



Antipodes

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Chapter 1

Pony legends spoke of a time when the moon and the sun moved across the sky at the behest of two great goddesses, but those times had long since passed. One day, they simply went... missing. No trace or hint of their whereabouts were ever found, and worse, the sun and moon froze in place above the planet. At first it hadn't been too bad- ponies on the daylight side frolicked and enjoyed the constant sunshine, while the ponies on the night side enjoyed the cool calm of the world at night.

Then, things began to take a turn for the worse...

10,000 Years Later

Jigsaw's horn shone a blue light on the dark walls of the cave. A creamy yellow pegasus trotted along behind him. Both shot glances over their shoulder every few minutes.

"Are you sure we're going the right way, Jigsaw?" said the pegasus.

"Relax, Tiptoe," Jigsaw said, squeezing through a pile of collapsed rocks that lay in their path. "I've made this trip four times now, and the worst thing I've had to deal with is cave-ins."

"Cave-ins?" yelped Tiptoe, her wings quivering against her flanks. "What are we supposed to do if something blocks our way?"

Jigsaw's horn glowed a brighter blue, and a rock that lay near Tiptoe's hoof moved out of her way. "I lift it," he said, matter-of-factly.

To be perfectly honest with himself, Jigsaw was just as scared as his new apprentice. He'd been put in charge of the tribe's water management system several years ago. The cave had a massive system of pipes, valves, and tubes linking the general populace to the only source of water for hundreds of miles: a vast, underground lake. At one time, the lake had been a safe and even pleasant place to visit, but those days were long

gone. Horrible creatures had moved into the water around the lake, and any visit there risked a fight with one of them.

Jigsaw's job wasn't easy, even if he didn't have to worry about things lurking in the dark. He had to adjust and reroute the water depending on broken pipes or areas that had fallen to the monsters- and there were more of those every year. The very survival of his civilization depended on it. This year, however, the Tribunal had seen fit to give him an assistant to train. Jigsaw found it strange that her special talent was stealth. How could that help him? He tried not to think about it that much, though. He was glad he wasn't alone.

The blue light cast by Jigsaw's horn made sharp shadows appear on the rocks ahead of her. Tiptoe ruffled her wings.

She never thought she'd be going into the lower sections of the cave. No pony did- except for water maintenance and some "daring" adventurers. The Tribunal had been attempting to put a stop to it for years- Their numbers had already been reduced dangerously.

There had been a time where thousands of ponies lived down here- you could still find the empty, carved-out caverns if you walked far enough. But ever since the grand cataclysm so long ago, they sealed themselves off from the outside world of sun and desolation and attempted to make a life in the caves. They numbered only in the hundreds now.

Suddenly, the claustrophobic tunnels opened up to a narrow walkway that spanned the length of the cavern, ending with a spiral staircase that led up into a smooth rock sphere cut into the ceiling. Metal pipes ran out in all directions and down into the lake. Mercifully, the water was still and nothing stirred in the darkness.

Jigsaw trotted out first and slowly made his way towards the staircase. The top of it stretched off towards the cavern's ceiling. Tiptoe spread her wings wide. How she wished she could take off! She'd never seen a room so large. She could do more than just hover- she could really soar! Unfortunately, she knew that that was a bad idea. Something could be lurking up there.

Back with the tribe, the largest room they had was the main chamber, and that was no more than the height of 20 ponies. Pegasi were ground-ridden

most of the time. Sometimes, in excavating caverns, there were drop-offs that required pegasi to fly over to help to build a bridge, but those were few and far between. Pegasi were still treated well- the Tribunal was made of of two delegates from each type of pony, but the pegasi as a people were declining. Less and less were born, and more and more earth ponies were taking their place. Some pegasi never even got their cutie marks at all. Tiptoe was one of the lucky ones- her feather cutie mark represented her light weight and ability to sneak, which had proven very useful when attempting to clear out monster infestations. That's how she came to be assigned to work with Jigsaw. She was supposed to find ways around creatures instead of confronting them.

"C'mon, Tip!" Jigsaw yelled at the pegasus. She was simply standing their at the tunnel mouth, her wings spread wide, her jaw agape. "Silly pony," he said to himself, "she wouldn't last a second on her own. "

He knew the feeling, though. The cavern was the largest room in the entire cave complex- so large that nopony had ever walked the circumference around the lake, or at least, nopony that tried ever made it back. The ceiling was several hundred feet up and shrouded in darkness.

She trotted up to the staircase and clambered up the wide stone steps towards the stone sphere that served as the control panel for all the water systems throughout the cave. Even the sphere, which seemed tiny in this enormous cavern, was wide enough inside for about 30 ponies to stand abreast. Jigsaw was waiting for her at the top.

"Okay, this is how it works. First step is to turn on the working lights."

He flipped a switch and the room hummed to life. Various dials and gauges on the walls began moving and from somewhere up above a ticker began printing readouts on paper that had yellowed with age.

A deep rumble shook the room, a splash could be heard below, and a huge reptilian head shot out of the water and raced up towards the shining orb on the ceiling. It was triangular and had milky white eyes that appeared to glow yellow in the harsh light from the viewing port that wrapped around the orb.

"What *IS* that thing?" Jigsaw yelled, jumping behind Tiptoe and putting his horn out hastily. "I've never seen anything like it!"

Amazingly, seeing the two ponies in the room, the serpent appeared to recoil and slink back into the water. The two ponies looked at each other and shared a nervous giggle.

A bright light shot out from where the dragon had been, metal pipes groaned and snapped, and the sphere broke free and plunged into the water below.

Chapter 2

The sphere crashed into the water below. Water poured into the room through the wrap-around viewport, buffeting Tiptoe and Jigsaw. The creature outside was flitting around the sphere, slamming into the walls, attempting to get at the prey inside. The blows shook and deformed the sphere, causing objects to fly off the walls and into the rapidly rising water below.

A jet of water shot out of the viewport, slamming into the two ponies and knocking them off their hooves. Tiptoe hurtled head over heels in the water. Struggling against the current, she extended her wings out flat, and her tumble stopped. She flapped furiously and managed to prevent herself from slamming into the wall on other side. She swam up to the level of the water and broke the surface.

“Jigsaw!” She yelled. “Jigsaw, where are you?”

The only response came in the form of the roar of the sea serpent outside, which had now managed to wedge its head into the viewport and was glaring down at Tiptoe with its milky white eyes. Tiptoe took a deep breath and dived under.

She saw Jigsaw down near the bottom of the sphere, floating near the main control console. He looked unconscious. She paddled down to him and grabbed his neck in her mouth, then began pumping her wings. The beat of the pony’s wings shot them upwards until they broke the surface of the water.

Tiptoe gasped. The sea serpent had managed to pry the viewport open long enough for it to slink its head inside. The triangular nostrils flared as it caught the scent of the ponies, and its head turned in their direction. It shot down towards the two ponies, its jaw open wide. Tiptoe dropped under the water and the serpent slammed into the wall behind them. The serpent’s body went limp, and Tiptoe began flapping her wings to attempt to fly up and over the water- but her poor wings were soaking wet, and the extra weight of Jigsaw was simply too much. Tiptoe instead beat her wings under

the water and began forcing her way up the torrent of water towards the viewport.

The sea serpent stirred. It reared its head up at the pegasus that was swimming up the current and opened its mouth wide.

Tiptoe saw the serpent's mouth open and braced herself, expecting it to strike. It didn't. Instead, she saw a white pinprick of light appear in the depths of the serpent's throat. She stopped beating her wings and tumbled backwards, just in time to miss getting hit by a beam of intense white light that shot out of the serpent's mouth and punched a hole in the side of the sphere.

There was a strong gush of water, then everything was still. The sphere was now filled to the top with water, and Tiptoe could escape! Unconscious Jigsaw still in mouth, she shot out of the sphere and upward. She looked down to see something that she hadn't expected- the serpent was trapped! It couldn't pull its neck out of the opening it had made in the viewport! As she swam up, she watched with a certain satisfaction as the sphere sank deeper and the tail of the serpent whipped past her and out of sight.

The satisfaction was short lived, however, as she looked up and realized there was a rock wall above her. The sphere had been pulled and tossed around underwater by the serpent's attacks and had slipped under a stone overhang. Tiptoe began to panic. She hadn't exactly had time to take a deep breath before swimming out, and she didn't know if Jigsaw was breathing. The terror and chaos in the sphere had kept her from realizing the true gravity of the situation. Their lives were in danger! She stopped flapping her wings and desperately looked around for any way through or around the overhang. Her wings were aching from the exertion of flapping underwater. She saw a small crack in the rock ceiling and made for it, her wings screaming in pain with every flap. She was getting desperate for a breath, and the swimming wasn't helping matters.

They broke the surface in a small room directly above the crack in the stone. Tiptoe flew out of the water and tumbled onto the ground, coughing and gasping for air. The only light in the room came from fluorescent mushrooms that grew along the walls. She dropped Jigsaw and began checking if he was breathing.

He wasn't.

Tiptoe had no idea what to do. She hadn't been trained in this before; how could she have been? The only liquid water that wasn't in pipes was in the reservoir, and nopony would ever be crazy enough to try to swim in that. She did the only thing she could think of: She took a deep breath, leaned over him, and began blowing air into his lungs.

Immediately, Jigsaw convulsed and rolled onto his side. He spit up water and began coughing. Tiptoe let out a sigh of relief and collapsed on the cave floor, exhausted.

Several hours later, Tiptoe awoke to find Jigsaw was awake and sitting up, his horn lit, staring intensely at the pool of water.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Jigsaw jumped. "Oh! You're awake." he pawed at the ground. "I'm making sure that thing doesn't come back."

"It won't. I saw it go down with the control room." Tiptoe said.

"Oh. Well... thank you. For saving me."

Tiptoe blushed. "What else could I do?"

Tiptoe began examining the room. It was very small- maybe 2 ponies high. There was a group of bioluminescent fungi in the corner, though their light was drowned out by the blue light from Jigsaw's horn. There was a tunnel that led off into the darkness in the wall behind her.

"What's going to happen to the tribe?" Tiptoe asked. "What will the control station going down do to the water?"

"Without the controls, it will just keep flowing as it always did. We just won't be able to control it."

"But... but what happens if there's a leak in an area we can't fix? What happens if the pressure drops?"

“Then... then we can’t do anything about it here, can we?” Jigsaw looked up at Tiptoe and sighed. “There’s nothing we can do about it here. Can you walk?”

“Of course I can walk.” Tiptoe said. She began to stand up and a sharp pain shot through her flank. Her wings felt as though somepony had tried to pull them off. She attempted to spread them out. She let out a cry of pain and retracted the wing back to her side.

“Don’t move.” Jigsaw said. “Let me take a look at it.” He walked over to Tiptoe and his horn suddenly flared with a blue light. He touched it to the spot where the wing connected to the flank. Tiptoe felt a tingle spread out and into her wings. It helped to take the pain away.

“How did you do that?” Tiptoe said, her eyes wide.

“My special talent is finding out how things work. That includes biology.” He turned his flank to show her his cutie mark- two gears meshed together. “It’s sprained, by the way.” Jigsaw said. “You pushed yourself way too hard back there. How did you even hurt your wings, anyway? Weren’t we underwater?”

Tiptoe quickly recounted what happened in the sphere.

“You managed to move quickly enough to escape the serpent while carrying me?” Jigsaw said, an eyebrow raised. “I’m impressed.”

Tiptoe smiled sadly. “But now I can’t use my wings at all. That’s pretty much all I have.”

Jigsaw shot her a skeptical glance. “You took charge back there. Better than I ever have. You saved my life. You’re more than the sum of your parts.” He began to walk towards the entrance to the tunnel.

Tiptoe’s face flushed with color. No pony had ever complimented her like that- she was a pegasus! Mostly ponies just looked down on her with pity. Some even disliked her just because of her wings. She’d never even flown before, not really. The most she had ever flown was hovering in the main chamber- and that was only so she didn’t forget how. She still remembered the moment she stood in the cavern for the first time, seeing so much

empty space above her. She couldn't see how she'd ever get back there. She didn't see how she would ever get to fly. But Jigsaw's words had stimulated something deep inside her. She imagined this was how it would feel to soar. She trotted gingerly over to the mouth of the tunnel.

Jigsaw glanced over his shoulder to see the pegasus standing behind him. "We should follow this. I don't know that we have any other options." He paused and added "I'm scared, Tiptoe."

Tiptoe cantered up and stood beside Jigsaw.

"What else can we do?" she said.

Together, they trotted off into the unknown.

Chapter 3

Tiptoe fell into place behind Jigsaw as they pushed forwards through the darkness. The glowing fungus that grew near the entrance didn't extend into the tunnel, so the only light came from Jigsaw's horn. Tiptoe tried to glance over her shoulder but winced at the pain in her wings. Jigsaw stopped and turn to face her.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Let's just keep going."

The tunnel curved upwards as the ponies walked on. As they moved on, the walls slowly became more and more smooth. The rough surface of the floor became more and more regular.

"Are these stairs?" Asked Tiptoe.

"I don't know. How could there be? No pony could ever have been here before." Jigsaw replied.

However, as they walked further, it became clear that they *were* stairs. The walls were tiled, too. The air also got warmer the farther they climbed. It was no longer the cold, damp air they had been used to breathing for the last few hours- it was hot and dry.

"Jigsaw? I think we might be getting close to the surface." Tiptoe said, her hair bristling at the thought. No pony ever went to the surface- not ever.

"We can't be that close. If we were, we'd be dead by now, wouldn't we? And besides, our tribe *must* have been here at some point. How else do you explain the stairs?" Jigsaw said. He wasn't entirely convinced, though. His job involved going through some of the oldest areas in the entire complex, and none of the places he'd ever been to ever went this far out.

Suddenly, the stairs ended with a large slab of metal blocking the entrance to what seemed to be a stone room cut into the wall. There was a small circle of silvery metal near the iron slab of the doorway.

“Jigsaw, have you ever seen anything like this before?” Tiptoe asked, inching away from the imposing slab of metal.

“No, not out this far. Tiptoe... I think these might be ruins of the old world.”

Tiptoe reared back in alarm. “Ruins of the old world? That’s forbidden, Jigsaw! Ruins of the old world are insanely dangerous! They always lead to the surface!”

Jigsaw gulped and said, “I’m not exactly thrilled about the prospect, but look. We’re at the same level as whatever is behind this door, and we’re not dead, are we? If the sun could shine through up here, it would be just as hot on this side of the door.”

Tiptoe backed down. “Alright. I’ll trust you. But if we open the door and we’re outside, I totally told you so.”

Jigsaw rolled his eyes and turned to look intensely at the locking mechanism next to the door. The plate of metal was surrounded by intricate etchings in the metal that didn’t seem to have faded with time. Jigsaw looked intently at the marks but couldn’t seem to make sense of them. He focused and touched the tip of his horn to the metal.

Instantly, he could sense the inner workings of the mechanism. The etchings on the lock were magical- and the method of opening relatively easy. Jigsaw inserted his horn into the lock and the room lit up. Locking mechanisms that hadn’t budged for thousands of years began grinding out of place. Bolts slid and came undone. The door slowly creaked open, making a horrible grinding noise. Blue light shot through the etchings on the door and up channels in the wall into reservoirs in the ceiling, lighting up the underground space.

Tiptoe looked in with a mixture of fear and wonder. Children in their tribe were raised on stories of the outside world before the Great Cataclysm. They say that ponies could walk the surface freely and that plants even grew up there. Of course, any pony now knew that would be a death

sentence. Nothing could survive exposure to the sun, not even for a second. It had been like that for as long as anyone could remember. However, the ruins of the old world still existed, here and there- but almost always it was far too dangerous to explore. The buildings were usually very close to the surface, or filled with monsters. Ponies had since learned to stay keep their distance, no matter the treasures that may lay within.

“Jigsaw, what is this place?” Tiptoe asked walking forward in awe behind Jigsaw. The room was enormous, though many parts of it seemed to have fallen in on themselves. To their right lay a large rectangular device that rested on tracks.

“I haven’t the slightest idea, but look up there. I think there’s writing. Can you read any of the old language?”

“Only what they taught me in training. Shouldn’t you know more than I do? You *are* the head of the water department.”

Jigsaw chuckled. “Doesn’t mean I paid attention in class. Do you think you could try to read it?”

Tiptoe smiled. Jigsaw rarely laughed, and when he did, it was usually a good sign. It helped to put her at ease. “I can try.”

She stared at the faded sign hanging on the opposite wall for several minutes and muttered to herself. Eventually she said “I can’t be sure, but it says something to effect of ‘Fillydelphia Public Transportation’... something. I can’t figure out the last word.”

“Network.” Jigsaw said. “That one I can recognize. So, this place was some kind of transportation network for the old world? But... The door...” Jigsaw paused, apparently lost in thought. Tiptoe imagined she could see the gears on his flank turning. Then, he looked up at her and smiled. “Do you realize what this means? This is working old world technology! And more than that, it’s safe! Do you realize what this could mean if we could get it back to the tribe? The scientific value of this facility is... I don’t even know! Priceless!” Jigsaw’s entire body appeared to shift. Most of the time in the tunnel and the cave, he has simply walked along in silence, his head down, but now, he held his head high. He was in his element.

He had been fascinated by technology ever since he was just a foal. Unfortunately for him, the pickings were slim in the tribe- the only technology available was either old world tech that had been salvaged and heavily modified or improvised from materials on hand centuries ago. Jigsaw didn't mind, however. He simply invented. Before he had even reached adulthood, he had built a water-clock that also purified sediment- something invaluable in the caves. This had caught the attention of the tribunal, which had put him in the water management department- quite prestigious for such a young pony.

He quickly climbed through the ranks due to his brilliant sense of machinery- he simply seemed to understand subtleties that other ponies didn't. It wasn't all fun and games, though. He had had several run-ins with terrible creatures, and sometimes all the people under his command didn't make it out with him. Over time, he turned from a happy, upbeat young unicorn to a cold and sarcastic head of water management.

"Jigsaw..." Tiptoe said, walking along side him. "This is great, and everything, but if we can't get back to the tribe, it doesn't really matter, does it?"

Jigsaw turned to Tiptoe and stared at her quizzically, as if he had forgotten that she was there. Then his eyes seemed to get wide and he broke out in the largest smile she had ever seen. He pointed over her shoulder with his horn.

"How about we take that?"

He was pointing at the subway car.

"Jigsaw, you're *insane!* That... thing... must have been here since the cataclysm! There's no way it works, and even if it did, we have no idea where it would take us! Not back to the tribe, that's for sure!"

Jigsaw seemed to find the younger pony's incredulity amusing. He raised an eyelash and gave Tiptoe a playful smile.

"You doubt the mighty Jigsaw?"

Tiptoe just stared back, her face unchanged.

The smile fell of Jigsaw's face.

"Okay, look. It's the same choice that we had at the door. We can either keep going, or stay here and starve to death. And I can get the car going. I *know* I can."

Tiptoe sighed. "If my wings weren't so sore, I'd slap you right now." She smiled in spite of herself.

Jigsaw chuckled and said "Oh, Tiptoe, what would I do without you?"

"You would have drowned. Or been eaten by a sea serpent," Tiptoe thought. She followed Jigsaw anyway.

Jigsaw pried the door open and walked inside the ancient compartment. Faded advertisements lined the ceiling of the car. Jigsaw felt like a foal in a sugarcube store- the wealth of knowledge in this room was almost unthinkable!

He trotted into the driver's area and looked at the console. It seemed to be mostly intact- a couple of the buttons had fallen off, but mostly alright otherwise. He touched his horn to the console. Instantly, the layout of the car appeared apparent to him- and there were a lot of problems. Rusted over gears, unconnected wires, bolts having been disintegrated over the march of the interregnum since the Great Cataclysm.

"Looks like I've got my work cut out for me here." Jigsaw muttered to himself.

Tiptoe gasped in wonder as the entire car appeared to be encased in a swirling ball of blue light. She looked in to see Jigsaw's horn was spewing off a brighter blue light than she had ever seen. Inside the car, time itself seemed to be moving backwards. Tears in the fabric on the chairs restitched itself, the metal seemed to regain its luster, the cracks in the glass healed. Metal objects from around the station flew up and appeared to bend themselves into complicated shapes, then fly under the carriage to attach themselves to some unknown mechanism.

The blue light faded from Jigsaw's horn, and he collapsed and slumped forwards on to the control panel. Tiptoe ran up to him.

"Jigsaw! Jigsaw are you okay?"

His eyes fluttered open. "I'm fine, I just did a rather large spell there. I might be out of it for a while."

Tiptoe looked around the compartment. Lights were flicking on and some large mechanism was whirring into life. With a jerk and a screech, the car began to move forwards.

"You can do all that, but you can't fix my sprained wing?" She said, laughing.

"Machines are easier than ponies. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to rest for a while."

Tiptoe led him over to one of the rows of seats, which he promptly climbed upon and fell asleep. Tiptoe climbed onto the row next to him and closed her eyes, too.

Chapter 4

Jigsaw lay on his back in the subway car, his head hanging upside down off the edge of the row of seats. Tiptoe sat opposite from him, staring out the window at the aged stone tunnel rushing past.

“See anything yet?” Jigsaw said.

“Nope. Nothing but rocks, puddles, and sand.” Tiptoe replied dully, smooshing her face against the glass.

“It’s been 3 days!” Jigsaw said, rolling over and sitting up on his haunches. “You’d think this a subway system would lead SOMEWHERE interesting, but all we’ve found are empty stations.”

“At least my wings are better. And at the speed we’re going, I’m just amazed this thing hasn’t broken down or reached the end of the tracks.” Tiptoe said.

Jigsaw’s voice adopted a tone of mock indignation. “Why, I never! You have so little faith in the mighty Jigsaw?”

Tiptoe rolled her eyes. Jigsaw had been in such high spirits lately. It seemed he was still ecstatic be in a piece of working old-world tech. Tiptoe wasn’t quite as happy about it. The machine creaked and shook, and occasionally it would break down, requiring Jigsaw to go out and scavenge for materials to fix it. They couldn’t keep it going forever- Jigsaw’s powers might have been prodigious, but this WAS a piece of 10,000-year-old tech.

“I’m getting pretty thirsty,” Tiptoe said, “can we stop for water?”

“Sure thing, I was getting pretty thirsty too.” Jigsaw said. He jumped off the seats and trotted into the driver’s cabin. His horn glowed blue as he pulled down on a lever and pushed several buttons. The whole car bucked and screeched as the wheels locked in place. Blue sparks could be seen flying from under them. Eventually, the car shuddered to a halt.

“I really, really hate that.” Tiptoe said, extracting herself from the window and hopping out the door into the tunnel. Jigsaw jumped out shortly after.

“I think it’s kinda fun!” He said.

Tiptoe rolled her eyes and they started off together up the tunnel, looking for water. The lamps on the front of the car lit the tunnel for several hundred feet ahead, and they quickly came upon a pool of fresh water and began to drink.

When they had drunk their fill, Tiptoe said, “I’ve been wondering for a while now, what exactly powers that thing? I noticed the lights turning on in the station when you put your horn into that door.”

“I’m glad you asked!” Jigsaw said, his ears perking up. “You’re familiar with electricity, right?”

“Yeah, we learned about it in school. They use it to electroplate metal, right?”

“Right. But that’s not all it can do. In the old world, they had ways of generating massive amounts of electricity. Electricity was used to replace magic so non-unicorns could operate some of the more advanced technology. That subway car back there was one of them, but now I’ve jury-rigged it to use magic. The lights at the station were magical, too. Magic and electricity have rather strange interactions. In fact, in this one book, I read about this time a unicorn tried to enchant a certain piece of old-world tech, and he ended up...”

Jigsaw kept talking, but Tiptoe had long since stopped paying attention. All these technical details really didn’t interest her, and magic was just a mystery to her. She was more worried about the food situation. They hadn’t eaten more than the occasional mushroom for 3 days now, and her mood was starting to show it. Jigsaw seemed unaffected, which bothered her even more.

“... of course, that being said, I still enjoy magic and magic powered things, obviously, I just think they both have their place. Not that it really matters

since we can't even generate an- Hey, what's the matter with you?" Jigsaw said, seeing her ears pressed down against her head.

"Will you just *stop talking!*" Tiptoe yelled. She spread her wings out. "All you've done for the last three days is talk about the stupid subway car! What makes you think I care? I asked one question, I didn't want your whole life story!" She stood there, wings outspread, fuming.

Jigsaw stared at her, his eyes flicking back and forth between hers. Then he seemed to shrink.

"I'm sorry." he said. "Let's head back to the car."

He began to walk towards the subway car, his head held low. Tiptoe followed far behind him. Before long, they were back in the car, and with a spark from Jigsaw's horn, they were hurtling down the track again.

Several hours later, Tiptoe sat on the bench in the very back end of the subway car. Jigsaw lay curled up in the front-most. Tiptoe glanced his direction and squirmed in her seat. She wasn't happy about what she'd said earlier. She got up and slowly walked towards Jigsaw.

"Jigsaw...?" She said tentatively.

"What do you want?" Jigsaw replied, without looking at her.

"I wanted to apologize for... my outburst earlier. I think I'm just stressed from... everything that's happened in the last few days."

Jigsaw sat up and stared out the window for several seconds. Then he turned, and Tiptoe was shocked to see his eyes were glistening with tears.

"Listen. I want to tell you something." he said. He patted the seat next to him with his hoof, and Tiptoe jumped onto the seat and settled in.

"You're not the first apprentice I've taken on, you know." he began. "There was another before you. A young earth pony by the name of Antimony. As brilliant a geologist as I'd ever seen. We were supposed to travel together into one of the old world ruins. We... well, we didn't make it far. We ran into a cave ogre along the way, and I'm ashamed to say that I ran for it.

Antimony tried to stand her ground and... she didn't make it out. She died because I was too cowardly to stay and help. Since then, I've traveled on my own, until the tribunal forced me to take you on." Jigsaw looked up at Tiptoe. "You saved my life twice back there in the water. I won't ever leave you to fend for yourself, Tiptoe."

"But... why are you telling me this?"

"Because... because I wanted to tell somepony. And... I wanted you to know. What you mean to me."

Jigsaw met Tiptoe's eyes, and they held each other's gaze for a long moment. Then, Tiptoe broke away and jumped down.

"I'm getting pretty tired. I think I'm going to go to sleep."

"Yeah, okay." Jigsaw said, looking slightly disappointed. He lay his head back down on the seat cushion. The train rocked.

He was surprised and pleased to find out a moment later that Tiptoe had curled up on the seat next to him. He smiled and closed his eyes.

It was then that the subway train ran out of track.

Tiptoe and Jigsaw were launched from the seats and went hurtling around the inside of the subway car until it finally came to a stop. Jigsaw sat up and looked around the mangled car.

"Tiptoe! Tiptoe, are you okay?" He yelled.

A wing appeared from under a pile of seat cushions. "I'm fine, Jigsaw! What happened?"

"I don't know," Jigsaw replied, "But I'm guessing it had something to do with that." He gestured out the back window at the track behind them, where no track could be seen for as far as they could see.

"We probably ran out of track and skidded to... wherever we are." Jigsaw said.

“Does this mean we have to walk?” Tiptoe asked, her ears drooping.

A bolt of blue light appeared to shoot from Jigsaw’s horn and into the metal floor of the car.

“It’s broken even beyond my ability to repair it” said Jigsaw. “Maybe if I had a few years and intimate knowledge of the mechanics of this thing I could, but as it stands, yes. We’re going to have to walk.”

Tiptoe grumbled and she and Jigsaw climbed out of a broken window on the side of the car. Jigsaw lit his horn and they began down the tunnel.

“It always seems to come down to this, doesn’t it?” Jigsaw thought. *“walking down a tunnel, with only the light of my horn to guide us, no idea where we’re going.”*

Farther down, Tiptoe thought she could see something. A small pinprick of light.

“Jigsaw! Put out your horn for a second!” she said. Jigsaw complied and put out his horn. Sure enough, there was light farther down the tunnel.

“C’mon!” Jigsaw yelled, and began galloping. Tiptoe followed as fast as she could.

The rapidly approached the source of the light- another station. However, once they broke into the station proper, the two of them recoiled in horror.

“*Sunlight!*” they shouted in unison. They instinctively put a hoof over their eyes and braced for immolation. However, it didn’t come. Jigsaw lowered his hoof cautiously.

“Tiptoe? I don’t think... I don’t think it can hurt us.” Jigsaw slowly walked forwards into the beam of light. It felt pleasantly warm on his skin. “I think.... I think we rode farther than we thought. I think... I think we’re in the temperate zone.”

Tiptoe's brain seized. The temperate zone was just an old pony's tale told to little fillies to make them sleep better! It couldn't possibly exist! But there Jigsaw was, standing full into the sunlight, his face up and his eyes closed.

Of course, they both remembered the story well. The great goddesses Celestia and Luna ruled the night and day in harmony, and the world was in perfect balance. Day and night came to all areas of the world, and only a few were too hostile to support life. The great sun and mighty moon traversed the sky equally.

But then, the Great Cataclysm occurred- the goddesses had simply vanished. The sun and moon stayed frozen where they were, and the world fell to chaos. The tribunal's records told of a group of ponies on the daylight side descending into a massive cave complex when the weather began to get too hot and sealing the entrance with a massive metal door. They were who Tiptoe and Jigsaw had descended from. The great metal door had only been opened twice afterwards- once at 1,000 years after the Great Cataclysm, and another after 5,000 years. Both times the sun had proven to be as harsh as ever- it instantly killed any living thing exposed to its rays.

Tiptoe walked forward hesitantly into the sunlight and something seemed to shift inside her. She looked up and saw the sky- the real, blue sky- for the first time in her life. She spread her wings and beat them downwards.

"Tiptoe, wait!" Jigsaw yelled, but it was too late. Tiptoe took off and flew up to the hole in the ceiling and out.

She felt lighter than she ever had. She soared upwards, flapping her wings as hard as she could. She dove. She flipped. She raced through the open air and breathed deeply. The air had a peculiar smell that she assumed must have been the foliage present all over the ground beneath her. She had never been happier in her life. How did she ever live underground before this? The sky was where she belonged.

She dove back into the small hole in the ground and saw Jigsaw standing there, his mouth agape.

"I saw you outside. That was... incredible!" Jigsaw said. "But... can you get me out of here?"

“I can try.” Said Tiptoe. She flew above Jigsaw and grabbed him with her front hooves and beat her wings. Slowly, they made progress up to the hole in the ceiling.

When they made it out, Tiptoe dumped Jigsaw onto the grass and landed, panting. “I really need to work on my wing strength if I’m going to be carrying you!” She said, laughing.

Jigsaw simply stared up at the sky.

“I’ve never seen anywhere so big... The sky is immense! And the grass! There’s so much of it! I’ve only ever seen grass in the botanical gardens! I mean, I’d heard the stories, but nothing can actually prepare you for...” He trailed off, still looking straight up. “Look at... look at the sun and the moon.”

The sun hung low and red in the western sky, casting a low, warm light over the grass. The moon hung in the east, dominating the skyline. It looked pockmarked and dull gray.

“That... that isn’t how they look in illustrations.” Jigsaw said. “They look almost as if they’re... dying.”

Tiptoe looked at the two celestial bodies on either side of them. “That’s true, but we’re here, now, and we’re very much alive, and I’m exhausted.”

“Agreed.” said Jigsaw, yawning. “It’s been a pretty crazy week.”

Together, they curled up on the ground and fell asleep. The strange, perpetual twilight cast long, spindly shadows onto the nearby trees.

Chapter 5

Jigsaw and Tiptoe woke up to find the sun and the moon were still frozen in the sky. They had no way to tell how much time had passed, but they both felt as though they'd gotten a good night's sleep for the first time in a long time.

"I think the next thing we should do is focus on finding some food." Jigsaw said, his stomach rumbling. "We haven't really eaten much of anything for the last few days."

Tiptoe nodded and took off. "I'll look for food from up here!" she said, flapping her wings and rising higher into the sky. Jigsaw just sighed to himself and trotted off towards the western edge of the clearing, where a small grove of trees was growing. The smell of all the green plants were almost too much for Jigsaw to take, but he knew better than to eat strange plants. Most of the food in the caves were grown in the arboretum, and very few ponies were allowed into it. It was the second largest of the caverns and by far the most heavily guarded. Jigsaw had been in several times to manage the enormous water distribution system that supplied water to all the plants. The trees and grass weren't too much of a shock to his system because of that- he just wasn't used to quite so much of it.

Tiptoe, on the other hand, had only been in the arboretum once, when she first became Jigsaw's apprentice. She had eaten the food from it, of course. She'd seen pictures. The first time she entered it, however, she was completely taken aback. She could feel the magic emanating from the lights on the high ceiling, a strange and rather uncomfortable sensation on her back. The sun was completely different, though. Far-off and weak though it may have been, it felt natural and comfortable to her. She soared over the green carpet beneath her, getting up as much height as she could. As she climbed, she began to notice something far-off to the east. It appeared to be a castle built into one side of a small mountain range. It appeared to be in a miraculously well preserved state- she thought she even saw a banner waving from the top of a spire. She flew down to inform Jigsaw.

Jigsaw was walking out of the copse, a few dozen apples floating in a hazy blue field above Jigsaw's head.

"Tiptoe!" He said as he saw her land rather clumsily in front of him. "There were apple trees back there! Try some, they're delicious!"

Tiptoe and Jigsaw sat down together on the grass and began to eat the apples. When they had eaten their fill, Tiptoe stood up and began to tell Jigsaw about the strange ruin in the eastern mountains. Jigsaw listened intently as she described the castle's appearance. When she was done, he stood up.

"Do you realize what this means? We may not be the only ones! There may be other ponies out here- we might get home yet!" Jigsaw said.

"Yeah..." Tiptoe said, ruffling her wings. Truth was, she wasn't sure she wanted to go home. Back there, she'd just be another member of a dying race, and she couldn't use her wings. Now that she was under the open sky, she couldn't conceive going back underground. Not for life, anyway.

"Oh! Can you do me a quick favor?" Jigsaw said to Tiptoe. "I want to try and salvage some stuff from the wreck of the subway car down in the cavern. I have an idea."

"Uh, okay, I suppose," Tiptoe said, "but I don't want to stay down there too long." She and Jigsaw trotted over to the jagged tear in the earth that led down to the cave entrance. Tiptoe grabbed Jigsaw and they began the slow decent into the cave.

They touched down lightly in the gloomy half-darkness of the cave. Jigsaw walked over to the wreckage of the subway car and looked at Tiptoe.

"I'd hold to something if I were you." Jigsaw said, a sly smiling crossing his face.

Blue light shot out of his horn. It hit Tiptoe like a wall and she flew back into a stone pillar at the other side of the chamber. She opened her eyes to see that Jigsaw was encased in a swirling vortex of what appeared to be blue plasma and salvaged parts from the old car. All she heard was a roar of energy as the parts began to fly together or break apart in the tide of

energy. Then, as suddenly as it started, the blue light streamed back into Jigsaw's horn and he collapsed onto the ground. At his hooves was a small metal platform with a sleek metallic box on the underside and two small lights on the front end. oversized wheels were positioned on the front and back ends of the platform.

Tiptoe flew over to Jigsaw just as Jigsaw stood up unsteadily. Tiptoe stabilized him and said "That was the most powerful magic I've ever seen! How are you on your feet?"

"The subway car was more than this took. At least I had a general idea of what I wanted to do this time around." Jigsaw replied. "This thing will make the trip to the castle much faster. It runs on magic, though, and I think I'm beat for a little while."

Tiptoe lifted Jigsaw outside and they lay down on the grass.

"Jigsaw?" Tiptoe asked, "What do you think is going on at home? Do you think the water's alright?"

"Do you want me to be honest or kind?" Jigsaw said.

Not the answer Tiptoe was hoping for. "Honest."

"Well, first off, we've definitely been reported dead by now. The water pressure will have been steadily falling since the massive leak caused by the control sphere falling out of the ceiling. The arboretum will probably take priority, and water will get shut down for most citizens." His voice got quiet. "I'd give them a week until the water runs out entirely."

Tiptoe's eyes got wide. "The whole cave? There's nothing we can do?"

"The only thing we can do is try to find something out here that will allow us to make it back. All we can really do is go forward. I don't really see any other options."

Jigsaw looked up at the strange sky. Streaks of light traveled across the eastern sky.

"I... I'm kinda glad we made it here, you know." Tiptoe said slowly. "I... like it out here."

Jigsaw sighed. "I know. I just wish it didn't have to come at the expense of the entire tribe."

"At least we're not alone," Tiptoe offered tentatively, "we still have each other."

Jigsaw looked over at the little yellow pegasus lying on the grass next to him. "Yeah, we do." he said. "At least there's that."

Tiptoe blushed and turned her head away from Jigsaw.

Jigsaw stood up. "I think I'm feeling better now. Good enough for the trip, anyway."

He trotted over to the hole in the ground and his horn glowed blue. Slowly, the cart lifted out of the hole, settling itself on the grass outside neatly. Jigsaw jumped on the platform, and Tiptoe promptly followed. Jigsaw's horn glowed blue yet again, and there was a click and a hum from beneath the platform. The wheels began to move, gathering speed. Soon, Jigsaw and Tiptoe were speeding along on a nearly silent, surprisingly stable platform.

"How do you keep it from shaking?" Tiptoe said over the sound of rushing wind.

Jigsaw created a bright blue flash from his horn for an answer.

"Magic. Right." Said Tiptoe. "You'd think I'd be used to it by now."

Several hours of riding later, the temperature had dropped noticeably. The mountain range loomed overhead, with the castle high above. It appeared much larger up close- it took up almost one entire half of the mountainside. The decay was more apparent, too- despite the large banner waving from the highest tower, many bricks were missing from the stone walls, and more windows were gone than present.

“Should we go inside?” Tiptoe said, looking up at the imposing front doors. They appeared to have once been intricately carved, but the carvings had all worn off long ago.

“I’m not entirely sure how we would go about that.” Jigsaw said. “I don’t see any doorknobs. Maybe we could just...” He walked into the door and pushed on it with his head.

The door swung open surprisingly easily. Inside, the light seemed to die only a few feet from the door, leading off into darkness. Jigsaw hesitantly took a step inside.

As soon as he did so, he knew he had made a mistake. That air around the two ponies seemed to thicken and taste of metal. Then, a roar and a wave of heat emanated from deep inside the castle, and the two ponies were swept inside. The heavy stone door to the castle slammed shut behind them.

Chapter 6

The heat pulling the two ponies into the ancient castle dissipated as the stone door slammed shut behind them. Jigsaw didn't waste any time. As soon as he could move again, he ran over to the door and touched it with his horn. To his surprise, the door not only wouldn't move, it seemed to actively resist his attempts to open it.

"Tiptoe! Where are you?" Jigsaw called through the darkness. The light of his horn didn't seem to carry more than a pony length in front of him here, and the air didn't taste quite right. He got the distinct impression that this was a very bad place to get stuck. A muffled reply came from his right.

"Jigsaw! Over here!" Tiptoe yelled. Suddenly, all along the walls, green fire burst into life in torch brackets aligned at either side of the entrance corridor. The green light seemed to cut through the gloom far better than Jigsaw's horn had been able to- but as soon as the torches lit, Jigsaw doubled over in pain. His horn felt like it was going to split open. It felt as though the magic inside him was writing and screaming inside his head. They had obviously entered a place of almost unthinkably powerful dark magic. Even Tiptoe could sense it. Her hair stood up and she shuddered from head to toe. Then, as quickly as it happened, it relented. Jigsaw stood up and looked around to see Tiptoe standing a few feet away from him, he back still arched. He walked over to her.

"Tiptoe, could you feel that?" He said as she straightened out.

"Yeah, I could. What was that? Was that... magic?" she whispered, casting nervous glances at the green torches burning slowly above them.

"Yeah, it was. Very, very powerful magic. We need to be on our toes here." Jigsaw said.

Tiptoe let out a smile in spite of her fear. "Good thing you have me around, then."

Jigsaw chuckled. "Come along, then. I think we should follow where the torches lead. It's that or wandering around in the darkness. At least this way we can find the source of this magical field."

Jigsaw and Tiptoe set off down the stone hallway of the castle. The ceilings were high and vaulted, though large portions of it had fallen in or simply crumbled away. There were the tattered remains of tapestries on the wall and what was once a rich crimson carpet lay shredded at their feet. As they walked, they encountered several doors and branching passageways, though none of them had lit torches. The green light cast an eerie glow over everything- it seemed to drown out colors and made Jigsaw's eyes constantly struggle to focus. Tiptoe wasn't much better off. Though she was much less sensitive to the magic in the air, she still felt the effects. The lights unnerved her and made her feel nauseous.

The castle floor angled downwards. Jigsaw started down the slope, but Tiptoe paused at the precipice. Jigsaw looked back over his shoulder.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"I... I don't want to go back underground!" Tiptoe blurted out. "I only just got out on the surface, and I don't ever want to go anywhere where I can't fly again!" She stamped her hooves on the stone tile.

Jigsaw was taken aback. Tiptoe had only raised her voice at him once before, and it still came as a shock to him. He shook off his surprise and spoke to the agitated pony in a quiet, calm voice.

"Listen. I know I can't hope to understand how you feel. You must have felt so cooped up all those years back down in the caves- but listen. We won't be down here forever, and we *need* to go down there or we'll never get out of here. I'll be right here the whole time. And besides, you can handle yourself! You fought of a sea serpent singlehandedly while carrying me at the same time! Then, you managed to revive me when I had stopped breathing. You've saved my life a lot more than I've saved yours. You're the bravest, most kindhearted pony I've ever met."

He walked up to Tiptoe and nuzzled her neck. She froze for a moment, then relaxed. Nobody had ever shown her affection like this, and she

certainly hadn't been expecting it in the current circumstances. The green glow from the torches seemed less harsh and bright.

Then, a loud crashing sound came from down the passageway and Jigsaw snapped his neck upwards. The green glow of the torches seemed back in full effect. Tiptoe and Jigsaw shared one glance full of meaning, then they began the descent into the bowels of the castle. As they walked down, the material that made up the walls seemed to change. The smooth tiles of the areas above were soon replaced with large, sloppily cut slabs of stone. The pain in Jigsaw's horn returned, though not as intense as it was up at the top of the castle. It was more like a throb of energy that got stronger the farther they walked.

Then, without warning, they entered a very large cave. On the left was what appeared to be a swirling force field of magical energy, through which blue sky could be seen. The cavern seemed to have been cut into the mountain. Old-world writing on the walls proclaimed this to be a pegasus take-off area. However, the most conspicuous area in the room lay to the left, where an extremely large selection of gold, gemstones, and skeletons lay. At the very back of the cave, on what appeared to be a giant platform cut into the rock, sat a dragon.

Its hide was midnight blue, with areas of creamy white around the base of his horns and fingers. Deep red veins seemed to course across his skin, glowing brightly with every heartbeat. His eyes were little more than bright green slits under his eyelids.

Jigsaw and Tiptoe screamed out loud at the sight of him. The corners of the dragon's mouth twitched at the sight of the two ponies. It opened its mouth and blew out a blast of green fire. It surrounded the two ponies and swirled like a vortex, immobilizing them. Jigsaw and Tiptoe struggled against the binding green flame, to no effect. Jigsaw attempted to use magic, but the pain in his horn swelled to such a great magnitude that he cried out and nearly lost consciousness.

The dragon flew over to the two ponies and examined them closely. When he saw the two ponies he had ensnared, however, his eyes grew wide and he retracted a few steps. He raised one hand and brought it slicing down through the air, and the bonds on the two ponies lifted.

“Speak, then, if you are able” the dragon’s voice boomed. Every syllable felt heavy, as though with each word, a massive rockslide was tumbling down a mountaintop.

Jigsaw spoke up first. “My name is Jigsaw, and this is my...” he cast a glance at Tiptoe. “... friend, Tiptoe. We’re from the caves to the west, and we’re looking for a way to get back home.”

The dragon’s eyes narrowed. ***“The west? It is nothing but barren wastelands overland, and the underground ways are far too dangerous for your kind. I know of one way, however; you must complete a task if you expect my aid.”***

Jigsaw was shocked at the dragon’s eloquence and quick answers, though his body language had betrayed a moment’s hesitation. “What is your name?”

“My name? I have had many names. Before the fall, I was known by one name. Now I am known by Tantalus.” The dragon said, his voice reverberating throughout the room.

“Before the fall?” Jigsaw said, his mouth agape. “You were around before the Great Cataclysm? Do you know what happened?”

Tiptoe couldn’t help but notice that even when a giant dragon was bearing down on them, Jigsaw couldn’t pass up an opportunity to learn.

“I was. I am the last in the world, I believe, that can provide a firsthand account.”

“Princess Celestia and Luna vanished because of one foolhardy young pony. I do not know his name. He was fooling about with powers far beyond his comprehension. He had come across a tome of ancient and unspeakable evil, and he spoke its words. Celestia, Luna, and a young ward named Twilight Sparkle both vanished by this dark power. The young pony who had used the spell fled into hiding, using the book to grow his power. He began feeding off of other ponies to make his own power grow. He hides there in the east, even now. He is a demon, my sworn enemy, and he is who you seek. Find him, and kill him, and you will find your way home.”

Jigsaw blinked with indignation. *“That’s it? We meet a creature that was around before Celestia and Luna vanished and before the Great Cataclysm, and he barely tells us anything? I could have found out more in the library back at the Tribunal!”* He didn’t voice his feelings, however. The dragon still looked angry.

“Very well. We will do this for you, if it will grant us safe passage.” Jigsaw said through gritted teeth.

The dragon smiled, a rather disturbing gesture, as it revealed rows of blackened teeth. He turned his head and blew a green mist at the side of the cave, which crumbled away.

“Go. Hunt the demon. Return when you have finished. I will find your way home.”

Jigsaw and Tiptoe walked out of the cave. As they passed the pedestal where the dragon had been sitting, Tiptoe noticed something strange: Far back, away from the rest of the treasure, lay a large, cracked blue gem. Underneath it, in what looked like a crude carving done with a claw, was the word:

Rarity

Tiptoe hadn’t the slightest inkling of what that could mean.

They walked out onto the snowy mountainside, and the cave wall seemed to repair itself behind them. Tiptoe then looked at Jigsaw and said, “That... that was incredible, what you did back there. Talking to a dragon like that.”

“I get the feeling that he was hiding things from us. A lot of things.” said Jigsaw. “His explanation seemed way too simple, and he was far too quick to give us this task and get us out of there. I’m not sure I trust him.”

Then, without warning, Tiptoe walked up to Jigsaw and kissed him full on the mouth. Jigsaw stood there for a moment, his eyes wide open in shock, then he closed them and enjoyed the moment. After several seconds that felt much too fast to Jigsaw, they broke apart. Tiptoe blushed, but stayed in eye contact with Jigsaw.

“What was that for?” he stammered.

“For saving me.” she said. “C’mon, we have a long ways to go if we’re going east.”

Tiptoe took off and began flying down the slope of the hill that formed the mountainside. Jigsaw stood there stunned for a moment longer.

Then, he set off down the snowy curve, following the yellow pegasus, who was now flying loops through the air.

Chapter 7

The wind howled past Jigsaw and Tiptoe as they trudged through the snow. A series of mountain ranges could be seen looming behind them, though they had left it far behind. They had been walking for the better part of a day, and the temperature was dropping all the while. The sun remained frozen in the west as ever- though it had now been eclipsed by the mountain. The dull gray moon loomed larger and larger. The green fields at the base of the mountain had slowly become more sparse until the grass was almost entirely covered in snow. A few stunted trees somehow managed to survive here, though Jigsaw had no idea how they managed to grow when all the water was frozen, at least as far as he could see.

Jigsaw peered through the low light and saw a larger-than-average tree with low, overhanging branches. He called over the wind to Tiptoe and they two ponies galloped towards the shelter.

Jigsaw shook the snow off of his hooves and turned to Tiptoe, who was resting against the side of the tree. "I think we should talk about what happened back there."

"You mean the kiss?" Tiptoe asked quietly, blushing and turning her head away from Jigsaw slightly.

Jigsaw's heart did a funny sort of flip on hearing Tiptoe mention the kiss, but he tried not to show it on his face. "I meant the dragon, Tantalus. Specifically, what he asked us to do."

The smile dropped off Tiptoe's face. "Oh. That. What exactly *is* it we're supposed to be doing? It's not like he gave us very specific directions besides 'east'. As far as we know, it could be a million miles east! And besides..." her voice dropped in volume. "I don't think I could kill anypony, no matter how evil they might be."

Jigsaw nodded. He appeared deep in thought.

Jigsaw looked up at the moon, huge in the sky, and let out a sigh.

“Remember back in the subway car? When I told you about Antimony, my first apprentice? Well, I wasn’t entirely truthful. She was... she was my mate.”

Tiptoe let out a little gasp. “Your mate died? That’s... that’s awful. I’m so sorry. But... why are you telling me this now? What does this have to do with anything?”

“I lied when I said I wanted to talk about the dragon.” Jigsaw said. He looked up at Tiptoe.

“We can’t be together. It’s just too dangerous. I can’t lose another pony because I can’t handle the situation! I just... I can’t deal with it. And who knows what we’re about to walk into?”

Jigsaw looked intensely at Tiptoe, then dropped his gaze to the snowy ground below. Tiptoe looked taken aback.

“Jigsaw... I didn’t mean to put this kind of pressure on you. I really do like you, but I understand that now isn’t the best time to form a relationship!” she said.

The sides of Jigsaw’s mouth twitched, but the smile didn’t last very long.

