

Fallout Equestria: Murky Number Seven

Chapter 30: Together Or Not At All

* * *

"I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry. Murky, I don't know what to say. Come here."

O-oh?

Oh.

I just, I didn't know what to...

Thank you.

"No-one should have to go through that, or have it end like that so close. Protégé sounds like one of those ponies that are once in a lifetime. I know I won't forget what you told me. What he did was unbelievable. If only more could turn their life around like that."

In some ways, he was like a brother. We were both born as slaves, we'd both needed one another to get to that moment and as much as we'd fought and argued, in the end we had been there for each other.

Standing on the ruins of the wall, looking back into the city before we started our final journey, all I could feel was that empty space beside me. Already, I missed having his quiet confidence to assure me that I was doing the right thing, or his cool initiative. He could really have been something special, a great leader, a hero of the wasteland for more than just a few days! If he'd done this much in such a short time, just think what could he have done for good out there!

"He saved all those ponies, Murky. Just remember that. Remember what he did."

I try to. Sometimes I think that after all this is done, maybe I'll see him again.

Will I?

"I..."

S-sorry, I shouldn't ask that. I'm just...

"It's okay. But he'd asked you to save those foals. You were all going back in."

Yes, yes. Us five, plus some of the parents. We were going back into Fillydelphia for one final task. They were in Ministry Station, at the centre of this whole nightmare.

Two hundred years before, Sundial had made this exact same trip. He could have turned and walked away, gone back to his life. But he chose not to. He put one hoof in front of the other and went back into hell to help others.

Now I was doing the same. I sometimes think that's what Weathervane meant when he said I was worthy of keeping the Pipbuck.

"I think he meant it for a lot more than that."

W-well I thought that was it anyway.

And what I saw regarding Sundial, I'll never forget that, or the way in which it happened. Memory magic is beautiful, but that place taught me how terrifying it can be if misused. We were aiming to rescue those who should never have been involved in all this; who didn't deserve to be touched by it.

I was born into slavery, I lived through it as a foal.

I wasn't about to watch them make another hundred Murky Number Sevens.

"You care."

If there was one thing all this had taught me, it's that you have to. If my friends hadn't cared for me, I'd have been dead long ago. If Protégé hadn't truly cared about other ponies, then Fillydelphia would still have owned all of them.

If I didn't care now, there would be no-pony left to stop all this abuse repeating itself over and over. There would be nothing to stop the eternal chain from turning all over again for another two hundred years.

"Amazing."

Huh?

"Murky, you gave up a chance to walk away into freedom! None of them would have shamed you for it. You had it, right there! And you chose not to in order to help others. You may not say it yourself, Murky. But this is the stuff that heroes are made of."

Well then it never feels like it. Sundial was right. All you know is that it has to be done.

"Then, this is the end of the tale?"

Yes.

This is the end.

This is why, after all that had happened, I'm where I am now.

* * *

Fillydelphia. The city of slaves.

Built from heavy steel and thick concrete, it stood amongst a wide valley like a beacon of industry, thick with heat and an omnipresent red smog. Chemical tinted fog spread through the streets. Above them lurked the watchful eyes of slavers wearing red-eyed gas masks. Chain fencing shut off side-roads and guided sick and warped slaves to their places of toil and sweat. When it wasn't scalding hot from forges and crucibles, it was stinging from acid rain dripping through cracks in run down shelters, all of them packed with more ponies than they could fit.

Slaves lived here.

Slaves died here.

All that was now coming to an end.

Red Eye's power had been contested by the mighty force of the Enclave. War had come to Fillydelphia. In the midst of the wasteland's two greatest powers clashing, a thousand stories played out. Every individual not part of their war had their own way to find. Be it whatever reason had driven Xenith to know about the green flare that had cleared the sky, Shackles' push to seize power from the shades of the past, or the frantic rush of the slaves to escape and break the wall that had enclosed them, times were changing.

Now all that mattered was who would get what they wanted in the end.

For some of us, pursuing our dreams, we had already lost something.

In the time since the green flare in the sky, and in our rush to destroy the wall, the war had reignited its ferocity. Above us, the hole to the blue sky was criss-crossed with smoke trails and scattered bits of cloud fallen from the skyships. Flares of energy fire mixed with dotted streaks of anti-air fire from the ground. It wasn't nearly as intense as the opening bout. Now, the Enclave and Fillydelphia felt like two exhausted and wounded warriors, struggling to lift their weapons and make tired swings at one another; driven only by what willpower remained.

The city lay in ruin. As I stood upon the shattered wall, I saw skyships littering the ground. The 'Thunderhead' that Protégé had spotted was slumped like some artificial mountain outside the city. Red Eye's infrastructure was broken and Filly's defences contained to small pockets as everything broke down.

Yet neither side wanted to lose, and it was that distraction that let twelve or so ponies sneak back into the city. We didn't talk much as we crossed the limits of that shattered wall and willingly set hoof into the hell-city we'd striven for so long to get out of.

Glimmer led the way, limping and having to hold Diamond's rifle in her magic to avoid its strap opening the wound on her back.

Behind her came Brimstone, trying with all his strength to not show the pain every step caused him, or that he always kept his back-right hoof on the ground for as short a time as possible.

Coral Eve strode with a purpose, even as she seemed to sway and have to right her direction, putting a hoof to her head now and then.

Around them were those who had foals left in the city carrying whatever weapons could be brought. All of them tired, most of them wounded. None of them willing to stop until their children were safe.

And behind them all, came Unity and I.

We trotted side by side, occasionally bumping into each other as our tired bodies stumbled, silently helping one another to stay upright. Her bandages and coat were filthy and her mane looked thin and unkempt. Exhaustion was slowing her down. Her eyes were only half open, always looking ahead. She had admitted it herself; she simply wasn't as fit as some of the other ponies here.

I knew the feeling well.

Only right now, what I was feeling wasn't anything to do with pain or exhaustion or fear for being back inside this city of concrete and steel. Instead, I simply felt hollow.

The elation and excitement our success had brought eventually sapped away. Now I simply felt an aching sense of emptiness in my gut, one that kept working away inside me every time I remembered Protégé's revolver in my bags. It was a frustration that grew and had no outlet because I couldn't figure out how to make it all better. I kept catching myself trying to plan out how to solve it for just a second before realising all over again that some things couldn't be fixed.

No matter what I did now, he was gone forever.

It made me angry at everything. I wanted to rant about how it could have been avoided. I wanted to scream about how stupid ponies were that it ever had to happen at all. Yet in the end it would all just collapse into a heap of emotional confusion and hurt. Eventually, I'd mentally exhausted myself.

For the last half a mile we had crept down back alleys, surrounded by twisted metal and shattered concrete. ducking away from confused packs of slavers trying to find someone who knew what was going on.

I had tried to reason with myself that he'd done enough for it to be 'worth it'. Soon after that, I'd felt disgusted with myself for even trying, realising I was only trying to help myself feel better.

That was when I simply put my head down and trudged onwards. What should have been a heroic gallop to save the foals had instead turned into a loathsome and quiet trot, with me desperately trying to not cry in front of everyone. Again.

Those ahead of Unity and I crept through an old diner with no roof and most of its tables scattered across the street. I looked around to try to distract myself, placing my front hooves on the counter as the others moved into the yard out back. I heard Glimmer whisper that she was going to take a hunt past the beer garden and see if the next road would get us to the Ministry in a straight line away from the main streets.

Lingering in the serving area, I looked around the way we'd came for any danger. His E.F.S wasn't picking up anything but-

His E.F.S.

Slowly, I slumped and placed my head in my hooves, before sucking in air and punching at the Pipbuck to hit the button to turn off the new system. Then I laid my head down on the counter behind my forelegs and shut my eyes.

Outside, Glimmer made a hushed bark for everyone to get ready to move, but I just stayed where I was. I felt my eyes sting, and my chest began to spasm slightly with short gasps.

Then there was the sound of hooves beside me, and a gentle hoof at my side, before it disappeared. Cantering to the back door, Unity shouted out to the others, leaning out so that they could see her. Through blurry eyes, I saw her go from being stable to panting harder than before, acting more tired than she was.

"Hey, uh...one second! I need to catch my breath! Sorry!"

She turned and hastened back towards me, out of the sight of the others. I felt her leg curl around and pull me back from the counter to sit both of us down on the other side of it, out of sight from the others. Pre-balefire cap-thingies were strewn across the floor, along with empty cake trays and plastic straws. Both of us stared out across the rows of tables down to a long battered and unlit Sparkle-Cola machine.

Simply her taking the time to sit down with me made me sob lightly in my hurt state. Shaking my head, I rubbed my eyes and looked at her.

"Why did you tell them that?" I sniffed. "You're not-"

"I dunno, I just didn't feel it was right to tell them it was you who needed to stop. Sorry, I don't know why. Are you okay?"

Instead of answering, I slumped and bit my lip, my front hooves tapping lightly together.

"Sorry, dumb question." Unity muttered to herself.

"No, no, sorry I didn't meant to...I just...I just don't know and..." I shook my head and looked out the window at the red ash dancing in the air. "I'm okay. I'm just tired and sore from it all. My rad-sores are hurting, that's all."

"Murky..."

"It's just all this dust, it makes them worse! And...and every muscle and bone feels like it's about to fall off and I just feel like I want to sleep for a month but I'm not tired! That's all! That's all it is! I'm not-"

I coughed and stumbled in my ramble, getting up and pacing down the diner.

"It's not...it's not that it's just because I want all this to be over! I'm sick of coughing and bringing up blood and...and I'm sick of the taste of RadAway and that's all it is! I'm okay, all right?! I'm o-yah!"

My hoof slipped on a discarded food tray as I stomped in a circle, making me stumble and slam into the Sparkle-Cola machine. My temper flared, and I turned and slammed my hoof right into its stupid grinning face again and again and again until I could raise my tired and now throbbing leg no more. I slid down the front of the machine and rested my forehead onto it as I felt genuine and large sobs begin to quake my whole body.

"It's not fair. Why did he have to die? It's not *fair!*"

The last word extended and pitched higher, like a whiny foal. I choked and coughed, my nose running. I couldn't muster the energy to shout any more.

"He deserved more, Unity. I just...I just can't stop feeling...feeling...I don't know."

My body was lifted away from the machine, as she turned me around and gently pulled me in to hug her, chest to chest. One foreleg curled around my head, as I felt her push her cheek into my neck. There was a gentle sway, as I let out all the emotion inside. I'd cried when he had died, I'd done so again as we had held a brief funeral for him, yet there was more to come. I felt embarrassed to be in front of her like this, but it all just finally came out as I spluttered and whimpered about all the hurt and and pain I was feeling. She listened to it all, and she never let go or even blushed.

Eventually, after sharing a quiet moment, and after I'd let it all out, she led me to a seat in the diner. Now, we were both sitting across from one another at one of the diner's tables. My eyes were sore, but it had stopped at last, as though what I'd needed to feel had finally been felt. I felt like something eating me up inside had left me, and now I simply had a feeling of blankness. It felt like an empty page in my journal, as I found myself willing to accept whatever she had to say in response.

Unity apparently intended to confront the issue directly. She reached over the table, taking both my hooves in hers.

"You shouldn't be afraid of accepting that it happened, Murky." Her voice was gentle, but held a core of strength. "If you don't, then you'll only ever remember the end because you'll never stop trying to squash that memory down. The more you try to ignore the way it ended, the more it'll just bottle up inside you."

"Mhm." I nodded, mumbling quietly.

Unity shifted her hooves slightly and continued, "I know it's a hard thing to take in, and it's not very nice either, but it really is for the best. It'll let you accept that it happened, and let you focus more on the reasons why he meant a lot to you. That's what Aurora Star always said about why memories matter. Just find the good they can do for us."

She cautiously smiled. "And if you honour Protégé by remembering him for the right reasons, you'll keep being the pony he always wanted to see you as."

"He taught me to read. He always treated me like I was more intelligent than I maybe was, made me feel like I had someone who really understood what I was going through. I felt comfortable around him." I almost whispered the words, before speaking up. "He sometimes said I gave him hope, but he gave me a sense of self-respect."

"And it's shown." Unity let her smile grow. "You should always remember what your friends do for you. I read a book written by Twilight Sparkle once at home; she said that every friend you ever meet has some impact on you, and you should always try to be what they believe you can be because it's the people we meet that make us better. If you do that, I'm sure you'll make him proud."

My heart stuttered at the thought, but this time I didn't shy away from it. Unity looked concerned for a second, until I finally brought a weak smile onto my face and looked her in the eye for the first time since she'd come to help me.

"It's okay, I understand," I said.

Her hoof patted mine, as she let go and sat back. I detected a little relief in her expression, as though she'd been worrying if she was saying the right thing.

"You know, Murky, it's the same for me. Back in Friendship City I really didn't have many friends, if I'm honest. I tended to stick to helping my parents with their work or making my trinkets to sell. Y'know, learning how to make them remind people of other ponies? But I never had my own group and I sometimes kinda rambled at people instead of actually speaking to them if I tried to talk. I guess I still do a bit, heh."

She shook her head and blushed, before looking at me sideways from under her mane.

"I guess it's just...since I met you, I don't do it as much. I feel more confident around others. Your friends feel like mine as well now, and I feel welcomed outside my family for the first time. I find it easier to make new friends. That's why I knew what to say to you there, because I've felt it myself. Regardless of how it happened back then before we got separated, Murky, thank you for being there for me."

I felt stunned. I'd always felt like I was having to pull myself together just to speak to her properly, but hearing that she had her own internal struggle and feeling like I'd left a mark on her as much as the one I always felt she had instead left on me was a lot to take in.

Now I saw her sitting there looking a little bashful for having said it, her hooves toying with that wavy mane, even if it was all stringy and frayed. She was right and I felt honoured to know this pony. We were close, but right then and there I felt a little spark of remembering why we were.

I got off the chair and began to trot past her to meet up with the others, but as I passed by her side of the table I stopped.

"Thank you."

With only half a second of worry, I turned and, for just a brief moment, kissed her on the cheek.

Unity blinked, her face still a little red, before smiling softly.

“Anytime.”

She gently patted the side of my neck as I blushed and trotted onwards. She caught up to walk beside me as we headed back out.

He had taught me self-respect, to believe I was the one who could matter to the world or someone else, like Unity.

I'd always remember and thank him for that.

* * *

Despite all that had happened to the city, the Ministry of Arcane Science building still stood tall. Gleaming obsidian walls rose above what had once been raised highways and apartment buildings. They now lay in rubble. I could see the Ministry's sheer sides bore scorched marks of energy weapon impacts, but still stood firm. With a ring of devastation surrounding it, Aurora's old headquarters was like a black monolith emerging from a very shallow crater.

“How in all of Equestria is that building still standing?” One of the ponies with us muttered to himself as he clambered up beside us to look at our destination.

“All the Ministry hubs were built to the highest wartime standards.” Glimmerlight took my binoculars to look closely at the entrance, speaking from the corner of her mouth as she did so. “In other words, to resist balefire shockwaves and fire. These Enclave weapons? They'll likely just deflect unless they put serious effort in.”

“I guess they gave up then.” Unity lifted a piece of rubble to peer above the lip of the slope leading down to the building. Up ahead, a flickering set of blue flames on the upper level of the Ministry sparked and scattered strange embers that mixed into the smog of the air before slowly fading on the winds.

We were in the ruins of the high rise building I'd once sat in with Protégé before infiltrating this place for the first time. My talk with Unity had helped a lot to get me focused again, but I couldn't ignore the gutpunch I'd felt once I'd recognised the location, or the similar task ahead.

Glimmer put down the binoculars and rubbed her nose.

"Well here's the curious thing, I don't see anyone. No guards, all the towers at the perimeter are either destroyed or empty. Even the weapons in them are gone. Front doors look locked."

"Just like the metro," I muttered.

"From what you told us, exactly that." Glimmer nodded at me and rolled down out of sight of the Ministry. "But from what you said about Shackles, he knows that we're aware of this place. He knows we're coming, so why no guards?"

"They'd be a target."

Brimstone Blitz snorted as he hunched to keep his massive frame out of sight and settled down near us.

"If the Ministry is as tough as they say, then if they ignore the Enclave, hide inside the station below it and don't cause any trouble, they'll likely get by this safely. Aye, Shackles and Grindstone don't want their little project involved."

"Aurora's project." Unity corrected, a hint of sadness in her tone.

Brimstone raised the eyebrow above his one eye, before shrugging. "Whatever. It's a lift down to it, right? That's what the slaver snitched on? Well there aren't many better things to put a chokepoint on to trap ponies you know are coming down it."

Glimmer sighed and lay back, both her hooves on her face. She looked tired, and rather sick of all these obstacles.

Coral Eve, meanwhile, simply stood and stared at the building like it had personally offended her.

"Then I suppose we had better figure out a way to get out of a lift without being shot down, hadn't we?"

She started to trot down the mountain of rubble, heading directly for the scattered remnants of the walls that had once surrounded the building. After a moment, the others began to follow her.

I stood and took in a brief glance of the area. Slaver or soldier groups were moving in the streets nearby, but they didn't seem concerned about this place.

Fillydelphia was leaving this place alone. Everything else was distant or quiet. An eerie sense of being in the spotlight began to settle on me, like the world was making way for this to, at last, end.

If we could just get them and get back to the hole in the wall, it'd all be over.

That's all we had to do.

Struggling to make my heart believe it, I cantered after the others.

* * *

My hooves landed on shards of bulletproof glass as I pulled myself into one of the upper floor windows. Over an inch thick, they were like big chunks of ice rather than a material anyone would expect a window to be made of. The building might have seemed almost indestructible from the Enclave's bombings, but the windows hadn't been.

Unhooking my grapple from the ledge, I gazed around at Aurora's office. I hadn't really meant to pick it, but it was the only window I knew for certain where I could find my way to the front door quickly to let the others in.

Her desk had been thrown across the room by an impact on the side of the building. Support columns on either side looked cracked up the middle, while the ceiling plaster and marble had been scattered all over the floor. To my left, I could see her prototype memory machine, the one that let non-unicorns use orbs. One I'd used long ago.

My heart skipped a beat as I saw the light green and cream orbs still scattered around the floor near it.

This was where Unity and I had wiped our own memories. I'd stood right over it last time and never even realised. Yet now that I could see them, see our memories right *there* on the ground, the still intact ones twinkling in the flares of distant explosions or flickering sunlight.

The thought of 'Why?' kept crossing my mind. It was so much time, so long to be friends all thrown away. Yet I'd seen two close friends forced to fight in the Pit before. Even now, I felt I could understand what she, and I, had been thinking when that had seemed to be our fate.

A momentary sting of pain went through my body to remember the selfless robot who had made that possible, one who had now given up himself to get us this far.

I trotted quietly across the room, my eyes finding papers of arcane looking symbols and numbers spread on the floor from the toppled desk. The door at the far end was ajar, and I could

hear nothing within the building. It was dead silence, an abandoned lair of secrets and ancient projects.

Briefly, I stopped, as my hoof hit one of the orbs. The cream sparkles shifted and flowed like shooting stars in the night within it. Soft and welcoming. To my weary mind, they seemed like her.

I debated it, I really did. Unity had preferred not to delve, but seeing them right there, I simply couldn't resist.

I exited the room with my saddlebag clinking from orbs inside it.

Maybe someday.

* * *

Moving downstairs frayed my nerves to the point that my hearted thudded faster, despite the relative silence in here. Every corridor had been left on emergency gem-lighting only, shrouding the Ministry in a low hue of dark blues and purples. I passed by engravings embedded into the walls, and around the enormous and theatre like mezzanines of the main hall. Every ornate decoration sent claw like shadows across the walls. Hopping up onto the railings, I leapt into the air and slowly glided down to the ground floor in small circles. Every pass took me by the enormous brass lighting fixtures that hung from a ceiling many floors above me, all of them lifeless, before I skidded and tripped to a halt on the wooden boards of the stage.

Around me, the cells built into the walls were all empty, or occupied only by those who would be moving no more. A faintly sick smell began to waft around as my wings snapped back in. Above, the hanging lights swayed as something thudded into the ground near to the building.

Then I heard a sharp knocking within the building.

I fled off the stage and dove into one of the cells. Hiding behind the curved stone at the side, I poked my head back out, trying to blend into the shadows.

There was nothing.

Then the sound came again. A rapping on metal or wood, from the same floor as me, echoing out into the hall and up through the large space. Suddenly, I felt very aware of every other little sound. The creaks of the lighting above me, the usually unnoticeable hum of the gem-lights keeping the darkness at bay and the rumbles of some boiler or spark-battery system in a room nearby.

The thudding came again, more frantically.

It was coming from the way I had to go.

Trying not to whimper, I got up and silently hastened my way out of the hall, toward the supply entrance I'd once left Mister Peace in before. I knew the way, and cut through the old locker-rooms to reach it.

That thudding only grew louder, more insistent, the closer I got.

It was coming from the supply area itself.

Oh please no, please don't let it be something else they unearthed and let loose in here. What if that's why they abandoned it?

Then I heard voices. Distant, panicked.

Easing forward, I exited the locker-rooms into the back entrance. The large room was empty, the concrete floor down from the delivery stands clear of anything but tipped boxes and abandoned repair bays.

My ears perked as I heard the source of the thudding, as my friends voices became clear. I could see the door I was supposed to open shaking.

Galloping forward, I reached the controls for the heavy shutter and threw my body over the lever to start cranking. At about the same time, the entire door buckled as Coral's magic thudded into it, knocking it back four whole inches, before it slammed back into place.

"I'm getting it! I'm here!"

"Murky! Murky, hurry up!"

That was Unity's voice. I felt a chill and a sudden panic, as I used all my bodyweight to get the crank moving. The heavy door started to slide upwards as the pulleys finally got some traction.

Brimstone's hooves got below it, and the entire thing lifted up at a much faster pace. I had to leap away before rapid spinning on the crank hurled me off it. Down below, everyone fled inside, crawling beneath the door, before Brimstone himself tossed himself under, looking up at me.

"GET IT SHUT!"

Turning, I bucked the crank as hard as I could, knocking the chain off it entirely. The pulley flew upwards, and the door came slamming down. The rush of air brought momentary whiff of a scent to my nostrils.

Rotten mint.

Everyone scrambled away from it, before collapsing in a panicked heap. Outside, I could hear nothing.

Glimmerlight moaned in pain as she tried to lift herself again, her thickly bandaged back appearing a little more red than before. I hastened over and started trying to tie down her bandages a little more.

“What happened?”

She swore colourfully, invoking an act I was faintly sure wasn't possible, as I tightened the covers on her wound, before panting and answering.

“Just...just caught the smell over the wind. Dunno from where. Could be anywhere in that rubble or...or ruins out there. Damn...”

Brimstone checked the door to ensure it was firmly closed, shaking his head.

“Turning into a right apocalypse out there. City's going to shit. No-one's coming out of this war with any good feelings.”

“When do they ever?” Coral snapped as she got herself up, before immediately glancing toward the back of the supply bay. “Murky? Come on, get us to her lab. Now.”

I gulped at the stern order, as Coral started to grow in impatience. “Y-yes, sure...this way!”

* * *

The halls and labs were as silent as ever as I took them through the same route I'd once infiltrated in the past. Coral strode alongside me, as though unwilling to be even one inch behind where she could be. Any time I paused, she would glare at me, unhappy and wanting to get going. I sometimes looked up at her, but that ferocious glare only intimidated me.

Once, I tried to quietly speak to her.

“I'm sure they'll be fine...”

“They *will* be.” She snorted, eyes narrowing. “They’re not keeping me from him this time. No-one will.”

Then she grit her teeth and sparked her horn, as though warming up.

That was the last time I tried.

Unity kept glancing around, until I realised she was doing the same thing I had. She recognised this place, even if she didn’t remember it directly. Briefly, she paused as we passed by the cells, falling behind.

I slowed, before Coral turned her head sharply. Quickly, I pointed ahead.

“J-just up through that door past the main hall, the main labs are just through the next room! I’ll just be a sec.”

I turned and cantered back to Unity, finding her staring down a row of cells.

“Murky...look.”

Ahead of us, I could see cells. Nothing special. A thin corridor, with what looked like old converted storage cupboards with bars welded across them.

“I don’t get it, what’s-”

“Murky, *look*.”

She pointed, at the two nearest us, the ones that looked out into the main hall. Standing near them, you could just about see up to the enormous atrium on the high ceiling of the building. Just two empty cells, each with a metal skeleton of a cot. They were-

“Oh my...” I gasped, as I did recognise them.

Within one of them, there were two shards of metal, carved and shaped to look like ponies, details impossible to discern in this light but clearly a unicorn and a pegasus.

Within the other, a few old slips of paper near the cot. Charcoal drawings.

In that moment, I felt very afraid and lost.

I saw Unity crying, before she brought a hoof to her mouth and bit down on it, screwing her eyes shut.

“Murky, I want to get out of here.”

“I know.”

“I want to go *home*.”

“I know.”

I gently pulled her away from the past, from the memories that didn't need to be felt.

“Let's go make it happen, okay?”

She sniffed and nodded, moving my hoof away to walk on her own, as we caught up to the others. I only looked back briefly.

The charcoal drawings were faded, but were all too familiar as that same unicorn and pegasus running free.

* * *

The others had already managed to find the lift. I'd been in this lab before, the one connected to her office, but I'd never given the lift a second thought. It looked like any other supply lift to any other part of the building to bring equipment up, ringed with brass and decorated steel covers. Now that I knew the truth, I could see the little clues. An advanced looking lock and access panel were emblazoned over it, and I could see the symbol of Ministry Station embossed on the top, something only those who *knew* would recognise. Glimmerlight was examining the control panel, pulling at the lock on it, until Brimstone casually raised his hoof and knocked it off. The silent 'I had it!' look on her face was a brief lift for my spirits.

Around it, however, lay some of the last remnants of Aurora's work in this entire place. As Unity and I caught up, I could see her glancing at all of them along the way. She stopped to handle a large orb, muttering words under her breath.

“Crystal from the Canterlot mines, it has the right magical resonance. They used Twilight's new spell to purify and make them clear.”

She turned and saw me looking, seeming almost shocked that I'd noticed.

“Unity?”

“It's...I, uh...” She scrambled to put it down, rubbing her horn. “I don't know, I just know it. She knew it.”

I picked up the orb and felt its astonishingly smooth surface. It reflected my own filthy and bruised face back to me.

"I don't know." She bit her lip and drew over an old tome, and then a clipboard with runes on it. "I know these things, yet I never learned them. It's all related to the spell that Aurora gave me, research to craft it. Oh..."

She staggered back, dizzy.

"I guess Aurora really did give me more than she intended when she gave me some of her memories. This is weird, it's like I recognise things I know I shouldn't."

Unity continued to walk toward the others, her hooves aimlessly touching and handling so many parts of Aurora's works.

"These were all pieces in her plan. No, not her plan...her dream. All her hopes that this could be beautiful, that it could help so many ponies."

I could see the wallboards filled with notes she went by. Unity read them aloud, but the words honestly sounded like another language to me. I watched her stroke the cases of orbs ready for testing, and saw her use a small spell to light a bulky machine that projected a broken pony image into the air. It didn't speak, but just stood still like a picture.

"She became trapped like the rest of us, and all her dreams never worked out the way she wanted." She trotted around the flickering image. "We have to stop him using her life's work for the very opposite of what she wanted. My talent is memory too, just in a different way, I need to do this for her, Murky."

"You and me both, sister." Glimmerlight clapped Unity on the back as she moved over to join us, before patting her own cutie mark, three memory orbs. "You got the subtle feeling that I can't replicate, I got the method to show directly the things you can't. Trust me, this means as much to me as anything. I'm not as aware of the crazy heights of memory magic as you are, but I know the effects it can have."

Glimmer's face stiffened a little. "For good and bad."

My big sister let go of Unity and wandered the desks, before picking out a few choice orbs.

"Now see, back in the Stable, they had these things called spell orbs. You remember them, Murky? Damn handy. Single use spells in an orb for the unicorns who don't kill their social lives to study. Now I'm thinking, this is her personal lab in her own Ministry that the staff in the

Stable came from, right? They got them on their own, but this is Aurora Star! Stands to reason she might have some...aha!"

Digging through what was there, she grabbed a few containers, reading their titles.

"Create door...clean clothes...grow moustache...hey, Murky, what do you think of that for ya, huh?"

She glanced back at me, the joke catching me off guard. Her face wasn't grinning fully. She was trying to make *me* smile and relax a bit.

"I...I don't think so, sis."

"Hm, pity. Now this is what I'm looking for!"

In her magic, she yanked across a container of multicoloured orbs.

"Firework spell! Just what we're gonna need for a distraction. Now, I better get that lift working..."

She and Unity moved to the lift. My sister worked on the panel's arcane technology, explaining to the curious unicorn with her what she was doing. Coral watched impatiently as other ponies loitered around and curiously examined all the empty orbs, magical equipment and discarded arcane technology across the benches and desks.

Brim, however, was up to something.

With a crash, one of the thick ceramic desks was overturned. Orbs scattered to the floor, and crown-like helmets shattered as he stomped around and ripped metal fixtures out of the walls or punched the bottoms of drawers out with little care.

"Hey, Murk." He nodded me over. "Get tying these onto the desk, aye?"

I picked up the wires he'd torn out and started on the task with my more dextrous little hooves. He was building a thick shield to lay in the door to let us even get out the lift.

Faintly, I could hear a rumbling. I kept working; it was hardly unusual. Skyships passed over from time to time.

Then I noticed that the rumbling was getting closer from the direction of the lift.

I leapt up.

“Everyone! Hide!”

