

A New Equestria

By Mist



Table of Contents:

Prologue	3
Chapter 1	11
Chapter 2	18
Chapter 3	25
Chapter 4	35
Chapter 5	44
Chapter 6	50
Chapter 7	59
Chapter 8	66
Chapter 9	78
Chapter 10	92
Chapter 11	104
Chapter 12	115

Prologue

Skyvale, a city that had earned itself the name “Heaven of Equestria”, originally for its celestial positioning as it watched over the world beneath it. It was to become a kingdom in itself that would rival even Canterlot some many moons ago. Originally constructed for the new found Princess Luna of the moon; thus much of the city was adorned with immortalized versions of her. One could not glance left or right without her eyes always following you.

That was the city’s past though; today it was nothing more than an unfinished fortress shielded from the sinister poisons of the outside world.

Upon finishing the steel blanket over the city that was intended to protect it from harm, it couldn’t have begun to serve its purpose at a faster pace. All of us inside the city had no idea what was happening at the time, only that we were forbidden to leave the city, and anyone who left would not be permitted back in. I had showed up at the city mere days before the closing of the gates to the outside world. Originally I had come to visit to see the opening ceremony for Luna. When the gates closed, all I could wrap my mind around was the curiosity of what was happening on the surface below. I never did get to see Luna or that ceremony.

When the gates closed, they stayed sealed shut for nearly two long years; “No one in, no one out”, that’s what the guards would tell us. It was best not to bother with questions as to what was happening out there, as you’d never be able to squeeze even a meager hint from them. They assured us that it was all for our personal safety, and before long no one bothered questioning it anymore. After all they endured; they eventually began to accept their new life in their permanent home. I was no different, but a part of me always wondered what was happening out there, and why it was being kept from us.

Most of the citizens had come here with their families, thus adjusting wasn’t as difficult for most of them, but the few who were told they must abandon their families down below responded in hysterics. In time though, they too would come to accept their fate and settle down. I had only arrived

with my sister, Torch. She was still but an infant when we first showed up, and thus remembers little of life outside the city.

The city's leader, Silver Hoof, was at least a generous creature. After the gates were shut he offered housing for all of the new citizens, and assigned them jobs as to give them a purpose in being here. It wasn't perfect, but it was endurable for the most part. He was a very lenient leader for a pony that had to ration everything, and could take no chances.

After two years of solitude to the outside, the city's advisers permitted the entry of one young colt, and no others, even to this day. They only instructed us that he was granted entry upon some kind of "trade", we never did discover what he could have possibly brought to make the strict lord of the city to bend his otherwise absolute policies.

His name was Dipper; it came from a constellation in the heavens he had mentioned before. It was appropriate for him, as his branding was of a star. He was a skilled navigator, and mentioned that he used to draw maps and do "recon".

Most in the city avoided Dipper as if he were death himself. They wanted nothing to do with an outsider, nor did they want any of their family to associate with them. *Hypocrites*, they had all forgotten that we were all outsiders at one point.

I had volunteered to allow Dipper to stay with myself and Torch, for some reason I was fascinated with this young colt.

He had many scars across his body as I recalled, I counted seven just on my first glance at him; I got the impression that he was a bit of a fighter from this. His silver coat seemed to have lacked the shine that it probably had at one point, as did his messy white mane. Everything about him seemed worn, except his personality. Possibly the most excitable pony I had encountered in my lifetime.

I remember he would tell the most enthralling stories with such vivid detail. Many times he would put Torch to sleep and share a bit of his tale with her, only to have the young filly demanding more in exchange for rest. He would laugh, tuck her in, and whisper "Maybe tomorrow", to her. His

sense of humor seemed to have remained intact despite being from the outside.

According to what he had informed us, the world outside was essentially destroyed by a giant war that started around the time that the gates were sealed. The opposition of society as it stood prior was something that he referred to as “the darkness”, and explained that it consumed anyone who allowed it to. It turned many to its power only to control them to fight for it. They would follow mindlessly, even to their own death. No one had seen where the darkness came from, or what its physical form was, but it created agents to perform its bidding. All Dipper claimed to know was that the darkness only wished to take this world from us, and would stop at nothing to do it. It took life away from anything it touched, and left much of the world below us coated in itself.

When it first appeared, opposition came to fight it. The elements of harmony had gathered to fend it off under the Knights of Celestia. There were many battles from there, and he mentioned specifically that he recalled one particular commanding officer from the fighting, one that he claims to have served under. Rainbow Dash, I recalled the name from many papers as the winner of many flying contests.

He spent many nights enthralling me in tales of her bravery and valiant efforts in the war. He depicted her as a Goddess on the battlefield and capable of speeds unmatched by any other. His stories gave me so much hope for the world outside; he had given me something to look up to, her.

The war would take a turn for the worse however, as only six months after the fighting began, armies of darkness had developed a new kind of weapon. Dipper never found out what it was, but it wiped out most of Equestria in one mighty blast. In only a fraction of a second the beautiful skies were turned black, and destruction swept over the land, leaving only bodies that it held no use for behind. It was as Dipper described, “the end of the world.”

That didn't stop the fighting however, the Knights of Celestia continued to fend off the darkness, and even Rainbow Dash would continue to fight. Dipper had served as her primary scout, and was present for a majority of the battles that occurred.

After a life as exciting as his, I could not help but ask why he wanted to come to a place like this. His response: "I wanted to see what it was like here." Nothing more than curiosity fueled him, he lived by the moment and for the moment.

Besides my sister Torch, he was probably the only friend I had in that entire city, probably the entire world. The truth is that I wasn't much of a social pony, and it derived from my lack of a cutie mark. Despite my age, I had yet to find anything that I was particularly exceptional at; my sister even got her mark before I did. The truth of the matter was that I just couldn't find anything I excelled at, and really I wasn't trying too hard. Essentially I had given up on acquiring a cutie mark years ago, I was ready to accept being a full grown colt with a bare flank.

Socially, I was inept in the sense that I honestly didn't care what other ponies thought about me. I had always been a loner, and it was a character trait that I think would be more favorable in some situations.

Sometime shortly after Dipper's acceptance into Skyvale, the city council granted permission to all citizens of the keep to leave the city walls to the ground below, but at a price. You would be granted freedom to leave at the cost of re-entry. The moment a single hoof touched the ground below, you were not allowed back in. One way out, no way back in. This system warded away would-be adventurers from leaving the city, but we still had a few every year that would leave; of course we would never hear from them again. I assumed that most of these individuals would run off to join the Knights in the rebellion.

Around the sixth year of life within the city walls, everything changed for me. Dipper, had caught a terrible illness. We had taken him to every medical facility the city had to offer, to no avail.