“Thank you for understanding. Now, I think we should get some sleep. We have quite an adventure ahead of us.”

He stood up and walked over to Tiptoe. He hesitated for a moment, then walked over and nuzzled Tiptoe. “I really do like you, you know.”

Tiptoe blushed. Jigsaw lit his horn and lifted away a patch of snow , exposing the ground below. He lied down in it, and Tiptoe joined him. The two ponies closed their eyes.

Tiptoe opened them several hours later find Jigsaw already awake. He had a small pile of twigs and rocks in front of him. As she watched, Jigsaw’s horn glowed blue and the twigs lifted off the ground and bent themselves into an elaborate structure.

“That’s amazing!” Tiptoe exclaimed.

Jigsaw let out a yelp and the structure sprang apart. He looked over to see Tiptoe sitting up in the clearing, giggling.

“Oh, you’re up.” Jigsaw said, looking a little annoyed.

“What are you doing?” Tiptoe said, standing up and stretching her wings.

“I’m just tinkering. It helps me relax.” he said. As Tiptoe watched, the twigs formed elaborate geometric patterns in mid-air.

“I wish I could do something like that,” Tiptoe said, “I haven’t even gotten to use my special talent.” She shot a glance over her shoulder at the feather emblazoned on her flank. “Haven’t really had to sneak anywhere.”

“Well, you never know. We’re heading out into a frozen wasteland to find some unicorn that’s apparently powerful enough to kill goddesses. Not to mention, who knows what’s left over from the Great Cataclysm? There could easily still be traps left unsprung the farther in we walk. You may soon have more work on your hooves than you bargained for.” Jigsaw winked, then stood up and walked out of the protective branches. Tiptoe followed, a little confused by how Jigsaw’s mood had changed since last night.

They walked out into the semidarkness of the plain. The moon hung low in the sky, casting a sullen gray light over the snow. The sun in the west had shrunk to a mere sliver of red light shining over the mountain range behind them. Tiptoe flapped her wings and took off, spiraling upward. Jigsaw set off at a canter.

After only a few minutes of flying, Tiptoe was rushing back towards Jigsaw.

“You won’t believe what I just saw!” She cried, obviously excited.

“What? What is it?” Jigsaw said.

“At first, I thought it was just a pile of rubble, but as I flew closer, I saw lights come on!”

“Tiptoe, the last place we walked into that looked inhabited, we got trapped and recruited by a dragon.”

“Well, do you have any better ideas?” asked Tiptoe.

“Well, I suppose not. And I *am* pretty hungry...”

“Then follow me!” Tiptoe said, taking off and flying away. Jigsaw rolled his eyes and set off after her.

Tiptoe arrived at the ruined building several minutes ahead of Jigsaw and began to look around. The wall that was still standing was maybe a floor high, though it looked as though the building was one much larger. Old world writing was etched over the ornate metal door that led inside, though most of the writing had been worn off by time, so that the only letters remaining were “AMY F CLSTA”. Tiptoe hadn’t the slightest idea what it could mean. From above, the building just looked like a jumble of steel beams and rotting wood. The lights that had shined through the window from a distance hadn’t reappeared since the approach, but Tiptoe was confident that something was alive inside, because when she opened the door, the air from inside was surprisingly warm.

Jigsaw galloped up to Tiptoe, who was waiting near the door. “This is the place you saw? It doesn’t look very inviting.”

“We’ll never know unless we go inside, now, will we?” She nudged the door open with her nose, and a buffet of warm air hit the two ponies.

“Well, that’s encouraging,” said Jigsaw, his eyes widening a bit.

Jigsaw lit his horn again and closed the door behind him. Inside was a narrow hallway that extended about 30 feet to a relatively featureless metal desk. The real eye-catcher in the room, however, was the large, golden sun emblazoned on the wall behind the desk. As they two ponies walked forwards, the sun suddenly blazed golden, flooding the room with light and heat. Jigsaw’s horn glowed even brighter in response to the magic in the air.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the lights shut off and the warmth vanished. Jigsaw and Tiptoe stood frozen in mid-stride, stunned.

Jigsaw put his hoof down. “Well, that explains the lig-”

His words were cut off by a sudden horrible buzzing. A sharp crack and a flash of blue light came from the end of the hallway, and white lights flickered to life along the length of the hallway. Jigsaw walked up to one and examined it with wonder. He touched his horn to the metal casing and a spark jumped between his horn and the metal casing on the light. He stepped back and nodded appreciatively, apparently impressed. Tiptoe just looked on quizzically.

Jigsaw turned around to face her. “The old world technology was apparently built to last. There’s an elevator down at the end of the hallway that goes... very far down. I don’t know how far.”

“You can tell all that just by looking at a *light*?” Tiptoe said in awe.

“This cutie mark isn’t just for show, you know!” Jigsaw said, a wide smile parting his face. “Now come on! Who knows what we’ll find down there?”

Tiptoe let out a heavy sigh at the prospect of having to go underground yet again, then followed Jigsaw down the hallway. They had to climb over a few broken steel beams, but before too long, they came to a small door in the rubble. Jigsaw touched his horn to the door, and after a few minutes of effort, the door slid open haltingly. Inside was a rather strange sight from the metal hallways- interior walls appeared to be panelled with wood. On the side opposite of the door, the sun symbol was once again repeated on the wall, only this one was a half sun instead of a whole. It still gave off a slight heat.

“Well, I suppose we should head down.” Jigsaw said, walking into the elevator compartment. Tiptoe followed him apprehensively. Jigsaw’s horn glowed bright blue, and the elevator hummed to life, moving smoothly down the shaft. Arriving at the first floor, the two ponies stepped off the elevator to see a very strange sight. Banners emblazoned with the sun symbol were strewn all around the room, though most appeared to have been burned. Many strange and spindly-looking devices lined the walls. A loud, low tone like someone striking a large bell rang out as the two ponies walked into the room. Tiptoe’s hair stood on end and her feathers ruffled. Jigsaw’s horn

glowed blue for just an instant, then the blue light seemed to expand out from his horn in rings and then vanished. Jigsaw gulped.

“There is some serious magical protection around this room. And I mean *serious*. If we hadn’t have passed whatever criteria it checks, we would have been dead already.”

“If this room is so well protected, what did that?” Tiptoe said, gesturing towards the pile of burned banners with her hoof.

“That’s what worries me.” Jigsaw said, looking uneasy. Nonetheless, he trotted off towards a large archway to their left that has ornate old world letting over the entrance. It read “Celestial Observatory”.

“Wait up!” Tiptoe shouted, cantering after Jigsaw. They entered into the dark room simultaneously, taking in the strange model of the sky that lay above them. Lined along the walls were dark monitors. On the floor was a dual insignia- A rising sun side by side with a crescent moon.

Jigsaw walked to the center of the room, turned in a full circle, and lowered his head. Tiptoe was confused for a moment, but then Jigsaw’s horn erupted in a brilliant blue light.

Pieces of metal, glass, what looked like cut crystal, and a few scattered electronic components flew through the air in swirl of activity, fastening themselves to unknown mechanisms behind the domed surface of the observatory. The sun and moon logo on the floor seemed to glow with a golden light, and there was a loud bang. The lights kicked on Jigsaw lifted his head, a sly smile on his face.

Suddenly, the screens along the wall burst into life. On them were an image of an earth pony outfitted in full armor, a look of terror on his face. An explosion shook the screen and the earth pony began talking rapidly, though no sound could be heard.

“Hold on just a second,” Jigsaw said. His horn lit up with only the faintest corona of blue light, in contrast to the rod of whirling blue plasma it had appeared to be just minutes ago. A blast of sound filled the room.

“-ow on supplies! I don’t know how much longer we can hold out like this. I thought the war with the west was bad enough, but this... thing... has managed to breach all our defences! It’s already killed almost everypony else in the whole facility! We’ve managed to hold out here for now, but I don’t know how long our defences will hold. Listen, if anypony finds this video, there’s still hope! Go east to the Night Palace. Our researchers found something to do with Princess Luna’s disappearance. Go! No-” the recording was cut off by what appeared a torrent of emerald flames, a flash of golden light, and a roar. Then the tape ended and the screen went blank. The sun and moon on the ceiling hadn’t moved.

“What was all that about?” Tiptoe said. “Was that recorded... during the Grand Cataclysm?”

“I think it must have been. War with the west? What else could it have been?” Jigsaw replied. “I’m more interested with this Night Palace and whatever broke in here. What do you think happened to it? I’m going to dig through the system to see if there are any records after that.” Jigsaw’s horn glowed blue yet again as he touched it to the wall.

It was then that a loud alternating tone rang out from the speakers in the room. The lights switched to a dark red color and heavy bulkheads fell all around the room. The two ponies were trapped.

Jigsaw looked nervously at Tiptoe. “Oops.”

Chapter 8

Alarms blared all around the Jigsaw and Tiptoe, so loud they had to shout to be heard. The formerly dark room was illuminated by harsh red lighting. The screens around the room were lit up, flashing a word in the old language that neither of the two ponies recognized.

“What have you done?!” shouted Tiptoe.

“I don’t know! I must have set off an alarm!” Jigsaw shouted back.

“No, *really?*”

“Look, there’s a chance I can still fix this! Not all of the systems have been locked down! If I can just... get...” Jigsaw closed his eyes in concentration. Tendrils of blue light burst from his horn and seemed to spread across the wall like vines, taking the edge off the red light that shone through the room. The tendrils of energy seemed to wiggle their way into the various cracks and gaps in the surface of the wall. Some of the monitors stopped flashing and instead displayed lines of text that flew by far too fast to be read. A swirling cloud of blue light appeared around the unicorn and soon he was obscured from view.

Tiptoe stood back from him, staring in awe at the bright blue ball of swirling light. One by one, the monitors stopped flashing and the lines of text appeared. Eventually, all the monitors were displaying the rapidly moving text. Then, without warning, all the monitors went dark, and the red light was extinguished. The room was illuminated by the swirling blue light coming from Jigsaw, but even as she watched, the light spun slower and slower until it faded away. The blue tendrils shot back into Jigsaw’s horn and he collapsed to the ground. The room went dark.

Tiptoe ran over to Jigsaw’s collapsed form, barely visible in the darkness. He was breathing, but unresponsive.

Suddenly, the room was flooded with light. The monitors all around the room had flared to light, each one showing the same image.



The symbol on the floor began glowing, as well, and with a loud slamming noise, the metal doors on one side of the room receded into the walls. The air suddenly grew warm, and the metal sun and moon moved into the center of the domed ceiling. They met, the sun fitting perfectly inside the stylized crescent moon.

Tiptoe stared in awe at the open doors. Floodlights lit the passage beyond, which stretched downwards. She sighed to herself. “Do they really have to make opening doors *that* dramatic?”

Jigsaw’s eyes fluttered open. “Did it work?”

“Oh! You’re awake. It kind of worked. Half of the door opened, and this half leads downwards.”

“Lovely. What does this symbol mean? It’s everywhere.”

“Who knows? It obviously has something to do with the sun and moon. Maybe it used to be a government institution.”

“I think it’s more than that. The magic here is some of the strongest I’ve ever encountered- except maybe for that dragon. This facility is way higher up than a simple government institution.”

“If it’s so powerfully protected, then how did you manage to get in so easily?”

A smile crossed Jigsaw’s face. “Because I’m good at what I do.”

Tiptoe nudged him playfully. She couldn’t quite forget, however, that every time he did magic, it seemed to be more impressive than the time before it. She wondered how she could ever compare to his level of ability.

Jigsaw stood up shakily and approached the passageway. “There’s nothing more I can do from here. Our only option is to go through that door, I suppose.” He passed under the metal archway, Tiptoe following next to him.

The passageway turned into a staircase as they walked on. The passageway ahead was only illuminated for a few feet in front of them- more lights came on as they walked forward, and the lights behind them switched off. Before long, they came to a platform. The hallway ahead of them was forked. On the left, the sun-and-moon insignia was engraved on the ground. Tattered scraps of fabric were littered along the ground. On the right, the passage was barren.

“I think we should follow the symbol. It seems like it’s led to good places so far.” Tiptoe said.

Jigsaw shrugged. “I don’t really see why not.”

As they entered the hallway, the sun-and-moon insignias on the floor began to glow softly. It provided the only light in the hallway, as this particular passage way conspicuously devoid of lights along the wall. Eventually they entered a much larger, round room. It was obvious this room had once been lavishly decorated: Empty flower vases, tattered banners, and torn-up chairs and seats littered the space. The most interesting feature of the room, however, lay directly opposite the door. Two ornate thrones sat against the wall. One looked as though it was once

bright white, though it had been faded and dirtied with time. The other throne looked black as night. Behind the thrones was a giant, solid-gold sun-and-moon insignia.

Jigsaw and Tiptoe stared at it in awe. After a few seconds of slack-jawed staring, Jigsaw spoke. "I think... I think this was once a royal chamber. Celestia and Luna themselves once sat here! This explains all the heavy-duty magic- they must have enchanted this place themselves!"

"It's incredible you managed to break through the enchantments, then."

"Well, they've gotten much, much weaker over time. Before the Great Cataclysm, this place was as good as impregnable."

"Then... then what was that attacking on the video screen back in the room with all the monitors?"

"That's what worries me. If something powerful enough to get through those enchantments exists... I don't even want to think about what it could do."

They walked up to the thrones and noticed a small stone platform in-between the two seats, this one strangely uncarved. Tiptoe walked onto it. A low buzzing sound could be heard emanating from the platform, but other than that, the room remained unchanged. Jigsaw walked on to the platform to join her.

"What do you suppose this could be for? It doesn't seem to do anything." Jigsaw said, prodding the stone surface with his hoof.

The room was filled with a brilliant golden light. The stone surface of the platform appeared to turn to clear crystal, beyond which stars could be seen. Then, the crystal opened up, and the two ponies were sucked inside.

Chapter 9

Jigsaw and Tiptoe plummeted through the crystal tube. Through the transparent walls of the tunnel, pinpricks of light could be seen—like stars, but shining much brighter, with a golden light. The transparent crystal was coarse and jagged, but a warm cushion of air seemed to push the two ponies away whenever they came too close to the edges.

Tiptoe flapped her wings furiously in a futile attempt to stop her descent. No matter how hard she flapped, she didn't seem to slow at all. Jigsaw fell below her, tumbling head over heels through the tunnel. Below them, approaching rapidly, a large, black plane stretched out in every direction.

After a few minutes of terrified free fall, the termination of the tunnel reached the two ponies. Jigsaw and Tiptoe suddenly found themselves standing on another platform in another throne room. The platform was glowing with the same bright, golden light as the other had, but within moments it had faded back to gray stone.

They were not alone.

Seated on a strange throne was a deep red unicorn, his jaw slack in amazement. Then, Jigsaw and Tiptoe lost consciousness.

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Jigsaw blinked his eyes open. His whole body ached as though he'd just been thoroughly beaten. He was lying on a comfortable mattress in a small but lavishly decorated bedroom. There was a large red curtain that had an ornate black "R" sewn into it. Jigsaw got shakily to his feet and approached the curtain. He tugged on the tassel hanging down on the side of the curtain with his mouth and the curtains were drawn open. He couldn't believe what he saw.

Spread out below him was a massive city. He was in a tower that appeared to grow out of the center of the mass of buildings, with stripes of alternating buildings and farmland spreading out from it like the spokes of a wheel. Far

off, at the border where the buildings stopped, a massive, shimmering blue barrier rose up from the ground. It seemed to encase the entire city in a shimmering blue globe, through which the sun and moon could still be seen on either sides of the sky.

Jigsaw stared out the window in awe at the city spread out beneath him. He simply couldn't believe what he saw. He couldn't comprehend how a city like this could even exist so long after pony civilization had collapsed. He staggered away from the window and sat on the bed. He stared out the window and tried to understand how he had gotten here and how this place could even exist. Luckily, he didn't have to wonder for long.

The door to his room hummed quietly and slid into the wall. A very small shockingly blue pegasus walked in, and upon seeing Jigsaw sitting up on his bed, smiled.

"Who are you?" Jigsaw said, a sharp edge of suspicion in his voice.

"My name is Cerulean. I'm glad you're finally awake," she replied. Her voice was very reassuring.

"How did I get here? Where *is* here? How does this place even exist? *Where is Tiptoe?!*" His voice rose as he spoke, eventually ending in a shout.

Cerulean didn't falter. "There's no need to shout! Trust me, you're safe here. Your pegasus friend is just across the hallway. She hasn't woken up, yet, though. Tiptoe, you said her name is? And what might yours be?"

"Jigsaw." He said, narrowing his eyes at Cerulean. "I want to see her."

Cerulean nodded. "Of course. Follow me." She got up and walked over to the door. It appeared nothing more than a slab of green metal—however, it had the sun-and-moon symbol emblazoned on it. Cerulean touched it with her snout. It glowed for a moment, and the door slid into the wall with the soft hum he had heard earlier. It led out into a plain hallway of gray stone. Directly across from Jigsaw's room there was an identical door, though this one appeared to be slightly newer. The door opened and they cantered inside.



Tiptoe lay on a bed in the center of the room. It appeared identical to the room they had just come from, only mirrored. The shimmering blue globe outside the window swirled and twisted like air currents, casting a strange blue light into the window.

“See? I told you that she’s just fine. She’s still suffering the aftereffects from using the portal. Speaking of which, we have some questions to ask you. Please accompany me to the royal chambers.” Cerulean said, her smile as wide as ever.

Jigsaw still felt rather uneasy with this pony, but the chance to finally get some answers was too lucrative for him to pass up. He followed Cerulean out the door and into the hallway.

The hallway had a rich red carpet stretching down its length. The gray stone walls had small orbs every few feet that were illuminated. Cerulean cantered along this hallway, Jigsaw close behind her. Soon they reached a spiral staircase which rose out of the ground in a large domed room. Strung along the sides of this room were ruby red banners bearing a black hoofmark and a single word underneath that Jigsaw didn’t recognize.

“What does that say?” He asked Cerulean.

“Why, it says *Stalliongrad*, of course!”

The two ponies reached the top of the spiral staircase. They trotted a short distance under a metal archway before coming back into the throne room Jigsaw and Tiptoe had originally appeared in before passing out. Now, Jigsaw could get a proper look at it. It appeared to have had a much different layout originally—parts of the room seemed to have been slapped on to extend the room. Red was everywhere. A rich red carpet covered the floor, and red tapestries hung from almost every window. The hoof motif was also omnipresent, from the shape of table in the room to the right, to the archway they had just passed under, to the logos on the tapestries. At the far end of the room was the deep red unicorn he had seen before. His cutie mark was some sort of red ribbon. He was seated in a throne that was split down the middle, half deep alabaster black, the other a bright white. It looked as if somepony had cut the original two thrones in half and stuck them together.

Cerulean bowed and walked out of the room.

The red pony jumped off the throne and cantered over to Jigsaw. "I'm pleased you've finally woken up! Please, come and sit with me. I imagine you must have many questions. I know I do."

He let out a genial laugh and winked at Jigsaw. He then began walking over to a doorway in the northwest corner of the room, which led into what appeared to be some sort of meeting room. A large number of chairs were arranged in a circle around a central table. The red pony took a seat and Jigsaw sat down directly across from him.

"Now, I believe some introductions are in order. My name is Rubidium and I am the governor of the glorious city of Stalliongrad! Who are you?"

"My name is Jigsaw."

"Jigsaw? What an interesting name."

Several unicorns entered through a small door in the far wall, plates of food hovering in front of them. They placed them on the table before giving a short bow and exiting the room.

Jigsaw eyed the food warily for an instant before his hunger got the better of him. As he began eating, Rubidium began to speak.

"I was quite surprised to see you appear in the throne room, particularly out of that portal. It hasn't worked in... well, I don't think it ever has! How did you get here? And from where?"

Jigsaw stopped eating and regarded the deep ruby colored pony across the table from him. Despite all the things he had done for him and Tiptoe, Jigsaw couldn't help but be unnerved by him. However, he didn't want to make enemies of the first group of ponies he came across. He decided to tell the truth.

He began to recount the story from the beginning, though he tried to omit any details that weren't crucial to the story. Rubidium sat across the table listening intently. His expression was inscrutable. When Jigsaw had finished, Rubidium hopped off the chair and began to pace back and forth.

“So... you really know nothing?” he said, his eyes narrowing.

“I don’t know any more than what I told you.”

“I need to show you something. Follow me.”

Rubidium trotted over to a wall and touched a panel with his snout. The table in the center of the room began to sink slowly into the floor. When it had lowered completely, a sheet of metal slid out to cover the hole. Then, to Jigsaw’s amazement, an enormous replica of the tower they were currently in appeared, taking up most of the space in the room. His eyes went wide.

Jigsaw walked over to the tower and swept his hoof into it. It passed through as if there were nothing there.

“It’s a hologram!” he said with amazement. “How is this possible?”

Rubidium walked out into the center of the room and the image of the tower shrunk down until it was only the size of a pony, then the spokes of land and buildings that surrounded the tower shimmered to life at its base.

“Before the fall, Stalliongrad was Equestria’s main military base. As such, some of the most brilliant scientists and advanced technology in the entire world was present here, including some of the most powerful protection the goddesses could bestow. After the fall, we were the only city in the middle ring that survived the war between the dark side and the light side. They simply couldn’t penetrate our protection. We waited out the war, and once it was over, we began to rebuild. The technology you see here is the result of ten thousand years of progress while the rest of the world stood still.”

“The middle ring?”

“The habitable zone in the middle of the planet. Where plants still grow.”

“And how did you stay safe from the Grand Cataclysm? What defences could you possibly have strong enough to repel all of Equestria?”

Rubidium smiled, though it didn't show in his eyes. He did a sweeping gesture with one of his legs and the image rotated to show the city from above. Clearly visible, like channels of liquid silver and gold running under the entire city, was the sun-and-moon insignia.

"This is the symbol of Celestia and Luna. I take it you know who they were?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"They are not totally gone. You said you encountered a dragon named Tantalus on your journey?"

Jigsaw nodded.

"The story he spun you was only partially true. There was no unicorn- he was the one meddling with power beyond his own control. I do not know why, or how, but he was corrupted by dark powers beyond comprehension. He attempted to destroy the goddesses, and most believed he was successful." Rubidium gestured towards the main chamber. "Follow me."

Rubidium led Jigsaw into the room and towards a small staircase behind the throne. At the top was nothing more than a white disc in the floor. They stood on it, and much to Jigsaw's surprise, it slid smoothly downward.

They appeared to be descending down a glass tube, through which the entire city could be seen laid out beneath them. The sense of scale was almost overwhelming to Jigsaw. The tower was many hundred, perhaps even thousands, of feet high. As they descended, smaller towers began flying past the two ponies. Inside, Jigsaw saw glimpses of the lavishly decorated interior. However, the small, run-down shacks at the border of the shell that surrounded the city could still be seen in the distance.

Soon the disc reached the bottom of the tower and continued on underground. The tube appeared to have been built into the facility much later than the rooms it intersected. They all appeared to be original to the military base and abandoned.

Eventually, the platform began to slow and glided to a halt. They entered into a stone room that appeared to have been carved in a rush. The walls

were craggy and uneven. Jigsaw could sense the room had a very strong magical field surrounding it. The lights in the ceiling had been replaced with the more familiar globes of magical energy.

Rubidium noticed Jigsaw staring up at the lights and said, "We can't have anything that runs on electricity down here. It won't work."

"Why not?" Jigsaw replied, his curiosity piqued.

"You'll find out." Rubidium said before turning and walking down the passageway at the end of the room.

Jigsaw followed, and they soon came to an intricately carved stone door. It appeared as though this door was given far more attention to detail than the rest of the rest of the room. Numerous carvings of ponies in various poses resided at each corner, while circles of old-world text Jigsaw didn't recognize surrounded the central symbol of a brightly glowing sun-and-moon symbol.

"Would you care to do the honors?" Rubidium said.

"I would love to!" Jigsaw said. He walked up to the door and pressed against it. The sun and moon flashed brighter than ever, and the words on the door rotated around it, lining up to form words Jigsaw didn't understand.

Rubidium, however, had understood. And he wasn't pleased.

# Chapter 10

Tiptoe's eyes fluttered open. She was surprised to find herself lying on a comfortable mattress in a lavishly decorated room. The red hoofprint and R motif was ever-present on the walls. A strange, shimmering blue light shone in through a window on the left of the room. Tiptoe approached it and gasped.

The city spread out beneath her. Rows upon rows on smooth, elegant-looking white towers rose from the ground below her. As she looked farther out, however, the buildings became more blocky, less clean, and less well-kept. At the edge of the line of buildings were little more than run-down shacks. On either side of the strip of buildings was green farmland, with buildings sparsely placed in rows. A shimmering blue shell of energy surrounded the entire city. Tiptoe stared out at it, taking it all in. A quiet ding and a hum emanated from the door at the front of the room, and a very small, bright blue pegasus walked in, a wide smile on her face.

Tiptoe reacted instantly, jumping away from the door and extending her wings as menacingly as she could muster. The blue pegasus didn't drop her smile.

"Who are you?" Tiptoe demanded, a slight waver in her voice.

"My name is Cerulean. Don't worry, you're perfectly safe. Your friend Jigsaw, too." she said evenly.

"Jigsaw was here? Where is he now?" Tiptoe said, retracting her wings.

"He's off with our governor. He's perfectly safe, I assure you. He was in here earlier, in fact." Cerulean said. Her voice was so bubbly that Tiptoe found it a little sickening.

"Can I go see him?" Tiptoe asked.

"Of course not! He's very busy right now, but don't worry! I've been tasked to show you around. Come with me!" Cerulean walked backwards, her

smile still wide, and beckoned out the door into the plain gray hallway beyond. Slowly, Tiptoe and Cerulean left the room, the door sliding with a soft hum into the wall behind them. They began their descent down a richly carved stone staircase.

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The door swung open and the hallway was flooded with a brilliant white light. Jigsaw had to avert his eyes for a moment, and Rubidium took a few steps back. After a few seconds, the light faded to a level that allowed Jigsaw to look at the item producing it.

Right in the middle of a large crystalline apparatus was what looked like a miniature sun. It was a deep yellowish red color and appeared to rotate and swirl in place. Surrounding it were two long crystal arms that extended into the ceiling. White light was flowing out of the sphere and into the crystal arms and travelled into the walls. Jigsaw hesitantly walked forward into the room.

“What... what is this? What is it doing?” Jigsaw asked, examining the sphere closely. It gave off a warm light.

“What you’re looking at, Jigsaw, is a fragment of Celestia herself.” Rubidium said softly. He stood at the threshold of the door.

Jigsaw stared at Rubidium in shock. “You’re joking, right? There’s no way this is possible.”

“But it is. When the dragon split the goddesses, not every fragment was lost. This one fell here. When Tantalus attacked, we built this to harness the power of the sphere and create the shield that still protects us. We’re not entirely sure, but we think there are six in total- three for Celestia, and three for Luna. No pony knows where the others are. Even if we did, we have no way of getting there. You’re the first that’s ever managed to get in from outside.”

Jigsaw stared at the sphere and attempted to absorb all the new information. It was almost too much to take in at once.

“Who exactly is ‘we’?” Jigsaw asked.

“The ancient Stalliongradians. They recorded everything. I could show you to the historical libraries if you’d like.” Rubidium stood leaning against the doorway, watching Jigsaw meander around the room.

“I’d like to see that, I think.” Jigsaw said. “First, though, I’d like to finish examining this.”

He gingerly touched the tip of his horn to the crystal arms that jutted out from the walls. As his horn began to glow, the white light inside the crystal responded by bending towards it. Suddenly, a high-pitched whine came from the walls of the chamber and the floor began to rumble. The crystal arms suddenly began to rotate around the sphere. Then, as quickly as it began, it was over. Jigsaw looked up in fright at Rubidium, who had a small smile on his face.

“What was *that*?” Jigsaw said.

“The attenuation rods need to realign themselves periodically. Now follow me. It’s not safe to be in here for much longer. There’s going to be a powerful blast of magical energy. Which, coincidentally, is why we don’t have electronics down here.”

Jigsaw took one last look around the room before heading out behind Rubidium. Together they walked into the pod-like elevator and began the ride back up. Jigsaw simply stood and watched as the scenery flashed by his eyes.

They were about halfway up the tower when it slid to a halt. The doors on the front whooshed open to reveal a brightly lit library. The room was rectangular, with what looked like polished wooden walls. Jigsaw cantered out of the door.

“You wait here and read anything you like. I have to tend to some business.”

With that, Rubidium’s horn glowed red, and the elevator’s door shut silently. It then began its descent down the tube and out of sight.

Jigsaw had only taken a few steps towards a bookshelf when a portion of the wall slid open to his left. Behind it were Cerulean and Tiptoe.

“Tiptoe?” Jigsaw said, surprised.

“Jigsaw! You’re all right!” Tiptoe said, running into the room. The two embraced as the door slid shut behind them.

“Where have you been?” Tiptoe said after they had separated.

Jigsaw then began to recount the tale of what had happened to him while Tiptoe was asleep. At the revelation of the fact that Celestia and Luna were broken up into fragments, she gave an audible gasp. Eventually, Jigsaw finished, and silence fell as she digested the information. Finally, she spoke.

“Jigsaw, do you entirely trust these ponies?”

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Rubidium rode the elevator down to the second lowest level. He stepped out into the stone hallway, squinting through the dim, greenish light. Only the emergency lights were left on this low.

He began to trot down the hallway. About halfway down, a sudden flash of rainbow light flashed behind him. He didn’t need to look back. He knew Cerulean was behind him.

“I led the pegasus to the holding area, just liked you asked. I assume the plan is going to proceed as we discussed?”

Rubidium shot a glance in Cerulean’s direction that made her freeze in place.

“He opened the door. He walked right up to the fragment of Celestia as if there was nothing there. He’s far too valuable to dispose of now. The pegasus can go, though. Is the subject ready?”

Cerulean breathed out a sigh of relief and replied, “Of course. Right this way.”

They continued walking on in silence. Eventually, they came to an unassuming mahogany door to the right of the hallway. Cerulean pushed it open and Rubidium entered.

The room looked as if it had once been a war room, though it was now heavily altered. The far wall appeared to have been carved out and extended several dozen yards into solid rock. Several pieces of equipment and magical apparatuses lined the walls. At the far end the wall, surrounded by all kinds of machinery, was a table. Strapped onto it was a purple female earth pony. As Rubidium approached, she began to struggle, but the metal clamps around her hooves kept her latched on tightly.

Cerulean looked away.

Rubidium approached and a small apparatus on a metal rod extended out from some device on the wall. At the tip was a series of concentric circles. Rubidium inserted his horn into the device and it began to glow ruby red. The earth pony shuddered and whimpered as a beam of red light issued from her chest and was funneled into Rubidium's horn. His coat became smoother, he stood taller, and his muscles became better defined. In a few moments, it was over. Rubidium stepped away from the device and it retraced into the wall. The earth pony in the shackles was dead. It looked as though it had aged a lifetime. The floor in front of the table slid open and the shackles unlocked. The body fell into the open pit and the floor slid shut again.

Rubidium stood up and breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to Cerulean, who was still looking away.

"I think it's time you retrieve our young intruders. I'll be in my quarters. Don't take too long."

Cerulean nodded and pressed her wings against the small disk hidden under them. She began to glow before a flash of rainbow light filled the room and she was gone.

She appeared in the hallway directly outside the library. She took a moment to compose herself and assume her signature smile before

swiping a hoof across the door controls. They slid open in front of her, and she let out an audible gasp.

The room was empty.

# Chapter 11

*Several minutes earlier...*

“Jigsaw, do you entirely trust these ponies?”

“What do you mean?” Jigsaw said, taken aback. “I haven’t really seen any reason not to trust them. I was wary at first, but why would they show me something as precious as the fragment of Celestia if they were hiding things from us?”

“I don’t know, Jigsaw,” she said uneasily. “I noticed pretty much as soon as they let me in here. Look around. Do you see any controls for the doors?”

Jigsaw glanced around the room. The elevator shaft at the far end of the room didn’t have any visible controls on the smooth glass surface. The door that had slid open to permit Tiptoe’s entrance was now flush with the wall.

“Okay, you have my attention,” Jigsaw said. “Was there anything else?”

Tiptoe lowered her voice. “Have you actually seen any other ponies besides the blue and red ones? I walked through several floors of this place and the only ponies I saw were outside the tower. I think we’re being held prisoner.”

Jigsaw opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. He retraced the path they had taken to the library in his mind, and it slowly dawned on him that Tiptoe was right. He hadn’t seen a single other pony during his whole trip through the tower. He supposed he had been too taken in by the wonder of the city.

“What do you propose we do about it?” Jigsaw whispered.

A large grin began to creep its way across Tiptoe’s face.

“Just follow my lead.”

Before long, the two ponies were standing on opposite sides of the sliding wooden wall panel that served as the only apparent entrance to the room. They heard a quiet mechanical hum come from somewhere inside the wall, and the doorway slid up smoothly. Cerulean stood in the doorway in confusion for only a moment before Tiptoe shouted, “*NOW!*”

A blue glow surrounded Jigsaw’s horn as he lifted a heavy book off a nearby bookshelf. It went sailing through the air and hit a surprised Cerulean right in the head, stunning her. Tiptoe and Jigsaw used the moment to run out the door. Tiptoe then ran around to the backside of Cerulean and kicked her with her back legs—hard. Cerulean went tumbling into the library. Just as she shook her head to regain her focus and began speaking, Jigsaw waved a hoof in front of the door controls. The door slid shut with the familiar humming noise.

“We did it!” said Jigsaw, breathing hard. “We actually made it!”

Tiptoe shushed Jigsaw. “We can’t be heard! Just because we didn’t see anypony earlier doesn’t mean there couldn’t be guards. If we’re going to sneak out of here, you’re going to have to follow my lead.”

Jigsaw was somewhat surprised at Tiptoe’s take-charge attitude, though he understood why it had taken hold. Stealth was her special talent, and this was the first time she had ever gotten to utilize it. He remembered the boost of confidence he had gotten when he was trapped in the subway station and figured it must have been similar to how she was feeling now. He just hoped he could keep up.

“Just follow my lead, and stay as quiet as you can.” Tiptoe whispered, walking over to the wall on the right of the hallway. She lowered her head and stood on the very tips of her hooves. Jigsaw was amazed as she began to move forward along the wall—her hooffalls, once loud against the stone, seemed to have faded into silence. Jigsaw stood unsteadily on his hooves—he felt that he might fall over at any moment. However, after a few steps forward, he began to learn how to step lightly and make as little sound as possible. However, if he attempted to go Tiptoe’s speed, he ending up making a very loud noise, so Tiptoe was constantly forced to stop and wait for him to catch up.

They set off down the hallway, Tiptoe stopping at every corner to look ahead and make sure the coast was clear. Jigsaw was mesmerized—her body seemed to flow from place to place, showing an elegance and conservation in movement he had never seen in a pony before. She even used her wings. Every now and then, in a larger room, she would take off from the ground, flapping her wings in a slow, stiff motion that was almost totally silent, exploring the upper levels of the multistory rooms. The tower had been completely deserted so far, although it looked as though it had been built to accompany a huge amount of ponies. Several times, Jigsaw spoke up to question the necessity of sneaking, but Tiptoe quickly silenced him.

Tiptoe peeked her head around a corner of a brightly lit, white-tiled hallway, then signaled for Jigsaw to follow her. After Tiptoe's tail had vanished out of sight around the corner, Jigsaw slowly made his way around to follow her.

They entered into what looked like a lobby. It appeared unpowered—there were no lights on anywhere. The ceiling stretched at least six stories above them, and rows of balconies jutted out from small rooms arranged around three of the walls, like an office complex. The entire western wall, however, was taken up by a single pane of glass. Through it, taking up almost the entire area of the window, was the moon. The silvery light that filtered in through the window cast an eerie light over the entire scene. Jigsaw and Tiptoe's shadows climbed halfway up the wall as they approached the window in awe.

The city could be seen spread out beneath them, lights twinkling in windows. Jigsaw approached the window, nearly mesmerized, when Tiptoe prodded him from the side and pointed towards a door to their left. Muffled voices could be heard coming from the other side. Jigsaw and Tiptoe remained rooted to the spot. Soon, however, the voices moved past the door and out of earshot.

After a few moments, Tiptoe spoke up. "Jigsaw, we're going to need to get through that door."

"What? Are you crazy?" Jigsaw hissed back. "We can't go out there! There are other ponies out there!"

“Exactly,” Tiptoe said. “Which means that there has to be a way out down there. Think about it. So far, we haven’t even been able to go down a level. We also haven’t seen any other ponies. If there are some out there, it stands to reason they must have come from somewhere, yeah? I vote we go exploring.”

“But what if we get caught?” Jigsaw said, glancing out the window at the glistening city below them.

Tiptoe chuckled quietly. “We won’t. Now I get to pay you back for all the times you showed off your magic. Try and open the door while I’m gone.” She winked at Jigsaw before leaping into the air and soaring up to one of the balconies above the door. She walked inside the small room behind the balcony and vanished from sight.

Jigsaw couldn’t help but smile at Tiptoe’s high spirits. They had been in such a constant state of rush and terror since this whole adventure began that he had learned to appreciate the little moments when he could. He took one final look out at the moon before cantering over to the door.

First he attempted to open it by means of the control panel fastened to the wall. It appeared to be much older than the sleek, motion activated control panels on the library door—this one had a control panel covered in strange and unfamiliar characters that extended from the wall at a slight angle. A small screen was directly above it. To either side of the keyboard was a large, round button—one green, and one red. Jigsaw decided to hit the green one on instinct. The screen winked to life, showing an image of a black hoofprint. Then, with a mechanical *screech*, the door slid open...to reveal a thick sheet of plaster on the other side. At the same time, Jigsaw heard Tiptoe yell down from the balcony. He galloped out to the center of the room. Tiptoe stood braced against the balcony railing, her front hooves resting against the top rung.

“Did you manage to get the door open?” she called down.

“Yeah, but it was blocked off!” Jigsaw replied. “I don’t see any way through unless you think we can kick a hole in it, in which case there would probably be armed guards right outside.”

"I figured as much! The room in here is empty, but the door is locked from the inside. It leads to a hallway directly above this floor, and there's a stairwell at the end of the hall!"

"That's great, but how am I supposed to get up there?" Jigsaw called back.

"Hold on!" Tiptoe shouted. She put her hooves back on the ground and took a few steps back before galloping forward and leaping over the railing. She spread her wings out wide and soared down in a series of wide spirals before finally landing in front of Jigsaw with a single flap of her wings.

"Okay, now you're just showing off," Jigsaw said.

"Oh, don't pretend you don't like it," Tiptoe said with a playful wink.

Jigsaw was surprised, though not entirely displeased at Tiptoe's attitude. Before he could speak, however, she took off again, looping around Jigsaw before coming to a stop hovering over him.

"I'm going to grab you and pull you up to the balcony. It's probably not going to be comfortable. Are you ready?" she said.

"Ready as I'll ever be, I suppose," Jigsaw responded.

Tiptoe wrapped her hooves around Jigsaw's midriff and began to beat her wings. Jigsaw was buffeted by several strong gusts of wind before they began to rise off the ground. He hung limp in Tiptoe's arms as they slowly rose towards the balcony.

Tiptoe beat her wings as hard as she could. The extra weight of Jigsaw made the flight excruciatingly slow. She had gotten stronger in the week or so they had been on the surface, though the weight of a full-grown pony still posed a significant challenge to her.

After a few agonizing minutes of flying, Tiptoe finally reached the level of the balcony. She dropped Jigsaw off before landing on the ground and collapsing onto her back, panting heavily. Jigsaw gingerly arched his spine back down into its normal position, acutely aware of the imprint Tiptoe's hooves had left on his stomach. Nonetheless, he turned to her and said,



“That was incredible back there. I don’t know that I’ve ever even heard of a pony being carried up that far!”

Tiptoe stood up, having caught her breath. Her feathers were ruffled from the exertion she had just put them through. She began fluttering them in an attempt to flatten them down when Jigsaw interrupted her.

“Let me do that. I can actually reach them, after all.”

He flattened down the stray feathers with one hoof. When he was done, Tiptoe turned to face him.

“Thanks,” she said, a note of fatigue still present in her voice.

They locked eyes for a brief moment. Both of them remembered the conversation they’d had under the snowy pine tree what seemed like ages ago, and they could read it on each other’s faces. Tiptoe, however, decided to take action. In one quick motion, she leaned forwards and gave Jigsaw a quick peck on the cheek.

“I know what we talked about, but you never said flirting was off the table,” she then turned around with a flourish and trotted into the dark room beyond.

Jigsaw stood stunned at the entrance to the room for a few moments before stating “I like her. I *really* like her,” to no pony in particular. He then entered the dark room.

Inside was just as empty as Tiptoe had described. To Jigsaw, it looked to have once been a residential area. There were several small rooms branching off of the main one, all just as empty. The only light in the room came from the light that filtered in from the doorway. Tiptoe stood at the opposite side of the room, where a simple wooden door was located. This one seemed to be about as old as the one in the lobby—it had a similar control panel in the wall off to one side. Tiptoe pressed the green button with her nose and the door slid open. Beyond was a brightly lit hallway. So brightly lit, in fact, that it temporarily stunned Jigsaw. When his eyes had adjusted, he saw a small red carpet that extended to either direction. To the left, the hallways simply turned and vanished from sight. To the right,

however, a stairwell was clearly visible. Rich, warm lights in the shape of a sun lined the hallway every few dozen feet.

“C’mon,” Tiptoe whispered, “We have to get going before someone else shows up.”

They had only made it halfway to the stairwell when the sound of voices came up from below. Tiptoe froze in her tracks for just a moment before she turned on the spot, jammed the open button on one of the nearby doors, and jumped inside. Jigsaw followed her lead and jumped in after her. She pressed the red button on the control panel and the door slid shut just as two ponies came walking up the stairwell. Jigsaw and Tiptoe placed their ears against the seam of the door in an attempt to overhear the conversation going on outside.

“...is that he’s finally found a replacement for the Attenuator, but he escaped with the other pony that came through the portal! They’re running around in the old residential areas right now! That’s what the lockdown earlier was about, I think. I don’t even think most of these old doors are even hooked up to the network any more, though. Doesn’t really matter, the bottom level’s sealed off anyway. Poor guy, though, I sure don’t envy him,” said a deep, gruff male voice.

“Have you ever seen the Attenuator in person?” The reply came from a much more subdued and younger-sounding male voice.

“No. But I’ve heard the screaming.”

Several seconds of silence followed this statement.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to just let her go?” the soft-spoken male voice said.

Suddenly the sound of a flurry of motion came from outside and a loud bang and sharp shake of the door caused Jigsaw and Tiptoe to jump back. It appeared as though one of the ponies outside had been pinned against the door they were currently hiding in.

“Listen up, kid. I know you’re new here, but if they hear you talking like that, they will **not** hesitate to kill you. What you just said has gotten

ponies...good ponies...*drained*. So you'd do best to forget you ever thought that."

The door shook slightly and they heard sounds of gasping coming from outside.

"Now, come on. We need to get back to quarters before we're caught after lockdown."

Tiptoe and Jigsaw shared a look. After a few moments, the footsteps outside the doorway faded away. Tiptoe asked Jigsaw to light his horn, and he complied.

"What's the Attenuator? And why do they want me for it?" Jigsaw asked, his voice shaking with fear.

"I don't know, but it doesn't sound like anything you want to be a part of. And what do you think they meant by 'drained'? What's going on in this place?"

Her voice shook at the last sentence, giving away her nervousness. When she looked at the fear etched on Jigsaw's face, however, she mustered up every last fragment of courage she had.

"It doesn't matter. We're going to get out of here. All you have to do is trust me."

She took a step back and extended her wings just a little.

"Do you trust me?"

Jigsaw looked up at her. "With my life."

"Good, because this won't be the first time I've saved you," she said with a wink, heading towards the door to the room.

Jigsaw knew she was putting on a brave face for his benefit, but it didn't really matter to him. The fact that she was willing to try at all meant a great deal to him. Still, though, he couldn't shake the line about screaming out of his head.

The door to the room slid open and Tiptoe poked her head out and looked up and down the hallway. She turned and nodded silently to Jigsaw to indicate the hall was clear. They headed out together, approaching the stairwell uninterrupted. Soon, they were descending down a flight of small, red-carpeted steps, ears perked up to listen for footsteps coming up the stairwell.

What they found at the bottom was not what they had been expecting. There was no hallway at the bottom of the stairway—instead, a round platform, similar to the one in the throne room, though not identical, was located in the center of a small room. This one, however, appeared to be made out of a dark black, reflective stone instead of the coarse and dull gray stone from above. A thick cord extended from the back of the platform and off into a wall. A rather melodious humming was coming from the platform. The most striking feature, however, was the holographic message displayed at head level over the platform—“Lockdown protocols in place. All intergate travel is disabled. Return to your quarters until further notice.”

Tiptoe and Jigsaw cursed in unison at the turn of events.

“Well, I suppose that explains the lack of ponies. What do we do now?” Jigsaw said as Tiptoe walked onto the platform. The holographic image floating above fragmented and distorted as she passed through it.

“Can you do anything with your magic?” Tiptoe asked.

She stepped off the platform and Jigsaw took her place. His horn began to glow as tendrils of blue light made their way down to the platform. Suddenly, the melodious hum issuing from the platform became harsh and discordant, and Jigsaw flew off and slammed into the wall behind it. Tiptoe let out a gasp and galloped over to him. Jigsaw groaned.

“Are you okay?” she implored.

Slowly, Jigsaw moved up to sit on his haunches. “It’s going to leave a nasty bruise, but nothing’s broken. The security here is just too tight. I can’t break in.”

“How is that possible?” Tiptoe said, a little exasperated. “I’ve seen you work a thousand bits of way more impressive magic!”

“Yeah, on systems that were thousands of years old or had no protection in the first place. Those computers in that compound back there were over ten thousand years old—the magical protection on them was nearly gone. These are fresh. Maybe if I had a few weeks I could break them, but for now we’re out of luck.”

Tiptoe glared at him for a moment, then shook her head. “At least we’re safe here, for now. Nopony’s going to come through the portal while it’s on loc—”

Before she could finish the sentence, the hologram above the platform vanished and the tinkling melody coming from it grew in volume. Just when Tiptoe was getting worried about the noise level, it suddenly cut back to near-silence and two large blue words appeared above the platform: “**Good luck**”.

Both Jigsaw and Tiptoe’s faces broke out in huge grins. They looked at each other, and without another word, jumped on to the portal.

A sudden flash of light came from underneath them, and they both felt as if gravity had been reversed. The world melted away into a blur of colors and shapes, constantly shifting and changing direction. They had the sensation of great speed, though it was hard to tell. Suddenly, with a rather jarring slam, the world became solid again, and they found themselves standing on a portal in a room with smooth, white walls. They didn’t pay too much attention to the architecture, however. Their attention was taken up by the door.

The ornately decorated entrance was visually striking. White designs reminiscent of creeping vines criss-crossed their way across a window made of glass that refracted the light from the glowing blue shield into beautiful patterns of color that played along the back wall. But what they noticed most wasn’t the door itself—it was what was outside it. Beyond the double doors was the city of Stalliongrad. The portal had taken them right to ground level.

Jigsaw began to laugh. He couldn't believe they were actually going to make it out of this alive! Outside the doors could be seen the slick, high-tech buildings he had been glimpsing in the elevators for so long. Ponies outside were going about their lives, eating at restaurants, laughing among themselves, and even operating slick-looking vehicles on narrow streets.

Together, they pushed open the double doors of the tower and walked out into the bustle of Stalliongrad.

*Minutes earlier...*

The elevator entrance in the library whooshed open. Cerulean cowered behind a bookshelf. She didn't need to look. She could already see the dancing red light casting the shadow of a unicorn on the wall.

Rubidium came around the corner and faced Cerulean. His horn looked as though it was on fire—a huge corona of red energy emanated from his horn, making him difficult to look at directly. When he spoke, the volume nearly shook books off the shelves.

"You *let them escape?*" he said. "How can you be so incompetent! Do you understand what this means?"

Cerulean didn't respond.

Rubidium let out a roar of rage and a torrent of red energy flew from the tip of his horn and hit Cerulean. She began to scream and writhe. Her coat began to lose its elasticity and vibrant blue color. After a few moments of this, Rubidium stepped back, breaking the connection.

"Be thankful I didn't take it all."

Cerulean, who now had the appearance of a pony 40 years her elder, didn't respond. Instead, she simply lay curled into a ball and sobbed.

Rubidium trotted over to her and lifted her face in his hoof.

"*Tell me you're thankful,*" he hissed, "*or I take it all.*"

Cerulean looked up, a look of anguish and anger etched on to her face.  
“Thank you.”

Rubidium dropped her head and walked back to the elevator, riding it back up.

Cerulean made a decision. She adjusted the device under her wing until it glowed a deep red color and pressed down on it. She flashed out of the library and reappeared an instant later in the hallway leading to the Attenuator's chambers. The screams that usually filled the hall were quieter today. Cerulean guessed that the facility's lockdown meant it was pulling less power, thus reducing the pull of the Attenuator. She opened the door at the far end of the hallway with her override password and entered.

In the center of the room was a decrepit, white, female unicorn, strapped on to a table. Two crystalline rods extended from the ceiling, stopping about three feet from her horn. From each rod, an extremely bright plume of magical energy billowed into her horn, to be converted into usable power. The power was drawn away by a large, metallic ring-like device clamped around the base of her horn.