There was a hurried rush. Brimstone, with his great bulk, ran into Aurora's office to entirely get out of the way. I dropped down behind the table shield. Unity and Glimmer ran with Coral and the others to get behind the far desks and worktables of the lab.

The lift was coming up.

As it neared, the cables started to squeak and strain. Scraping metal signalled a possibly warped shaft as it skidded and pushed its way into the level we were at.

The door opened, and panic came piling out.

I pulled myself into a little ball as over a dozen slavers fled from the lift. Throwing the brass doors ajar, they were shedding equipment, tossing it away in an effort to run faster. Some held their heads and staggered, screaming.

“Where are you?!” One hollered, swinging at empty space, before his friend grabbed and pulled him away. “What am I seeing?!”

“Screw that place! C'mon, exit's this way! This way! Let's get outta here before it happens again! RUN!”

They headed right past our hiding spots and out into the main hall. Their panicked voices echoed as they ran for the way out.

Slowly, we rose up again.

“What was that about?” I didn't really ask anyone in particular.

Coral Eve trotted up beside me and angled her head sharply.

“Doesn't matter. There's our ride.”

She dragged the table to shield us into the large cargo lift, even before Brim got back.

“Come *on* all of you, or I'll hit this damn button myself now!”

Ponies hurried at her command, and we began to filter into it.

Unity and I shared a look. We'd both been down here before. Ministry Station did strange things to ponies, but I'd never seen slavers react that way before. Ever.

Coral slammed the doors shut, before hitting the crank to send us down.

“Hold on, my dears.” She snarled to herself, low enough that only I could hear. “Mother's coming.”

And if I knew Coral, then a storm was coming for anyone who would dare stand in her way.

* * *

The lift was not fast. To be more specific, it was particularly slow; creaking and juddering, probably running on rusted gears and stiff wires. It was all I could do to not habitually latch onto someone else's leg out of nerves of it simply dropping to plunge us all into the darkness. After everything we'd been through the idea of such a simple and pointless end felt strangely terrifying.

There were occasional flickers of red light as Unity practised the opening stages of Aurora's spell. While we intended to simply get the foals and get back topside, it had become an unspoken decision that if we got the opportunity, we had to shut down the Nexus itself to prevent it ever being used in future. Unity's face strained and sweated as the powerful spell hounded her mind and even seemed to sting her horn from the enormity of the arcane complexities. After a while, Glimmer laid a hoof on Unity's back.

“Admirable, hun. But save your strength.”

Unity cancelled the spell, and hung her head, biting her lip. “I'm just a little unsure if I can do it.”

“You'll do fine.” Glimmer stroked Unity's wavy mane. “I know you can do it.”

I curled my lips to smile, anticipating she might look this way.

And then I wasn't beside her any more.

oooOOOooo

My fluffy mane bobbed over my face, rubbing almost annoyingly at my nose as the lift thudded to a halt, before starting again. My knees were shaking, their bright coat dulled by dirt and gravel dust. I tried to stop myself from trembling like a foal before a doctor's appointment, but it was becoming harder as my mental stamina wore down and everything became a blur.

Beside me in the lift, Aurora Star was focused and still, practising her spell over and over, casting the small space alight with colour. Yet even so, I could see her grit jawline, her eyes too still and small. She was as terrified as I.

The only difference was that Aurora was controlling it, forcing her fears back to concentrate on the task at hand.

"This is all we've got left to do, Sundial," She uttered, her nasal voice mismatching the heroic duty she now faced on her path for redemption.

"I...I know..." I muttered.

"Then we can both go home."

oooOOOooo

I yelped, staggering back until I felt Brimstone catch me from behind, one giant hoof stopping my path. I heard Unity gasp as she fell into Glimmerlight. Around me, everypony recoiled, asking questions and patting their faces to remind themselves of who they were.

"What...what was that?" I spoke with a more familiar mouth.

Glimmer held her head. "Memory magic. I felt like...like I was being reminded of something distant. Being where I shouldn't be, like now but not as me. It was like when I let others see memories."

Gulping, I stood back up. "I saw it, like an orb."

Unity was shaken, but nodded. She stepped forward and rested a hoof and her forehead near the lift's control panel as it shuddered and dragged itself down the shaft.

"Me too, I was-"

"Sundial?"

"Aurora."

We spoke almost simultaneously, and then stared at one another with wide eyes. Very quickly my heart began to feel tight and my skin crawled.

"Felt like a damn nostalgia." Brimstone muttered. "Didn't see anything, just felt like an old warrior sometimes feels, missing old stresses and adventures of youth."

Unity tapped her head again and again, pacing in the short space. The other slaves around us groaned and held their heads. Everyone had felt *something*, it seemed.

"If it's memory magic..." Glimmer clipped the ground with a hoof. "Then it has to be the Nexus, like before."

"It's my magic."

Everyone turned to Unity, as she stood up straighter.

"I don't, uh...I don't mean me, specifically. But it's...it's my magic, the kind I use. You know how I make objects feel like they remind you of something? A loved one? A friend? It's like that magic, only a thousand times stronger. I think that's why Aurora picked me instead of Glimmer. I did something similar to her."

No-one really said anything. Coral was steely and quiet. Brimstone pensive. Glimmer just looked a bit spooked.

I couldn't blame her. I'd been Sundial. I'd seen through his eyes, like a memory orb but just from nothing. Yet it had been more than that, memory orbs still let me remember that I was me. With this one I'd actually felt what he'd felt.

This memory machine, the magic it was set to use, or the 'Nexus' if they really wanted to use that name; it was incredible. Incredible, and terrifying.

Unity sighed, trying to make sense of this. "It's reminding us of things from before, only the magic's strong enough that we might feel like it's an orb. Wow, Aurora must have been-."

"Wow or not, we're going to destroy it if we can, before that sort of thing gets us killed down there." Coral Eve shook her head to clear those thoughts. "Murky? Time for your E.F.S, we must be near the bottom."

My heart dropped a little as I remembered the system, bringing up more recent and hurtful memories than those I'd just seen. I swallowed the heartache, before tapping the button.

"See anything?"

As the red interface clicked onto my vision, I took a quick glance in front of us.

Then I squeaked.

"They're..."

Before my eyes, I saw the red marks. Lots of them.

“They're waiting for us.”

* * *

The slavers were arranged in a half circle. I could track them as we came down. About ten or twelve of them in total, but the little marks kept sliding backwards and forwards every time I tried to count them.

Twelve slavers. We had more, but not everyone was armed, and most of us were walking wounded.

Glimmerlight crouched by the door, holding spell orbs in her magic. Brimstone was behind the massive desk we'd pulled in, his muscled legs taut and ready.

The lift dinged.

“Now!”

“Now!”

Both slavers and slaves put their last ditch plans into action. The final ring of defence down here, against the last ditch effort to get through.

The snap and rattle of long rifles and automatic weapons was met with the ear-splitting cracks of bullet on metal. I hunched onto the floor at the very edge of the lift, Unity and I clutching each other to fit into the small space away from the door, almost below a tan coloured mare clutching a medical bag trying to get out the way.

Brimstone stood like a rock, wincing and grunting as his battered body absorbed the shockwaves of the desk being struck again and again. My eyes throbbed as flares of sparks lit and darkened the lift again and again like a strobe light, with the noise like a demented ironmonger wailing on an anvil.

Then Brimstone hurled it through the door. He ran with it, roaring with adrenaline and his final musters of strength.

Glimmerlight was ready. Behind him, her orbs erupted into sparkles that flowed around her horn.

“Happy Freedom Day, you sick bastards!” She yelled, as her horn suddenly projected streams of multicoloured flares that streaked out into the Ministry Station. I heard the crackling

detonations as all sorts of coloured explosions lit up the lift, meshing with popping gunshots and reverberating echoes.

“Go!” She hit my hoof with hers, and we ran.

Rushing through the door, following Brimstone, I dove into the nearest cover behind the lip of a staircase leading up toward the top of the sloped room. We'd emerged into one of Ministry Station's enormous ticket office halls. I could see balconies above around the edges of the tall, two levelled structure, beneath extravagant curves and white marble pillars. Each of them was lit by the flares of gunfire and the chaos of colour and explosions that was Glimmer's orb-cast fireworks spell. The flares blew up into glittering clouds of smaller lights that then themselves erupted like firecrackers or stun grenades. I could hear the slavers screaming about not being able to see. Any incoming fire lessened until the fireworks finally faded away. It was just enough time for us to get past the chokepoint of the lift entrance.

We were at one end of the corridor, the slavers at the other. On a raised dais, where the ticket desk stood, they had some sort of heavy weapon. Before that, amongst the chaos as a firefight began to break out, I could see frantic movements of red marks, confusing me and throwing information overload into my brain so much that I had to turn it off. I didn't know how Protégé coped with it all.

“Don't keep your head out too long!” Glimmer shouted to the others, falling to her side behind a pillar with a grimace, before snapping off a shot from Diamond's Rifle. “That heavy gun'll-”

That heavy gun was going to do what it wanted anyway. Finally, it opened up, the exact same model as the one that had shattered the front of the Mall.

The noise drowned out everything else. It didn't go bang, it made a bass-like *thump* on every round that cycled through. One of Red Eye's newly-built heavy machine guns, firing the same rounds as anti-machine rifles. Across the pillared hall, a column shattered atop a slave, making her cover her head with her own rifle from the chunks of marble raining down. The wall behind us was battered, six inch plates of ceramic and mural being sheared off the elaborate surface on every strike, the *thump-spock* sound of the shot and impact overlapping again and again.

“The *hell* do we do now?!” An old stallion, dull green and holding a revolver shouted.

“Keep firing!” Glimmer screamed, trying to fire again, but just ducking back in as the floor was raked and torn up near her.

“It's gonna kill us!” A young mare half buried in marble wailed.

"What do we do?"

"What do we do?!"

"I...uh...I..." Glimmer rubbed her forehead with her spare hoof. "I..."

"Unity, get back!" Coral yelled.

I heard Unity shriek so loudly that my heart stopped for a second, until I saw she had been thrown backwards by Coral's magic as her own pillar was torn to pieces behind her. The cream unicorn skidded over the floor, until Coral reached out to drag her back in, evading the line of gunshots that ripped up the floor after her. A cold sweat began to trickle down my back. We were losing cover.

"What's next? What's next?!" The slaves were trying to shoot, to aim, but there was too few of them, that cannon was chewing through the cover and forcing them to move. We didn't have anything like the numbers to take on a prepared position.

"Uh...try to move up one side, I've got an idea!" Glimmerlight stood up, put a hoof on the column and rushed forward to the right, away from me, gasping in pain at her back wound. She was pulling with her magic at her saddlebag, trying to get an energy bomb she'd made out. "If we can just get up another line of pillars, I can-"

Then I simply heard her shriek.

Incoming fire tore up the ground around her, and she fell away, toppling over a step and out of sight in the lower fringes of the hallway's sides. A trail of blood began to seep from behind the corner of the stairway.

No.

No!

My world simply collapsed around me as I saw what I just saw.

"GLIM!" Brimstone roared, but even he couldn't move. The cannon seemed to sense his will to charge in to help her and stitched the wall he hid behind relentlessly.

"What happened?" Coral tried to see from where she was, only hearing Brimstone's cry.

"We're going to die!" A young mare cried out.

I simply stared at where Glimmer had gone, and felt empty.

I'd only just-

I was still trying to come to terms with-

He'd only just died. I already felt like I were made of glass. I couldn't take this. I couldn't do it again, we were so close. A well of emotion grew inside me, and I felt my eyes water. My stomach tightened so hard that I gagged on the smell of gunpowder and marble dust. I wanted to scream and beg for them to stop killing my *friends*.

My *family*.

No, I *wouldn't* let them. Not again. I wasn't going to lose another one.

I spun around the pillar and shot my grapple hook toward the upper floor. Heedless of the rounds flying past me, I bit the trigger and sent myself surging upwards. Someone shouted and I heard Coral cry out, but I didn't care. Hitting the balcony's rounded wall, I grabbed it with my front hooves and rolled over it before immediately sprinting off down the top floor of the raised hallway. Slavers on the opposite side shouted, but I ducked below the level of the balcony barriers and stayed hidden as I dashed and weaved my way up the hall, unmolested by the pinning fire below.

Suddenly, I was behind the weapon itself. The one that had-

No, I wouldn't dare think that. I wasn't going to let *anyone* die.

There was a single slaver firing from the very top of the hall ahead of me, armed with a long rifle and several grenades.

Running as silently as I could, I threw my entire bodyweight into his outstretched hind knee. I heard a sickening pop. He fell, squealing like a foal. Crying in fear and trembling at a horrid new emotion I recognised as fury, I struck him across the face with my hind hoof. Tugging at his bandoleers, I yanked off the grenades, before pulling the pins and tossing all three over the balcony onto the slavers' position below.

I never knew if I killed anyone, but I heard the panicked screams before a trio of explosions ripped through the hallway. The heavy gun went silent.

"There he is!"

Two slavers from the opposite side of the upper floor skidded around on the smooth mosaic flooring and saw me standing over the unconscious body of their ally. Fluid, as agile as any pegasus should be, I threw myself off the balcony and opened my wings, gliding down over

the devastation the grenades had wrought, before using the grapple hook again to drag myself into cover at the opposite side from Glimmer, my hooves sliding and drifting me sideways on the flooring. Behind me, I could hear the slaves moving up, and the devastating boom of Coral's magic. Mothers and fathers among the group cried out, I heard shouts of 'Save the foals!' and 'Give me my child!' Any of them would take insane risks, to have come this far, any would give their life for their foals.

I wasn't done, my friends could be hurt. I had to stop relying on them, they'd suffered too many times protecting me.

I couldn't listen to them scream. I couldn't watch any one of them die again.

Keeping low, I snuck around the side of the remaining slavers. They were panicking, firing at the advancing slaves. One of them spun his gun my way just as I slid smoothly into the shadows of the pillars on their side, before scooting my way up the rear stairwell toward where the heavy gun had been, mere feet from them. Peering up, I saw one had a battle saddle.

He was aiming at Coral.

No.

I dove up from behind him, making him yell at the surprise weight on his back. I gnawed at his saddle's release catch, before hearing the guns collapse either side.

"Get the hell off me you stupid runt!" He swung me into a pillar, and the jarring pain dropped me to the floor. He stepped back, aimed at me and pulled the trigger, only to realise what I'd done to his weapons. Snarling, he instead drew a knife and advanced on me, murder in his eyes. His friend joined him.

There was a thudding *boom* of pressure, and a horizontal pillar shard crushed both of them.

From within the smoke of the grenades, Coral Eve strode forward, a heavily wounded Glimmerlight slung over her shoulders. Behind her, one of the slavers tried to run back to the heavy gun, swinging it around toward a couple I knew as husband and wife. Brimstone dove over the wall and bodily tackled him. The warlord tore the gun from its mounting and brought it down hard with a dull crack on the slaver. The other two slavers were quickly cut down as they fled. Perhaps not courageous, but the parents with us, especially that old stallion, had little give for mercy. Their children were within reach.

As quickly as it had begun, the firefight was over. Unity rushed past the others who were warily regarding the unsettling atmosphere down here, carrying the medical bag toward Glimmerlight.

My sister opened her eyes, her left side streaked with blood from numerous cuts. The shattered marble floor had sliced her bandages. She looked pale.

She also looked shocked.

"Murky...wow."

"Sis!"

She stumbled as Coral let her down and numerous potions were poured over her or down her throat to finally stop the bleeding and stabilise her. I was shaking so hard with adrenaline that I kept twitching even as I watched her.

Then, mercifully, I saw her smirk briefly.

"Quite the...the tide turning moves from you there."

I felt a little bashful, so instead I simply knelt down and held onto her hoof. She pulled me in with her one good front hoof.

"You've turned into one little dynamo of a brave stallion, lil'bro."

My heart sunk.

I knew it wasn't bravery.

It was fear.

I clutched my sister as tightly as I dared while she hissed at others treating her wounds.

Please, Goddesses, I'm sorry if I've not spoken to you lately.

Please don't take any more of my friends at *this* point.

Please.

* * *

Very quickly, it became apparent that Ministry Station was not as secure and perfectly hidden from the war as we had all suspected.

The moment we had gotten everyone together again, I finally took some time to see where we were within the station now that the ambush was over. I remembered an ornate metro station, crudely converted for the designs of the zebras and then once again modified by present day slavers with scrap materials taken from the darker city above. I remembered the malign ambience that seeped into your mind, those whispers and eerie feelings that wore you down and brought bad memories to the surface. The one that preyed on those with inner worries and repressed experiences.

I remembered the place where memory magic had become the focus of a corrupted vision, one that Chainlink Shackles wanted to bring into the new age.

Yet while the shape was the same, the ambience had changed and the station itself was coming apart at the seams.

The ceilings bore enormous cracks that stretched end to end. I saw the bodies of slavers and slaves crushed beneath fresh rubble that blocked adjoining tunnels to the old platforms. The Enclave's bombardment had concussed Ministry Station from above and left it shattered. In the distance, I could hear muffled crashes as the station fell apart or crumbled, as its weakened structure came apart. The voices of ponies rung through the halls like ghosts, echoing further than their words would normally carry and completely incomprehensible. Occasionally, there were howls and scratching behind the walls. I swore I heard something surge past in an adjoining tunnel somewhere. Those terrifying beings still wanted in. They might just have a way now. I wondered if they already were.

Briefly, I felt my heart clench as I saw the corpse of a withered slave, the chain on her collar feeding under a dozen tons of concrete, steel and marble. The entire line of slaves had been buried in this passageway. I couldn't be sure, but I thought it led to the old platforms that Protégé and I had once entered through. As I stared, I heard a distant sound from down the tunnel it blocked, a horrified scream after a shriek that sounded ethereal and unnatural at this distance.

Suddenly, cold as it felt, I was quite glad this tunnel was blocked.

Glimmer clapped me on the shoulder, angling her head silently to encourage me to keep moving.

"Okay..." I muttered, trotting away from the grisly sight.

"Eyes forward, lil'bro...just...just so close...keep trotting."

My sister looked weak. The potions had managed to get her stable, but she needed time and rest to properly recover. However it wasn't just her body, but on her face. She was grimacing and lowly moaning every so often. We could all feel it, that distant and niggling toying

at the edges of our minds. The Nexus was still here. It was still active. Glimmer no doubt had rather horrific memories of what it had once done to her in a moment of weakness. All around us, ponies who'd never been here before were knocking their heads, shaking them or clenching their teeth every so often.

For me, I felt it dredging up a horrid thought.

What if we failed?

It had happened so often before. Like an unending cycle, every time we began feeling like this would be the moment we finally got out, something would shut us down at the last moment. What if this was just another one like that? I'd been teased with being outside the walls on more than one occasion, before being drawn back in for both good and bad reasons.

What if that's what it was this time?

What if I'd already failed and didn't know it yet?

What if I'd never get out of this city?

My hooves started to trot closer together, and I closed my eyes. What if-

oooOOOooo

-I never got to see her again? What if I never got out of this, despite only ending up a part of it while trying to help protect her?

Aurora was galloping hard ahead of me. My legs felt floppy and uncoordinated.

"Wait...wait! I can't keep this up!"

"You have to!" She shouted and turned her head. "They'll know we're here by now!"

Pushing my worries to the back of my mind, I put my head down and strove to catch up. Behind us, we could hear barks in an unidentifiable language. Tall and lithe shapes bounded around the corner, shadowed in their long cloaks.

"Aurora! They're behind us!"

"I know, run!"

"They're going to-"

"RUN!"

oooOOOooo

"Murky! Murky, run!"

I was running! I could see Aurora ahead of me and-

And-

Brimstone Blitz pulled me up off the floor. My mind spun harshly. I was dizzy. There was an enormous crashing sound all around us. I heard ponies screaming and hooves clattering on hard flooring. A huge chunk of the roof fell and shattered beside me as a shockwave tore through the entire tunnel and took all of us off our hooves.

"What is that?" Unity screamed, sheltering under an archway, before being pulled by Coral to keep moving.

"It's the Enclave again!" The stallion with the revolver shouted.

With Brimstone, I hurried after them, trying to dodge the falling debris. I could see the walls themselves buckle as another supernaturally powerful impact tore down through the earth. A pillar fell clean over between all of us. I leapt onto it and kicked my hind legs furiously to push myself over it, landing on my back and scrambling to my feet again. We galloped madly as a third strike lifted me a clean foot off the floor. Kicking at thin air, I stumbled as I came down again and collided with Coral's side.

"That's no Enclave weapon," Brimstone snarled.

"Wh-what do you mean?" I waited as others tried to crowd through a door only a couple of ponies wide, hiding at the side of the corridor to avoid the lighting units crashing down and sparking on the ground.

"Unless they hid something much more powerful from that war upstairs, which I doubt, nothing we saw would do this. This is something much more powerful hitting the city."

"Much...more..." I trailed off as I fell into his chest. Another wave of force surged down past us. It was like a giant's footsteps. Like one of the Goddesses had struck her hoof upon the surface of Equestria. Above me, I saw a trickling of rock dust falling through a series of growing cracks. Like slow lightning, they spread and twisted.

Even I knew that roof wasn't going to hold.

“Get out of there! Through the door!” Coral waved her hoof. Before I could do it on my own, I yelped as Brimstone picked me up and tossed me through to get me moving. He dove through after me, snorting in pain as he landed on his side.

Behind us, with a rush and a sudden hissing of broken pipes in the ceiling, the entire tunnel collapsed. Ahead of us lay an old security door, all sealed up. Glimmerlight was already pawing weakly at its controls panel, trying to get through to the wires. Behind me, Brimstone shook and clutched his battered chest as he slowly got back to his hooves.

On my back, feeling the repeated thuds of whatever this weapon was only continuing, one every thirty seconds or so, I heard the shattering of fixtures and hanging lights dropping as the impacts shook them loose. The whole metro felt like it was going to come down! I saw Unity waving to me, hiding within what looked like an engineer's station to the side of this tunnel. I clambering inside, along with a dozen other ponies. Briefly safer, we watched as the roof continued to fall outside in the much less stable tunnel. Brimstone sheltered Glimmer with his body itself, grunting in pain from the chunks rocking off him as she worked. One pony was hit in the face by a vent cover exploding off the wall. Coral dragged the pony in, their muzzle covered in blood.

Slowly, the impacts began moving further away from us. The tremors eased off. Aftershocks fed through the flooring and walls.

“What...what even was that?” Unity was shivering badly.

“Was that the Nexus?!” A mare, an aunt trying to find her nephew, was looking around frantically. I'd seen her jumping at shadows earlier.

Unity shook her head slowly, “No, no it wasn't. It came from above. Aurora's spells can't do that. But I can feel the memory magic deeper inside. It's like every so often I see it through her eyes, to remind me.”

“Me too.” I bit my lip. “I was Sun-”

I stopped and went quiet, staring directly ahead. The thought of Sundial passed away. There was a new threat.

“Sundial? What did you-what?” Unity looked confused by my staring and tapping at her shoulder, until she saw what I had stopped to stare at.

We were trapped until Glimmer could open that door, and I was looking at three vent covers on the walls that had been sealed off. Only now, they had been blasted open and hung loose. Behind them, the grey darkness of the ventilation system was now open.

I knew *why* those vents had been sealed.

“Seal them up!” I screamed, pointing at the covers. “Seal the vents!”

A wave of fear passed through everyone present. They'd been in Shackles' prison when we'd been chased before. They knew what lurked down here. Glimmerlight looked back briefly and then went to work with renewed vigour.

“I still need a few minutes!”

I was too short to reach them. Frustration mounted as I saw others grabbing the thick steel slabs the slavers had used to block off the vents and clamber up to try and replace them. Instead, I raced into that engineering room and started looking around frantically. Boxes of tools offered nothing as I yanked them off tables and spilled them on the floor to look for usable items. Hammers wouldn't be strong enough. Shoving the wheeled table to the side, I opened the cage for heavier track repair equipment and found what I was looking for. A nailgun.

“Brim!” I shoved the nailgun across the floor to him, allowing the huge pony to grab it in his muzzle. He used his height to start pounding eight inch nails in around the covers again. Every time he managed it, they'd have to hold the plate down again from the big jolt it gave. It was achingly slow.

A wash of unsettling feelings flowed over me. Was that fear, or Ministry Station's subtle ambience? My stomach twisted and I felt my balance suffer as I watched them work. Three unicorns, including Unity, worked together to shove piece after piece of marble into one of the vents to try and block it instead. The feeling only grew. This was a small space, with nowhere to run. If one of them came in they would-

oooOOOooo

“What have they done to him? Sweet Equestria itself...”

I almost threw up as I saw the aftermath of zebra shamanistic magic. Within a brickwork back chamber of the station, we had finally lost our pursuers in the darkness and with a little spell by Aurora. Memory magic was powerful enough to make those chasing you forget where you were, it seemed.

Yet now I looked upon utter horror. What lay before me was no longer a pony. I'd seen zebras grow wings in the videos meant to demonise them, but this was far far beyond that.

The fact that it was still moving and aimlessly gurgling or exuding fluids only turned all the horror into a tragic feeling that made me just feel hollow.

"What have they done..."

I had to turn away as Aurora, tears in her eyes, ended its misery.

"You might not believe it from the propaganda, Sundial, but Twilight assured me that not all zebras are like this. This group, they're like some fanatical tribe. I get the feeling even those commanding the zebra lands would be horrified at what this group did down here."

I covered the body, if it could even be called that, with a tarp and hung my head.

"I don't care, Aurora..."

"They wanted to create far worse. They may even still manage it. That's why we're here, Sundial. Twilight didn't ask to be the one who had to stop the eternal night or the lord of cha-"

"I don't CARE about Twilight, Aurora! I don't CARE about the zebras and what they do back home!" I rounded sharply on her, the smaller scientist recoiling from me. "I just want to stop this and...and then go home to Skydancer and just live my life and forget about everything. Come on, we have to help the others down here..."

oooOOOooo

My vision blurred and flickered; everyone around me was groaning. Blinking rapidly, I staggered around as the others seethed and held their heads. A number of them were crying quietly, seeming to be unsure why.

Had they seen what I had seen? Or had they just felt it? I wanted to stop and think, why was the memory of Sundial the one that came to me? Why Aurora for Unity?

Yet there was no time to think.

As we had woken up from dizziness and memory of whatever the Nexus was doing, the realisation that the corridor now *stank* of rotten mint landed like a dash of cold water upon us.

"Glimmer...Glimmer!" I slurred, finding my sister trying to pull out wires and twist small crystals in the control panel with weak hooves and faint magic. She was fighting to keep her eyes open, but she was the only one who knew how to do this.

"I'm trying! This stuff is ancient!"

Brimstone shook his head and launched back to the vent, hammering nails with the gun again and again around it. Someone in the engineering room found a spot-welder and sparked it up. We were slaves, many of us knew how to use these tools, and now we put our brutally

earned skills to use. Carrying one another on their backs to reach, floating equipment up in magic, they tried their utmost to block the path off again.

Echoing through each of the three vents, I heard a rattling. The metal within them began to shake.

Then the howl broke through from every side.

Ponies screamed. Some covered their ears. The one with the spot welder fell over, holding his head in mad fear. Some ran into the engineering room to hide. They all hounded Glimmer, and I had to push into one's chest to stop them from trying to interfere with her work. My heart thudded so hard I worried it might bruise my ribs.

Unity shrieked and fell back from the vent she was trying to block by floating marble chunks into it. The supernatural noise roared from it louder than all the others, and I saw chunks rattling and being thrown out. The cover Brimstone was nailing down thudded and bent inwards.

"GLIM! GET THAT DOOR!" He bellowed, turning to try and nail the other side of the one being welded.

Five seconds later, it almost broke off. The old warlord rammed his shoulder against it, until the next impact rattled him clean off it again.

The strength that would take left me in horrified awe.

"Get us out of here!" A mare screamed as she piled more and more rubble inside to try and block the one digging through it all. Nails pinged off like shrapnel and stung her in the side like a small bullet as the second vent ruptured. A gurgling, bubbling sound tinged with ferocious *need* emerged from it under all the banging.

The security door finally slid upwards.

"Go! Go!" Glimmerlight jumped through and grabbed the controls on the other side. Everyone followed. I almost got run over by the larger ponies, having to squeal and dodge like in any large crowd as a slave to pull myself with them and scamper through.

Briefly, I saw Glimmerlight delay on the handle until she spotted me for certain. Then she yanked it. Behind us, the vents pinged off. I saw them both falling to the floor again as the door slammed down hard. Moments later, I heard three sounds of things landing on the floor. Several bassy, gurgling animalistic growls emanated from the room. Protégé's E.F.S was misreading it, showing only one of them for a few seconds, before it disappeared.

With a horrid rasp of fury, one of them collided with the security door. It held strong, but I saw the hinges rattle.

The outer metro's monsters were now in the Ministry Station. We couldn't wait around here too long, but it occurred to me that our way out was now shut off entirely.

We were trapped.

Panting, holding my face, I felt the station's aura of malcontent and sickening feelings washed into me. I felt it seep into my mind, reminding me of all the nights alone in chains. Reminding me how easily they could become a reality once again, and how little time had passed since it had been.

Unity dropped beside me, pale and ashen. On the other side, Glimmerlight held her forehead and lay against a terminal, her stamina drawing down.

Then behind us, I heard a voice not from our group.

"Hey, what the hell are you all...oh crap!"

Turning, we saw a group of slavers had entered through one of the side tunnels, looking as beaten up and terrified as us, carrying tools.

"What? Oh, crap! Hardy's ambush failed! Get 'em! Get 'em! He'll have us if we don't!"

They panicked, reaching for their guns, but they'd already said the unfortunate key word.