I recall the last conversation I had with him.

"I don't regret any of it, Flare."

Flare, that was my name. My family had named us all after the element of fire, a tradition that had been in my family for generations apparently.

"The war may have changed me, but it did so for the better. I learned the meaning of responsibility, courage, and loyalty. Oh, so much loyalty..." He was lost in his memories it seemed.

I didn't interrupt him. Waiting silently for him to continue, he tilted his head in my direction with a smile. There he lay on his death bed, still full of happiness.

"I got to serve under the best damn warrior Equestria has ever known, and I loved every second of it. If I could go back and do it all again, I would. She truly is the greatest, and I hope you get to meet her one day. She made me stronger than I ever could have become on my own." He extended a hoof in my direction; I cradled it while getting closer to the dying colt.

"You truly admired her didn't you?" I asked.

He nodded. "I can die without regret because of all the joy that filled my life. Meeting her, serving the Knights, and of course meeting you..." He choked a little trying to speak.

"Me?" I replied.

His face lit up with a heartfelt smile, "The people here didn't take too kindly to outsiders. I was fortunate to even be allowed in at all. I thought I would have to spend the rest of my days alone, but you extended kindness to me. You embraced me and allowed me into your home even though you had no idea who I was, or where I'd been."

"None of that ever really mattered to me..." I admitted.

"I wish there were more people with your kindness..." He laughed.

I blinked. "Why's that?"

He chuckled before answering, and then gave me an innocent look. "Maybe then we wouldn't have even had a war to begin with."

The next morning when I awoke, I had realized that I was alone in that room. The colt there before had been stripped of the last bit of life left in him. He lay still and silent, almost as though in a deep slumber. Even in death, a smile still played his lips, which he would take to his grave.

Nothing really happened in Skyvale from then on. Every day I hoped that another outsider would enter the city limits, but no such thing could, or would happen. Many left, but none entered. Life was stagnant for the time.

Within the seventh year in Skyvale I had grown restless of life within the steel prison. Torch was coming of age, and close to reaching adulthood. As she was entering adulthood, I was doing little more than getting older, but none wiser. I had no directive still, and an empty flank to prove it. I was probably the oldest pony that ever lived that lacked a cutie mark.

By the end of that seventh year, I knew what I wanted at last. I wanted to leave the city, to go down to the ground below. As soon as I proposed the idea to Torch she opposed, as I expected her to.

“Brother, you’ve heard the stories about the ground from Dipper, but how do you even know that they’re true, or rather still true? You forget that was almost seven years ago!” She protested.

“I understand your concern Torch, but this really is my calling. This is why I haven’t obtained my cutie mark yet, I haven’t found my talent. Surely there is something down there that is calling for me, maybe other ponies that need help. We take life in this city for granted, we’re blessed with all the things that make life easy, but not everyone is like that. Plus wouldn’t you like to be able to leave the city someday? To be able to come and go freely in a new Equestria?” I smiled as I stroked her fire red mane delicately.

“What will you do down there?” She questioned with a worried expression.

“I’m going to join the Knights of Celestia. I want to help build a new Equestria...” I explained.

“Let me come with you then!” She blurted out.

“No. You need to stay here where you’ll be safe. There’s no telling what’s out there, and it is best that you stay here. The people here need you, after all you’re on your way to becoming a doctor.” I responded.

I stayed firm on this decision, and eventually she had little choice but to accept it.

When the day actually came for me to leave, I recall my last sight of her being one of tears streaking down her cheeks.

The ceremony for leaving was simple. You entered the airlock with Silver Hoof himself, then he informed you of the conditions of this arrangement, then if you chose to accept, he let you leave the airlock alone. No one had ever seen outside that airlock except Dipper.

“Flare the earth pony.” He began. “You are about to leave Skyvale to the Equestrian ruins. As city council leader, and founder of Skyvale, I am required to inform you that the moment you set hoof onto the ruins, you are forever bound to them, and not permitted to return here to Skyvale. You will no longer be a citizen. Do you comply with these terms?” Silver had clearly practiced this speech several times.

I nodded. “I do.”

“Are you absolutely certain? This is a large decision you make, and it cannot be undone. I hope you have given this plenty of thought...” He said.

I bowed my head, “I understand. I have given this much thought, and decided this is the best decision for me. Life in the city has been a pleasant dream, but I can’t stay asleep forever. The time has come to wake up and face reality.”

He sighed and nodded in acknowledgement; a hint of disappointment smeared on his face. Begrudgingly he left the airlock and when the steel portal shut behind him, the elevator to leave the city opened its doors inviting me inside.

Without hesitation I stepped inside. I couldn’t afford to put any doubt into this plan. During those final moments in Skyvale, the thought on my

mind surprised me. I wasn't thinking about Dipper, or life in the city, or thoughts of what life down below would be like, or even Torch. The only thing on my mind was finding the Knights of Celestia. Whatever challenges faced me down there, they surely would be able to assist me in overcoming them.

The door had finally opened, exposing the mysteries of the outside world to me at long last.

Chapter 1

The outside world, it was nothing like I had imagined it. Even from all the vivid depictions that were given from Dipper's stories, I wasn't able to grasp what I was truly seeing. The skies had sinister black smog covering them, blocking any sunlight from ever exiting their grasp and touching the ground. The heavens had been closed up for some time it seemed, and the earthbound may never see sunlight again. It was doubtful that even though with the gift of flight could fly high enough through the black coat of darkness to see the once proud glowing orb of life.

Floral life had suffered severely from this deprivation of light. Many of the trees were leafless, and rotting. There was nothing but tarnished dirt for miles it seemed. Not a flower in sight, or a blade of grass to be seen. The only things that appeared to survive in the plant category were the fungi, and even they looked unhealthy, more so than usual.

I stared down a lonely wasteland, void of life, presence, and existence; nothing but empty dirt and sand, and a strong odor. This odor, I had never experienced before; the foulest stench I could even get into my nostrils was before me. I was unable to even fully inhale without choking and my body telling me to upchuck. There couldn't exist a smell as malignant as this one. It wasn't coming from any particular route around me, more like every route. This stench; the only thing I could say it was off the top of my head, was death. This was what death smelled like.

The smell was appropriate, as gathered around the entrance to the city were the cadavers of several ponies. Many of them looked like they were malnourished during their hour of passing, implying to me that they had died of thirst and starvation waiting here. That was of course for the bodies that still had flesh on them, the rest left behind nothing but their skeletons and maggots.

I had never seen a corpse before, but part of me was expecting it out here. I knew that the war meant there would be death nearby, but I didn't think this close.