Upon hearing Cerulean's entrance, the Attenuator opened her eyes. Cerulean caught her glance and began walking over to her. The Attenuator braced herself for what she thought was going to be some fresh punishment, but instead Cerulean simply whispered, “I'm sorry.”

Cerulean then slowly made her way over to the main control panel for the facility, located on the far side of the Attenuator's chamber. She opened the lockdown protocol and entered the code for the override.

The computer prompted her with a text box asking “Lockdown deactivation message?”

In the box, she typed two words.

“Good luck.”

The red lights on the control panel all turned green as the portals came back on line. The screams of the Attenuator started fresh and clear and the

power requirements for the facility shot up. The sweet, tinkly music that accompanied attenuation also grew in volume.

Cerulean walked up to face the Attenuator, who did her best to suppress the screams.

Cerulean began to speak. "I may have lost years of my life, but I can stop it from ever happening again."

She then turned back to the console and entered her emergency keycode. Power to the entire facility was cut, leaving only the shield intact. For the first time in her memory, the Attenuator felt the pain ebb away.

Cerulean turned to leave. Before she did, however, the Attenuator spoke in a voice that sounded every bit as sweet as the music accompanying attenuation.

"Thank you. For the first time in a long time, I have hope."

Cerulean had never heard the Attenuator speak before. She smiled to herself, turned the teleportation plate under her wing to its green setting, and pressed it. She vanished in a flash of light.



# Chapter 12

Jigsaw stood on the pavement, staring up at the towering buildings overhead. He was about to speak when he received a jab in the side from one of Tiptoe's wings.

"Ow! What was that fo-" he stopped short, interrupted by Tiptoe's glare. Slowly, he began to take notice of his surroundings. His attention slipped from the architecture to his immediate surroundings to the general attitude of the ponies surrounding him. They were all walking with their heads lowered, eyes set resolutely forward. Jigsaw, with his head up and mouth open, looked very out of place. He quickly lowered his head and walked side by side with Tiptoe.

He still couldn't help the occasional glance up, though. The hyaline spires of the city extended hundreds of feet skyward—but, they were all dwarfed by the tower they had just left. It extended several times higher than even the highest building near it, thousands of feet high, piercing the sky like a needle. It appeared even more piecemeal than the rooms inside it had led him to believe- it appeared as though it had once been a much smaller tower that had been continually built upon. The base was rectangular and dark, though as the tower ascended, the exterior changed many times, from orbicular walls to the final, sleek, antennae-like point at the very top. The exact center of the shimmering protective dome around the city radiated out of this central point, encasing the city in its constantly billowing blue light. The effect was something like the bottom of a pool, though the warm, white lights of the city helped to lessen the effect.

The city itself was immaculately clean. Ponies were filing in and out of several nearby buildings. They quickly assumed the same head-down posture that everypony had, quickly making their way away from the tower. The sidewalks were made of a white material that felt something like rubber. The roads were made out of what looked like black volcanic glass, though Jigsaw knew that would be an exceptionally bad material to build a road out of. As they walked along, some ponies shot them strange looks, but they weren't bothered. After a few hundred feet of walking, Tiptoe and Jigsaw came to a crossroads. The road curved off to the right in one

direction and continued straight on in the other. This far from the tower, the ponies were beginning to raise their heads and talk to each other. Tiptoe nudged Jigsaw and gestured with her nose towards a space in between two buildings right where the roads diverged, and they slipped inside.

Tiptoe was the first to speak. "Jigsaw, where are we going to go?" Her voice quavered, as if she was unsure of herself.

Jigsaw still hadn't quite recovered from the shock of the city. He had a wide-eyed, stunned expression on his face. "What are you talking about?"

"Yeah, we escaped," Tiptoe said, "But we're still in danger. We have nowhere to go!"

However, before Jigsaw could respond, a bright flash of red light and a sharp *crack* came from the entrance to the alleyway. When the light had faded, a small band of ponies was blocking the exit. Around their midriffs, they all had a red jumpsuit encircled by a black stripe. At the head of the pack was a gargantuan, forest-green earth pony. Embedded in his shoulder was a small, round disc that was currently flashing red. When he spoke, his voice was harsh and raspy.

"Did you think you could escape from Rubidium that easily?" he hissed, walking forward slowly.

"W-who are you?" Tiptoe said. She began edging backward, and Jigsaw quickly followed her.

"We're who Rubidium sends when he wants something *dealt with*," said a small blue pegasus who emerged from behind the burly green pony. Her voice was dripping with malice. She looked directly at Tiptoe when she said "*dealt with*". Jigsaw's horn flared to life and he stepped forward.

"Stay away from her!" he shouted.

The group of ponies looked at each other briefly before breaking into derisive laughter. The green pony moved out of the center to allow a gray unicorn to take the center stage. His horn began to glow with a dim white light and Jigsaw was thrown against the concrete wall of the building next

to him. Tiptoe gasped, but Jigsaw stood up and shook off the shock. He didn't try to take the offensive again, however.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Our orders are to capture you," the gray unicorn replied. "The girl is disposable."

At this, Jigsaw bristled in anger.

Tiptoe's back was against the wall now. Jigsaw was directly in front of her. Rubidium's hit squad moved in slowly. The gray unicorn's horn was glowing brighter.

Jigsaw looked over his shoulder at Tiptoe, and in that instant, they both understood what the other was thinking. Jigsaw crouched down, and the group of ponies advancing towards them were momentarily taken aback.

Then, Tiptoe leapt up, grabbing Jigsaw's midriff and pumping her wings furiously. They sailed over the stunned ponies and landed back near the mouth of the alleyway. "Run!" Tiptoe screamed, and they took off.

Rubidium's hit squad wasn't stunned for long, though. They raced after them. The chase was on.

Jigsaw and Tiptoe galloped down the roads, blowing past crowds of highly confused-looking ponies. The strange vehicles driving down the roads slammed to a halt when they saw the strange pursuit. Jigsaw glanced over his shoulder to see the blue pegasus rapidly gaining on them, her wings flapping furiously.

Jigsaw directed Tiptoe around a corner. They were now running parallel to the edge of the shimmering shield. Jigsaw glanced back again and saw, to his relief, that there didn't appear to be anyone following them. He was just about to slow down when Tiptoe yelled, "Stop!"

Jigsaw whipped his head back around to find that the group of red-banded ponies had somehow managed to beat them to the end of the street and were now running towards them. Jigsaw dug his hooves into the sidewalk

and skidded to a stop, then quickly turned direction and galloped away. Tiptoe had taken off and was now flying slightly ahead of Jigsaw.

“Tiptoe!” Jigsaw yelled. Tiptoe slowed down slightly so as to be next to Jigsaw.

“What?” she called.

“We have to get inside somewhere and fight them off! We can’t just run forever!” Jigsaw said.

“You’re right!” Tiptoe shouted back. “But how can we ever hope to fight off these ponies?”

They didn’t have to wait long to find out. They barrelled around a corner and down an alley only to find that their path was blocked by the rather imposing front doors to one of the many giant towers. They turned around only to find that the group of ponies standing at the mouth of the alley again.

The green earth pony stepped forward. “Really, you two? All that running to end up in exactly the same situation?”

The blue pegasus swooped up into the air. “And don’t think you can try that fancy flying trick again. This time, I’m ready.”

Jigsaw noticed a faint metallic scent in the air. Suddenly, a bolt of what appeared to be lightning shot from one side of the alleyway to the other, stopping the progression of the hitponies. Tiptoe stared at Jigsaw. “Did you do that?”

“No!” Jigsaw said, stunned. “I can’t do anything like tha-”

He was interrupted by a sudden blast of light and heat. He and Tiptoe were pushed back into the wall by the force of the blast. When the light faded, a single female, inky black unicorn was standing between Tiptoe and Jigsaw and the hitsquad. Her shoulder appeared to have a somewhat large, glowing rectangle set in it, reminiscent of the green pony’s, only much more bulky looking. Her cutie mark showed a stylized orange-and-yellow wisp.

The burly green pony stood there in shock for a moment. The pegasus quickly landed, and the unicorn lowered his head.

“So, Rubidium actually decided to send you after these new arrivals? Why is that?” the black pony said. Her posture was strangely laid-back, in stark comparison to the hitsquad, who looked as though they might snap at any moment. Tiptoe silently wondered why this simple unicorn inspired such fear in this elite squad.

“None of your business, Incendia. What are you doing here?” The burly green pony said, his voice even lower and raspier than usual. Every muscle in his body was tense.

Incendia, to Jigsaw and Tiptoe’s shock, actually sat down and began to exam the alleyway.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been to his particular district before. Lovely outdoor gardens.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” the green earth pony snarled.

“Oh, fine then, if you insist. I’m here to do what I always do! Save people and ruin your day.”

She turned her head and winked at Jigsaw and Tiptoe, though they couldn’t help by notice that she was beginning to tense up too.

Then, with a shout and a flash of white light, bedlam broke out. The gray unicorn had lifted what seemed to be an entire car and hurled it at Incendia, while the blue pegasus followed not far behind.

Incendia responded in a split second. She hit the button on her shoulder, and she vanished in a blast of heat and light. She reappeared a few seconds later directly behind the group. The car hit the ground and skidded to a stop only a few feet from where Jigsaw and Tiptoe were standing.

Incendia’s horn began to glow deep orange, and she began to chuckle. Then, without warning, her whole body erupted into flames. From her horn spouted what looked like a gigantic whip of fire, which she swung around a

few times before lashing out and the burly green pony. He quickly jumped aside and galloped out of the alleyway, shouting instructions to his cohorts.

The two other ponies quickly galloped out into the street to join him. Jigsaw and Tiptoe cautiously approached the mouth of the alleyway to get a view of the action.

Incendia was now engulfed in flames. The blue pegasus struggled to dodge the flaming tip of the whip as it flew through the air. She wasn't fast enough, though. The flaming whip caught her in the side, ripping apart her red banner, and creating a deep cut down her flank, bisecting her cutie mark, a soaring bird of prey. She went spiraling to the ground.

The unicorn levitated a large table from a nearby house and hurled towards the flaming unicorn. Incendia reacted instantly. The fiery whip zig-zagged through the air, wrapping around the table like a lasso. She spun around on the spot and swung the table through the air. She released it and sent it flying towards the gray unicorn. It soared through the air, smoldering slightly from where it had been in contact with the length of fire. The gray unicorn's horn began to glow, but it was too late. The table collided with him with a loud, dull thump and he fell backwards. His head slammed against the strange material of the sidewalk and he stopped moving.

The green earth pony glanced to his fallen comrades and then turned his head and began to manipulate the device in his shoulder. Incendia's eyes widened and she shot out a tongue of flame, but too late. With a press of the disc, a strange shimmering effect surrounded the green earth pony. The flaming strand deflected off it, causing the field to ripple.

The green pony charged at Incendia. She attempted to jump out of the way, but the green pony was surprisingly quick for his size. He collided into her and she tumbled backwards off of the road and onto a small stone bench on the sidewalk. Her flames went out.

She sat up slowly. The green pony galloped over to her, then turned his back. He raised his back legs as if preparing to kick her. Jigsaw and Tiptoe looked away- nopony could possibly survive a buck to the head from such a large pony. Fortunately, Incendia had her wits about her enough to duck down. The green pony's hooves hit the stone of the bench harmlessly. With

what looked like a great effort, Incendia ignited herself again. She rolled out from under the green pony and bent her head down. A small bright white light began glowing at the tip of her horn. The green pony opened his mouth in shock, but it was too late. From the white point, a concussive blast of flame leapt out. Jigsaw and Tiptoe ducked to the side of the alleyway to avoid the intense heat radiating out from the wave of fire. The green pony's shield remained intact, but the blast knocked him off his hooves. He hit the ground hard and skidded several feet. He didn't get back up.

Incendia gave one final look around before extinguishing her flames. She suddenly swayed on her feet and had to brace herself to stop from falling over. She was panting heavily. Jigsaw and Tiptoe ran out to see her.

"That was incredible!" Jigsaw said. "Who are you? Why did you save us?"

Tiptoe shot a disapproving glance at Jigsaw. "More importantly, are you okay?"

Incendia straightened up a little, though she was still panting hard. "My name is Incendia. I've come to rescue you."

"But who are you?" Jigsaw insisted. "Why are you trying to rescue us? How did you find us?"

"I'm from the resistance movement," Incendia said, "and as for 'why' and 'how', I think it would be best if I showed you. Come with me. I promise you, we're the good guys."

Tiptoe and Jigsaw shared a look. "We don't really have any choice, way I see it." Tiptoe said.

"Good." Incendia let out a weak smile.

Many things happened at once. Incendia's eyes suddenly focused on a point directly behind Jigsaw and Tiptoe. They turned their heads to follow her line of sight and saw the gray unicorn was back on his hooves, a small chunk of concrete levitating over his head. He let out a shriek and launched it towards them.

Incendia jumped forward, forcing Tiptoe and Jigsaw out of the way. The spinning chunk of concrete struck her on the right front leg, and she screamed in agony. With a sickeningly loud crack, the leg bent backwards- far more than a leg ever should. She collapsed to the ground, whimpering. Her leg was splayed out at an impossible angle. Jigsaw and Tiptoe ran in front of her, blocking the gray unicorn's path. Before they could get a chance to retaliate, however, a loud clicking sound came from behind them. Incendia had pressed the rectangular device embedded into her shoulder.

Instantly, Jigsaw and Tiptoe felt as though they were being torn apart. They were being alternately pulled on at all sides and then compressed. Breathing was nearly impossible. Then, when they thought they couldn't take it anymore, they suddenly slammed to the ground. Jigsaw felt as though he had just been run over by a large boulder- his whole body ached. Judging from Tiptoe's shocked expression, he figured she did too. They were in a small, unassuming room that appeared to have been quickly and shoddily made out of wood. There was no furniture, only a single electric light hung from a ceiling. Then, with a fresh blast of light and heat, Incendia appeared before them. She crumpled to the ground. Immediately, two other ponies- a female unicorn and a male pegaus- rushed into the room. When they saw Jigsaw and Tiptoe, their faces lit up with joy. It was short-lived, however, because they soon noticed Incendia lying in a heap on the ground, her right leg splayed out at an unnatural angle.

The next entrant into the room surprised Jigsaw more than anything else. Cerulean stepped through the doorway, her trademark smile replaced with one that appeared genuine.



# Chapter 13

Jigsaw simply stared in shock and horror at Cerulean. It was undoubtedly the same pony, though she appeared to have aged twenty years since their escape from the library—her fur had lost its lustrous blue sheen, her wings had become ruffled and flat. Her walk, however, was upright and proud, a distinct change from her simpering disposition she exhibited in Rubidium's tower.

Tiptoe recovered from the shock first. She flared her wings outward and marched towards Cerulean.

"What are you doing here?" she seethed.

Before Cerulean could respond, Incendia spoke. She was standing propped between the two ponies that had entered earlier, her leg still splayed out painfully. When she spoke, her voice was clearly strained. "We know she used to work with Rubidium. She defected to our side and gave us some very valuable intel."

"Oh?" Tiptoe shot back. "What intel did she give you that was so important?"

"Well, she told us how to find you, among other things."

Tiptoe opened her mouth as if to respond, then closed it again. Cerulean smiled weakly.

The two ponies holding up Incendia led her over to a small cot that folded out of the wall at the far corner of the room. They began bandaging her injured leg.

"I know you don't trust me," Cerulean said, "and I know I have no reason to expect you to. That being said, will you allow me to explain my motivations?"

Tiptoe had a sour expression on her face, but she walked over to commune with Jigsaw.

“We might as well hear what she has to say. If what Incendia says is true, Cerulean saved our lives.”

“No, Incendia saved our lives,” Tiptoe muttered, though it was more to herself than anypony else. She nodded, and Cerulean began to speak.

“Rubidium, as you are no doubt aware by now, is a tyrant. However, you have been shielded from the worst of what he can do. I was his assistant. I’ve found out more than most anyone else in Stalliongrad ever has, and it goes far deeper than anyone can imagine.”

“And just why did you suddenly have this change of heart?” Tiptoe asked with more than a touch of venom.

“I’m getting to that,” Cerulean assured, “just hold on.” She began again. When she spoke, her voice was hesitant and her words were carefully chosen. “I didn’t become Rubidium’s assistant of my own free will to begin with. My family...they couldn’t afford to keep me. We lived near the barrier, you see.”

“Why should that affect anything?” Tiptoe queried.

“The more affluent ponies live closer to the center of the city. No one that can afford it lives near the barrier. It may keep the worst of Tantalus’ onslaught off, but...it doesn’t keep everything out. My family...they lived right on the border.” At this point, she fell silent, staring at the ground. After a few moments, she spoke again. “As I said, they gave me up. Most ponies given up to the government just get drained, but—”

This time, it was Jigsaw that interrupted. “What exactly does that mean, ‘drained’? We heard some security guards mention it.”

Cerulean looked at Jigsaw with sadness in her eyes. “Draining is how Rubidium keeps order. How he instills fear in the populace. And...and how he stays alive.”

“*What?*” Jigsaw and Tiptoe said in unison. Behind them, Incendia shifted

uncomfortably on the cot, her leg fully bandaged in a reflective, silvery fabric.

“Rubidium’s reign of terror didn’t just start recently,” Cerulean said. “He’s been ruling for the past ten thousand years.”

Jigsaw and Tiptoe’s eyes grew wide with shock. Neither of them spoke for a few moments, but soon Jigsaw managed to squeak out “How?”

“Draining. Draining is the process by which Rubidium steals a pony’s life. He’s the cause of my...” she faltered. “...my current condition. It’s also why nopony has overthrown him throughout his entire reign. Well...” she glanced at Incendia. “At least not successfully, anyway.”

Incendia chose this moment to attempt to get off the cot. She stood unsteadily on her three good legs, holding her bandaged leg just above the ground. She limped forward, and the two other ponies followed her closely, ready to catch her if her balance wavered. She approached the small group near the doorway.

“We can’t stay here too long. This is only supposed to be an intermediary safe spot, and we’ve already left far too much evidence behind.” She glanced behind her at the charred spot on the ground where they had teleported in. She began to fiddle with the settings on the pad embedded in her shoulder. It was changing colors rapidly, before it settled a glowing orange hue.

“Don’t you think I should do it?” Cerulean offered. “After all, you are injured, and we’re carrying six ponies, and—” she stopped after an icy look from Incendia. Tiptoe was surprised a fire pony could look so cold. She hit the button on her shoulder.

The familiar disorientation and discomfort that accompanied their earlier trip through the teleporter returned, magnified what felt like five times. The whirling colors whizzed past them at incredible speeds, and they felt as though forces from all sides were alternately pulling and compressing them. Eventually, when they felt they couldn’t take anymore, they tumbled out of the light and pressure in a heap and into a small, brilliantly white room.

There was a moment of panic as Jigsaw struggled for breath, but after a few seconds his lungs opened up. He gasped for air, and the others soon followed. They all stood up, and Incendia hobbled over to the door and pressed a small button on a panel next to the door. Immediately, a blue beam of light swept down over the ponies in the room, and the light on the panel flashed twice before turning green. The door swung open.

"It's safe to come in. Sorry about the rough teleport. Hopefully we can fix that soon." Incendia said.

"How exactly do those work?" asked Jigsaw.

"Jigsaw," Cerulean began, "I understand you have a lot of questions, but I can't answer them all at once. It's best that we focus on what's pertinent."

"Oh, alright," Jigsaw conceded. Together, the group filed into the room, with Incendia leading the group and Cerulean trailing in the back.

They were lead through several narrow, metallic corridors, each one with branching hallways. Incendia lead them through an extremely complex, labyrinthine pathway, and Jigsaw couldn't help but feel that it was intentionally designed that way.

"Why is it always underground?" Tiptoe muttered to herself. "Why can't the resistance have a nice, open-air office?"

Jigsaw chuckled and glanced over his shoulder at the pegasus, who blushed when she realized she had been overheard.

Before too long, they arrived at a small, domed underground area. Jigsaw was struck by how similar the room looked to the much larger area that they had used to teleport into Stalliongrad in the first place. Fortunately, this room did not lock down upon entry.

The two unknown ponies gave a bow to Incendia and backed out of the room.

"Welcome, everypony, to the headquarters of the resistance!" As she spoke, the room came to life. A large holographic image of the city, complete with shimmering magical shield, was projected in the center of

the room. The glittering light from the image of the shield cast a cool, blue light around the room, illuminating it with much more clarity than the small, white lights inlaid in the wall. The room was less similar to the underground bunker than Jigsaw initially thought. Three rows of seats surrounded them, and a central table lay directly beneath the hologram. Incendia cantered over to the table.

“Well, Cerulean,” Incendia said, “you may continue.”

Cerulean nodded and turned towards the two ponies sitting together on the other side of the table.

“Where was I? Draining? Yes. Most ponies given up to the government are used for Rubidium to feed on. Families that give up their children get a monetary benefit, but it’s barely enough to survive on. Still, ponies are desperate.”

“So how were you *not* drained?” Tiptoe inquired.

“I...I still don’t know. Rubidium simply picked me out of a lineup and made me his assistant. I always just assumed there was an opening. Naturally, I was terrified. At first, I wasn’t told much of anything. I was sent out on mysterious errands with no explanation as to why or what I was accomplishing. Over time, however, I began to earn a reputation for my...results. I always accomplished my goal, because I was so frightened of what would happen if I didn’t. Eventually, I qualified for one of these.” She turned her head to point towards the gently pulsating disc on her shoulder.

“They’re formally called Personal Transportation Devices, but most everypony just calls them teleporters. All higher-up government ponies get them implanted so they can travel around the city unimpeded.”

Incendia spoke up at this point. “Not the resistance, though. We had to make our own. As you’ve experienced, it’s...rougher than the official version. We don’t exactly have the best materials or information to work with. Rubidium runs a very tight ship. That is, until Cerulean here came along. She brought such a wealth of knowledge with her that we couldn’t turn her away.”

“But do you entirely trust her?” Tiptoe asked.

Incendia and Cerulean’s eyes met for a brief moment. An understanding seemed to pass between them.

“No. But the resistance is struggling. The two ponies you saw in here earlier? That’s it. That’s all that’s left. We’ve been getting worn down for months and we haven’t had any new recruits. I was worried that we were going to get wiped out...until Cerulean showed up. So no, I don’t entirely trust her, but we’re at the end of our rope and I have to take opportunities as they come.”

Tiptoe looked down at the table and nodded slowly. “I understand.”

A small smile appeared on Cerulean’s face as she looked at Tiptoe. “Thank you. I won’t let you down.” Her gaze moved from Tiptoe to Jigsaw, and her smile fell. “Unfortunately, there is one other matter of importance we have to discuss. And the concerns—”

“The Attenuator.” Jigsaw interrupted. “They said I was her replacement. Who is she, and why am I due to replace her?”

Cerulean took a deep breath before she began speaking. “The Attenuator is the backbone of the city. The fragment of Celestia in the city’s underbelly is the power source, but the power is raw and unrefined. That’s where the Attenuator comes in. The power from the fragment is funnelled up from the fragment and into a special room in the tower where the Attenuator is kept. We’re not entirely sure what it is—some quality of the unicorn’s special talent, natural ability, or possibly just personality allows them to convert the raw power from the fragment into pure, clean power. The process is...extremely painful. Rubidium takes every unicorn given up to him down to the fragment’s chamber. Most of the time, the door guarding the fragment won’t open under any circumstances. I don’t know why. Rubidium does, but he would never tell. Anyways, whenever a unicorn capable of attenuation approaches the door, it will open. They can even approach—and in some cases, touch—the fragment.”

Jigsaw sat upright on his chair, staring intently at Cerulean. Tiptoe glanced

back and forth between the two. The look of intensity on Jigsaw's face was almost frightening.

"Attenuators are exceedingly rare. Attenuation shortens the lifespan of the pony in question, and as they age, the power output drops. It can be...unpleasant when they need to be replaced. Sometimes we have been forced to...to artificially extend the life of the Attenuator. The current one has been around for over one hundred and thirty years. Your arrival was so fortuitous because Rubidium had begun to believe that whatever quality that lead to successful attenuation had gone extinct. The power output had been dropping dramatically for decades, and soon we wouldn't have been able to maintain city infrastructure. He was becoming desperate. When I let you two escape he was furious. Angry enough to take it out on me. He drained years off my life, after all I did for him, all the years I had already sacrificed in his service! It was the final straw. I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't watch one more pony undergo the draining process. So, I gathered up all the information on the tower as I could, released the lockdown, and defected."

"That's what Rubidium wants me for?" Jigsaw said, his voice shaking. "He wants to torture me for my entire life just to generate power?"

"That's the long and short of it, yes," Cerulean confirmed.

Tiptoe spoke up before Jigsaw could respond. "He has to be stopped!"

Jigsaw nodded emphatically. "He can't be allowed to do this. Not just to me. To every pony in the city."

Incendia smiled. "So. Jigsaw, Tiptoe. Would you like to join the resistance?"

Jigsaw and Tiptoe looked at each other for a brief moment, then turned to Incendia. "Yes," Jigsaw said, "we would."

"Excellent! Follow me." Incendia said. The entire group stood up, and Incendia lead them out the door they had come from. They continued down a metal passageway to a small room on the left. It was very plain and undecorated. Two cots folded down from the wall on the far side and a computer terminal glowed on the right wall. On the left, a small door lead to what was ostensibly a bathroom.

“This is where you’ll be staying. Sorry it isn’t fancier, but it’s all we have.” Incendia said. One of the ponies that had helped prop her up earlier appeared at her side, a saddlebag draped over his back. Incendia’s horn glowed orange, and a small, rectangular device similar to the one in her shoulder floated out of the bag.

“Don’t worry,” she said with a smile, “we’re not going to implant this one. This is just for emergencies. If the base comes under attack, stand near the device and simply press down on the button. You’ll be transported somewhere safe. Jigsaw caught the floating disc in his mouth and carried it over to one of the cots on the wall. He bent down and set it under the cot.

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone, I think. You’ve had quite the day.”

“I’d appreciate that. The only sleep I’ve gotten was when I was unconscious in the tower, and that wasn’t exactly restful.” Tiptoe said.

Jigsaw nodded in agreement, and Incendia stepped back out of the room. Jigsaw turned and began trotting towards the cot, when he suddenly turned around.

“Incendia!” he yelled. “Wait a second!”

Incendia look back. “Yes?”

“Can you send the details from Cerulean’s files to the terminal in the room?”

“Of course, I’ll send them right over. Just remember to get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow.”

On that note, the door to the room slid shut, and Tiptoe and Jigsaw were alone.

Jigsaw turned back to the cot and climbed upon it. Tiptoe climbed onto the one next to him. They turned to face each other, and Jigsaw let out a sigh.

“I’m scared, Tiptoe. Really scared. It was almost better when I didn’t know what the Attenuator was...it’s worse than anything I could have imagined.”



Tiptoe looked at Jigsaw sadly. "I know. I can't imagine what it must be like for you."

There was a moment of silence as Jigsaw stared at the glowing computer on the wall.

"Do you ever think about home?" he said quietly.

"I haven't had much time, honestly," Tiptoe replied. "But yeah, I have."

"I wonder how it's holding up," he said. "It's been, what, a week? Two? I can't even keep track anymore. Either way, the water pressure will have started falling significantly by now. The arboretum will have had to cut back on water dramatically if not altogether."

"Is there no chance they could have fixed the pipes by now?" Tiptoe asked. "I know that you were the head of the water department, but you had ponies working under you, right?"

"Of course I did. But this wasn't something simple like a burst pipe or even an invasion by monsters. The entire main command module for the entire network was blown out of the ceiling! That couldn't be rebuilt in a decade, let alone a few weeks. I suppose it's possible that with some good luck they could have patched some of the leaks and salvaged a little more pressure out of the system, but I doubt anypony would have figured out what had happened in time."

Tiptoe nodded slowly. "So, it's hopeless?"

"Not entirely, but I just don't know how they could have...let's not dwell on it. We have a new society to save."

Tiptoe chuckled despite herself. "How did we ever get involved in all this? Saving civilizations? Wandering around the surface of Equestria? It all seems like something out of a story."

"Yeah, it does." Jigsaw mused. "But the stakes are very real. The fate of this entire city is apparently resting on me. Why me? What did I ever do to deserve this? What makes me suitable to be an Attenuator?"

“I don’t know,” Tiptoe said, “but we can’t let them get you. We have to fight back. All we can do is hope that Incendia has a decent plan.”

Jigsaw nodded. “Tiptoe?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know what I would do if you weren’t here.”

Tiptoe blushed. “I don’t know what I would do without you either.”

Jigsaw jumped off the bed and did something that shocked Tiptoe—he kissed her. Tiptoe blinked in surprise.

“Wha—but I thought you said you didn’t want to get into a relationship? I thought you said it was too dangerous?”

“Tiptoe, there’s a psychotic, practically immortal, immensely powerful unicorn that wants to strap me into a torture chair for hundreds of years and turn me into a magical transformer. At this point, I’ve been forced to realize my priorities. And first and foremost is you.”

Without another word, Jigsaw trotted away from the cot and to the computer terminal, where an image of the teleportation pad appeared onscreen. Tiptoe laid down and smiled to herself. She closed her eyes and dozed off, the light from the terminal and Jigsaw’s horn casting long, spindly shadows on the wall behind her.

# Chapter 14

Jigsaw's eyes opened. He blinked almost at once at the harsh, fluorescent light that was illuminating the room. He rolled off the cot and stood up, blinking the sleep out of his eyes. The door to the bathroom opened and Tiptoe cantered out. Upon seeing Jigsaw standing at the foot of his cot, she smiled.

"Oh, you're finally awake!" she said. "You stayed up so late with the terminal that I thought it would be better to let you sleep. I've been up for a few hours already. I left you your breakfast on my cot." She gestured towards the cot with her head where a small meal was sitting on a metal tray.

"Oh, thank Celestia," Jigsaw said, "I'm starving." He walked over to the tray and sat on the bed. His horn began to glow with a faint blue aura as the food floated to his mouth. Tiptoe trotted over and sat next to him.

"So," Jigsaw asked in between bites of salad, "what's on the agenda for today? Did you get any news from Incendia?"

"Yeah, she told me to bring you back to the main chamber once you'd woken up and finished eating."

"Did she say what for?" Jigsaw asked.

"No," Tiptoe said, "she said we should both be there."

Jigsaw finished off the salad and stood up. "Well, I suppose we ought to go, then."

Together, they set off down the hallway. Jigsaw wondered for a moment how they would find their way to the main chamber after all the twists and turns it had taken to get to their room, but at the first fork in the hallway Jigsaw noticed a small strip of lights along the ceiling had been illuminated. He assumed that they lead to the main chamber and followed them.

He was right. After several minutes of following the twisting corridor, they entered back into the large, domed chamber. Incendia was seated at one side of a large table in the center of the room. Above her, a large holographic image of the familiar sun-and-moon insignia blazed, illuminating the room with a warm glow. Incendia looked up as they crossed the threshold and smiled.

“I’m glad you’re up. We have a lot of work to do.” she said. She got up from the table and walked around it. Jigsaw was shocked to see that her leg was unbandaged and appeared to support her weight.

Incendia noticed Jigsaw’s stare. “Medical technology has come pretty far in the last few thousand years. A broken leg won’t put you out of commission for long, if you have the supplies.”

Jigsaw nodded appreciatively. “That’s good to know.”

Incendia smiled and said “Now, we do have some business to attend to. We have to use the teleporter, so brace yourselves. We’re going to take a little tour of the city near the outskirts so you can see just how bad things are.”

Jigsaw and Tiptoe nodded in acknowledgement. They gritted their teeth as Incendia hit the button on the teleporter. They began the now-familiar process of being tossed from side to side, though it seemed less intense than it had before. With a jarring jolt, the world solidified, and they were standing in a very small, very rundown shack that seemed to be made out of plastic sheets. It was barely large enough for the three of them to fit in.

“Just follow me and don’t say anything,” Incendia instructed. She led them out of the shack and onto a rough dirt street.

Jigsaw and Tiptoe almost gasped in shock at what they saw. Stretching out before them were row after row of the same shabby buildings they had just come out of. Extremely downtrodden and emaciated ponies wandered around on the narrow dirt street. None of the sleek, shiny vehicles could be seen here. Tall smokestacks in the distance belched black smoke, most of which blew mercifully out of the shimmering dome, but what didn’t settled near ground level and made the air smell sooty and thick. Far off,

Rubidium's tower could be seen rising ominously out of the center of the city, surrounded by the much smaller peaks of the other towers.

Incendia began walking directly away from the tower. They reluctantly followed her. Tiptoe couldn't help but notice the other ponies' reactions to Incendia. They would glance up and see the teleporter embedded in her shoulder and their eyes would grow wide. Some wore expressions of joy, others of fear, on most it was a mix of both. They would retreat into shacks or side streets on her approach. Within moments, the entire street was clear. Incendia didn't walk like the other ponies, either. She held her head high and walked quickly. She didn't show any signs of the limp from the previous day. They were rapidly approaching the edge of the city. After only a few minutes of walking, they reached it. The shimmering blue barrier terminated just ahead of them. The blue light that shone off of it seemed to drown out all the other colors of the city. Even Incendia's fiery mane seemed to lose its luster under the blue light.

Incendia's horn glowed a bright reddish-orange hue and a small rock lifted off the ground. She tossed it through the shield. As soon as it made contact, there was a flash of light and a concussive burst of air that nearly destabilized Tiptoe. On the other side of the glittering wall of light was a small pile of ash.

Incendia began to speak. "You've already seen the inner city, where those with the money live. The rest of the ponies are forced out here, to the slums. The barrier protects, yes, but anything that comes into contact with it will be instantly destroyed. They ponies living here have to deal with the constant possibility of death because of something as simple as a misstep. Not to mention this is Rubidium's prime feeding grounds. No pony will notice if a pony goes missing in the dead of night from here. It's awful and it's wrong, and it's what we're sworn to fight for."

As she spoke, smoke began to coil off of her coat and into the air around her. Jigsaw and Tiptoe subconsciously backed away from both her and the barrier a few feet. When Incendia finished, Tiptoe spoke up.

"That *is* awful. I can't imagine having to live like that." she said quietly.

The smoke rising from Incendia's coat stopped and she seemed to slacken a little. "Come on. I have something else to show you."

It was then that the lights of the city flickered out and the glittering shield disappeared.

~

Rubidium wiped the blood off his horn, leaving trails of red on the white walls of the Attenuator's chamber. The attenuator's body lay slumped on the table, still strapped onto it. The wound in her chest was still fresh.

There was a flash of green lightning on the horizon and the ground rumbled and shook. Rubidium smiled.

"Won't be long now."

~

Incendia's eyes grew wide. For the first time, Jigsaw saw actual fear in them. When the green light flashed, she turned to Jigsaw and Tiptoe and smashed the button on the teleporter on her shoulder. After another jarring transition, they were back in the underground atrium with the holographic projector, though it was now only projecting a single, weakly lit red bar. Cerulean was already present, but the two unidentified ponies were gone. Incendia glanced at Cerulean who said, "Gone. No idea where they could have gone."

Incendia nodded. "What are we going to do?" she said. Panic was seeping into her voice, and it was clear to Jigsaw and Tiptoe that she had no idea what to do next.

Cerulean didn't answer. She didn't look as frightened, but she was extremely tense. Suddenly, an image burst into being above the table. Rubidium's head was floating above the table, as large as a small building. Tiptoe gasped and Jigsaw let out a shout.

Incendia cantered up to the table and stood in front of the projection. Rubidium chuckled.

"Incendia! Glad to see you're still kicking, so to speak! I heard about your leg. I suppose you've noticed our little situation with the shield," he said.

“What have you done?” Incendia demanded.

Rubidium let out a cold, humorless laugh and his head moved out of the image. Behind it could be seen the Attenuator’s body with what appeared to be a stab wound in her chest.

Incendia stared in shocked disbelief until Rubidium stepped back into the image. She took a deep breath, and spoke in a voice that sounded uncharacteristically weak and shaky. “You’ve signed your own death warrant.”

“Have I?” said Rubidium. “If only there were some replacement for the Attenuator handy!” His eyes turned to Jigsaw. “I’m not going to mince words. You have about fifteen minutes before Tantalus gets here. You can either get here before that happens and restart the shield, or you can die along with the rest of the city. I’ll be waiting.”

His horn began to glow red, and he let out another cruel laugh. The image went dark.

Jigsaw spoke first. “I have to go. I don’t have any other choice. Staying means that this entire city would die, and I can’t allow that.”

Tiptoe spoke next. “You can’t go! You’d be stuck there for hundreds of years or more, just like that other pony! It would be a fate worse than death! And all the other ponies would still be living in fear and oppression! I say we focus on fighting Tantalus.”

“Impossible,” Incendia interjected, “He’s much too powerful. There’s a reason we needed the power of a goddess to stop him from attacking.”

“I think I might have a plan,” Cerulean said, “but it’s dangerous, and might not end well for eve-”

They never got to find out the rest of Cerulean’s plan, because at that moment, the entire room shook. The metal groaned and creaked. “Oh... oh no. He miscalculated.”

“What do you mean?” Jigsaw said in alarm. “Miscalculated what?”

“Tantalus,” Incendia said quietly. “He’s already here.”

This time, Cerulean pressed her teleporter button. The world melted away, only to reform itself a moment later. They were standing in another slum, though in a completely different position. The sun was eclipsed behind the tower, and as such, the light from the moon was the only thing that illuminated the buildings. They stood still in the street in silence for a few moments until a massive roar shook the buildings.

“Run!” shouted Incendia.

The group took off towards the edge of the city, along with what seemed like most of the ponies in the city. Soon, a huge crowd was galloping towards the border. But after only a few minutes of this, Jigsaw stopped and let out a cry of anguish. A splitting pain had suddenly begun in his horn- pain so intense it froze him in his tracks.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Tiptoe said.

Her answer came in the form of green flames that suddenly burst into life around the border of the city. Several ponies that had been galloping towards the border couldn’t stop in time and ran right into the flames. The flames flashed in intensity for a brief moment before returning to their jade green color, leaving no trace of the ponies behind.

The group stared in horror at the scene unfolding before them. Ponies began running in every direction, and before long, the streets were mostly clear. “What do we do now?” Tiptoe said.

“I still have one idea,” Cerulean said. “The portal in Rubidium’s throne room might be able to get us out of here. I have no idea where it would send us, but you two managed to make it work before, so who knows?”

Jigsaw and Tiptoe weren’t afforded the opportunity to think it over. An enormously loud roar echoed out from somewhere on their left, and a glance revealed that Tantalus had taken off and was now flying toward the tower. A green corona surrounded him as he flew, leaving swirls and whorls of green mist in his wake. Underneath him, the scene was grisly. The green fire that was blazing at the city edges seemed to follow in his



wake, setting alight the shabby shacks and buildings beneath it. As he flew on, the fire lost its green lighting and became orange. Screaming could be heard coming from the burning sections of the city.

“We have to help them!” shouted Incendia. She began galloping towards the blazing fires to the east.

“Wait! Don’t run towards him!” Jigsaw shouted.

Incendia didn’t stop to respond. Jigsaw and Tiptoe shared a glance and made a snap decision—they took after her, Cerulean hot on their heels. They ran through the rubble of what had once been row after row of shabby huts, now reduced to flaming wreckage. As they were running, Tiptoe dodged around a metal beam and lost her footing. She tumbled to the ground. She recovered quickly, though, sitting up and shaking her head. She looked back to see what she had tripped over and screamed in horror. The body of a bright green earth pony was strewn over a small sheet of plastic.

Hearing the scream, Jigsaw looked back at Tiptoe only to see her staring in horror at the body of the earth pony. “Stop!” he shouted. His voice held such authority that even Incendia stopped. When she turned to see the scene behind her, her face fell. Jigsaw galloped over to the now sobbing Tiptoe.

“Tiptoe,” he began, “I know it’s awful. I know it’s sad. I’ve seen my fair share of dead ponies in the caves back home, but we can’t stop now.” He lifted Tiptoe’s up from the ground and towards him. “Look around. If we don’t move now, we’ll end up just like that. We may still have a chance to save them if we leave now.”

Tiptoe looked up and nodded slowly. She got to her feet and joined the main group.

“Are you alright, Tiptoe?” Incendia asked.

“I think so. I’ve just... I’ve never seen a dead pony before. Not in real life, and not like that. Seeing the Attenuator run through was awful, but this... this is something else.” Her expression slowly hardened, and she looked up into Incendia’s face. “They’re going to pay for this. Both of them.”

“That’s the spirit,” Incendia said, though she didn’t look entirely sure of herself. “Now, we have work to do.”

They galloped for a few more minutes through the rubble until they had reached the spot where Tantalus had taken off. The destruction was almost unimaginable. Ponies were running madly through the streets, many on fire. The sound of explosions and screaming drowned out the crackling of the fires that still raged all around them. Incendia’s horn began to glow, and suddenly Jigsaw understood why she had taken off towards the fire- she was extinguishing it! As her horn glowed more intensely, the flames around her grew smaller until they went out completely. It was costing her a great effort, however, as she could only extinguish a small area at once.

Jigsaw glanced nervously at Tantalus, who by this point was nearly at the tower. “Uh, Incendia?” he said, “Noble as this is, if we don’t leave now, he’s going to destroy the tower.”

“I know,” Incendia replied through gritted teeth. “That’s why you have to go on without me. Cerulean, you know what to do.”

“We’re not leaving you!” Jigsaw shouted over the roar of sound. “We’re all getting out o—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. Cerulean had pressed on her shoulder teleporter, and the three ponies had vanished, leaving Incendia behind.

The familiar lights and colors surrounded Jigsaw for a moment, but just before the normal moment of departure came, Jigsaw felt the familiar splitting pain in his horn, and the colored lights began to fly past with increasing speed and ferocity. The pressure on all sides of Jigsaw increased, far past the point of Incendia’s teleporter. Jigsaw was gasping for breath and unable to fill his lungs. The colors flying past began to slowly turn into the same bright green shade as Tantalus’ fires. Then, with one final, nearly unbearable compression, the world righted itself. Jigsaw has just enough time to see Cerulean and Tiptoe fall to the ground before he too slumped over, unconscious.

Rubidium paced around the Attenuator's room. He was fuming with rage—the leftover protection from the fragment should have slowed Tantalus more than it had! His only option now was to fight. His horn glowed blood red as the latches on the Attenuator's table undid themselves. The Attenuator's body slid off the table and fell to the floor in a heap. Rubidium stood on the platform and his horn glowed even brighter. The attenuation rods in the ceiling rotated in their sockets and once again the white beams of energy shot from them. Rubidium was flung backwards by the force of the energy flowing into him. He tumbled off the table and was forced into the far wall, the attenuation rods faithfully adjusting their angle to continue their stream uninterrupted. Rubidium writhed in pain on the ground of the chamber. Then, as quickly as it had began, the flow of energy ceased. Rubidium lay on the floor of a chamber, curled into a ball for a few moments, smoke rising off his horn. Then, with a moan of pain, he stood up and opened his eyes. His horn began to glow, and his eyes soon followed suit. He bellowed out a laugh, and a ring of red energy rippled out from his horn, shattering the windows of the chamber.

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Jigsaw woke to Tiptoe's shouts. He opened his eyes to see her standing above him, saying "Thank Celestia you're awake! We have to run!"

The scene around them was hellish. They were clearly in the upper areas of the city, with its tall, sleek buildings, but it looked as though they had been hit just as hard as the outer areas. The spires were almost all missing their points. Fires raged out of control. Buildings were crumbling from all sides, raining flaming wreckage down on the street, which now had massive cracks and leaked a prismatic fluid that shone with all the colors of the rainbow.

"How long was I out? What happened?" Jigsaw asked.

"Tantalus interfered with the teleportation," Cerulean said. "We're very close to the tower, however. When we get inside, we should be able to take the teleporters up. Those will be much harder to interfere with."

"He knows we're here?" Jigsaw asked, aghast.

“It would appear so, but I think he’s more worried about Rubidium at the moment.” Cerulean responded.

“What do you mean, ‘worried’? What does he have to be worried about?” Jigsaw asked.

His answer came in the form of a sudden blast of heat and light. The pain in his horn returned in full strength and it took everything he had to keep standing. “What in Equestria was that?” he asked.

“Look behind you.” Tiptoe said.

Jigsaw whipped his head around in time to see Tantalus bring down his massive fist on a ball of red light that was standing on a street less than 300 yards away. With the strike, another blast of light and heat hit, refreshing the pain in his horn.

He didn’t need any further convincing. Without another word, the three ponies took off in the opposite direction of the battling forces, towards the tower.

The tower was in bad shape. Large chunks of it were missing, and small waves of energy were pulsing from cords hanging from the severed rooms, causing them to twitch unsettlingly like tentacles.

The wind began to pick up behind them, and Tiptoe looked over her shoulder at the battle between Rubidium and Tantalus. Behind Tantalus, one of the taller buildings had been uprooted and was floating in a hazy green field over Rubidium. Tantalus raised his claws upward, then brought them down in a sweeping motion. The tower plowed into the ball of red light surrounding Rubidium and the familiar blast of energy was released, though it seemed to be magnified tenfold with the force of the impact.

“Get behind a building!” Tiptoe shouted in horror as a wave of fiery debris flew through the air towards them. Jigsaw and Tiptoe dived into a side alley, but Cerulean wasn’t as fast on her hooves. A flying shard of metal struck her in the side as she turned to jump into the alleyway, and she landed inside in a heap and let out a cry of pain.

Tiptoe gasped and ran over to her. The shard of metal was embedded so deep in her midsection that it was protruding from the other side. Blood was gouting from both sides of the wound, and Cerulean was giving horrific gasping sobs. The color was rapidly draining away from her blue coat.

The battlefield seemed to have grown calm, for the time being. The only sounds that could be heard were the crumbling of far-off buildings and the crackling of burning fires.

“Don’t worry about this!” Tiptoe said through her tears. “It’s all going to be alright. We can make it through this! Just don’t die! For the love of Luna, don’t die!” Tiptoe was crying now too. Blood was beginning to pool under Cerulean, matting her fur.

Cerulean looked up at Tiptoe and took a deep, wheezing breath to control her gasping. “At the lobby teleporter... enter ‘six two four four two’ and select the green setting. It will take you where you need to go.” She coughed, and bright crimson blood splattered out of her mouth and onto the wall next to her. With what was supreme effort on her part, she looked up and whispered two words to Tiptoe.

“Good... luck.”

With that, her head fell to the ground. The blood stopped spurting out of the wound and slowed to a trickle.

Tiptoe’s sobbing grew more intense and she threw her front legs around Cerulean’s body. Jigsaw approached and placed his head on Tiptoe’s. His horn glowed with a soft blue light, and Cerulean’s eyelids slid shut.

“We have to go now, or her sacrifice will have been in vain.” Jigsaw said, barely audible over the sounds of collapsing rubble outside.

Tiptoe stood up and nodded, though her eyes didn’t dry.

Jigsaw peered around the corner of the alleyway and, seeing it was clear, signed for Tiptoe to keep following him. Together, they galloped out into the street and headed towards the tower. However, the calm didn’t last long. They were only a few yards out from the entrance when the sharp pain in Jigsaw’s horn returned and a beam of red light shot out from behind them.

Jigsaw chose to ignore it. They were rapidly approaching the doors to the tower now. With one final sprint, they barrelled through the remains of the ornate doors and into the lobby.

Once inside, Jigsaw didn't waste any time. His horn began to glow with a blue light and the holographic display burst into life above the teleporter. He entered in the code Cerulean had said and soon a green light was blazing above the platform.

"Get on!" Jigsaw called, stepping onto the platform. Tiptoe complied, and the two vanished with a flash of light.

A moment later, they appeared in a dark, stone hallway that was shaking as though it was in an earthquake. Dust was crumbling from the walls with every tremor. "Where are we?" Tiptoe shouted over the muffled sounds of explosions and the rumbling of the walls.

Jigsaw looked around and saw something familiar- A large, ornately carved stone doorway, symbols glowing almost blindingly white.

"It's the doorway to the fragment of Celestia!" Jigsaw shouted to Tiptoe.

"Why would Cerulean send us here?"

"She said it would take us where we needed to be... What if we're supposed to take the fragment with us? To stop Tantalus from getting his claws on it?"

"Are you insane?" Tiptoe shouted. "How would we even take it with us?"

"I don't know!" replied Jigsaw. "But we have to try something! Why else would she have sent us here?"

Jigsaw approached the door, and the symbols on it began to flow and transform themselves into new orientations. The sun and moon insignia on the door blazed golden, and the door slid open. Jigsaw entered cautiously, his eyes trained on the object in the center of the room.

The fragment of Celestia in the center of the room seemed to have swollen to twice the size it was when Jigsaw had seen it before. It still had the appearance of a miniature sun, but it was now cycling through colors. The golden-yellow glow it normally had was being interrupted by flashes of green and red. Jigsaw's horn began to buzz with the raw power of the fragment. He approached it slowly and cautiously, trying to think how he could transport it off the platform it was on. He attempted to lift it with magic, but the buzzing in his horn simply got more intense, and the miniature sun got more agitated, flashing red and green at an even greater speed. Experimentally, Jigsaw reached out a hoof and lightly tapped the surface of the sphere. To his surprise, there was no pain. It felt soft and pleasantly warm. Jigsaw then lowered his horn and touched the point of it to the sphere.

A high-pitched whining began to emanate from the center of the room and the buzzing in Jigsaw's horn grew in intensity until he could barely stand it. He attempted to wrench his horn away from the sphere, but it was impossible.