Beside me, I more *felt* the magical flare rather than saw it. Coral Eve exploded out of our pack of slaves, galloping across the flooring and wrenching her head through the air like a rhino skewering its foe. The resulting *boom* of telekinetic force blew me head over hooves. Terminals tore out of their fixtures and desks hurtled across the room like enormous shrapnel. The slaver group were catapulted from their hooves, hurled against the far wall.

From the same route they'd entered from, more slavers emerged at the commotion. Up ahead, from the way to the slave pens I'd once found my friends in, the place the foals allegedly *were*, a second group ran out to check on all the noise.

The large and circular room was mostly intact. Terminals had been crushed by sheets of metal fallen from the roof, and the tunnel that led to the platforms was blocked by a pile of desks and furniture. A raised walkway crossed over the middle in two directions, while the old resting area below was occupied by banks of terminals and desks.

In the distance, I heard a sound. I was certain Coral heard it too.

A foal screaming in terror.

Now we all dropped into those lowered sections to take cover. Everyone pulled their weapons free for one last firefight, hoping to have it done with before the beasts broke down the door behind us.

We need not have bothered.

Coral Eve drove into them as an unstoppable well of power and wrath. Her eyes burned with hatred for these slavers. At what they'd tried to do to her son. She knew they were nearby. She had endured pain, sacrifice, time, heartbreak, loss and taunting for this whole journey. She had fought in war and slaved for months.

Now that all anger and bile came out as she saw the final stretch ahead of her and heard that one telling sound. The change in air pressure set my ears ringing. The entire ornate lighting fixture in the ceiling was torn free and threw itself amongst the slavers like a skeletal wrecking ball. Glaring at those in her way, she sent not only terminals and desks hurtling through the air. No, that wasn't all! Panels from the walls and ceiling flew off and tore into the slavers like blades. Nothing was coordinated, nothing precise, just raw tidal waves of telekinetic power surging back and forth across the room. Hurtling, tearing, launching and smashing. Slavers were thrown from their hooves and launched screaming across the room. Pillars shattered, upturned and were fired like battering rams.

She trotted meaningfully forward toward that last doorway. Behind it, a terrified slaver hammered a similar panel to the one Glimmer had used moments before. The shutter began to slide down.

With a growl, Coral tore the entire door *off* before it could close and anchor itself against her magic. Twisting metal bent out of the walls as she hurled it into two of the memory machines resting against the far wall, the legacy of what these slavers wanted to do to her child.

Within twenty seconds of utter carnage, Coral had demolished the entire central hub of Ministry Station. Smoke rose from the exploded terminals, half obscuring her as the furious mare now marched toward that doorway.

Those with us who had never witnessed her at her full potential gaped in awe, before fearfully following her. Everyone stayed at a safe distance as we did so.

Coral Eve was unleashed, and Goddesses help anyone who would stand in her way now.

* * *

Hurrying across the loose sheet metal of the raised walkways across the hub, I saw Coral sprint into the tunnel and veer into the next room. Flashes of light, gunshots and eruptions of rubble and dust came hurling out ahead of us. The slaver we'd seen run departed the room sideways, slamming into the far wall. Above the noise, I heard her cry out.

"Grindstone!"

She held the 'o' in the word, seething. At the end of the low tunnel lay the thick door of the portal chamber the zebras had used to enter and leave the city without being seen. She had instead gone to the left. Sucking in air, I skidded around the corner and cautiously glanced in.

My friends had once been trapped here. It looked much the same, using cage doors I now recognised as having been taken from the prison to fit into the similar archway design of Ministry Station. The marble ceased here, giving way to damp stone and brickwork covered in mildew. Squat pillars punctuated the flooring, but I saw that it was different. They'd demolished the back half of the room, scattering a paltry amount of child's toys and dirty mattresses around in some hopeless attempt to distract the foals.

And in the cells to either side of me, I saw the foals themselves. Terrified, hunching together, they clustered at the back of the cells and cried aloud. The walls stung at me. Above the fighting, the roars of hatred, the shrieks of terror and shattering of stone, as though the whole tragedy of the foals in Fillydelphia had collated in this one place. To only scant relief for the moment, I saw they were uninjured, but they'd been stripped of all their belongings.

Slavers were picking themselves up from the far right of the prison. One raised his shotgun, before a telekinetically hurled swarm of bricks tore into the group. The bricks shattered in the air under the tremendous forces, turning them into lethal shrapnel. The slavers were flattened against the wall and ripped apart.

Before them, surrounded by a swirling aura of rock fragments and dust, Coral Eve was throwing everything she could see at anything that vaguely looked adult. Every time, she would scream as her horn seared and burned atop her head. I dreaded if she might suddenly burn out.

"Coral! We're coming! Hey!"

Glimmer's limping body was cut off from going in by Brimstone as he held her back. Seconds later, a base of a pillar rattled above our heads against the frame of the curved door. Everyone fell back into the portal corridor, pointing weapons around corners.

There was no approaching Coral right now.

Inside, I could see her head swivelling left and right. She spotted every group of foals, hunting relentlessly. From behind her, two slavers suddenly ran from the shadows, metal pipes descending. Glimmer yelled in pain as she dropped beside me, but lifted her rifle in her magic and shot one of them down. The second of the two tripped over his falling comrade. It gave time for Coral to notice him.

He didn't even have a chance to beg before her magic sent him firing up into the roof with enough force to break a neck. He slammed back to the ground, slid and flew into a pillar. He lay very still.

"Grindstone! Where is he?" Her voice was cracking, drawn out by pain and anger. I could see her cheeks streaked with dampness as she strained and resisted her horn from shorting out.

With the brief lull, I raced into the room. I heard Glimmerlight shout after me and try to follow; but I heard her gasp and stumble as Brimstone pulled her wounded body back into cover. My hooves skittered as I stuck behind every pillar I could until I was able to dive into one of the foals' pens. They screamed as I suddenly emerged from the shadows.

"Wait, wait! It's okay!" I waved my hooves. "We're getting you out!"

"Hey!" A familiar raspy voice from the group piped up. "It's Murky! Murky! You came!"

Starshine Melody pushed around another colt, before rushing across and clamping her little hooves around my chest tight enough that I actually gagged. Against all wish to act fast, I grabbed ahold of her and breathed a sigh of relief. I'd saved her once before in the crater; if anything had happened to her now, I didn't know what I'd think.

"Starshine, where's Lilac and Chirpy?"

"I'm here!" Lilac poked her head up, inseparable as ever from the only other ghoul foal in the group with Starshine. She stared out at Coral, the mare who had promised to adopt her if they got out. "M-Miss Coral looks really mad..."

"Just a bit!" I hushed as I started to wave them on. "See that door? Run out there! Go, go!"

They looked hesitant, until I remembered who was with us.

"It's your parents come to get you! *Run!*"

That got them moving. The foals, crying and screaming as they went, rushed out of the cell in a cluster. At the door, several ponies ran in to retrieve them. There were tears, there were shouts.

"I want to help!" Lilac complained, but I just pushed the brave little filly with a wing.

"If you want to help then tell me, where's Chirpy?"

She looked around, hunching beside me instead of moving as rocks tumbled past us outside the pen.

"They wanted him first! They said it'd make her stop!"

"Then they're stupid," I muttered.

"That's what I said!" Lilac shrugged dismissively. For a foal, the gesture was oddly cynical.

I could hear more slavers deeper in shouting out in panic or rage. Creeping out and hiding behind the nearest pillar. I saw Coral ripping a cell door off to silence them with low flying rebar, before she disappeared again, running further in. Crashing sounds signalled her ripping off the door to every possible side room as she went.

Then it suddenly stopped.

"Chirpy!"

Coral's voice wasn't one of relief - it was panic.

Against all my efforts, Lilac followed me. Ahead of us, we found Coral Eve amongst a squad of enormous slavers. Beyond that, I could see a large wooden gate slamming shut to the next section of the prison. The slavers rammed into her side, knocking the unicorn off her hooves on the stone floor. Rolling onto her side, she snarled at one, before he was lifted and hurled through a pillar, his back snapping on impact. Two others dove at her, grabbing around her body to try and choke her. In a flash of light, all three of them exploded off the ground and hurled toward a cell with Coral still in their grasp, driving through prison bars. Staggering, blood streaming from a wound on her forehead, Coral Eve sent the last one flying through the gate.

Upon breaking it, the last foals were finally revealed, and amongst them, Chirpy Sum and Grindstone.

Grindstone stood alone, trapped against the back of the chamber. He was wheezing hard, with his eyes open and terrified. I guessed he'd just closed that gate after him when Coral

had spotted them. With Coral's horn forming the only major light source in the flickering darkness, she struggled to her hooves and locked eyes with the slavemaster that had taken her son.

"Grindstone..." Her voice trembled as she gasped and then roared in nothing but pained anger. Brickwork began to shake and my ribs vibrated inside me. Dust seeped from the ceiling above her, before being thrown away in arcane curves as it got caught up in the aura of power surrounding her. I didn't even hear what the end of her sentence was, for her horn shrieked, making the sound of a thunderstrike.

The donkey was snatched from the ground and catapulted forward, toward her and into the nearest pillar. At the last second, a golden flare surrounded him and the pillar's brickwork shattered. Dropping to the ground, virtually unharmed, Grindstone shook his head and glared at her.

"You will not take me for an obstacle to be cast aside!"

He had Aurora's shield talisman. Of *course* he'd have access to it.

Around him, foals fled toward Coral, surging either side of her like a small tide of ponies to flee out the way she'd come. Chirpy Sum fled with the others and sprinted forward. Grindstone's eyes twitched, before he snapped down and grabbed the young colt around the neck. Clutching him in his frail hooves, he lifted Chirpy Sum clean off the ground in a chokehold. The small foal was wriggling and gurgling as he tried to keep breathing.

The old slavemaster had a cane in his mouth, tipped with a small blade held to the exposed throat of the foal.

"Don't." He hacked and coughed around the cane, gripping it tightly as the blade rocked and rested on the foal's skin. I saw Chirpy go very still. "Don't consider coming closer, Mrs Eve. You want revenge, of course, but I know you wouldn't lose him to get it. You're going to stay right there, and let me get my radio."

Coral Eve stood like a rock with all four hooves spread and braced. Her horn spluttered and seethed with crackling magical energy. I saw Coral Eve's pained face watching Chirpy's. The foal was shaking hard, his hooves reaching out to his mother, but he wasn't whimpering. He was shaking, biting his lip.

"M-Mom..."

Coral was visibly struck hard, her legs trembling, eyes unable to leave that blade on her son's throat.

Grindstone began to awkwardly pull at his radio.

"Fiver, get a group together, they're trapped in the-"

Then Chirpy, that brave little colt, took a deep breath, before suddenly twisting and biting savagely into Grindstone's neck.

The old slaver screamed in pain. In shock, he dropped the blade. I saw blood run from his neck as he shook and fought. After a couple seconds, he tore the foal off and with what strength his body had, threw him onto the hard concrete ground.

"You little savage!" he shrieked, as he picked up the blade upside down in a blind rage, and swung it to strike Chirpy across the face with the hard wooden pole. He squealed, staggering backwards and falling. Holding his face with both hooves, crying aloud, he scrambled and tried to get away from the slavemaster approaching him, cane held high, ready to come down again.

Grindstone snarled, holding his neck, before he turned back to find Coral staring right at him in horror.

Then her face twisted, putting any rage Grindstone had ever displayed into deep shadow. At that moment, I felt the very ground of the Ministry Station shake.

Immediately, everyone that wasn't Coral did their level best to get out of the room as fast as was physically possible.

Coral's horn sprang into life, lightning blue. It flared like a spark battery, stuttering before roaring into its incredible depths of power.. I hid behind Brimstone, clutching onto his side. Coral Eve scowled in a way I'd never imagined she could have.

The resounding *boom* of her telekinetic wave drove every piece of debris in the room toward the slavemaster. I felt the entire chamber *shift*, bouncing all of us off the ground. He held up his hooves and his shield snapped up as chunks of rock, metal from cell doors, slaver bodies, weapons and entire pillars hurled into him and blasted him and his yellow sphere of protection into the far wall.

The protective talisman drove a three foot hole into solid concrete, somehow absorbing the impact for Grindstone, who hunched inside it, before screaming up at her.

"This is Aurora's shield! *You can't break her shield! You can't!*" His voice was panicked, and he reached once again for his radio. "You're going to die in here when they arrive!"

Any hope he had was shattered by a whole pillar crashing into his shield and knocking the donkey head over hoof inside it. I saw rock pillars shattering in mid-air from the impact of her magic. The very slabs of the floor hurtled through the air. A side office collapsed from the stresses on its rotten wood.

Coral Eve was standing within a cyclone of telekinetic power, a storm of debris and heavy objects whirling, slamming and haphazardly flying vaguely toward Grindstone. There was no accuracy and no subtlety. Grindstone tried to crawl out from under it all, rolling onto the floor, that golden shield sparking and reflecting many times every second. He lay back, his hooves held up, body bruised from being tossed around inside his shield.

As I caught sight of Coral's face, I saw her eyes seem to briefly light with power as she glanced from her motionless son to the one who had put him that way.

"You led them. You did this to him. To me. To all of us!"

Grindstone was lifted up. He stared at her in horror.

"I'm an old, dying donkey! If I didn't have the power with Shackles, I'd have been dead! *Stop!*"

Coral's face stiffened, the distaste of his trying to justify himself bringing up every bitter night I'd watched her spend worrying for Chirpy in her time within this city of slavery.

"And I'm a mother who just watched her son struck down before her eyes."

Grindstone's face betrayed a sudden terror as her magic surged inwards and gripped the sphere amongst all of her telekinetic power.

"You can't break-"

"I don't need to."

Arching her back, she leaned upwards and cried out in pain and effort, as her horn gleamed and erupted with power. A whirlwind of rushing air surrounded her body, as I saw her horn now held two shining auras of magic over it, one overlapping the other. I'd heard tales of unicorns powerful enough to do that. Now I saw it for real, and stared in awe.

The ties on her braids snapped and exploded off, letting her long mane blow wildly in the furious winds driving around the chamber. The floor cracked beneath her hooves.

Clenching her teeth, her horn surging with those layered auras, Coral *squeezed*. Around Grindstone, the sphere ground and squealed with conflicting magic. White sparks flew off the

shield like embers from a furnace. Grindstone's face contorted in horror, as he suddenly realised what she was doing. The space inside grew smaller, as Coral's emotionally driven magic took out every last ounce of her long ordeal on him. He turned over and over, unable to place his hooves, scrambling inside as her magic crunched the shield inwards. It buckled, crackling like glass.

"Wait...wait wait! NO!"

In one horrific motion, Coral threw everything she had at him, and the sphere suddenly gave up. Within half a second, it imploded to the size of a baseball. With a wrench of her head, Coral sent it careening into a far cell. An unnatural sound accompanied it shattering within as the talisman was smashed.

With a great snap and a flurry of rank wind, Coral's magic ceased. My ears popped and rung from the change in air pressure.

The entire room seemed to settle by a full few inches. Pillars toppled as the swirling magical forces ceased. At the epicentre, Coral wobbled on her hooves. Her horn fizzled, before going truly dead.

At the same time, even as she raised a hoof to take a step toward Chirpy, she fell over. Her body landed hard, but her shaking limbs refused to give up. Crawling, pulling her shivering body, I saw Coral Eve use the last drips of her energy to drag herself to the young foal.

Only after she had gotten to him, to wrap her forelegs around his body and reclaim her son, did she lie still.

* * *

I waited impatiently as Unity and a couple of the more medically trained ponies saw to Coral and Chirpy. It had taken three ponies to pull Coral's hoof from around the colt to check on him. Both had stirred, but now I simply waited to hear if they would make it.

Coral had pushed herself too far, probably further than she ever would again. Chirpy's head was cruelly swollen, and Unity was crying as she held him gently in her hooves and slowly helped his barely conscious lips to sip a healing potion.

Glimmerlight sat beside me and held her head, watching them all. She'd wanted to be the one to help Chirpy, but her body was simply too weak to even hold up the little colt's weight now.

Stretching out one wing, a limb light enough that it wouldn't hurt her back, I placed it around her. Soon enough, she leaned over, the side of her head on the top of mine.

"We made it, lil'bro. Got back through this awful place, got the foals, got Grindstone. Classic storming the castle, huh? Isn't this the bit where we go off home to cheering crowds and we all get medals?"

Her face tried to smile. She was coping. That whole run had been exhausting and (for her) even more painful from her wounds.

"First thing I'm doing when we get out is get a drink, Murky."

"Can I have one?"

"You can drink straight ethanol for all I care by this point...oh my gosh..."

She had turned to see the foals. A heartwarming set of reunions had started to occur as the others all caught up. Parents were hugging their children as though they might slip away again. I saw one incredibly lucky family of a husband, wife and two foals all reunited without having lost anyone. The uncle found his nephew. A father cried like the colt he was holding in his hooves to merely touch his child again. I heard him muttering a phrase over and over, 'never again'.

Yet off to the side was something that broke my heart in two.

Almost three dozen foals were standing quietly and alone in a huddled group, staring at those with parents who had made it this far. Some of them were quietly sobbing to themselves, looking very lost and scared.

Turning away, I tried to hide that I was about to do the very same thing.

Glimmerlight wiped her eyes.

"The way back to the lift's blocked by those beasts, Murky. There's only one other way."

I gulped, knowing what she meant. Staring back through the prison, I could almost feel it just around the corner.

Glimmer pulled herself up, grunting in pain.

"I've got a portal to try and fix."

Behind us, there was a sharp gasp. Her long mane spread out below her, Coral Eve suddenly woke up, groaning in pain. Half her face muddied with barely cleaned blood, and her

whole body seeming drawn and burned out, she none-the-less swatted and pushed at the others until she got at least up onto her hind legs to shuffle forward.

“Chirpy...Chirpy, my dear...”

Unity carried the colt over, helping his mother to take a grip of him, as I breathed a sigh of relief. She was all right.

From beside me, I heard the tapping of Lilac Rose's hooves as she slowly approached the mare who had promised to adopt her as one of her own. If my heart had broken only a few minutes before, now I felt it mend as Coral immediately held out a foreleg, her tear stained eyes only looking welcoming to the young ghoul.

Behind Lilac, however, was Starshine Melody.

The second of the ghoul fillies, Starshine nervously scuffed her hooves as Lilac spoke for her.

“Miss...Miss Coral...Starshine heard that...that you were adopting me and...and she wondered if...if...”

“Would you t-take me too, please?” Starshine's voice was as fragile as marbles across thin glass.

Coral Eve's eyes trembled, before I heard the kind and soft tone that was so tragically rare from her.

“Of course, my dear.”

Behind me, the crowd of orphaned foals were all watching as the powerful mare that had saved them hugged Starshine tightly. A crowd of bright, wide eyes saw her take one of their own under her wing.

Then a colt suddenly spoke up, stepping forward nervously.

“C-Can you take me too?”

He rushed forward, hopping up to rest his hooves on her chest.

“Can you take me home with you? I...I don't have...”

A few seconds later, a second colt followed him.

“M-me too! Please! Me too!”

Then a filly shouted out, and then a third colt, followed by three foals almost at once. In ones and twos, they cantered and then galloped forward. Foal after foal suddenly began to run toward her, desperate and pleading faces upon all of them.

“P-Please, can you take me!”

“Me too!”

“I don't want to be alone!”

“I want a mummy again!”

“Can you be my mommy?”

Within seconds, Coral Eve was surrounded, by a crowd of foals all reaching and pleading from beneath her, tugging at her hooves and trying to shout the loudest, all of them asking in one great rush. In the months of isolation, after the horrors of the past few days and the realisation that their parents were gone, they had seen this one mare storm through their captors like Celestia or Luna herself. Like some protective force of nature come to save them, as strong as any foal imagined their mother always was.

In the centre of them all, Coral Eve closed her tear stained eyes, emotionally overwhelmed.

Then she reached out her hooves and bent down with them all. Sniffing and hugging again and again to all sides, she nodded.

“Yes...yes, of course I will. I'll take care of you all, my dears...I'll take care of you.”

* * *

I felt Unity squeeze my foreleg as we watched the foals troop after Coral into the portal room. Every time she saw the relief and hope on their faces, I saw her expression melt in happiness. Undoubtedly, my limb would have the blood cut off from it moments later every time Coral helped one of those who were still crying.

It was official now, Coral's role in the new village we would make was decided.

She was going to open an orphanage to care for all the foals that Red Eye's industry had left stranded.

I couldn't think of anything more appropriate for her to be doing.

Yet watching them find their 'forever mommy', as Lilac Rose would chirp, it only reminded me of the scene I hoped to have soon enough. My hoof clasped around the shape of my journal in my saddlebag, trying to fill my heart with just one more bit of energy to finish this off.

Glimmerlight limped around the chamber, moving from arcane console to terminal, to floor panel and generator. I could hear her making very mild, 'safe for around Coral and foals' curses under her breath as she huffed and threw her hooves up.

"Well, it's as we thought, no power reaching this place, not enough to activate it after all. I can...I think I can repair it. Spent enough time in this place as a mute to learn after all.."

She shivered, like a chill had gone down her back. I didn't blame her, I could feel it too. Far off, through the corridors, that strange ambience felt like it had retreated during that last rush, when we'd all felt a common, straightforward purpose to keep us focused. But now that things were pausing, as another obstacle came up, I could feel the whispers at the edges of my mind. Tugging at frayed ends, trying to get a reaction.

I closed my eyes, all too well remembering it. Every little doubt, every fear or weakness. Each memory dug up by this strange place. The times that I'd failed, as far back as the last time I found an orphanage, and that vertigo as I'd leaned forward, and-

oooOOOooo

-grabbed the chains around the lock. Putting a hind-leg against the door, my forelegs wrapped in chain, I pulled with all my might. The rotten wood snapped and splintered bit by bit. Every yank dug the chains into my hooves, shooting pain up my legs. I could hear the begging behind it, every wail and shout for salvation. I pulled again. Blood began to trickle between the chains and years fell from my eyes, but I couldn't stop now.

The lock snapped off the door itself, and the prisoners were free.

They rushed out, weary and damaged. Some carried broken friends with them. Behind me, I heard Aurora's magic tear another lock apart as though she were dismantling it for experimentation. Ponies fled by us in their dozens, directed by several Equestrian soldiers. I still wasn't sure where they'd come from, we'd only come down here ourselves. Something about a portal in the room just beside us, they seemed just as confused as anyone. I could hear gunfire from outside the prison chambers, near to the main waiting room of the metro station. Ponies were being hustled through it. The rescue was underway.

We'd done it.

Checking the cell, I picked up a dizzied pony who babbled nonsense and threw him over my back, before rushing back out to catch up with the others. The leader of the soldiers was speaking to Aurora, shaking his head. She gripped his collar with her magic and sternly said something in his ear that I didn't hear. Gulping, the officer nodded.

"Yes, Ma'am." He uttered, before turning to the others.

"Miss Star and Sundial will take care of what they needed to. We get these ponies topside! No...no matter the cost! Let's do what we signed up to do, mares and gentlecolts!"

"We didn't sign up! We were draft-"

"Technicalities, Dreamer! Grab a pony, let's get the hay out of this place!"

Aurora helped me with the pony I carried, as we dragged the poor soul between us to pass him to a much larger soldier, one who could easily carry him. My companion then turned and slid a hoof around my neck.

"One last thing before we go, Sundial...we have to shut down what they did to these ponies. Remember in the mountain? The orb on the machine?"

"The Nexus?"

"Yes. We have to shut that thing down. We can't stop them coming here for now, there's not enough time to dismantle it. There's too many for that. But we can delay them. Someday, I'll finish this for good. Once Twilight hears..."

"Let's go! Let's go!" The officer was waving at us. Together, Aurora and I galloped after them, keeping low from the fire being exchanged around corners and over metro benches with the flickering shadows of zebra infiltrators coming from what seemed like every tunnel around us. I felt a swell of pride as I saw some prisoners take up discarded weapons and step onto the line to help hold them off and give their friends a better chance to get away.

Bit by bit, following the waved commands of the officer, they got us across that giant room with the four entrances. We ran when he told us, and dropped when he screamed a warning. Eventually, as they began to shuffle ponies toward the lift out of here, Aurora and I took a new path.

She stumbled, holding her head.

"They've done it wrong...this isn't what it was supposed to do..."

Wrapping my hooves around the mare, I tried to keep her going, as a looming metal door became apparent ahead of us. The central chamber of the metro, where they'd stored the memory nexus itself. The full working model of the prototype on the mountain.

"Please, Aurora..." I muttered, pulling her with me. "We're almost there..."

oooOOOooo

Snapping back to reality, I gasped and stumbled, making Unity yelp in surprise.

"Murky? You okay?"

I had to stay focused. Just keep my eyes on the finish line. That was all I had to do now. Don't let it win. *We're almost there.*

"Just this place..." I clenched my teeth, looking back down the corridor.

Glimmer rested a hoof on my shoulder, taking a rest by using me as a leaning post.

Thanks, sis. Love you too.

"We're gonna have to do Aurora's plan, everyone."

She spoke to the group, as we all gathered around. The parents and foals were setting up on the platform of the magical portal, where zebras must have once stood to leave this city. Yet Brimstone and Coral stood with myself, Unity and Glimmer to listen.

"We have to activate that Nexus in there. Get it to spark power into the station, activate this thing, and then turn off that cursed machine forever before we go. Stop them ever using it, and get out together. All together."

Glimmer's voice was sullen, direct and tired. She was really running on fumes.

Unity closed her eyes for a long enough time that I worried this place was getting to her, but she'd seemed almost serenely immune to it thus far.

"The orb he took from us is primed. I can feel the memory magic around this place. I...I wish I knew how, it's just like I recognise it from a memory that isn't mine."

"Aurora." Brim's voice was low and rough. "The old rot isn't quite gone yet I suppose..."

Unity looked around nervously, before shakily nodding. "I think so, I didn't tell everyone but...but I told Murky. I've been feeling things like her a lot. Since I came here, I recognise it."

Her eyes turned harder, a serious side of her I'd rarely seen.

"Shackles, or Grindstone, has set the orb in place. That's why the Nexus is so out of control. An orb without any memories is sitting in it, waiting for someone to give it a memory to activate with. Aurora experimented with it once. Murky and I heard it on a log in the mountain. We only need to get there, he's put it where we need it..."

And that was where I felt my spirits drop.

"If Shackles put it there, it's because he knows now that we need it to be there. He wants us to come."

Brimstone made a low sound, as though he was thinking and wanted others to expect him to speak any second. His one eye was almost closed, the big warlord looked exhausted and shivery.

"Glim, you need to get this thing ready. Coral, you're not in any state to go anywhere."

He looked at Unity and myself.

"I'll go with them and make sure it's done."

Glimmer stiffened up, standing up from leaning on me to lightly knock the massive earth pony on the shoulder. Her hoof bounced.

"You keep those two safe, okay, big guy?"

Brim closed his eye. "Just get that portal working..."

Coral kissed us both on the forehead, her movements graceful, but slow.

"You'll get there, my dears."

Glimmerlight ruffled my mane, and bumped hooves with Unity, winking at her.

"We'll get that mares night out yet, see you soon."

Unity and I stood either side of Brimstone as we left the portal room to return to the rest of the station.

The Nexus, and undoubtedly something else, awaited us.

We can do this. I kept telling myself that. *We can.*

You said that every time before, replied the nagging thoughts, pulled from my subconscious by this eerie place.

* * *

Shackles was waiting.

He would be.

I had to steel myself. I had to pull my courage to the top now.

Even exiting that room was like pulling myself from a warm bed into the cold. That reluctance and temptation to stay was strong. The marble and sheet metal floors gave way to dark corridors filled with whispers and sparks. Rumbles of collapsing tunnels and eerie howls of unknown forces echoed through them.

Pushing our bodies through the pain to move at this point, we galloped through it all. Brimstone led the way, directed by Unity's shouted commands. Yet at this point, I knew the way as well. I'd seen it, the flickered, confusing memories that wandered this place had made the route from the cells to the Nexus very clear. Looking down, I felt strange to know that I was following the same way that Sundial himself had ran. His, my, pipbuck was retracing its steps before.

History was repeating in a way that made me feel quite intimidated by the scale of time and events around me.

As we came to the central room, running out onto the raised platforms that crossed across the middle, we wheeled right, toward the one exit I'd yet to take in this place, the one to our east. Across from us, to the north, the thick door was bent and buckled inwards, but whatever had chased us before seemed to have gone in search of others. Through the western door, I could hear ponies shrieking and running. Squinting, I saw slavers pass briefly across it, fleeing in a panic. There was no cohesion left down here.

Heading in the opposite direction, we closed in on where Unity and I now knew the Nexus would be. I thought back to the mountain, to that strange arcane device at the centre of a lab. This entire city had been about control. Right from the war with the draft and fear, all the way through a prison, to the slavery and to enforcing memories. This device, these orbs like I had seen on that mountain, were the twisting of beauty into the worst form of control I could imagine.

This entire station was a place of insidious being now, and none of that was the fault of the memory magic itself. It had been abused, taken and used in ways never thought of, and part of me wondered if Ministry Station itself wasn't so much evil as it was just as broken as the unfortunates it had been tested on. If the memories the nexus and its larger orbs had felt around it had been of better times, could this station have instead been a place of peace to all those who wandered its halls?

Instead, it had been forced to remember agony and enslavement. No matter what its original intent, it was now a place of nightmares, projecting it upon everyone who entered it, whether it had ever truly wanted that or not.

As we galloped through rows of traveller lockers and passed by the old metro station cafes, I found myself quite surprised at how much sense that now made, now that I knew the whole story. If we'd had more time, I would have wanted to ask Unity if she-

I tripped. Distracted, I felt my hooves catch on a raised marble slab.

