down from on high.

“Wha-”

**BOOM!BOOM!!BOOM!!!**

Great clouds of dirt and fire ripped outwards as the rockets hit. We were all thrown off our hooves.

As we all lay groaning, Cassie yelled again. “MOVE! GET OUT OF THE WAY!”

As we scrambled, three more rockets hit. The world spun around me, before I slammed down hard. My head lolled to the side just as Atesh crashed down beside me. Cept and Naiara were there in an instant.

“Protect the elder!” Cept bellowed, sweeping the area for the unidentified threat.

“BWAHAHA! I TOLD YOU BASTARDS I’D BE BACK! AND I BROUGHT MORE GUYS!” Crush and his increased entourage surged forward, still firing rockets. The zebra were only just beginning to return fire, while Cassie had her rifle out and blasting.

The ten buffalo soon split up. Four moved to engage the zebra, another four reacted to Wings’ and Schwarzwald’s returning fire, leaving Crush and the armoured pony to stride straight towards me, Atesh, Cept, and Naiara.

“Come on, new guy. Let’s show these damn stripes what happens when you mess with the baddest in the Wasteland!” Crush’ mud-brown body was bristling with weaponry, and he opened up with all at once.

“Fuckfuckfuck!” We all dived aside, Cept and Atesh to one side, Naiara and I to another as a cascade of automatic fire lanced through where we’d been standing.

“Ahahaha! Don’t run, just stand still and die, punies!” Crush moved to follow Cept and Atesh, while the armoured buffalo turned to us. Without a word, he lowered his head and charged.

“Move, Snow!” Naiara shoved me aside, before flipping away. At Naiara’s shout, the charging buffalo faltered, crashing to the ground. He rolled over onto his side, head facing me. I found myself looking into his eye, in the dawn light. He stared back, the one eye I could see looking almost... familiar.

“Look, just stay down and you won’t be hurt.” The eye widened as I spoke, and the buffalo it was attached to jerked upwards, scrambling backwards at top speed.

“You’re... you’re here!” His voice, muffled by the helmet, squeaked out.

“Uh, yeah. Listen, just stay out of it!” I couldn’t spare any more time on this guy. Crush and his band had to be stopped. Turning on my heel, I rushed towards the four trading fire with my friends.

As I neared the fight, I saw one buffalo go airborne, as a grenade from Breeze went off under his belly. He landed with a *splat*, guts spilling out from under him. If he wasn’t already dead, he soon would be.

Breeze took two grazing shots to the shoulder from one of his buddies, and dropped back in pain.

“Breeze!” Cassie drilled a high-powered rifle round through the skull of the buffalo who shot her sister. He too dropped.

That left two more. One was swiping and shooting at Wings, as she wheeled and dodged above him, letting loose with her revolvers whenever she saw unarmoured fur. The buffalo barely winced at her shots, and kept firing.

The last of the four was dueling with Schwarzwald and Bosco. Just before I reached them, his launched a rocket, but it only made it halfway between the two sides when a stray bullet set it off. All three combatants were thrown backwards, to lie groaning on the ground.

“AARGH!” Wings’ screech snapped me back to her fight. The buffalo had gotten a hold of her hind leg, and was crushing it between his hooves.

“Let her go!” My Cryo Serpent shot forward, faster than it’d ever been, and wrapped around HIS hind leg. Startled, he let go of Wings, and swatted at the ice on his ankle. “BITCH!”

That was all he managed before Wings, Cassie, and I all slammed into his head at once.

“Motherfucker, that’s hard!” Wings complained as we fell away. She was right, it’d been like hitting stone.

Swaying, the buffalo began to drop, but bit down on his battle saddle as he fell. Unconscious, his guns ran until they jammed.

“AARGH!” Wings hooted, cradling a wing.



“Let me see.” Cassie dropped down next to her, gently examining the injured appendage. “Not good, it hit the joint. You need a healing potion.” Cassie turned to me. “Snow, go help the others. There’s still a fight going on.”

“R-right.”

With our group out of immediate danger, I went looking for Crush. *If we stop him, we end this.* I passed the armoured buffalo again, who was still sitting where he’d been before, following me as I moved. *Kinda creepy, but whatever. It’s not important right now.*

Of the remaining five buffalo fighters, one was dead. Two striped bodies lay motionless across from him. The other three were facing off against the other stealth-cloaked zebra, with the growl of gatling fire battling the crack of the zebra rifles.

That left Crush. The leader of the buffalo was taking on Naiara and Cept at once, as they fought to keep him from Atesh. The old zebra was behind the two, weaponless, and unable to do much against Crush’s vast array of guns. Still, he hadn’t been hit yet.

Cept and Naiara were doing their best, but they didn’t rely on weapons like their clanmates either. Every time one got past Crush’s guns, his goading horns would drive them back. Something had to give.