"Jigsaw!" Tiptoe shouted. She ran towards him, but when she got to the doorway, some invisible barrier stopped her from entering. The air in front of her seemed to ripple like the surface of a pool. She threw herself into it nonetheless, attempting to break through to Jigsaw, who was now screaming. The sphere was growing brighter and brighter.

Then, with a sudden *whoosh* of air and final flash of golden light, the fragment disappeared. The barrier in front of the door vanished and Tiptoe tumbled in. Jigsaw, miraculously, was still standing. His horn had taken on the appearance of the sphere- swirling pools of golden light flowed along its length.

"Jigsaw! Are you okay? What happened to the fragment?" Tiptoe said.

"I'm... I'm fine, Tiptoe. I'm not sure what happened. I think... I think the fragment's entered into me, somehow."

"What?" Tiptoe said in shock. "How do you know?"

"I can feel it. I don't really know how to describe it. It's like a buzzing sensation in my horn." As he spoke, the golden light faded from his horn,

and darkness returned to the room. Jigsaw instinctively lit his horn, flooding the room with cool, blue light.

“Does this mean you have the powers of the sphere now?” Tiptoe said.  
“Can you use them to beat Tantalus?”

Jigsaw cocked his head to one side. “No, Tiptoe, it’s not like that. It’s not something I can draw upon. It’s just... there. I think this is what the ability to Attenuate is for. I think it’s for transporting the fragments... to bring them back together.”

The end of his sentence was punctuated with a massive blast that nearly shook them off their hooves.

“We need to get out of here, at any rate,” Jigsaw said. “Get to the elevator!”

They quickly galloped through the hallway to the glass elevator. The platform was resting slightly off-level at the bottom of the tube. Jigsaw stepped on and pressed one of the smooth buttons on the side of the platform. Nothing happened.

“Okay, hold on,” Jigsaw said as he lit his horn.

The platform was surrounded by a blue aura and began to shoot up the tube. Fortunately, the tube appeared to be intact, and after a few minutes of rising rapidly, they reached the throne room. The view from the windows were obscured by the smoke that was billowing up from the ruins of the city below. Jigsaw and Tiptoe quickly crossed the room and stood on the platform where their Stalliongrad journey had begun. With the familiar golden light, the grey rock melted into crystal and opened like a gaping mouth and swallowed up the two ponies.

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The red glow had almost completely vacated Rubidium and Tantalus raised his claw and brought it smashing down on top of him again. His coat was turning darker and lines and creases had begun appearing on his face. It was only a matter of time now.



Tantalus gathered as much energy as he could and let out a torrent of green flames from his reptilian snout. He felt the protection of the shield give way and in a final burst of red light, it was over.

Tantalus looked down at the smoldering pile of ashes on the ground in front of him and spoke in a voice that shook the rubble at his feet.

**“That was for Rarity.”**

# Chapter 15

Tantalus surveyed the burning wreckage of the city. He had finally achieved his goal, his revenge on Rubidium, but it still didn't help the rage. He could still feel it boiling away inside him, barely controlled by the sheer effort of his will.

Then, he doubled over in pain. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before, as though part of him was being ripped out from the inside. He knew what it was. The fragment of Celestia had been absorbed, and it had left the city. The rage was uncontrollable. He opened his mouth wide, and green light seemed to grow from deep inside his throat. For just an instant, Tantalus tried to suppress it, but he knew it was hopeless. The light erupted out in a funnel of magical energy of nearly inconceivable power. It expanded in all directions, burrowing deep into the earth, up into the sky, and out in every direction, obliterating all in its path.

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Jigsaw and Tiptoe tumbled through the chaotic funnel of light and sound. The crystalline walls of the tunnel flew past the two ponies, coming close to collision but never actually touching them. After several minutes of being tossed through twists, turns, and bends in the tunnel, they were spit out of another platform in an unfamiliar room.

The rotting wooden walls had begun to buckle under the strain of an unknown load above them, making the room's age clear. In one corner of the room, a steady trickle of water flowed from a large crack in the ceiling. The room was poorly lit by several small, blue lights hanging haphazardly on the walls. They sparked feebly in an attempt at greater brilliance as Tiptoe and Jigsaw picked themselves off the ground and began to take their bearings.

The pad was located in the back left corner of the room. It had a low ceiling- perhaps only a yard above Jigsaw's head. What was once a table lay in the center of the room. One leg had broken in two, causing one corner of the table to rest on the wooden floor. Scraps of green fabric could still be seen clinging to the surface of the table, though it was almost

entirely bare. The teleportation platform itself was also in abysmal condition. Large cracks and seams ran through it, occasionally sending out sparks of blue light. Jigsaw was surprised they had even managed to come through it. In general, the room appeared to be in far worse condition than even most ruins they had seen.

“Are you alright?” Jigsaw asked. He could only just see the outline of Tiptoe on his left through the dim light.

“I’m okay,” she replied, though her voice was shaky. “Where are we? What is this place?”

“I don’t know,” Jigsaw replied. They looked around the room, their eyes beginning to adjust to the gloom. At the opposite end of the room was a door with what were once small glass windows, though the glass had long since fallen away.

“Jigsaw, can you light your horn?” Tiptoe inquired. Jigsaw obliged, his horn igniting with a brilliant blue light, brightly illuminating the rather small room. The lights on the wall flicked again in response to the magical energy, though now they were barely visible.

“I think we should get out of here,” Jigsaw said nervously, looking towards the cracks in the ancient wood above them. Tiptoe nodded and they began to canter towards the door. The floor creaked with every step they took, bending and buckling under their weight. Tiptoe began to flutter her wings slightly in an attempt to keep her weight off the floorboards. Fortunately, they reached the other side of the room without incident. When they reached the door, Jigsaw pushed against it to open it for a moment, then stepped back.

“Hold on,” he said, “there’s some kind of protection around this door.”

“What kind?” asked Tiptoe.

“I’m not sure. It was very faint, but it’s there. Hold on.”

The light from his horn faded to a small blue pinprick as he touched it to the seam where the door met the wall. He began to run it along the edges of

the door, repeating this several times. When he was done, he stepped away and relit his horn.

“I can’t tell what it’s supposed to be. It’s very, very weak. I think it was placed here before the fall, and hasn’t held up well since then. Like most of this place,” he added as an afterthought.

“So, it’s safe to go through?” Tiptoe asked.

“It’s safe,” Jigsaw confirmed, “but it might not be pleasant. I have a feeling it was meant to keep people out.”

“... or in,” Tiptoe added. Jigsaw pushed the door open.

Beyond the door was another very dismal-looking hallway. It was pitch black, and the wood had buckled and bent so much from water damage that it seemed to meander around corners. Sections of the wall had fallen in altogether, and a pile of debris lined up along the wall where wood paneling had once been.

Jigsaw began to walk through the doorway. Immediately, he felt a strange buzzing in his horn and a pressure trying to force him back the way he came. He struggled forward as the feeling became more intense. It was as if somepony had stretched a sheet of clear plastic over the doorway, and he had to force his way through. The air around him began to grow hot. Then, just when he thought he wouldn’t be able to get through, the pressure released and he tumbled forward, hitting the wall at the opposite end of the hallway.

He stood up and shook himself. “You can come through, but it can be pretty uncomfortable,” he said.

Tiptoe nodded and pushed against the invisible barrier in the doorway. From this angle Jigsaw could just barely make out a golden yellow sheen that seemed to be pressing against the pegasus. But after a few moments of struggling, it broke and Tiptoe began to fall forward. Jigsaw’s horn flared, and a blue nimbus appeared around Tiptoe, providing enough support for her to recover from her fall and stand upright.

“Thanks,” she said.

Jigsaw nodded, and they began their slow trot into the gloom of the hallway. After a few minutes of winding darkness, they came across a heavy metal door that seemed quite at odds with the purely wooden aesthetic they had seen so far. They pushed it open with an ear-splitting *screech* and entered into the room beyond.

The room was in a similar state of disrepair, though it seemed to be made of more modern materials. Crumbling plaster sloughed off the walls, revealing an iron framework beneath, and the same faint, blue lights from the portal room lined the walls. It was small and square, with a still relatively intact desk in the center. Jigsaw took a step towards it when Tiptoe spoke behind him. "Look at the door."

Jigsaw turned to look at it, and his confusion grew. On the metallic surface of the door was a very large scorch mark- as if something had been burned off the door. Inspecting it closer, Jigsaw found that the edges were jagged and rough and that the mark was actually a crater. It was as if a section of the door had been melted off.

"What happened here?" Jigsaw asked, more to himself than Tiptoe. There was nothing at the base of the door, as one would expect if the metal had been melted off. It was simply gone.

Jigsaw looked around the room again. On the two walls on either side were smaller, wooden doors, also with scorched gouges cut out of them. One was missing its entire bottom half.

"I don't like it here," Tiptoe said nervously, looking up at the heavily cracked ceiling. "Wherever we are, I don't think it's safe."

"I think you're right," Jigsaw said, "but how are we supposed to find our way out of here?"

"I have no idea. Maybe there's something in the desk that can help," Tiptoe replied.

Together, they made their way over to the desk. Jigsaw's horn flared with light and the desk drawers pulled themselves out and floated above the desk in a haze of blue light. In unison, they all upturned themselves and

dumped their contents on to the desk. Jigsaw was disappointed in the results. Almost everything in the desk had crumbled to dust, with only a few scraps of paper remaining. But, just when he was about to drop the drawers in dismay, a lone, intact sheet of paper floated down to land upon the pile of scraps. Jigsaw carelessly tossed the floating drawers aside and picked up the sheet.

“What does it say?” Tiptoe asked, taking off to hover above Jigsaw so as to get a better look at the document.

Emblazoned in the upper left corner was the sun-and-moon insignia, next to strings of Old World writing. “I think it says... ‘instructions’, or possibly ‘protocols’. It’s a set of directions for what to do in an emergency. I think... I think this is some kind of emergency bunker or war room.”

“War room?” Tiptoe said. “You mean, from the Grand Cataclysm?”

“I don’t know, it doesn’t say anything about what emergency... but I think I can use it to find our way back. It says ‘corridor three has surface access and should be blocked during lockdown’.”

“Which one is corridor three?” Tiptoe asked.

The room shook violently. Jigsaw and Tiptoe lost their balance and slammed into the ground. The iron bars began to buckle and snap, groaning like an ancient beast waking from a long slumber. Dirt began to pour in from the cracks in the walls, and the ceiling slipped a few inches lower. The blue lights flickered out.

“Run!” shouted Jigsaw, and began galloping towards the door to his right. Tiptoe quickly followed, and they blasted through the aging door and flew down the hallway. With a jerk that nearly knocked Jigsaw off his feet, the room they had just left collapsed. A wave of dust blew past him, obscuring his vision. Tiptoe took off and flew ahead of him, flapping her wings hard. The dust began to clear, and Jigsaw saw something that almost made him laugh with relief- a stone stairwell that ascended into darkness above them. As they began running up the stairs, however, Jigsaw noticed something was off- his horn was positively humming with magical energy.

Then, a few steps farther up, a sharp pain shot from his horn and through his left side, causing him to collapse in pain.

Tiptoe turned quickly in midair and alighted next to Jigsaw, who was now lying on the steps, convulsing, as though he was having some kind of fit. Then, his horn erupted with light, but not the familiar blue light. Golden light streamed out of the tip of his horn, thick and warm, floating in the air above them. An ear-splitting *bang* sounded from somewhere above them, and a rock about twice the size of Tiptoe came tumbling down from farther up the staircase. Tiptoe shoved Jigsaw to the side of the wall and pressed herself against it. The boulder tumbled past them, missing by only a few feet. Then, with another ground-shaking rumble, a sound like an explosion came from overhead. Tiptoe squinted up the staircase in the light cast by the strange swirling magical tendrils, which now seemed to be swirling even faster. What she saw caused her to scream in terror.

Rapidly tumbling down the stairs was a jumbled mash of metal beams, stone, and wood. Tiptoe threw herself over Jigsaw's body in an attempt to shield him from the worst of the onslaught and braced herself.

Then, just before impact, the swirling tendril of light suddenly coalesced. Tiptoe looked up in awe to see what looked like a gigantic sun blazing over her head before its brilliance forced her to look away. The rumbling of the rocks had ceased, and they appeared to be frozen mere inches away from her face. Then, with another blinding flash, the sun sent out a burst of heat. It was unlike anything Tiptoe had ever experienced. She let out another cry of pain and tightened her hold against Jigsaw. Then, just when she thought she might sear, the heat and light faded to darkness. She opened her eyes. They were huddled over in the center of a ring of scorched earth about thirty feet in diameter. Tiptoe didn't have time to consider the strangeness of the scenario, however. With one final shudder, she released Jigsaw and drifted into unconsciousness.

Chapter 16

The first thing Jigsaw noticed was the pounding in his head. The pain radiated out from the base of his horn, causing him to raise a hoof to his head and massage it gingerly. As soon as he touched his head, however, the pain spiked. He let out a yelp and opened his eyes. He was lying in what appeared to be a circle of scorched ground. He slowly pushed himself up on his haunches, blinking his eyes to clear his vision. Even the smallest movement caused him to wince with pain. A light layer of snow coated the ground just outside the circle, with a grove of evergreen trees growing not far beyond. On the horizon, barely visible over the glare of the sun, was a flickering green light. Jigsaw's horn hummed for a moment, then the glow was gone. Jigsaw squinted at the spot where the glow had been when he heard a rustle behind him. He whipped around in alarm, but was relieved to see that it was only Tiptoe. She was lying on her side, facing away from him. Jigsaw got up and trotted over to her in concern. Her mane seemed to be singed, but she appeared otherwise uninjured. Jigsaw then turned his attention to the charred ring around them. It appeared to be about twenty feet in diameter. Jigsaw scuffed at the ground with his hoof, revealing bare earth under the layer of soot. He tried to think back to the last thing he remembered- doubling over in pain on the staircase. How had he gotten here? And why did his head hurt so bad? He decided the only thing for him to do was to try and wake Tiptoe up.

Tiptoe opened her eyes slowly, not quite understanding what she was seeing. Then, as understanding rushed back to her, she jumped back on to her feet and looked around wildly. She was relieved to see a rather startled looking Jigsaw standing next to her. She threw her hooves around him and hugged him tightly. Jigsaw bit his lip to stop from yelling out in pain.

"I'm glad to see you too," Jigsaw said, obviously bemused, "but what exactly is going on?"

Tiptoe let go of Jigsaw and said, "You don't remember?"

"The last thing I remember, we were climbing up a staircase when I got this horrible pain in my horn. Next thing I knew, I woke up here."

Tiptoe nodded. "I suppose that makes sense. You had some kind of fit on the stairs, and the roof caved in up ahead. I tried to get you out but I couldn't move you nearly fast enough. Then this strange light came out of your horn. It looked like that sun symbol we've seen before."

"Sun symbol?" Jigsaw said. "Do you think it could have anything to do with the fragment of Celestia?"

"It must," replied Tiptoe. "What else could it have been?"

"I think- I think it was trying to protect me, since I'm carrying it. I can't quite tell, but I get certain feelings from it. They're really vague and unclear, but I think that was a sort of last resort to keep me safe and you just got taken along for the ride."

Tiptoe thought this over for a moment before breaking out in a smile. "So does this mean we can't be killed? It's going to keep us safe!"

Jigsaw shook his head gravely. "No. It's going to try. I don't know that it will always succeed, and even if it can, I don't think my body can handle it. Whatever it did back in that staircase nearly took me out for good.

Tiptoe's smile gradually vanished as she remembered Jigsaw convulsing on the stairs, his eyes rolling back into his head.

They sat in silence for a time after that, mulling over the information. A chill wind picked up, slowly beginning to blow away the soot and re-cover the area in snow. The two ponies began to shiver.

"Come on," Jigsaw said, "we should go into the trees. At least we'd be sheltered from the wind." Tiptoe nodded, but still sat on the ground, staring out at the moon, large, dull, and silvery-gray in the sky. Tears began welling up in her eyes. Jigsaw made his way over to her.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Tiptoe blinked, tears running silently down her face.

“Doesn’t it ever overwhelm you?” she asked quietly. “Don’t you ever just want to give up?”

Jigsaw didn’t really know how to react. “What do you mean?”

“I mean we just saw an entire city full of innocent ponies die. Ponies we knew! Because of us!” The tears were coming faster now.

“We don’t know that it was because of us,” Jigsaw responded, trying to sound reassuring.

“Oh, really?” Tiptoe’s voice became harsher. “You think it was just *chance* that Tantalus showed up when he did? That he managed to get into the city after ten thousand years of being held back?”

“Tiptoe, I don-” Jigsaw began, but Tiptoe cut him off.

“I don’t want to hear what you don’t know! I want to hear some answers for once! What are these fragments for? Why are we trying to find them? Why aren’t we trying to find home? Don’t you care about anyone back there?”

She began sobbing, her tears falling onto the mixture of soot and snow at her feet.

Jigsaw was stung by Tiptoe’s remarks, but he stayed calm.

“Tiptoe, you know that isn’t fair. Of course I care. Do you think I wanted this... this thing to embed itself inside me and nearly kill me? No, I didn’t. I don’t have any more choice in this than you do. The only thing I can think to do is keep looking for these fragments. Maybe we can use them to get revenge on Tantalus for killing all those ponies. I don’t have all the answers. But I do know that we can’t give up. Incendia wouldn’t have wanted that.”

Tiptoe took a deep, shuddering breath to steady herself. The tears stopped.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just... what happened back there was so terrible, and we’re just expected to keep going, and we don’t even know where we’re supposed to go! It’s all so insane!”

“You’re telling me. The most exciting part of my day used to be going to fix a leaky pipe.” Jigsaw said, a small smile beginning to tug at the sides of his mouth.

Tiptoe didn’t smile, but instead flung herself around Jigsaw again. This time, Jigsaw reciprocated by nuzzling Tiptoe’s neck. “We’ll make it through this. We managed to escape everything thrown at us so far, right?”

Tiptoe didn’t respond, but dug her face into Jigsaw’s mane. Jigsaw exhaled sharply from the pain of the added weight.

“Is something wrong?” Tiptoe asked concernedly.

“I’m still pretty sore from the whole ordeal.”

Tiptoe released Jigsaw and smiled despite herself.

“What do we do next?” she asked, turning on the spot to examine her surroundings. “I have no idea where we are. Which direction should we go?”

Jigsaw opened his mouth to answer when suddenly, he froze. Tiptoe saw his eyes gloss over as if he had somehow fallen asleep while standing upright. Just when she was about to say something, he snapped out of it, his eyes becoming sharp and alert.

“Northeast,” he said. “We need to go northeast.”

Tiptoe looked at Jigsaw quizzically. “What was that about?”

“What was what about?”

“You froze for a bit when I asked you.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t freeze,” Jigsaw replied, obviously confused.

“You did!” Tiptoe insisted. “You stopped talking and your eyes glossed over, then you sort of snapped out of it and said we should go northeast.”

“Strange,” Jigsaw said. “I feel fine. I just definitely think we should go northeast.”

“Well, I suppose we don’t have any other leads.” Tiptoe sounded uneasy.

Jigsaw nodded and stretched, attempting fruitlessly to work out some of the soreness that still pervaded his muscles.

Together, they set off on hoof into the grove of trees.

The tall evergreens provided shelter from the chilly wind, at the cost of blocking out what little light the far-off sun and dull moon provided. Jigsaw lit his horn, though it took rather more effort than he was used to. The small light given off caused strange, spindly shadows to be cast from the tree branches, causing the two ponies to occasionally jump at what they perceived as something stalking right next to them. Invariably, they would let out a nervous chuckle, then continue down the path, eyes still flitting from side to side.

Mercifully, though, they made it through the copse without encountering anything worse than low branches. However, when they emerged from the thick group of trees, the wind was stronger and more bitter than ever, and the snow was several inches deeper. The gale blew so hard that Jigsaw almost had to yell to be heard over it.

“I think we should camp out in the forest until the wind dies down! I don’t think we could last very long out here!”

Tiptoe shouted a word of agreement and they quickly turned back into the dense grove of trees. Though they were now protected from the wind, they still shivered bitterly, having lost any body heat that the hike through the copse had given them.

They walked a small ways farther into the trees, coming across a small area that was large enough for a fire. Jigsaw began gathering fallen twigs and other refuse from the forest floor, piling it in the center of the clearing. When he felt that the firepit was satisfactory, he leaned his head down and held the tip of his horn an inch away of some of the bark he had stripped from branches to use as kindling. A small spark shot from his horn and

struck the bark, igniting it. He blew gently on the smoldering chunk of wood, until flames sprang up and began to consume the pile of twigs.

The two ponies huddled around the fire, soaking up the heat and the light. Finally comfortable, they let the exhaustion of their ordeal wash over them, and they curled up on the ground and fell asleep.

Chapter 17

The sun beat down on the rough, featureless stone, as it had for the last ten thousand years. Once, it had been covered in a thick layer of soil, but over time, it had dried and turned to dust. The spot hadn't seen activity since. Until today, that is. The air seemed to shimmer with a light even brighter than the pervading sunshine, and with a sharp crack, a pony stumbled seemingly out of nowhere and collapsed onto the parched rock.

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By the time Jigsaw woke up, Tiptoe had already been up for quite some time. The fire was burning weakly in the fire pit—Tiptoe obviously didn't know much about building a fire. Jigsaw stood up and stretched, shaking off bits of forest debris. Tiptoe turned her head and smiled. She was sitting on her haunches near the fire, attempting to take the edge off the cold. Jigsaw trotted over to her and sat down beside her.

"How long have you been up?" Jigsaw asked, blinking the sleep out of his eyes.

"A few hours, I suppose. I didn't sleep very well. Too cold," she said.

"Did you find anything to eat?"

"No. The only thing in this forest, as far as I can tell, are trees. No fruit anywhere."

"That's too bad. I'm starving," Jigsaw said. He cast his gaze around the small clearing. It appeared completely unchanged from the night before, save the multiple pairs of hoofprints that now covered the ground. Jigsaw sighed and stood up.

"I suppose we should keep going. Maybe we'll find something to eat along the way."

Tiptoe remained sitting, staring into the weakly sputtering fire for a few moments. Then, with a resigned sigh, she stood up. She stretched out her wings out to their full length. Jigsaw almost gasped. He had forgotten just how large Tiptoe seemed to be when she wanted to.

“I’m going to fly up and see if there’s anything interesting from above.”

“Alright,” Jigsaw conceded. Tiptoe flapped her powerful wings down once. The resulting blast of air blew burning embers from the fire out in all directions and nearly knocked Jigsaw over. The embers, fortunately, landed in the clearing, which was devoid of flammable material. Jigsaw chuckled to himself as he turned to put out the smoldering bits of wood that was littered around the fire pit. Tiptoe had come so far from the scared little pony in the caves.

Eventually, the fire was out, and the only light that streamed through was the eerie moonlight from above and the weak sunlight. Jigsaw looked up. Tiptoe was high overhead, flying in a wide figure 8. Jigsaw turned his head back towards the treeline. He stepped out into the weak ray of sunlight that was eking it’s way through the trees. Jigsaw was surprised to find that even though the sun was only barely visible over the horizon, the ray of light warmed him more completely than the fire had.

Tiptoe swooped down and alighted next to Jigsaw. She looked somewhat concerned.

“What’s wrong?” Jigsaw asked.

“There’s a mountain. A very large one, directly in our way,” Tiptoe said, flatly.

Jigsaw looked stunned. “We didn’t see a mountain yesterday! How could one just have appeared?”

“I have no idea, but how are we going to get around it?” Tiptoe asked.

“Could you carry me?” Jigsaw asked.

“Over a *mountain*?” Tiptoe said incredulously. “No, I don’t think I could do that. I doubt I could even get over it by myself.”

“How wide is the base?” asked Jigsaw. “Could we just wa—” he froze mid-sentence. His eyes glazed over again, though this time, Tiptoe could almost see a dull, white light emanating from inside them. As before, it only lasted a moment, before Jigsaw blinked and continued talking. “—lk around it? Actually...on second thought, I don’t think we should go around it. Something tells me that what we need is on top. We should climb-.”

He saw Tiptoe’s frightened expression and cut himself off. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“You froze again, but this time seemed different. Your eyes glowed,” Tiptoe said, visibly concerned.

“My eyes glowed?” asked Jigsaw, though he sounded more interested than frightened.

“Just a little,” said Tiptoe, “and only for a second.”

“What do you think it could mean?” Jigsaw asked. “Do you think it has anything to do with yesterday?”

“It must,” agreed Tiptoe. “What else could it be?”

“Should we do anything about it?” Tiptoe said.

“I...I don’t think so. Something tells me it’s okay; that it’s a good thing. Call it intuition I suppose.”

“Or I could call it the fragment of Celestia living in your horn.” Tiptoe said, a smile beginning to creep across her face.

“What, you don’t trust me? When have I ever led you astray before?” Jigsaw said, in a theatrically exaggerated voice. They began to laugh.

“I’d forgotten how good it feels to laugh,” Tiptoe said, the good mood fading as quickly as it came.

Jigsaw nodded somberly.



“Shall we make our way out?” Tiptoe asked.

“I suppose so. Climbing that mountain won’t be easy.” Jigsaw said.

~~~

The pony that had collapsed on the sun-scorched earth twitched and opened her eyes. Immediately, she knew she was in danger. She sprang to her feet, surprisingly energetic for somepony who had been unconscious just a few moments before. The sun was about a quarter of the way up the sky in the west- she knew that if the teleporter had taken her even a few miles farther, she wouldn’t have lasted as long as she had. Even now, her throat was dry, and she could tell she had stopped sweating. She had to get out of there, now.

She glanced over to her shoulder, at the teleporter. It was flashing red. Red meant danger. After the teleporter was used, it required a certain amount of recharging before it could be used again. However, it did have an emergency backup supply for an emergency situation, and this definitely qualified. The only problem was the location was impossible to specify. Before, she hadn’t cared where she ended up, so long as it wasn’t there. But at least she had been able to specify that she wanted to be somewhere survivable—at least for a little while. If she teleported now, she’d have no control.

She decided. She turned her head to her shoulder and pressed the flashing red button. With a sound like a small explosion, she disappeared from the desert.

She reappeared an instant later on a steep cliff-side, and promptly lost her balance. She tumbled head-over-hoof down the steep incline until she came to rest on something hard.

Her head was pounding- she had hit it on a rock on the way down. She weakly lifted her head to look at her shoulder. The screen of the teleporter had been smashed. She attempted to stand up, only to fall back down. The ground was slippery. For a moment, she was confused. Then, she connected the pieces. She was lying on ice.

She almost let out a cry of joy. She stood up, more carefully this time, ignoring the pounding in her head, and slowly made her way over to the

shoreline. Once there, her horn began to grow a deep orange, and she bent down to touch it to the ice. A puddle of water began to form, from which she drank greedily. She drank for several minutes before she stopped herself and sat by the side of the frozen river. She was going to be alright.

It was then that Incendia looked up. What she saw almost made her pass out again.

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Tiptoe flew above the snow, keeping pace with Jigsaw's slow process through the heavy drifts. Sue couldn't help but feel sorry for him, but the feeling of the air beneath her wings was too great for her to pass up. It helped take her mind off the horrible events that have happened in the last few days.

Jigsaw, on the other hand, was trying to analyze everything that had happened. It was how he had always dealt with tragedy in the past—logically, coldly, and detached. It was the only way he knew.

Antimony had been the worst. His thoughts always strayed to her when he thought of the tragedies of the last few days.

He had been so innocent back then. He was fresh out of school, and together, they were considered some of the most promising engineers of their time. The accident had been such a shock to him. He didn't know how to handle it—it was as though his entire life had crumbled out from beneath him. He had buried himself in his work, avoiding the pain. It had had its uses, he found. He accomplished many great things—a new pumping system that was over twice as effective as the old one had been chief among them. He never quite recovered emotionally, however. He improved with time, true. But he never quite regained that easygoing, carefree personality he had had before the accident.

Not until Tiptoe, anyway. When he was with her, Jigsaw finally began to come out of his shell. He began making jokes again. The day-to-day minutia of daily life in a cave had become far less tedious. He was becoming like he had been when Antimony was still alive.

At first, this terrified Jigsaw. He didn't want to open himself up to any other ponies ever again; not at that level, anyway. It wasn't until that night in the bunker that he decided to take the chance and open up to Tiptoe.

Jigsaw looked up at her silhouette far above and a thousand thoughts shot through his mind. *"Did I make the right choice? Am I setting myself up for another loss? Is this fair to her?"*

He looked towards the mountain that loomed ever closer. He couldn't allow himself to think like that, not now, not when so much was resting on their shoulders. He had made his choice. So had she.

Still, the fear was there.

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Several hours later, Incendia sat at the base of a large, frozen waterfall. It appeared to have been frozen instantly—the ice appeared as if it cascaded over the rock and crashed into the river below. Far ahead, jutting out over a narrow precipice, the spire of a tower was visible. She simply stared up at it. She had never seen anything so impressive. She had seen towers back in Stalliongrad, but those had mostly been built for functionality. Or for the wealthy to lord over the less well-off ponies.

This caused Incendia to look back down. The thoughts of Stalliongrad filled her mind with conflicting emotions.

Technically, what she had fought for her whole life was complete. Rubidium was dead. It wasn't at all how she wanted it, though.

Her thoughts turned towards her last moments in Stalliongrad. She had split up from the group in the rubble of the outer city and turned her attention to the injured ponies that littered the streets. Her efforts to help were almost always stymied, however, by the sheer insanity around her. Ponies galloped through the streets at random, not caring who or what they ran down.

Eventually, she realized it was futile. Her only hope was to meet up with Tiptoe, Jigsaw, and Cerulean. She set her teleporter to take her to the

nearest safehouse to the tower, she slammed the button. She just hoped the building was still standing.

It wasn't. Luckily, it had been almost totally leveled, so she only fell a few feet onto a flat piece of stone. That was the least of her problems. Clearly visible, only about a quarter mile away, were Tantalus and Rubidium. They were locked in viscous combat, flashes of red and green light radiating out with every blow. She could feel the magic in the air. It made her sick to her stomach.

Then it happened. With one mighty blast, Tantalus managed to knock Rubidium to the pavement. With one final, crushing blow, Rubidium was extinguished. Incendia felt it. It was like her very bones wanted to escape the magic in the air. It wasn't right.

Tantalus let out a mighty roar, and green fire began to fly out in all directions. Incendia barely had time to react. She set her teleporter to random and smashed it, hoping it would take her somewhere far away.

Looking up at the dark, icy castle, it certainly had.

Something flitted by at the corner of her vision. Incendia whipped her head around to see what had caused it, but saw nothing. Then the pain came. Her head still pounded from her tumble down the mountainside. She lowered her head and closed her eyes until the pain subsided. When she opened them again, she caught sight of her reflection in the ice.

What she saw frightened her. She looked on the verge of death. Her normally sleek, almost mirror-shined black coat as ruffled and unkempt. Her flank had several deep lacerations, each with a mixture of dry and fresh blood on them. What frightened her most, though, was her mane. It was singed. That should be impossible. She was entirely immune to fire.

"But not the green fire," she realized.

Again, the motion in the corner of her eye. This time, she moved her head more slowly to avoid the shooting pain. A wisp of some silvery substance disappeared beyond a rocky outcropping on the other side of the frozen river. Slowly, cautiously, Incendia got up and began to make her way towards the other side, when she heard a faint sound coming from her left.

She turned to look, and to her delight, she saw two ponies galloping towards her across the frozen river.

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Tiptoe spotted her before Jigsaw did. A small black dot at the foot of the waterfall. They had found the frozen river relatively quickly—for whatever reason, it was almost devoid of snow, and despite the slippery surface, progress across it was much faster than through the heavy snow. Tiptoe swooped down to the surface of the ice and slid into place next to Jigsaw.

“You’re not going to believe who I saw!” Tiptoe said, the words tumbling over each other in her excitement.

“What? You saw someone out here?” asked Jigsaw. “Who?”

“I think it was Incendia!” Tiptoe said.

“Where?” Jigsaw said, hardly believing his ears.

“The base of the waterfall!”

Jigsaw didn’t need to hear any more. He took off galloping in the direction of the icy wall, Tiptoe hot on his heels.

# Chapter 18

Incendia took a few lumbering steps towards the two rapidly approaching shapes, but she stumbled and stopped only a few feet from her starting place. Tiptoe, in contrast, flew as fast as her wings could carry her, nearly crashing into the ground in front of her.

“Incendia!” Tiptoe shouted. “I can’t believe it’s you! You’re alright! We never tho-” she stopped halfway through her sentence as she began to process Incendia’s appearance. She looked to be on death’s doorstep. Her formerly black, shiny coat was ruffled and browned. A disturbingly large gash on her flank was surrounded by dried blood. A fresh cut above her eye sent scarlet down the side of her face. Despite all this, however, she stood tall, and a broad smile played across her face. When she spoke, her voice was strong and clear.

“It’s good to see you too, Tiptoe.”

It was at this moment that Jigsaw came scrambling up to join them, his footing precarious on the icy soil.

“It’s really you,” he said, his eyes wide. “How did you escape? And... and what happened to you?”

Incendia swayed on her feet for a moment and sat down. “I’ll tell you everything, but can we rest for a while? I’ve had quite the ordeal.”

“Apparently,” Jigsaw said. “Rest sounds like a good idea. We’ve been walking for hours.” Jigsaw took a step closer to Incendia. “Are you sure you’re alright? You look...” Jigsaw didn’t finish the sentence. Incendia understood.

“I feel like it,” she said, letting weariness creep into her voice.

“May I take a closer look?” Jigsaw asked. Incendia nodded, and Jigsaw’s horn lit up with its familiar blue glow. He knelt down next to Incendia, slowly

moving his horn back and forth along the length of her body, the tip hovering just above her skin. He paused a few times over the most heavily injured areas- the gash on her flank, the cut on her head, but he also paused over areas with no apparent injury- several times over her stomach and the base of her head. Every now and then, blue sparks seemed to shoot out out of his horn and dance along Incendia's fur until they suddenly stopped and sank down, seeming to vanish. Tiptoe watched with great interest. Incendia had her eyes shut and her teeth gritted, as though the sensation was painful. When Jigsaw was finished he stood up, his face blank.

"How is it?" asked Tiptoe nervously.

"It's bad," Jigsaw said, "but I think she'll live. I managed to fix up some of the smaller things, but she has some serious blood loss and a concussion."

Incendia reached a hoof up to massage one side of her head. "That would explain the pounding headache."

"I might be able to help with that," Jigsaw offered, his horn once again erupting into brilliance.

Incendia shook her head. "I've had far worse injuries back in Stalliongrad. Right now, I'd just like to sleep."

Jigsaw nodded. "I suppose me and Tiptoe can get to work building camp. I... I hate to ask, but could you make a fire? Just for tonight?"

In response, Incendia's horn began to glow orange, and a small, brilliantly bright sphere of fire appeared in the center of the group. Jigsaw thanked her, and he and Tiptoe set off to find supplies. As soon as they were out of sight, Incendia gasped at the effort of the spell and nearly lost consciousness. "*Stupid*", she thought. "*Overextended myself. Take it easy.*" She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked over at the swirling ball of fire in the center of the clearing. The ice on the ground below had already melted into a glassy black puddle, and the heat emanating from it was coming off in waves, warm and comforting. She smiled to herself. At least one thing had gone right.

Tiptoe and Jigsaw spent several minutes searching the surrounding area for supplies for beds, but quickly gave it up when they realized the ground was completely barren. When they made their way back to the glowing sphere, they found Incendia was already deep asleep, nestled far closer to the burning sphere than either of them could have bared.

Jigsaw and Tiptoe curled down together near the edge of the sphere's influence, where the heat was at its mildest and most comfortable. Jigsaw lay on his back, staring up into the sky.

"It's actually kind of pretty," Jigsaw said.

"What is?" Tiptoe asked groggily.

"The sky. The moon."

Tiptoe rolled over to look up.

"It is," she said. "I haven't really had much time to look. Not since we first came out of the underground."

"First came out of the underground," Jigsaw repeated quietly, smiling a little. "That's what we did, isn't it? It seems like it was so long ago. Did you ever think we would see the sky?"

Tiptoe didn't answer. She didn't have to. Instead, she studied the sky. The sun was now fully out of view, blocked by the mountains, but a sliver of the moon was visible over the castle, perched majestically at the spot where the waterfall once cascaded over the mountain. The waterfall itself remained the same as it always had been- frozen, cold, and beautiful.

The sky was not totally dark. The sun, however low and faint it may have been, still sent streaks of color through the clouds. The dull, silvery-gray light of the decaying moon was not bright enough to blot out the stars. They marked the sky like uncountable millions of pinpricks.

"It really is beautiful," she said quietly.

"Just imagine what it looked like when the goddesses were still around," Jigsaw said.



A long silence followed this. So long, Jigsaw thought that Tiptoe had fallen asleep. When she spoke, Jigsaw gave a small start.

"I love you, Jigsaw," Tiptoe said.

Jigsaw closed his eyes. He stood at a junction, a choice before him. His relationship with Tiptoe needed to be cemented here and now- or it never would be at all. He made his choice.

"I love you too, Tiptoe."

With that, Tiptoe rolled over and closed her eyes, drifting off almost instantly.

Jigsaw's rest didn't come nearly as fast. He remained awake for quite a long time, staring up into the strange and alien sky, until he too nodded off, bathed in the light and warmth of the strange magical light, so stark in contrast to the icy, frozen wasteland that surrounded them.

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Many hours later, after each of them had slept their fill, they sat together, attempting to gather the last bit of warmth from the rapidly failing spell. The small ball of fire was slowly rotating in the air, and with each revolution, it seemed to get smaller and become more insubstantial.

"It'll be gone in another hour," Incendia said.

"How do you feel?" Tiptoe asked, looking concernedly at the gash on her flank.

"I've had worse before. Don't worry, I'll be alright," Incendia said with a smile. "I won't slow you down."

"I wouldn't speak so soon if I were you," Jigsaw said, looking out at the frozen waterfall. "we need to go up to the castle."

"I figured as much," Incendia admitted. "How are we supposed to get up there?"

Jigsaw tore his eyes away from the silhouette of the castle, tall and majestic against the dull gray of the moon, and began to search the face of the mountain. However, after only a few minutes of this, Tiptoe spoke up.

“When we were on our way here, I noticed something strange on the mountain. There’s a dark line that runs out from behind the castle all the way down to the base of the mountain... uh...” she gestured with her hoof somewhere off to the left. “Over there. I know it’s not much to go on, but it’s better than nothing.”

Incendia shrugged. “If that’s all we have, we might as well check it out. Come on.” She stood up quickly and began to walk off towards the direction Tiptoe had indicated, but she could only take a few steps before the pounding in her head and the dizziness forced her to stop.

Tiptoe walked over to her side. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, really. Just got up too fast, that’s all,” Incendia said, still smiling weakly. Tiptoe nodded and began walking, though she kept glancing back at Incendia to make sure she was following. Jigsaw soon caught up with them, having broken camp.

They made their way slowly across the frozen river. Though they tried their best to keep their eyes on the ice before them, they couldn’t help but be drawn up to the castle. It seemed almost as if it was pulling them towards it.

Eventually, they reached the other bank of the frozen river and continued on. Tiptoe walked in the front of the group, occasionally taking to the air to search for the dark line she had seen from the sky. Jigsaw hung back, walking alongside Incendia, who, despite a noticeable limp, was keeping pace admirably.

They didn’t have to search long. The path started just beyond the waterfall, around a small, rocky outcropping. The path itself was in remarkably good condition considering its age. There were steps carved into the mountain, out of what appeared to be white marble. The only sign that time had affected them at all were the cracks that were omnipresent on every step. They continued up and out of sight, twisting around to follow a natural mountain ridge.

Jigsaw stared up at them in awe. "This is unbelievable. How long must it have taken them to build these? This mountain isn't marble; they would have had to bring blocks all the way here, cut them into shape, then carve out the mountain! It must have taken decades, maybe even centuries! This is truly a marvel of the wo-" he stopped in mid-sentence, noticing Incendia's look of incredulity and Tiptoe's expression with clearly betrayed her desire to burst into laughter.

"Are you done yet?" Tiptoe said, smiling.

Jigsaw lowered his head, murmured something that might have been "yes", and began to climb the stairway, followed closely by Tiptoe, who was helping support Incendia up the stairs.

Progress from that point on was quite slow going. The stairs were icy in many places, forcing them to be extremely cautious. As they climbed higher, the cold became stronger and more penetrating, necessitating small breaks where Incendia would conjure a miniature and much smaller version of the ball of fire she had made at the camp. It was at the third one of these breaks that she spoke up.

"What exactly is it you hope to find in that castle?" she asked. They were a few hundred feet up the mountain by now, giving them a clearer view of the castle.

Jigsaw was confused for a moment before he remembered. He let out a laugh and said, "Have we really not told you?"

Incendia looked confused. "No, you just showed up out of nowhere and invited me to come with you. I didn't ask for an explanation because I thought one would be coming, but it looks like that's not the case."

Jigsaw then began the long explanation of what had transpired since their separation in the rubble of Stalliongrad, with Tiptoe interjecting to fill the details when Jigsaw had passed out. After several minutes of explanation, they fell silent.

Incendia didn't respond at first. Instead, she stared up at the dull gray moon, which appeared to have grown to over twice its original size in the sky since they became climbing.

"So... that's what we're after? The fragments?" she said after several seconds of contemplation. Jigsaw and Tiptoe nodded in response.

"Are you so sure that's a good idea?" Incendia asked.

Jigsaw looked shocked. "Of course it is! They must be brought together!"

"Think about it," Incendia continued. "The fragment in Stalliongrad was exploited for ten thousand years and used for unspeakable evil. You think the Attenuator was the worst of it? Or the draining? There were much more horrible things. I don't think we should be collecting the fragments. I think we should be locking them away, making sure that no pony can use them to commit such atrocities ever again!"

She shouted the last line, fire sparking to life in her mane, though she couldn't hide her reflexive wince of pain at the sudden outburst. Jigsaw and Tiptoe took a step back in fear and alarm. Incendia stared at them intensely for a moment before her eyes went wide and she extinguished the flames.

"I'm sorry," she said hastily. "It's just... I spent my whole life in that place. You were there, what, a few days? You didn't get the full brunt of the horror of the place. You didn't..." she swallowed. "You didn't have to live in it. If you'd seen what I have, you wouldn't want to collect them either." She sat down and turned her head away from the group, staring into the fiery ball she had conjured.

Tiptoe approached her slowly and sat down next to her. When she spoke, it was in a calm, kind voice.

"I can't imagine what it must have been like to grow up there. I'm sorry. But what we're doing here... we're not going to use the fragments for evil. We can't even use them for anything if we want to."

"That's not true!" Incendia interjected. "You teleported from that staircase!"

Jigsaw entered the conversation. "That was out of my control, and it nearly killed me."

"Jigsaw's right," Tiptoe said soothingly. "We're going to try to use the fragments to undo all of the wrong. We're trying to help. Maybe we can use their powers for good instead!"

Incendia stared at Tiptoe's face for several moments, then turned her eyes upwards towards the moon.

"I've never seen it this big before," she said, under her breath. "It's beautiful."

They stayed like that for what seemed like hours, the three ponies staring up at the moon, a single pinprick of flame burning brightly in a world of darkness and cold.

Chapter 19

Incendia put out the tiny flare after they had warmed up as much as they could and they began to climb the winding staircase once more. The increasingly bitter cold coupled with the dim light and physical exertion felt like a heavy weight pressing down on them, making them sluggish and irritable. The staircase itself must have been marvelous when it was new- it wound along the mountainside, occasionally winding inside passageways of what were clearly once exquisitely carved friezes, but had long since been worn away to near illegibility. At one point, the path led them through an enormous rocky overhang that cast them all into pitch black darkness.

After about an hour of grueling climbing, they climbed over the crest of a small ridge to find that they had reached the castle at last. The building was even more majestic up close- it was in nearly pristine condition. The cold, however, was more biting than ever. The three ponies stared up at it in awe. Incendia was the first to speak.

“An actual old-world ruin,” she said, her eyes wide. “ I never thought I would actually get to see one.”

This caused Jigsaw to tear his eyes away from the castle to look quizzically at Incendia. “You basically *lived* in an old world city! What do you mean, ‘never thought you’d get to see one’?”

Incendia turned to stare at Jigsaw, then a small smile crossed her face. Jigsaw was relieved to see it. This little bit of lightheartedness was such a refreshing change from the dour and silent walk up the mountainside. Suddenly, the cold didn’t seem as bitter.

“Jigsaw, there wasn’t an original building in that whole city, save maybe the tower. You probably know more about the old world than I do!”

Jigsaw chuckled at this. “I don’t know about you, but I’m pretty tired. I think we should camp here tonight and go in when we’re well rested.”

“Oh, I thought you’d never say so,” Tiptoe said, falling to the ground in a theatrical faint.

They all laughed. Reaching the top of the mountain, seeing the castle spread out above them, seemed to drain their stress away. They were still hungry and exhausted, but the general mood was jovial.

With a spark and a wave of heat and light, Incendia conjured the familiar sphere of warmth. Jigsaw noted idly that it bore a resemblance to the fragment of Celestia he had collected. He felt a strange tingling in his forehead.

“Why don’t you tell me about your home?” Incendia asked. “If we’re going to be traveling together, we might as well get to know each other better.”

Jigsaw and Tiptoe began to tell Incendia about their lives before the adventure. Incendia was an excellent audience. She listened intently when they described the caves and how they had come to be populated, she gasped when they discussed the creature that had attacked them in the water control sphere, and the whole group became paralyzed with laughter when Jigsaw shared the story of the time he had opened the wrong valve and flooded the Tribunal chamber.

“I was on lavatory duty for a month!” Jigsaw choked, his eyes streaming with laughter.

“Oh, by the goddesses!” Tiptoe said, breathing heavily. “I remember when that happened! It was weeks before the water pressure got back to normal! I didn’t know that was you!”

“If there’s one thing that taught me, it was to always make sure the valve I’m opening isn’t-”

“-isn’t the alpha valve?” Tiptoe completed. They burst out into fresh bouts of uncontrollable hilarity. Incendia looked back and forth bemusedly between them for a moment before she understood. It wasn’t the joke that was making them laugh. It was the relief. She’d been there herself, at times, after particularly narrow escapes from Rubidium’s security forces or magical protection. It was the only way to release the tension. She smiled, but she also felt an acute pang of loneliness. She couldn’t join in on the laughter.

Jigsaw caught Incendia's eye, and slowly, his laughter stopped. He was looking at her with a measure of concern.

"Incendia? Are you feeling alright?"

She blinked and refocused on Jigsaw. "Yeah, sorry."

"How are your injuries?" asked Tiptoe.

"Actually, I feel okay, all things considered," Incendia responded. "I think it looks worse than it actually is. My head is what's really hurting."

Tiptoe glanced at the enormous dried gash on Incendia's flank. "You're a tougher pony than me," she said.

Incendia giggled in response. "Trust me. Getting injured is nothing new to me."

Jigsaw raised an eyebrow but didn't retort. Instead he said, "That was a nasty concussion. Do you want me to try to do something for the pain?"

Incendia shook her head. "No, it's alright, really. I don't like ponies fussing over me. I never have."

"Then would you mind if I took a look at the device on your shoulder?"

Incendia's eyebrows raised in a look of surprise, then she said, "Okay, but it's broken. I don't know how much you could hope to learn from it."

"I was up almost the whole night we spent in your bunker reading through your databases. I want to see if I can repair it."

Incendia shrugged. "Be my guest." The device on her shoulder glowed orange in tandem with her horn. There was a metallic *clank* noise, then a deep, low note sounded. Jigsaw was reminded unpleasantly of the sound of Attenuation.

Then, with an unceremonious squelching pop, the metallic disk fell out of Incendia's shoulder, leaving a hole about an inch deep.

Jigsaw magicked it over to himself and began examining it. Tiptoe, however, was staring at the circular hole in Incendia's shoulder.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, rather timidly.

"No, not at all!" Incendia said. "I've had it for so long that having it not be there feels a lot stranger."

Conversation was light after that. Jigsaw was too involved in slowly disassembling the device to talk much. Incendia was too tired from her injuries and the hike to engage in much conversation, and fell asleep quickly as a result. The flare seemed to gravitate towards her in her sleep, stopping when it was almost directly above her. Tiptoe wondered idly how she could resist the heat before she, too, drifted comfortably off to sleep. Jigsaw followed not long afterwards, curled on the ground, the partially disassembled mechanism in between himself and Tiptoe.

~~~

Far away, in his mountain lair, Tantalus paced. Things had not gone according to his plan, not at all. All the two ponies were supposed to do was break the protection around Stalliongrad- he had no idea they could actually escape with a fragment of Celestia! He glanced over at the cracked, worn sapphire resting on its pedestal and felt a stabbing pain in his head. The anger seemed to ebb. Maybe it was for the best? Maybe he should let them be brought together...?

**"No,"** he thought. ***"I've worked too hard for too long to let it come to this."***

He straightened up and turned away from the pedestal. He had work to do.

He walked over to the mouth of the cave and spread his wings to their fullest extent. At their widest, his wings were almost sixty feet across. All along the edge, green flames erupted into life, casting a strange, flicking light on the cave walls.

Then, something distracted him. A wailing alarm from somewhere deep in the cave caught his attention. He stormed back into the depths, breaking

his own protective enchantments as he went, resetting them behind him with hastily blown bursts of fire, which formed into wriggling symbols of angry red flame before they spun apart, forming a shimmering barrier in the air.