Only I didn't land on the ground.

My sense of direction spiralled, and vertigo surged through me. A sickening wave of nausea passed through my gut into my mouth. Like there was no gravity, I felt myself flip end over end, stretching, reaching out for the others. I saw Unity briefly, then, Brimstone, but they were so distant. So distant and blurry. Unity and-

What was his name again?

Blurry shapes overtook my vision, the two unidentified ponies seemed to fade. I couldn't remember where I was now. I felt scalding ground beneath my hooves as I found myself standing. I could smell hot metal and toxic fumes.

I was a slave, and this was my factory.

Dark shapes stared down at me. I could see a cream unicorn huddled and shivering, her stringy light orange mane with red streaks covering her face as tears dripped from below it. The shapes, those imposing dark figures raised a hoof. I saw the glint of a metal studded whip.

The roof began to close in, tightening, as the machines, whips and barking orders condensed, pulling inwards until I felt like I was in a small tunnel underground, surrounded by slavery. Orders were being barked at me from every side, so many that their voices overlapped until I couldn't hear them. I screamed at them that I didn't understand, how could I obey them if they all talked at once? A farmer, a factory overseer, a lecturer, a monster. They twisted and stretched, their bodies bending around me, following my face no matter which way I looked.

Chains crept like snakes along the ground, moving with a life of their own. I tried to run, but I couldn't remember where I was trying to run to. One by one, they snapped shut around my legs, as I pulled and pulled and screamed.

Something massive curled around me, and pulled at me as though I were being yanked out of water.

I surfaced, and saw a spiralling cafe area of Ministry Station. Dizziness sent me reeling into an upturned chair and table, away from Brimstone Blitz who stood with Unity held in one hoof like a foal. His other one had been lifting me.

Gasping, sweating as panic and adrenaline surged through me in equal measure, I held my head.

"What...what the hell was-"

Brimstone shook his head and reached out to pull me with him.

"Something in the mind..." His normally gruff voice was low and dangerous. "Stay focused..."

Unity cried out and fell from his grasp, stumbling until she realised where she was. Her cheeks were streaked with tears. Reaching out, I tried to help her, but she fled from my hooves for a second, eyes wide.

"I was...I was back home, I was being taken again..." Her panting voice was thin and high pitched, more vulnerable and fragile than I'd ever heard her.

Brimstone pushed both of us ahead of him. "Keep...moving..." He growled and stared directly ahead.

Unity limped and bumped against me as she found her way. Up ahead I could see the exit to the food court, now a disused area where slavers had spent their time with cards and drink while stationed down here. I put hoof in front of hoof and kept moving. The exit at the end here led to where I'd seen Aurora and Sundial go. The last door. We just had to-

"You are Number Seven!"

I screamed as I felt the lash split my back. Falling to my stomach, I cried out for him to stop. I knew he wouldn't. Turning my head, I could see his beady eyes staring at me with a sick mixture of anger and pleasure.

"Stop! I...I am..."

"You are Number-"

The apparition was made blurry as Unity came surging through it and picked me up. The pain faded to a dull throb of memory on my back.

"Murky! I'm here, keep moving! It's this place! Fight it, it's not real!"

I wailed as I saw the blur raise that whip again toward here, but it faded before anything landed. Shivering, I clung to her as she kept trying to push me ahead. Brimstone was in front of me, angrily tossing a table out of the way and breathing hard.

"Fight it! Fight-"

She shrieked, falling against me instead. I didn't know from what memory, but the sound yanked me from my own nightmares. Unity was hurting. Unity needed my help. Just like I needed hers.

"Unity, I'm here!" I pulled her up into a hug, trying to edge closer and closer, following the path Brimstone made for us. Together, we fought through it. Each helping the other. Friendship defeating the memories. If one stumbled, the other was there to help.

We would do it, together.

We always-

Two ponies escaped. Together we ran from the Ministry of Arcane Science slave-den to try and make it to the wall. The siren had sounded, the griffins had gone up to hunt. Beside me, I saw Unity racing forward, keeping pace with me as we made for our planned route. We each were the others only friend since we'd come here, since we'd met in a factory. Since we'd found comfort in the other being a good pony at heart. I'd helped her feel confident. She'd helped me feel like more than a number.

"Come on, Unity! We're almost there!" I struggled and spoke, trying to keep her moving.

"They're coming!" She shouted, and I turned to see the dark shapes from above descending. Nets, shock sticks and whips were held in their vicious talons.

Something grabbed us both from behind. We struggled, but there wasn't any pain. Being shaken from the delusion, I saw the shadows clear until Brim's face stared down at us. He was grimacing, scowling and shaking his head, warding us away with his hoof.

"Go..."

"Brim, what wr-"

"GO!"

Brimstone Blitz sent us both sliding across the floor to slide to the end of the cafe, before he stumbled away and lashed out at some invisible foe. My head hurt, I could barely tell what was what any more. We were in Ministry Station, but things I had seen, they were so *real*. They were *my* memories.

Behind us, however, a great crashing became obvious as Brimstone hurled an enormous table into a line of old vending machines.

"You can't have my clan!" He bellowed, twisting to snarl at whatever he saw. A furious anger burned in him. A savage bestiality.

The fear in my gut mounted as he swung and destroyed anything in reach of himself. His wounds reopening from trying to fight something with a body much less healthy than he apparently now saw that he had.

"Back down you runt! This is my clan! My raiders!"

Unity was backing away from him, and I did much the same.

This wasn't the Brim I knew, and we couldn't be there to snap him out of it without getting crushed. He charged and struck against the side of a bar, smashing it into tinder wood.

This was the Dragon, and who knew what he would do to any shapes he saw, one strike would kill us.

"Murky, if we do what we have to, it'll end it for him, it has to!" Unity tugged at me, as I watched my oldest protector snarl and froth, a berserker like persona that he had long put to rest by the time I met him.

I didn't want to-

"Murky! Move! We can help him, but not here!"

Unity grabbed my head and pulled it to hers. I was crying, she was too. This was all so much.

“It's the memory magic of the orb, Murky! Shackles has put it in *without* a memory, it's trying to find some, but this place is so corrupted and ruined that it's trying to find your worst memories to take, to give it something! Stay together!”

I saw her determined, but fearful eyes, and nodded with a whimper. Behind us, we left Brimstone. I only prayed we'd fix this in time to save him from really hurting himself.

Holding hooves, we took step after step, approaching that same thick door I'd seen Sundial arrive at.

“Brace yourself, Murky...”

Unity winced and grabbed its handle in her magic, before pulling.

oooOOOooo

I raced inside, following Aurora. A great white light hit my eyes and sent me reeling. I heard Aurora shout something, and grab my hoof to pull me with her.

“Stay with me, Sundial! I need you here!”

oooOOOooo

Unity pulled me from ahead. I pushed forward, a blinding green gleam from within the chamber making my head throb. It all emanated from the orb. The same one we'd found on the mountain top. The one that was the key to getting out of here.

It was held within a giant, walk in freezer, probably for the café outside. A metal gantry had been built above the slick floor to support the machine itself, with a walkway in a circle around it. Below it, the ground was covered in a thin layer of ice. It wasn't large, but it held the orb ten feet above the ground, looking like the pedestal or spire I'd seen in old books of legends in Equestria, crafted from stone and metal. Arcane symbols that glowed seemingly from within were carved upon it, along with strange markings that didn't look like any Equestrian language I knew, looking more ritualistic.

Yet as I pushed inwards, I felt the room grow so much larger, like reality was bending around it.

I felt my hoof slip from hers. Then she was gone.

“Unity? Where are you?”

oooOOOooo

"I'm right here!"

Aurora was just ahead, climbing up onto the gantry within the large room. The temperature in here had dropped. It looked like it was converted from the old freezer of the food court, with a metal walkway added above the slippery floor. Around the edge, generators were hooked up to an enlarged version of the memory machines from before, the ones designed to let non-unicorns see memories. Atop it, on a small metal and stone spire covered in markings, lay a memory orb gleaming like Celestia's sun itself in purest white.

The Ministry leader was covering her eyes, trying to push toward the orb. My head was splitting from the intensity of the light.

"Hold on, Aurora! I'm coming, I'll-"

oooOOOooo

"-help!"

I pushed forward, before finding myself facing in a different direction from where I thought I was. Screaming, I tried to tell the present day from memory. I fell onto the ice-cold metal walkway. The white became a sickly, balefire-like green as I blinked and stared at the orb. It warped and pulsed with a magical aura, seemingly uncontrolled. My throat thickened. The shot of sickness passed right through me, and I threw up off the side of the gantry, looking down the short two foot drop toward-

The street below the Orphanage. One little step forward and it'd be over...

I leaned. I didn't even realise how far I was gone before-

Unity's hoof grabbed onto my sweater, pulling me until I fell onto my back, looking up at her tearful eyes. I could see desperation and care in them as she stared down at me.

"I'm not letting you go..."

Filled with renewed purpose, I-

-surged upwards, grabbing her in a tight embrace in the glow of the memory nexus itself. Breathing hard, I turned to look at it. Together, we guided ourselves toward the centre of the room, right below the orb.

The same place.

"This is it!"

I caught her eyes, helping support us both up.

"Unity..."

oooOOOooo

"Aurora..."

oooOOOooo

"End it."

Getting up, I saw Unity take a deep breath and nod, an inspiring strength on her face. She turned toward the orb and marched up the gantry steps, until she was just below the orb itself. Spreading her hooves, she planted her forelegs on the railings and closed her eyes.

Her horn lit, a hazy red amongst the sick green. Twinkles and rings began to pulse around it, and I heard her gasp with effort. Her body shook, her hind legs almost giving way as her horn suddenly sparked and grasped the orb itself in a tight field of magic.

"I can't do this, it's so complicated! I've never worked on magic like this!" She muttered to herself, before groaning and almost slipping.

Catching her, keeping her upright, I held on to her.

"Yes you can. Aurora Star knew you could! She believed in you!" I paused, before taking a sharp breath. "And I believe in you! We all do!"

Something bolstered in her, for the field around the orb suddenly grew stronger as she gritted her teeth. Our manes blasted backwards as the collision of magic sent a wave of power rocketing around it, not unlike Coral's own magic.

I heard Unity scream in effort, before finally she got her magic locked onto it. Waves of power kicked at my sore body and rattled the gantry we were on. Slowly, the overwhelming green hue began to fade and grow dimmer.

"I...I have to get it to properly activate first!" Unity strained to speak. "I'll tell you when it's...when it's at full and I can...I can shut it down for good!"

"You can do this!" I encouraged her. I hoped Glimmer was ready back at the portal chamber to make use of this.

“Very sweet, just like the last time I caught you two.”

The voice cut through everything like a cold spear to my heart.

“One of Aurora's last 'special' orbs, the unicorn with the power to project memory into other things and the perfect slave. I told you long ago, Number Seven, everything I own always comes back to me in the end.”

I heard his stomping hooves. As the green flaring light died down and Unity strained with Aurora's spell, I saw his leering face in the darkness behind the nexus itself. His huge body stood up, moving away from a back door to the chamber. A hulking shape that set the gantry creaking began to move toward us.

He came toward me, ordering a slaver to use the firehose...

...to strike me and always move into my personal space to remind me I had none...

...to bring the lash down again and again...

...to play games, order me to do things, ask questions that had only horrible answers...

...to put the collar back on.

Yelping, I staggered back. It was as though the memories were fresh as he slowly marched over the circular platform around the orb. His face was twitching, and he had an obsessive gleam in his eye.

This place was affecting him as well. Ever since he'd found this place, he'd become more obsessed than ever before.

“Unity...move, we need to-” I whispered to her, trying to pull her by the torso.

“I can't...the spell, it...eergh....” She gasped with the effort, sweat streaming down her face.

Shackles held out his hoof. I heard a clattering of chains, as I saw two collars in it, one of which I recognised all too well. Unity's eye facing him was open and fearful. I felt frozen as he moved toward us. He stepped around the gantry, gradually coming closer, as I stood shivering between him and Unity.

“Put them on. This fanciful runaway attempt was longer, but it always ends. It always does, Number Seven. You are mine, if both of you run then you will be trapped. If

you run alone, then you'll know I have her. Now put it on, Number Seven. There's no Protégé to shoot at me for you this time."

He sneered, looming over us, chains dragging on the ground. The comment struck deep, and he saw the reaction on my face.

"In fact, there's no Protégé at all now."

The brief silence that followed was interrupted as I felt it all rise back up. Every frustration, every bit of grief and sadness.

Every bit of *anger*.

My body moved before my sanity even caught up with me. I screamed at him, for the first time, in rage rather than terror, and launched at him.

Shackles merely caught me, twisted and hurled me against the far wall. Spinning in the air, I impacted upside down and dropped onto the back of my neck. Wailing, I held it with my hooves on the ice-slick floor of the old freezer locker.

A thick crunch beside me indicated Shackles had dropped off the gantry. I saw him raise his hooves and kicked off the wall. Sliding on the slippery floor, I shot between his legs and crawled under the gantry itself before his hooves slammed down. The thin ice shattered, revealing the old floor beneath it. Already, I could feel the chill penetrating into my body from lying against it, but that was the least of my worries.

"You know what I do to the disobedient, Number Seven!"

Turning, he grabbed the thin metal gantry and tore a section clean off, reaching in for me. Kicking at his face, I kept trying to get him further away from Unity, trying to flick a foreleg to get my battle saddle to activate as I crawled through the metal struts. Up above me, I saw Unity stumble and fall against the railing, moaning as her horn flickered and threatened to drop the spell.

"Keep going, Unity!" I screamed up to her, as I felt the mechanism of my trigger finally whip out to my mouth. Twisting, I angled it at Shackles and fired off the grapple-hook.

It impacting directly on Shackles' chest, making the massive stallion stumble back with a grunt. Getting out from under the gantry, I fled to the back of the room instead, fumbling with my saddlebag and trying not to slip and fall on the ice. *Rarity's Grace* wouldn't do it, but I had something that might.

Chainlink Shackles wasn't willing to give me the time.

The whip shot out, and this time for real, sending a welt of pain across my lower back. Screaming, I dropped to my side as my legs gave way. Exhausted and stumbling, I floundered.

My old master's hoof landed on my chest before I could get anywhere, and sent Protégé's revolver skittering across the floor before I could use its heavier rounds. The crushing impact jarred the leg caught between my chest and his hoof, before he picked me up and dumped me into the corner with enough force that every bit of air was forced from my lungs. I heard Unity shriek as she saw it, but my vision was hazy. I kept having to blink, feeling like I could see the Mall, the prison, the soil fields of Fillydelphia or his personal office. His mad face grinned at me in obsessive glee, rotten teeth yellow and clear in the light. It was the same no matter where I was. It was the same grin, the same teeth, the same scar. He was a constant. An unchanging figure who I felt like had been with me my whole life. I was the born slave struggling to be more. He was the born slaver striving to remove change.

Here, now, I just couldn't fathom what could make anyone be like that.

"I was always waiting for you, Number Seven. Someone like you. It had to be you."

Gasping, fighting for air, I shook my head.

"Why? *Why me?*! Why did you choose me for all this? I'm not the only born slave ever! I'm not the only pegasus ever! I'm not the only pony who ever wanted out! *WHY ME?!*"

He lowered toward me. I could smell the reek of sweat and rot coming from him this close. His eyes were glazed over; he'd lost it. This place had broken him as much as it broke me. But his tone was shockingly quiet. No demand I not speak when not asked a question. No demand that I end with 'Master'.

"Because the others just didn't last this long, and I'm just as determined to never give up and lose control as you are..."

The line sent a shockwave through me. I didn't know what kind of childhood was needed to create a stallion like this. I didn't know what had been the point when he had snapped, but finally I realised why he saw me as comparable.

I had been right.

It had always been about control. Whatever had happened to him, he was a *born slaver*. Growing up, the thought of losing control of others was as strong to him as my drive to not lose control of myself.

Then Red Eye had come.

He was, in his own sick way, fighting to regain control. The insanity, the disgusting logic of a broken mind, reminded me of all the reasons I wanted to be free from this place, from this kind of life.

I had to be free from this madness.

I had to be.

I had to be!

Biting hard on my trigger, the grapple wound in from behind Shackles. Repeating the same trick I'd used against Sooty, I yanked it as it neared, sending the metal hooks belting into the side of him. They dug into his armour, sinking deep.

Roaring in pain, Shackles recovered a lot faster than Sooty did.

The sudden impact across the side of my face sent me whirling across the floor to lie in a heap. I felt my cheek swelling, and a tooth felt loose. Looking up, I saw him turn and stamp toward me.

"I don't make threats..." He snarled. **"I simply carry them out, Number Seven."**

The whip dropped to his side again, and he bit into its grip. Shivering, I gazed at it, trying to protect myself as best I could.

Above me, I saw the orb suddenly flare brightly. The green flares from it dimmed, as a brighter white began to pick up from it. Behind the Nexus itself, I saw Unity standing strongly on, her horn flaring with a second aura, much like Coral Eve's had before. Her eyes were wide, staring directly into the orb itself. Around me, I heard the hum as all the machines and connections to the Nexus itself sprung into being. The lights on the roof above brightened. More power than ever before began to spread through the whole facility.

Chainlink Shackles stopped, staring at it with a scowl, before Unity's eyes turned to him.

"He is more than just a number...and he's not yours. This place, these orbs...they need memories, they see memories, they seek them out. I see...I see memories..."

The spirals of power from the orb reflected out and around us all. Aurora's research, taken to its zenith, activated before my eyes. Unity's mane was surging in the air behind her.

"I see *yours*." She twisted her face to one of disgust. "And I see why you're so afraid inside, because of what happened to you when you *had* no control. What your fath-"

Shackles roared at her, surging toward the gantry again. **"Quiet, you little runt!"**

Unity screamed back at him as the orb blinkered and shone one last time.

"Murky was stronger than you ever were! He became a pony to be proud of knowing, no matter what you did to him! You only tried to repeat what happened to you on others because it made you feel stronger!"

"SILENCE, SLAVE!" Shackles stormed around the gantry, and I saw his lash crack through the air. Unity's head whipped backwards, as he struck her directly on the face, and she fell, clinging on with only one hoof to the nexus' railing.

But she would surprise even me, for she didn't fall any further. Throwing her other hoof back on to the metal to catch herself; she rose once again, despite the pain, and stared directly at him. She was breathing hard, and a line of blood from the gash in her forehead ran down her face, but her eyes were strong, and undefeated.

"I'd pity you for why you did all this...but I know you eventually started to enjoy it. Your chance to create a city of ponies who'd never be able to stand up to you? You're a coward! It's over, and no matter what happens, I can be proud of that!"

A beam of light shot from her horn, striking the orb, and emitted an enormous ring of sparkling white light. The gantry railings were blasted off. I saw Shackles and Unity hurled back, before I slammed against the wall again.

Before the light blinded me, I saw the connection between Unity's horn and the orb grow stronger.

The strength to get to her surged through me, and I pulled myself up, trying not to look at the orb itself that flared again and again, as the energies in it, the memories were shut down bit by bit. I felt everything it had shown me collapsing away. The whispers in the shadows quietened one by one. Climbing onto the gantry, I saw Unity lying on her side, writhing and crying out. Her horn had a third aura around it. I pulled myself bit by bit, before diving to her side and holding her.

"Unity!"

Her shouts were dying away. Around me, the entire chamber was crumbling. The magical power unleashed when Unity had activated the nexus itself and started to break the memory spells it was woven with had weakened the already damaged area's roof.

"Unity!"

Behind us, Chainlink Shackles suddenly loomed against the white light. I tried to pull Unity away, to try and break the link that was clearly costing her strength, but that monster followed us.

Brimstone's warcry carried into the room. Thundering across the floor, he came charging into the nexus' chamber, leaping right over us.

His dive sent him crashing into Shackles. The old warlord tumbled head over hooves with the slavemaster, crushing the gantry below them. Together, they rolled off it, dropping to the far side of the machine. Rising, I saw the hatred in their eyes. Brimstone's hooves flew with the experience to get striking right away, throwing a blow to the stomach that buckled Shackles, dropping him to the floor. Rising up, Brim brought both front hooves together to try to drop them hard. Snarling, Shackles blocked them and drove Brimstone into the wall, ramming his thick bulk into the red stallion. The two quickly staggered away from one another, grasping at the walls. They were both injured, but Shackles retreated from him, stepping up on the gantry.

He paused and stared at me, then at Unity, and then me again. With a sick grin, he reached out and cranked out of the dials on the Nexus. Lights shone from the platform holding the orb. The spell it was imbued with shone out and magnified to a much higher potency.

While Unity was still connected to it.

I heard her sudden shriek of terror, as whatever she was trying to shut down grew stronger. Shivering, with spasms every time her horn glowed brighter, she wept and cried out with one final effort.

I felt my ears pop, as the feeling of something invisible shattering exploded in the air around me. Control panels burst and wires spiralled into the air. The glow of magic snapped and deadened. The spell flickered and warped through a whole rainbow of colours in the air, before imploding onto itself.

Unity had broken the spell. She'd done it. Aurora Star's spell had worked just as it should have. Exhausted, she fell limp into my grasp.

In the aftermath, I could feel the creeping ambience of memory magic in the air, leftovers of the stronger, more malignant spell that had been unleashed again and again in their sick experiments down here.

Shackles glared directly at me.

"You'll never truly escape me, Number Seven. You'll come back to me."

The orb, now glowing only a light cream with orange wisps and red streaks; sparked dangerously. Even while Shackles saw Brimstone rising, prepared for a fight, he kept his eyes on me and backed away.

“You'll always come back to me in the end.”

A section of the roof caved, dropping a pillar between Shackles and Brimstone.

“Murky, get out of this room!” Brimstone hollered, coming running back.

“Always!”

Brimstone grabbed me, yanking me into the cafe again and slamming the door shut behind us. I could see another corridor behind Shackles, another exit to the locker. His grinning face never left me as he slowly backed away into the safety of the opposite door, before the one facing me slammed shut.

“Always.”

The cafe itself was starting to crumble, but concrete shattered down behind us in the room with the glowing orb. I hoped it buried it forever.

Putting Unity down, I held on to her limp body until Brimstone slammed the door shut behind us, trapping that vile magic within it. Slowly, I forced myself to finally open my eyes and look at her, hoping against hope that whatever he'd done hadn't-

I felt a stab of terror - she didn't move.

Long seconds passed. I spoke to her, lightly shook her, held her and used my own body to protect her from the small bits of debris falling as the unstable metro station began to fracture above our heads.

“Please...please don't go...” I cradled her, crying into her shoulder. My stomach clenched tightly. I heard Brimstone step behind me and stare over, as I simply held her.

“Don't make me lose another friend...” I hoped, I prayed.

Ignoring the crashes and crumbly closings around us, I only stayed there for her. Nothing else mattered. Then, slowly, at last, I finally saw Unity's eyes open again, and breathed a sigh of relief. She blinked, moving vaguely as she figured out where she was. Hugging her tightly, I cleared her mane from her face.

“Unity? Unity, are you okay? You did it...you actually did it! We can go home!”

She looked at me with dizzied eyes, before looking around, seemingly confused.

Feeling my heart thud a little faster, I jostled her slightly, "Hey, hey! It's me!"

Her eyes just kept staring. There was no reaction at all. Panicking, I got her up, but she just stood and stared blankly.

"Unity! It's me! Murky!"

Unity just stared ahead past me. She wasn't even looking me in the eyes.

A bit of rubble from the roof dropped and struck against her head hard enough that anyone would react. Crying out, I pulled her away as cracks split up the walls of the food court, joining the ones on the ceiling. Plaster and fragments began to drop around us. I could hear fresh gunfire in the distance, and shrieking howls muffled by thick walls.

She didn't react to anything.

"Unity!" I screamed at her, starting to feel my eyes dampen. The same sinking feeling as I'd felt when I saw Protégé go down began to fall over me. We'd come so far! I couldn't lose someone else! Not like this!

"Unity! Your name is Unity!"

I shook her again, and again.

"YOUR NAME IS UNITY!" I shrieked.

Brimstone looked on sadly, before jumping to the side as a thick slab fell beside us. This entire area was unstable now, but I held onto her. I didn't care.

"Speak to me! Say something!"

She didn't.

"ANYTHING!"

She didn't.

It was like a blank slate. Her eyes refused to look at me. Tears streaming down my cheeks, I fought to get my journal out, I'd show her! Make her remember! But I felt Brimstone pulling at me.

“Murky, we have to move now! This entire wing is going to collapse! That bombardment earlier and then that spell shook the foundations loose!”

I threw him off and held onto Unity.

“I don't care! Get off me! We can fix this! We can find a way to fix this! Unity, it's me! MURKY! You...you and I! We're friends! You're from Friendship City! Look at me! *Please!*”

From the side of the cafe area, a sealed door bent under the weight of an archway collapsing. The stench of rotten mint flooded into the area.

Brimstone's huge legs grabbed us both, and I shrieked and fought him as he threw us onto his back, before galloping off. Behind us, enormous chunks fell to the floor, as I just held the blank, motionless *thing* that had once been Unity in my forelegs. What had that spell done to her? What had that orb done to her? Shackles had done something right at the end, he'd done something to rob me of something at the very last moment.

Again.

“No...” I cried into her shoulder, feeling nothing reacting in return. This was just cruel. It was unfair! “No...no...not after all this. Not again. NOT AGAIN!”

Screaming, crying, I was carried with her, as Brimstone raced through Ministry Station, as it finally began to crumble under the weight of the war, the impacts and the unleashed magic within it. He outran the monsters, he smashed through fleeing slavers. He got us both back. Both of us. Both alive.

She was alive, in the strictest sense.

But I'd still somehow lost her.

* * *

Glimmerlight had done it. The portal was active. In the end, all her planning had worked out. All the hours she'd spent pouring over details and routes, it had paid off.

Brimstone Blitz had done it. He'd kept those he protected alive. He'd ended the horror of the Bloodletters and he had, in the eyes of many, redeemed himself.

Coral Eve had done it. The foals were safe. She had found her son, and made it to the point she'd promised she would, finding a way to forgive and find a new way forward.

Unity had-

I sobbed and had my head in my hooves again.

She'd done it. She'd finally put an end to the whole horror of what Aurora Star had been forced to start. Only in doing so it had cost her.

I'd watched Glimmerlight examine her through tear-stained eyes. She confirmed my fears. That orb, whatever Shackles had done, had cut out memories similarly to what Glimmer used to do to herself. Only, it wasn't the precise and targeted methods she used. It was effectively complete.

Aside from basic instincts, almost nothing remained. Glimmer had come out of trying to view one of Unity's current memories with a sudden migraine and a sharp scream. It was just a jumbled mess. She'd said it was like she was far away, trapped somewhere else, and what she saw made no sense at all.

From that point, I'd simply found the quietest, darkest corner of the portal room and sat with my head tucked into my hooves.

I couldn't stop thinking about every time Unity and I had escaped danger. Every time she'd saved my life. Every time I'd saved hers. I remembered the way we'd giggled like foals over silly little things, or the times we'd been there to comfort the other in this journey; whether or not we each remembered it. I recalled the ways she used to tease me about my journal drawings, or the way we'd bicker about whether I'd landed or crashed. The way she'd been the one to help me confront losing Protégé. The way we'd sat atop the Mall and agreed to spend time together after we got out of here.

To spent time together. Just us. Just in case.

Daring to look up, I saw her standing looking blankly at a wall. I couldn't bring myself to keep looking, or to hold her. It *wasn't* her.

I just wished I'd done something else. If I'd not been so weak, maybe I could have knocked Shackles back. If I weren't so small and useless.

I just wanted her to be safe, so I could have my friend back.

Holding my Pipbuck closely, I finally felt like I understood the core of what Sundial had been going through.

Behind her, I could see my friends helping to get the foals and all the supplies we'd carried with us onto the portal's platform. There were rumours about unicorns who could

teleport, this seemed to just be a bigger version. Glimmerlight had explained it worked similarly to the spell-orbs, a contained knowledge, fed through a machine. The orb being charged had given it enough energy for one last trip; to where-ever it ended up.

A murderous hell that was breaking out in the metro station behind the thick metal door. I could still feel the creepy ambience in the air. It was lessened, without the sense of something evil lurking where the memory nexus once had been, but memories still felt like they were drifting through the air. I knew that anywhere was better than here.

We were effectively ready.

We'd escaped.

Unity was standing right there, but I felt like we'd left her behind.

I couldn't-

oooOOOooo

-keep up. My singed hooves stung with pain as I tried to keep up with Aurora. The stairs out of the metro station were far too sharp and steep to get up with any sort of speed after everything I'd just been through.

The streets of Fillydelphia were a complete shock to the system after all that. Bright red brick and sculpted concrete between grass mounds and benches. Coloured wagons rolled back and forth, with all manner of smiling ponies unaware of what had just happened beneath the ground. I could see the tower of the Arcane Ministry above the tenant housing rooftop, and the chariots offering to take ponies to the Harmony Mall.

The serenity would never last long, as ponies saw the prisoners come limping and dragged out into the sun. Exhausted, as medical wagons started to pull up and the soldiers started trying to call for help, I fell against a tree and held my head in my hooves.

It was over.

Aurora dropped beside me, and we shared a glance, and a relieved smile. Now that word was out, the Equestrian Army would purge the metro. The officer had said word would get sent out to Frontier Six Two, the outpost that had spotted the other side of the zebra's portal.

Things would have been happier, but for the sudden beeping from my pipbuck.

Looking down, expecting an alarm I'd forgotten to turn off, I felt my blood run cold.