That something was Undertow. Propelled by her water, she splashed down on the big buffalo's back. As soon as she was down, she began whipping her tendrils this way and that, dislodging or destroying Crush's weapons.

"What the hell? Get offa me!" Crush shrugged his shoulders rapidly, trying to dislodge her, but she held fast.

"Naiara, get away!" Undertow called down from her perch. "I will hold him."

"NO YOU WON'T!" Crush threw himself backwards onto his back, crushing Undertow between himself and the ground.

"UNDERTOW!" I couldn't see her under Crush's bulk. All I could see was his big, crooked, sneer.

"There you are, *one horn*, you're first." Rolling himself upright, he unloaded with everything.

A wall of ice shot up before me, catching the barrage. I caught the barest reflection of purple smoke before the wall shot forwards, slamming into Crush and sending him sprawling. I felt warm spots on my coat, but didn't care.

Four Cryo Serpents shot out at once, rising from the ground and biting into the guns on crush's mammoth battle saddle. One after another, his guns turned to ice and shattered before his eyes.

Unarmed, he struggled upright, glaring at me. "I don't need those to gut you, little pony. I'll take you out myself!" Snorting and stamping, he barreled towards me.

I wasn't even looking at him. All I could see was the still form of Undertow, lying on the ground.

"MMMMRRRRROOOOO-urk!" My ice wedge cut him off mid-bellow. It crashed upwards into his neck, halting his charge and trapping him in that position. His hind legs scrabbled ineffectually to free him from the perch.

"Do you know who I am?" It was like I was hearing my voice from somewhere else. It was unnerving how calm I sounded.

Crush wasn't unnerved. He just continued to struggle against the ever-growing ice.

"Some bitch. Who cares?"

"Close, but not quite. You see, Buffalo, I... am Red Ice."

"zat supposed ta mean something to me?" He grunted, glaring down at me as I stood in front of him.

I noticed that all around had gone quiet. “Well, that’s kind of the point, isn’t it, Crush? You don’t know who I am. You don’t care. All you care about is your stupid pride.”

“O’ course! A bull’s pride is what makes him a bull!”

“Yes, ‘bull’. A lot of that going around.” I idly inspected the scars Cassie had put in my ankles. “As I was saying, Buffalo, I’m Red Ice. I’ve fought Steel Rangers, Plottawan slavers, Raiders, robots, Pegasi, monsters... and now Buffalo. I’ve fought against, and with, pretty much everything this Wasteland has to offer. I’ve lead Raider armies into battle, faced down abominations in their own homes, uncovered secrets that others wouldn’t dream of, and played power games with the tops of the tops. Did you know I was in one such important negotiation before you and your moronic herd showed up?”

He was still fighting, though the sweat was freezing in his mud fur. “You’ll die for what you did to them, *one horn*.”

“You’re starting to repeat yourself, Crush. That’s your problem. Out of all of us here, you matter the least. All you care about is your dustbowl village in the middle of nowhere. You’re irrelevant, Crush. You don’t matter.”

I raised a hoof. As I did so, an ice arm formed out of the stocks holding him. It swam up and around to his left horn, wrapping around it. “And, even though you

don't matter, you still dared to ATTACK ME AND MY FAMILY!" I twisted my hoof, and the ice tightened around his horn. Slowly but surely, I began to pull down. "You dare hurt her?! Dare attack me?! You are *nothing* to me, Crush! You barely register in comparison to everything else I have to deal with. You. Don't. MATTER!" I pulled down harder, causing small cracks to appear along his horn.

"UURGH! Get away from me, bitch! I'll kill you!"

I felt my lips curl up into a terrible smile. "You're just a nobody, *lump*. You can't kill Red Ice!"

*Click.* The barrel of a gun pressed to the side of my head.

"Stop." Wings' voice was rock solid.

Slowly, I lowered my hoof to the ground. Turning carefully, Wings and I were soon eye-to-gun.

Behind the revolver, she stared at me, with those burning blue eyes, unblinkingly.

"Enough, Snow. Put those eyes away. Go see to Undertow, she's coming round."

Robotically, I turned and marched to my fallen sister. The buffalo in the ice stocks was utterly ignored. Undertow was stirring as I got there. Naiara was watching over her. "Easy there, kid. Don't try to move."

“N-Naiara? Did we win?”

Sniffing, Naiara shook her head. “Nobody won, Undertow. We just survived.”

Silently, I sat down beside them both, and wrapped my hooves around them.

From beyond my closed, teary eyes, I heard Cept and Atesh conversing. “Did you see? That is the power of the horn! Look what it did, even for a pony as weak as her.”

“I saw, Elder. It was a... memorable display.” Cept’s voice was stilted, thoughtful.