He reached the spot he was looking for. The blue gem on its stand of honor. Rarity's last gift to him.

A whining, hissing, and buzzing was coming from the stone. Golden light shone out of the spiderweb cracks in the surface. Tantalus recoiled in shock and anger.

He had enchanted the stone long ago, of course- he knew what it meant. He inflated with anger. How *dare* they attempt to take what was rightfully his? Those ponies- those disgusting creatures that crawled unbidden on the surface of the world, *his* world!

The fury began welling up inside him once more, but he was too focused to let it take over. Instead, he channeled it. With one mighty breath, he blew out a whirling torrent of green flames. They spun like a tornado, whirling around him until in an instant, he shot off out of the mouth of the cave, little more than a pillar of green fire.

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When Jigsaw and Tiptoe woke the next day, Incendia was already awake. Her normally coal-black body was engulfed in bright orange and red flames, and a thin line of fire extended from where her horn normally was. She was waving it over her head, bringing it down with a sharp *crack* on to the ground before her, leaving deep gouges and smoldering embers. She was magnificent to behold. She appeared to radiate not only heat, but also a focused intensity, a feeling of strength and power that the other ponies felt they could draw upon.

Incendia caught sight of them as she twirled on the spot, and the flames began to recede. Soon, her coal-black coat returned, though her mane made it look as if she was still burning. With a slight tinge of unease, Tiptoe noted the last place where the flames receded was her eyes. The black pupils took a long time to reemerge from the swirling orange, yellow, and red surface her eyes became when she was on fire.

“You’re up!” she said excitedly. “Finally! I’ve been up for hours already, practicing.”

She glanced up at the massive door at the foot of the castle. “Are we going in?”

Jigsaw looked to Incendia, then to Tiptoe, then up at the castle. He let out a sigh and said, “I suppose so, but don’t treat this lightly. Who knows what we’ll find in there.”

Incendia’s smile weakened, but she didn’t drop it. “I know, I’m not. I’m just itching for some action!”

Tiptoe raised an eyebrow incredulously. “It’s been three days since your home city was destroyed by a dragon and you’re injured. You’re itching for action?”

Incendia winked at Tiptoe and said, “What can I say? I’ve always been a...” She paused and snickered. “... fiery one.”

Tiptoe groaned loudly at this. “I swear by the goddesses themselves, if you start making fire puns, I will smother you in your sleep.”

Jigsaw, however, was staring disapprovingly between the two. Incendia ignored him and, turning on the spot with an exaggerated flick of her tail, began walking towards the door.

Jigsaw started forward, yelling over his shoulder at Tiptoe as he galloped, “I think I should go ahead! We don’t want her accidentally tripping any protective enchantments!”

Tiptoe rolled her eyes and took off, moving quickly to catch up with the two ponies approaching the door.

It was massive. Like most things of the old world, it must once have been beautiful. Ancient, faded carvings covered the surface, and it was at least twice the size it needed to be to be functional. Over the doorway, in intricately carved Old Language script, were words that Jigsaw immediately understood.

“Canterlot Castle!” He said with a start. “This is Canterlot!”

Tiptoe whipped her head around to Jigsaw and let out a disbelieving “*What?!*”, but Incendia simply stared at him quizzically.

“I’ve never heard of that,” she said slowly. “Should I have?”

Now it was Jigsaw and Tiptoe’s turn to look puzzled. “Well, yes! Canterlot was the seat of power in the old world. It was where the goddesses reigned,” Jigsaw said. Then, with a furtive glance up at the spires, he added, “It was also also where they were said to have met their ends.”

They all turned their gaze back up at the door. It was much too large for them to move on their own.

“Do you want to try magic?” Incendia said, studying the small seam that ran down the center of the door.

“I suppose,” Jigsaw answered. “Tiptoe, if you could push too, that probably wouldn’t hurt.”

Tiptoe nodded and stepped up to the door, extending her wings wide, and braced herself against it. Incendia and Jigsaw’s horns both began to glow, and the door was surrounded by a strange mottled green-and-orange outline. They each took a step forward, straining against the resistance of the door.

“Push!” Incendia grunted through gritted teeth. Beads of sweat were beginning to form on her coat.

Tiptoe flapped her wings down once. It kicked up an enormous spray of dirt and rocks, but the door lurched open a fraction of an inch.

“Again!” said Incendia. Tiptoe flapped down again, and again, and again, the door moving a little bit more every time, until finally the door had opened wide enough for them to squeeze through.

Jigsaw and Incendia put out their horns and panted. Tiptoe turned to face them and said, “That wasn’t so bad!”

“We were doing most of the work!” Jigsaw said, though not unkindly.

“You were fantastic, Tiptoe,” Incendia said, smiling, though she was still breathing hard.

With a private smile, Tiptoe stepped aside to allow Jigsaw and Incendia to enter before her.

She had the hardest time squeezing into the small space in the door. Her wings were pressed so hard into her flank that they left an imprint, but she managed to make it through. What she saw didn’t surprise her in the slightest.

The inside of the castle was pitch black. The only light was coming from the small crack of the door and Incendia and Jigsaw’s horns. The one thing that did surprise her, however, was the temperature. The inside of the castle was warm. It felt perfectly comfortable, and she was immensely grateful after the cold she had been forced to endure for the last several days.

“Is there anything we can do about the darkness?” said Incendia, her horn beginning to brighten.

In response, Jigsaw closed his eyes and pointed his horn downwards. At first, Tiptoe couldn’t understand what he was doing, but as she watched, he began moving his horn along the ground, over to the wall on the left, and up until it was about level with his head. Then a single brick slid smoothly out of the wall and clattered to the floor beneath them. A small tangle of wires and other wiring Tiptoe didn’t recognize. Then, without warning, a brilliant bright blue flash issued from Jigsaw’s horn, temporarily blinding the two other ponies.

When Tiptoe had blinked away the bright spots on her retinas, what she saw made her breath catch. A startlingly bright, twinkling aqua-blue light was shining out of Jigsaw’s horn. It was pulsating gently, but rapidly, and with each pulsation, the blue light snaked through the wire and out into the walls, growing brighter in intensity every pulsation. Tiptoe glanced over to Incendia and was amused to see that she was staring at Jigsaw with her jaw slack. Then, with another blinding flash of light and the sound like an a

dozen pots and pans falling to the ground, the lights that lined the room kicked into life.

Jigsaw took a stumbling step backwards, steadied himself, and took a deep breath in and out. He smiled when he saw the looks on Tiptoe's and Incendia's faces. "That felt good."

"How in Equestria did you do that?" Incendia said, staring from the tangle of wires to Jigsaw to the lights and back again. "That was some of the most- I don't- not even Gizmo could have done-" She sat down on her haunches, staring at Jigsaw in disbelief. Jigsaw shrunk away, obviously embarrassed.

"Years of practice," he said sheepishly. "Really, I'm not that good. It's just my special talent. The spell was pretty easy when you know what you have to do. All I had to do was give the system a little jolt, all the wiring and stuff was still there."

Incendia didn't look convinced, however; she got up and began trotting down the corridor without another word. Jigsaw and Tiptoe followed close behind.

The hallway came to an abrupt end at what appeared to have once been part of a much larger chamber. The walls sloped around them sharply, forming a dome about twenty feet tall that appeared to have been made quickly and carelessly out of concrete. A single, bare old-world bulb hung above them by a black wire which went straight up into the concrete.

Directly ahead, at the opposite side of the dome, there were three openings in the concrete, each leading- as far as they could tell- into darkness.

"What do we do?" asked Tiptoe.

"I think we should split up," said Incendia.

Tiptoe giggled nervously and said, "That's not how we do things around here. Right, Jigsaw?"

Jigsaw didn't respond, however. He was staring down one of the tunnels.

“...No, no, Tiptoe, I think she’s right,” he said finally. “Don’t ask me how I know, but I think we’re each supposed to go down one of these. Alone. It’s the only way we can progress.”

Tiptoe held her mouth open, aghast, then shook her head violently. “No! We can’t split up! How can I protect myself? I don’t have your magic!”

Jigsaw tried and failed to contain his smile. Tiptoe’s fear quickly turned to anger.

“What’s so funny? Is it pick on the pegasus day again?” She said, her eyes beginning to water. “Because I got enough of that at school!”

Jigsaw was taken aback by her reaction. He cantered over to her and spoke softly.

“No, no, that’s not why we’re smiling. We’re smiling at the fact that you think you’re helpless.”

“What do you mean?” Tiptoe said with a small sniff.

“I mean that you managed to escape from a sea serpent while carrying me unconscious on your back without breathing. And that you managed to carry me out of that subway station when you had never flown more than a few dozen feet before. And that you managed to sneak me out of Rubidium’s compound. You’re not defenseless, Tiptoe. You’re probably the most capable pony here.”

“Tiptoe, you are a badass. Trust me, I have experience with these things. Don’t ever let anypony tell you otherwise.” Incendia added with a wink.

Tiptoe looked back and forth between the two unicorns then stared down the dark tunnel. “Alright,” she said, “I’ll go. But how am I going to see?”

In response, Incendia’s horn flashed orange and a tiny ball of light appeared and floated over to hover just above Tiptoe’s head.

“That’s one of the first spells I learned how to do. It will follow you around and light your way.”

Tiptoe smiled. "Thanks, Incendia."

Incendia nodded. Jigsaw moved back to the middle tunnel, with Tiptoe on his left and Incendia on his right. He stared down his tunnel for a moment more, then looked to his left and caught Tiptoe's eyes. As sure as he was that this was the right thing to do, he was still nervous. He thought Tiptoe could sense it. He tried to put a lot of unsaid emotions into that gaze. Then he glanced to his right, at Incendia. She looked tall, proud, and powerful- but the look in her eyes was unmistakable. She didn't want to split up either. He gathered all his courage and gave her a steady nod, then he began to make his way into the tunnel.

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Tiptoe, trailed closely by the small ball of light, made her way into the tunnel once Jigsaw and Incendia had vanished out of sight. The walls were craggy and looked to be made out of the same hastily poured concrete as the dome. Tiptoe wondered what reason anypony could have had to build this. The tunnels seemed to slope upwards at a gentle angle, and also gently curved to the left. She figured she must be walking in enormous loops, going slowly but steadily upwards. To what, she didn't know.

She took the time to reflect back on the day so far. Incendia seemed much more lighthearted than she would have guessed. She wondered if it was a coping mechanism. Either way, she seemed to be a welcome addition to the team. She also had to admit it was nice having another girl on the team.

These thoughts gave her pause. When had she started thinking of them as a team? Life had changed so much so quickly. "*And not all for the worst,*" she thought. Her thoughts turned to the night she and Jigsaw had spent in the forest and she smiled.

Eventually, she came upon a square doorway carved into the rock. When she cantered through it, she was surprised to find that she had entered an entirely new space. It was at least two stories tall and had wide glass windows on the far side that overlooked the frozen landscape beneath. What she was more concerned with was how she had entered the room.

The doorway she had come through- which she would have sworn was a



concrete square- looked like an ordinary door from this side. She pulled it open only to find that there was nothing but a solid concrete wall behind it.

She felt the fear well up in her again. She looked frantically around the room and found what she was looking for- another door, red-and-gold trimmed. She galloped over to it and pulled it open. She was incredibly relieved to see another room behind it. She galloped in, slamming the door behind her with her mouth.

She breathed a sigh of relief and began to take in her new surroundings. Then the horror hit again.

It was the same room.

She wheeled around. The door she had just come out of was the one she had originally entered the room with. She pulled it open again to find herself faced with the same wall of concrete that had blocked her way before.

She began to hyperventilate. This had to be some kind of magical thing. Jigsaw would know what to do.

*“Tiptoe.”*

The voice had come from somewhere behind her. She spun once again and saw a sight that nearly made her cry with delight. Standing there, looking just as frightened as she was, was Jigsaw.

She galloped over to him and threw her hooves around him. She began to cry. “Oh, Jigsaw, I’m so glad you’re here! The room wouldn’t let me go, and I was afraid I would be stuck in here forever, and I wouldn’t ever see you again, and-”

*“Get off of me, you filthy pegasus.”*

Tiptoe froze. She couldn’t believe what she had just heard. She immediately let go of Jigsaw and stepped back, tears still streaming down her face, though for entirely different reasons.

“Jigsaw, how could you sa-” she began, but she stopped when she saw his eyes. They weren’t Jigsaw’s deep, watery blue eyes. No, these were featureless silver discs.

“You’re not Jigsaw!” she gasped.

*“And what makes you so sure?”* said the thing that was in Jigsaw’s form. It grinned, but this did nothing to help its appearance. Its mouth went far too wide, and each tooth was filed to a point. Tiptoe also noticed, with a cold shiver, that it didn’t move its mouth when it spoke.

*“I’m what he’s too afraid to say,”* sneered the voice. *“That’s what this place does. It lays bare one’s heart.”*

The thing began to walk in circles around the petrified pony. Tiptoe was too afraid to move. With every passing second, the thing was appearing less and less like a pony- its hooves growing longer, mouth wider, eyes larger.

*“What’s the matter?”* asked the thing. *“Afraid of the truth?”*

“You’re not telling the truth,” Tiptoe squeaked.

The thing stopped pacing. *“And what would you know of the truth? You, barely out of school, never at the top of your class! I hated that you were assigned to me. I couldn’t stomach the idea of working with a pegasus.”* It nearly spat the last word. Though it looked like a warped and stretched Jigsaw, its voice was a perfect imitation.

*“What good could you have been to me? I didn’t need an assistant. I didn’t want one! All you ever could do was get in my way. And just look at the consequences!”*

The thing made an expansive gesture with his hooves. *“You’ve led us here. And my, my, what a trail of destruction you’ve left in your wake!”*

The thing cantered closer to Tiptoe, eyeing her intently.

*“It was your fault, you know. The creature that attacked us could sense your fear. It knew you were weaker. I knew it would happen. You killed*

*them, pegasus. You killed everyone back home. They could never repair the water system with their star unicorn taken from them."*

Tiptoe was shaking with suppressed sobs now. The creature continued.

*"Not to mention Stalliongrad. Thousands died, pegasus. Perhaps millions. The last city in all of Equestria, wiped out because of your foolishness."*

Tiptoe couldn't stand any more. "You're lying!" She shrieked, tears running hot and wet down her face. "The real Jigsaw loves me! He knows none of those things are my fault!"

The thing cackled at this. *"Love? What does a mere foal like you know about love?! All you ever were to me was a replacement for Antimony. A last resort when I thought I couldn't have any other, more desirable mates. But now..."*

The thing cantered up to Tiptoe and put its horrible mouth right next to her ear. When it spoke, it was in a raspy whisper.

*"Now I've found another unicorn. A pony who can actually take care of herself. Somepony who won't hold me back. Why would I ever want you? A useless pegasus, who's only contribution to the group so far has been to ruin even our best laid plans?"*

Somewhere deep in Tiptoe's mind, a small part of herself that had not been consumed with despair spoke up.

*"I can't just lie back and take this. Whatever this thing is, it isn't Jigsaw, regardless of how much it knows. Fight back! It's what they would want!"*

"Stop calling me 'pegasus'," she said quietly.

The thing's smile dropped off its face. It quickly moved away from her and stared at her for several seconds.

*"What did you say?"* it said after several seconds of tense silence.

"I said, stop calling me 'pegasus'!" Tiptoe said, her resolve strengthened by the creature's reaction.

*“Then give me a reason not to!”* hissed the creature. *“Prove your worth! Prove that you can be anything other than a useless burden to ou-”*

Its last words were lost in the clatter of hooves against stone. Tiptoe was charging towards it, and the creature was too stunned to move out of the way.

As she approached it, she threw her hooves up in the air- and with an impact that made Tiptoe’s sides ache, she embraced the creature.

*“No! No, get off me! What are you-”* it spluttered, twisting back and forth in an attempt to break her grip.

It was no use. Tiptoe hung on as tightly as she could, her eyes screwed shut. After about 15 seconds, the creature stopped abruptly.

It spoke once more, but this time, its voice was soft, almost feminine. *“You pass, Tiptoe.”*

Then, with a rush of wind, the thing Tiptoe was holding was gone. She flopped face-first onto the ground in front of her, and she didn’t get up right away. She rolled onto her side and began to cry, harder, deeper, and more desperately than she ever had in her life. She remained like that until the door at the other side of the room was blasted off its hinges.

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Incendia, guided by the light of her horn, made her way into the rightmost cave entrance. She trotted quickly and confidently through the winding cement passageway, stopping only to examine some small cracks in the concrete, through which a dull, silvery light was shining.

Eventually, she had made her way up to a large, ornately carved wooden door. The surface was covered in carvings of ponies in all sorts of activities. Incendia stared interestedly at the Old Language letters that were carved all around the door, though it was completely incomprehensible to her. She hadn’t seen many authentic examples before.

When she had seen her fill, she magicked the door open and stepped inside.

Incendia blinked. The room was pitch black. After a moment, when her eyes had not adjusted, she increased the intensity of her horn. This didn't help anything. Incendia was puzzled until she looked down. It wasn't that she still couldn't see: the floor of the room was a smooth, featureless black surface.

She squinted through the dark for something to see, but as far as she could tell, the room was just featureless. Disappointed, she turned to make her way back through the door and smacked the side of her head against a strange object.

She stumbled back and waited for the fresh pain in her head to subside. Finally, when she could open her eyes, she looked up at what she had hit.

She screamed. It wasn't the door. Standing before her was a very small hut constructed shoddily out of old, rotting wood and paper.

She turned and galloped as fast as she could in the opposite direction. The hut was familiar to her. It was her childhood home.

She glanced over her shoulder in terror and screamed again. Though she was galloping at full-tilt, she wasn't getting any farther from the hut. She could hear the sounds coming from inside, now. The shouts of anger and fear. She tried to ignore it, but it was impossible. She stopped attempting to gallop away and flung herself to the ground, clamping her hooves over her ears to try and block it out.

It didn't work. The sound seemed to just grow louder and more horrible. With a cold shock, Incendia recognized the voice of her mother.

"No! You can't have her! You can't, I won't let you!"

"You've had your fun," said another voice, which Incendia instantly recognized as Rubidium's. "You've managed to evade me for an impressively long time, but your time has come. Hand over the girl and I will leave peacefully."

“Never!” her mother cried.

“I’ll fight you!” came a deeper, male voice that Incendia recognized as her father’s.

She heard Rubidium give a horrible chuckle. “Two unicorns? What ever will I do?”

A horrible flash of red light burned its way into Incendia’s eyes, even through her closed eyelids. She heard a strangled scream. Though she couldn’t see it, the image of her father, gouting blood from a gash across his face, came unbidden into her mind.

Then, she heard her own voice, though it was higher, shriller. “Mom! Dad! No!”

She knew what was coming next, and despite every cell in her body screaming not to, screaming to run away and never look back, she lifted her head and turned to look at the small hut.

“My, my, just who I was looking for!” came Rubidium’s voice, dripping with sarcastic joy.

A white flash of light came from inside the hut, and for just a moment, Incendia could see her own silhouette.

She heard a grunt of pain come from Rubidium. “You’ve made a grave mistake!” he roared.

She saw a bolt of red light streak across the doorway, and her own face, alive with terror, was thrown into sharp relief.

With that sight, the memories she had tried so hard to repress came flooding back, their clarity and accuracy confirmed by the events playing out before her eyes. She remembered her mother aging, wrinkles appearing on her skin, until she was nothing more than a dessicated corpse. She remembered Rubidium’s cold chuckle, how his wounds had closed as new ones opened on her mother.

And she remembered when she had reached her breaking point.

Rubidium turned his eyes on her, and she lost control. Her horn exploded with orange light, and the small candle on the table in the corner flared into an enormous fireball. Rubidium's look of smug success changed to one of shock. He opened his mouth and said something Incendia never heard, then turned to run out of the hut. She remembered her younger self's short-lived feeling of success. She had won. He was gone.

Then, with a horrible realization, she remembered her father.

She looked to her left to see a dark shape, lying on the floor next to the table, twitching, completely engulfed in flames. She recoiled in horror. Her horn was still glowing, still feeding the fire, and only now did she realize she didn't know how to control it. She mustered up all her courage and determination and focused on turning the flames down.

The older Incendia lowered her head again and grasped it with her hooves as the hut exploded.

When the debris had stopped falling, she turned her head back towards the ruin of the hut. Lying in the middle of the flaming wreckage was a small, black filly, her horn weakly flickering orange. With a happy musical tinkle and flash of white light that was most unfitting for the circumstances, a stylistic rendition of a flame appeared on her flank.

The adult Incendia was breathing hard, as though she had just run a marathon. Her mind had gone blank. She had been trying for years to forget this- and then, in one fell swoop, the entire even had come flooding back in agonizing detail. Then, she saw something that brought her out of her stupor.

The filly version of herself stood up and looked directly at her. Incendia blinked twice. She didn't remember this. The pony standing in the center of the burning debris began walking towards her. With each step she took, the filly Incendia appeared to age. She grew taller, sleeker, and stronger, until she was roughly the same age as the real Incendia. This version of Incendia, however, was at once more beautiful and more horrible than the real Incendia. Her mane, instead of the coppery orange-red hair of the real Incendia, was nothing more than a layer of red flames burning on her neck.

“Wh-what are you?” Incendia stammered.

“What am I? Oh, I think you ask the wrong questions,” said the Incendia-thing, with a smile that lacked an ounce of kindness. *“I believe the better question is, ‘who are you?’”*

Incendia couldn’t find any words. She opened and closed her mouth silently.

The Incendia-thing chuckled a cold, mirthless chuckle. *“At a loss for words? That’s a rarity. I know you, Incendia. I am you.”*

“What’s going on?” Incendia managed to say. “Why are you showing me these things?”

“Because that’s what this place does,” it said. *“It shows you the truth you don’t want to see.”*

Incendia just whimpered, still cowering on the ground. The Incendia-thing frowned at this. It stalked closer to Incendia and roughly jabbed a hoof in her side, causing her to grunt in pain and roll onto her back. She was now looking directly into the thing’s eyes, which she now realized were a blank, silvery-white.

“Look at you!” it shouted, so loudly that Incendia’s ears rang. *“Look at the so-called ‘Terror of Stalliongrad’, the ‘Voice of the Ponies’! Look what she has been reduced to. Crying and huddling on the ground like an animal. I’m disgusted. I expected better.”*

These words stirred something in Incendia. Something of her rebellious spirit still remained, and, with the greatest effort it had ever cost her, the orange/red flames sprung to life, covering her from head to hoof.

The Incendia-thing retracted a hoof, and quickly widened the gap between them.

“That’s more like it,” it hissed.

Incendia let out a crazed shriek and lashed out a tongue of flame at the thing. It hit dead-on, slicing across its face. Its head jerked sharply to the left, and a deep gash was clearly visible on its face, oozing out a thick, silvery substance that faded into nothingness before it could hit the ground.

“Oh, Incendia,” cooed the thing, “violence won’t get you anywhere.”

“Let me go,” growled the real Incendia. She was already putting herself back together, preparing to fight her way out.

“Not until you’ve seen the truth. We’ve already seen your past. Why don’t we take a look at your present and future?”

Its eyes began to glow, and images shimmered into being between them. Incendia dimmed her flames unconsciously.

Floating in the space between them was an image of their camp the night before. Incendia was sitting on one side of the floating orb of light, her legs curled up beneath her, while Tiptoe and Jigsaw sat on the other side, nearly falling over each other in laughter. As they watched, the background faded away, until soon the only images left were Jigsaw and Tiptoe’s laughing faces.

“You’ll never be happy like they are,” the thing hissed. “You lost that when you allowed Stalliongrad to be destroyed.”

“I didn’t allow it to be destroyed,” Incendia said. “That was Tantalus and Rubidium.”

“Either way,” sneered the thing, “my point still stands.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Incendia shot back. “You can’t see the future.”

“No, but I can see the truth,” it said smugly. “What exactly are you hoping will happen? That you’ll stumble across some other town? That you’ll find a mare willing to throw her life away to join you on this suicide mission?”

Incendia winced.

“Or are you, perhaps, hoping for some dissent within the group? For Tiptoe to coming running and declare her love for you?” The thing let out a derisive laugh.

“Of course not,” Incendia said, though she sounded shaken. “I barely know her.”

“Indeed,” said the Incendia thing, somewhat cryptically. *“You see, I am right. Can you stand it? Will you be able to sit back and watch their love bloom while you wither on the vine?”*

“I’m not doing this for myself!” Incendia shouted. Something had snapped inside her. She didn’t know what she was saying now. It wasn’t coming from her mind. She was speaking directly from her emotions. Dimly, she registered the thing that was imitating her had raised a foreleg as if to step backwards.

“I’m doing this because I have nothing left! *I made a mistake!* I was careless, and Stalliongrad was destroyed because of me! I didn’t know how important those two ponies were. I let down everypony I had ever known! Everypony I had ever loved!”

For just a moment, the thing’s eyes flicked orange, and an image of a beautiful chocolate brown earth pony replaced Jigsaw and Tiptoe’s. Her bright yellow eyes seemed to cut through the gloom. In a blink of an eye, it disappeared. Incendia didn’t even have time to register it.

“I escaped Stalliongrad, but I shouldn’t have!” She was getting hysterical now, shouting at the top of her lungs. “I didn’t know why at first, but I do now! I need to help them! They showed me kindness, healed me! I know I haven’t known them for very long, but this feels right! More right than anything I’ve ever done! I’ve done so much wrong by so many ponies, but now I have the opportunity to do something good, my own happiness be damned! And you...”

She ignited again, though this time, the flames licking up around her body were bright blue.

"You will not stop me!" She took a defiant step forward with each word, breaking through the illusion of Tiptoe and Jigsaw's smiling faces on the last one.

"Understand?" Incendia said. She noticed, dimly, that the thing imitating her was now the one cowering. She didn't look beautiful anymore. It looked weak and feeble, almost insubstantial, illuminated by Incendia's blue flames. It still spoke, though it was almost without any emotion whatsoever.

"Would you die for them?"

"Of course I would," Incendia snarled. "I wasn't sure until right now, but now I am. I learned everything I needed to know at that campfire. These are *good ponies*. They have loved ones, hopes, dreams, and ambitions! And despite everything they've been through, they're still fighting the good fight, and they don't even know why! But I do. *Love.*"

With that final word, she finished, waiting for a response. Instead, the thing simply stood up. It suddenly no longer looked menacing. It was staring at Incendia with what she could only describe as the proud look a parent might give to a child. All traces of malice were gone.

"Don't be so quick to give up on your own happiness," it said. *"And..."* It paused, eyes darting back and forth between Incendia's own, as if trying to make up its mind. Then, it continued: *"Your father's final thoughts were... that he was happy his daughter had the strength to stand up for what was right."*

With that, a sound like rushing wind filled Incendia's ears, and the thing vanished. Suddenly, bright moonlight flooded into the room, replacing the black, featureless walls with color and texture. Incendia didn't notice, however. The thing's final words rang in her ears. She was overwhelmed, tears sizzling against her still-hot coat, a strange mixture of joy and sadness filling her heart.

Her sobbing continued uninterrupted until the fountain crashed through the ceiling.

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Jigsaw entered the dark passageway at a trot, and was delighted at what he found. A small crack in the wall, just large enough to squeeze through, led to what he assumed must once have been a guard outpost. Swords and shields lined the wall, but Jigsaw only had eyes for one item. A set of saddlebags sat, dusty and unused, in one corner of the room, and Jigsaw immediately picked it up and flipped it onto his back. Then, as though the act of lifting the bag had jogged his memory, he remembered he had left the parts for the teleporter back at their campsite. Hoping against hope they weren't out of range, Jigsaw lit his horn. Several minutes later, he let out a sigh of relief as the parts came flying in through the crack, landing snugly in his bag. He squeezed his way back through the crack, a difficult task now that he was wearing saddlebags, and continued up the dark passageway. It was grueling work, though not as strenuous as the climb up the mountain had been. The tunnel constantly switched back on itself, with a series of platforms that Jigsaw was forced to climb up. It was almost as though it was a staircase built for giants, but that wouldn't explain the low ceiling.

Still, he climbed, and finally, the last ledge led to a beautiful room-something like an indoor garden, though all the plants had long since withered away. An ornate gem-encrusted silver fountain was in the center of the room, surrounded by comfortable-looking padded benches. Jigsaw gladly lay down upon one of them and began examining the fountain. It was covered in a thick layer of dust, making it clear that it hadn't been used in a very long time. On a whim, Jigsaw focused his attention on the fountain, and attempted to see if he could get the water flowing again. The fountain glowed faintly with blue light, and sure enough, Jigsaw could sense a collapsed section of pipe a few feet under the statue. He smiled. It had been quite a while since he had repaired a pipe system.

He closed his eyes and the glowing around his horn intensified. He could feel the pipe swelling, repairing itself as ordered by his magic. Finally, when he was done, he opened his eyes, expecting to see a cascade of water flowing from the fountain.

Instead, the ground rumbled and lurched, nearly throwing him off the bench, and a feeble trickle of water spurted from the mouth of one of the silver ponies before it stopped. From somewhere in the distance, Jigsaw heard a shriek.

"Who's there?" he shouted, jumping down from the bench.

*"Jigsaw? Is that you?"* came a voice Jigsaw recognized instantly.

It was Antimony's.

From behind the fountain came a silvery-gray unicorn, her cutie mark of a beaker stark in the light from Jigsaw's horn.

Jigsaw stared for several seconds, jaw slack. Then he spoke in a disbelieving monotone. "I must be dreaming. I fell asleep on this bench and now I'm dreaming. It's the only logical explanation."

*"Jigsaw, it's not a dream!"* chuckled Antimony. *"I'm standing right he-"*

She never got to finish her sentence. From the darkness behind her, a gigantic shape began to emerge. Jigsaw recognized it immediately.

"Look out!" he cried.

Antimony whirled around just in time to see an enormous snake-like creature slide out of the darkness. It was at least eight times the size of Jigsaw, and its body was covered in sores, which appeared to be oozing a silvery substance.

*"Oh, Goddesses, Jigsaw, help me!"* shrieked Antimony. Jigsaw couldn't move. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He had relived this moment over and over again in his dreams and while awake, thinking what he could have done differently, but now that it was happening again, he was too afraid to act.

"I don't understand!" he called, tears beginning to stream down his face. "Why is this happening? What-"

His words were cut off by the roar of the snake creature, which struck its rotten head down onto the silvery gray pony, sinking its horrible yellow-and-black fangs deep into her side. Antimony let out a cry of pain and terror.

Jigsaw let out a strangled scream as the creature whipped its head from side to side, tearing a bloody chunk out of Antimony. The horrible

fangs slid out of her side with a sickening *squelch*. The force of the snake's violent undulations tossed Antimony's lifeless body to the floor, and she skidded to a halt at his feet. The snake began to eat the chunk of Antimony it had torn out with horrible crunches and slurps.

Jigsaw stared down at her, gasping for breath, not understanding what had just happened. The snake creature stared at him with piercing green eyes for just a moment before it faded away.

Jigsaw lowered his head to Antimony's and began to sob into the safe fur of her mane.. Then, with an odd, jerking twitch, Antimony's body moved.

Jigsaw backed away quickly. Something was wrong.

Antimony stood up, leaning slightly to her left, opposite where the chunk of flesh had been torn out. When she opened her eyes, Jigsaw was shocked to discover they were featureless, silver discs.

*"The first of many,"* it said, in an alarmingly casual tone.

"Y-you're not Antimony!" Jigsaw said, taking another step back.

*"Of course not,"* it hissed. *"I am the truth."*

"What do you mean?" Jigsaw said. Tears were still streaming down his face.

*"I am what you're too afraid to face,"* said the thing. *"I am representative of all those who have died for you."*

Jigsaw didn't respond. He felt as though his throat had swollen shut.

*"What's the matter?"* the thing said mockingly. Without warning, it was directly in front of him, shouting into his face. *"Afraid to act?!"*

It took a step back and began to pace back and forth in a horrible parody of Antimony's gait.

*"Poor, little Jigsaw. So detached, so intellectual. Always top of your class! Poor, pitiful Jigsaw, who suffered a loss so early in life. One wonders if you feel anything at all."*

"Of course I do," Jigsaw said, exerting a massive effort to keep his voice from cracking. He attempted to blink away his tears with no success.

*"And yet you stood there and watched her die, again!"* it retorted. *"Tiptoe wonders sometimes, you know. She wonders if you really do love her. If you even can love anymore. And who could blame her? Not I, certainly."*

"What do you want?" Jigsaw asked, emotion creeping back into his voice, causing it to quaver. He couldn't keep up the facade any longer.

The thing appeared to stop for a moment, as if to think of how to respond. Then it said, *"To illuminate that which is too often left in the dark."* With that, the thing's form abruptly changed to that of Tiptoe's.

*"Stalliongrad died to save you,"* it said in a perfect imitation of Tiptoe's voice, though without any trace of her signature kindness. *"You let an entire city perish rather than simply sacrifice yourself. You were too afraid to act!"*

It began stalking steadily closer as it spoke. *"Your quest is futile, you know. What exactly is it you hope to achieve? To reassemble the broken goddesses? They are a relic of an age long since forgotten. It's only a matter of time until I end up like her."*

With that, the thing's neck jerked sharply to the side, and with a sickening crunching sound, it collapsed to the ground, legs and wings splayed at impossible angles.

*"All that you will accomplish is to kill the world that much faster."*

"You're wrong!" Jigsaw shouted, his voice sounding hoarse and unfamiliar to him.

"You've been saying that I sit back and let others die for me, then you tell me I should give up? That doesn't make any sense!" As he spoke, his crying intensified, though he had no idea why.

The thing stood up and stared at Jigsaw, as if inviting him to continue.

“You don’t know the truth. You only know how to tell convincing lies. I’m doing this right now so nopony ever has to die for me again!”

His sadness and confusion were beginning to turn into anger. His horn began glowing so brilliantly blue that he felt as though he could almost see through the Tiptoe-thing, which bore a look of terror on its face.

“And don’t you *ever* tell me I don’t love Tiptoe. I’m done with taking things lying down. Never again am I going to sit back while things like *you* terrorize what I love!” Jigsaw finished the sentence shouting, the cords in his neck taut with anger.

The thing sighed, almost as if it had been waiting a very long time for this, then stared at Jigsaw intently.

*“It will do,”* said the thing, with a finality that did not invite a response from Jigsaw.

It began to walk backwards, away from Jigsaw, and he heard the sound of rushing wind begin. Then, suddenly, the wind died down, and Jigsaw recognized the expression on the thing’s face: despair.

It stood, staring at him for a long time before it finally spoke.

*“Antimony wants you to be happy.”* it said, so softly Jigsaw almost didn’t catch it. The expression on its face showed the same despair, though it seemed now to be tinged with a touch of regret.

Then, with that, the rushing wind picked up again, and the thing was gone.

Jigsaw collapsed onto the bench, fresh tremors of fright and sadness shooting through his body.

When he finally dried his eyes, he had made a decision his mind. He would find Incendia and Tiptoe. They had been apart far too long.

He didn’t have the chance to get up, however, because at that moment, the fountain erupted.



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Without warning, water began gushing through the fountain at such high speeds it sprayed the walls and floors. Jigsaw was so taken aback that he was washed off his bench by a jet of water from an ornate golden pegasus. Spluttering, he ignited his horn and ran to the base of the fountain, touching his horn to it. He understood what was about to happen only moments before it did.

The floor around the fountain cracked, and with one final jet of water, the fountain crashed down, pulling Jigsaw with it. He jumped into the fountain, acting purely on instinct, which proved life-saving when they collided with the floor below with a sound like a small explosion. The water softened the impact enough that Jigsaw avoided collision with the hard, metal walls of the fountain.

He climbed out of the basin, gasping for air, and was surprised to see a very shocked Incendia gawking at him.

“What just happened?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“Never mind the fountain,” Jigsaw said, his voice hard with determination. “We have to find Tiptoe.”

The authority in his voice kicked Incendia into action.

“Right,” she said. “Any ideas of where to look?”

Jigsaw glanced around the room. “Where did you come in?”

Incendia gestured to the door directly behind her with her horn.

“Then we should probably check that door,” Jigsaw said, gesturing to a door in the back-left corner of the room, opposite where Incendia had come out.

They cantered over to it without another word. Jigsaw’s horn began to glow, but the door wouldn’t budge.

"It's locked," he said, peering at the keyhole. "I think I can figure it out, just give me a few minutes..."

"Oh, just let me do it," Incendia said, sounding somewhat exasperated, as she stepped between Jigsaw and the door. Her horn cast its familiar orange light, and the door blew apart in a flash of fire.

They heard a scream come from the other side, and Jigsaw rushed inside.

"Tiptoe! Tiptoe, is that you?" Jigsaw shouted in alarm. His head whipped back and forth frantically until he saw her, standing up about twenty feet away.

He took off towards her at a gallop at the same time as she did. They met in the middle, throwing hooves around each other, sharing a passionate kiss.

"I'm so sorry!" Jigsaw exclaimed as they broke apart. "I should never have said that we should split up. I'll never leave you alone again!"

Once more, tears were flowing, but these were tears of joy; tears of relief.

"I don't ever want to be apart from you again! There was this creature, and it said the most horrible things, and-"

"I know." Jigsaw said, soothingly. "I know."

"I love you, Jigsaw!" Tiptoe said. The note of pleading in her voice was unmistakable.

"I love you too, Tiptoe," Jigsaw said resolutely, staring steadily into Tiptoe eyes. "Don't *ever* doubt that."

And with that, they kissed again.

Incendia turned away when she saw this, feeling flustered. This wasn't a moment meant for her. Another pang of loneliness shot through her.

At least until a pair of hooves closed around her neck, taking her completely by surprise. She looked up to find that Tiptoe had rushed over and embraced her.

It was too much for Incendia to take. She began to cry again, for the life that she had lost, for long-lost loves, for the future, and for the overwhelming feeling of affection she felt for the creamy yellow pegasus. She didn't think she could ever express how much this simple hug meant to her.

After several moments of hesitation, Jigsaw also placed a hoof around Incendia's neck.

They stood together like that for longer than any of them knew. They weren't concerned with the passage of time just then.

When they broke apart, Jigsaw was not entirely shocked to see a silvery-white orb, just like a miniature moon, floating in the center of the room.

It had been the most emotionally trying experience of their lives, but they had found what they were looking for.

Chapter 20

The silvery orb hung, silent and mysterious, in the center of the room. It's surface was perfectly smooth and glassy, and it rotated slowly, sending off wisps of shadowy mist.

"So... what happens now?" Incendia asked, her voice low and hushed.

In response, Jigsaw began to walk slowly towards where the sphere hung, his head bowed low as if in reverence. He felt a strange, pulsating buzz begin in his horn, as though it were anxious to make contact. Cautiously, he raised his head until the very tip of his horn broke the silvery surface of the sphere. For a moment, a single ripple issued across its surface, causing the silvery light to shimmer. Then, Jigsaw was enveloped in a sheet of whirling silver mist. Incendia started forward towards him, but Tiptoe extended a hoof, catching her in the chest.

"I don't think we should interfere," she said in a near-whisper.

Shimmering intensely, the mist whirled faster and faster around the unicorn, until with a brilliant flash of white light, the mist zoomed up and into Jigsaw's horn. The flash was so bright that it momentarily blinded Tiptoe and Incendia.

When they blinked away the bright afterimage, they were surprised to see Jigsaw, standing where the sphere had been, his horn glowing sliver, tendrils of light seemed to reach up from the floor and flow into his horn.

"Jigsaw, what's going on?" asked Incendia, more than a little alarm in her voice.

"I don't know!" Jigsaw shouted in response, shaking his head violently to try and draw the tendrils away from his horn. Where the silvery substance left the smooth marble floor, large cracks began to appear. The surface lost its sheen, dulled, and became brittle.

Jigsaw galloped towards the other two ponies, away from the rapidly growing spiderweb of cracks. The tendrils were now licking up the walls, drawing some shimmering energy out from the walls and windows. It was as though whatever protection that had kept the place intact was being stripped away, and the ten thousand intervening years were beginning to take their toll. The moan and rumble of slipping stone was so loud that they couldn't even hear themselves shouting. Soon, the three were forced into the only untouched corner left in the room, pressed as close together as possible to stay away from the advancing wave of cracks and decay. Chunks of rock were beginning to rain down from above, some large enough to crash through the floor and beyond. Finally, the floor beneath them cracked and sagged, and the last of the silver light began to flow into Jigsaw's horn.

Several moments of tense silence followed the end of the strange light show. None of them dared to speak for fear that the sound of their voice might somehow cause the floor to give way. Gaping holes were present from where pieces of the ceiling had caved in and smashed through the floor, causing the room to resemble the pock-marked and crumbling surface of the moon above.

"Is everypony okay?" Incendia asked in a low whisper. Still, the sudden sound nearly caused Tiptoe to jump in surprise.

"I... I think so," Jigsaw answered shakily. He was panting heavily, and his horn still glowed silver, though it was fading in brilliance and intensity.

"I'm okay," Tiptoe murmured absentmindedly. She was staring at Jigsaw with concern.

Jigsaw, however, was staring at the floor. His eyes were darting quickly around the area, taking in every little detail. Eventually, he turned his eyes to Incendia.

"How good is your levitation?"

Incendia looked taken aback. "Same as any other unicorn, I suppose. I mean it's not my special talent, but I practice all the basic mag-" she cut herself off mid-sentence, her eyes widening with comprehension. "Jigsaw, you're not seriously considering..."

"I am," he said, simply.

"What is he considering?" Tiptoe said, looking back and forth between the two unicorns.

Jigsaw turned to face face her.

"We're going to carry ourselves down the mountain," he said, a faint gleam deep in his eyes.

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Tantalus touched down at the base of the castle, tongues of green fire licking at the barren earth for a few moments before spinning away into nothingness. He clenched his enormous reptilian fists.

He knew he was too late. They had already collected the fragment, and the castle was beginning to crumble. Somehow they had managed to break through his wards and discover the mountain, but more pressingly, the fragment had already entered the vessel, and the castle had finally decayed.

Despite all this, he found himself grinning. He knew he was at an advantage. He was familiar with this particular castle. He had come here back before the Grand Cataclysm many times. he knew that he had them cornered.

He took in a great breath. He could feel the spell he was about to cast burning within him, wriggling and squirming, begging for release. With a mighty exhale, the spell left him in a torrent of green fire, whirling around the base of the castle, enveloping it, and burrowing into the faults and fissures of the foundation.

The mountain gave a mighty shake, and the already unstable castle began to crumble.

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Jigsaw, Tiptoe, and Incendia screamed as huge chunks of marble, the heads of statues, and even- once or twice- the skeletons of some long dead ponies rained down from the ceiling above them.

“Now!” shouted Jigsaw, looking at Incendia. “We have to do it now!”

Incendia’s horn glowed in response, enveloping the chunk of marble they stood on in a bright orange glow. Jigsaw joined in soon afterwards, the blue glow of his own magic mixing with the orange. With a lurching, jerking movement, the rock lifted from the floor and began to float to the remains of the large window that overlooked the waterfall. They were constantly forced to split their attention between keeping the chunk of marble floating and deflecting the chunks of debris that were raining down from above. Tiptoe hovered just above the rock, keeping her weight off it.

Suddenly, with a thunderous blast, an enormous and horribly tarnished bronze alicorn statue came crashing down from above, heading directly towards him.

Incendia’s head snapped up and she braced herself against the surface of the floating marble.

“Jigsaw, get ready!” she shouted. Then, with a flash of orange light, she let go of the marble and focused on the statue.

Pain exploded in Jigsaw’s head, and his feet slid several inches over the surface of the stone, coming dangerously close to the ragged, fractured edge. His horn shone intensely, magic radiating from it so intensely that even Tiptoe could feel it- like sort of a warm buzz heading down from the center of her forehead all the way to the tip of her tail. The marble dipped and bobbed dangerously, but stayed airborne.

The bronze statue was floating in the air directly above them. Incendia looked much the same as Jigsaw did- fluid magic flowed off her horn, the energy radiating away from her so powerfully that it was almost visible.

“I don’t have the strength to move it!” Incendia said through gritted teeth.

Tiptoe didn’t know what to do. The statue was so large that she didn’t stand a chance of moving it on her own, and she didn’t want it hanging over them

all the way down the mountain. She didn't seem to have much of a choice, however.

Moments later they zoomed out the window and left the crumbling ruins of Canterlot Castle behind. They hovered in the air for a moment more before, with an earsplitting *crack* followed by a series of the loudest *booms* Jigsaw or Tiptoe had ever heard, the castle snapped off its foundations and began tumbling down the mountain. The waterfall shattered under the pressure of thousands of tons of rock and metal, and in several more minutes, the mammoth avalanche was over. A thousand feet below them lay a gargantuan pile of twisted wreckage.

Tiptoe nearly laughed in relief, until she remembered they still had to make it down to the ground below. Jigsaw and Incendia began to sweat under the punishing weight of keeping the marble aloft.

Abruptly, a huge burst of green fire licked at their backs, breaking their concentration. "*Tantalus!*" shouted Incendia. The sheen of magic around both objects vanished. With that, Jigsaw, Incendia, the statue, and the platform all plummeted.

Tiptoe just barely managed to dart out of the way of the alicorn statue's outstretched wings, only half an inch away from hitting her. She folded her own wings dove down, towards where Jigsaw and Incendia were clinging to the platform, horns lit in a desperate attempt to slow their plummet. As she dove, she saw a vast dark figure shoot past her, green flames trailing behind it. Tantalus would be waiting for them.

Finally, with one monumental effort, Jigsaw and Incendia managed to coordinate their efforts enough to slow both themselves and the statue. When they hit the ground with a jarring, though mercifully non-fatal impact.

They didn't get a moment of rest, however. Incendia hadn't been able to stop the statue's decent entirely, and they had to roll off the platform to avoid getting impaled by the ancient horn. The statue cleaved the marble platform cleanly in half and clattered to the ground, seemingly undamaged. Jigsaw had the fleeting thought that it must be enchanted.

Tiptoe alighted next to them a moment later. "Oh, thank Luna's grace you're alright! We have to run! Tantalus beat us down here, he's waiting for us!"

Incendia and Jigsaw were breathing raggedly, but they still looked around in alarm. However, the moonlight was so dim that they couldn't see more than a few yards in any direction. They didn't detect any motion, however, and the only sounds were the clatter of small rocks as they came careening down the hillside to join the ruin of the castle, which was only a short distance to their left. They allowed themselves a sigh of relief.

"I don't know why but I think he's gone. Maybe he thought there would be no way we could stop the platform in time," Jigsaw said, his breathing slowing. "Incendia, do you think you could cast one of those flaming balls to follow us around?"

"Allow me," said a horrible, growling voice from somewhere directly ahead of the group, back towards the forest. A huge shape shrouded in green fire was illuminated some three hundred feet ahead and covered the distance in mere seconds. Jigsaw's horn began to glow anew, and orange flames erupted all along the length of Incendia's body.

Tantalus stood over them, staring down at the flaming unicorn in mild surprise. The veins on his face pulsed unpleasantly, almost seeming to glow with an internal light.

"Two has become three, I see," he said, sounding mildly amused. His voice was horrible, resonating with such a terrible power that actually made Tiptoe lower her head and retch. Fortunately, she hadn't eaten anything for almost three days and had nothing to throw up. Tantalus' very presence was noxious.

Tantalus ignored this, though his smile grew a hair wider. He stared intently at Incendia. **"Where did you come from? A survivor of Stalliongrad? No matter, I-"**

His words were cut off by Incendia's flaming whip, which lashed at his exposed stomach. As far as any of them could tell it had not had any measurable effect on him, but his smile dropped.

“You dare to interrupt me?” Tantalus snarled at her. ***“You will pay dearly for that.”***

“Why are you doing this? Jigsaw asked, desperate to stall for time. Tiptoe stood behind him, wings outstretched, but her quivering was unmistakable. She was petrified.

Tantalus turned his attention instead to Jigsaw. ***“You foal. You do not know what powers you interfere with.”***

“Then why don’t you tell me!” Jigsaw shouted.

Tantalus sneered and, to Jigsaw’s utter astonishment, said ***“Very well. You do deserve an explanation. You have gotten significantly farther than any before you, at any rate.”***

“Why did you let us go from the cave?” Jigsaw asked.

“Because I thought you might be able to get me into Stalliongrad. The story I told you then was essentially the truth, as you may have guessed. Rubidium was a royal guard that lusted after the power of the goddesses. He unleashed power beyond his control.”

“What power?” Jigsaw asked. With a growing horror, Tiptoe noticed that the edge in Jigsaw’s voice was beginning to fade, being replaced by his familiar inquiring tone. Incendia was still blazing, eyes locked on Tantalus as if waiting for him to act.

“It is... difficult to put into words. The sort-of antithesis to the goddesses. Evil itself, ones such as you might call it,” he said. His tone was like that of a teacher speaking down to a foal it considered inferior. Tiptoe knew that tone all too well.

“But where did it come from? How did it get trapped in the book, and what does it have to do with you?” Jigsaw said.

“Where? Is it honestly relevant?” Tantalus said drolly. ***“Dredging up ancient history will not help you. Suffice it to say that the goddesses had it sealed away very near the beginning. Something about... ideological conflicts.”***

“As for what it has to do with me, I am amazed you have not guessed yet, Jigsaw. For all intents and purposes, it is me.”

Jigsaw took a step back reflexively. “What? How is that possible?”