"No...no no no...Aurora...Aurora, look!" I stammered, pushing it to her to see.

The tired mare adjusted her glasses and stared at the screen, before pulling out some form of pager and checking herself, tapping it impatiently. Around us, I saw every radio equipped soldier suddenly stop and get that same look of disbelief. I finally forced myself to read it.

"All valid, in-date, Stable-Tec ticket holders please report to your designated Stable immediately. Its location has been automatically added to your E.F.S interface. Only ticket holders will be admitted. Bring a minimum of belongings. Move with haste and remain calm.

This is not a drill."

Those five words.

Those last five words.

I stumbled to my hooves. I felt sick. I looked around, panicking, but seeing most of the city blissfully unaware. Was it a glitch? Did I really have to? Why now?

This. Is. Not. A. Drill.

Any bit of doubt was removed. With a slow, warbling and bass filled moan, I heard the sirens.

Across the rooftops, echoing off the hills either side of Filly, the Balefire Alarm System was activated. The rise in volume matched the sudden tingling I felt all over my body. I felt my eyes water. Around me, ponies ceased moving and started looking at one another. They didn't know, they weren't sure. Foals wailed at the sound. Wagons stopped on the spot. Slowly, one by one, the truth began to seep in as that horrible, mournful sound surged through the air again and again and again. A death note for the end of the world.

Then the first people panicked. The fleeing started. The screaming followed. Pegasi took off. Shoppers dropped their bags, or foolishly kept them clutched as though they could save them. Wagon drivers begged people to help detach them from their rides. Past us, dozens fled into the metro we'd just left. The soldiers were barking orders and trying to pick up the prisoners.

No-one knew what to do.

"Aurora...Aurora, help me, I-I...I don't know..." I begged her, I felt confused and paralyzed by fear. The world felt blurry. Detecting my lack of movement, my pipbuck started a shrill and loud beeping on top of the sirens that, strangely, made me scream.

Her hooves grabbed me.

"Come with me! The Ministry's built to withstand it, we've got a basement!"

She was just as scared as the rest of us. Together, we fled through the crowds, many of the soldiers coming with us, pulling a wounded one with them, before a single driving thought made me stop.

"I can't! I can't!"

"Sundial what are you doing?" Her voice cracked into a terrified shriek.

Gulping, I looked down the next street, toward where I knew-

"Skydancer. I can't leave her! I need to get her to the Stable, we'll get in!"

Aurora opened her mouth, but didn't say anything. We were both knocked about by ponies fleeing and screaming, but Aurora just sniffed and took a deep breath.

"You're a better pony than I ever realised, Sundial. Go find her."

"Thank you..."

"Thank you."

With that, for what was likely the final time, we parted ways. I saw her help with the wounded soldier, as she started pulling him toward the Ministry. Instead, I turned back.

It was the reason all this started. To make her safe with me in case this happened.

I began galloping toward my own streets, the ones I knew she lived in. I thought about my father, my friends. I had no idea where they'd be.

I just hoped I could get to her in time.

oooOOOooo

Startling myself back to reality, I gasped and shuffled away.

Looking around, it looked like most had just assumed I had nodded off.

This place was still brimming with memories. I wondered how many it had gathered over the years. How many lost souls from the world above it had remembered the final days of.

Wiping my eyes, I let my heart settle from the rending fear of having seen *the* moment. That one moment when everyone knew it was over.

He'd gone back to get someone he cared about, even when it seemed hopeless.

Slowly my eyes focused on the blank form of Unity, standing motionless as ever as Glimmerlight and Coral gently tried to get her onto the platform.

What had Chainlink Shackles done to her? Was there no way I could undo it? Would she slowly remember who she was?

There was just one little niggling thought in my head. I'd *recognised* that the power growing before she'd shut it down had made it more difficult for her. It seemed logical to assume that's what had gone wrong, but something about it just felt, well, familiar.

As my friends gave me space to my grief, while they set about getting us ready to leave, I found myself looking at my pipbuck, and beginning to search.

For anything.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing...

* * *

Some minutes later, I heard the soft trotting of Glimmerlight as she limped over to me and lowered her head.

"Hey, lil'bro..." Her voice was low, heartbroken by the loss of Unity as well. "It's time to go. Time to be free."

Pulling me upright, she hugged me tightly.

"We'll maybe find a way, I'll help and...and see if I can't put something back together. Maybe being away from here will help?"

I didn't say anything, I just sniffed and held onto my sister. Gently, she led me over to the main console. Lights flickering around several levers, not that it was working again. Behind it, the portal itself was a low platform surrounded by a cage that would lock in its intended things to

be teleported. I figured it was to make sure no-one was standing at the edge of it and maybe got half transported. A portal with safety railings. How about that.

Unfortunately, what normally would have made me smile to see only produced a dull and unwilling ache instead.

As though seeking something to be said, Glimmer pointed out the levers.

“Just one flick of this one here, then we canter up and we're gone. We made it.”

Upon that platform I saw them all waiting. Amongst them, Unity was being held protectively by Coral Eve. Feeling sick, I looked away from her blank stare and instead glanced up at Glimmer.

“Can I...can I pull it?”

She ruffled my mane. “After all this, you deserve to be the one.”

Kissing my forehead, she wandered over to her things and picked them up, before joining the others on the platform. Slowly, I turned back to the console and tried to stop myself shivering in trepidation. This was it. No turning back.

I reached out and pulled the lever to close the cage shut around them, and then immediately threw my weight on it to snap the lever off. Up on the platform, the metal bars descended and rolled into position. Safety locks engaged, holding it shut.

Any talking on the platform ceased. I saw them panic, noticing me back outside and realising what was happening. Glimmerlight rushed up against the thick bars of the protective cage, now more like a prison to those ready to be transported. She shook at them, yelling out to me.

“Murky! Murky what's going on?!”

I couldn't look her in the eye as I did this.

Biting my lip hard enough to feel it bleeding, eyes watering, I pulled down the next one to start the portal up, to engage the teleportation spell. I'd watched her figure it out, sneakily viewing from the side.

“Murky stop! STOP!”

She reached out with her magic, but the lever was broken. She tried to grab my hoof with it, but I shook it off. Above them all, a magical spark began to form.

It was done, there was no stopping it now.

All of them crowded against the cage, reaching through, screaming at me to stop. Telling me that I was free. My sister's voice carried above it. Slowly, I trotted nearer, looking at the ground.

"Stop! Please, stop! You don't have to be a slave! You can come too! You don't have to stay! Murky, please, don't do this! Don't!"

In front of them all, I finally looked up at them through tear-stained eyes.

"I'm not a slave." I sobbed, and forced myself to keep going. "I just...I...I can't leave her...I know a way."

Reaching down, I hit the play button on my pipbuck, and let the audio-diary I'd collected from Aurora Star's assistant Sparkler play. I'd found it in his office on the mountain, just after the firefight inside the prototype memory nexus lab. As soon as it began playing again, I held it up and cranked the volume dial.

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

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

All my hunting, all the clues, I'd managed to finally dig out the one that made me realise what I had to do now. My chest heaving, I put down my pipbuck leg and spoke quietly to them, my eyes finding the emotionless ones of Unity.

"Together, or not at all, remember?"

I had never, in my whole life, seen my sister's face as distraught and agonised as I now saw it. Not any pain of slavery, nor any horrid truth compared to the look in her eyes, and it hurt me dearly. She sank down, pushing her hooves through towards me.

“We'll help you, Murky, we'll help you! Let us out and we'll go with you! You don't have to-”

Screwing up my eyes, I found myself suddenly screaming, as the well of emotion finally boiled over. I struck my hooves against the cage.

“You're all almost dead already! *Every* time we...we have to go back to get something, to do that little bit more, I *lose someone!* Caduceus, Ragini, Mister Peace, Protégé...”

I almost lost it, feeling the hollowing in my stomach to say one more, the pain making me whine. “...and now Unity...I...I just...”

I wailed it out, my voice breaking and rasping from my throat in utter terror.

“I DON'T WANT TO LOSE ANY MORE OF MY *FRIENDS!*”

Collapsing down, my tears hitting the metal floor beneath me, I felt Glimmer's hooves on my own, holding them tightly through the cage.

“Murky, I don't want to lose *you!* It's...it's not fair.”

Then, from behind her, I felt Brimstone's massive hoof rest on his side of the bars, on top of where my left one was. To the right, Coral's gentle touch held on.

No-one could say anything else. I heard the whine of the portal's spell picking up its power. I didn't have long. This would be the last time for a very very long while, if at all.

And I didn't want to see them crying as my last time.

I steeled myself, trying to force a smile. I had to be strong.

“It's just, y'know, the long route, right? Maybe I'll get out some other way, someday...”

Glimmerlight reached all the way through, grabbing me and hugging me against the bars.

“No! You're going to do it this time. You will! I...I can't stand the thought of you not. So you're going to *do* it this time. You are. You *are*. Please...do it, I don't want to lose you. I can't. You're going to help Unity and...and then you're going to get over that wall. And you're going to come find us, and I'll...I'll have your new home ready.”

Brimstone leaned down against the bars.

“Aye, if there's any pony I've ever known who can make the impossible happen.”

Coral Eve stroked the hoof she held in both of hers.

“I know you'll make us all proud when you walk into our new village with stories to tell.”

Shocked, my mouth hanging open, I stared at them all.

“I...I...”

Glimmerlight couldn't bring herself to smile in support as they did. Letting me go, letting me stand up, she wiped her eyes.

“You're not the same Murky I met, lil'bro.”

Her magic held up her own mirror, and I felt a sudden rush of worry as to what I would see. I always remembered what I'd seen long ago whenever I looked in them. A fragile, skeletal little ruined pony with rags, broken wings and a meek expression of submission. One who would cry at the vaguest threat, who would beg and plead. A pony who shrank away from challenge, who stopped when he was told. A slave.

Now, I saw something different.

I saw a pegasus. His height didn't matter, it was the look of purpose in his eyes. The inner strength that held him up. He was clad in clothing he'd made himself, a saddle that he'd earned and carried through countless dangers. He had goggles atop his head he'd taken (twice) from a hated foe, a pipbuck on one leg and a saddlebag full of proper supplies. By his sides, feathered wings were spread that he had flown on. But most importantly, he stood tall. He was his own pony.

He was not a slave.

“I believe in you, Murky. I always have ever since I first saw your cutie mark. And I...I can't stand to go without you, I don't want to say goodbye...”

Sobbing, I leaned my head into hers through the bars.

“I don't want to either...but if it were me, you'd do the same.”

Spluttering, I saw her finally nod, accepting it, pushing a sad smile onto her face.

Above her, the magical sparks finally grew to their utmost. The twinkling lights formed up around them all, as I stepped back from the cage, slowly letting go of her hoof.

I stared up at Brimstone. His wry grin betrayed the pained look in his remaining eye to part ways. He'd been a constant, a cornerstone in my life since he'd first saved it.

"Brim...thank you. Never let anyone try to say you aren't a hero at heart, no matter what you started as. You taught me what it was to protect what matters to you."

He winked, and I could swear I saw a tear, an unthinkable sight.

"You got more strength in that little body than you know, kid."

Turning, I saw Coral, her blue mane fluttering in the portal's growing magic. Her soft smile sent a warmth of maternal comfort through me, even as much as I could see the pain it took her to accept this and put that expression onto her face.

"I never knew my mother too well, Coral, but if I had...I'd want her to be like you. You're the strongest pony I've ever met, you showed me what determination really is."

She pressed a hoof to her lips, then pressed it on the bars. "Any mother would be proud to see their colt turn out like you, my dear."

Below her, Chirpy, Starshine and Lilac clutched to her legs, and waved. I tried to laugh and wave back.

Finally, my eyes fell back to Glimmerlight.

What words could even be said?

"Sis...you...you were...you gave me..." I stammered.

Thankfully, I didn't have to finish. She wiped her tears and grinned.

"You've been fighting your whole life for this moment. What's one more little wall, huh?"

Laughing, despite my weeping, I saw them all lifted from the floor as the spell took hold, my gaze following Glimmer.

"You were always there for me, for everything."

"Only cause you were for me, lil'bro." She spoke quietly, just enough for me to hear over the growing rush of magical energy.

Then the sudden flare of a teleport spell cracked into the room, and I caught one last glance of Unity's blank face looking almost directly at me. My heart thudded, pulling up what reserves I had left. Don't cry more now, I told myself. Not in these last few seconds.

I saw Glimmerlight's hoof reach out.

"Don't lose hope! You'll make i-"

And then, as that flaring light faded, they were gone.

The spell flared, leaving an empty platform and a singed taste in the air. The lights cut, and the panels all died. The last energy left in this place finally ran out.

Leaving me alone, in utter darkness.

Standing there, hearing only distant sounds in the corridors outside, I stared down at the floor and shook, trying to not be overwhelmed by the realisation of what I'd just done. Of what I'd just given up.

Fighting with my body, to make it not shake, I had to keep telling myself over and over.

"I'm not crying..." I whispered. "I'm not crying."

Those were just drops of sweat dripping from my face, I told myself. Just water from the roof dripping off my mane. Just a leaky canteen. That's all they were.

"I'm not crying..."

* * *

Amongst the buried remains of Ministry Station; surrounded by the whispering shadows of fading memories and within earshot of howling entities that prowled the lost facility, I had never felt so utterly alone. Even on the surface, there had been ponies that while not friends, were not enemies.

Now, I felt like the one remaining rational thinking pony amongst the madness that had overtaken this place.

I had to wait for what felt like an hour in the portal room before the noises outside slowly subsided and any audible trace of those horrors had receded to further off places. Only then did I dare open the heavy door to re-enter Ministry Station.

With none of the lighting units in the station active, the pale green of my Pipbuck was my only source of light in the corridor ahead of me.

Once, such an environment had scared me into creeping around and tearfully curling up in whatever corner I could find. Now, I had a purpose. It was that purpose that had fuelled me to take this path, and if I hesitated for just a second, I feared for the hole of terrified inactivity I might fall into.

'Do what Protégé would do', I told myself. Feel the momentum, let it carry you. Change something when you see a chance that you might be able to.

As soon as that door opened far enough, I was under it and galloping. I had to trust in my own ability to be quiet by this point if I wanted to do this. I ran for the central hub of the Ministry, that crossroads at the centre of the station, I knew it was straight ahead, even if I couldn't see it in the gloom. My light picked out the ruptured floors and doorframes that threatened to knock my hooves out from under me. My ears heard wails and shrieks from far off that reverberated through the empty tunnels and platforms of the old metro station.

Upon reaching the hub, I swerved to the right, making for the nexus again. Behind me, I heard the crumble of loose earth and clattering panels as a broken ceiling split apart at last.

Immediately, I picked up the whiff of rotten mint.

I expected it, I knew they were here. They had reclaimed this place as their own. Vents and doors rumbled and clattered with their movements behind the walls, echoing through the earth in ways that simply shouldn't happen. The smell grew, and finally, I heard the sound behind me.

A gurgling, unnatural howl, came from the hub behind me, so loud that I felt it overwhelm my senses and make me stumble while holding my ears until I hit the wall. At the same time, I felt something rock the entirety of Ministry Station. The ground heaved, and tossed me onto my nose. That howl never ended, I couldn't hear anything else, and it just grew and grew.

Stumbling, dragging myself up to scamper and flee, I saw a slow white light forming behind me in the hub. They must have been in the room right across from it. Through the darkness, I saw a sudden movement, and felt my blood run cold.

The thin light was the form of two piercing eyes. That was all that was clear about it, as it shifted and jerked into sight. The darkness felt like it was folding in around it, moving in rapid and sharp movements. Never smooth. Never distinct. It was like my eyes couldn't focus on it at all. I caught sight of lines. Limbs? I couldn't tell, as it shrieked and began to move in such rapid stuttering bounds that it almost felt like it was tearing through the air. Ahead of it washed a

terrible change in the ambience, like Ministry Station itself was reflecting its presence. A wave of terror, pain and hatred flowed through me and threatened to paralyze me on the spot.

I screamed and hurled myself away from it, galloping onwards down the corridor, tearing my eyes away with more effort than felt natural. I felt a sickening drop in my stomach making me glad that darkness obscured any further detail. A nightmare made real came after me! Tripping, catching myself on the raised marble tiles and aftershocks passing through the corridors, I tried to remember which turnings led to the nexus, hearing it impact on the floor far harder and more rapidly than my own hooves were.

“NO!” I yelled, in futile command at whatever it was coming up behind me, before colliding headlong into the doors to the small food court.

This was it!

Standing on my hind legs to reach the mouthpiece for the doorway, I pushed back with my forelegs and swung it open.

Hanging wires and lighting fixtures behind me began to sway and kick up. My shaking hooves fought to get inside from the howl only getting louder and closer. The door had a bar on the other side, linked to a lock that went behind a heavy self-service stand. The padlock fell off as I panicked and tried to slam it on. Wailing at my luck, I scrambled for it, as the light in the pitch dark area grew in the cracks of the door. Behind me, I could feel the dying pulses of the nexus in the next room. My head was spinning in fear, heartbreak and dizziness. My hooves fumbled and dropped the lock again. I couldn't stop thinking about Unity and my friends. Their hurt faces, her blank, dead look.

You have to do this.

A wave of focus flowed through me as I gave up on the lock. Through the crack in the loose door, those intense white glows flew around the corner. I saw something open below them, far wider than should be possible by the vague shape that I could see, like a tear in the darkness itself. The howl amplified in volume, making my head buzz, as a feeling of revulsion and hopelessness washed over me. Throwing my grapple to the top of the service cabinet, I bit the trigger and leapt backwards. With a metallic crash of plates and cutlery, the entire cabinet dropped down in front of the door, just in time for it to be knocked a good half a foot inwards by an enormous and intensely focused strike on the other side.

Go!

I didn't wait to see if it would hold, or to contemplate what I'd just seen. I fled between the upturned tables for the far door, trying not to throw up as the sensations faded. Off to my left, a second shrieking joined the first, as another corridor began to hear the rapid *thumpthumpthump*

of something approaching. More were coming. The vents to my right were shaking violently free from their fastenings.

There was no way back.

I genuinely had no idea how my strength lasted to get the door to the nexus open again. All I knew was the fear in my mind reminding me of the nightmares I'd had about how long the screams of those caught by those things lasted for. Pulling with all the might I could, I opened the door to the stunning orange and cream hue of the nexus once more.

Immediately, unexpectedly, the pain hit me right in my heart.

Slamming the door closed behind me, dropping the lock as the food court became a haven for those things, I felt my emotions crack. Something assailed me, and made me stagger back into the door again in time for their impact on the other side to make it strike me in the back of the head.

I fell forward and hit the floor. My head felt split, with pain lancing through my brain again and again from the back of my skull. Had I been concussed again? I couldn't tell. Rolling, I felt my balance fly out of control.

“Argh...what...Unity what...”

I mumbled. I forgot everything. I forgot those twisted creations, I forgot where I was. All I saw was orange and cream colours illuminating vague shapes of a room. Yet inside, all I could feel was raw emotion.

Intense fear. Hopelessness. Loneliness. Heartbreak.

It wasn't mine.

Hers.

Finally working out where the floor was below me, I got all four hooves down on it. Lying on my belly, I squinted hard and stared up at the orb.

It glowed in a horrid, broken way, like the colour within it was fighting, struggling against something. I felt so very afraid. I barely understood all this in the way that Aurora, Unity or Glimmer did.

But I knew how she felt, and as I pulled myself closer, I could feel her solitude as if they had locked her away from me. Forgotten times were surfacing. As I got my hoof onto the railing of the gantry surrounding the nexus, I remembered the agony of us embracing before we

erased our memories, or the panic when they'd told us we were to be executed in the Pit. Pulling myself up, I staggered and limped along the gantry on three hooves, the fourth holding the railing.

Find their signature and destroy it, Sparkler had said. Destroy it and she'll be saved.

But what about you?

I forced the thought back. I couldn't think on it. If I did, I'd snap.

Easing forward, I put my hooves onto the nexus itself, and began to climb. While it was only around ten feet tall, the climb was hard for a dizzied, tired little pegasus to clamber up. Yet as I got closer, I felt the memories only get stronger. My eyes erupted into crying. My nose became blocked. My ears rung, hearing the howling outside, the thumping on the door, the collapsing of the station and the screaming of-

Of-

Her-

No, me. Or-

Slumping forward, I dropped my upper half beside the orb. My coat felt frazzled, like pins and needles all over this close to powerful magic.

Find her signature.

I didn't understand what it all was, but I remembered her talking of that. Someone's magical signature, how every pony was different.

And I had hers.

Reaching into my saddlebag, I drew out the Littlepip statuette she'd made for me so long ago. She had infused it with her magic, her special talent, to make me never feel entirely alone so long as I had it. Holding it against the orb, I saw all the colour in it gravitate toward the model. Sparkles shone around it, with the colour seeming to push and glow, like it was trying to escape; to get out and return to her.

I prayed this was right. I hadn't prayed so much these days, but at this moment, trapped below the surface in a nightmare, it was all I had.

I reached forward and grabbed the orb.

Then I screamed.

Agony surged up my limbs. The magic within it lashing out as I gripped my hooves around it and began to pull. I lost track of where I was. I saw the Ministry above, the Station below, the mountaintop, the Mall, my friends. It assailed my memories, forcing them back before tugging at them, like if I'd shoved my hooves into a spark-battery generator. My voice pitched, shrieking until I felt my lungs spasm. I wanted to let go. To shout 'please, stop the pain and the madness.' I wanted to throw myself away, but something kept me doing it. Kept me pulling, kept me lifting. Behind me, the door began to breach, the nightmares were trying to get in.

It didn't matter now.

I lifted the orb above my head, my balance whirling atop the nexus. Magical arcs flew out and streaked the walls around me. I couldn't look away from the galaxy like shapes inside it, seeing dens, chains and whips. It was holding Unity's memories, everything that made her Unity, trapped inside it!

"Do it!" I screamed to myself, willing my limbs to summon up the strength to move past the surging energies flowing through me.

Behind me, the door smashed open. The howling began deafening. The walls, assailed by magic, split and collapsed. The roof began to cave.

Do it!

Crying out, I dove from the nexus, and brought the orb smashing down below me.

The feeling of my sore body impacting on the metal floor clashed with the shattering of glass.

And the sound of the entire room falling down behind me.

oooOOOooo

"Skydancer, hurry! Hurry!"

She was hesitating, looking back every few minutes. I'd found her in the front room with her parents, trying to overturn their couches to make a hopeless shelter in the way the pamphlets claimed might work. Her mother had been running the bath to collect water and trying to hang rugs over the windows. When I'd arrived to tell her about the Stable, her parents hadn't hesitated to push her to go with me.

Having to pick her up and tear her from them as she refused over and over to leave them had been the hardest thing I'd ever done, even after everything that had happened. Her father had looked me in the eyes before I left.

He'd realised the same thing I already knew, and I'd never seen him give me a look of respect and gratitude the way he had back then.

We had gotten out of the city after I'd convinced her to start flying us there. Only in the last run to the Stable had we dropped down after Equestrian Army soldiers warded any pegasi to land and not try to overfly the ticket gate. Others had gotten there first, with only some being let through. Even out here, the sirens were making my head hurt and my body feel chilled every time they picked up. We'd heard far off rumbles and seen flashes on the horizon, and I hoped they weren't what I thought they were.

Finally, we arrived in the queue at the gate, and I held onto Skydancer as we both wept along with anybody else who'd made it up here.

No-one could find any words. Even the soldiers at the gate were wide eyed and shivering as they pushed people through or warded them back. I saw the mighty sight of two Steel Rangers guarding the Stable door itself within a short cave. Inscrutable and unmoving, they watched us all.

Around us, there were scant few reunions, and a lot of questions. Stallions and mares were bitter and angry, while foals clung tightly, wondering why everyone was shouting. Pets ran rampant as they were denied access and pushed out to be abandoned on the hillside. One stallion lay on the ground being attended to. He'd had a heart attack in the shock of the moment.

"Sundial, they-"

"Don't try to see it."

"Why..."

"I don't know, I just don't know."

We swayed back and forth, hooves tightly wrapped around one another, until finally we came to the gate.

"Ticket!" The soldier hastened to us.

I took the large plastic ticket from my pocket, holding it up.

"In addition, Miss Aurora Star of the Ministry of Arcane Science says that Skydancer here can-"

The soldier cut me off.

"Where's her ticket?"

"Sir, this is Aurora Star herself that told me she could-"

"No ticket no way in! Come on! We don't have time, ticket or get back, sir!"

"The Ministry-"

"The Ministry isn't Stable-Tec, sir! Now come on if you have one!"

I hadn't held out much hope for that plan. I'd just wished. I'd hoped that this could have all ended better. Only now I knew what I had to do.

I turned and gave the ticket to Skydancer.

"Sundial, what are you doing?!" She shrieked as I took her in my hooves and pushed her toward the guard.

"She's taking my ticket, is that okay?"

"Sundial!"

He nodded, "This way Ma'-"

"NO!" Skydancer fought us both, before grabbing me and planting her lips onto mine. "I don't want to lose my family and you! We...we could-"

Holding onto her, feeling my tears hit her shoulder, I shivered at the choice I was making. Yet everything up till now, it had been to do this. To get her in.

It hadn't always worked out the way I'd wanted to, but I'd been given a chance to do at least this.

"Sky, I wish I could tell you everything that happened. But...but you have to do this."

I actually expected her to argue more, but something was off about her expression as she slowly nodded. Her voice dropped.

"I...I will. But it's...it's because...I was going to tell you, I meant to soon, I..."

She leaned into my ear, and I heard two words. Two words that changed my entire outlook on this. That reinforced all the reasoning, all the more importance for her to be the one to take the ticket. The reason her father had looked at me that way, he'd thought I knew already.

Leaning back, we tearfully gazed at one another, as I felt my hoof go to her belly and softly settle there. It felt insane to laugh, to smile at this time, but I did.

At the end, I could save more than just her. And I felt happy that I was. There were no words, so I simply pulled her face closer to mine instead.

With one final kiss, everything like the kind that had made me go from crush to love, I let them pull her away toward the Stable door.

Amongst the rioting mob left behind, I stood alone and still as I watched it close.

** * **

Somehow, I dreamed. As though my mind was so tired, so hurt and worn thin after all this time that I simply needed to fall into another world from tiredness.

I dreamed that I sat upon the hills outside Fillydelphia, watching the panic below as distant sirens touched the edges of my hearing. The horizon was lit with great flares that crackled and glinted in the dying light. I could even feel the soft grass beneath me, and feel the intoxicating touch of clean air in my lungs. In a moment of horror, everything was oddly peaceful and quiet.

Beside me, sat Sundial.

Only now did I really see how weak and worn out he was. His eyes were sunken with thick black marks, and his normally bushy mane hung limply around his shoulders. His head turned to me while I stared, and gave a sad smile.

"I guess this is finally it, huh? All this way."

I had no words, simply nodding instead.

Sundial sighed and stared at his home below. "In the end, this mattered more. I couldn't save us both, but at least I got her...I got them, safe."

"That's what matters." I didn't know what else to say, not knowing if I was speaking to him or not. "They're safe..."

He spluttered, his eyes turning wet, but as he brought a hoof to his face I saw him force a smile.

“Those I care about. Maybe not all in the end, but enough for me to feel I managed something. Now I guess it's just...”

He looked up, as I felt my vision darkening around me. Everything grew hazy, and I slowly began to lose feeling from my body. Yet in the sky, I saw and heard the distant approach of something coming down from the clouds. He held up his pipbuck and clutched it tightly, as I felt myself do the same to my journal.

“I'm going to leave this for someone else. Someone to know what happened here. Someone who maybe, sometime in the future, will carry it away from this place, to find some measure of freedom, to return it to those who survived.”

The object fell, and a static noise of crackling green fire washed over the world.

I fell, knowing this was as far as I would come. At least, in the end, I'd done what he did, something worth-

The green light warped and split. Orange and cream grew within it, burning my eyes and warming my freezing body. From within it, I saw a shape. A hoof reaching down for me, grabbing my own.

Unity.

“It won't be just me. I won't allow it, Murky. Remember what we swore?”

Her face was bright, determined and believing, as she pulled me back; away from the darkness. I heard the resolve in her voice, the determination to keep a promise.

“Together...or not at all.”

She smiled, as she pulled me from the brink.

“So go and make it 'together', Murky!”

** * **

My eyes shuddered open to find myself covered in dust and rubble.

From my hoof, I heard a Click of a pipbuck's audio recording ceasing.

And in front of me, around the shards of the orb, an orange glow drifting away.

Tired, I was so very tired. Behind me, the entire room had collapsed, sealing me away from the entrance and those things in the tunnels. Sparks dropped from shattered lighting fixtures above me, giving intermittent lighting in the blackness of the abandoned station.

Watching the final glimmers of the orb's glow fade away, I hoped Sparkler was right.

The task ahead of me was terrifyingly daunting, however. I'd been granted one last chance. One last, desperate, chance to do the impossible. I couldn't lie here and die without taking it. Not after all this! She wouldn't want me to. None of them would.

Even if I didn't think it possible, they believed I could; and that was enough for me this time to try it.

Staggering to my hooves, gasping for air and sucking down Radaway, I fell into the corridor behind the nexus room, the same one Shackles had escaped into. Limping, swaying on my hooves, I cantered as best I could down the corridor, knowing there was some way to the surface, he wouldn't have come this way if there wasn't. I left behind me the shattered remains of Aurora's work, for the very last time. Just as I'd left behind the Mall.

But now I knew to myself, just as I'd leave behind Fillydelphia.

It took time, but eventually I found the thin service-way that Shackles must have taken, its steep steps promising an escape. Falling into them, I pulled and pulled, every step a sore effort, until I finally came to the heavy trap door, still open.