Glaring into the eyes of the most recent looking corpse, I could see fear in her face. She was a young filly, probably no older than Torch. The look on her face, the terror in her eyes, she feared death. She came here out of that fear. They all must have come here for that same reason; they wanted salvation from this place, hoping that Skyvale would offer it. The city however wasn't as generous as they had thought. They were locked out, and left here to die.

Finally the realization of what was happening around me hit. Tears ran furiously from my eyes as I felt my throat begin to contract in the opposite direction. Within only moments of that happening, I keeled over in discomfort and up came my last meal.

Dipper had forgotten to put more detail into the reality of this forsaken land. All he ever went on about was the Knights of Celestia, and the boldness of Rainbow Dash. He neglected to mention much of what this place was really like.

At my feet, a scrap of paper landed upon my yellow coated hoof. Tilting my head to examine it, I could recognize a pony on the poster; a light purplish coat, with a dark mane to match it. Her mane had been clipped to have bangs in front of her, and a pink streak right down the middle. Her body safely guarded by some finely crafted white armor with gold trimmings. A set of gold wings decorated the hoof plating on all 4 hooves, but clearly for decoration and nothing more. This must have been the armor of the holy knights. I remembered her name, Twilight Sparkle. Sometime before the war Celestia announced her as her right hand, there was a big televised event about it. I remember watching it with my father during the time.

At the top of the scrap I noticed another young mare in similar armor. This one however had a hood up, with her face still fully visible. She was a sky blue, rather majestic pegasus, with a vibrant multi-colored mane. Her magenta eyes seemed to compliment her extravagant locks, while maintaining a look of determination. It was her, the famous Rainbow Dash, I was sure of it.

I read the contents of the poster hoping for any further information. It read as followed:

The Knights of Celestia!

The Knights of Celestia are here to protect you, and ensure your future and safety. We will face the oncoming dark menace with courage and determination. We will not allow this black omen to take our world from us, and you shouldn't either. We are ready to rise to arms without fear.

The Knights are commanded by Celestia herself, and 2nd General Twilight Sparkle.

Field Commander Rainbow Dash, otherwise known as "The Miracle", has lead our troops to victory even with the odds stacked against her. She is living proof that this is not the end, and we do not have to accept our own extinction; we have the choice to fight against it, to deny it our lives. Do not hesitate to join, you could be the next Rainbow Dash.

I was almost in shock at how fortunate I was. *It is her*, was the only thing that I could wrap my mind around.

Frantically I peeked around for anything I could use to carry things. In my descent from the city, the idea of bringing anything with me hadn't crossed my mind. I never imagined that the world down below would look like this. With a stroke of good luck, I was able to locate a small side bag. It was in rather poor condition, but it could definitely hold together for some light traveling. It was better than nothing.

Fastening the bag to my side, I silently thanked the kind traveler who had left it behind and hoped their fate was not an unpleasant one. I tossed the flyer inside; I figured it might be useful, even if its only purpose served as a self-motivator.

Peering around at my surroundings, I silently cursed Dipper; he had never given me a map. An expert on maps and navigation, and not once had I thought to acquire a map from him before making this venture, though I suppose it was my own fault. I was off to a brilliant start, out in a desert without a map, or a clue as to which direction to head. I had come to Skyvale in a chariot, which I slept during most of the flight. Not that it would matter anyways, judging by what I had seen already, any landmarks that were there seven years ago would surely lay in ruins now.

I couldn't help but continually ask myself what could have possibly done all of this? The war was big sure, but this couldn't have been some kind of weapon that destroyed the face of the entire country. Who would build such a thing? *How* would they build such a thing?

I tried to keep those thoughts in the back of my mind, as I needed to figure out where to begin. If I stayed here any longer I might end up like my "sleeping" companions.

The flyer! My mind jumped. I reached into my bag and brought out the scrap and studied the backside of it. My hunch was correct.

Recruiting

All new recruits should report to the recruiting center in Ponyville near Canterlot castle. You will there be administered an aptitude test which will help determine the best place for you within the Knights.

From August 17th 2010 until September 6th 2010, all new recruits shall be visited by Celestia herself, who shall be sending off all new soldiers personally. Don't miss out on this special opportunity; be at Ponyville to sign up for the Knights today!

Even more fortunate, there was a small map there. Ponyville appeared to be far east of where I was. There was no scale on the map to determine how long a travel it was, but I could probably just look for landmarks from here, even if they are ruined.

With the first hoof forward, I began my long walk towards a fairly uncertain destination. Anything was better than here though.

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I couldn't tell how long I had been walking, maybe a couple of hours, perhaps even a full day. I didn't feel as though I was getting any closer to where I was heading as everything out here looked the same to me, perhaps an additional stray corpse here and there. Corpses seemed to be the only inhabitants of this place, as I hadn't come across signs of life for miles. I was beginning to get doubtful that anypony was alive out here. It was possible; Dipper hadn't been out here in a good five years, so maybe

in that time things had changed, though I was more hoping a change for the better.

It was hard to imagine that this pit of dust and charred dirt was once the beautiful countryside of Equestria. I could see the blooming flowers, and tree branches swaying in the gentle breeze in my mind. The memories of a world before the war were racing through my head as I looked at the results of said war before me.

I snapped out of my daydream to see a figure off in the distance. It appeared to be moving towards my direction. *Another pony.* My heart nearly leapt out of my throat at the thought. For the first time out in this land of death, I had discovered another living creature. With full heart, I darted towards the individual yelling to them.

“Hello over there!”

The figure appeared to have heard my call, and didn’t change his speed even the slightest. I galloped faster trying to close the distance between us.

“Are you with the Knights of Celestia!?” I asked, knowing the chances were low.

It answered me with silence.

I was getting fairly close to it, when I realized that this creature wasn’t a pony at all, but some kind of large dog-like monster. Its coat had several patches missing from it, most of which were covered with its own blood.

It was missing one of its eyes. The wound from that injury however looked days old, and appeared to be festering with infection now. It looked exceptionally hostile towards me as it snarled and hissed viciously at my direction. It was missing a majority of its teeth, which only made it more terrifying.

The beast was probably at least five times larger than the average canine, but despite his massive size, he appeared malnourished. It was clear he planned to correct that problem.

“Easy boy...” I pointlessly tried to calm the monster.

As expected he didn't seem to be very interested in my words. I was foolish to think that a starving monster would be willing to obey commands from what appeared to be dinner to it, but it was worth a shot.

I slowly trotted in a circle around it, attempting to lead it away from me, but he followed not taking his only eye off of me. Up this close, I could see that he had a collar on him as well, but I couldn't get close enough to see any of the writing on it, not that I wanted to get any closer to this beast.

Without much warning, the massive creature lunged at me. I only had a second to react, but I aimed my back hoof to it, and bucked as hard as I could. Luck was on my side, as I managed to hit the beast in the face, causing it to fall to the ground in pain. I almost felt sorry for the thing.