“It is difficult to speak of different parts of one’s self. I was once two entities, before the fall. A dragon named Spike and the being which Rubidium had unleashed. Spike had hidden away in the chaos following the fall, and the being approached him, brokering a deal. Spike had... his own reasons for accepting. Such power the being had! For several years, we remained separate. Spike was weak. He fought the inevitable for so long. Eventually, however, he succumbed to my influence. Very little of him remains, now. For all intents and purposes, I am the being. I have had free reign over the world for the for the last ten millenia.”

To Jigsaw’s utter astonishment, Tiptoe spoke up.

“That’s not true! Back in your cave, I saw a gem on a pedestal. Who was Rarity?”

Tantalus froze. The smug smile dropped off his face.

“Do not speak of things you don’t understand,” he muttered, his voice deathly quiet. The terrible power behind his voice seemed a little less overwhelming. Jigsaw had a sneaking suspicion that more of this “Spike” remained than Tantalus cared to admit.

“What would she think of what you have done?” Tiptoe said. It was a total shot in the dark, but she hoped it might have some effect.

It did.

Tantalus let out a mighty roar and brought one claw slashing through the air, slamming into Jigsaw and knocking him away. Tiptoe was exposed now, and Tantalus wasted no time in extending his other claw, lifting Tiptoe right off the ground. With another roar, he brought her slamming down onto her side, pinned to the ground by one massive, black claw on her cutie mark.

Incendia let out a cry of horror, and her flames grew in size and intensity until they once again became blue. She braced herself against one of the chunks of rubble and her horn began to glow even more brilliantly. The air near Tantalus' head shimmered for a moment before a huge, fiery explosion erupted into life near his ear. When the fire had cleared, Tantalus' head was smoking, but he didn't appear to have even noticed.

“Do not speak of things you don't understand!” he repeated with a mighty bellow. Jigsaw watched in horror as he began to slowly drive his claw into Tiptoe's cutie mark. She let out a horrible scream of pain, a sound unlike Jigsaw had ever heard her make. He stood there paralyzed for a moment, but only for a moment. Images of Antimony came flooding back into his mind. He *couldn't* let this happen. He *wouldn't*.

He took off at a gallop towards where she lay screaming. With a sickening *crunch*, Jigsaw heard what must have been her hip being crushed under Tantalus' cruel talon.

Then, to his own astonishment, his horn burst into life. Jigsaw could feel magic flowing from it, magic that was unfamiliar to him. With a shriek of anger and surprise, Tantalus withdrew his bloody claw from Tiptoe. A shimmering shield of silver light enveloped the three ponies.

Jigsaw didn't care about where the shield had come from at that moment, however. He leaned over Tiptoe, who was shaking on the ground in a pool of her own blood. Tantalus had severed an artery, and with each frantic pump of her heart, another spurt of blood flowed out of her flank.

Incendia stood staring, wide-eyed, at the scene before her. Jigsaw looked up at her, tears in his eyes.

“Incendia, please, help me, I've never been good at healing magic! There's blood everywhere, what do I do?”

Incendia didn't speak. Instead, she shot a glance at Tantalus, who was now slamming his fists furiously against the magical barrier, then over her shoulder. She took a few slow steps backward, then turned tail and ran out of the protective shield, which flashed brightly to allow her passage.

Jigsaw was shocked, but he shouted after her, "Fine! Run! Abandon us like you did in Stalliongrad!"

Tantalus stopped slamming onto the shield to watch her jump over a pile of rubble opposite where the platform had landed and out of sight.

"She has some sense," Tantalus said. "Perhaps she will make a valuable ally. Do you see how futile your quest is, now? You cannot trust your allies. All that awaits you is death. Give up and join me. I can heal her. Together we can rule this world."

Jigsaw looked up at Tantalus for a moment. He opened his mouth to speak, but another voice, speaking from somewhere behind him, caught his attention.

"Hey, Tantalus!"

He whirled around to try and find the source of the voice, but it still took him several moments. Clambering, slowly and unsteadily, horn blazing so brilliantly it looked to be more plasma than solid, over the rubble was Incendia.

Tantalus smirked. ***"What new tactic is this? Have you not yet learned that fire cannot hurt me?"***

Incendia was trembling, biting her lip so hard it was bleeding. Blood was flowing, fresh, from the cut on her flank. Her eyes darted above Tantalus' head in response.

Jigsaw and Tantalus both looked up at the same moment. Hovering directly over Tantalus' head was the bronze Alicorn statue, horn pointed down, encased in an orange shimmer of magic.

Incendia spoke, her voice quavering, as though each word cost her a monumental effort.

"Nobody fucks with my friends."

There was a flash of orange light and Incendia collapsed onto the pile of rubble, tumbling down to rest on the ground.

The bronze alicorn statue fell, the point of the horn driving itself directly into Tantalus' eye, so deeply it protruded out the back of his head.

Some part of Jigsaw's mind realized that he must have been right about the enchantment on the statue, for when it met Tantalus' head, white sparks shot out like a firework. Dark bile began to bubble out from the wounds in Tantalus' eye. He swayed on the spot, then, with a flash of green fire and a deafening *bang*, the statue exploded and Tantalus was gone.

The shield shimmered out of existence as suddenly as it had come. Tiptoe let out a weak moan of pain, bringing Jigsaw's attention back to her. His horn ignited, and he held it close to the gaping wound in Tiptoe's side. He could feel the injuries- each one sharp and clear to his sense, but he felt the familiar sense of fuzziness- like there was some kind of obstacle in his way that prevented him from figuring out how to fix it.

He focused all his energies, perhaps more than he ever had before. Silently, in desperation, he even said a prayer to the goddesses, willing them to lend their strength to him if they could.

Then it happened. The barrier was gone. Deep inside Tiptoe's flank, Jigsaw could see flesh knitting back together. Blood vessels snaked along muscle and sinew to rejoin. Her shattered hip shifted and cracked, fusing back together.

Jigsaw's entire body had gone numb and cold. He was shaking uncontrollably. He knew he had gone too far, this time- this magic could very well kill him. But he didn't care. It just strengthened his resolve.

Finally, after what felt like hours to Jigsaw, but could only have been a few minutes, the wound in Tiptoe's flank was sealed. With a happy musical tinkle and a flash, her cutie mark once again reasserted its rightful place.

Jigsaw lost consciousness just as Tiptoe regained hers.

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Far away, in Tantalus' gloomy castle, the blue gem on a pedestal began to vibrate and shake. Yellow light shot out of the fissures on its surface. With

a loud snapping sound, another crack snaked across the surface of the gem. Green smoke billowed out of the crack until the floor was covered in the thick fog several feet deep. The smoke began to float together, and with a flash of green light, Tantalus was lying on the cave floor, his scaly skin looking raw, red, and undeveloped. His eyes opened, whole and intact.

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Incendia woke up first, to the gentle nuzzling of Tiptoe. She blushed intensely and stood shakily to her feet, attempting to hide her face from Tiptoe. She wasn't sure how successful she had been, but Tiptoe made no comment.

Jigsaw was still lying where he had fallen, horn fizzling weakly. His breathing was shallow and rapid. Tiptoe trotted over to him and Incendia followed.

"What happened?" Incendia asked.

"I don't know. The last thing I remember was blacking out from pain, and then... I think he healed me," Tiptoe said, staring at Jigsaw with a mixture of affection and concern.

As they spoke, Jigsaw stirred. His eyes fluttered open. Initially, they were unfocused, but as he stared at them, they sharpened. Tiptoe galloped over and put her head very close to Jigsaw, whispering as though she were afraid that her voice could injure him.

"Are you okay?"

Jigsaw smiled weakly and said, in an oddly raspy voice, "I'm just glad *you* are."

With that, he passed out again, but Tiptoe wasn't quite as worried. His breathing had steadied some.

"Come on," Incendia said, her horn glowing. She turned towards the forest. "We should find shelter".

Chapter 21

Arduously, they began their trek back towards the distant treeline. Incendia led the way, Jigsaw floating gently behind her in an orange halo. Tiptoe stumbled after them both. Her hip felt stiff and awkward, and her condition was exacerbated by the frozen river's slippery surface. She was lightheaded and dizzy, too, and her stomach was growling loudly.

Incendia wasn't doing much better. She was making very slow progress along the river; the effort of keeping Jigsaw's unconscious body aloft was straining her already spent energy. Her horn felt uncomfortably hot, a sensation which was almost entirely unfamiliar to her. She had used too much magic, and she knew it, but they were so close...

Finally, after many more determined hoofsteps, they found themselves on the cold dirt of the river bank. The rubble from the castle extended all the way out to the timberline, though only the tips of the highest spires actually touched the stunted forest.

They made their way into the woods, and the moon's gray, lonely light was quickly lost in the branches and needles of the canopy. Incendia's red-orange glow flared brightly in response to the growing shadows. The crack of foliage and twigs under her hooves heartened her, and before long, they had found an area sufficient to make camp.

Incendia gingerly lowered Jigsaw to the underbrush and collapsed onto her haunches, breathing heavily.

"Are you alright?" Tiptoe asked, trotting over to Incendia's side and looking down at her with concern.

"I'm fine," Incendia replied. "I just need some rest. And some food," she added, her gut twisting uncomfortably.

“Oh, Goddesses, me too,” Tiptoe sighed, her head drooping. “I don’t suppose we can eat these.” She prodded absently at the pine needle carpet.

Incendia shrugged and leaned her head down, snatching the greenest needle she could find with her mouth and began to chew. Her face contorted in disgust and she spat the needle back out.

“Ugh, I’m not *that* hungry.”

Tiptoe turned her head away from the green patches on the ground in disappointment. She felt even hungrier now that food had been denied.

To distract herself, she set about to gathering firewood, because Incendia looked as though she was about to collapse. Jigsaw lay, breathing shallowly but steadily, at her side.

Before long, Tiptoe had collected a stack of twigs and dried branches into the center of the clearing. Incendia watched bemused as Tiptoe attempted to set up a fire pit with little success. The feeble pile of kindling and branches kept collapsing no matter how the pegasus arranged them. Tiptoe swung herself around to attack the pile from a different angle, her backside facing Incendia.

Incendia’s eyes initially widened in surprise at the new view, accompanied by a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She couldn’t help but notice the curvature of Tiptoe’s body. She found herself leaning forward, brightening the light from her horn ever so slightly to get a clearer view.

With a twitch, Jigsaw stirred. Incendia tore her eyes away from the creamy yellow pegasus, who had now taken to attempting to club the tinder into place, and refocused on Jigsaw.

Suddenly, she felt a stab of guilt and shame. She squirmed and padded at the ground. The words of the thing that was guarding the fragment of Luna came back to her. “*You’ll never be happy, you know.*” She swallowed hard. What if there really wasn’t anypony out there for her? Her gaze turned back to Jigsaw. This wasn’t fair to him, either. Tiptoe wasn’t hers to ogle. What right did she have? If he hadn’t been there, she felt sure she would have been doomed to a life of wandering aimlessly through the desolate wastes,

assuming she could even have survived her injuries without his healing magic. And this was how she was repaying him?

But, in spite of herself, she found her gaze wandering back to Tiptoe...

She shook her head and looked away.

She sat there, her eyes trained resolutely on a spot to her left where she could see neither Jigsaw nor Tiptoe, her fluttering heart at odds with the horrible clenching and knotting of her stomach, until a *thump* from her right brought her head whipping around. It took her several seconds to process that the sound came from Tiptoe. She had sat herself down next to Incendia and was staring at her expectantly.

“Fire!” Incendia blurted out after several seconds of silence. She blushed intensely. “You want me to light the fire!”

“Yeah, that was kind of what I expected,” Tiptoe said, giggling.

Incendia bolted up and made her way over to the pile of tinder and branches in the center of the clearing, her ears flat against her head, silently thanking Celestia that Tiptoe couldn’t read minds. She gathered up her strength- what remained of it- and a feeble ember sparked to life at the tip of her horn, leaping from it to smolder in the pile of twigs and branches. Incendia blew on it gently, and in moments, orange flames were blazing in the heart of the fire pit. It wasn’t as warm or as bright as Incendia’s magical flares had been, but it was all she could do.

Tiptoe watched Incendia curiously. She had never seen her blush like that. Had she done something to embarrass the unicorn? What thoughts could she have interrupted?

Then, with a weak cough and a groan, Jigsaw drove all thoughts of Incendia from her mind. His eyes fluttered open. He was exhausted, but alert.

“Jigsaw!” Tiptoe shouted in delight. Incendia hobbled over to them as fast as her tired legs would allow her.

Jigsaw blinked several times, then made to sit on his haunches, but Tiptoe pushed him back down. He didn't try to get up again. Instead he opened his mouth and croaked, in a barely audible whisper, "What happened?"

"We could be asking you the same thing," Tiptoe said, with a glance at Incendia. "The last thing I remember, I was pinned under Tantalus' talon. Then, next thing I know, Tantalus is gone, I can barely move my leg, and everypony but me is unconscious!"

The words tumbled out of her mouth, and her eyes were wide and bright with relief. Jigsaw's breathing was slow and steady now, and when he spoke, his voice was noticeably louder and stronger.

"It was Incendia. She lifted the alicorn statue and dropped it right onto Tantalus' head."

Tiptoe gaped at Incendia. "*You* lifted *that*?"

Incendia blushed yet again, staring into Tiptoe's wide, green eyes. "I had to. Tantalus was going to kill you if I didn't do something, and that was the only thing I could think of doing."

Tiptoe didn't look any less impressed, however, and she didn't look away until a cough from Jigsaw forced her to.

"How are you feeling?" asked Incendia.

"Like I got stung by a cave-manticore," groaned Jigsaw.

"Oh!" Tiptoe exclaimed with a start, as though the thought had only just occurred to her. "Why aren't I hurt?"

"I was wondering about that, too," Incendia said. "I thought Tiptoe was... I didn't think she would make it."

"You didn't?" Tiptoe asked, her previous glee giving way to fear. "How bad was it?"

Jigsaw tried once more to sit up, and this time, Tiptoe let him. He swayed a little, but after several deep breaths, he sat up.

He then began to tell the side of the story that only he was awake to see. The gaping hole in Tiptoe's side, the healing magic, Tantalus' vanishing in green flames.

When he was done, Tiptoe looked at her flank, amazed, stretching out the restored foreleg in appreciation.

"It feels just fine, though it is a bit stiff. How did you do it? I thought you weren't good with ponies."

"I'm not," Jigsaw replied. "Or, at least I wasn't. There was always a barrier there. Like the feeling you get when you try to do magic that falls outside your specialization." He glanced to Incendia as he spoke, and she nodded in understanding.

"I'm not familiar with that feeling," Tiptoe interjected, a noticeable edge of irritation in her voice.

Incendia tilted her head in thought. "It's... difficult to describe," she said thoughtfully, "but I suppose the best metaphor would be a wall of glass. It's solid, you can't go through it, but you can see that there's a whole world outside it. Only, everything outside is fuzzy and out-of-focus, and..."

She stomped her hoof on the forest floor. "I'm not explaining it right!" she snapped. "It's really hard to put into words. It's more of a feeling."

"It's okay, Incendia," Jigsaw said. "I don't think it's something non-unicorns can understand."

Tiptoe bristled, and was about to make an indignant remark until Jigsaw continued coolly, "Just like I don't think we could ever understand what flying is like."

Tiptoe deflated, the tension leaving her muscles. She was being petty, she knew. She couldn't help her inability to do magic any more than the others could help that they couldn't fly.

The silence stretched out after that. All three of them turned towards the fire, attempting to soak in as much warmth as they could from the dancing light.

“I’m really tired,” Jigsaw eventually said. “I think we should turn in for the night. Unconsciousness doesn’t count as sleep. Tomorrow our agenda is food.”

Incendia and Tiptoe both chuckled at this and agreed. Incendia got up and trudged over to the other side of the fire, leaving Jigsaw and Tiptoe essentially in private.

Tiptoe nuzzled against Jigsaw. “I’m really glad you’re okay,” she said softly, over the sound of the crackling fire. “I was afraid I would lose you.”

Jigsaw returned the nuzzle before rolling over onto his back to look up at the sky.

“I wasn’t sure if I was going to make it either,” he said, his blue eyes alight with the reflection of the stars. “When I saw you lying there... there was so much blood. I couldn’t let it happen. I dug deeper into myself than I ever had before. I knew right away that I had gone too far, but I didn’t care. So long as you were alright, I didn’t really care what happened to me.”

“I care,” Tiptoe said. She rolled over onto her back too and nestled herself against Jigsaw. He was warm- warmer than he should have been- but she didn’t mind. It helped take the edge of the cold.

They stared up into the star-mottled sky together, the moon hidden behind dense tree limbs.

“Did you ever think you would see it in person?” Jigsaw asked. “The sky, I mean. The stars.”

Tiptoe stared up at them, twinkling down on the two ponies. Great swaths of color painted the sky, much more intense with the light of the moon blocked.

“No,” Tiptoe began, “I didn’t. I...”

She paused, hesitating for a moment, then continued on.

"I used to dream about the sky. The bulkhead would swing open, and outside, it would be just like the pictures in the old books. The sky would stretch out as far as I could see, and I would take off, and I would fly higher and higher, never having to go back again. I wouldn't be just another useless pegasus up there. There would be others, and they would... I would have a purpose."

She stopped, swallowing hard. Her throat seemed to have swollen shut.

"You have a purpose, Tiptoe," Jigsaw said quietly. "You saved my life. I wouldn't be here without you."

He turned and kissed Tiptoe on the top of her head. "And you're probably the only thing that's kept me from going insane."

"What do you mean?" Tiptoe asked, face still slightly red.

"I mean that you've been the one thing that's kept me from cracking. This whole thing... it's crazy. Last month, my biggest worry was making the trek to recast the spell on the purifier battery. And now..."

He raised a hoof and hovered it near his horn. "I can *feel* them. It's like a pressure, pushing against the edges of my horn, trying to get out. It wasn't very bad when all it was was the first fragment of Celestia, but now... Tiptoe, I'm carrying *pieces of the goddesses*. That's enough to drive anypony insane. You've been my lifeline, my one tie to my old life that I've had to cling to. I don't know what I would have done without you. I suppose it's a moot point, because I would have drowned a long time ago."

His hoof was shaking now with the effort of holding it aloft, and beads of sweat were forming on his brow. Tiptoe reached up and moved it down, and Jigsaw let out a breath.

"It's just..." he sighed. "I don't show it, but I'm scared. I don't know why *I'm* the one that got saddled with this. I don't know anything about the world out here! Surely there were more capable ponies than me. Incendia! She could do this so much better than I could. She knows how to fight! I just don't know if I can do this!"

He rolled over and wrapped his hooves tightly around Tiptoe's neck and squeezed. Tiptoe felt the warmth of Jigsaw against her again. The feeling seemed to travel through her entire body, leeching the chill out of her bones. The cold night air felt artificial in comparison.