Rolling out of it, grimacing as my muscles rebelled against the motion, I dragged myself onto the wooden steps of the serviceway I'd ended up in. I was back in the ticket hall we'd entered, a previously sealed door forced apart with Shackles' strength.

Limping, I fell against the lift controls, and heard it descending. I fell into it, and felt like I was sleeping the whole way back up. I had my saddlebags left. A canteen of Radaway, one healing potion, some food from the raid on the logistics warehouse, a small tent, my battle saddle and Protégé's pistol. There were other odds and ends to survive outside like camping tools and a map of the surrounding area, but I'd not been able to carry much with me. Most of the supplies were in the bags I'd sent my friends away with, I couldn't have made it through there again carrying so much. It'd do, it had to.

As I came to the surface and wandered through the abandoned Ministry, I did not find the same city I had once known.

* * *

Fillydelphia was burning.

The heat struck me first, before my I felt my lungs spasm and clench within me. The front yard of the Ministry was ablaze. Choking, eyes stinging, I staggered through the gaps in the fire and witnessed the fiery carcass of the city.

Red brick and concrete splintered and cracked from tenements. From the ground to the fragmented rooftops, everything was covered in a fine layer of ash and red dust, the same material that hung in the air and the sky, drifting in lazy, choking clouds. To my left, at the end of the street, I witnessed a searing and blackened crater, fifty feet wide that radiated with magical sparks. The ground beneath my hooves was stinging from red-hot fragments littered all around from the factory that had been exploded by whatever that meteoric impact had been. No Enclave weapon I knew of could have done that, and I could see their ships looking like they'd been melted in the same way. Their remaining ships hung in the sky, exchanging sporadic fire with the ground, a stubborn and pointless gesture from two sides clearly no longer capable of fighting. Skyship wrecks littered the ground, their clouds still sending lightning shocks into streetlamps or fences near them as their cloud generators malfunctioned on the ground.

It felt claustrophobic and alien. On all sides, I felt blocked off by collapsing structures or sparking fires. Struggling to breathe, I pulled my fleece up over my mouth, stretching the collar to give me any form of filtering from the choking smog in the air. Blinking away my watering eyes, I staggered down the only route I could. There were a series of steps ahead, possibly into a park. I hoped that a little more open space might give me a break to get my bearings.

Around me, dark shapes hid in buildings that weren't ablaze. Most were shivering, or rocking in shock. Others moaned and cried from wounds. In the distance, I heard worryingly familiar howls of supernatural volume on the cutting winds. I wandered as one lonely little pony around those who had witnessed what happened here.

Some of them saw me, before fleeing deeper into their building. Another one grabbed a radio before he went.

It was an uncomfortable reminder. This was still Fillydelphia. There were still griffins in the sky, and still slavers surrounding me. Their scrap-built bridges were, in some places, still intact between bent buildings. I heard shouts and pushed onwards, trying to disappear through the thick smoke that billowed horizontally out of an old toy-shop to my right and across the street. I felt the stairs beneath me in the blinding cloud, and pushed myself into a gallop to climb them. Slowly, I gained sight again as I passed out of it, seeing a row of concrete steps, that led me onto a raised area. Park benches were settled either side of me, with old telescopes for tourists to use overlooking the city from here.

I gained my first sight of what had become of the city as a whole.

Fires, hundreds of metres in length, surged across Fillydelphia in great walls, consuming buildings and turning them into blackened silhouettes. They rose into the sky, warping and twisting to greater heights than I thought possible, like some nightmare-scape. I could hear a screeching hiss, before realising it was rain, boiling and evaporating in the air before it could often hit the ground above the fires. Storms had gathered above the city and gale winds rushed down to fuel the fires and blast boiling rain across my face at this elevated position. I could see more of those same craters all across the city, where they had devastated factories, or left bisected ships strewn on the ground. Something had rained from the heavens, like a meteor shower, and had killed the war. In doing so, it had broken the Enclave fleet and shattered what remained of Fillydelphia. In the distance, through all the smoke, the imposing figure of the Wall remained present, and below it, I saw scattered remnants of slavers trying to round up all the unfortunates they could, like faded black ghosts in the distance. Elsewhere, I heard wailing screams echoing off walls. Terror, panic and pain.

It felt like another world. I'd often called this place a 'hell city', but it felt like that abstract comparison had become a terrible reality.

A warped electronic shriek cut through the air. Static and audio feedback so loud that I winced and hunkered down against the vista's wall. My hairs bristled, remembering the unnatural electronic sounds of the metro's horrors from before, and how they were once again on the surface now, somewhere in this city. Yet instead the PA system's speakers to either side of me cut into life, finally breaking through into a deep and sickly voice.

His voice.

"Stern is dead."

It seemed to echo from every angle around me, coming through the fires themselves. I could hear the speakers and their vague direction, but I couldn't see them anywhere through the smoke and fire.

"In her death, I am now the Master of Fillydelphia."

"No...no, no..." I whimpered to myself, feeling very visible all of a sudden. I heard him continue, sending instructions to his slavemasters, to the overseers, to collect all they could. He decreed that Enclave soldiers found on the ground will be the first generation of new slaves to rebuild their, or his, legacy.

The circle would begin all over again. Protégé had told me how Fillydelphia had been before Red Eye, and fate seemed to have conspired to return it to that state.

I heard Shackles begin to chuckle to himself, a confident, smirking laugh. I could even see his face in my mind.

“And Number Seven, I told you that you'd come back to me, didn't I?”

I willed my limbs to move, but they were rooted to the spot, even as they felt like they were burning on the heated ash covering the ground as what felt like the city itself spoke. Suddenly, I became aware that I wasn't alone. In the buildings surrounding the park, I saw dark shapes approaching. Fuzzy at the edges, their outlines bending like broken mirrors in the heat-waves, they began to shift out toward me.

“You have cost me, Number Seven. You have cost me dearly in a way I can never recreate now. I may not be able to do that, but I still have you, and you will be an example. A reminder of the consequences. If at the very least that is what I can retrieve from you after what you did, then that is more than enough. I rebuilt this city once, Number Seven. I can do it again. Fillydelphia!”

His voice rung out, and I winced hard at the last, shouted word creating feedback that rung in my ears.

“A small green pegasus exists among you. Many of you know him.”

I saw the slavers begin to all stand up, advancing out of the buildings they'd been sheltering in. Red eyed gas masks moved beside bandaged and warped faces. Many were shivering, looking shell-shocked and broken in their eyes, like they obeyed without question. Slowly, I began to back off.

“He belongs to me. He always will. He is at the crossroads park near the Ministry of Arcane Science.”

A shuffling made me pause, as I turned to see more ponies began to limp and stumble around the front of the park. All of them fixated on me.

“The one who brings him before me, who brings him home, shall be the one who is to be pulled from the fires, and to be rewarded with whatever they wish, protected by my side. A successor to the chain.”

A circle of slavers surrounded me. Injured, desperate and seeing their chance to be elevated before them, they growled and threatened with intermingling voices. Behind them, I saw others coming around corners, or peering from windows and bridges. Griffins began to circle towards the crossroads.

Activating it, my new E.F.S was blanketed in red. Alone in a hostile city, with the Wall far off and with limited supplies, I realised for the first time the sheer impossibility of my challenge.

One lonely slave, inside a city that sought to keep him here, surrounded by a colossal wall. A legion of slavers seeking him. No-one behind him now. No known way out.

In the end, I always knew, it came back to this, at the very simplest level of everything I knew I was, since the very beginning.

A slave seeking to escape his master.

"You will be brought home, Number Seven."

Looking back ahead, I bit my lip and steeled my heart.

"You're right..." I muttered, as the circle closed and I kicked out my hoof to activate the trigger on my saddle. "...but this isn't my home."

Crying out, if anything to stir my own frightened body into action, I raced forward, my wings spread. They swarmed toward me, as I leapt and fired my grapple-hook above their heads. Feeling the impact of it on the nearest building, I bit hard on the trigger. With a tug on my saddle straps, I shot above their heads and opened my wings. Gliding past those surging forward, I dropped to the floor behind them and stumbled, reeling the hook back in as fast as I could.

Dozens, perhaps more, immediately spun and chased me. I could hear radios barking locations already.

In the distance, the slow winding moan of the balefire siren began to pick up across the city, a rallying cry of an escapee, even at this insane moment. It was a city with one purpose now in mind, as far as I knew.

"Running won't help you now, little slave. You have no-where to go."

With howling slavers at my heels, I put my head down and ran into the city. I had no idea what to do now.

I'd known it the moment I'd chosen to come back. I'd known it back when I had first taken a run at the wall on my own. This couldn't be done.

But I was going to try anyway.

* * *

My hooves pounded into the split tarmac, carrying me down the street we had so recently fled through in armoured wagons. Behind me, a crowd of slavers surged from every alleyway and still standing doorway as the word of their prize went out. I could hear their taunts, their every command. Gunshots occasionally slapped into the ground near me, causing me to stumble and try to swerve around, slowing me down.

Already I was breathing hard, my heart thumping in my chest like a jackhammer, so hard it was painful. Every instinct said to stop, to lie down from the battering I'd taken in the last few days, but if I did then I'd have given it all up.

I yelled, suddenly scrapping to a halt. Down the street, a group of slavers tumbled out of their den, snarling and preparing their battle saddles. I saw nets loaded into them, blocking my path.

"Come here, slave!"

Surrounded, I ran to the side and fired my grapple-hook to the nearest building. As the two sides of slavers converged, I bit the trigger and tugged myself up the fractured wall. Teeth hurting from biting so hard, I peddled with my hooves, trying to climb the vertical surface as the winch mechanism in my saddle squealed and grew hot against my side from the steep angle. Rocks and sticks hurled up at me. Heat seared my underside as I dropped through a window and found the building to be aflame. The floors had dissolved inside, leaving me with only rotting and smouldering planks to edge and canter across as I tried to keep moving forward.

It was my only plan. The hole in the wall from before was the only way out I knew of. Once the panic had passed, I'd spent the last ten minutes trying to head in that direction, it wasn't too far from where I'd come out.

Outside, the slavers kicked in the doors, and I heard them arguing about the bottom floor being covered in fire. Above me, griffins descended and began pointing through the smoke, down through the roofless burning building. I leapt across a gap, pulling myself into the next room, before screaming and scrambling on flimsy wood as it kept falling out from under me. Grabbing a hold of a staircase, I rushed onto the rooftops, choking and patting at my clothing from the embers that had fallen on it.

Hidden in the smoke, I ran to the edge of the building, and leapt the six feet to the next one. Made of sandstone, it had stayed upright, and I tried to get my pace up again. I could see the broken wall in the distance. I just had to stay out of sight, to become hidden again, and I could-

No. Oh no.

The wall was still broken, but it was closed.

Even at this distance, the moment I crossed over to get a better look at it from this high up, I saw the full squads of soldiers surrounding it. They covered the ramp I had carried Protégé up, with searchlights and hounds prowling the old killing-zone between the buildings and the wall.

Reaching the edge of the rooftop, I stopped and stared. My heart sunk.

“You honestly thought that I would permit you the same way as those wretches before you, Number Seven?”

The voice carried across Fillydelphia, ever-present, making use of Red Eye's system to reach all his 'workers'. My hooves quivered as I hunched into an old air-conditioning unit and watched the griffins searching for me.

“You have forgotten me, slave. You have forgotten that I know you. Chains are in your blood, my blood.”

I shook my head, I refused to believe it, even now. The scar on my forehead thudded and ached. 'It's just the headache', I told myself. That balefire siren was unending, driving into my skull. The roar of the fires like a bottom line of sound that was blanketing my fragile hearing.

Shivering in place, as slavers surrounded the building, I struggled to think of any way I could get past the soldiers, but they were even setting up a giant net to cover the hole. He knew I could glide. He was taking steps.

The madness, the sheer, single minded *insanity* of it to capture one small slave was soul-crushing. Had I died in the station and woken to a nightmare world built for me?

He was making a point.

Looking around, I saw the griffins coasting on the hot fumes of the fires, scanning with their sharp eyes.

They-

That was it.

I had done it before. I'd glided from the top of a crane and crossed half the city by air to catch up with Unity and a sky-wagon. The furnaces had given me lift, but now the entire city was a rising wave of heat.

All I needed was a high enough starting point, and maybe I could gain enough height to at least get a grapple onto the lip of the wall. Once I was up there, I could just glide off the other side!

And I knew just where to go. Peering out across the rooftops, between two pillars of flame that erupted again and again as ammunition stockpiles exploded warehouse by warehouse, I could see the crane still standing.

Crawling out before this entire building fell into itself, I threw on my goggles and made a run for it. I felt my wings flapping by my sides as I rushed for the front end of the roof and dove off of it. Behind me, the cries of griffins were almost immediate, attracted by the movement below them. Damn their hunting attuned eyes!

Spreading my wings, I felt the wind catch them and pull me away from my perch. My weight was supported from the air currents, as I flew across the street, into the next side road back towards the Ministry, the crane I remembered was nearby to it. Four flights up, I had enough height to stay aloft and pass over the old highway, using the dropping away elevation of the city to keep me in the air.

Risking a glance back, I saw and heard the rushing griffins diving from above, talon's outstretched. Screaming, I banked hard. One flew past me, their strong wings recovering to gain more height. I felt uncertain in the air, as I dove and turned, whirling in circles to try and dodge more than move forward. Hanging in the air, I started to lose height. I started to slow down.

Three griffins began to dive from above. I wouldn't have enough speed left to properly dodge them.

So instead, I tucked my hooves in and dove sharply. Retracting my wings, I did the only thing I knew I could to get some speed back, I dropped like a stone. The burning ground of the city rose up to meet me, as I felt the heat on my face growing. Behind me, the griffins surged through the air.

At the last second, I opened only a single wing, and let the sudden resistance on one side of my body flip me over and throw my body to the side. Spreading them both, I veered for what I could see that might help me, a narrow alleyway between two warehouses. The moment I had it lined up, I shut both my wings again and hurtled out of the sky toward it. Blanketed in smoke, I could barely see it through my goggles. They misted up slightly. I couldn't see the edges.

Far faster than I had ever expected to go, I raced into the alleyway.

Behind me, I heard the shocked cries as the much larger griffins threw out their wings and halted their descent. They couldn't fit their wingspans into it, but the few seconds I had to

appreciate that were immediately lost. A fire escape came racing up through my vision, and I struggled to get my wings out. I barely slowed down enough to not break my ribs on impact, grabbing onto it with both hooves as the rusty structure collapsed below me. My hind legs kicking into the air, I tugged and pulled myself onto the leaning structure, diving off it before the entire thing tore off the wall and fell into the darkness beneath. Confused, disoriented, I threw out my tired wings once again and drifted to the ground, almost spearing myself on the metal bars of the fallen fire escape in the process.

The moment I got back up, the smell of rotten mint fell strongly across the alleyway.

Screaming in abject frustration and panic, I immediately ran forward as something began to move opposite me through the corrugated walls of the warehouse. The sheer, hurtful unfairness washed over me like a reminder that this world had become one of darkness and terrors ever since I had broken the orb. I couldn't stop. I couldn't rest. Ever.

And I could feel myself losing the stamina and mental strength to continue already.

Metal panels broke ahead of me. Wailing, I ducked and rolled beneath the level of them, catching a glimmer of movement from the corner of my eye following every panel knocked out. I wove and ducked. It tried to smash through every section of the warehouse, and I could only pray that the door wasn't open at the end. My fear drove me to leap over a burning pile of wood and bluntly ram through the flimsy fence at the end of the alleyway. Tumbling down a slope, end over end, I eventually felt the wet slap of mud hit me.

Above me, I saw a griffin land at the top of the slope, with two others descending.

He was pulled back from the lip and I heard a horrid shriek. He disappeared so quickly, I almost missed it during a blink. His group began firing from the sky down into the alleyway with desperation, crying what I guessed was his name.

Slopping in the thick mud, finding an odd relief in its damp coolness from the heated air, I awkwardly pulled myself down the dry riverbed I'd fallen into. Near the bend in the river, I could see the crane, it-

Exploded.

I saw the white flare from around its base, before the detonation shook the ground below me. Slowly, it toppled, the crane's arm turning and pointing to the sky as it all crashed down and demolished the surrounding construction yard.

Tugging myself out the other side of the riverbed, putting some distance between me and the massacre happening behind me at the warehouse, I could only stare as the plan I had only just imagined went down in front of me,

"I will permit nothing that you might use now. Nothing. Think about your position, runt. Even if you got over the wall, what then?"

Shivering, I ran into the nearest cover I could find, a shanty-town that had once housed slaves. Now it had become a maze of rot and debris. Running in circles, I sought to find a way out, a way back to the streets.

"Fillydelphia is surrounded by low hills and plains. Hellhounds prowl its territory. The next closest city is many miles away."

'I don't care', I thought to myself, as I bucked the mesh gate open and fled back onto what I recognised as the roads back to the refinery I'd first gained my rad-sores in.

"You have little to no food, you are sick and hurt. How far could you even get? You haven't nearly enough Radaway for that sickness, do you?"

I'd made it this far! As I turned the corner, I saw a roadblock up ahead, as black-clad soldiers pointed in my direction. In my exhaustion, I was getting sloppy, I should have stopped and gone to ground.

The crane collapsing had left me aimless, and careless.

"No..." I whined, before turning back again to flee further up the street, as though heading toward the old town, where that Orphanage had once been.

"And what beyond that, Number Seven? What then? You believe the wasteland is a paradise? It is every bit as ruthless as it is in here, and much of it isn't too fond of pegasi after what just happened."

As I neared the old town, hoping to go to ground properly this time, I skidded to a halt. Every street I tried was almost the same. Road blocks. Hovering griffins. Rotten mint. Swarming parasprites after the pits had been broken open in the war.

"You have to slow down and face the fact at some point, Number Seven. You cannot run forever."

Turning back, I made for the only safer place I knew.

For the next hour, I sought to return to the Mall and locate the sewer entrance, but as I got close, I could spy the harsh light of slavers welding it shut. I ran, I hid, I flew, I fought, I escaped and I struggled against the cage that was tightening on all sides.

My energy was dwindling, and every way I turned, the net was closing in. They had radios, top cover from the skies and an army behind their master. Every time they saw me, they were coming closer. For hours, I tried to find any opportunity to rest, only for them to root me out, or for the fires to spread into whatever building I hid in.

Every step of the way, he threw nothing but near truths into my head.

I was afraid, in a very terrible way that I had never known before. I had been frightened both sharply and over time. I'd been scared my whole life. But this was new. It was a creeping inevitability.

As I huddled against a chimney stack, staring at slavers in the roads below hunting for me, I realised that was wrong. I had felt it before, when my wings had been taken to that anvil the night after gaining my cutie-mark. When something you know is going to destroy your new-found hopes is going to happen and you can't prevent it. A mixture of frustration and denial.

This was like that, only stretched across hours, rather than seconds.

“You are in the block beside the Ministry of Wartime Technology, Number Seven. We know. The irradiated tunnel below the wall you tried on your first time has been sealed.”

It was impossible to escape through that anyway, but he'd sealed it anyway. I could hear slavers muttering to themselves, questioning the apparent obsession of their master, but their prize was worth it, and none would dare oppose him openly. It was like he had thrown a blanket of control over the whole city. A psychological command of being the only voice of authority left who could speak to them all. I could see Shackles' most ardent supporters leading the groups. Brutal and respected by their peers, they were enforcing his word. They spoke of figures like Whiplash and Wicked Slit being elevated into upper ranks due to their support of Shackles, bringing their own loyal followers with them.

He had cast my capture as a sign of unity, an accomplishment to prove that slavers were still in control of this city. One of the slaves who had helped 'lead' the rebellion that had killed many of them or their comrades and robbed them of their slaves.

I wondered if it might crumble later, if his single-mindedness with me would let others see the madness that had overtaken him. Not that it made a difference to me. If I was caught, it wouldn't matter if he lost to more sane leadership again in future, I'd still be his.

Right now, that felt like the only thing he cared about. The thought that *I* had driven *him* to this in the same way he'd driven me to want to escape sent a shiver down my spine. I'd never imagined such hatred following me.

He knew everything about me. He knew every escape attempt and had been learning all my likely safe-spots.

I wiped my eyes. They hurt and stung from swollen tear ducts and the heated dryness that had overcome them afterwards. If I wanted out of here, I had only one option. Every bar had slammed shut around me, and every one of my plans had been killed before I'd even gotten to try.

“You are alone, Number Seven.”

Only one option. Do something entirely different. Something I *couldn't* have done before. Something he didn't think I was capable of.

Break the chains. Break that which held me in. Break the wall, and then soar through. All on my own.

“Your friends aren't here to save you.”

They didn't have to. They believed I could do it.

And I trusted them more than I believed *him*.

* * *

I held my charcoal in my mouth, even as I shivered and sweated from fear. The plan was in my head, but I needed to see it before me. I needed to know it could work. Tucked into the last hiding spot I could find, I had a blank and grey wall before me, crying out for something to be added to it. Slavers weren't too far away, but I needed this to settle my mind.

Lines. I had to do lines. They were shaky and jagged as I squinted through my goggles. Lines connecting all the parts I needed. To show the wall, I began to curve them with thick and strong sweeps. Curves. Curves to show me the route I'd have to take.

Curves, linking all the parts across the city. From where I was, to the Enclave crash site somewhere along the way. I knew one had to be close by, they were everywhere. From there I needed shapes.

Shapes, to draw the items I needed from it to help escape the iron ring closing down around me. They had to show me what I needed before reaching the FunFarm. Shapes, to draw the enormous ferris wheel I'd seen every day for so very long in that den. Shapes to show me the pegasus skyport nearby to that side of the city, to show me its tall control tower. Shapes to show the wall behind the ferris wheel.

Shapes to show me the path to *life*.

I stepped back, the charcoal dropping as I clutched my saddlebag like a soft toy and stared at it.

My last chance lay out in front of me. One last attempt. If I failed, I somehow just knew that I'd never be able to escape again.

But it was mine. My plan. It was all I had, and it was new. He couldn't predict me now.

I heard shouting from nearby as I gathered my things. I glanced at the charcoal, before rubbing it all off with a rag. No mistakes, no evidence. I strapped my bags and battle-saddle on, and then began to climb the building. I had mere minutes before griffins spotted me, but going up the metal gantry gave me enough of a view to look over the houses until I finally spotted what I needed.

The black carcass of a crashed skyship, surrounded by lifeless forms of Enclave troopers.

Beyond it, the FunFarm, where it had all began.

Beyond that, the wall next to the ferris wheel.

Beyond *that*, freedom.

I couldn't hesitate. If I did, they'd clamp down again. A belief that I could do it was the only thing holding me up.

Taking a deep breath, I leapt from the edge of the roof, and began to glide toward the ship, passing quietly above the heads of the slavers. Already, I saw a griffins beginning to stop and stare from much higher up, checking out the movement they saw.

'I can do this', I could only keep telling myself.

'I can do this'.

"You cannot escape this city, Number Seven."

'Yes I can.'

* * *

"I think he went into the wreck!"

“Get down there then!”

My hooves tossed the supply crate to the side and went back to fighting with the locker. I wasn't an expert on anything about the Enclave, but I'd seen their soldiers working. I'd seen them use flares throughout the war. We'd learned early on to avoid areas marked in bright colours. They often got hit from the sky soon after.

I didn't have any explosives, so I had to make someone else do the task for me.

The locker burst open, revealing nothing but several small packs of tightly sealed food and tablets. Not what I needed, but I shovelled them into my saddlebag regardless as I looted my way through the shattered ship. Trying to hold my stomach, I dug around in the harnesses of the corpses within it, pushing their broken armour aside to try and find anything that looked like a flare. Further from the flames amidst the skyship's crater, I could feel rain lashing against my back through the holes in the upperside of the wreck and making the metal slippery beneath me.

The voices from outside got closer, as I heard hooves sliding down the loose and damp earth. Clattering metal signalled their approach, as my hooves finally found coloured tubes with small strings behind them. This had to be them!

I gathered all of them I could, before coming across two others that looked thicker. Struggling through my misted goggles, I tried to make out the letters, mouthing them as I touched my hoof across them.

S-M-O-

What was that one? 'K'?

Smoke!

“There he is!”

Looking behind me, griffins were clambering up through the hole in the middle of the ship.

“Come with us!”

I bared my teeth and pulled the pin from the smoke grenade, tossing it at them.

“How about you blow up instead!” My raspy voice screamed at them, as I turned and ran toward the cockpit, aiming to dive out the shattered glass. Behind me, they scattered with yells

about a grenade. They'd fallen for the trick! The smoke ignited and filled the interior in claspings and thick grey fog.

I ran through it, did my best to avoid the shards of thick glass in the cockpit and dropped to the ground outside. Tripping once over an Enclave trooper's metal body, I scrambled up the side of the crater. Already, the radios around were bleeping and crying out about me escaping again.

Running into the closest home, an old bungalow that looked about fifty years older than any of the others, I started pulling out the flares. I'd seen the roadblock on the other side after all.

The moment I got inside the house, two of them were waiting for me.

The first grabbed me from around the door, his wet forelegs gripping around my neck. Squealing, seeing the second one rushing over, I kicked out frantically with my legs and connected with the second one's muzzle. Behind me, others were climbing up the crater.

"Got ya! Stay still! Stay-YARGH!"

I bit his foreleg and clenched as hard as I could. This was no time to fight cleanly. I tasted blood, and it felt like my teeth tore something as I ripped away from him. Grabbing a broken lamp from the house's cabinet, I hurled it at the first one I'd kicked and ran past him, slipping beneath the dinner-table to block his path. As I passed by the front of the house, I pulled the string on one flare and tossed it outside through the open front door. I could see the roadblock starting to move in on me, with soldiers advancing.

At the sight of the blue smoke sparking up from the bright light of the flare, they immediately fled. They knew what it meant as much as I did.

"Is that..." The slaver behind me stared. "You idiot! What are you doing?!"

Hyperventilating, I began backing away from him. "What I need to. Because you won't let me go."

Their radios lit up with panicked voices. Both of them turned and ran out the back, screaming at the others to back off. Taking the opportunity, and against every instinct I'd learned from the war, I ran out the front and past the flare itself; using the fear they had of it as a distraction. Slavers and soldiers ignored me as I slipped past them in the shadows and smoke.

Up above, I heard a roar as one of the remaining skyships braved the few anti-air guns left to start angling in on the street. Likely they thought they had some grounded pegasus survivor in trouble. In a way, they weren't wrong.

Sprinting until my lungs burned, I fled down the street and tried to veer away from anyone who noticed me. I kept hoping they didn't launch anything *too* big, before-

The street beyond me erupted, launching me off the ground. The impact hit me like a gale force wind, before the sound caught up and deafened me. Closing my eyes, I careened into a wooden picket fence, smashing through it into dead grass.

For a second, everything seemed still. Deafened, my ears ringing, I lay there and stared into the stormy sky. Through the smog, the lightning seemed red in colour, only occasionally lighting in a crackling white when it peeked through gaps. Burning wood landed around me as debris from the airstrike dropped all around.

Looking back, the roadblock's barriers were simply gone, with a dozen slavers and soldiers rolling on the ground, just as dizzied as I was. Loose earth and flat tarmac chunks clattered down to the ground around the small crater. The plasma weapon had struck exactly where I'd dropped the flare.

They were accurate. Compared to other airstrikes I'd seen, this seemed to be something low-yield, probably to not endanger troopers on the ground. The skyship arced around, orbiting the site as though watching for something.

A small rise of hope began to fill me again. That was what I needed. The mess of sounds in the city began to slowly return, as I pushed onward. I'd slipped past those pursuing me, depriving them of knowledge on where I was for the moment. I had a clear shot at the FunFarn.

Ahead of me was the main route of trade through Fillydelphia, the same direction Shackles had humiliated me down when he'd first claimed me. Now, broken from the pursuers, I limped until feeling returned to my body. As I moved at the edge of the road, sticking behind smoke and dark overhangs of the half wrecked factories, I saw the FunBarn itself in ruins. Struck right at the start of the war, it was just a shell of thick timber now. On my left, I saw Wicked Slit's factory at the centre of attention. Shadowed figures of captured Enclave were being herded into it along with any recovered slaves. A shrieking mare's voice carried on the wind, ordering higher ranks than before around. I didn't go any closer.

Ducking off the road, I took a few minutes to crawl beneath an upturned wagon to get my breath back. Outside, slavers ran past my hiding spot. They hadn't a clue which road I'd taken, and I couldn't imagine they would predict I'd try to return to my old slave pen. Fighting not to choke on fumes as the storm's furious winds send red ash surging across the street, I returned to my last journey.

I approached from across the back road, slipping into the scrap-fields I'd found Sundial's Pipbuck in. Crawling through enormous pipes and hiding below tarps, I slowly, achingly, made

my way toward the ferris wheel. It lay behind the metal ruin of the old rollercoaster, the spotlights on it all smashed. It wasn't tall enough to get enough height for gliding over the wall, and it was much too close to it anyway, but I had an idea.

The entire Farm seemed abandoned, other than occasional passes by griffins and some individual slavers wandering the stands, but I knew that as soon as I did this, they'd work out I was here in a heartbeat. Moving through the old food outlets and carnival games, I sneaked behind slavers or hid from them to close in on the wheel. Their attention was on everywhere but their immediate surroundings, mostly seeming concerned about the fire from the FunBarn making its way down to the rides, if the wind turned this way.