“Go on, get out of here!” I scolded.

That wasn't exactly my smartest move, as it rose back to its feet with a ferocious growl. In the face of his hunger it was clear that he had forgotten all about fear.

His second lunge was just as unsuccessful as the first, as I repeated the strategy, but this time darted off in the opposite direction of the beast, hoping to outrun it so that I could keep going towards my destination.

Peering back I saw it was still giving chase to me. He wasn't going to let a meal get away from him that easily. I set my attention to straight ahead and focused everything on galloping faster.

Not too long after I started, the creature gave up and turned the other way, but I didn't stop running. I wanted to put some space between me and that thing before I was ready to slow down. Last thing I needed was a second encounter with that monster.

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Nearly an hour of galloping had exhausted me. I needed to rest somewhere, but there wasn't a house, or remains of one anywhere to be seen.

I was fortunate however that there was a small cave under a jutting cliff. It wasn't exactly as inviting as it could have been, especially with thoughts of my own bed in my mind, but it was perfect in comparison to the outside. The shelter of a cave sounded very comforting by that logic, granted nothing else had already claimed said cave.

I approached cautiously trying not to disturb anything that could be resting in the dank hole of limestone. Performing a thorough inspection, this small opening in the rocks appeared to be empty, and uninhabited, and thankfully clear of dead bodies. I didn't think I could handle resting next to a "permanent sleeper", right now.

The cave was small, but cozy. Curling up against a wall, I let my eyelids fall. I don't think I recall ever being quite as frightened as I was out in this place. My whole life I had always gone on about how I wanted to be a fearless hero, somepony that ponies could count on, but the truth is, I had never experienced how real the world can be until I came out here. I never imagined that I'd ever be stranded in a forgotten land fighting for my own survival; a place where you had to find a dark old cave just to get some sleep.

My stomach hissed something fierce at me. I had gone probably a day and a half without eating, on top of that the only meal I had before I left I had vomited. I would need to find something to eat soon. Right now however I only wanted to drift away into a slumber. Maybe if I went to sleep, I'd wake up and this would all just be a horrible nightmare. I wasn't counting on such luck however.

Chapter 2

I had been moving for several hours. I was hesitant to convert the time into days, as since I never saw the sun rise or set, it was impossible to tell when night ended and day began, and of course a watch was something I neglected to bring. I had never thought knowing what time it was would hold any relevance when I left the city.

One thing was certain, I was starving. I hadn't eaten since I left the city, and there was definitely a food deficit out in the remains of Equestria. On top of that, even if I located food, there was little way to ensure that it would still be edible. Sitting out here with exposure to the elements probably would make it difficult to stomach any food that survived. Still, I was at the state where I could eat almost anything, so long as it filled my stomach. I don't think I've ever known what it was like to be this hungry. Correcting this problem would have to become a high priority, as the lack of food was starting to affect my ability to travel. Resting became a constant detour; I must have stopped at least eight times or so to take a rest, I even almost passed out once.

With some luck I had come across what appeared to be the remains of a landmark on the map, Fort Stallion; an old military bay left behind years ago. It clearly has suffered during the time of its abandonment, as most of it lay in ruins, but the outer wall was mostly intact, with a few tents and housing areas still standing. It was perfect to take some refuge, and possibly even locate some sustenance.

Cautiously, I peeked within the gates, as I didn't want another encounter with the "friendly" creatures of the wasteland again. During my travel over the past few days, I must have come across a dozen animals, all of which wanted me in their stomach. It was amazing what intense hunger can do to normally docile creatures; survival always came first I suppose.

Fort Stallion appeared to be still abandoned, I was thankful for that, but I wouldn't let my guard down until I was entirely sure this camp was

deserted. A part of me though wished it wasn't completely empty, it would be nice to meet another pony out here.

In the center of the encampment there stood a grand marble statue of Celestia with her sister Luna standing valiantly behind her. It was a rather realistic likeness of the Princess; the only flaws had come with age and the elements buffeting the work of art. A lot of money must have been spent on this; it was probably put here as a morale booster.

Deciding that food was more important than marveling at art right now, I made my way to a small structure marked "supplies" by a rotting wooden sign. Inside was a labyrinth of crates stacked upon more crates. I sighed and began cracking open these aged wooden boxes.

With a fierce back kick I popped the first one open. The crates were dried out and worn with age, so they shattered like glass when struck. A pile of syringes, needles, and gauss tape pooled onto the floor. My deductive skills allowed me to determine that was a medical supply crate, not really anything of much use to me. I tried another as my stomach growled.

This one dropped thousands of small metallic cone-shaped objects. They spilled all over the floor with a loud clatter. I wasn't exactly sure what they were really, but there were thousands of them all modeled to look the same. They were flat on one end, and came to a point on the other; I couldn't see much use for such a piece of metal. They were probably produced on some assembly line to be so symmetrical, but why?

Hunger calmed my mind's questions, and forced me to keep checking the boxes. I kicked the lid clean off of one that hugged the wall. *Jackpot.* This one was filled with many sealed bags of an orange color. I pulled a bag out, and flipped over the package to read the back.

Dog-Gone-Good Jerky

We at Dog-Gone-Good are proud to present our original flavor beef jerky.

Our jerky is processed the moment the beef is acquired. We take it right away to be smoked over a real open fire, unlike our competitors who use artificial smoking methods that take out the flavor. We do everything the

real way here at Dog-Gone-Good, that's why our jerky is the top selling in Equestria! The secret lies in our special blend of spices that give it that tangy irresistible flavor that you know and love so much. We hope you enjoy our products as much as your taste buds do!

I wasn't exactly too thrilled to be eating meat, but I was so hungry I could eat a rock if it had some salt on it probably. Throwing caution to the wind, I tore the package open and started to devour the strips of cow meat. It was salty, and age had worn away some of the "original" flavor (I was guessing, as I had never tasted it before), but it at least tasted like food, just not very good food; I could still eat half a crate though with my hunger.

Munching down all I could from the bag, I torn open another package and began to shred through the bland meat. I had never known what hunger was until now. At Skyvale there was never a time where we went days without food; almost every day we had three square meals, two if you were me. I didn't eat much, and I usually skipped lunch in favor of dinner.

I used to have a basic routine every day. Waking up, I would have a small breakfast right before going to work. I was employed as a delivery colt for food supplies. My work consisted of taking the food from the farms to the market. In Skyvale they had a large farming section of the city for food production; the city was designed so ponies could live there indefinitely. It was very simple work, and it wasn't exactly something I enjoyed doing, or had much pride in, but everypony was required to have a job upon reaching adulthood within the city. If you didn't qualify for a job with your cutie mark, the city gave you one. Naturally it's easy to see how I acquired my field of work.