"So, that's your purpose," he whispered into her ear. "You give me something to fight for."

~~~

Incendia lay on the other side of the fire, curled into a tight ball in a futile attempt to conserve heat. The light breeze that was blowing through the trees occasionally wafted the heat from the fire towards her, but that also came with snippets of Jigsaw and Tiptoe's conversation. Every word was like a spike being driven into her heart. She tried to focus on the crackling of the fire. Eventually, she managed to fall asleep.

She awoke to find something resting on her neck. She froze. Her instincts told her to catch fire and burn whatever was holding her down- her time in the resistance had taught her that waking up with something placed against her neck was not good. Then, it moved back and forth, and she realized what it was. It was a pony, and it was nuzzling her. She let out her tension with a breath.

"Are you awake?" came Jigsaw's voice, strangely loud in the silence of the forest.

Incendia sat up to look at him. "What are you doing?"

Jigsaw was barely visible in the fading light from the dying fire. Clearly, no pony had bothered to get up and add new twigs. Incendia was just able to make out half his face in the light from the embers. It was for this reason that it took her several moments to identify the expression on his face- shame.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I said when you went to get the statue during the fight with Tantalus. You've proven yourself to be one of the kindest, most loyal ponies I have ever known, and you deserve better."

He bowed his head low to the ground.

“Jigsaw, I...” she wasn’t sure how to respond. She had forgotten about his words, written them off as exactly what they were- meaningless words shouted in the heat of an emotional moment, while she was doing something that looked mightily suspicious. She had no idea he felt so strongly about them.

“I forgive you. It’s fine, honestly, I understand,” she stammered. Jigsaw raised his head slowly. Even this small action seemed to have exhausted him.

“Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

With that he turned and made his way back around the dying fire pit and carefully laid himself down next to the still-sleeping pegasus.

Incendia turned away from the fire, her mind racing. In his state, it must have cost Jigsaw an immense amount of willpower to do that.

Her mind went back to her time in the resistance- the endless parade of ponies that would come and go, inevitably getting captured or killed in combat operations. None stayed for long, nothing was constant. She had only ever gotten close to one, but she had gone just as quickly as the others.

This was an old pain, though. Hardened by years of fighting and struggle, of issues so much larger than just herself. She hadn’t ever put herself first, why should she start to now, when others still depended on her?

Still, she couldn’t help but feel the warm tingle of joy. Jigsaw obviously cared about her more than she knew. The words of the thing guarding the fragment of Luna came back to her once more. *“Don’t be so quick to give up on your own happiness.”*

Incendia focused all her energy on the pile of embers and ash, and a small flame flickered to life in the center of the pit. She didn’t even notice the cold as she curled up near it and went back to sleep.

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Tiptoe woke first, tiny tongues of flame still burning in the fire pit, in spite of the fact that the fire had long since burned out. The stars were every bit as bright as they had ever been.

In a few minutes, everypony had been awoken. Their goal was immediately apparent- food. Their hunger had grown so severe over the night that they could hardly focus on anything else. They barely even exchanged words of greeting. Instead, with a wave of her horn, Incendia extinguished the few remaining tongues of flame in the fire pit and the group made their way westward- away from the baleful light of the moon and towards the warmth of the sun.

The walk was even more tedious than the climb up the mountainside staircase had been. Their stomachs seemed to protest with every step, screaming for them to eat something, but there was no food in sight. The forest blocked out what pitiful light from the sun that managed to reach this far, and the ground was utterly bare.

Finally, they made it through the copse of trees and out onto the snowy ground beyond. Their hearts sank. There was no green outside the forest. To their left, a hill sloped gently up and curved away out of sight. The light from the sliver of sun peeking over the horizon was reflecting off the snow, causing them to squint, but this was only a mild irritation. They were appreciative for what little warmth it provided. The breeze was also blowing from the west, the warm air causing the snow to become a slushy slurry under their hooves. Jigsaw realized dimly this had to be how the trees got their water.

Suddenly, he paused. "Wait!" he shouted to the others, who had begun to walk away from the hill. They paused and turned to face him.

"What is it, Jigsaw?" Tiptoe asked, a note of concern in her voice. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine!" Jigsaw said excitedly. "I think I just figured out where we can find food! Tiptoe, fly around and check the other side of the hill!"

Tiptoe opened her mouth to ask why, but Jigsaw's eyes were so alight with excitement that she instead flapped her wings and flew into the sky. She saw the Jigsaw was right almost immediately after takeoff.

When she was only a few dozen feet off the ground, green began to peek its way over the crest of the hill.

"Grass!" Tiptoe shouted in delight to the other ponies back on the ground. "There's grass on the other side of the hill!"

Incendia and Jigsaw didn't need to hear anything else. They took off towards the hill, galloping as fast as they could towards the promise of food. Tiptoe noticed, with a stab of worry, that Jigsaw was noticeably slower than Incendia and was panting heavily.

With an awful pang of hunger, however, her eyes were drawn back to the sloping green hill.

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An hour later, the hill had been almost entirely stripped of grass. Jigsaw, Tiptoe, and Incendia sat at the top of the hill, trying to let their meal settle. They had eaten far more than they were used to. Not because the grass had been particularly tasty- it wasn't. It was short and chewy, tainted with the unpleasant taste of dirt and- Jigsaw thought- magic. Either way, they were full, and finally were able to think clearly.

"Oh, by Luna's horn, let's not ever go that long without food again," Incendia said.

"Agreed," Tiptoe added, giggling.

Incendia smiled, then turned her gaze toward Jigsaw. "So, where's the next fragment?"

Jigsaw looked conflicted, as though he wasn't sure what to say. He bit his lower lip.

"It's... far away. But I think there's something I should show you first."

The other two ponies watched curiously as Jigsaw pulled the saddlebags off his back and upturned them. The only thing that fell out was the pile of parts for the teleporter.

“I think I can fix it,” Jigsaw began, “but only partially. The problem is the power source is dead, and we don’t exactly have a supply of refined goddess energy to recharge this one. We need to find a new power source.”

“Jigsaw, where are we going to find something capable of outputting that kind of magical energy?” Incendia chimed in incredulously. “They were hard enough to find back in Stalliongrad.”

Jigsaw smiled at this and looked slyly at the two ponies.

“That’s why I’m going to make one.”

# Chapter 22

Incendia stared at Jigsaw, eyes wide, her mouth moving soundlessly as she struggled to find words strong enough to express her disbelief. Finally, she found her voice.

“Are you *crazy*?” she shouted. “Do you understand how long it took the Resistance to find one of those? We didn’t make it! The only one who ever did was Rubidium himself and the top scientific minds of the city! It took us months to steal one, and even longer to reverse-engineer it to work in the teleporter! That was the only device we ever managed to make, and even then it never worked quite right. Ours was always rougher than the real thing.”

Tiptoe reflected uncomfortably on the sensation of Incendia’s shoulder-mounted teleporter. It felt as though they were being peeled apart every time they had used it.

“I don’t actually intend on fixing the teleporter,” Jigsaw said, “I intend on modifying it to operate under a new spell.”

Incendia’s incredulity shifted to curiosity. “What kind of spell? I didn’t even know you could put other spells in there.”

“We may not have advanced as far as you Stalliongrad ponies did, but we did make some new discoveries. We got pretty good at enchanting things and wringing every last bit of power out of what we had on hoof.”

“The next fragment is located halfway around the world. On the sunny side. We’re going to need a vehicle to get there.”

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“Foolish!”

Tantalus’ roar shook the piles of gems loose, sending them cascading down to the stone floor, many of them smashing into pieces on impact. The

cracked blue gem stayed firmly on the pedestal, however. It was still issuing beams of golden light and vibrating slightly.

Tantalus bent down to examine it, though he was careful not to let any of that light strike his face. The gem was covered in a spiderweb of cracks, several of which ran almost to its center. Tantalus took a deep breath and blew out softly. A noxious green cloud seeped out from between his lips and squirmed into the cracks on the shiny blue surface. The golden light slowly diminished in brilliance, until after an agonizing few seconds, a dull emerald glimmer began to shine from deep within the gem. Tantalus let out a sigh of relief and put his face into the beams of green light. His skin started to sizzle and burn under the baleful radiance but he didn't move. He was lost in thought.

Worry gripped him- genuine worry, the likes of which he had not experienced in ten millenia. The meddlesome ponies now had two fragments, one from each goddess. But even worse than that...

He had been tricked! Forced to retreat, and by a denizen of *Stalliongrad*, no less! He could barely stand the insult.

He turned his face away from the gem and looked out towards the mouth of the cave, a small smile begin to tug at the ends of his reptilian lips. He had, at least, managed to kill one of them, even if it had allowed for that wretched unicorn to pull her trick.

He also knew their location. If he acted quickly, he could strike while they were weakened.

He made his way back, deeper into the cave, kicking aside the loose gemstones, sending them skittering across the stone floor. Soon, he came to a small alcove. The room was lined with tall, cluttered bookshelves, most of their contents moldy or damaged beyond recognition. Nevertheless, many were still standing proudly. In the center of the room was a small desk- one far too small for him to use- but it was stacked high with parchment.

It was time to write a letter.

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A warm wind was blowing from the west, helping to take the edge off the chill. They had been walking steadily westward for the better part of the day, and the terrain had begun to reflect their efforts. A green carpet was laid out under their hooves and small shrubs with bright red berries were becoming increasingly common, along with rolling hills. Tiptoe was regularly forced to fly up to the tops of them to scout ahead.

“Jigsaw, what exactly are you hoping to find?” Incendia said. She was limping again, the gash on her flank still obviously painful.

“We’re bound to run into something if we keep this up long enough, I’m sure. Besides, we needed to get to somewhere with food. I didn’t really expect us to find ruins and build it in a day,” Jigsaw replied, rolling his eyes.

“Shhh!” came a hiss from the top of the nearest hill. Tiptoe had flown ahead and was now staring at something out of sight, her ears flat against her head. She began to make her way back down the face of the hill slowly and silently, not turning her back to the hill till she had reached Jigsaw and Incendia.

“There are three other ponies just over that hill collecting berries from one of the bushes,” Tiptoe said in a whisper, her voice tense with apprehension. “What should we do?”

Jigsaw’s eyes widened with excitement. “Other ponies? They might lead us back to civilization! We have to talk to them!”

“Are you sure about this?” Tiptoe said, her ears still flat against her head.

“Don’t worry, Tiptoe,” Incendia said, a note of pride evident in her voice, “if they start trouble, they’ll have to go through me first. I killed a dragon, remember?”

Tiptoe chuckled, and an uneasy smile replaced her worried frown. “Alright, I suppose. They can’t be any worse than Tantalus, anyway.”

Jigsaw nodded and began to climb up the hill, followed closely behind by Incendia.

At the foot of the hill were three earth ponies, picking berries out of the bushes with their mouths and putting them into small baskets around their necks.

“Hello!” Jigsaw called out. The three ponies looked up in alarm, dropping their mouth-fulls of berries onto the ground.

“We don’t mean you any harm!” Jigsaw shouted down at them. “We’re... peaceful explorers. May we come down?”

The three earth ponies shared a glance, then one of them stepped forward. His fur was emerald green, with a cutie mark that resembled a sapling, and his face was creased with concern. When he spoke, the words tumbled out of his mouth, as though he was reciting something from memory. “Halt in the name of mighty Luna! We are citizens of Totemhoof, endowed with all the rights and privileges that come with that post. If you show any signs of aggression, we will be forced to react accordingly.”

Jigsaw glanced over his shoulder at Incendia and Tiptoe before repeating his previous statement. The three unknown ponies took a step backwards, their eyes darting wildly back and forth, clearly unsure of what to do.

The same one with the sapling cutie mark advanced again and continued, his voice sounding marginally more firm, though his brow was glistening with nervous sweat. “Follow us. The elder must be informed of new visitors.”

“But we just want to talk,” Jigsaw insisted.

“We can’t. Y-you have to follow us.”

Jigsaw couldn’t understand why the mysterious group of ponies looked so nervous to be leading them, but he quickly shrugged it off and signaled for the other two to follow him. They crested the hill and fell into line behind the green earth pony. He kept glancing back at them and whispering things to the other two earth ponies, whose eyes were locked resolutely forward.

“Are you sure we should be following them?” Tiptoe whispered from beside Jigsaw. The sudden sound made him jump. Fortunately, the three mysterious earth ponies did not seem to have noticed.

“I’m not very happy about it either, but I don’t think we really have much of a choice. They said they were citizens of somewhere! That means they may have vehicles!”

“If they have vehicles, why are these ponies on hoof? We can’t count on this place being as advanced as Stalliongrad, and if you remember, Stalliongrad had certain trade-offs too!” Tiptoe hissed.

“I know, I know. But, honestly, what could we find there that would be worse than Stalliongrad?”

“I’m not really anxious to find out,” Tiptoe grumbled.

They walked for about an hour in silence after that. As they moved deeper west, the hills became steeper and more numerous, but they didn’t have to climb them. The earth ponies led them on a winding track through the valleys formed in between the hills, their baskets rattling around their necks, until finally, the leading earth pony stopped and turned to face them.

“We’re about to enter the village. If you speak the truth about your intentions, you will have nothing to fear.”

Jigsaw was surprised- his voice sounded much stronger and more confident. He brushed aside a branch from one of the ubiquitous bushes to reveal a small horn, seemingly carved out of bone. The earth pony took it in his mouth and gave two short blasts, the sound echoing off the steep hills.

Two much higher-pitched blasts came a moment later, and the earth pony nodded resolutely and jerked his head towards the bend in the path.

“Through here.”

Rounding the bend, Totemhoof was clearly visible. Nestled between two great hills, the village was almost entirely isolated from the surrounding countryside. What looked like the remnants of a radio tower was sticking out of one of the hills, the top of which was obscured by a thick blanket of cloud, which extended over the rest of the village. The buildings themselves were small and looked as though they had been assembled out of scrap metal, wood, and bits of other buildings. Though there were small silver light posts every few dozen yards, Jigsaw’s heart sank- there were



clearly no advanced technology here. The village was certainly no metropolis- Jigsaw couldn't imagine more than five hundred or so ponies living in it.

What drew his eye most, however, was a building that was easily twice the size of any other in the village. It was located about halfway up the steep hill to the radio tower and appeared to have been constructed with much more care than any other in the village. It was a massive cathedral, with a giant sun-and-moon in front of it, easily the largest they had seen thus far. This one, however, was subtly different- the crescent moon was glowing intensely, while the sun seemed dull and unlit. Something about it made Jigsaw's stomach squirm, but he couldn't dwell on it, because a group of menacing-looking unicorns and pegasi were coming up the path towards them. They were dressed very peculiarly- each one wore robes of dark blue or purple and hoods which shrouded their faces, though the bladed staffs held in the mouths of the pegasi couldn't be mistaken.

One unicorn stepped forward. Jigsaw assumed he must be the leader due to his fine robes- intricately inlaid with stars and moons, and the purple fabric seemed to shimmer with an internal silvery light. He stood there for a moment before his horn began to shimmer a deep purple- the same color as his robes- and his hood fell.

His face was weathered and aged and his dark coat mottled with grey, but his eyes were bright and alert. When he spoke, his voice was strong and clear.

"I am the high priest of the Church of the Moon. Who are you?"

"My name is Jigsaw, and this is Tiptoe-" he gestured his head to his left, "- and Incendia."

"Where did you come from, and why?"

Jigsaw hesitated for a moment, unsure of how truthful he should be. "From the west. We're sort of... wandering. We ran into your group of berry pickers outside, and they led us here."

"Ah. Are you from Stalliongrad?" The priest asked casually.

Jigsaw opened his mouth to respond, but Incendia cut him off.

“You know about Stalliongrad?” she asked.

“Oh, my, yes. We’ve had several refugee groups trickle in over the last day or so, ever since Tantalus’ latest attack. Are you refugees, too?” the priest asked. With a flash of white light, a scroll of parchment and a narrow, brilliant cobalt-blue quill materialized out of the air near the elderly pony.

“Well, yes,” Incendia responded, not entirely untruthfully. “But we can’t stay long, we have to-”

“Nonsense!” the priest said. “Our doors are open to any Stalliongrad refugees. Any enemy of Tantalus’ are friends of ours.”

The elderly pony smiled at them, and the guards that flanked either side of the narrow passageway began to disperse. Jigsaw couldn’t help but notice that the priest’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

The priest began to walk down the winding path that led to the village, leaving it empty of ponies. Jigsaw took that as his cue to begin making his way down the passage. He glanced over his shoulder and was surprised to see that the group that had led them into the village was nowhere in sight. He could have sworn that they hadn’t walked ahead of them. Perhaps they had turned back?

It wasn’t worth dwelling on. He set off down the path, Tiptoe and Incendia on either side.

The pathway widened considerably as they cantered into the village, and it wasn’t long before the heavily trodden earth was replaced with a wide cobblestone street. Buildings were carved directly into the side of the hill, windows lit up from within. A creamy yellow stallion with a quill and inkwell cutie mark met them a small ways into the village, introducing himself as Quill Dipper, and led them away from the group of guards down a winding road which led deeper into the center of the village. The streets were packed with ponies of all kinds, and many of them nodded or called greetings as they passed. Before too long, however, their guide led them down a a relatively empty and narrow footpath.

Quill Dipper began to talk as the noise of the streets died down.

“Welcome to Totemhoof! I hope you’ll forgive our general state of disorganization, we’re really not used to getting new ponies, let alone hundreds.”

“Hundreds of other ponies survived Stalliongrad?” Incendia asked, her ears darting up in surprise.

“Yeah, we’re about a day’s journey west of Stalliongrad, as the pegasus flies. We’ve been having groups of those refugees showing up since yesterday, and we’ve been settling them in some of the empty buildings,” he said. He repeated the next line so softly that Jigsaw could barely hear him. “We have a lot of those.”

“Why is the cloud cover so heavy here? It was pretty clear before we got into the valley,” Tiptoe said.

“Ah, that’s due to our team of expert weather pegasi! Unlike the rest of modern Equestria, we keep a firm control of the weather. We believe the only way to the future is to recapture the ways of the past and to give glory to the great moon goddess. That’s one of the most important things you should know about life here- we are almost all members of the Church of the Moon, dedicated to the worship of Luna. The moon has provided for all our needs and we lend it our devotion in thanks.”

The passed by a small garden. A small, blue earth pony filly and her mother were digging in the dirt, dropping seeds into the holes and pouring water on the mounds of dirt behind them. Jigsaw took a deep breath through his nose, the sent of the fruit growing on the vines filling his lungs. Vividly, memories of his limited time in the Arboretum came flooding back to him. With the heavy layer of cloud above, he could almost pretend the valley had a ceiling. It felt more like home than anything else had.

He looked over his shoulder at Tiptoe, and she smiled back at him.

The continued to make their way up the path until they arrived at a small metal building with a pointed roof.

“Sorry, but this is the only building we had available for you. It’s a little small for three of you, and we haven’t hooked up electric lights yet, but you won’t have to share it with anypony else.”

“Thank you for doing this, honestly, but I can’t imagine we’ll stay long. We can’t afford to linger too much.”

Quill Dipper smiled wryly. “That’s what they all say. Don’t worry, you’re safe from Tantalus here. We have our defenses.”

Jigsaw suppressed a doubtful snicker. Quill Dipper led them into the house, showing them around the four-room interior. He wasn’t exaggerating when he said it was small- they barely had enough room for them to walk around without bumping into each other. There was only one bedroom, but after only a few minutes inside the house, two pegasi came swooping down from the clouds, clutching a mattress with a pillow on it in between their teeth.

“It’s just temporary, until we get more supplies,” Quill Dipper assured them. “Until then, two of you are going to have to share a bed. I hope that won’t be an issue.”

“I don’t think it will be,” Jigsaw said, glancing at Tiptoe, who was standing behind Quill Dipper. She blushed intensely and mouthed “Jigsaw!” indignantly, though her small smile betrayed her true feelings.

Incendia simply swallowed hard and looked at the bare mattress lying unceremoniously on the floor of the small building.

Quill Dipper did a sweeping survey of the room. “Well, I suppose that will just about do it for you tonight. You’ll hear the morning announcement when the work day officially starts, and from then on, the turn of the hour will be announced until the night cycle. It’s how we keep time here. Right now it’s early night. I’ll be back at noon tomorrow to show you ponies around more.”

He paused for a moment, and when he resumed, his voice was soft. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you, having your home destroyed like that. If I ever lost Totemhoof, I don’t think I would have the strength to carry on. I just hope we can help heal your wounds. Welcome to Totemhoof. You really are welcome here.”

Jigsaw nodded respectfully, a knot forming in his stomach over the lies of omission he had made to get here.

Quill Dipper turned to leave, and almost made it outside the door before Incendia blurted out “Wait!”

Quill Dipper turned, “Yes?”

“Why are you doing this? Helping the refugees, I mean? What do you get out of it?”

Quill Dipper smiled. “I told you, we worship Luna and the night. We would be remiss if we didn’t offer a place to rest.”

He left and closed the door behind him. The torches on the wall flickered, their smoke drawn towards small triangular vents cut into the ceiling.

Jigsaw yawned. “This was certainly an unexpected development, but the concept of sleeping on an actual bed is too attractive for me to dwell on it now. We’ll regroup in the morning.”

“Sounds good to me,” Incendia said, curling up on her mattress near the doorway.

Jigsaw and Tiptoe went into the bedroom, closing the simple wooden door behind them.

Incendia’s mind raced. She was ecstatic that some of Stalliongrad’s inhabitants had survived. She couldn’t imagine how they escaped, but it didn’t matter to her. She was so relieved, in fact, that she was almost unaffected by the giggling and creaking sounds coming from behind the closed door at the other end of the room.

Almost.

Incendia lit her horn and snuffed out the flames of the torch and pulled her pillow up over her ears.

# Chapter 23

Jigsaw found himself standing in a verdant field. Flowers of all shapes and sizes bloomed around him and the air was fresh and clean. The sun was almost directly overhead, but it wasn't harsh or burning. It felt pleasant against his skin, warm, life-affirming. Now that he had felt it, the light of the midday sun, he wondered how he had lasted so long without it, and how he could ever go back to the pale imitation of the sun that resided on the surface now, or the heartless light of arcane fire or electric filaments.

There were ponies, too. To the right, and a short distance ahead, a small town was visible. A majestic clock tower grew from the center of town, the hands having just recently struck noon. The skies above were criss-crossed with pegasi, flitting to and fro among the clouds. Jigsaw took a deep breath, allowing the cool air to fill his lungs, filling him with energy.

Then, as he watched, a green shockwave emanated from somewhere beyond sight and began to spread, inching unrelentingly towards the town and the field and all the frolicking ponies in it. Just before it reached him, Jigsaw closed his eyes. His coat stood on end, and he heard the sound of distant screaming.

He took a breath in and nearly choked. The air was smothering and dank. He opened his eyes.

He was underground, back in the caves of his youth. The musty, humid air suddenly invaded his lungs, bringing with it, a wave of panic that slowly subsided. After taking a few moments to compose himself, he set off at a

trot, passing by the flickering lights, placed at uneven intervals throughout the tunnel.

He came into a large atrium. On either side of him, carefully carved stone staircases led up the ledges in the yellowish rock of the cavern. He was back in the main chamber. Ponies bustled around, pipes clutched in their mouths, notepads levitated in front of them. In the center of the chamber was the council chambers, jutting up towards the ceiling like some thorn in the earth, wide at the base and narrowing as it went up before ending in a flared tip. Jigsaw made his way inside the doors. The carvings on its surface seemed to writhe and squirm at him as he passed- images of ponies cowering from the sun, the large metal door slamming shut, the bolts sealing them both inside and out.

He walked into the lobby and made his way down the stairs into his office: a small room, deep underground the main chamber, decorated with blazing arcane torches and bisected by a network of pipes, gauges, and a small bronze fountain, which he had made himself and which depicted a beautiful pegasus pouring water out of a large jug and into a small pipe which led down into the floor of the office.

Jigsaw shut the door and the lights immediately shut themselves off, plunging him into near-total darkness. He attempted to light his horn, but to his horror, he found it was gone. The magic welled up inside him and dissipated. Before the terror of his situation set in fully, the scene before him was suddenly illuminated. He was standing on a floor made of a strange, slippery, metallic substance, and before him a mountain of the stuff grew. At its crest was the council building, larger than life, and next to it, a giant replica of the fountain stood.

He was drawn to it inexorably, but as he moved, the metallic material of the mountain began to collapse and slough away, crumbling and cracking under his feet. The tower fell, crushing the fountain, and the ground under Jigsaw gave way.

He was falling now, chunks of metal raining down around him. There was no floor, no ceiling, and no walls, only black nothingness as far as he could see. Black and chunks of metal, and that was all there was.

Then, from one of the chunks, a figure burst forth. Tiptoe flew towards him, a yellow streak in the featureless black of the landscape and the mirror-like surface of the metal.

Tiptoe scooped him up and began to fly up, towards a bright light directly above, the disk of the sun, but her flight was erratic and jerking. Jigsaw turned his head and was shocked to discover she only had one wing. She was flapping it for all she was worth, but it wasn't enough to support his weight. With one final effort, she gave a mighty flap, bringing them tantalizingly close to their goal, before they fell back, falling down into the black gloom, faster and faster, towards that field near the town of death and darkness...

Jigsaw awoke with a start, shivering from the cold. It seemed he had kicked all the blankets off his body in his sleep. Tiptoe slumbered next to him, so entangled in the covers that only her head was visible. There was light outside the window of the small room, causing long stripes to be projected out of the slats covering the windows. Totemhoof was awake.

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Half an hour later, Jigsaw, Incendia, and Tiptoe were gathered in the small kitchen. Incendia was chopping a long, slender green root into slices and magicking them onto rectangular plates. Jigsaw had never seen it before, but Incendia swore up and down they were delicious. Hesitantly, Jigsaw lifted a slice up to his mouth and took a bite.

“Oh, Goddesses!” he gagged. “That’s disgusting!” The root tasted bitter, like spoiled fruit, but he was the only one that seemed to mind.

“You’re crazy,” Incendia said, dropping several slices into her mouth and chewing greedily. “These are delicious.”

Before Jigsaw could respond, however, he heard the front door to the house creak open. Through the doorframe and the dim light from the torches, Jigsaw could make out the shape of Quill Dipper entering the house.

“Jigsaw? Is anypony home?” he called. He had two weighty saddlebags draped over his back, and he looked exhausted.

Jigsaw walked out to the living room and called for the others to follow.

Quill Dipper greeted them and shrugged the saddlebags off his back. They hit the ground with a dull *thump*.

“Good morning, everypony!” he said, panting slightly from the exertion of carrying the bags. “I trust you all slept well?”

“Best night’s sleep I’ve had in a long time,” Jigsaw said.

“I’m glad to hear that,” replied Quill Dipper. “Today is going to be a busy day for you all!”

Without further ado, he opened up the heavy burlap saddlebags which Jigsaw could tell was full of clutter, and pulled out three pairs of much smaller saddlebags, and three scrolls of rolled-up parchment.

“These are yours! You’re lucky you came when you did. We had some extras! Now, we’re stretched a little thin today because of the-” he stopped for a moment, then shook his head and continued. “We’re stretched a little thin, so we can’t give you the usual tour. All I can really do is give you these.”

He unrolled one the tubes of parchment to reveal a beautifully illustrated map of Totemhoof.

“This ought to direct you to anywhere you might need to go. I don’t have a map of the skies for your pegasi companion there, but I’m sure she can handle herself well enough on her own in the air, right?” he said with an absentminded smile.

“Thank you,” Jigsaw said, “this is very generous.”

“Don’t mention it,” Quill Dipper said. “Now, I’m sorry, but I really must go now. I’m already late!”

“Really, we do appreciate it-” Jigsaw began, but Quill Dipper threw his saddlebags back over his shoulder and began to make his way out.

“I’ll talk to you all later!” he called, hurrying out the door.

“That was odd,” Jigsaw said. One of the maps flew into the air in a hazy cloud of blue light, unfurling at hoof’s distance from Jigsaw. The calligraphy was beautiful, and the lines on the map were crisp and clear. At the bottom lefthand corner of the map was a stylized image of a quill and the name “Quill Dipper”.

Jigsaw cracked a smile and curled the map back up and stuck it in one of the saddlebags.

“So what are we supposed to do?” Incendia said.

Jigsaw turned to find them looking at him expectantly.

“Well, don’t look at me! I don’t know any more than you do. I suppose we’ll just do what Quill Dipper said. Wander around the town, see the sights.”

“I’m not convinced that’s such a good idea,” Incendia said, shuffling her front hooves.

"I really don't think the townsfolk mean us any harm. If they did, they would have done something when we were asleep, wouldn't they? Or have poisoned the food in the kitchen, or something," Jigsaw said dismissively.

"I still don't know," Incendia said.

Jigsaw sighed and focused all his attention on Incendia. Her ears were pressed flat against her head, and her pupils were wide.

"I understand why you're nervous," Jigsaw said, "but this isn't Stalliongrad. I don't know why, but this place- it *feels* better. I think we're okay here."

"I know, I know," Incendia said, "it's just that this place brings back memories. I thought I was away from Stalliongrad, then this place came right out of nowhere and- and I wasn't ready, is all. I'll be fine."

"You *did* get away from Stalliongrad," Jigsaw said.

Incendia nodded, and began to make her way towards the door. Jigsaw and Tiptoe grabbed their saddlebags and maps and followed.

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The door opened, and the intensity of the light made Tiptoe blink and squint. When her eyes got the chance to adjust to the harsh light, she was shocked at what she saw. The sky above was still blocked off with clouds, which seemed to glow with an internal light. The strange, ominous radio tower protruded out from the hilltop, but something was noticeably different about it. Near the top of the tower, searing through the clouds, was an enormous glowing orb, bright enough to illuminate the streets of the town below. It wasn't quite daylight, but everything was easily visible. Curling up the sides of the tower, like vines, were heavy cables pulsing with light, like giant fiber optic cables. Near the center of the sky was a brightly illuminated patch of cloud. Black specs- Tiptoe thought they must be pegasi.

When she turned back to point this out to the others, she found they had disappeared while she was staring at the clouds. From all over the town, pegasi were flying up, wings flapping furiously as they shot up into the sky. Tiptoe wasn't sure if she should join them or not.

She set off down the narrow sidewalk. Their house was built rather high on one of the hills that encircled the town, and most of the buildings near it were unoccupied, so Tiptoe had to walk for several minutes before she came across anypony else. An elderly electric blue earth pony was walking around her garden, a bag of feed clutched in her mouth. Every few seconds she would shake the bag, sending a spray of feed to the ground below. In the corner of the yard was a chicken coop, full of loudly squawking chickens, just waiting to be let out.

Tiptoe cleared her throat nervously.

The earth pony looked up at her and dropped her bag of feed. "Was there something you needed, dear?" she said, cocking her head to one side.

"Yeah, I was just wondering... I'm, uh, a refugee of Stalliongrad, and I'm not sure where I'm supposed to go," she said, stumbling over her words.

The earth pony smiled. "The immigrant pegasi usually report for concealment duty, just like the natives. They'll teach you up."

"Concealment duty?" Tiptoe asked. "Where is that?"

"The sky, of course!" she said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "Goodness, you are new, aren't you? Where's your guide?"

"M-my guide?" Tiptoe said, taking a step back unconsciously.

"Your guide!" the elder pony exclaimed. "They sent out a notice to every household the day before yesterday, giving procedures on how the immigrants are to be handled. You are to be shown around with a guide. Luna wills it!"

"I... took a wrong turn. Got separated. Please, can you just tell me where to go?"

"The hole in the clouds. Be careful, her will obscures." The elderly pony said, her eyes focusing on the bright area in the sky.

"Thank you," Tiptoe said awkwardly, backing away from the earth pony and her garden. She made her feel uncomfortable.

Deciding she really didn't have any other option, she extended her wings. She paused for a moment, savoring the anticipation that came before flight, then flapped her wings down. With a buffet of air and a gentle swirling of dust, she left the ground.

When she was only a few dozen yards, it suddenly hit her that she had never flown up to cloud level before. In fact, she had never really flown much higher than a hundred feet or so. She hovered in mid air for a moment, watching the few remaining straggler pegasi take off into the sky. For a moment, panic gripped. What if she fell? Did she have the skills to catch herself?

But then she felt the wind, the warm breeze blowing from the west. The weightless sensation flying gave. The freedom, and the promise of something new to explore directly above.

She soared upwards, feeling the changes in the air currents, the updrafts and downdrafts, the give-and-take of flying, until she burst through the cloud layer.

What she saw nearly made her fall right out of the sky. All around her, sculpted out of cloud, was an entire second town. The moon, bright and silvery, was visible in the east, and most of the buildings were turned to face it. Pegasi were bustling around, trotting right on the surface of the cloud, going to and fro between the buildings in the clouds. Some, in uniform, were marching out to the west, while others, dressed in yellow, were flitting about in the air, catching stray bits of cloud and redirecting them to where they were needed. The most striking aspect of the city in the clouds, however, was the sculptures.

Larger than life, they were molded out of cloud in the shape of ponies of every sort, though pegasi were by far the most common. They appeared to be leaping and bounding up the center of the cloud city, faces turned towards the moon, each sculpture spaced a few dozen yards apart, flanking the main street. As they got closer to the eastern edge of the city, towards the moon, they began to take on more and more desperate appearances. They were crawling, hooves outstretched. At the edge of the cloud city, the barrier where the cloud floor ended and the sky began, stood an enormous sculpture of an alicorn- Luna herself, molded out of dark

storm clouds, wings outstretched to encircle the moon. It made Tiptoe decidedly uncomfortable.

To the west, the top of the radio tower poked through the clouds, providing illumination to the entire cloud city. Tiptoe couldn't help but notice that not only were there no buildings anywhere near it, but there were no ponies- not within three hundred yards, at least.

She began to make her way east, towards the strange statue of Luna. It took her longer than she thought- the statue never seemed to get any closer as she walked forward, though the tower behind got farther and farther away, until she suddenly found her self at the edge of the layer of cloud, directly under the torso of the gargantuan sculpture. It looked so much larger close up. Her thoughts wandered back to the thing that had been protecting the fragment- and she shuddered.

The clouds did something odd when they reached the end of the city limits. Instead of dissipating and spreading like natural clouds, they billowed and poured over the edge, creeping all the way down to the edge of the hills and sliding over, forming a thick fog that covered most of the land below. It was like watching a cloud waterfall in slow motion, tumbling over the precipice.

"You really shouldn't stand that close to the edge, you know."

Tiptoe spun around to find that a grey pegasus was standing directly behind her, a scowl on his face.

"We can't do anything if you fall here. Your wings won't help you, either."

"Who are you?" Tiptoe spluttered.

"Probably who you're supposed to be with. Stalliongrad refugee, right? It's not hard to tell. You look like you've never stepped hoof on a cloud in all your days until just now. Bet you never even made so much as a drizzle."

"Uh, yeah, I am," Tiptoe said.

"My name's Thunderclap and I'm supposed to teach you foals about weatherworking. What are you doing over here? Nopony's suppose to

come this far east unless they have business over here, and *you* most assuredly don't."

"I got separated from my group," Tiptoe said defensively, "and if nopony's supposed to be over here, what are you doing here?"

The peagusus narrowed his eyes.

"I *live* here," he said, gesturing to a small building near one of the front hooves of the sculpture.

"Oh."

The grey pegasus stared at Tiptoe for a moment longer, then rolled his eyes and turned away. "Follow me."

Tiptoe hesitated for a moment, then began cantering off behind Thunderclap. She couldn't help glancing over her shoulder at the massive sculpture of Luna, and the dull, crumbing orb framed by its wings. She felt a stab of sadness- a longing for something she had never known.

An hour later, Tiptoe was seated on a small translucent stool with a group of about thirty other pegasi of all shapes and sizes. Most looked to be in significantly worse condition than she was. Many were missing large patches of feathers. One had such a large gash across his face he could barely open his left eye.

Thunderclap paced back and forth on the cloud surface, looking the group over, the perpetual scowl clearly etched on his face.

Without warning, he pounded his front hooves down on the ground and flapped his wings. He soared up in the air, taking a large column of cloud with him. With a few deft wing flaps and a single buck from his back legs, the cloud began to condense and rain- directly onto Tiptoe and the group.

"This is quite possibly the most important job in the entire city. Weatherworking allows us to stay hidden from those that would do us harm and gives us the water to provide crops. Luna's grace may be great, but even She cannot summon clouds from nothing. They are drawn here from

farther west, but they're hard to come by, understand? Do not ever let me catch you wasting a cloud, understand?"

"Now then. Let me ask you all a question. Did any of you stumble across this place by accident? Did you just waltz into the city limits?"

A few ponies shook their heads, and a few weak "no"s rose from the group, but Thunderclap pounded down on the clouds. A huge flash of light and a monstrous boom echoed out from under him.

"No, *sir!*" he shouted. "If you expect to be doing this job, I expect proper discipline!"

"Yes, sir!" the group called.

"Excellent. Now, how many of you have worked the weather before?"

One hoof raised uneasily into the air.

"Step forward."

Tiptoe watched as a very small brown pegasus made her way off her stool and stood in front of Thunderclap.

"What did you work?" he asked.

"I moved a cloud that managed to get inside the city shield," she said. "Just once."

Thunderclap was silent for a moment.

"That's it? You moved *one cloud*?"

"Yes, I was a servant in one of Rubidiu-"

"I didn't ask for your life story," Thunderclap said quietly. "Go sit back down."

The brown pegasus hurried quickly back to her seat.



“Now, here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to give you all areas of the town. Your job is to make sure that the rain that’s scheduled to happen today *happens*. If it doesn’t, it’s on your throat. Luna be with you, you’ll need it!” Thunderclap said.

Before long, Tiptoe had been assigned to some nondescript patch of grey cloud. The area was apparently over a farm and was scheduled for heavy rainfall, so there were three other pegasi in the area, all flapping their wings and bucking the cloud to try and squeeze water out of it. The clouds swirled and shifted, but nothing more than a few drops got squeezed out.

Tiptoe fared no better. The clouds seemed to obey her even less than the other ponies. She kicked and bucked, flapped and flew, but the cloud just billowed and drifted away, forcing her to corral it back into the blanket of cloud. Even the other pegasi were giggling. She just couldn’t understand why she couldn’t get it to rain. It was just water, after all...

Suddenly, an idea hit her. This was just water, right? She knew about how water worked. She’d been groomed to operate a huge network of water, after all. What was this but slightly more primitive water management? She turned her head and looked at the feather on her flank. This may not have been her special talent, but she knew she could do this. She *had* to.

She dived through the clouds, barreling through a blanket of grey until she burst out the other side. She hovered just underneath the clouds and flapped her wings- once, twice, three times. The clouds billowed and swirled under the buffets of air, rising up into the sky. When she was satisfied with the result, she flew upward again, punching through the clouds. The other pegasi had stopped to stare at the huge wall of clouds which was now advancing steadily upwards. Then, she began flying around the clouds, closing the distance around the cloud with each revolution, until she had compacted the clouds into a narrow pillar of quickly rotating cloud.

From that point, all she could do was wait and mutter a prayer to Luna.

The pillar began to sink under its own weight and turn grey. She dove down through the cloud layer again, and began to push up on the grey pillar of cloud now trying to poke its way out of the sky. She pumped her wings as hard as she could until-

Rain.

The water poured out, a nearly solid sheet that almost caused Tiptoe to fall out of the air. Before she could lose control, however, the water broke apart into narrow droplets and began falling down towards the green carpet below.

She hovered, letting the water soak into her coat, looking up at the circle of cloud she had made.

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She didn't listen to Thunderclap's admonishment of her "unorthodox" style, or that she had sent way too much rain over a far too small area, or that she could have hurt herself flying below the clouds. She didn't listen to the adulation of the two ponies who had been working near her, who insisted that Thunderclap himself probably couldn't have made so much rain out of such a small cloud. Her mind was still down there, in the weird light of the tower, with the rain spattering on her face. When she headed back down to the ground at the end of the day, she was freezing cold, exhausted, and happier than she had been in a very long time.

She arrived at the house at roughly the same time as Incendia, who was smoldering slightly. She could feel the heat coming off of her from a few feet away and kept her distance.

"Tough day?" Tiptoe asked.

"You could say that," replied Incendia. She smiled weakly and they went into the brightly lit house together.

Chapter 24

Incendia made her way down a cobblestone pathway which weaved in between the many short buildings built into the side of the hill. She was reminded vividly of Stalliongrad- the buildings here seemed to have been pieced together out of plates of metal from some long-demolished structure, just as they had been in the slums of Stalliongrad.

This place was different, however- most of the metal surfaces were glossy and reflected the bright light from the streetlamps and the veiled luminescence of the distant radio tower. The buildings stood strong and sturdy, and almost all of them had lights gleaming out of the windows. Up and down the road, ponies were leaving their homes, some pulling wagons filled with tools or green food. Incendia's stomach gave a sudden grumble. Whatever she had eaten that morning hadn't filled her up very much.

She approached a rather bland-looking elderly brown earth pony who was pulling a small cart stacked high with shining tubes, which appeared to be made out of some kind of crystalline glass. She asked him if he knew where she could find food. The earth pony opened his mouth to answer, but caught himself when he saw the circular indent in Incendia's shoulder.

"Yer one of them Stalliongrad refugees, ain't ya?" he said after several seconds of silence.

"Yes, I am," Incendia said. "Is that a problem?"

"Ain't no problem," the earth pony said, "just might be difficult fer ya to get yer hands on some food without any money. Try old Cloverhoof's market over yonder, he's always been kind to charity cases."

"Charity cases?" Incendia huffed. "It's hardly my fault that I don't have any money!"

“Woah now, don’t split yer bit,” the elderly pony said quickly, “ah just meant that not a lot a’ folks around here would be willing to hoof a bill like that, refugee or not. Y’all got one of them maps they hand out to you folk, right?”

Incendia rolled her eyes, but her horn began to glow and the map that Quill Dipper had left her flew out of the bag slung over her back and unfurled in mid-air.

“Well, we’re here, an’ yer gonna want to head in that direction,” the earth pony said, jabbing a hoof at a large green area next to a small fountain. “Can yer see how to get there from here?”

“I think I can,” Incendia replied, studying the map.

“Well, alright then. Ah gotta git back to mah work, but it was a right pleasure talkin’ with you,” the elderly pony said, starting forwards with his cart.

Incendia rolled up the map and walked away, feeling disgruntled. “Charity case? Who does he think I am? What does he think Stalliongrad is? We don’t need handouts from anyone.”

She shook her head and continued her journey through the curving streets of Totemhoof. As she made her way further into the city, the buildings grew taller and closer together. More and more of these buildings seemed to be made of wood rather than scrap metal. She passed an enormous building which appeared to be made of some strange silvery stone. At the top of the curving ceiling was a crescent moon carved out of a brilliant crystal, which was refracting and shining the light from the radio tower down upon the street in a glittering pattern. Incendia was so taken by the sight that she collided with a scarlet unicorn, who was meandering in the opposite direction.

“Oh, sorry!” Incendia sputtered. “I wasn’t paying attention!”

“Don’t worry about it,” the scarlet unicorn replied. “I wasn’t watching where I was going eith-“

She stopped mid-sentence, staring at the small crater in Incendia’s shoulder where the teleporter had been. “What happened to your arm?”

“Oh, that? I’m a Stalliongrad refugee. I used to wear a device in my shoulder there, but it got damaged and had to be removed.”

The scarlet unicorn looked appalled. “Why did it have to be *embedded* in your shoulder? That’s barbaric! What did it do?”

Incendia was surprised at her reaction. “It was a teleporter, and it had to be embedded in the shoulder because otherwise there was a chance it could get lost or stolen.”

“Your protection against theft was to bury things inside your own body?” the unicorn asked, a look of disgust still evident on her face. “Perhaps it’s a blessing to the world that that place was finally wiped off the map. Luna knows we’re happy to not have it looming over us anymore. I think we should have let you... *ponies*... wither and be done with it.”

Anger began to bubble up inside Incendia, but before she could do anything about it, the scarlet unicorn huffed and turned, proceeding into the cathedral.

Incendia stood there for several seconds more, debating whether following the unicorn inside would be worth it. Before she could make the decision, however, a stream of earth ponies filed out from the side streets and the cathedral and marched past her. The unicorn’s words momentarily forgotten, Incendia watched them march past in wonder.

They seemed to be an equal mix male and female, and they all wore deep midnight blue cloaks, but the fabric was unlike anything Incendia had ever seen before. The material seemed to shimmer gently with a light of its own. The reflected glow from the cathedral roof seemed to be dampened and absorbed by the cloaks, almost as if they were bending the light inwards on themselves. Incendia figured it must be magical.

The cloaks were not what she was devoted the majority of her attention to, however. She was more concerned with the heavy, spiked balls attached to their tails and the lances gripped at sharp angles in their mouths. As unfamiliar as Incendia was with her surroundings, she knew a military movement when she saw one. These ponies were gearing up to fight.

Then, as quickly as they had appeared, they had gone, marching down another street and out of sight. The street was now deserted but for Incendia and the crystalline moon's peculiar sheen.

Incendia continued down the path the map had indicated, and it didn't take long for her thoughts to wander back to that infuriating scarlet unicorn. Totemhoof's wonder was wearing off quickly. She had spent her whole life fighting for the good of the people of Stalliongrad, and is this what her efforts had led to? The destruction of their homes and the corralling of whatever paltry survivors that remained into a city that at best merely tolerated them, or thought of them as "charity cases?" After *generations* of oppression and fighting, *this* was the ultimate fate of her people?

Incendia could hardly stand it. She could feel her temperature rising. Small fires crept up into her brilliant copper mane only to abruptly extinguish themselves. She had to maintain control. She didn't think the population of Totemhoof would be any more understanding if she burst into flames. As far as she knew, that wasn't a very common ability.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to concentrate. After several seconds she had cooled down enough to continue on, though her mood hadn't really improved.

The streets widened as she made her way forward. She figured she must have passed into some kind of commercial district, as nearly every building she passed was brandishing a sign above its door. Advertisements behind clouded glass windows depicted smiling fillies clutching dolls in their mouths or burly earth pony colts swinging hammers down upon some molten metal on a black anvil. There was even an advertisement showing a midnight blue mare in a lacy saddle. Incendia lingered in front of that window perhaps a bit longer than she should have.

Eventually, she found the spot the map had indicated. A fountain depicting a majestic alicorn- Incendia assumed it to be Luna- surrounded by kneeling ponies stood in the center of a small cluster of carts loaded to the brim with all sorts of ingredients. A lime green unicorn with a four-leaf clover cutie mark stood behind a counter and a very rusty cash register. Several ponies milled about among the carts, idly filling bags with various goods.

Incendia approached the unicorn behind the cash register.

“Can I help you?” he asked, smiling.

“I hope so. My name’s Incendia, and I’m a refu-“

“A refugee from Stalliongrad?” the unicorn finished. “I assumed as much. Well, you’ve come to the right place. The name’s Cloverhoof. Pleasure to meet you, Incendia. That’s an interesting name. How did you get it?”

Incendia dropped her eyes to the cobblestone ground. “I don’t know.”

Cloverhoof evidently sensed that he’d trodden on a sensitive subject, for he cleared his throat and continued, “Well, help yourself to anything in the square. Stalliongrad refugees get one free pass.”

“One free pass?” Incendia asked.

“I couldn’t stay in business if all the refugees just came and took what the wanted all the time. As much as I want to help you out, I have mouths to feed too,” Cloverhoof said. “And I want to drum up business. Trust me, once you taste my food, you won’t want to shop anywhere else!”

“Thank you,” Incendia replied. “I think I’m going to take a look around now.”

She turned on the spot and rolled her eyes, cantering off towards a promising pile of bright red flower petals. A steely grey pegasus stallion with an anvil cutie mark was standing near the cart, reading a label on the bottom. He looked up when he saw Incendia, but quickly lost interest and went back to examining the label.

Incendia sniffed at the petals and, glancing around, snagged one off the side of the pile with her mouth and chewed. It was sweet and watery and reminded Incendia of the berries they had eaten on the hillsides. She wondered if they came from the same plants.

She made her way around the cart to the label that the grey stallion had been examining earlier. It read:

BLOODBERRY PETALS

Freshly picked by one of our highly-trained scavenger teams, these are the most pristine bloodberry petals this side of the Divide! Get them while you can- supplies are highly limited.

Incendia regarded the label idly before lifting a small bundle of petals off the pile and floating them towards her pack. Before they had made it even halfway, however, a deep voice sounded from her left.

“Excuse me, miss, but are you-“

Incendia jumped and turned to face the sound. Her old battle reflexes kicked in- every muscle in her body tensing. The crimson petals suspended in the air were incinerated in a flare of light and heat. Standing before Incendia was the grey pegasus she had seen earlier, a very shocked expression on his face.

Incendia exhaled sharply and relaxed. She glanced back at the remains of the petals- a pile of ashes on the ground- and cursed under her breath.

“I’m sorry, miss, I only wanted to know if you were a Stalliongrad refugee.”

Incendia stared blankly at the stallion for a few seconds before she understood what he was asking.

“Oh! Yes. I’m sorry about the petals- I was just startled is all. I’m a refugee.”

The grey pegasus smiled uneasily. “That was some powerful magic you just did,” he said. “I could feel the heat from here.” He chuckled nervously, and his eyes flicked down at the crater in Incendia’s shoulder before darting back up to meet her gaze.

“It was damaged in the escape attempt,” Incendia said. “I had to remove it.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to stare,” the pegasus said. “If you don’t mind me asking, what’s your name?”

Incendia wondered if she should be truthful with him for a moment. She had learned early on in Stalliongrad not to give out her name to just

anyone- she might be recognized as the leader of the resistance. But, after a moment, she remembered that she had already told her name to Cloverhoof. Besides, Stalliongrad had gone, and Rubidium's followers with it. Probably. She figured she could take him anyway even if he did start a fight.

"Incendia," she said curtly.

"Good to meet you, Incendia. My name is Ironmane," the grey pegasus replied, "and I have a favor to ask you. I was in one of the first immigration waves to arrive and I've already used up my one free pass here. I get enough food at home-" he stopped mid-sentence and glanced away from Incendia. "At where I'm staying, but I love these little red petals, and I can't afford them. I don't suppose you'd be willing to get me a bag?"

Incendia didn't even have to consider it. "Of course I will. We refugees have to stick together, don't we?"

Ironmane's eyes lit up. "Thank you, miss!"

Incendia loaded up her bag with the petals and brought them over to Cloverhoof, who marked an inventory list then told her she was free to go. Incendia dropped the bag at Ironmane's hooves, and he grabbed the strap in his mouth and slung the bag over his back.

"Sorry about scaring you earlier," Incendia said apologetically, "I'm just still a little on edge. Things have been a bit... harrowing since Stalliongrad."

"I know what you mean," Ironmane said. "Sometimes I wonder if we're even better off here. Did you see that march a while back? Something big is going on and nopony is willing to tell us anything. That, and.." he dropped his voice and looked around. "All this Luna worshipping business creeps me out, frankly. The goddesses never did me any good, and they sure don't look like they're doing this place any good either."

Incendia nodded absently. She had never really stopped to consider what she thought of the goddesses- she knew that a piece of Celestia had been powering Stalliongrad, but it had never occurred to her that people might still worship the goddesses. She had assumed the fragment had been just that- a fragment, some tiny part of the powers that once were that still

lingered. No pony in Stalliongrad had really worshipped it- they respected it's power, but the goddesses were mere bedtime stories at best.

Then Jigsaw and Tiptoe had come along and changed everything she had thought she'd known about the state of the world. Tantalus had always been a far-off threat, something that was probably terrible on the outside but also something the city's shield had always been able to keep out. Sometimes, before Jigsaw came along, she used to wonder about whether Tantalus could possibly be worse than being trapped in a fishbowl with Rubidium like that. At least Tantalus only killed ponies, he didn't suck them dry to add to his own power. And the Attenuators were nothing more than a genetic anomaly- ponies capable of withstanding the power of Celestia flowing through them. But then Jigsaw had absorbed the fragment and escaped the city. She had seen a piece of Luna personally- the thought of the creature animated by it still made her shudder- and she had seen Tantalus up close- and driven a statue through his eye, no less.

She must have gone silent for a long time because Ironmane scuffed his hooves against the cobblestone road and said, "I didn't mean no offense if you hold with the old goddesses, miss."

"No, no, it's alright," Incendia said, coming out of her introspective reverie. "I was just... thinking about things. I didn't take offense."

Ironmane nodded and said, "You know, I really appreciate what you did back there, getting me these petals and all. Why don't you come and meet my group? Like you said, us refugees have to stick together, right?"

Incendia shrugged. "It was no problem. And sure, I suppose."

Ironmane led her through a few blocks of winding sidewalks and tall, industrial-looking buildings, before he came to a quaint cottage nestled between two much larger buildings. Incendia guessed this had originally been a residential district, but all the houses had slowly been replaced with factories and shops.

"Home sweet home, I suppose," Ironmane said. "Come on in, I'll introduce you to Aurora."

Incendia followed him inside. Though it looked like wood from the outside, Incendia was surprised- and a little relieved- to discover that it was actually sheets of metal *painted* to look like wood. She didn't do too well in wooden buildings.

The inside was warmly lit by wall-mounted light fixtures in the shape of torches. There was very little furniture, just a table with a few chairs. The kitchen appeared to be built into the far corner of the room, though it was separated by a long countertop. There were three doors on the left, each of them closed.

"Aurora!" Ironmane called. "I'm back from the market. I got the petals and I brought a guest!"

"You got the petals?" came a female voice from behind one of the doors. Incendia heard paper rustling and the sound of a quill clattering against a desk, then a dark blue unicorn came out of the farthest door. Her tail was a light purplish-blue, and her cutie mark was a ribbon made up of all the colors of the rainbow. Incendia had to concentrate to stop her jaw from going slack- this unicorn was gorgeous.

But Aurora ran up and embraced Ironmane, and Incendia's hopes fell. "*Just my luck,*" she thought, "*all the pretty ones are taken.*"

"And who is this?" Aurora said, turning towards Incendia. Incendia noticed with a start that she had a teleportation device embedded in her shoulder- a proper one, smooth, round, and flush against the skin. The display flickered weakly between green, red, and blue.

"This is Incendia," Ironmane said. "She gave up her one free purchase to get us the bloodberry petals."

"How nice of you!" Aurora said with a smile. "I don't know of many ponies who would do that. You're welcome to stay for dinner if you like, but we don't have much in the way of food. It would help so much if this place only had an oven," Aurora said, pouting. "Oh well."

"And oven?" Incendia said with a wry smile. "I think I may be able to help you with that."

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Fifteen minutes later, Incendia was standing in the kitchen, all of the ingredients laid out before her, as well as a menagerie of pots and pans. She didn't recognize most of the food- strange, lumpy brown roots, green stalks of what looked like celery but had no rigidity, strange fruits of all shapes and sizes. Some foods were familiar, however- ruby red apples, carrots, and grass clippings were present.

"Now, the locals tell me these-" she indicated the bulbous brown root- "are delicious baked. Do you think you could do that?"

"I can do you one better," Incendia said, grinning. "You might want to step out of the kitchen."

Aurora did as prompted, though she looked a little bemused. Incendia closed her eyes and concentrated on the food on the counter. Her horn shone with a brilliant orange light, and the food on the counter was soon enveloped in a haze of magical energy. It all lifted off the counter and began to sort itself into pots and pans of various shapes and sizes. Next, she lifted the pots off the counter and ran them under the tap, allowing them to fill with water. She gritted her teeth- levitating so many objects simultaneously was difficult, and now that they were full of water, they were heavy to boot. She wasn't done yet, however. The main event had yet to begin.

She closed her eyes again and focused harder on the heat radiating from her horn and burst into brilliant golden flames.

She heard Aurora and Ironmane gasp in the other room. "Don't worry!" she called, her voice wavering with the strain of the magic. "I'm okay! Just keep back!"

Incendia could hardly see through ferocious inferno whipping around her. She could feel all of the pots and pans floating in the air nearby- the water already beginning to boil, the roots baking. She braced herself harder against the metal floor of the cottage as energy continued to pour out of her horn.

From the outside, all Ironmane and Aurora could see was a swirling ball of fire, brighter and more intense than anything they had ever seen before. The heat was immense- when Incendia had first ignited, Aurora thought for a moment that her eyebrows must have been seared off. As they watched, however, the fireball began to swirl less and less rapidly. The individual pots and pans could be seen flying through the air, orbiting Incendia like planets to a sun, each encased in another deep red fireball of their own. Soon, the fireball diminished until it was so small that Incendia's outline could be seen, an intensely blazing golden form standing on a red-hot metal floor. Eventually, the flames ceased licking up her coat, and it cooled gradually from white hot to dull red to black. Her mane seemed to burn longer, like a wildfire streaming out from her head and flank, until the wisps of flame coalesced into strands of coppery orange-red hair. For a long time her eyes lingered as pools of molten metal, but before long, they too cooled from blazing white to their normal orange.

With a grunt of effort, Incendia set the pots and pans down on the stone countertop, all filled with perfectly cooked steaming fruits and vegetables.

"That was more difficult than I expected," Incendia said, panting slightly. Sweat trickled down her flank, not from heat, but from exertion.

Ironmane and Aurora stared at her for a long moment, long enough for Incendia to think that she had done something wrong.

Then they began to whoop and holler, clopping their front hooves down on the metal floor.

"That was incredible!" Aurora said. "I wish I could do magic like that!"

"In all my years of working the forges, I've never seen a pony that could work heat like that!" Ironmane said. "That was amazing!"

Incendia smiled. "Thank you. I've had... plenty of opportunities to hone my skills."

"Well, I think this counts as a special occasion," Aurora said. Her horn began to glow pale silver and a small green saddlebag came zooming out

of the farthest door on the left and landed in front of her feet. She opened the top and began rooting about inside it.

"This was in my bag when I escaped from Stalliongrad... ah, here it is!"

She pulled out a ruby red bottle with an ornate silver-topped cork firmly fastened at the top.

"This is my great-grandmother's famous fermented dandelion juice. Must be at least a hundred and fifty years old. Probably the last bottle in existence."

"You saved some of your dandelion juice?" Ironmane asked, a huge grin splitting his face. "Maybe Luna *is* watching over us!"

"I've never had any," Incendia said.

"Oh, just you wait," Aurora said. Her horn sparked, and the cork shot out.

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Incendia, Aurora, and Ironmane all sat around the small table. Empty plates of food were stacked in the kitchen, but the bottle of dandelion juice was still being passed around. Incendia had made a small fire in the center of the table, and its light and warmth warded off the cold of the outside air.

"That was delicious, Incendia," Aurora said. "Thank you."

"It was my treat," Incendia replied. "I haven't gotten the chance to do any magic for a few days anyway and I was getting antsy."

They chuckled.

"So, what did you two used to do back in the city?" Incendia asked, taking a swig from her glass.

"I worked in the forges, if that wasn't obvious," Ironmane said, glancing towards his anvil cutie mark.

"A pegasus working in the forges?" Incendia mused. "Unorthodox."

Ironmane shrugged. "It's not like I had much of a choice. I wasn't born into doing what I wanted like my beautiful wife here," he said with a smirk.

Aurora giggled and bumped against Ironmane with her shoulder. Then she turned to Incendia and said, "My father was a scientist working directly for Rubidium, assigned to the personal teleporter project back in the day. We were... lucky. That's why I got this," she said, jerking her head towards her shoulder, "and why I was allowed to be an artist."

"An artist," Incendia said, placing her glass down on the table. "Didn't meet too many of those in Stalliongrad. Who did you work for?"

"Another scientist. Working on the Attenuators. He wanted sculptures for his home." Aurora's eyes fell. "I didn't like what they did to those poor unicorns. I'm not proud."

"Now, honey, don't pout. What's done is done, and it's all over now," Ironmane said, nuzzling Aurora.

"I suppose," she said. "I never felt like I was doing anything with my life back there, though. I'm not sure I even miss it," she said, taking another sip of dandelion juice.

"How did you two meet?" Incendia asked.

"She needed metal for a sculpture, and I was the one they sent to deliver it," Ironmane said. "One look and I knew she was the mare for me."

"Oh, stop it, you," Aurora said. "But, yes, that is the bare bones of it. How about you, Incendia? You haven't told us much about yourself. Any special stallions in your life?"

Incendia sighed and picked up the glass of dandelion juice and took a swig. "No... no *stallions*."

"Aaah," Ironmane said. "I'm not one to judge."

"Why don't you tell us about her?" Aurora said.

Incendia hesitated for a moment, then took another drink of dandelion juice.

"Her name's Tiptoe. I didn't meet her until just recently- only a few days before Stalliongrad's destruction, in fact. I didn't think too much of her then. The last few days were... ah, hectic for me. Once I got out and got to know her... I don't know. I don't usually go for the quiet types, but she just... she has this, pardon the pun, flame. She's been through more than I even want to think about and she's still so... innocent. I never really... I don't think most of us knew innocence back in Stalliongrad."

There was a moment of silence, where they all stared at the magical flames in the center of the table.

"That, and she's pretty damn attractive," Incendia said, swirling her glass in mid-air.

Ironmane snickered. "I'll drink to that," he said enthusiastically.

Aurora just shook her head, but she still clinked her glass with the others and drained the remaining dandelion juice.

"So, are you two together, then?" Aurora asked.

Incendia's smile faded away. "No."

"I recognize that tone," Ironmane said. "That's girl trouble, right there. What's wrong?"

Incendia sighed again and prodded the flames with her horn absently. "She's taken."

"Oh, you poor dear," Aurora said. "I'm so sorry."

"*So am I*," Incendia thought.

"Can we change the subject, please?" Incendia asked.

"Of course, dear. I'm sorry I even brought it up," Aurora said.

"It's no problem. So, how did you guys escape?" Incendia asked.

"Same way as most, I suspect. As soon as the shield fell, it was obvious the worst had finally happened. I knew that horrible dragon would be arriving any moment, so I gathered up as many ponies as I could and teleported out of there."

"How did you know the teleporter would work?" Incendia asked. "You couldn't teleport out while the shield was up. How did you know where to point the coordinates?"

"My father helped build these," Aurora said. "I can do more than make pretty sculptures, you know. Besides, I could ask you the same thing," She winked playfully.

"As soon as the shield was down, I just dialed it as far as I could from where I was. What I didn't know was how many ponies I could take with me."

"How many *can* you take?" Incendia said. "I've never taken more than three or four."

"I managed to get about forty," Aurora said. "I might have been able to get more if not for all the chaos right before the end."

"Forty?" Incendia said incredulously. "That's insane!"

"I didn't think it would work," Aurora said, "and it almost didn't. That's why it's been just flashing colors since, I expect. I don't know anypony who has a working one anymore, though you're the first I've met who had one taken out."

"How many ponies do you think escaped?" Incendia asked, not sure if she wanted to know the answer.

"Oh, probably in the hundreds," Aurora said. "The government workers and their families- really anypony with a teleporter- was rounding up as many ponies as they could and getting them out of harm's way. Some even risked going into the outer edges to get some of the less fortunate. Didn't... you do the same?"

"I only brought two others," Incendia said. She felt bad lying to her, but it was a small lie, after all. Besides, she was too happy about the survivors. The upper class had actually put themselves in harm's way to save the "lower" ponies, in defiance of what Rubidium would have wanted. Perhaps it was the dandelion juice, but just thinking about it made her feel warm inside.

"Well, I don't blame you," Aurora said. "It was so chaotic. Riots in the streets. If I didn't know in advance I could take ponies with me, I probably wouldn't have tried."

"Except for me," Ironmane cut in.

"Yes, except for my dear husband," Aurora corrected.

"So, what about you, Incendia?" Ironmane inquired. "You haven't told us much about yourself yet."

Incendia had a cover story prepared, of course. She had to have some way to explain her appearance.

"Firefighter," she said. "As you saw before, I've always been good at controlling fire. I teleport in, get the survivors out, then put out the fires."

"Were you a noble's daughter, then?" Aurora asked.

"Middle class," Incendia said. "My special talent caught the attention of Rubidium's administration."

"Admirable occupation," Ironmane said. "Spent a lot of time in the outer rings, didn't you?"

"Naturally," Incendia said.

"Might have saved my life once or twice. You should have seen the conditions of the forge I had to work in when I was young. They actually used paper in the walls. Paper!"