It was about now that I felt my adrenaline finally start to ebb away in the slower paced sneaking. It would be brief, but I had to stop and put my hooves to my face. Surrounded by hellish fire, stinging rain and a city falling into anarchy all over again, I just felt overwhelmed. It was like slavery and war had found a horrific middle ground, with horrors and creatures seeping back to the surface from parasprite pits and the metro.

"I can't stay here." I had to mutter it aloud to myself, just to hear a voice that wasn't foul and demanding. "I'm going to fly away, and he's never going to see me again."

Gulping, I tried hard to believe it. Only after stopping could I feel how tired I was, but with any luck, after this last run I wouldn't need my legs any more to do this. Sucking down Radaway from my canteen, the relief it caused made me aware of how much my throat and lungs were burning with more than exhaustion. The radiation in the air was being carried on all this ash from the fires and winds. The air felt thin, eaten up by the furnaces. The rain slicked mud in this cooler section of the FunFarn looked like blood beneath my hooves in the red glare of Fillydelphia, and my skin felt like it was crawling with light burns. My breath was wheezy every time I tried to suck in the hot, thick air. It felt almost funny, to think that hours before I'd felt like I was at my limit.

Now I was finding what that kind of talk really meant.

If I was going to do it though, I couldn't wait here. If Shackles got desperate, who knew what measures he might take? I only had a limited window before he started working through every possible measure I could take.

Pulling my body back up, I ran the last hundred metres to the ferris wheel, winding my way silently behind the petting zoo to reach it, out of all sight.

It loomed above me, and I looked between it and the nearby wall. This close, the structure seemed impenetrable, but I tried to remember what Protégé had said about it. Enough of an impact, and it would fall. I thought about throwing a flare onto the wall itself, but I could see guards atop the towers and along the fences guarding it. It'd be suicide to run at it on hoof.

Well, I had multiple hundred tons of steel ready to do that for me.

Pulling the flare's cord, I hurled it onto the ferris wheel's hinge supports, and then ran for the pegasus skyport as fast as my rapidly numbing and sore legs could carry me.

Immediately, I heard voices cry up from the FunFarm.

"Hey, what's that? What's that?!"

"Enclave flare! They said he's using them! He's here! Get away!"

Slavers fled away from it, much as I did. Leaping broken fences, even running through my old pen, I tried to get back to the road. I only knew a few ways to the skyport. And I hoped they'd be distracted with what I just did. Skidding to a halt, I ducked behind a popcorn wagon as three of them passed right in front of me, before rushing ahead again the moment their eyes were facing away. My heart thudded, I had to make it this time.

Above me, a skyship veered away from its orbit and dove toward the ferris wheel. On its side, I saw the glowing charge of some large weapon. Getting out of the FunFarm, I crossed the road and dove through the window of the closest ruined house, before looking back.

With a static roar, the enormous magical energy weapon discharged its lethal blast into the struts of the ferris wheel, right on target. In a blinding flare of white, I saw the wheel lurch and topple. For a heart stopping moment, I thought it would collapse to the side and I felt the whine of disappointment rising in my throat.

Then, it dropped back again, and it began to roll.

Through the smoke of the airstrike, the wheel dropped onto its outer frame and came crashing down from the raised platform it rested on. Gaining momentum, the whole device tumbled forward, picking up speed slowly. Creaking metal and shattering passenger cars drowned out the roar of fires as it windmilled forward and down the slope, right towards the wall. Banging again and again as each flat segment hit the ground, just round enough to become a massive wheel that quickly grew out of control, It careened into the fences and crushed guardposts that slavers had just leapt from with no regard for the height. I heard screams and accidental gunshots as it smashed through their posts, right toward the wall.

Like a giant, out of control boulder, it impacted on the wall. Covering my ears, the sound still penetrated into my skull like someone had just dropped a bag of metal beside my head. The resounding 'boom' shook the ground below me and threw up so much dust and wreckage that I lost sight of the impact itself. Like some ethereal being's scream, I heard bending metal over the crashing of concrete upon the ground.

"Please...please, please, please..."

Holding my breath, I stared into the dustcloud as it slowly cleared.

Utter grey, as grey as the makeshift concrete of the wall.

And then a spear of orange.

I squinted, as the light beamed through the cloud and right into my eyes. Covering them, I tried to glance through to what was happening, and saw my every hope realised.

Under the impact of the wheel, the wall crumbled. Whole chunks began to fall, leaving an enormous, crooked gap higher than it was wide. The edges fell, widening it at the top, and sending a shine of bright orange light through it.

Bathed in that heat, I saw the source. Directly ahead of me, through that hole, I saw the setting sun.

I was tired, but now I could see my goal.

"I can do this..." I growled, turning reluctantly away from the sun, and seeing the tall structure of the pegasus skyport's control tower down the streets. With its height, and the fires to pick up speed, I could glide through that hole. I knew I could.

"I can do this!"

Screaming aloud in determination and pain, I pushed myself onwards.

"I CAN DO THIS!"

* * *

Kicking my legs furiously, I fell over the top of the chain fence surrounding the skyport's landing strips. The impact on my side knocked the wind out of me, but the gunshots following me were a reminder to not stop. Coughing, I struggled, crawled and eventually got back to sprinting for the tower.

Across the fields, slavers came rushing toward me from the right. Yelling out, they took aim and within seconds I was dancing and diving away from their own fire down a slope at the edge of the runway.

"I can see what you're planning, Number Seven."

The PA system echoed again, he'd started talking again the moment I'd neared the skyport and gotten spotted. The fear clung to my heart as I crawled along the bottom of the ditch, with slavers approaching on either side.

Then, I heard the coughing bang of some sort of launcher. I ducked out of habit, before I saw the streaking missile pass instead over me and impact on the side of the control tower. A huge chunk of the structure exploded outward, collapsing to the ground, and I saw the whole thing sway.

The terror in my heart came out as a raspy, choked scream.

"Don't!"

"You're only seeking to kill yourself by trying what you're thinking. How far will gliding take you? How far can you manage on the ground before you choke on your own blood? How are those lungs doing now?"

As if on cue, I stumbled and choked. The metallic tinge on my tongue worried me, but I couldn't stop now. A second missile struck the tower, and I saw the whole thing distinctly start to tilt.

I sprinted for the base, coming out of the ditch and braving the fire from the slavers.

"I promise, Number Seven, I will keep you alive."

As if my fear needed anything worse to imagine. Memories of bloody whips, of burning metal collars and being beaten into the floor were still too fresh. Life under him, I'd rather-

The thought struck me hard, making me stumble.

"I'd rather die..."

Feelings I'd tried to bury were coming back. The last time I'd thought that being atop an orphanage, and the pain that had caused my friends. The last time I'd been atop this tower ahead of me I'd thought the same thing.

"What good is killing yourself just to spite me, eh? You can lose your delusional thoughts of leaving home, or you can lose everything by doing this."

The scattered impact of a shotgun exploded the ground beside me, and I fell on my side. Scrambling on the ground, I almost saw the round that hit the ground and then ricochet right

past me. Looking back, I could see the slavers advancing, firing ahead of me, around me. Shooting the ground.

They were herding me.

Behind them, I saw a the solder with the missile launcher, two others loading him again.

“Stop right where you are, and I promise, you'll live.”

I shivered, the tower right in front of me looked ready to fall any moment. Bricks were tumbling to the ground from it, and I could see the dust from little cracks forming along the base as the weight tilted. Steeling myself, I ran inside.

Inside was almost worse. The staircase had been shattered at the second floor, and furniture had fallen down the inside from buckled floors. The moment I stepped within, the third missile struck and blasted a hole from the outside inwards. Chunks of concrete and brickwork dropped and I dove to the side on the stairs to avoid it. Panicking, I simply kept running, it was all I knew now. I galloped up the stairs until I reached the broken gap, where I immediately resorted to my grapple-hook to wind myself up further.

A fourth missile struck below me, aiming at the base. Through the holes I could see the slavers backing off, dozens of them surrounding it on all sides. There was no way back.

“This is foolish, Number Seven! You'll do nothing but kill yourself to try this!”

I snarled back as I yanked out my hook and dropped onto the upper floors, then fired it again to the roof of the top floor and ran almost vertically up the wall with it, flapping my wings as I went, giving me lift to speed up. My centre of balance tilted, as I felt the entire tower begin to topple.

Slamming through the door to the balconies, I screamed as my centre of gravity went out from under me. Running upwards against the falling structure, weaving around the falling objects, I sprinted for the edge and leapt!

Leapt. Leapt into the air, into the sky. Leapt because I had no other option, no other instinct.

And as I leapt, I felt my wings unfurl, and catch the air.

I was going to defy him. I was going to live!

I was going to *fly*.

Fifty metres up, above the crashing remains of the control tower, I felt the sense of weightlessness come over me as I dropped in the air. Wind rushed against my face and my wings, as I strained and pulled back with my body, the forces flowing over me until I finally felt myself start to angle upwards again. Flying forward, I saw the skyport pass away from underneath me, replaced by the sight of houses and parks whipping by below me. The sense of freedom, of joy, surged through me. A confident grin came across my face, I'd done it! I'd gotten airborne, high enough to make it to the gap!

Below me, fires raged, and I threw my body to the side, feeling one wing raise and one fall as the forces of the air and my own flurried speed from that dive propel me almost sideways. I felt unsteady, wobbling back and forth, feeling like I might plummet any second. Only confidence, a knowledge that it was supposed to feel light kept me from panicking. The turn sent me racing over the fires of the skyport terminal, where the old slave market had once been. From below, I felt a surging lift of power and strength, as the warm air prickled my body.

Yelling to the heavens above, I spread both my wings fully and leaned back, as I felt it send me skywards. Surging directly upwards, I felt my balance invert as my head began to tilt back, and I found myself upside down, my tail to the clouds above.

The power of the fire, the strength of the rising currents, kept me rising slowly, higher and higher until I felt the coolness begin to settle in. I could see just past the wall, out into the city beyond it and the plains beyond that. As all of Fillydelphia spread out below me, I could see the horizon itself. For a few seconds, I felt at peace, utterly free of danger as it carried me.

Feeling my rise start to falter, I took a deep breath, and dared to tuck my wings in.

Angling downwards, pushing my head toward the ground and tucking in all my hooves, I dove at a sharp angle. If I wanted to do this, I needed speed. Too slow, and they'd shoot me out of the sky. It seemed high now, but I knew how fast my altitude could drop off on my shaky, small wings. My ears were filled with nothing but the roar of the wind, as I dropped down through skyship trails and pillars of smoke. Holding my breath, I punched holes in them on my rapid, curving descent back down. The red haze thickened, and I finally let out my wings again to try to catch myself.

Crying out, feeling my eyes water behind my goggles, the winds buffeted my stiff wings, making them bounce and knock back. Again and again I tried to keep them out straight, as I felt my flight path wobble and veer side to side. The rooftops started to come up to meet me as I tried to properly level out. My tail felt stretched behind me as my speed turned from vertical to horizontal.

"Come ooon!"

My left wing failed, and I pushed it back out again before I rolled right over. A crash at this speed *would* kill me.

Griffins were in the sky, but I raced past them, hearing only the briefest shout and seeing a momentary blip on my E.F.S as I aimed for the gap in the wall. Between two huge factories, I could see the edge of it, but gradually I began to realise that I didn't have the height to make it there on this one rushing dive.

I'd half expected it, I didn't know enough about flight yet to predict these things, but there were options.

Clenching my teeth, I flung myself to the side to curve away from the factories. If I had to make another run at it, staying in the air from the fires, then I'd do it. Up here, soaring in the sky, I felt I could do anything.

"A bird struggling in its cage, Number Seven!"

The voice carried on the winds, coming from all over below me. Racing across the rooftops, I aimed for the next fire outside of the mill I'd oft worked in. Feeling the lift under my wings, I gained altitude and flew upwards, trying to flap as best I could to get everything I could out of it. My wings felt stronger than they ever had, my heart more determined, my mind more settled and confident in the air.

The red dots returned on the E.F.S display, as the griffins finally tried to head me off. They didn't have the speed I still retained from my dive, but they were smart and knew how to intercept ahead of my path.

I'd have to detour.

What started as a single flight in my mind turned into a chase. Veering away from them, I found myself passing over the raging furnaces that were the parasprite pits, before diving to get inside the cover of smoke from the wrecked Ministry of Image. Navigating by directions on the E.F.S compass, I flew blind into the choking smog, holding my breath until it felt like my lungs would burst.

"Would your friends really want you to kill yourself in this attempt? Wouldn't it be best to stay alive? Surely they'd try to rescue you..."

He was desperate now, he'd say anything to make me stop, make me land. He was losing me, and he knew it!

Bursting from the smoke, away from the griffins, I felt myself faltering, before the hazy heat of the fires below kept me from falling too far. Twenty feet above the rooftops, I sped past

streets and slave pens I'd known so well. I passed the Ministry of Arcane Science again, veering over old town on my long circular route to take another run at the gap in the wall.

"Perhaps I'll even try to find your mother and bring her here for you, eh? You don't know who to look for, I do."

I shook my head, diving again to have enough speed to hit the fires along the edge of the crater, before a shot of melancholy passed through me to whip above the wrecked roof of the Mall. Out and out, I passed over the Hearts and Hooves Hospital, the Ministry of Wartime Technology and finally headed back for a go at the wall again.

"No matter where you go, I'll be waiting, Number Seven."

The griffins were distant. The fires spread all the way to the gap.

"I'll be waiting."

I had a clear run.

Fighting to not let the excitement overwhelm me, to keep a calm head, I clenched my teeth and flew for all I was worth. Rolling in the air, actually spinning twice until I had the right angle, I hit fire after fire, lifting me up, picking up speed. The ground began to pass faster and faster. Factories, scrapyards and slave pens passed away beneath me, every single one the last time I'd see it, every metre forward a metre I'd never have to walk again! All this way, this whole journey, all for this last run!

My muscles screaming in pain, my wings buckling, I forced them all to stay how they had to be. Over the skyport again, but taking another route, over more fires, keeping my altitude this time.

From below, I could see slavers pointing upwards. Bullets whipped around on all sides of me. One big cannon sent its tracer rounds through the air ahead of me, and I had to dive and roll to get under them. Every street below filled with slavers warned to look for me firing upwards. I flew past them, too fast for them to hit.

Rocketing between the two factories, I began to pull upwards, I could see the gap getting close, getting larger, wider, easier to reach! I was on track, I was-

The impact from below slammed into the root of my right wing.

Feeling everything slow down, I felt like I'd stopped in mid-air, as the pain exploded through me. My eyes widened, as my body twisted, and my wings folded back from the agonising impact. Yet I didn't scream. Tumbling end over end, my speed died on the spot.

As I fell, I could clearly see the gap in the wall, the sunset through it. Mouth open, my hoof stretched toward it, as though I could somehow reach it.

“No...”

And below, the ground raced up to meet me.

* * *

I was alone on the ground.

I was still in Fillydelphia.

My body was in pain, but my heart was in agony.

Above me, the gap in the factory roof where I'd impacted and shattered the thin metal shone a beam of red light down upon me. I lay on a hard floor, amongst the abandoned forge. My grapple hook was still attached to something above me, the last reaction to save my life I'd had.

But now I lay still, eyes wet, not knowing what to think or feel, other than the heartbreak. My four legs all felt numb and rigid. My back felt twisted. I was seeing double vision. It took everything I had to finally roll over, and felt my eyesight swim with the effort. Coughing, hacking up blood onto the rust coloured ground, I collapsed on my front. I could feel blood dripping from my head and my right side. My wing lay limp, the last time I'd tried to move it only sending a lance of white-hot pain through me. The bullet wasn't in me, but it had left a long tear in my body near the wing. Hissing and whining, I regarded the exposed flesh with horror, before putting my head to the ground. I wanted to wail and cry like I'd never done before. I could still see the gap in my mind. So close.

So. Close.

Then I heard the first stomp.

If I hadn't been surrounded by the blistering heat of the forge that set my skin tingling and my head to dizziness, I'd have felt my blood run cold, but the shivering of fear I now felt was just as bad.

Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. Careful and methodical.

Then through the hazy heat and smoke, I saw his thick form come sauntering toward me. His eyes full of malice and single minded intent, his mouth grinning wickedly and carrying

the same rifle I'd seen take Protégé's life. He pulled the bolt on it, ejecting the empty round I just knew had been the one.

"I told you I'd be waiting, Number Seven."

Dread, panic, fear. They all collided in my mind. I tried to crawl away from him, not even knowing where I was going. Gripping the metal legs of a raised gantry, I tugged myself toward the steam of the molten steel vats. The moment I stretched and moved, my side erupted into a fire of pain and made me clench up with a squeal. Kicking my hind legs instead, I tried to push myself away on my good side, spluttering and gasping at the red hot heat from the vats and the pain by my side.

Shackles simply walked calmly behind me. He followed me, sticking to my pace no matter how far I pulled myself. As I turned around a vat and pushed through more pain barriers than I knew I had, he simply wandered behind me. Toying with me and dragging it out.

"In truth, I saved your life, slave."

Gritting my teeth, I screamed and dropped down a small set of stairs into the forge itself, surrounded by sparking leaks of liquid metal on the floor and furnaces stoked from the basement.

"There's enough slavers with instructions to kill on sight near the fracture in the wall you made already to simply shoot you down. Did you really think it was possible to escape now that I'm in control? No slave escapes me...you could say it's my special talent, eh?"

That sick laugh echoed between the vats. The steam kept him a blurry, demonic visage that followed me no matter where I went, never outside of leg's reach.

Then finally he leaned down and grabbed me. Gasping in pain, I felt myself picked up and carried back to the front of the factory. His stench overpowered even the smoke of the forge, the slimey, sweaty feel of his coat making my skin crawl. When he finally dropped me beside the workbenches near the entrance, I struggled to get all four hooves down before collapsing onto my belly, wings splayed either side.

"I...I don't care...I'd rather die." I spluttered, trying to pull my bag forward to get at the one healing potion I knew was left in it.

Shackles kicked the bag toward me, waiting as I greedily plucked the cork out and tried to drink as much of it as my dry throat could without coughing it all back up.

"And that's precisely why I won't ever let you."

Something about the way he said that struck a horrid chord within me, as I felt the magic of the potion slowly reknit my side. There was a sense of timelessness to it.

The reality of that radioactive collar became clearer, and I fought to not throw up the very potion that was helping me.

"There's something quite appropriate, Number Seven." Shackles leaned forward and grabbed me by the fleece, lifting me from the ground to stare him face to face. "That you fall in the very factory you began this life in."

I gasped, a shot of pain going through my head as he knocked my skull with a hoof.

"Don't remember, eh? Thought you could forget? Thought you two could escape me like that?!"

His hoof cracked across my face hard, dropping me to the ground. Dizzied, I looked up and saw the factory laid before me. The burning roof was dropping into the vats in chunks, or crashing down at the far end, but the fires and hot vents gave it an eerie, ghostly shape to the benches, conveyor lines and cranes above vats of molten metal.

"This...this is..."

I could see them. Shapes of ponies at their workbenches, hunched low over them like ghosts. Memories in my own head that I felt I'd forgotten, but they were still there. They always were. Dark shapes that fell and stumbled. The crackle of the fires like whips on flesh, the moan of bending girders one of misery. The shapes faded and blew when the winds rushed through the factory, stoking the fires to ever greater heights.

"Like a good homing bird, hmm?" Shackles leaned down, and I felt the hoof on my back press me to the ground as his mouth drew uncomfortably close to my ear. "The whole time, you've never stopped returning to me. Every attempt brought you closer. You always ended up back where you started, again and again, didn't you?"

Eyes wide, I started to remember. I remembered being here, I remembered being trapped in Fillydelphia for the very first time, so long ago.

"Oh you'll whine, you'll complain, 'why don't I ever get anywhere?' About how it 'never moves along' for you. It's all because of this, Number Seven. It's been a long time, but I think you're finally starting to realise that from the very start, you knew it'd end like this."

He grabbed my head, making me holler from the pressure, dragging me through the ash and embers to stare eye to eye.

"This is the story of the slave who dared to dream."

His grin spread.

"But the thing about dreaming is if you made it then you wouldn't be dreaming of it, would you?"

I felt my body shiver deeply, his eyes piercing into me, his voice getting into my head itself. The burning city around us felt so very dreamlike, the smell of the smoke making me dizzy.

"You might have gotten further than all the others, you might have insulted me, denied me what I wanted in Ministry Station and gotten so many others away from me...but you won't, and I think you know it."

I clenched my eyes shut and tried to squirm away, but instead I found myself bodily slammed into the ground. My head knocked against the concrete and I curled up. I felt surrounded by recurring memories of this place, where it had all started for me since I'd been brought to this city.

"This is where it started..." I rasped, pulling myself up to my knees.

"Yes, Number Seven. Now you get it." I felt his hoof stroke my back, all the way to the base of the spine. He dug his hoof below my saddle's straps, and dragged me along beside him.

"And where it will start again." He grinned, pleased to have his hooves on me. I struggled and kicked, but he slapped me into the ground roughly, like I was just some small nuisance. Clutching my chest, I slid along the ground as he trotted.

"But first, we need to see about returning you to how you once were. Till you can relearn your place and everything can finally go back to normal, Number Seven."

Scrambling on the ground, I was dragged through the scorching mists of the forge, as I saw that unmistakable shape begin to appear through it.

"Starting with those wings that I did not *permit* you to have."

It was an anvil.

All sense of pride drained from me. I spun on his grip and strained to go *anywhere* but to that thing. I could feel myself starting to hyperventilate, my wings flaring and whipping back and forth in panic.

“Ah, so you *do* remember, eh?”

Snarling down at me, Shackles threw me inside the side of the heavy anvil. My shoulder clanged against it, before I wailed as his hoof flattened my wing on to it. Tugging until I felt my wing-stem stretch, I shook my head and screamed, crying out for him not to! Out of the corner of my wet eyes, I could see him dragging up a hammer, placing it in his mouth to raise up.

I couldn't move! I couldn't get away! My wings!

The hammer descended, and I shrieked as I threw my entire body forward. The metal clang of the hammer on the surface inches away made me scream in pain, despite him missing. Panting and whining, I realised he was toying with me, breaking my nerves before he broke my wings.

It rose again, and it came down. I clenched my eyes shut.

Those few seconds, when you know it's going to happen, but you can't stop it. Curling up, I consigned myself to the pain to follow, clenching my eyes shut.

The dull sound of metal on metal made me leap up and squeal, shaking my head violently, until I looked back and saw the hammer inches away. I could feel myself being frayed thin, gasping for air. Staring up at him, I felt myself fighting to urge to beg, to plead.

“Now there's the look in your eyes you should have.” He whispered, before taking up the hammer once more.

Shaking almost uncontrollably, I pulled twice more, before realising I was never getting my wing out without cutting it off. As he felt me fall still, he lingered, staring at me, indulging with those insane beady eyes as I slumped down to wait for it.

Through the smog, I could again see those dark shapes, faded ghosts of slaves if I squinted and tried to recall where they had all been. I could see even myself, as I saw the workbench I'd once been chained to. I watched as I remembered how I'd been thrown to the side and beaten down for being afraid and not working hard enough. Every memory I imagined, I could see it.

But my heart stopped as I saw another shape grab onto me, and lifted me up to whisper into my ear.

This wasn't just where I had been caught by Fillydelphia.

It had also been where I first met her, a long forgotten memory to both of us.

Above me, Shackles stroked my mane with one hoof, before plunging down.

I didn't pull away.

Instead, I leapt up. I dove onto the anvil with my forelegs and threw my entire weight backwards to tip the entire thing upwards. Committed to his strike, Shackles' skull cracked against the hook like tip of the anvil. With a yell, he threw the hammer in the distance and stumbled back, letting go of me.

I spun and screamed, trying to use every bit of inspiration I'd taken from watching Brim do it a hundred times, to strike him directly in the eye with my hoof as hard as I could.

The massive slavemaster recoiled back, bellowing in rage and pain as I felt my hoof impact hard, the edge of it striking the bone around his eye. Reaching down, I grabbed the nearest bar of discarded metal I could in my mouth and swung it under his chin. The thin metal impacted on his throat, and that roar cut out with a splutter. Shackles staggered back, holding his face and throat, collapsing onto his side. Holding my weapon, I braced my hooves on the ground.

"I'm not afraid of you."

I was.

"You're never going to hurt me or anyone else again."

He was.

Trembling, I raised the metal up and brought it down hard on the back of his head. It impacted hard, driving him to the ground as I went for the gap between skull and neck, all the fury I'd felt downstairs, the worry I'd not see my friends again boiling up into this one moment.

"You're-"

"-your MASTER!"

His enormous hoof surged up and careened into my chest. The wind was knocked clean out of me, as my ribcage buckled and sunk back. I was sent flying, blasted ten feet away to land on a metal staircase.

Ahead of me, Chainlink Shackles rose to his hooves, with murder in his eyes.

"You have made a very dear mistake, Number Seven."

My courage dissolved at the sight of his rage, but holding my chest, I backed away and ran up the stairs onto the gantries. He didn't approach slowly this time. The entire structure swung and rocked as his huge bulk surged up after me. I ran past the offices of the overseers, trying to suck in enough air in the stiflingly hot factory to get my lungs working properly again.

I knew this factory, my memories were there, buried deep, but I remembered that scalding vent of steam that always was down this catwalk to the right. Ducking behind the raised offices, I ran through it and tried to ignore the stinging heat. All I needed was to break line of sight with him, and this would let me do it.

The moment I was past it, I turned and fired my grappling hook right above me before he emerged to see me. Looping it around a crane, I pulled myself directly upwards to grasp onto the crane's arm above vats of glowing metal.

Below me, I saw him erupt through the steam, hissing from the pain.

He was looking around, he couldn't see me, but balancing awkwardly up here, I knew I'd not be able to stay forever.

Instead, I went on the attack! Leaping off, using my grapple's line like a swing, I sent my whole bodyweight crashing into the side of his head. The crushing impact set my ribs to flare up again, but I grabbed on to him and tugged with all I could, trying to push him off the gantry! Try to tip him into the vat, my own grapple-line would save me! I beat at his head, I tugged and ducked away from his grasping hooves.

"Worthless pegasus!" He bellowed at me, insult after demeaning insult. I yelled nothing but scared and angry cries back at him, beating on his ears and nose with my hoof over and over, but I couldn't get his weight to move. Slowly, I heard him turning to laughter, as he struggled back onto the gantry.

Instead, he turned and flung himself into the glassless framework windows of the raised office above the work floor. Together, we crashed through it, and I felt his bulk crush down atop me. I hugged my head, using my legs to protect it as he came to his hooves and rolled off of me. As he held his head, trying to clean the blood from his eyes after the wound from the anvil started to bleed, I took the chance to move. Desperately, I tried to crawl away to the window, to try and get back through it.

"They all get uppity near the end." Shackles snarled, as I heard him turn to face me.

A lash of pain tore along my back. Screaming, I dropped to the ground on the outside of the window, clattering onto the gantry. The achingly familiar sting of a whip leaving a red score through my fleece. I heard him stomping toward the window again as I struggled and grasped the railing to get back up.

“They all think, 'I'm the one!’”

The lash struck again, and I fell forward along the railing. The side of my head stuck through it, feeling the searing heat from below, but my back was in spasms. I could feel the tears in my fleece and the wounds opening and sucking as I struggled forward.

The rock of the walkways as Shackles climbed through the window and dropped down behind me made me stumble, before the third strike had me howling in pain.

“Until they get reminded!”

I screamed again.

“And shown!”

Again!

“They're just like any other slave, they haven't escaped! They're still trapped!”

The whip landed again, and again, and again. Reduced to shrieking, rolling on my sides, I wailed and felt the horrid and demeaning pain of a lashing come back to haunt me.

Then briefly, he paused, before his hoof knocked me further down the gantry. I could see it was a dead end, the point where slaves would pour ingots into the vat below, but I had nowhere else to go. The most I could hope for was to glide. He strode over me as I crawled, cackling and jostling me from side to side, as I neared the edge.

His hoof crashed down on my back, and held me to the mesh floor, my head over the lip, with the metal edge digging into my throat. From below me, the searing metal in the vat forced me to shut my eyes, my face feeling like it was slowly starting to burn.

“You did more than the rest, I'll give you that. That'll be one warm memory for you to keep to yourself as you help me build a new city upon this ruin.”

His weight bore forward, and I felt myself being ground below him, my chest and belly being flattened down, unable to even cry out. I felt my eyes water, my front hooves flailing uselessly at the ground.

“I can punish you, and hurt you as long as I need to, Number Seven. Everyone breaks sometime. Ponies a hundred times stronger than you have been brought to pleading before me. Heroes of the wasteland who had years of adventures and heroics before your time have knelt and whimpered for it to stop with me. You're nothing compared to them.”

His voice was whimsical at the end, as he let up with his hoof and pushed me up until I was kneeling before him, facing away. I crawled and staggered down the gantry, until his hooves came to rest on my tired, exhausted body to hold me gently, but firmly still.

“How much has it hurt? All this rebelling? All this raging against me? And yet, you're still here, and it still hurts.”

His hoof dragged down my back, along the fresh whip scars, making me cry out, tears streaming down my cheeks. I couldn't handle this. I didn't have the strength to fight him. One strike from him was worth a thousand of what I could do.

Then my old collar dropped beside me, its chain feeding back over to his clutches.

“Just put it back on, and I promise, it will all stop. One obedient pony, showing the rest how to survive. You came all this way, and I'm sure *everyone* is proud of you...you don't have anything else to prove.”

It clicked open, as I stared at it, panting hard, before sniffing and bowing my head.

“That's it. That's it.”

“I...” My voice was low and stutter, full of pain. “I...want to live...”

He lifted the collar, as I felt its warm metal against the back of my neck. His whole body was leaned over me, the bottom of his chest resting against my head like some sick idea of an embrace.