I mused myself with the idea of perhaps survival was my special talent, though I knew it to be untrue, and my flank showed no signs of agreeing with me. The loneliness of this empty land was starting to take its toll on me. I could feel a slight wave of depression falling over me, as I started to regret coming down here in the first place. It was clear that Dipper had exaggerated about the world below the city. He never said how the air felt poisonous, or how there wasn't another pony for miles, or even about how every animal wanted to make you into its next snack. Then again, all Dipper ever did talk about was the war, and the Knights of Celestia. At this point, that's all that kept me going was the determination to find them.

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My eyes opened, awakening me from my long rest. My stomach was still very full and upset from all the jerky I had eaten. Clearly my body didn't enjoy the idea of putting meat into it, but was willing to keep it down on the account of it wasn't going to get much else out here.

The fact that I had yet to see any place that wasn't abandoned made me safely assume that any nutrition I found out here could very well be up to seven years old, and not quite edible. Jerky was probably one of the few things with enough preservatives in it to last this long.

Yawning, I stood upright and decided to explore more of the encampment before taking my leave.

I spent most of the next few hours looking for anything of use or value, besides food of course. I had already tucked away as many packages of jerky as I could into my bag, along with a canteen that I had located and managed to find a working water source to fill it with. The water here tasted rather stale, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

My eyes were charmed by the discovery of a digital sound recorder that lay on a table in what appeared to be an officer's station of the base. Curiosity sparked as I hit the play button, to my shock it still worked. A rather tomboyish female voice exited the device.

"This is Vinyl Scratch, first lieutenant of The Rainbow Raiders, under the command of Field Commander Rainbow Dash, serving directly under the Knights of Celestia. I'm making this data log because one: they haven't given me orders for the past three days, and I'm going nuts sitting here doing nothing; and two: in case we don't win this war, I think it would be wise to leave behind some kind of record so ponies can know of my exploits, after all I am quite amazing.

Anyway, this camp isn't exactly the worst place I've been stationed, though I am a little concerned as to what exactly the Commander is planning. She hasn't issued a single order since we got here, and frankly it bothers me. All she's done is tell us to enjoy ourselves while we can, but really how can I possibly do that when there's a battlefield calling my

name? Well I suppose this isn't entirely unlike her, as she is always going on about appreciating everything, sometimes she sounds like Fluttershy really.

Me though? I just want to go back out there where the fighting is. My spirit burns for the rush of the battle! I want to get a stab at the bastards who dared challenge Celestia."

I was a little surprised at the contents. This person knew Rainbow Dash, and served under the Knights. I pressed the button to allow the next recording to play.

"This is day four at this place, and I'm soooooooo bored. My talents are being wasted just sitting around doing nothing. Dashy means well, but really she has to understand that I'm just no good at sitting around and waiting. She spends most of her time taking a nap, but that's not my style.

She's been very determined to win this war since we both first enlisted really; she's totally a true badass! I considered once throwing away my music career and starting an assassin group with her when the war is over the other day, but she didn't like the sound of it; told me to stop joking around.

She got really serious though the other night when I brought up the last fight we were in. I was trying to tell her that we should have taken out the remaining forces while they were retreating, but she got really stern with me. Went on about how there's enough bloodshed as it is, and she didn't attack also because they had foals with them, and she refuses to kill children. This isn't the first time either; she's spoken against opening fire on foals before, even if they are armed. The girl needs to snap out of her fantasy sometimes and realize this is war; if there's anything I learned out here, it's that the enemy doesn't like to play by the rules.

I don't see why Dashy is so stressed; after all she's got me, Vinyl Scratch, the greatest soldier who ever lived by her side."

This pony was very egotistical, but in a playful way. The way she spoke insinuated that she had known her commanding officer prior to joining the Knights. I was still fascinated by this information; it actually lifted my hopes of finding the Knights.

There was only one recording left, I was almost sad that they were almost over. It almost felt like there was someone else in the room with me, I sort of felt like I was getting to know Vinyl Scratch just a little bit from listening to these, even if she might be long dead since the time these messages were recorded.

“Day Twelve, we’re finally moving out; took long enough. Some kind of emergency summon by Celestia was issued to our unit, and we have to leave right away. They didn’t give us any details except that they want Rainbow’s Raiders on the front line. Dashy seems a bit excited about this one, we may actually get a stab at Trixie she’s saying. How I would love to sink my horn into that traitor, unfortunately it’s saying things like that which have them all worried I’m going to go postal or something. Thus they put me on chopper duty for the time being, something about needing further mental evaluation before I’m put back on the front lines, all a bunch of medical jargon to me.

Rarity is making a fuss about how we shouldn’t be so sure that we’re going to be able to get Trixie, but she forgets that we have the best unit in the Knights. We’re lead by Rainbow freakin’ Dash for Celestia’s sake. Not to mention we have the best damn equipment money can buy, and of course, yours truly.

I am not exactly looking forward to pretty much babysitting patrol, but I guess I can stick it out until Dashy decides otherwise. Besides, I don’t want to steal the glory of getting that devious Trixie from her. That’s all she’s talked about for a while now was bringing Trixie to justice, and I’m all for justice. I just want one piece, that’s all; something to hang on my mantle.

I’m not exactly sure what kind of grudge Dashy has against Trixie, besides of course her totally fucking us over and killing thousands of course, but everyone hates her for that. Dashy’s hate for her seems deeper, like something personal between the two. Dashy has always been pretty quiet about her personal life, but a lot of us would like to know what’s her deal with Trixie.

Anyway, I am heading out now. I’m going to leave this recording behind for anypony to find it.”

I couldn't recognize half of the ponies that she mentioned in the recording, however I made a mental note of them, as according to Vinyl, that was Rainbow Dash's team right there. Perhaps that information would prove useful at some point.

Who was Trixie though? Obviously I could assume she worked for the enemy, but I really wanted to know why Rainbow Dash had such a vendetta against her. She made it sound like there was a personal grudge between the two, and not just that of opposing officers in war.

A part of me was overly excited. The thought of the Knights in battle had my heart racing with joy and anxiety. I was more eager to meet them now than I was before. Everything I heard about the Knights only made me admire them more and more it seemed. They had to still exist; there was no way that they could have been destroyed. They're probably out there rebuilding now that the war was over.

The Knights really did sound as great as Dipper described them. Vinyl Scratch spoke with the same pride that he did to be a part of them. *Come to think of it, since he was a Knight that served under Rainbow Dash, he might have been here in this camp when Vinyl made those recordings.* My mind focused on that thought. I then silently remembered that they would have had to be at least four or five years old for him to be here. It was possible that they were that old, but I wasn't putting money on it. Chances are they were dated long before he even joined, or long after he had left.