Atesh was exhilarated. “Exactly! We must take the horn from her, now!”

“Not now, Elder. We must attend to our brethren.”

“What do you mean, ‘not now’?!”

A hint of reproach leaked into Cept’s response. “We no longer have enough fighters here, Elder. We must put our clanmates to rest.”

“...Of course. Forgive me, Cept.”

“...As you say, Elder. Please, this way.” Their hoofsteps faded quickly. I didn’t open my eyes to follow them.

“Snow?” A muffled voice came in from the side.

I looked up for this. The armoured buffalo was standing a little ways away, with guns pointed at him from several directions.

“What do you want, guy?” Wings challenged, both revolvers up. “Your buddies are all dead, and your leader’s lucky not to be joining them.”

The Buffalo ignored her, continuing to stare at me. “I can’t believe you’re here, Snow.”

I peered at his helmet, trying to figure out who he was. “Do I know you? Were you one of the guards at Lethbridge?”

His eyes dimmed at that. “No, Snow.” He reached up and tugged his helmet off, voice no longer muffled. “It’s me.”

My heart stopped. “No.” I whispered. “Oh, please no.”

Shedding his armour, revealing his cienna fur, Al beamed down at me. “I finally found you, sis.”

Feeling Undertow shift beside me brought me out of my stupor. “You... you can’t be here, Al. This isn’t right. Al, WHY ARE YOU HERE?!” I was on my hooves now, advancing on him.

“Well, I came with Crush, and...”

“WHY AREN’T YOU IN THE STABLE?!” My hooves were roving all around his face, neck, and front legs. *You can’t be here, Al. You’re supposed to be safe in the Stable!* “What happened?”

“We got thrown out.” He deadpanned.

The revelation dropped me to my haunches. “W-what? You mean the Overmare...threw you out?!” *I’ll kill her. I’ll kill her slowly. I’ll shove my ice so far up her-*

“Not exactly. She’s out here too.”

The surprises just kept on coming. “What?”

“She got thrown out too.”

My brain needed a reboot. “How? Who threw you out?” I reached up and smacked him on the top of his head. “WHAT WERE YOU DOING TO GET THROWN OUT?”

“WHAT WERE WE DOING?” Al never did have the most stable temper, even with his family. “WHAT THE HELL ARE *YOU* DOING, SNOW?! I heard you just now. You called Crush a ‘lump’.”



“What in the hell does that have to do with anyth-”

“You sound like Roc.”

That shut me up. The confrontation in Whiskey Sour’s bar came back to me in a rush. *Al was right. I used the exact same fucking word and everything. I told Crush he wasn’t important.*

*What have I done?*

Al pressed on. “He’s the one who threw us out. Roc’s Overseer now. He won the elections two weeks after you left.”

“No!” Despite everything else, this seemed like my biggest problem. I did not know why.

Al blanched. “Yeah. Soon as he was in the Over Office, he turned around and booted the four of us out.”

My eyes shot wide. “The others? Where are they?” I grabbed whatever part of him I could reach, and shook. “Where are Buff and Lo?”

His big, kind brown eyes were full of sorrow. “We... got separated, Snow. I’m sorry.”

“No no no, this can’t be happening! You three have to stay together. Whenever something bad happens, you help each other! I’ve been telling you that for years!”

“I know, sis. I’m sorry.”

Him apologising was like poison in my soul. “No, Al. Don’t ever apologise. This isn’t your fault. I should have been there. *I’m* sorry. So sorry for everything.”

A half-smile grew on his face. “So let’s go find them, Snow. You and me. We’ll find them both, and the Overmare too, and we’ll all go back together. Roc can’t get away with this if you come back too.”

He broke my heart in that moment. “I... can’t.”

“Eh?” He tilted his head, not comprehending.

“I can’t go back to the Stable, Al. I just can’t.”

“Why not? We have our Pipbucks,” he looked at my bare legs, “er... I have my Pipbuck. It can get us back to the Stable, even through the blizzard.”

“That’s not...” *That’s not the problem.* “I still have things I need to take care of out here, Al. There’s too much at stake. Too much still to be done.” My eyes flicked over to Undertow, who was watching silently, and intently.

Al was riding a wave of boyish optimism. “Then I’ll help. I’ll come with you, and we’ll get done twice as fast!”

*Not a chance in hell, little brother.* “Absolutely not! You’re not safe out here, Al.”

“Snow, I don’t really think any of us-”

“I said no, Al.” I cut him off forcefully.

“What about them?” He shot back, waving a hoof across my gathered friends.

“Why are they safe if I’m not?”

“They’re Wastelanders! They know the risks. They’ve been out here all their lives.”

“So what? I’m twice the size of any of them! I can take whatever the Wasteland can dish out.” He pounded his chest. In the Stable, I’d have found his teenage macho pride charming. Out here, the thought terrified me.