"Smart," Incendia said, giggling.

Ironmane shook his head. "It's no wonder we had about three fires a day."

They sat in silence, watching the fire flicker on the tabletop. The mood in the room seemed to shift, becoming more solemn.

"I do miss my workshop," Aurora said quietly. "All my best pieces were there."

"I know what you mean," Ironmane said. "All they have me doing here is forging maces and swords. They won't even tell me what it's for. I appreciate the hospitality, but I'm not sure I like the secrecy. They're gearing up for something big, I'm sure of it."

Incendia's ears pricked up at this, but she said nothing.

Outside, from one of the many street-posts, nine loud buzzes announced the time.

"I'm getting kind of sleepy, dear," Aurora said to Ironmane.

"I am too," he said. "It was wonderful meeting you, Incendia, but I'm afraid we're going to have to close up shop for the day."

"That's okay," Incendia said. "It's probably time for me to get going too. It was nice meeting you, too."

Ironmane and Incendia stood up at the same time. Ironmane gave her a respectful nod and walked to the closest door on the left and entered it. Incendia's horn ignited and the fire on the table was sucked into her horn.

"Are you coming to bed, Aurora?" Ironmane called from the other room.

"In just a minute. I want to say goodbye to our guest," Aurora called back. She got rather unsteadily to her hooves.

"Thank you for having me," Incendia said, smiling. "It was a very nice evening."

"Incendia," Aurora said with a sweet smile, "I may not look it, but I've been around a while. I can tell when somepony isn't being entirely truthful."

Incendia's guard went up immediately. "What do you mean?"

"Now, now, it's not my place to pry," Aurora said. "You've done right by me as far as I'm concerned, and everypony's entitled to their secrets. But I can tell that you're hurting inside, and I'm going to guess the source was that mare you mentioned earlier. If that was a lie, I'll eat my hooves."

Incendia didn't make eye contact with Aurora, but she blushed intensely.

"Now, I know it's not my place to give relationship advice, but if you truly love somepony, I think it will work out no matter what the situation. I mean, look at me. I fell in love with a pegasus from the poorest parts of the city. Do you really think I even thought it had a chance of working? Of course I didn't. But just look at us now- maybe it's not exactly how we imagined it, but we have a roof over our heads, we're together, and we're safe."

She walked over to Incendia and placed her head gently on her neck.

"Just remember you're not alone."

With that, Aurora turned and trotted towards the bedroom, the door closing behind her with a gentle click.

Tears fell down Incendia's face, turning to steam before they reached the end of her snout.

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The trip home was uneventful. It was lightly drizzling. The mysterious light from the radio tower had diminished significantly in brightness, but spindly, trident-shaped streetlights had flared to life along the roads, casting the city streets in a somewhat eerie blue.

She arrived home at roughly the same time as Tiptoe, and her smile at the sight of Incendia made the water coating her flank curl off her in trails of steam. Incendia hoped she didn't notice.

"Rough day?" Tiptoe asked.

"You could say that," Incendia responded.

They opened the door and walked in together. Incendia was surprised to find Jigsaw already in the house, sitting at the table, a grim look on his face.

"We need to talk."

# Chapter 25

Jigsaw stepped out into the cold, wintry breeze and surveyed the city below him. Hundreds of pinpricks of light shimmered from the streets below, a mixture of dim yellow bulbs and bright blue magical flames. He noticed something he hadn't the night he arrived- there was a distinct distribution of magical lights versus mundane. Their cabin was on the south slope of the valley that Totemhoof sat in, giving Jigsaw a good view of the whole city. The farther east he looked, the more common the arcane lights became, culminating in the giant, decrepit radio tower on the west hill, complete with the mysterious glowing silver orb and shimmering cables snaking up it's side. As he looked west, the blue lights became less and less common until they were almost totally replaced by electric lights. The building architecture changed noticeably as well. On the east side, huge, sweeping structures of wood or metal were common, while smaller, more practical designs were more common in the west.

What captured Jigsaw's attention most, however, was the radio tower on the top of the east hill. Jigsaw could feel something emanating from it- some strange, attractive power. He figured there must be a fragment of Luna here- the Luna worship and the mysterious shielding from the outside world was a dead giveaway. What troubled him was why he couldn't sense it until just now, and why the sensation was so faint. Were these ponies abusing the power of the goddess as well?

All these thoughts rushed through his head in the few moments he spent walking down the lane. He wanted to go west, but hesitated. The prospect of exploring without Tiptoe and Incendia was not appealing to him. If ever a situation called for stealth, this was it, and he still wasn't sure if he could pull off any defensive magic after his healing spell on Tiptoe.

It didn't take him long before his natural curiosity overcame him. He figured that he didn't need to sneak in to anywhere- not yet, at least. He had no reason to suspect these ponies of wrongdoing, and besides, it wouldn't hurt to get a closer look.

He set off towards the radio tower.

As he made his way down the streets of Totemhoof, he couldn't help but take mental notes about the city. He had no way of telling how old the city was- it was clearly scavenged from old world materials, but they were pristine and expertly assembled- sheets of metal riveted together rather professionally. It wasn't anything like Stalliongrad, with its thrown-together ramshackle huts. These were proper buildings.

By far, the most ornate buildings he saw were the temples. There was one almost on every street corner. Though some were small and unimposing, most were decorated with gigantic statues of the moon or of ponies groveling at Luna's hooves. Jigsaw shifted uncomfortably. Something about the temples didn't sit right with him.

He didn't want this town to have any dark secrets. Stalliongrad had been bad enough. Were all the cities in the world like this? Squirreled away in hidden valleys or hiding behind walls, protected only through by whatever small power of the goddesses were left?

He didn't know why he cared so much. This whole thing had brought him nothing but trouble. He didn't even know that the goddesses still existed at all until he had left the caves. When he was a colt, he read everything he could get his hooves on- old world technical manuals, contemporary cave fungus growing techniques, fictional novels of great cities existing deep under the caves. The books had always painted a beautiful image of the surface world before the fall and the Grand Cataclysm. His favorite thing in the library, though, even more than the books, was the mural that was painted across the cave roof, which had been carefully smoothed and flattened by the cave's original inhabitants- the first generation of survivors. It showed a group of ponies of all different types standing on a lush, green hill as the rose crested over it in the background. In the far left corner of the mural, the huge, steel door that blocked the cave off from the conditions of surface life was swung wide open. Buildings could be seen in the background, black against the rising sun. Written underneath it, in old world text, was the phrase "To the Future."

Jigsaw scoffed spitefully at the thought. He wasn't even sure there was a future to be had, here. Sure, the buildings here seemed to be ornate and civilized, but they were still living in the past instead of looking to the future.

Ten thousand years had passed, but you wouldn't think more than a few decades if you looked at it.

And where did Tantalus fit into all of this? Jigsaw still didn't understand what role he played in all this. What could he possibly stand to gain from all this? Why didn't he take the fragments for himself, when he clearly knew where they were and knew Jigsaw was looking for them? And, perhaps most pressingly, what in Equestria was he, really?

He had been hopeful that, after Incendia had dropped the statue on his eye, that he was gone for good, but the more he thought about it, the less sure he was. Tantalus hadn't left a corpse- he had vanished, disappeared in a puff of green smoke. Plus, Jigsaw was sure he would know if he had really been killed. Whatever strange effects hosting the goddesses had on him had always made his head pound and his stomach twist when Tantalus was nearby, and he felt sure he would have felt in some way if he was gone forever.

Jigsaw shook his head and tried to focus on the matter at hand. He didn't like to let his mind wander too much. It never helped anything.

He passed through a street that was lined with carts, each with a loud, fast-talking pony trying to hawk his or her wares. They sold everything from shovels and shears to silver moon necklaces. Jigsaw was tempted to stop at a cart that was selling healing potions, but quickly realized he had no money. He made a mental note to come back if he ever got his hooves on any, however- he was almost certain another trick like healing Tiptoe would kill him. He couldn't count on being able to pull off another feat like that. He wasn't even sure how he did it the first time, but he had a feeling the freshly absorbed Luna fragment had helped.

He wished there was a book on the whole thing that could explain it.

As he pushed his way west, he couldn't help but notice that the crowds in the streets began to get thinner and thinner. Fewer shops were open, and most of the windows were dark. Even some of the temples looked as though they had been empty for a long time. One even had a broken window.



It wasn't long before Jigsaw was standing alone at the foot of a huge stone archway built into the side of the hill, directly under the radio tower. Jigsaw hadn't even seen another pony for almost five blocks. He began to get uneasy. Had he broken some kind of unspoken rule by coming here?

He began to turn and walk away when the wooden door to the temple creaked open, causing Jigsaw to nearly jump out of his skin. It was the old priest that had greeted them when they first came to Totemhoof.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I- I was just wandering around," Jigsaw said. "I'm sorry if I'm not supposed to be here, I just-"

"You aren't supposed to be over here," the elderly pony said, but his eyes were soft. "But, I suppose I can let it go this once, since you are so new. Interested in the church, eh?" he said, smiling.

"Yes," Jigsaw lied. He was relieved he hadn't gotten in trouble on his first day in the new city.

"Come inside, then," the priest said.

Jigsaw followed him inside, and the massive wooden door swung shut behind him. The interior was a rounded tunnel, lit by glowing crystals, which jutted out of the walls at irregular intervals.

"Are those magical?" Jigsaw asked, nodding his head towards one of the formations.

"Oh, yes," the priest said. "Before the fall, this was one of Equestria's largest crystal mines. That's what created this whole valley, you know- the mines."

Jigsaw's interest was piqued. "What kinds of crystals were down here? Spell-fixing or focusing?"

The priest looked at him and smiled again. "Ah, a scholar of the arcane sciences, are you?"

Jigsaw nodded.

"I used to study magic myself in my youth, though I understand you Stalliongrad folk had a much deeper knowledge than I ever did. Both kinds of crystals were found here, and still are. It's how we keep much of the city powered, and why we were so slow to adopt electricity."

The old pony studied Jigsaw for a moment before saying "Come with me. I have something that I think might interest you. I'll tell you more about Luna along the way."

Jigsaw followed the unicorn down the tunnel, which sloped downwards at a gentle angle. The priest began to inform Jigsaw of the history of Totemhoof.

"We're not very old; at least, not compared to Stalliongrad. Totemhoof was established 1,750 years ago, roughly."

"It wasn't occupied after the fall? Why?" Jigsaw asked.

"I do not know. I wasn't there. Our records only go far as back as that. The valley has always had a natural cloud cover, but it was only the great Silverwind- my ancestor- that uncovered how to work the weather to keep us hidden from Tantalus."

"The *weather* keeps you hidden?" Jigsaw asked, intrigued.

"Indeed. The secrets have long since been lost to us, but so long as we keep enough cloud above us, we remain hidden from the outside world. Tantalus only knows our general location, and if he wanted to, he could dive headfirst into the fog and never find us."

"I've never heard of anything like that," Jigsaw said. He hesitated for a moment, then asked, "How does it work?"

"We have no idea.," the old priest sighed. A few yards ahead, the tunnel ended in a small door cut into a stone wall. The priest paused when he reached it and turned to stare at Jigsaw. "You... you remind me of myself, when I was younger. I'm about to show you something, but I need to know if I can trust you. Can I trust you?"

"Yes," Jigsaw answered warily.

The priest's horn ignited and the stone door swung inward, bathing the tunnel in light. He signaled for Jigsaw to walk in, and he complied.

Jigsaw blinked. For a moment, he thought he was back in the main chamber of his home. The cavern was immense and clearly not natural. Cement pillars rose from the ground and up into the darkness of the ceiling. The walls looked to have been hastily excavated, as they were rife with craters and pits, but as Jigsaw looked up, the wall became smooth. Up near the top, metal plates were bolted on the smooth, sandy colored stone. Crystals jutted out of the excavated pits, providing light to the room. But, the most notable aspect of the space, by far, was what lay in the center.

A huge pit, at least a hundred feet in diameter, was dug into the ground. This pit wasn't rough like the ones on the walls, however- the walls had been smoothed and a firm-looking wooden staircase spiraled down along the rim. From the center rose an enormous crystal sculpture of an alicorn, the largest Jigsaw had ever seen. It had clearly been hewn from an even larger crystal- every facet of the sculpture glistened and gleamed. Unlike the formations jutting from the walls, this one didn't shine with blue light; instead, it pulsed gently with a soft, silvery glow.

"What is it?" Jigsaw asked.

"Our most sacred treasure," the priest said. "Legend holds that, when this area was first settled, our ancestors found the tunnel to this place. Most of the metal buildings you see out there were salvaged from here. Our best guess was this once was an industrial warehouse, but that was so long ago all reliable records are lost. When somepony was prying up a floorboard, they found the tip of a crystal poking out. They began to dig. Many other crystal deposits were discovered, but most of them were scarcely larger than a pony. But this crystal in particular never seemed to end. The deeper they dug, the more crystal there was. Finally, after months of effort, they had unearthed the whole thing. Legend holds it was twice as large as it is now."

Jigsaw tried to imagine that- a crystal almost the size of a dragon.

“Our ancestors began to cut up the crystal to use in various mechanisms. It’s a spell-fixing crystal, you see, but it has the unusual attribute of being able to hold a spell almost indefinitely. That’s what made me join the church as a youth, incidentally- the chance to study this magnificent natural phenomena up close.”

“So this isn’t a secret?” Jigsaw asked.

“Yes and no. It was a secret from you. You must understand, Jigsaw, Luna commands us to help those in need, but if we gave away all our secrets so freely... We can’t afford to trust so implicitly.”

“Then why trust me?” Jigsaw asked.

The priest regarded him for a moment. “I’ve lived a long life, you know. I know how to take the measure of a pony. I don’t think you mean us any harm.”

“Then why is the part of town above us closed off?”

The priest didn’t meet Jigsaw’s gaze. “Some secrets you would be happier not knowing.”

This sent up red flags in Jigsaw’s mind immediately, but on some level, he agreed.

Jigsaw turned back towards the crystal. “Is there more to your story?”

“Yes,” the priest confirmed. “This is where it gets confusing. Legend states that after so much of the crystal had been cut up, the elders decided to carve the rest into a sculpture dedicated to the mighty Luna, our protector. Then... then the legend states that the ‘essence of the gods’ was introduced into the crystal and ‘locked away beneath key and spell, awaiting the Uniter.’”

“What does that mean?” Jigsaw asked.

“There is a door at the far end of the cavern. Many have tried, but it cannot be breached by any means. Still, once a year, many pilgrimage down here and try to open it in an attempt to find the Uniter.”

Jigsaw had a sinking feeling he knew exactly what that was, but he knew better than to speak up. Instead, he asked, "Can I get closer?"

"Of course. You're welcome to touch, too, if you so desire."

Jigsaw made his way closer to the sculpture. His mind was working overtime. On one hoof, he was relieved- the town actually *did* seem to be more or less what it had presented itself. But why *were* parts of the town closed off? What exactly did this crystal mean, and what was behind the door?

The light from within the sculpture seemed to pulse faster, as if responding to Jigsaw's agitated mental state. Jigsaw's horn began to tingle as though it had pins and needles. He made his way down the spiraling staircase until he stood at the bottom of the structure. It was even more impressive than before, standing almost three stories high. Upon close inspection, Jigsaw was able to see that the crystal was tinged blue, though the color was almost entirely drowned out by the white light.

Tentatively, Jigsaw reached out a hoof and laid it against the surface of the crystal. He wasn't sure what he was expecting- a great surge of power, the revelation of the location of the fragment, or something equally as impressive. Instead, all that happened was his hoof begun to tingle as well, like it had fallen asleep.

"Can you feel anything?" the priest called.

"Just a sort of tingling," Jigsaw called back.

"Some of us can feel it. Most of us can't. It's good to know you ponies from Stalliongrad are not dead to the goddesses."

Jigsaw made his way back up the staircase, and soon stood next to the priest again.

"I have two more questions," he asked.

"Oh?" the priest said, an eyebrow raising.

“Why Luna? What about Celestia?”

The priest smiled. “You will forgive an old unicorn for forgetting to explain. We respect Celestia also, but she is not our patron. We do not find protection under the sun, nor do we find peace. Luna represents the ability to overcome our own worst nature. She encourages us to face our fears head-on and not to doubt ourselves. Celestia is far more passionate and quick to action. Luna recommends cautious action. Do you know the legend of Nightmare Moon?”

“Of course,” Jigsaw said. “Every foal in the-“ he caught himself just in time. He had about to say “the caves.” “-place I grew up knew the old stories.”

“Good,” the priest said. “That’s an example of what I mean. That story illustrates that, sometimes, even the best of us fall from grace, but that nopony is lost for good.”

Jigsaw nodded. “I understand. I do have one more question.”

“Yes?”

“What is the radio tower?”

The priest frowned. “That is a mystery even to us. The old legends make no mention of it other than as a marker of the east, and none can approach it. It seems to be masked with the same magic that protects this city. If somepony attempts to approach it from the ground or the air, they will appear to be walking directly towards it- until they suddenly come out the other side, or worse, stumble off the clouds up above. Strange as it is, Totemhoof could not exist without it. It’s first and most obvious use it regulating our day and night cycle. It turns off and on on a strict 12-hour schedule. What’s less obvious is that we grow our crops by it’s light. Indirect and filtered by cloud though it may be, any crop it touches grows hardy and strong. I believe it to be a gift from Luna herself.”

Jigsaw nodded silently and turned to look at the crystal again.

“Can I have some time alone here?” Jigsaw asked.

The priest hesitated for a moment, then smiled. "Certainly. I will be outside if you need anything."

As soon as the priest disappeared in the darkness of the exit, Jigsaw's horn began to glow, and his saddlebags undid themselves. Jigsaw felt awful, having had to lie to the kindly priest so often, but Jigsaw had no idea how he would react if he knew the truth. It was better not to tell him.

The pieces of the teleporter came floating lazily out and arranged themselves in front of Jigsaw. He found what he was looking for, and with a small amount of effort, a small ball of metal came floating out. He placed the other components on the ground and began to focus on the small ball. The top of it lifted off, revealing the tiny sphere of crystals within. Each one was held in place by a thin metal rod. Jigsaw had found it when he was tinkering with the device by fireside, but he hadn't thought much of it until now. An array of focusing crystals was aligned all around the spell-fixing matrix- the gem that held the teleportation spell. With great care, Jigsaw pried it from the inside of the sphere and levitated it to himself.

It was a deep red, almost mahogany colored, and opaque. A very large crack ran down the length of the gem along with several smaller cracks to either side. Any magical properties it once had had long since been leeched out of it.

Jigsaw grasped it in his mouth and led it over to the statue in the center of the room and gingerly touched the point of it to the surface of the statue, saying a silent prayer to Luna to fix the gem. He knew it was a long shot, but stranger things had happened to him.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, then the gem suddenly got very hot, so hot that Jigsaw had to spit it out and back away. To his surprise, however, the gem did not fall to the ground. Instead, it stuck to the statue, quivering, as though the point had been driven into the surface like a knife into the earth.

Then it burst into flames, burning brightly for several moments, before it was consumed. It didn't even leave ashes.

Jigsaw was stunned. He hadn't expected *that* to happen. He had hardly expected anything at all to happen. Now he had no way of repairing the teleporter.

He cursed under his breath before gathering up all the parts and stuffing them back into his saddlebag. He still had one thing he wanted to try before he left.

After almost five minutes of walking through what he now realized was a truly gigantic underground space, he arrived at the far side. He almost snorted with laughter when he found what he was looking for. The legendary locked door that nopony had been able to open for almost two thousand years was nothing more than a simple maintenance door, identical to the one he had encountered immediately after escaping the caves. The writing on the door was in the old language and almost entirely unrecognizable. In the center of the door, like a bull's-eye, was a small hole, intended for a unicorn horn.

Jigsaw took a deep breath. Did he really want to do this alone? This might be his only chance to enter without arousing suspicion, but he still wasn't up to his full strength.

Eventually, his curiosity won out, and he lowered his horn into the receptacle.

He nearly passed out from the shock. There were *powerful* enchantments on this door, dozens if not hundreds of wards to keep out all but the authorized user. The protective magic weighed down on Jigsaw as though a boulder had been suddenly dropped on his back. He wanted to shout out, but he thought better of it.

Then after a few moments, he felt the spells snap. There was a blinding flash of light, and a retort like a firecracker, and the door swung open.

Jigsaw stood there, panting. If he hadn't been completely sure there was a fragment somewhere in this town, he was now. Nothing could possess a pony to cast a spell that powerful unless they had something valuable to hide.



He stepped inside, and the door swung shut behind him. There was a rush of air and a feeling of intense heat, and Jigsaw knew that the spell had set itself again. At least he didn't have to worry about being followed.

He was in a simple, unadorned metal hallway. Rusty and corroded pipes ran along the roof and flecks of paint could be seen peeling off the walls. Jigsaw set off at a trot, taking note of all the rooms he passed.

This seemed to once be a barracks of some kind. Metal frames that must have once held mattresses were lined up against walls in almost uniform distribution. Something about the place felt familiar, but he couldn't quite place what.

Soon, he reached the end of the hallway. A thick, rectangular ventilation shaft seemed to have fallen from the ceiling to his left, all but blocking the path, so he set down the right passageway.

Then, like he had walked straight into a pole, it hit him. He knew this place because he had been somewhere almost identical before. Before they got to Stalliongrad- the strange building with all the Celestia symbols that they had almost trapped themselves in- this place was almost exactly the same.

Jigsaw tested his theory the next spot he found where there had clearly once been paint. He took a deep breath and blew the dust off the wall, and there it was. The outline was faint, but there had clearly once been a moon insignia on the wall.

Totemhoof was built on the former site of an underground bunker belonging to the Luna side of the Grand Cataclysm.

It didn't take Jigsaw long to find the bank of computers where he had nearly trapped himself before. He knew better than to turn them on this time around, though the temptation was strong. Instead, he headed off through one of the doorways and down a staircase.

The rest of his trip was uneventful. The place had clearly been picked clean eons ago- probably by whoever had enchanted the door. Jigsaw was on the verge of giving up and going home before he found something extremely out of place.

He had just finished climbing down another flight of stairs. By this point, he was so deep his ears had popped. The hallway that stretched out before him was only a few yards long, and it ended with another door. This door, however, was clearly not original to the facility. It was made of wood and engraved with the cycles of the moon. Jigsaw's heart leapt when he saw it- it was obvious what was behind this door!

When he opened it, he could hardly believe his eyes.

He was standing on a catwalk near the top of another immense room, though not quite as large as the room with the statue. What drew his eye immediately was what was in the center.

Docked to a large tower was a Lunar Battleship.

He had seen diagrams and pictures in books in the library where he grew up, of course, but he never thought I had seen one in real life. It looked as though the years had taken a toll on it, though. In the pictures, it looked huge and majestic, soaring through the air over crowds of cheering ponies. Flown by Luna herself, it was supposed to be a huge armored balloon, impenetrable even by dragonfire, the perfect melding of magic and machine, the ultimate in pre-fall war technology, able to staff a crew of almost thirty ponies. The mast at the front of the ship depicted a pegasus soaring towards the skies.

This one did not look nearly so good. The floor beneath it was scattered with tiny pieces of metal, indicating parts had fallen off of it. The balloons still looked inflated, amazingly, but the mast had corroded to a near-unrecognizable state. Jigsaw's first thoughts were that their vehicle problems were solved- with this, they could sail around the entire world in a matter of weeks, and even stand a fighting chance of beating off Tantalus's attacks.

Soon, though, reality set in. If this thing could even fly- which he doubted more and more as he looked at it- there was no way it's more advanced offensive and defensive systems were operational.

Then an even more bizarre thought hit him. Why had they docked an airship hundreds of feet underground? More pressingly, *how?*

Eventually, he tore his eyes away from the ship and began to inspect the rest of the room. The ceiling seemed to be made of strange glass- Jigsaw had no idea why that was. Then he found what he had been looking for. In one far corner of the room the panels had been torn off the wall and a small recess had been dug into the wall, revealing more crystals. In the center of all these, floating serenely, was the fragment of Luna. The crystals all around it were pulsing with the same soft white light as the statue above had, and strange, heavy wires were attached to the crystals and ran up into the ceiling. Jigsaw realized with a jolt that these were the same cables he had seen distantly running up the side of the decrepit radio tower.

“That’s one mystery solved, at least,” Jigsaw said to himself.

He made his way down a narrow industrial-looking spiral staircase to where the fragment lay. He was almost upon it before he screeched to a halt. If he absorbed this fragment, what would that mean to Totemhoof? It seemed as though this was their source of life. At the very least, it was the thing that allowed them to grow food. They weren’t stealing its power like Stalliongrad was. No, they had been resourceful and found out how to use the power of the fragment to their advantage without committing terrible crimes. Jigsaw had no idea how they managed to discover the fragment’s effects on crystals, but he had no doubt they would disappear if he took the fragment away. He couldn’t do that to the town that had taken him- and many Stalliongrad refugees- in and kept them safe. He needed to talk to Tiptoe and Incendia.

He retraced his steps back up through the facility, which wasn’t difficult, as he’d cut a wide swath through the dust on his way down. He unlocked the door leading to the chamber with the statue, and closed it carefully behind him. He made his way swiftly towards the door at the other end. He had no idea how long he had been down there, but he doubted the priest wasn’t suspicious by now. Much to his surprise and relief, however, the priest wasn’t waiting for him outside the door. Instead, he found him near the exit, standing in the waning light from the radio tower above.

“You spent a while down there,” he observed. “I don’t blame you. It strikes each of us differently.”

“It was... an experience,” Jigsaw said with a nervous chuckle.

“It was nice to meet you, Jigsaw,” the priest said.

“You, too,” Jigsaw said, setting off towards home.

But after only a few steps something made him pause. He turned to face the old priest.

“Who are you? What’s your name?”

The old priest smiled. “The important thing is that you know *yours*. You’ve been through a lot, I can tell. Seen things nopony should have to see. But it’s important you never lose track of your own identity. You’re very troubled, Jigsaw, but I know you have a good heart.”

Jigsaw said. “Thank you again,” he said, and began to canter away.

“Moonbow,” the priest called when Jigsaw was nearly out of the church courtyard. “My name is Moonbow.”

Jigsaw arrived at the house to find it empty. He was concerned that something had happened to the other two, but after only a few moments, he heard hoofsteps outside the front door. Incendia and Tiptoe entered, the smiles on their faces dropping as they saw Jigsaw’s face.

“We need to talk.”

Jigsaw gave them a detailed account of everything he had done that day. When he finished, nopony said a word.

“We can’t take the fragment away from these ponies,” Incendia said. “They don’t deserve that. And... and this is the only place my people have left.”

“Absolutely not,” Tiptoe agreed.

“I don’t think so either, but we’re going to have to eventually. We can’t just leave it here.”

“Maybe there’s some way around it!” Tiptoe said eagerly. “Some way to take the fragment and still keep the city functioning.”

“If you know it, feel free to tell me,” Jigsaw said. “I’m open to ideas.”

Tiptoe went silent, blushing slightly.

“Thought not. Now, I think we should focus on the two things we *can* do something about- the airship and whatever is causing the whole east side of the city to be effectively off limits. Do you know anything about that?”

Tiptoe shook her head, but Incendia spoke up.

“I saw a huge squadron of armed ponies filing out of one of those churches. I know a military action when I see it, and that was one on a massive scale.”

“They’re fighting something?” Tiptoe said. “What could it possibly be?”

“I want to say Tantalus,” Jigsaw said, “but I doubt he would attack so overtly. I don’t think he has any way to know our location, anyway. I don’t sense him nearby.”

“Those goddess-powers are kinda scary, Jigsaw,” Incendia said, smiling slightly.

“Scary, but useful,” he said.

“Can we discuss this in the morning?” Tiptoe said, yawning. “I’m exhausted.”

“Agreed,” said Incendia. “I’m completely burnt-out.”

Jigsaw groaned, but he couldn’t help but smile. It didn’t hurt that Tiptoe’s yawn had been just about the most adorable thing he had ever seen.

“Alright, we’ll call it a day for today and reconvene in the morning. Goodnight, everypony.”

As if on cue, the light from the radio tower snuffed out, signaling the start of night.

Jigsaw and Tiptoe made their way into the bedroom and the brunt of Jigsaw's exhaustion finally hit him. Climbing all those stairs had taken more out of him than he had thought. He flopped onto the soft mattress, thankful he had something more comfortable to sleep on than dirt and twigs.

Tiptoe snuggled in alongside him, and they fell into deep, if not entirely untroubled, sleep.

# Chapter 26

Tiptoe awoke with a start. Something had stuck her— hard— in the back. She attempted to roll over, but was hit again, this time just below her ribcage. With a flap of her wings, she propelled herself out of the bed and spun to look at what was hitting her.

Unsurprisingly, it was Jigsaw. He was tossing and turning violently in his sleep. The sheets lay in a heap at the foot of the bed, presumably kicked off. Tiptoe didn't know how she hadn't been woken up before, Jigsaw was trashing so violently. She approached the bed to try and wake him when she noticed something odd: even though the lights of the city had only just begun to glow, the interior of the room was bathed with a golden light. She glanced around to the braziers mounted on the walls and saw that they were cold. The light seemed to be emanating from Jigsaw himself.

Tiptoe froze, suddenly unsure if waking Jigsaw was the best choice of action. However, after a moment of consideration, she began to inch closer and closer to him.

"Jigsaw?" she whispered. "Jigsaw, are you okay?"

Jigsaw didn't respond. He was still thrashing about, threatening to tumble out of bed.

"Jigsaw?" she called a little louder, unease creeping into her voice. This time, however, Jigsaw seemed to respond. The thrashing became less violent, and the tension seemed to leave his muscles. Tiptoe let out a sigh.

Her relief was short-lived. A moment later, Jigsaw began to twitch and writhe uncontrollably. Tiptoe's eyes widened with fright.

"Incendia!" she shouted, her voice cracking, "Incendia, get in here, I think Jigsaw's having some kind of a seizure!"

She heard a muffled clatter and a sizzling sound, but at that moment, the light atop the massive radio tower burst to life, signaling the start of morning. Jigsaw stopped twitching, going truly limp this time. The golden light slowly receded until the room was illuminated only by the light filtering in through the window.

Tiptoe approached Jigsaw slowly once more, and tentatively nuzzled him. "Jigsaw? Are you alright?"

Jigsaw's eye's flung open, and his horn began to glow with a blue light. This was unlike the light that normally shone from his horn, however. It was a significantly darker shade of blue. Tiptoe tried to step back, but was horrified to find that Jigsaw's magic was holding her in place. Jigsaw's eyes began to glow, shining with a deep blue light in much the same way that Incendia's eyes glowed when she ignited.

"Jigsaw, what are you doing?" Tiptoe pleaded. "Let me down!"

Jigsaw turned to look at her, his eyes unfocused and glossy, iridescent in the light from the window and shining from within.

When he opened his mouth, the voice that issued out bore little resemblance to his own. It was deeper, more forceful, and dreadfully raspy. It said, each word booming through the bedroom, "*You have not yet seen the shape of things to come.*"



It was then that Incendia burst into the room, a frying pan containing three sizzling eggs floating in an orange haze just behind her. Her mouth fell agape with horror at the scene in the bedroom that was playing out before her— Tiptoe struggling in mid air, suspended in a tight band of light projecting from Jigsaw's horn. She dropped the eggs and focused her energies towards the spot in between Jigsaw and Tiptoe.

With a sound like a firecracker, they flew apart. Tiptoe caught herself in mid-air with a flap of her wings, but Jigsaw flew out of bed and smacked into the far wall. The glow instantly disappeared from both his eyes and his horn and, a moment later, he got shakily to his feet.

"What... oh goddesses, my head... What just happened?" he asked. Tiptoe galloped up to him and flung herself over his shoulders. The sudden shock nearly threw Jigsaw back onto the floor, but he stumbled and managed to maintain his footing.

"I'm so glad you're okay!" Tiptoe cried, pulling away from him. "I thought something awful was happening to you!"

"I feel like I just had a statue dropped on me," he said, with a shaky smile at Incendia, who was still eyeing him suspiciously. "I'm okay now."

"You weren't okay when I came in," she observed, making her way closer to the spot on the bed where Jigsaw had just been and examining it, as if she expected to find some kind of residue.

"What happened?" she asked, turning to Tiptoe.

"Jigsaw kicked me awake," Tiptoe said, "and it looked like he was having some kind of seizure. He was also... well, he seemed to be glowing. Then, right when morning started, he picked me up and he said 'you have not yet seen the shape of things to come,' then... well, you came in and did the rest."

"I'm so sorry, Tiptoe," Jigsaw said. "I didn't do those things. I don't know what came over me."

"Well, at any rate, I couldn't sleep well last night," Incendia said, "so I got up early and made breakfast. We might as well eat. Big day ahead of us."

They all made their way into the main room. As they exited, Jigsaw shot a dark look out the window at the radio tower and muttered, "I may have *some* idea of what came over me."

In short order, Incendia had them all settled down at the table. Luckily, she had been able to salvage the eggs that had dropped on the floor of the bedroom. After breakfast, they all felt a little calmer and more levelheaded, and some semblance of normalcy had returned.

"Where did you learn to cook so well, Incendia?" Jigsaw asked.

"It wasn't always a life of excitement, Stalliongrad," Incendia said. "I had time to experiment with my powers here and there, and being a natural stove means I was often the one that had to cook. Eventually, I started just doing it to relax."

Jigsaw nodded, then let out a deep sigh. "We should probably talk about what happened this morning."

He felt the mood in the room change instantly. Whatever calm mood had pervaded before was gone. Undeterred, he pressed on. "I don't know, but I think it was a warning. Something is going to happen today, and I don't think we have a lot of time to act."

"How can you possibly know that, Jigsaw?" Incendia asked.

"Because whatever it was, it was inside me. I can't really explain it. I just... I really think this place is in danger."

"Well, what's our plan of action?" Tiptoe said, with a sharp look at Incendia, who was still eyeing Jigsaw suspiciously.

"We need to sneak into the church and get a closer look at the airship," Jigsaw said, though he didn't sound entirely sure of himself.

"What about the fragment?" Incendia asked. "Shouldn't we collect that while we're at it?"

Jigsaw sighed again, got to his feet, and began pacing around the table. "I've been thinking about that, and I just don't know. The fragment is the only thing keeping this place safe. Who knows what would happen to it if it was taken away?"

"But we can't just sit here and do nothing," Incendia countered. "After what happened this morning, do you really think that you'll be able to just walk away?"

"Probably not," Jigsaw conceded, "but let's just get going. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Jigsaw threw on his saddlebags and they left their cozy home and began to retrace the winding route Jigsaw had taken the previous day. The streets were sparser and more bare than they had ever seen before. Here and there, ponies were erecting shops or watering flowers, but they seemed lethargic and listless. In fact, the only ponies who seemed to not be diminished were the pegasi. Their forms were still clearly visible, silhouetted against the gray of the sky.

Eventually, they came to a section of street that had a small wooden barrier erected in it, which stated simply "Closed for repairs." They took a detour around a large grassy field and ended up walking on a colorfully tiled path that was within touching distance of the magical cloud barrier.

"Have you noticed that every day there seem to be fewer and fewer ponies about on the streets?" Incendia asked. "It's bizarre. I wonder what's going—"

Her words were cut off but a sudden blast of sound and hot air. The concussive wave broke over them, blowing clouds at them like a heavy fog and obscuring their vision. Before any of them could react beyond a gasp, however, the clouds suddenly rushed back into the cloud wall as if pulled by a powerful vacuum. As if pulled away, Jigsaw began to make out shapes on the path that had not been there before. Several ponies were lying splayed on the path ahead of them, as if they had been suddenly deposited there. They were all dressed in the dark blue capes of the temple guards, though most looked as though they had been torn to shreds. Several of the ponies had bright scarlet burns on their coats, and one was lying in a pool of rapidly increasing blood.

"By the goddesses, what was *that*?" Incendia said. "My ears are still ringing. It sounded like something exploded!"

Jigsaw opened his mouth to reply, but closed it suddenly when he noticed that one of the ponies— the one lying in a pool of blood— had a quill and inkwell as a cutie mark. Tiptoe and Jigsaw spoke at the same time, having evidently noticed the same thing.

"Is... is that Quill Dipper?"

They rushed over to the unicorn and tried to get a closer look at his face. Jigsaw's stomach clenched. It was Quill Dipper, and the blood was coming from a gash on the side of his face, running from his right ear, across his eye, and through to the tip of his nose. Blood gushed out in pulses.

"Is he breathing?" Tiptoe asked in hushed tones. Jigsaw leaned down and put his face near Quill Dipper's.

"Yes, but it's very shallow. I'm going to do what I can."

Jigsaw's horn ignited, and he waved the tip over the cut. The wound glowed for a moment, and the blood lessened from a torrent to a trickle.

"That's all I can do, I'm afraid," Jigsaw said. "I still haven't recovered fully from last time."

One of the ponies who wasn't bleeding began to stir, groaning and grunting with pain. Jigsaw and Incendia rushed over to help him up.

"Are you injured?" Jigsaw asked, eyeing the large burn on the earth pony's flank.

"Nothing I can't deal with," the pony replied.

"Then, do you mind if we ask a few questions?" Jigsaw said, his tone shifting from one of care to cold determination.

"You're refugees, right?" the injured pony asked. "We're... not supposed to tell refugees about it, it's..." he trailed off upon seeing the look in Jigsaw's eyes.

"That pony on the ground over there is a friend, and I think we deserve to not be kept in the dark. You can either tell us, or we're going to find out for ourselves."

The earth pony looked for a moment as if he was going to resist, but his resolve faded. "Follow me," he said, taking a few shaky steps towards the cloud barrier.

"Wait!" Tiptoe called, "What about Quill Dipper and the others?"

The earth pony blinked, as if surprised to find that there were other ponies there, then slowly backed into the barrier. Without warning, it surged forward, engulfing them once more. When it contracted, the other ponies were gone. Even the blood had vanished. The tile looked as though it had been scoured clean.

"Where did they go?" Tiptoe inquired.

"Somewhere safe," replied the earth pony.

Soon, Jigsaw, Tiptoe, and Incendia were making their way through the layer of cloud. It felt strangely different than when they had entered Totemhoof- the fog seemed like steam in a sauna, hot almost to the point of being uncomfortable. It seemed to try to buffet them, too, pulling them to one side or pushing them the other. As they walked, Jigsaw had to fight the urge to veer off to the left or right and continue following the burned pony. After several minutes, however, they emerged from the cloud barrier.

What they saw was something far worse than any of them ever anticipated. They were standing at the foot of the huge hill that surrounded the valley that contained Totemhoof, and before them stretched out a battlefield. The sound was nearly deafening. Explosions could be seen off in the distance every few seconds, rocking ground with each blast. Pegasi swooped back and forth through the air, piling cloud on to the cloud barrier. Jigsaw couldn't help but notice they were all dressed in the blue robes of the temple guards. The ground directly in front of them was filled with tents and camps. Earth ponies and unicorns rushed around, moving equipment or soldiers.

"What's going on?" asked Incendia, her eyes wide. "What is this place?"

"We're fighting a war. Let's get into a tent, then I can explain everything to you. We're not safe out here."

A moment later, the four of them were huddled inside a pure white tent which had been erected directly in front of the cloud barrier. The earth pony stumbled over to a wooden cabinet in the corner of the tent, opened the doors with his teeth, and grabbed a tube of salve, which he squeezed onto the burn on his flank.

"We've been fighting a war. That's why so many houses are deserted and why we've been so willing to take in refugees," he said. He spoke quickly,

pausing only to take breath, as though he'd been waiting a long time to say these words. "It all started just a few days ago. We've always been prepared, of course, just in case somepony tried to invade, but they came so suddenly. Followers of Tantalus, you know."

"*What?*" Jigsaw spluttered. The earth pony ignored him and continued.

"They just came and came and came and didn't stop. At first we just let the cloud barrier do its thing, but after a while it started to get thinner and thinner. We realized that they were degrading it somehow! So we launched a counterattack, but they're crazy. They're not even ponies, some of them! I didn't even know griffons were still around until they started attacking. But they just keep throwing themselves at us! I don't know how they do it, but they never seem to get smaller in number, even though they're dying by the hundreds. Well, it worked, I suppose, because they managed to diminish our numbers so much that we were worried about sustaining our population. Almost all the pegasi have been assigned to keeping the cloud barrier functional, and the rest of us are out fighting on the front lines. After we figured out the refugees didn't like Tantalus any more than we do, we decided to let them in, but Moonbow himself stepped in at the last minute and barred anyone from telling them about the war until they were ready. It makes sense when you think about it, I suppose. They came from a city that was destroyed into one that was about to be if we didn't win. How's that for unlucky?"

The trio simply sat for several moments, not sure how to react to the information so unceremoniously dumped into their laps. It was Incendia who spoke first.

"You lied to them?" she demanded, advancing towards the earth pony, who suddenly looked as though he regretted telling her that bit of news. "You *lied* to my people? Made them think they had finally found a safe home?"

"Incendia..." Tiptoe said softly. "It wasn't his fault."



Incendia wasn't listening. The earth pony was now at the edge of the tent, unable to back up farther, and Incendia was still advancing.

"Do you have any idea what we've been through? What most of our lives were in Stalliongrad?" As she spoke, her horn began to glow, and flames began to form on her coat. She was within inches of the earth pony, who now looked abjectly horrified. Tiptoe lunged forward as if to make a motion to stop her, but Incendia merely stamped her hoof and turned away from the earth pony. The flames on her coat slowly ebbed and died.

"I'm sorry about that," Tiptoe said to the earth pony, who was still eyeing Incendia wearily.

"I understand," he said. "But please remember, I'm just a hoof soldier. I didn't choose to do this, and I haven't been able to talk about it with anyone since."

"I'll wait near the mouth of the tent," Incendia said. "I need some air."

She tromped off looking disgruntled. "I'm sorry about that," Jigsaw said apologetically as the earth pony stepped away from the canvas wall of the tent, still looking unnerved. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Like what?" the soldier replied.

"Like what exactly does the cloud barrier do?"

"It keeps the city safe. Anything that enters the clouds that isn't a resident of Totemhoof or possessing the permission of a citizen to enter won't be

able to. They'll just get turned around and come out the other side of the valley, or right back out where they entered. Sometimes they even come out at the top of the clouds. We don't know how it was made, but it's the only thing that's kept us safe from marauders since the founding of the city. Radio tower is kinda like that too, same principle," The earth pony stammered.

"What about what you did with the cloud and Quill Dipper?"

"That's another thing citizens can do, if we need to. It's a defense mechanism— we can use the clouds to transport injured ponies to a healer. Anypony can do it, if they can get in the clouds."

"What did you mean by followers of Tantalus? Who are they?"

"You never heard of them back in Stalliongrad?"

"Uh, no," Jigsaw said quickly. "They didn't freely release information about that back there."

"Ah, okay. Well, they're nasty characters. You should consider yourself lucky for having not heard about them. We don't know much about them, other than they follow Tantalus. They don't seem to have any kind of organization and they don't stop coming, ever. They just throw themselves at us. Never dispose of their dead. Near as we can tell, they don't even treat their wounded. They just let them rot where they fall. And the unicorns use some of the worst magic I've ever seen. Huge fireballs, ponies turned inside out, the works. They don't look quite right either. Like the walking dead, they are. Not dead, though. Die as easy as anything else. More like they just went crazy and don't care about anything anymore."

"How did you end up getting blasted through the cloud layer?" Jigsaw asked.

"Some kind of explosive they lobbed at us. We were standing near the clouds at the time and the blast knocked us through them."

"I need to see the battle for myself," Jigsaw said.

"Don't know why'd you want to see that," the earth pony replied, "but okay, there's some binoculars in the cabinet."

Jigsaw levitated the binoculars out of the cabinet and all three of them left the tent. Incendia was standing just outside, staring out at the distant battlefield. Jigsaw lifted the binoculars and looked out at the spot where Incendia appeared to be looking.

The battle was too hectic and fast paced for him to make out much of anything, but he saw a few strange dark shapes— griffons, perhaps— darting to and fro in the air, and strange green fires that charred the earth beneath. A mass of blue, presumably the temple guards, stood facing away from Totemhoof, forming a defensive wall which was hurling what looked like spears at the disorganized mass behind it.

Jigsaw passed the binoculars to Incendia and Tiptoe in turn, each surveying the battle playing out so far away. When they had looked their fill, Incendia turned to the earth pony.

"How long did you say this battle has been going on for?"

"This is the fourth day of fighting, I think," the earth pony replied plaintively. "It's hard to tell when you don't have the lights of the city to tell the days apart."

"You set all this up in four days?" Incendia said incredulously.

"Like I said, we're always prepared for invasions. They just... usually aren't of this magnitude. We've never lost so many before."

“What do we do now?” Tiptoe whispered to Jigsaw.

“The plan isn’t changed. We still need to get to the fragment. There’s nothing we can do about this.”

“But Jigsaw,” Tiptoe whispered back insistently, “if we take the fragment, then the clouds will probably dissipate! We can’t risk that knowing what we do now!”

“We’ll discuss it when we get there. Either way, we still need to get down there to check out the airship. It looked like we might be able to get it working again or at the very least get some useful things to scavenge,” Jigsaw spoke, his words sounding hollow and monotonous.

“Are you okay?” Tiptoe said, her throat constricting slightly with worry.

Jigsaw blinked. “Yeah, I’m okay. It’s just... that’s a lot to take in at once. My mind is reeling.”

“I understand what you mean,” Incendia said, joining the whispered conversation. “This is exactly what I was hoping wouldn’t happen.”

“Should we get going?” Tiptoe asked the group. “I don’t see much point in sticking around.”

“Agreed,” Jigsaw and Incendia said in unison.

“Uh, excuse me,” Jigsaw called to the earth pony soldier, who was so intent on watching the far-off battle that he had apparently not noticed they had stopped. “Can we get back through the cloud layer since we’re not technically citizens?”

“Hm?” the earth pony mumbled, still intent on watching the battle. Then, he seemed to process that somepony had spoken to him. “Oh, yes, you should be fine. Giving you a house was implicit permission, I should think.”

“Could you give us permission, just in case?” Jigsaw asked. “I don’t want to stumble out above the clouds. Only one of us has wings.”

“Yeah, sure. I, Spring Seed, give you permission to enter and leave Totemhoof as you see fit,” he said, though he still hadn’t taken his eyes off the battlefield.

“Well, we should be good to go, then,” Jigsaw said, turning back towards the group.

“Goodbye,” said the earth pony dreamily, “and good luck, whatever it is you’re trying to do.”

“I think he got a blow to the head in the blast,” Jigsaw hissed to Tiptoe, who had to repress a snort of laughter.

They made their way through the cloud layer, once again fighting the compulsion to drift one way or the other, before finally emerging back onto the tiled pathway.

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Jigsaw, Tiptoe, and Incendia stood before the mighty facade of the church. Jigsaw felt that the huge stone building seemed significantly more imposing now that he was faced with the prospect of sneaking inside.

“Remind me again why we can’t just walk in?” Tiptoe said nervously, her eyes wide and neck craned upwards to take in as much of the building as possible.

“Because I don’t think I have free reign to just walk in there any time I feel like,” Jigsaw said, “much less with two other ponies in tow. Plus, even if they don’t mind that, I highly doubt we’ll be left alone long enough to get

inside the door at the back. Apparently, regular citizens aren't even allowed in most of the time. So we're gonna need you to work your magic, Tiptoe."

She gulped and nodded. "You two are going to have to do *exactly* as I do, though. I can't guarantee we'll all be safe."

"Hey, look at me," Jigsaw said gently. Tiptoe tore her eyes away from the church and focusing on Jigsaw. Before she realized what he had in mind, he leaned forward, and their lips met. Incendia glanced towards the ground, suddenly flushed.

They broke apart. "You'll be fine, Tiptoe," Jigsaw said. "I believe in you."

Looking bolstered, if a bit flustered, Tiptoe nodded and began to make her way up the steps. After a brief struggle with the heavy door, all three of them managed to slip inside the ancient, weathered stone building.

The hallway was rather chillier than outside had been. In place of torches, those strange crystals jutted out of the walls at seemingly random intervals. The intermittent lighting was a blessing for Tiptoe, however. She slunk alongside the walls like a cat, holding herself lower to the ground than normal. Her bones suddenly seemed to stop factoring in to her movements. It was as if her whole body had gone fluid, flowing along the wall and around corners as if she were made of water.

Incendia could hardly believe what she was seeing. Tiptoe seemed to have undergone a complete transformation. While she and Jigsaw had to struggle to keep their hooves from clapping loudly against the stone of the tunnel, but Tiptoe seemed to be able to turn off sound around her. For Incendia, it added a whole other layer of attraction to Tiptoe. Several times, ponies emerged from branching passageways, talking quickly in hushed tones. Tiptoe whipped back against the wall, Incendia and Jigsaw following her lead, pressing themselves tightly into the crevices and imperfections in the rock wall and hoping they didn't look directly at them. They also had to pause occasionally for Jigsaw to try and remember which branching

passageway would lead them to the correct chamber. Finally, however, after what seemed like hours of tension, they approached the small, roughly cut stone door.

Jigsaw shimmied open the door, and the trio slipped inside. The giant crystal sculpture glimmered from the recessed pit in the center of the cavern, but the rest of the cave was utterly unremarkable.

“I think we can stop sneaking now,” Tiptoe said, straightening up. “What is that?” she asked, tilting her head in the direction of the statue, which was pulsing rapidly.

“It’s not important,” Jigsaw said. “What’s important is what’s over there.”

They made their way through the room, the rapidly pulsing light from the statue creating a nearly blinding strobe effect, making their motions look oddly robotic and unnatural.

They approached the door at the far side of the cave, and Jigsaw inserted his horn. The pulsing light from the statue suddenly ceased, becoming placid and calm. Incendia’s hair bristled as she felt a sudden wave of heat emanate from the door, then, with another loud *snap* and a flash of light, the door swung open.

Jigsaw took charge, leading them down the labyrinthine and decrepit network of stairs and corridors.

“We always seem to come back to this, don’t we?” Jigsaw said, glancing over his shoulder at Tiptoe. “The two of us, walking through narrow, underground passageways, in the dark.”

“And there’s usually mortal peril involved,” Tiptoe added, giggling.

“Hey! I’m here too!” Incendia chided.

“Well, Incendia, welcome to the club,” Jigsaw said, laughing.

They turned a corner and their mirth died instantly.

“This is the door,” Jigsaw said. “The airship is in here.”

“And the fragment?” Incendia asked. “What are we going to do about that?”

Jigsaw didn’t answer. Instead, he opened up the door with a push of his head, bathing the dark hallway in brilliant light.

The airship sat there, looking exactly as it had when Jigsaw has been there previously. In the carved out section of the room, the fragment floated serenely, looking as though it was suspended in a brightly glowing thunder-egg.

“It’s beautiful,” Tiptoe said, staring at the airship. “Has it really been here for all this time?”

“Well, obviously, somepony came in here at some point to deposit the fragment.” Jigsaw replied evenly.

“But it hasn’t flown in all that time?” Tiptoe said, her voice low.

“I doubt it.”

“Why is the ceiling black?” Incendia asked, staring up.

“That’s a very good question,” Jigsaw said. “I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“It kinda looks like the sky on the night side of Stalliongrad, when clouds would block out the moon and the stars,” Incendia said absently.

“Fitting,” said Jigsaw. “But now I think we’re going to have to decide what to do with the fragment.”

“We can’t take it,” Incendia said without delay. “My people are surviving here. If we take that fragment, it might make the clouds dissipate. We can’t afford to take it.”

“I don’t know,” Tiptoe said hesitantly. Both Jigsaw and Incendia looked at her in surprise. She gulped. “Well, we don’t really know what made those clouds, do we? We don’t have any proof it’s the fragment. For all we know, it’s just been sitting here. Plus, what do you think the consequences of not taking it would be? Maybe it would protect the city in the short term, but can we really afford to just sit around and let Tantalus run rampant? He’s not going to stop looking for us just because we stopped fighting.”

“What are you saying?” Incendia said waspishly. “Are you saying we should just finish the job you two started back in Stalliongrad? And what do you think those cables are for if the crystal is just sitting here?”

Tiptoe’s eyes grew wide. She looked hurt. “Incendia,” Jigsaw said, stepping forward into Incendia’s field of vision, “you know we didn’t mean what happened in Stalliongrad. We didn’t want it to happen.”

“But you want it to finish!” Incendia shouted, her horn sparking to life in spite of herself. “You’re willing to risk the destruction of my people— for what?”

“To stop the destruction of everything else!” Tiptoe shouted back. She was getting angry, too.

“Now, you two,” Jigsaw said. “Let’s calm down and discuss this like adult—”

BOOM!

The room suddenly jerked and shook, as though an earthquake had struck. The three of them stumbled, and hundreds of years of dust trickled down from the ceiling.

"What was *that*?" Incendia shouted.

"The room is collapsing!" Jigsaw cried. "Things must have taken a turn for the worse in the battle up above."

"What do we do?" asked Tiptoe, her eyes darting around the room frantically.

"We can't go back!" Jigsaw shouted. "Those tunnels will have already collapsed! Quick, into the airship!"

Incendia and Tiptoe rushed to the base of the airship, and Tiptoe took off, flying up ten feet and snatching the door handle in her teeth. It swung down, a staircase unfolding out of it. The staircase seemed to be made of brilliantly cut crystal.

"Jigsaw! Get in here!" Tiptoe called, gesturing towards the airship door.

"Hold on! I have an idea!"

He turned around to the fragment, which was still floating serenely amid the numerous glowing crystals. The room gave another great rumble, nearly throwing Jigsaw off balance, but before long he came to it.

"I hope you're happy," he whispered under his breath. "I hope you know what you're doing. Because from here I'm not seeing too much difference between you and him."

He leaned down low and touched the tip of his horn to the silvery orb.

Instantly, light and sound exploded around him. He was surrounded by a whirlwind of silver mist, swirling around him faster and faster. His horn burned, his head felt as though it was about to burst, and then-

It was over. He stumbled for a moment, then blinked. He knew what he had to do.

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Tiptoe rushed inside the airship, joining Incendia in the dark interior. The space they were in had clearly once been grand. It was tall enough for Tiptoe to do a loop-de-loop, and the walls still contained stripes of dark blue paint.

***BOOM!***

Another tremor, stronger than the first, shook the airship. Tiptoe was thrown face first onto the cold, metal tiles of the floor. This time, the room did not settle. It kept shaking, throwing them to and fro. Bits of railing crumbled down from a walkway above, slamming into the ground like giant bullets.

Incendia and Tiptoe crowded together under a rotting wooden desk in a weak attempt to protect themselves from the heavy debris slamming down around them.

“What do we do?” Tiptoe asked again. “Jigsaw had collected the fragment, and then...”

Some ancient piece of heavy machinery smashed down mere feet from their hiding spot, prompted both of the trapped ponies to scream with shock.

Incendia made a snap decision. There was no way they could get out of here, they must have been thousands of feet underground. If she was going to die in this pit, she had to say something first.

“Tiptoe, there’s something I need you to know,” Incendia shouted over the sound of metal slamming into metal.

“What?” replied Tiptoe.

“I love you!”

Suddenly, it was as all the sound had been sucked out of the room. Tiptoe started at Incendia, wide-eyed in shock. She opened her mouth to respond, when Jigsaw’s voice interrupted her.

“Where are you two? I think I know how to get out of here!”

Tiptoe and Incendia bounced up from under the desk to see Jigsaw standing there, a shining crystal floating in mid air to his left and the disassembled bits of Incendia’s shoulder teleporter to his right.

“We need to get to the engine rooms! This way! We don’t have any time to waste!”

He took off running down a hallway to the left, the other two hot on his hooves. Before too long, they came to a room that was full of all sorts of strange-looking metallic objects. Tubes and pipes were everywhere, and three tanks of softly glowing liquid lined the walls to their left

Jigsaw didn’t have any time to look around, however. Time was of the essence.

With reckless force, he tore a large, dark black crystal out of a small chamber in a huge machine in the center of the room and stuck the brightly glowing crystal in its place. Then, he turned on the spot and galloped out, yelling at the others to follow.

They turned a corner and came to the narrow coil of a spiral staircase, which they climbed as quick as they could. The top of it was the underside of a trapdoor, which Jigsaw threw open with wild abandon. The room beyond was lined with screens on three of the four walls; some were larger

than a pony, yet others seemed so small that they looked as though they could never have shown anything useful. Jigsaw shot around the room, tearing our bundles of cable— with his teeth, no less— and hastily splicing in bits and pieces from the teleporter.

“That’s all I can do,” Jigsaw said, rushing up to the back of the room, where a large, padded chair stood facing the fourth wall, which wasn’t so much a wall as a lack thereof. Where it should have been, there was simply a large, open space, through which they could see out onto the room.

“We’re at the top of the ship?” Tiptoe said with confusion. “How did we get up here so fast?”

Jigsaw wasn’t listening. He settled himself into the chair and his horn began to glow. A small dashboard rose out of the ground at his hooves, complete with yet another screen and a bright red lever.

“They really built this for show, didn’t they?” Jigsaw said, more to himself than anyone else. He threw the lever down.

The noise was deafening. A huge, high pitched hiss sounded, a deep rumbling, louder than any coming from the room outside began deep in the bowels of the ship, and extremely high screeching sounds emanated from all around them.

Then, all sound died, save for a small hum. A bright light glimmered around the fourth wall for a moment, and an instant later the catwalk collapsed. One of the thick metal supports came swinging down directly towards the hole in the wall. Tiptoe and Incendia flinched instinctively, but when the column slammed into the hole, there was a flash of light and a sizzle, and the support ceased to exist.

“What was that?” Tiptoe asked, her eyes wide.

“I have no idea,” Jigsaw responded, “but we have to get out of here. Hold on tight!”

Tiptoe and Incendia both bit on the nearby railing as the airship gave an almighty jerk and, to their utter shock, they began to rise up. Jigsaw’s horn was glowing a brilliant blue, and the screens around the room were coming to life one by one, displaying hundreds of lines of old world text. The pure-black ceiling had begun to flicker, glowing a brilliant white. As they rose, they seemed to pass right through it, the view of the crumbling underground chamber slowly wiping away to alabaster.

Then they were out, floating out of the clouds, a few hundred yards away from the radio tower.

Jigsaw started out at the tower in disbelief, then all three of them let out a hesitant laugh that quickly grew hysterical with relief.

When they glanced out of the wall again, the laughter stopped abruptly.

The clouds were pulling away from the city, swirling away as though repelled by a magnet. From their vantage point in the skies, they could clearly see the legions of Tantalus’ worshippers pouring up and over the hills protecting the city.

The trio stared down at the city, watching the orange flicker of fires begin to spring up.

“No,” Jigsaw said quietly. “No.”

“What are you—” Tiptoe began, but Jigsaw’s horn had begun to glow brilliantly again.

“We’re in the most powerful battleship from before the fall. I intend to use it. Press any and everything at that panel,” Jigsaw said, pointing to a number of screens displaying red, rapidly flashing old world text. “I’ve set it to only

target Tantalus' supports."

"You can do that?" Incendia asked.

"I don't know how it works, but they show up green on the targeting system," he answered. "Citizens show up blue. Press it."

Incendia pressed the largest button she could find, and the room shook yet again. The high-pitched screeching sound began yet again, and Incendia stared up at the display. It was flashing scarlet, and text was flying by so quickly she could barely even tell letters apart. The screeching was deafening and then...

A blue wave emanated from the bottom of the ship, speeding almost lazily towards the town, rippling and shimmering as it went. It washed over the town with what seemed, from their vantage point so far above, to be extreme sluggishness, but cover the town it did.

"Press it again!" Jigsaw shouted, his expression intensely focused on the scene playing out below them.

Incendia jammed the button again, and the airship gave another mighty shake. The alarms got even louder, and from far off, several small explosions could be heard. but down below, the blue light grew and grew, until it reached such an intensity that it was nearly blinding, then faded away.

Down below, the mob of the invading army began doing something astonishing. "What's going on?" Tiptoe asked as she peered over the side of the ship. The mass of green and red that was Tantalus' forces seemed to have frozen in place, surrounded by a soft, blue glow, as though that strange wave had suddenly replaced all the ponies with ice sculptures.

Jigsaw got up from the command chair and walked over to the console Incendia was operating, which was still spitting text faster than he could read.

“What was that?” Incendia asked quietly. “What did I do?”

“I used to read all about these as a colt,” Jigsaw said, staring at the console. “They were supposed to be the grandest vessels of their time, as well as the most powerful. It was said just one could win a war.”

“Is it supposed to be making all these noises?” Incendia inquired, turning to look at the screens.

“No,” Jigsaw said, pressing a button just below the one Incendia had pushed.

Instantly, Jigsaw felt as though he was half as heavy as he should have been. They had begun to descend, and quickly. The alarms reached a fever pitch, nearly deafening them with their insistent whines. A bright white beam shot from the bottom of the ship, just visible out of the fourth wall, and slammed directly into the ground, moving perpendicular to the ship, which was floating lazily towards Totemhoof.

Jigsaw galloped back up to the command chair and tried desperately to get the ship to rise, but nothing seemed to be responding. The controls were very simple- the magical engines made up for any intricacies of motion that could not be controlled by a joystick, but no matter how hard he pulled, the ship didn't rise.

The light from below passed over the now dark radio tower. The light seemed to get siphoned inside, flowing down the heavy cables and into the earth. All over the streetlights began to ignite, growing brighter until...

Another blast rang out from below, the sound of thousands of streetlamps exploding, a dismal cacophony that caused the white light to spill out and



rush through the streets as though the streetlights had become spigots. Wherever white light met the blue glow that still surrounded the frozen forces of Tantalus, there was a small flash, and they seemed to vanished.

The ship moved away from the radio tower, and the white light died.

The white light stopped flowing from the lampposts instantly, but the damage had been done. Over three quarters of the invading force had been hit by the light, and the quarter that was left was shrugging off the paralyzing blue wave and retreating.

The damage to the city wasn't negligible, however. The explosions of the streetlights appeared to pockmarked the surface of the city with craters, and the invading army had started several fires that were raging out of control.

Jigsaw yanked on the joystick, and, mercifully, it responded. The entire airship jerked to one side, careening over the hills that surrounded Totemhoof, and then...

The screens died, and the ship began to plunge out of the sky.

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Jigsaw's eyes fluttered open. For an instant, he thought he was back in the caves, waking up in his office after falling asleep at the desk. Then he remembered. The ship, the strange weapons, the crash...

"Tiptoe!" he yelled, making a motion to jump out of bed, though a searing pain in his side stopped him. He looked down to see a white bandage wrapped around his midsection, a streak of scarlet seeping through.

He was in a hospital!

"Jigsaw?" Came a reply from somewhere out of sight.

Lights flipped on, and Tiptoe and Incendia came running from the left.

“Your’e okay!” Tiptoe said, tears in her eyes.

“What happened?” Jigsaw asked, standing up very gingerly. “How long have I been out?”

“About six hours,” Incendia said. “You got the worst of it when we hit the ground. You had a pretty bad cut on your stomach, but the doctors say you should be okay if you take it easy for a few days.

“We’re in Totemhoof?” Jigsaw asked.

Incendia and Tiptoe shared a knowing look.

“You were incredible back there,” Tiptoe said. “I don’t know how you knew what to do, but you saved the city.”

“I just drew off of what I’d read,” Jigsaw said. Then, with a smile, he added, “I’m good at figuring out how things work.”

“Well, after the crash, the residents of Totemhoof came rushing out to see what was happening,” Incendia began. “Neither of us were injured very badly, and the airship didn’t seem to even have been scratched. We followed the route back down through the engine rooms and met the Totemhoof residents outside. We explained to them what had happened, and they took us in for medical care.”

“What about the clouds? Isn’t the city exposed now?”

“Apparently,” Tiptoe said with a smile, “they had some old prophecy that warned them of this. Moonbow thought it was you from the moment he met you. He says they mourn the loss of the essence of Luna, but that the city should no longer be a target to Tantalus now that nothing of value to him

remains there. And, because we decimated the forces so completely, they should be able to fight off and straggles that might come.”

“So... we did it?” Jigsaw asked tentatively.

“Yeah,” Tiptoe replied, “we did it.”

“The question is,” Incendia said seriously, “What do we do now? The engine looked shot. It was pouring smoke and fluids were leaking everywhere.”

“We pushed it too far,” Jigsaw said. “It was in no condition to be doing what it did, and my repairs were very haphazard. I think we have to try to at least get it flying, though.”

“Why?” Incendia asked. “I mean, I know you wanted a vehicle, but do you really trust that thing?”

“No,” Jigsaw said, “but we *need* a vehicle. The next fragment is west— very far west. Far enough that we won’t make it if we don’t have some kind of protection. We at least have to try salvaging from it.”

He let out a yawn and paused.

“I know I’ve been out for six hours, but I feel like I could sleep for another six. We’ll go at it tomorrow.”

Tiptoe nodded. “We haven’t slept since the crash. We were too busy worrying about you and having to talk to Totemhoof officials. Sleep sounds good. We have temporary rooms in the other hospital wing.”

“Sleep well,” Incendia said, exiting the room at a trot.

“Goodnight,” Tiptoe said, leaning in close to Jigsaw. “You were amazing out there. I love you.”

She planted a quick kiss on his lips, then left the room as well.

Jigsaw fell asleep more quickly and feeling more satisfied than he had in a long time.