I decided to take the recorder with me. I wasn't sure why, but for some reason instinct was telling me I should take it.

Leaving the encampment I continued towards the destination set to me by the flyer I had discovered moments after leaving the city. I wasn't even sure why I was going there anymore really, as the odds of anypony still being there were low, but I just wanted to try regardless. I was willing to accept that this could be a fruitless venture. I couldn't go home, so there was only the option of moving forward.

With that, I took another step out into the vast wastes. It was as bleak and deserted as I had left it, but some reason a spark of hope was about me.

Chapter 3

I had passed another couple of ruined landmarks not too long ago, meaning I was getting closer to my destination. I was fairly fortunate that my first assumption of every landmark being destroyed beyond recognition was wrong. According to the crude map, I was approaching Everfree forest, which would be the final obstacle I had to cross to get to the village. A forest didn't sound like an ideal place to be considering how the animals I've run into thus far have behaved. It didn't appear as though there was any way around it though, so I would have to hope I got lucky.

Fortunately I had stocked up on food at the camp, and I had rationed it reasonably up to this point, this would help in getting through the forest as I could keep my energy up and not have to make many stops. I had doubts that there would be any kind of cover from the wildlife in the forest, and thus I was not keen on sleeping there.

I was only a few miles from that forest, when I noticed some figures in the distance. This time I was certain they were ponies. They were a bit smaller framed, but they were definitely of my own kind. My heart jumped with excitement as I approached them.

Up close they were a bit different than I imagined. There were three of them, and all three were smelly and dirty. I don't even think the animals out here were quite as unsanitary as this trio. The biggest one of the group appeared to be missing several teeth, and the remainder of his teeth were chipped and damaged. He had sort of a lazy eye as well that seemed to follow me no matter where I moved.

The other two appeared to be twins. Both dark mahogany colored colts with blonde mane. They looked equally as dirty, but their dark color hid most of the filth upon them, except their mane of course. They appeared rather dim-witted as they walked rather awkwardly and had an odd chuckle about them.

The big one stepped forward and gave the most unpleasant, clearly forced smile I had ever seen. His disgusting teeth were only made more prominent by this gesture.

“Well, what have we here? Y’all must be from them Knights, I don’t often see colts of your... Condition... Out here in the ruins...” He was putting odd emphasis upon words.

The other two began to circle about me as he conversed with me. Something about this meeting was off; I began to take a few steps back, only to be blocked by the other two.

“I’m actually from Skyvale...” I commented.

He let out a loud hearty laugh, and the other two followed his lead. “City pony then? What could you possibly be doin’ out here then?”

I didn’t like this group already. Something about them was off, and I wanted to get away from them as quickly as possible.

“I actually came here to look for the Knights of Celestia, I don’t really want any trouble...” I lowered my head.

“Trouble ya’ say? Shucks, we jus’ wanted to invite y’all to dinner.” He gave that awkward smile of his again.

“I’m really not that hungry...” I tried to back up some more, but the other two had me trapped.

“It’s a good thing that you’re the meal then!” He yelled and darted towards me.

I was quick enough to get out of the way, but the two brothers grabbed me and pressed me to the ground with extreme force. They were a lot stronger than they looked. I squirmed and struggled to get free, but to no success.

My heart was beating at least five times faster. These ponies wanted to *eat* me. I panicked and offered an alternative to them.

"I have plenty of food on me! I'd be willing to share; you don't have to do this!" I pleaded.

The biggest one just laughed at me.

"I love it when they struggle! Thanks for the tip though, now we will have something as a snack after you." He grinned.

I started squiring as violently as I could. I focused all the energy in my body into getting free. Kicking and violently jerking, I was doing anything I could to at least give the two holding me a hard time keeping me there. I was hoping that they would eventually get tired and give me an opportunity to make a break for it. It might have been my mind putting me into denial about my predicament, but I couldn't tell really.

"Hold him still..." The brute said as he picked up a strip of metal sharpened into a blade from the ground.

"NO!" I yelled.

"Don't worry, it'll only hurt for a lil' while kid..." He assured.

I bit at the hooves of my captors, but it seemed to have little effect on them. Their legs were scrawny and meatless; I suppose it was easy to see how they were driven to cannibalism.

I held my eyes shut tightly with tears leaking from them. This was it; I was going to die being eaten by fellow ponies. The first ponies I had met out in this hellhole, and they wanted to eat me; Equestria really had changed. I thought for a brief moment at how I failed; I never even got the chance to meet the Knights, or show Torch the outside. I never even got my cutie mark, and now I would die without it.

BANG!

An ear shattering sound pierced the air. I peeked an eye open to see that one of the twins now lay on the ground in a bloody mess. Something had taken his head clean off at the top of the neck. His blood was everywhere, all over me, all over the other twin, and all over the big brute. My eyes couldn't believe what they were seeing. He was dead; something

killed him right in front of me. The other two seemed to be just as shocked as I was at the situation. The brute turned his head in the direction that the sound originated, and then quickly averted his attention back to the other twin.

BANG!

The other twin's head was taken off just like his brother. He exploded in the same bloody mess as the one before him. The brute hesitated for a moment in shock, but then darted away probably trying to avoid the same fate, but his efforts were futile. With another loud boom he too was taken down. Seconds later he lay still in a pool of his own bodily fluid. All three of them were dead in under a twenty second period.

I peered in the direction of the sounds thinking myself to be next, certain that I escaped being eaten to be blown apart. Atop the hill to the right of me was an older looking mare, probably a couple years older than myself. She had an obnoxiously pink coat, and a wild poof ball of a mane to go with it. Her blue eyes seemed to not match the look of solemnness on her face. There was a scar planted right on her forehead inching closer to the left than the center.

Attached to her right hoof was a very odd mechanical looking device. It was a metal plate with a long canister looking scrap of metal sticking out of the back of it. Near the bottom facing towards the foot of her hoof was a cylinder that appeared to be retracting in after it had finished its task, it was probably responsible for the loud banging that felled my three attackers. Right on top of that cylinder was what appeared to be a retractable blade. My guess was this was some kind of weapon, though I was not sure what kind of magic controlled it.

On her other front hoof she had a black metal band around it. The band was giving off a teal glow, but one that was slowly fading and returning it to a plain black band.

The mare leaped off of the hill top and positioned herself right in front of me. Glaring me up and down, she leaned in extra close and put her eyes only inches from my own. She nodded and retracted her head back and turned around to begin walking away. Then with a sudden jerk she turned back around and extended her blade to my throat.

“So, they finally sent an assassin to lay me to rest have they? It’ll take more than that to slay me!” She yelled rather delusional-like.