“And now you will.”

He knocked the ring, sending it around to finally close.

Until my hoof blocked it from snapping shut at the front of my throat.

“But not with *you*.”

With every bit of strength I could muster, I threw my hind leg back and delivered my hoof between his hind legs with vicious intent.

Shackles gasped and cried out, the cleanest, most satisfying cry of pain I'd ever heard from his mouth. His body slumped, dropping back in a hunched posture, eyes closed and one hoof reaching for me.

Instead, I grabbed the collar, and threw out my hoof. For once, I opened my mouth and the expected trigger flew right into it to bite down on immediately, as I threw the collar around the hook itself.

The grapple-hook fired directly upwards, passing by Shackles' head. It soared above him, as I sucked up the pain, pulled every ounce of inner strength I could, and launched to my hooves. I unloaded everything *Rarity's Grace* had into his underbelly, and he collapsed. Falling onto his back, I dove over his neck, slipping the cord around it.

As agile as any pegasus, I put my hooves on the railing beside us, and threw myself off the edge to catch the collar and hook as they descended again.

I dropped directly toward the molten metal, but this time my entire weight was behind the drop, and holding the cord and chain now wrapped around his neck. With a sharp tug on my body, I felt it pulled sharply down, as both of the loops noosed themselves around him. I heard the gurgling choke as his neck was crushed and constricted, trapped against the edge of the gantry. Crying from the burning heat so close below, I tugged, flapped with the strong fumes from below and bounced, making him struggle and spasm up above.

I screamed. I screamed at him to just finally give up. To let me go.

I didn't expect him to roll off the gantry.

With all the force of my fall, and the weight of the collar and chain, I'd pulled him clean off the gantry by his neck. Up above, his enormous body tumbled, and limply fell.

Panicking, I flared my wings in the rising heat, trying to get myself to fall *anywhere* but below, but his body struck me on the way down. I closed my eyes, tumbling end over end with him, flapping and trying to push off him.

Before finally, I felt myself slam into him as his body hit the edge of the vat, and toppled us both onto the concrete below. The cord on my grapple-gun snapped, and I was flung across a workbench, clattering to the floor behind it.

I felt like I'd blacked out for a few seconds, as the pain threatened to overwhelm me. I had to struggle to get enough breath in from the claustrophobic heat and smog, and the effort was making my head spin. Dizzily, I lay there, and glanced behind me.

Chainlink Shackles lay on the ground in a heap, a chain around his neck. Between him and I, my belongings were scattered from my tugged open saddlebag.

My legs didn't want to cooperate. I could see Unity's statuette lying some feet away, and my journal a little closer, but I couldn't stand up.

Chainlink Shackles could.

The moment I saw him stirring, saw him growling and rolling onto those thick hooves, I just panted and dropped my head to the floor again. How?! What did it take? *What did it take to finally escape this nightmare?*

He trembled, limped and stumbled. I could hear him choking and rasping. His side was scarred, burned deeply from the impact with the boiling vat. His bulletwounds dripped dark blood onto the floor. One of his legs looked twisted. His jaw seemed loose, and his words were slurry, more of a growl.

“Slave...belong...”

He began to advance, slipping and stumbling, but I could not stir anything into my body. His hoof crushed the grapple-gun, I hadn't even realised it had torn free from my saddle.

The pain shot through me like a whipcord, making me fall where I was. Immobile, I stared back at him approaching, feeling all my rising hope slowly draining. Around me, the fires closed in on the factory, sending dark shadows scattering and whipping between the workbenches. Like memories, like visible shades of slaves standing there, held into their work by the eternal chain.

“Number Seven...” He spluttered, until his eyes rested upon Unity's Statuette below.

“No!” My voice was tiny.

With a furious gesture, his hoof descended and crushed the only gift I had from her. He didn't move his gaze from me for one second. He stumbled forward and crushed the burning remnants of my tent. He trampled the packet of stolen food. He cracked my goggles.

“Never...leave...” His shadow began to reach me, lit from behind by the glow of the furnaces.

Slowly, he began to move toward my journal, sitting open on my finally completed picture. All of my friends, together, the only piece I had now that would ever show them all. In doing so, he came for me. Slowly, I stumbled and pulled my body toward it, hugging the journal to my chest, staring at the seemingly immortal slavemaster approaching.

Then he stopped, and I saw his head look around, furious.

“What are you all doing?”

Those same dark shapes of slaves I'd seen at the edge of my vision were now moving in on him. I'd thought them nothing but fragments of my imagination. Looking half dead, covered in burns and with lifeless eyes, they set their sights on the wounded Shackles. Like memories emerging from the fires and darkness, they grouped around me, and behind him.

"Begone, worms. Your master demands, you will obey!"

The dark shapes glanced only at him. They held tools. Hammers, saws, autoaxes. They surrounded him, each of them weak, but they were many. Oh, so many. Lash scarred, with burns on their necks, they glared at him, like no others I'd seen outside of-

No, my mind had to be playing tricks, they weren't-

"GET BACK, SLAVES!" Shackles roared, slamming his hoof down.

In return, they began to advance, as I heard autoaxes begin to whine and spin.

"GET! BACK!"

They didn't listen.

They disobeyed.

Past me, those shadows poured toward him. I didn't hear any voices, I didn't hear any screams from them. They descended upon him like an unholy fury of desperate and vengeful spirits, warped in the heated haze of the factory. As they neared him, I saw Shackles lash out again and again, but they flowed past him like mist. The autoaxes rose and fell, before descending again and again. His roars and commands were utterly ignored, as he was driven down, buried beneath their wordless revenge.

Soon, I heard his roars stopped, replaced only by the last sounds of the slaves tools striking the ground over and over.

Clutching my journal, I turned, beginning to try to pull myself up. My balance swung upside down and I staggered into a lathe, holding on to its metal tray to pull myself toward what was left of my saddlebag. Limping, staggering onto it, I fell atop it.

Behind me, I heard one last, great angered roar. I saw only a single mark on Protégé's E.F.S, one red mark.

"NUMBER SEVEN!"

The pile of slaves was thrown apart, as what seemed unreal emerged from them. Carved up, bloodied and howling, he charged for me, even as they tore and slashed at him.

“YOU ARE MINE! MINE! YOU BELONG TO ME!”

Falling upon my saddlebag, I clenched my teeth around what I'd been searching for and spun around the moment he leapt.

Only this time, I had Protégé's revolver held tightly in my mouth and a hoof striking a button on my Pipbuck. I felt time slow, as a blinking on my left hoof lit up in front of my eyes with the one charge of S.A.T.S Sundial had left me. The aiming spell was settled squarely on his head.

“Not any more.”

I pulled the trigger, and the numbing pain of the heavy recoil threw my head back. But guided by the targeting spell, the large round flew true.

Before me, Chainlink Shackles fell for the final time, crashing into the ground in a heap.

On his side, now marked by the exit wound of the round, the symbol of the unbroken chain was now broken.

As unexpectedly as they had appeared, I saw the slaves slowly pass away into the shadows and smoke. They dropped their tools and chains, finally leaving.

Leaving me alone to clutch my journal and rest.

* * *

It took me a long time to pull my battered body together enough to stagger out of the factory again. The fires now raged thoroughly inside it, collapsing the roof and making the gantries bend and break. Behind me, the way back was sealed with flames and pouring molten metal.

I tripped on my nearly lifeless hooves, crashing headlong into the scalding, inch deep gravel that passed for a road outside of the forge. Up above, the storm raged, searing the sky with blinding flashes and throwing rain that hissed in the heat of the burning city. Winds tore at me, throwing me from my hooves again and again as I sought to stand. This main road was a wind tunnel, carrying stinging droplets of the downpour with it.

Up ahead, five hundred metres distant, I could see the gap in the wall. A great spear of orange sunlight struck through it, cascading across me as I stood directly in front of it in the middle of the road.

On my left and right, the factories and the FunFarn were now ablaze. The fires spread and closed in, nipping at the road edges and draining the air from the area. I had no-where left to go. No other path I could take.

Gritting my teeth, I took one step toward the gap. Then another. My back dripped with sweat, my hooves burned on the ashes, my heart stuttered. Both sharp and dull pains raced back and forward along my body. Every step felt like a fight. Every stumbling, slow pace forward took a full five seconds to make.

I hadn't gone ten metres before I collapsed again. Wheezing, I found little air to take in and my lungs tingling with smoke and inhaled heat. The fires were sucking the oxygen all away. The gap ahead, that gateway to freedom, was mockingly distant. It kept tilting as my head fell over and over from tiredness seeping in.

'Just a little further', I told myself. It's only a little further! I reached out, and drew myself back up.

"Just run, just keep running!" I coughed and spluttered the words, as I threw my weight forward. For the next few metres, I stumbled and fell along, veering to one side and then the other. Scalding rain lashed at my eyes, forcing me to squint. Air and ground, they both burned. They all sapped my strength, until I felt my legs twist, and my front ones gave out.

Fifty metres from where I'd started, I dropped again. I was wheezing hard.

I could taste smoke. I wanted to sleep. Just sleep so badly. I could just-

Just rest.

Just for a moment.

The crack in the wall wheeled over on its side as I dropped to my side. My body felt broken. I didn't have enough left in me. I could barely walk. How could I fly? I couldn't run to get by. My lungs were coughing up blood, I couldn't take in enough air to exert myself.

And so I fell there, and curled into the growing ash. Slowly, I felt the pains begin to fade as I stopped moving. It felt good. It felt peaceful.

I'd freed them all. I'd gotten my friends out, made sure Shackles would never hurt anyone else and then gotten this close. That was pretty good.

That could be enough.

Enough to be happy with.

Enough to, in the end, feel proud of.

Enough-

No! I felt my body spasm, as I was shocked back into having my eyes open. The very act of trying to stay awake sent a rush of pain throughout me. My body rebelled, every signal it had telling me to stay down. I was done, it told me. I was too hurt. It'd hurt too much to move now!

Breathing in and out, panting hard, I slapped the ground with a hoof and *felt* that pain rush through me.

I'd *felt* pain before. I knew what it was like! But ahead, just ahead, I could see the end! The wall was broken, I only had to go through it! *The end was right there!* Coughing, I screamed as I pulled my broken body up. Stumbling, limping, I kept moving further, veering side to side in my dizziness and exhaustion.

I collapsed.

I got back up.

I collapsed.

I got back up.

Every time crying to the heavens through the gaps in the reforming clouds above. Every time shedding tears of pain. Every metre taking a new, harder force of will to move that extra bit further.

I fell once more, and I pushed up with my front hooves, but my lashed back sent white hot needles through me, and I dropped. Rolling, I felt my journal fall into my hooves, as I clutched on tight.

On its charcoal covered pages, I could see the smiling faces of my friends. Looking up, I could see the crack, the gap in the wall. Then my friends. The way out. My friends waiting. The way home.

A reminder. A reason. I knew what it felt like now. I had tasted freedom, just as he'd said!

I knew what I was fighting for and it'd be worth any pain. If this hurt more than I ever hurt in my life after it, then it'd be worth it. If this damaged my body to the point that I would be hurt outside forever. It'd be worth it!

Snapping my journal away, I drew myself up, my eyes fixed on that wall. Slavers stood ready on it, I could see they were armed. I shook, wanting to fall, but I spread my hooves and willed myself to stay upright, wings spread.

I could do this.

Behind me, I heard a small scraping of metal.

Briefly, I turned my head, before my mouth slowly hung open.

It was still there at the entrance to the FunFarm. That crazy cut out of Pinkie Pie I'd passed by so many times. It was pointed toward exactly where I was standing, with that raised foreleg creaking back and forth.

It was waving goodbye. Yet that wasn't all. My eyes widened, and the horrendous sounds faded for just one second, as I saw what surrounded it.

Three shapes in the smoke.

A young doctor.

An enormous, saluting machine.

And a small, black horned stallion, a peaceful smile upon his face.

Staring in disbelief, I none-the-less felt a measure of serenity fall upon my painfully thumping heart. Quickly, I smiled back.

Even as what I swore I'd seen disappeared and faded to the winds, to leave only the metal stand of the Ministry Mare alone, I felt one last effort left in me. A raise in my spirit. A willingness to endure the pain. To push into the storm.

One. Last. Time.

I turned back to the wall, and its waiting slavers. I let out my breath to ease my nerves, and closed my eyes.

And then I ran.

The effort was almost insurmountable, but I made my body do it. I pushed my hooves in front of one another, no matter how much it hurt. Spraying red hot ash from below me, drawing the smoke around me with my wings, I galloped for all I was worth toward that gap in the wall. Every few steps, I felt myself wavering. But every few steps, I would remember *something* that would give me the strength to carry on. The things I didn't have before, the memories of friendship, of love, of life.

I remembered impressing Brimstone with swearing at last. I'd felt proud. I'd felt strong. It let me pound my hooves into the ground, sprinting as fast as I could.

I remembered being comforted by Coral; sitting and knitting together with her in an orphanage. It let me feel at ease, as I let my wings arc out to either side of me and stretched them as far as they would go.

I remembered dancing with Glimmerlight atop a table for my birthday, laughing more than I ever had. I let the joy of reaching the end fill me inside; making me push harder than I ever had before. It made my wings begin to flap by my sides.

I remembered Protégé teaching me to read, the first time I'd really seen how much he cared. It gave me the hope to believe I could do something I'd never done before.

I remembered a promise. A promise that would make me push harder than ever before. That made my wings throw down again and again. The gale force winds surged along behind me, as I leapt and fell again and again. Every time, I threw down my wings and tried to feel the winds, and every time I dropped back onto the ground. Gritting my teeth, I put my head down and galloped harder and harder toward the wall. I accelerated, enduring every injury and seeking just that one little bit more energy to dredge up from within my spirit! Fillydelphia wouldn't own me forever!

The storm winds threw me forward, and I leapt as high as I could. Screaming in pain, I flapped my stiff, sore wings like I never had before.

For a second, I stayed aloft.

I dropped back to the ground with a thud, and set my legs kicking viciously to get my speed up again. I would!

I tried again, and fell.

Again!

And again.

Like every failed attempt.

Every time I'd come up short.

Every time they'd told me to stop.

Until finally. Finally, I caught the wind *just* right, and I felt myself jump, and then not come back down.

Three feet off the ground, I felt my heart almost stop in shock. Fighting the urge to freeze up, I gritted my teeth, bore the pain and kicked with everything I had. My wings flurried and strove to lift me, and I began to speed up. The vicious wind from behind me carried me. The ground passed by beneath me as I surged forward, gaining height steadily. The thrill, the sheer, unbelievable thrill of taking off under my own power sizzled through me, even as the heat of the flames and threw me side to side. Wheeling up and down from one side of the street to the other, I dove and rose again and again, before angling my wings forward and powering them back and forth to pick up speed.

Up ahead, the wall grew larger, and the slavers raised their weapons high. Bullets flew around me, and I rolled away from to the side to catch the fumes from a building fire. They sent me soaring up, arcing around the whipping red marks of tracer rounds.

Stopping myself from climbing too far, I tried to keep only going forward. Climbing would lose speed, I needed to go forward, only forward! Fires whipped up in my wake, as I skimmed the rooftops. I gritted my teeth, eyes only ever watching the world beyond the wall. My target.

I had to go faster! Always faster, if I were to make it! Diving again under their fire, I arced toward the wall and drove myself down toward the biggest fire I could see. It was a full ammunition dump that was crackling and erupting into the sky with the remains of the ferris wheel atop it. Feeling the wind roar in my ears, feeling it support my wings and drive me onwards, I dropped almost vertically toward that inferno. My entire face felt tight as I clenched up, trying to keep looking without any goggles. I pushed my forelegs out.

I left it as late as I dared, my heart singing with the feeling of almost being there.

Heedless of the pain it would cause, I dove *into* the tops of the flames.

And like I'd always done, even though I'd never realised it as much as I could have, I rose again atop the mighty eruptions coming from the detonating munitions. The shockwave and heat sent me skyrocketing upwards and onwards.

Faster than I ever thought a pegasus was capable of, trailing embers from the tips of my wings, I *roared* out of the fire, picking up speed beyond anything I could have hoped for! With

the smoke having obscured my approach, I buzzed the tops of their guard towers, climbing the whole way. My wings were blurring from the effort, as I streaked past their heads, screaming and yelling in sheer determination! The enormous structure of the wall began to loom forward. I saw all the debris and rebar within it like a net.

The gap neared, and I banked on my side to try and fit. Gunfire exploded from around me, filling the air.

But they were too late.

Surging through the air, I flew *through* the Fillydelphia wall, carving a path through the smoke that curled and drifted apart behind me.

The rush of joy, the unbelievable feeling washed over me, like I had never thought possible. Immediately, the enormity of the world outside opened up to either side of me.

Climbing higher into the sky, I arced upwards and threw my wings back over and over to go higher and higher. Driven by the rising heat, I kept going. I'd done it! I'd actually done it! Rooftops began to pass away beneath me, rolling quickly past as I raced out of the city itself, into the wasteland! The wall began growing smaller as I flew past skyships and low clouds. High up, the winds caught me, supporting me without need to flap any more. I glided and curved around in the air in any direction I wanted, but always up and further from Fillydelphia, every bit of distance a growing sense of relief and safety! My eyes were dry from the rushing winds and no goggles, my body hurt, but I didn't care.

On and on, past the clouds, past anything I ever thought I'd see, I broke through to the sky itself.

And there, for one incredible moment, I slowed down, and hung in the air. Spinning slowly, I saw no city. No fires. No red glare.

Just an open sky, and a sunset.

In that one tranquil moment with no sound, I felt all the pain fade away.

It didn't matter what happened now. I'd done it. From a foal born in chains, through rock farms and sales, through whips, anvils and a slave city, from Stables, secrets, war, blood, strife and tears over decades of trying, I'd come all the way at last. *All the way.*

Just for this one moment, to know I'd broken the cycle.

I spread my hooves, and felt myself hang on the wind, a smile upon my face.

Gradually, I began to drop, as I flipped over backwards and let myself be carried by gravity. I dove down toward the clouds, aiming to get as far from Fillydelphia as possible. The storms below would toss me around, the ground would be hard and I felt too tired to stay up forever. The layer of clouds below rose up and up, promising a return to a new hardship. A new journey, one I wasn't sure if I was ready to face. I had to fly as far as I could before I had to-

I came roaring out the air, aiming to break through and make a dash for it! At an angle, gritting my teeth, I prepared for the next difficult step to begin.

The clouds approached, tinged in soft orange from the sunset, and I clenched up to head into the storm.

I squeaked in shock as I impacted upon the clouds instead.

Shrill and yelping, I buried myself into the soft, pillow like substance of the cloud-layer. To my shock, I stopped amongst it. I flailed and tried to get my head up. Heart thumping, feeling like I was walking on air and about to fall as soon as reality remembered me, I staggered back and to the side before falling onto my backside. My legs hurt too much to really move properly.

"What? *What?!*"

Looking around, I was surrounded by a new world. A quiet, gentle world of fluff, sky and sunset that stretched on as far as I could see. It lazily rose and fell, shifting side to side in its ponderous, wind carried motions, like being in a crib that was being rocked.

I'd heard rumours. I'd thought them foal's tales.

Now, before my disbelieving eyes, I saw that the stories of pegasi were true, and I broke into laughter. I lay back and chuckled, then roared to the skies with giggles and snorts.

Pegasi could walk on clouds! / could walk on clouds!

Rising up, tired but spurred by joy and possibilities, I tried to leap and bound from cloud to cloud, imagining myself sinking into the great wads and springing out of them like a trampoline. I could be alone in the darkening sky. Safe and happy.

Instead, as soon as I tried to move, my legs gave out, and I dropped onto the side of a cloud as my aching body reminded me of the horrors I'd been through.

"I'm out!" I cried out to the faint stars, as I clambered and galloped to the top of the biggest one I could see. "I escaped!"

Coughing, feeling light headed as the clean air surged through my lungs, I finally tried to relax my stiff wings

As I kept my eyes open, I could see the path ahead of me across the sky, formed from gentle white mountains. They would be my road, my route to find where I had to.

And looking at the way the clouds were lazily drifting on the winds, I knew just where to go first to let the entire wasteland know I'd gotten out.

My legs quivered and ached, and my wings gratefully fell by my sides as I ceased moving. The scars, the cuts, bruises and burns seared still, but I would live.

Letting my tired eyes finally close, I curled into the soft clouds and let myself go limp.

As the slave city of Fillydelphia burned, I was carried far away in the sky, sleeping for what felt like the first time in days, a smile upon my face.

I would live.

And for the first time, I would have my life.

* * *

Click.

"Good morning to all of my faithful listeners still willing to tune in! This is the Dee Jaaay! DJ Pon-Three, that is, haha! A lot of folks thought that I'd never be back on air, but here we are for yet another day of me still running the airwaves. Some of you may wish it weren't, and maybe you'll get your wish, but we'll get to that one in a minute.

Before the news today, I can only want to tell you of a story that just came to my ears over the past couple days. A tragic one, it hurt me to hear it all. One coming our way from Fillydelphia. Now everyone remember that train of slaves that managed to make it out that I told you about a few days ago? They told us about the war over there, and about what happened to those trapped in it. Only now I hear the story of one little slave starting to reach me.

A slave who, along with others, went back in to get all those foals we heard about out, and who never left with his friends after doing so, because one of them wouldn't have properly made it out if he hadn't. This all, despite being born a slave, and more than probably any of them, having reason to want to get out.

Yet he went back. In the end, he gave his place to someone else.

What can I say, Equestria? What can I say? Quite the story.

Except...

Except that despite all that horror, all that tragedy, this one gets to end well! Because he's right here with me NOW! I got no idea how he managed to afford staying Tenpony for a few days to finally get in touch with me, but he made it happen! Say hello to the wasteland, Murky!"

"I-wha? Can they hear me now? OH! H-hi!"

"Isn't he just the bastion of strength and confidence you'd expect from a little escapee like him? My assistant's got him down in the interview room while she's up here helping me, quite the cutie, so she tells me. Looks can be deceiving, as we all know about 'small' heroes these days, which is why I've got him on here.

Wastelanders, what followed him is a story that I couldn't hope to tell you all about here, but I ask you all to keep it in mind. This little guy had nuthin'. Absolutely ziltch! Born a slave, worked a slave, thrown into the pits of Fillydelphia, and yet he fought, scratched and clawed his way to get out here, soaring out past that wall on once broken wings. If that isn't an inspiration, I don't know what is, and I wanted you to hear it in his own voice. Murky? Tell the lovely ponies what you've got to say."

"Um...well, I...I had it written here and...okay.

I failed a lot, and there wasn't a moment I wasn't scared. But I've, uh, I've learned to know that...that's okay! I tried to escape a lot through my life, ever since I was a foal. But every time I tried, I fell down. I fell further, until I fell into the fires of that city, and I thought I'd never get out again.

But I tried again, and I failed again.

I guess what I'm trying to say is...sometimes you'll fail. Maybe you'll start something, and want it so very bad, and it'll just unravel in front of you. Or you'll get so far and then realise you didn't plan it right and it just slowly ends up not working out. Sometimes you'll feel like it all *should* work without a hitch, but then it just...doesn't, for no reason other than bad luck. Other times you'll keep trying to improve to be good enough to do it, but you never feel like it's coming.

I lost count of the times I failed, and it hurt a lot. I fell down, I started thinking I couldn't. I never stopped being scared, and it won't ever stop being scary to fail.

But if you just keep finding a reason to get back up and try it again, maybe from a different angle, or adjust how you think about it...maybe someday, you'll find some things that'll help you get there in the end. If you don't keep trying, you'll let whatever it is hanging over your

head win, be it chains, your place in life or just feeling like you can't. It won't be easy, but failing...it's not the end.

For me, it was friends. I couldn't have gotten this without them, couldn't have done the things I did without them believing I was capable of it."

"For a stallion who hadn't been taught to read or write until a few weeks ago, that was poetic, Murky."

"I...ah...hehe...thanks, I guess."

"Now listen up, all you out there. In these days of history changing, empires falling and wars in every town, it's easy for us to forget. When the scale goes up, we start to think about numbers, rather than the people. And in this case, it was nothing more than just one slave wanting to escape his masters. One slave who wanted to live. One slave who dared to dream."

And to his friends out there, if you're listening in, he wants you to know. He's coming to find you, and I believe he'll manage it, no matter how long it takes."

Murky, you got anything left to add before we move on?"

"Just, um...I wanna say something."

"Let's here it, little guy."

"I...I DID IT!"

"Pfft, hah! I bet that felt good. Isn't that a little pep-talk for our day in recovery? Now, in completely unrelated news, there have been a series of robberies in Tenpony lately, all coincidentally from the five most miser like and wealthy ponies in the tower..."

Click.

* * *

The gentle winds of Manehattan blew around my face, as I stared out into the morning sky. The rooftops were gleaming under the light of the open sky, as I felt proper sunlight, one of the few times I had. Only for once, I could stop and enjoy it. My new stitched fleece felt soft and warm around me, while my embroidered saddlebag carried more fancy food than I really knew the names of.

"Well you certainly cut a different figure after a few days in here."

I turned my head, and Homage smirked from the balcony door.

"Came to see you off, sorry, got caught up helping the big guy."

"That's fine." I thinly smiled, still shivering a little at having shouted as loudly over the airwaves. Seeing her only reminded me of it. "And, heh...yeah. I really like the spa..."

"I'll bet! Of all the ponies who needed one, I figured you'd want it. Brighter green and more light blonde than I'd thought you were, huh?"

She trotted up beside me, glancing at the rising sun.

"You know, I've said goodbye to someone before from this same spot, I always think about it. I wish you had more time here, there's a lot of questions I want to ask you about what really happened behind those walls. About the journey you went on. But hey, for times future, right? You know, I wouldn't mind you crashing on a couch if you wanted to wait for your friends to come here instead."

I shook my head.

"I...I don't know if there's any 'Plan B' out there or not. Shackles was insane by the end, what if he has someone out here, someone who was told to come after me if I ever did get out?"

Homage frowned, resting a hoof on my cheek.

"Murky, you know the odds of that are ridiculous, you can't let fear of him stop you doing what you want out here."

Looking down, I took a long breath, and nodded.

"Well, there's another reason, I think. I'm, uh, gonna go back to the places I can remember. I wanna go to Friendship City and see if Unity's parents are still alive, maybe check in Bucklyn Cross too for Glimmerlight. And...uh...maybe see if I can find my mom too, and free her..."

I had to pause, sniffing briefly, until I felt the DJ's assistant lean in to lightly hold me in a warm hug.

"You never stop thinking about others, do you?"

As I stepped back, I raised an eyebrow, a little confused on what she meant by that. The light hearted unicorn sat down and twirled a hoof.

“Look, think about everything you've been through, huh? You were born in that life, you never had any of the stuff we do. But the entire way, every time the option came up to run or go back, you went back into danger to do the right thing and help them. Even when your freedom was offered to you, no strings attached, you went back to bring more out. *Twice*. You just kept giving up the very thing you wanted most so that others could have it. Listen, I had to put up with Red Eye's crap radio for almost as long as you did, working on the broadcast. He promised a lot of things that never came out of there, but if there ever was one true generous soul to emerge from that city...I'm looking at him.”

I was stunned at what she said. I'd never thought of it that way. Her fancier Tenpony clothing whipped in the wind, as she watched me process all that, seemingly quite amused in the same way Glimmer often had been to watch my expressions as I worked things through in my head. Then she bit her lip and looked up, as though having an idea.

“Heeey, look. Idea. I'm gonna be leaving this tower soon, got a little journey of my own to go on. I know you're leaving right now, but what do you say...meet up in Junction R-Seven in a couple weeks time? Maybe even travel together a bit? I figure we could both use the company out there, and believe me, I have a lot of questions.”

I hadn't expected that. Eyes widening, I found the idea one that immediately I liked. I'd made it this far by making friends, perhaps this could take me a little further.

“I'd love that.”

She held out her hoof, and (feeling a little silly) I knocked my own against it.

“Deal made then, Murky. So, you got everything you need? Ready for the big push into the unknown? Go find your friends?”

I trotted on the spot, feeling the excitement build. Was !!

“Oh yeah! There's so much I wanna try! All the foods, and the drinks, and all the ponies to meet and the places I'll get to visit! Glimmer'll kill me if I don't have a few good stories before I find her! I just wish I coulda...well, coulda maybe met, 'her', y'know...the Stable Dweller? Let her know how thankful I was for what she did at the very beginning. I'd heard sometimes she came here...”

Homage's face made a peculiar expression, before she looked to the sky. “Oh don't worry, Murky. I'm sure she'll hear about it.”

Okay then, whatever that meant.

But with one final hug and thank you to her for helping me out here, it was time to go.

“Thanks for all your help to get my message out.”

“Nonsense. If there's one thing I'm glad to do after all the shady stuff that went down, it's put something positive out there. Now go on, you've got a long road ahead of you.”

Grinning ear to ear, I mockingly saluted her with a wing, waving with a hoof, as I leaned backwards, and leapt off the balcony itself.

“Go show that wasteland what it's been missing with you!” Homage waved and shouted from the balcony door, “Go enjoy it! Whatever you want! No chains now!”

“Thank you! Goodbye!” I screamed back, as I dove.

I felt the rush of the wind around me. The currents in the air flowing across my body. The choices, whichever one I wanted to catch. In the end, I made my decision, flared my wings and soared down the streets of the enormous city. Smiling, full of delight, I spun around buildings and sought out the hot air to rise again and again, before finally flying out past the suburbs, away from the city, out into Equestria.

Finally, I was flying.

Flying high.

Flying onwards.

Flying...

...free.

* * *