“Al, you’re not going anywhere near what I have to take care of. I’m taking you somewhere safe, and you’ll wait there until I can find Buff, Lo, and the Overmare. Then we’ll ALL decide what to do next.”

He was starting to shake. “Why are you doing this, Snow? Why won’t you let me come with you?”

I was shaking too. “You can’t. It’s too dangerous for you. You have to stay where it’s safe. Listen to what I’m saying to you, Al. I’m doing what’s best for you. I’m still your big sister.”

“ARE YOU?” He roared. “From what I just saw, I’m starting to-”

He stopped as his brain caught up to his mouth. We stared mutely at each other, our haunted expressions a mirror image.

“Snow, I-I didn’t mean to... I would never... I don’t...”

Swiping a hoof across my burning eyes, I found just enough strength to look him in the eyes one more time. “I’m taking you somewhere safe, Al. That’s final.”

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The gates of Sprinkles Supplies rumbled open, with a smiling Fedexi Lexi on the other side. The smile quickly faded as she took in our injuries, and general demeanour.

“Howdy, Snowflake. Howdy, Undertow.” She greeted her favourites first.

“Hi, boss.” I replied, listlessly.

“What brings y’all here this time?” She was still staring at Cassie and Breeze, who were trying to look inconspicuous.

I pushed Al’s front leg. It had no effect, but he took a step forward anyway. “I need you to look after him for a little while.”

She regarded the sulking Buffalo for a few moments. “Ah ain’t running a motel here, Snowflake. Who is he?”

“Please, boss?” I pleaded. “He’s my little brother.”

That got a reaction. Her eyebrows shot up so far, they disappeared into her frizzy orange mane. “Him?”

“Just for a little while, Boss. I’ll pay, or... or he can work! Whatever you need.”

Lexi looked across all of us again. “Snowflake, Undertow, what happened? Really?”

Undertow saved me by speaking up. “A lot has happened, Boss. It would take a long time to explain, but I promise that we will explain it, in time. Can you please look after Al until we find his brothers?”

“More of ‘em? How many brothers y’got, Snow?”

“Three, Boss. I want them all to be safe. Can I bring the others here too, when I find them?”

It was an agonising age until she answered. Turning to Al, she looked up at him sternly. “Hey, big fella. Ya fit and healthy?”

Blinking in surprise, he nodded.

“And yer really Snowflake li'l brother? This ain't a put-on?”

Al's jaw set. “I wouldn't joke about that. She's my big sister. She'll ALWAYS be my big sister.” He answered, emphatically.

Lexi stamped a hoof. “Well awright then. Git inside and down to the kitchens. We need a garbage boy.”

“Aw, c'mon, can't I-”

“Ah ain't askin', boy!”

Al rapidly shuffled inside, casting a forlorn glance back at me as he went. I had to force myself to keep looking until he rounded the corner. At which point I burst into tears.

“T-t-thank you, B-Boss.” I managed to sob.

Striding forward, Lexi's purple hoof came up and roughly scrubbed at my eyes.

“Dry them tears, Snowflake. That boy needs you t’be strong, just like Undertow does. Y’ain’t got time to cry. Y’got two more brothers to find. ah’ll look after this one until y’do.”

She paused for a moment to whap me around the back of head. “Now ah know there’s no way in hell that you’d leave family like this without it being damn dangerous, so ah’m telling you now that ah ain’t ever gonna forgive you if’n y’go an’ get yourself killed, got it?”

Still nuzzling the hoof that was wiping my eyes, I could only mumble an affirmative.

Satisfied, Lexi gave my cheek one last rub, before turning on her heel and heading back inside. “All o’ you better be safe, y’hear? Look after each other, Snowflake, Undertow.”

The gates rumbled shut behind her.

Breeze turned to Undertow. “Your mom’s scary.”

Undertow nodded in agreement. “Yes, but kind.”

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*Level Up!*

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Perks gained:

Something the Matterhorn? - In extreme emotional situations, Snowflake receives a massive boost to her magic, but also experiences a sharp drop in perception and, well, sanity.

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Author's Note:

That took a while. I should not have tried to write the chapter without an arc layout first. This will be remedied for the remaining chapters.

As always, a big thank you to [KKat](#), [Y1](#), [Auramane](#), [Cascadejackal](#) (he did the original cover art, which is still on the Fallout Equestria wiki), [Void Heart](#) (he did the new cover art), [Shunketsunoponi](#) and you, the readers. Please read and comment, and pass the word along if you like the story. Finally, because I find it a really funny coincidence to have another fic with a Stable 61 that's set in Equestrian Canada, go read [Fallout Equestria: Pure Hearts](#).

That's all for now, folks. Please keep reading, commenting, and spreading the word on Old Souls. I really appreciate your feedback.