“I’m no assassin!” I protested with fear on my breath.

She raised a brow and sat back retracting her blade. “Of course you’re not an assassin, why in Celestia’s name would you think such an odd thing?” She questioned.

I blinked. Was this mare serious?

“You just accused me of being an assassin!” I reminded, lowering my guard. If she wanted to kill me, she’d have done it already.

“Well, have you eaten any onions lately?” She asked with a rather serious tone.

I was confused. “Um, no?” I replied.

She smiled rather heartily and pulled me close for a deep hug; squeezing so hard that I was having trouble obtaining air. She was far stronger than she looked.

“This is great news! That means you’re not a cabbage! I can’t tell you how many cabbages I find out here. Really terrible things they are.” She was nodding while speaking.

Cabbages? I had no clue what she was talking about. It all seemed like incoherent nonsense to me. Either something was wrong with her, or she was speaking in some kind of code or language that I wasn’t too familiar with.

“A cabbage you say?” I responded.

“Indeed, everyone knows that cabbages eat onions, so if you don’t eat them, then you must not be a cabbage. It’s a good thing to, I’d have had to shoot you then plant you in a cornfield then. So where are you heading to stranger?” She seemed a little bit more excited now.

I was hesitant to tell her, but then figured I may as well, no harm in it. "I'm heading towards a place called Ponyville, perhaps you've heard of it?" I said.

"Only in fairytales have I heard of such a place; however I do know how to get you there; right through Everfree forest right?" She said.

I couldn't tell if she was messing with me, or being serious. She acted stupid and clueless, but somehow was still able to keep a conversation going. Perhaps this was her idea of a joke? Who would have guessed that anypony out here would have a sense of humor. Then again it would probably drive one to madness just accepting the depressing state of things out here all the time. Maybe this was her way of coping with the harsh reality she lived in.

"Yeah, that's the one. Is it safe to go through the forest though?" I questioned.

She shook her head. "It's far from safe, and the only ones who have ever made it through were the talking rock and me of course!" She seemed rather proud of herself.

"R-right... I don't suppose you could tell me a way through the forest quickly then could you?" I really was starting to get nervous around this mare, she was clearly mentally unstable. There was no telling what she'd do next.

"I couldn't allow you to go alone, you're ill-equip, thus an easy target for space snakes to just snatch you up. If you're not careful, they'll grab you when you're not looking and take you back to Jupiter where they'll conduct evil alien experiments on you!" She answered.

"I think I'll take my chances..." I replied.

She stepped closer and put a hoof around me and pulled me in for another awkward hug. She let on a bright smile as she pressed her cheek close to mine.

"Nonsense, I'll lead you right through the forest with most of your body parts still attached. You've nothing to worry about friend, as the great

White Falcon will lead you through the forest. No wait... That's not right... What was my name again..." She tried to find the words.

"It was Pink something..." She added.

Taking a glance at her blade out of curiosity I read the words "Pinkie Pie" engraved on it. It looked like it was scratched in crudely with another blade. Not exactly the mark of good craftsmanship, but the device was still effective enough to kill three cannibals.

"Pink Giraffe? Pink Waffle...? Pink Rock...?" She was in deep thought.

"Pinkie Pie?" I suggested.

"YES! THAT ONE! THAT'S IT!" She waved her hooves around furiously in excitement. "THAT'S ME! PINKIE PIE!" She added.

"Right, well are you sure you are up to going through that forest..." I was cautious about this situation; after all I just met this pony, and she didn't appear to have all of her marbles.

She stomped a foot on the ground and nodded with determination. Her entire expression changed within a millisecond. This mare was quite sporadic.

"I'll get you through faster than goats on a roof! Don't even worry about it for another second, just follow me and I'll get us safely to the other side where Ponyville is only about a 10 minute walk from there. You're in good hooves with me!" She assured.

I didn't quite get her analogy, but nodded anyways. She had a weapon, and I didn't, so I really didn't have much of a choice in the matter. If I wanted to cross safely I wanted somepony that could at least fend off anything that could try and sneak up on us. Even if I had a weapon I doubt I'd be much use with it as this mare was. Before the war weapons were only reserved to the Equestrian military, and even then they were very simplistic blades and spears, nothing like this magical armlet of hers that appeared to be able to cause ponies to get decapitated merely by pointing it at them.

I nodded and she gleefully took the lead. I decided to remain silent for a while, as this girl clearly had plenty of entertainment talking to herself.

The forest was more of a swamp it seemed. Most of it was flooded and there was only one real path in getting through it, clearly pony-made as well. Perhaps Pinkie Pie was the one who cleared this path for travelers? The fact that there was even a distinguished path at all means that somepony else had gone through here, which means I wouldn't be alone when I arrived at Ponyville. Whether or not that was a good thing was left to be decided, after all the only ponies I've met so far were either mentally unstable, or wanted me for lunch.

Pinkie Pie was unpleasantly cheerful during this walk through the forest, nothing seemed to bother her. I decided I might as well see if she had any useful information.

"Say Pinkie Pie..." I started.

"That's Dr. Pinkie Pie." She corrected.

"You went to medical school?" I asked curiously.

"I did!? Wow, that's so cool! What kind of doctor am I!?" She was overly excited at the remark.

"I was only kidding..." I took a step back from her.

She frowned and drooped her head a little. "Aww, that sucks... I bet I would have been a really cool doctor..."

I honestly was hoping that she was joking with me at this point, and that she wasn't just completely out of her mind. Ignoring the previous discussion I moved back into what I originally meant to ask her.

"Were you in the war?" I asked quite straight forward.

She perked her head up and tilted it in confusion. "War? What war? There was a war?" She acted sincerely dumbfounded.

I sighed.

"I guess that means you wouldn't be able to tell me anything about the Knights of Celestia, or Rainbow Dash then would you...?" I admitted defeat in this conversation.

She jumped and tackled me to the ground with an exuberant smile on her lips. "Well why didn't you say so!? I know Rainbow Dash!"

I blinked and started to get a little excited myself. "So you mean she's still alive!?" I was almost yelling.

She giggled like a foal and nodded. "Of course she's still alive, it takes a lot to take down Rainbow Dash; I've known her for a long time. She lives not too far from here-" She cut herself off.

Lifting her right front hoof, she aimed it in the distance. The band on the opposite hoof glowed again, and the device strapped to her extended appendage seemed to be activated now. The cylinder at the end let out a loud bang with a small fire igniting from the tip for a split second. When the fire subsided, a tiny amount of smoke escaped it. In the distance there was some kind of animal that was felled by the action. I couldn't get a good look at what it was, but I could safely assume that it wasn't too friendly. Pinkie Pie just tilted her head back down to me and continued talking as though it didn't happen.

"I can tell you how to get to her after we get out of this forest if you want?" She smiled innocently.

"That would be great; I would really appreciate that, though I'm curious as to why you've been so kind to me..." I said.

She got off of me and I pushed myself back up. Kneeling in, she touched her nose to mine and just gave me a sugary smile and a wink. Then she turned back around and gestured for us to keep trotting. I decided that was the best answer I would be getting out of her, so I shrugged and decided not to make much of it.

It was nearly an hour of Pinkie Pie talking nonsense about how she suspected that gnomes were planning to attack her, and that was the

reason she didn't sleep much. I was only paying half attention, and giving short answers to give the illusion that I was listening to her. After it was finally over, we had reached the other side of the forest, only getting attacked twice by what appeared to be bears.

I could see a village off in the distance, it wasn't more than a mile from here it looked like, an easy journey on foot.

"This is as far as I go stranger, but if you're looking for Rainbow Dash, you just need to keep heading towards town. She's held up in Twilight's old library, you can't miss it; it's the big hollowed out tree with all the book-thingies in it. Just watch out for those pesky cabbages, I lost my left hoof stepping on one..." Pinkie Pie instructed.

I wasn't sure exactly what to say, so I left it at a simple, "thank you." She smiled in response and gestured the way to me. Despite being a lunatic, she was at least fairly kind.

Not wasting any more time I darted towards the town at full speed. I didn't want to stop for anything now that I was this close. My blood was pumping faster than ever, but this feeling was interrupted abruptly. A sharp pain was felt in my back leg. It was unbearable; I had never felt pain like this before. I collapsed onto the ground, unable to run any further. I could hear the grunts and chuckles of other ponies before I passed out.

Chapter 4

I awoke from a nightmare of being attacked by more cannibals with a gasp. My dreams had been so vivid and real for some time now. The real wasteland of Equestria was far more horrifying than any dream could simulate though. Despite being plagued with nightmares, I found I was able to relax more in sleep than in a waking consciousness.

My eyes adjusted to an artificial light around me, fluorescent of some kind. After a moment of dilating, they permitted me to take a glance at my location. I was quickly able to determine that I wasn't where I had fallen asleep that was certain. I was in a bed as well, which was odd as my attackers certainly didn't seem like they had much reason to keep me alive; perhaps they had other purposes for me.

Gazing around I could see that there were several bookshelves all around me, most of which with books scattered about in an untidy manner. A lot of volumes appeared to be missing as well. I noticed that the floor, although still dirty, was a lot cleaner than expected of any building out here in the ruins. It was void of dust, so clearly there was someone living here besides myself.

Cautiously I pulled myself out of the bed and stepped onto the floor. My left hind leg nearly gave way from putting the pressure on it. It was dreadfully sore. Glancing back at my left flank I noticed it was bandaged and that a spot of red had seeped through the wrap.

I forced myself to make it to the doorway and down the stairs. I was only four steps from the bottom before my leg finally decided it couldn't take the strain anymore and gave in. I slid down the stairs with my chin hitting every step on the way down. With a crash I landed on my stomach in pain. In agony I attempted to force myself to stand again, however I was only able to drag myself off of the stairs pathetically.

"So you're finally awake then? Perhaps you should be taking it easy though?" A tomboyish voice echoed from across the room towards me.

A cloaked pony sat at a simple wooden table sipping from a glass. The cloak she wore was aged and tattered, and appeared grey in color. She was wearing the hood up, which concealed her face; only her snout was visible from under that hood. The aura she gave off was one of unfriendliness; the aura of a mare that clearly wanted to be left alone.

Examining her further I could tell she was a bit older than me, probably Pinkie Pie's age or so. She had a sky blue coat, and her tail was hanging out of her cloak, which was adorned with a vibrant rainbow it appeared. If I peeked at the right angle I could see some strands of the same colors hanging down towards her face.

I noticed that she had a similar device on her front right hoof as Pinkie Pie did. This pony's however had a blade that appeared red in color with a multi-color trimming along the edges of the blade. The word "Colors", was carved onto the blade, though unlike Pinkie Pie's this one looked like it was etched in with precision, more than likely by some kind of expert that crafted these weapons.

"You should give your body a chance to heal before you go back out there. You've been out cold for nearly two days, I thought you were dead when I found you." She continued not waiting for my answer.

Finally I spoke up. "Um, where am I?"

She took another sip from the glass in front of her, not even turning to face me. "You're in Ponyville." She answered plainly.

"How did I get here? What about the ponies who attacked me?" I started bombarding her with questions; she didn't seem to mind though.

"Well, you were attacked by a group of savages after you got out of the forest. I happened to be heading out to get some supplies, and I happened to notice the incident. I took care of the bastards quickly and then Pinkie Pie helped me bring you back here." She explained calmly.

I glanced back at my backside. "Who put these bandages on me then?" I asked.

“That would be me as well. I removed the bullet out of your backside and patched you up. I’m not much of a doctor, but I learned a thing or two from hanging around some. Most ponies learn how to patch themselves up out here as I’m sure you know.” She seemed a little friendlier than she let on at first.

“What are you doing out here kid? You don’t look like one of those savages, so you must know that it’s dangerous out here.” She changed the subject.

I sat up. “I’m looking for the Knights of Celestia.”

She laughed a little before replying. “You won’t find them out here. They’re held up at the Canterlot castle.” She informed.

“How can I get to the castle?” I inquired.

“Where are you from kid?” She changed the subject yet again.

“Skyvale...” I answered very softly.

She sighed and took another sip. Her kind aura quickly turned to one of seriousness and intensity.

“I left the city to look for the Knights of Celestia, and Rainbow Dash...” I noticed her ears twitched when I mentioned the last part.

“You’re her aren’t you? You’re Rainbow Dash?” I tried not to sound too excited, I didn’t want to come off as an overly enthusiastic fan, but it was difficult to contain myself.

“Go back to Skyvale.” She replied sternly.

I blinked in confusion. “Why?” I asked.

“There’s nothing for you out here. Perhaps if you go back and tell them you made a mistake and beg they’ll let you back in. It’s a better place for you than out here I assure you.” Her voice seemed void of emotion now.

“I can’t go back. That’s the rule of the city; once you leave you are not permitted back in. I left knowing this, and I have no intentions to return; I came out here to find the Knights of Celestia, and Rainbow Dash, now tell me: are you her?” I raised my voice and tried to match her in terms of seriousness.

She sighed and took yet another sip of her drink. A pill bottle levitated directly to her from a nearby shelf. Pouring out the contents, she took two pills and washed them down with a sip of the vile looking liquid in front of her that she had been downing this entire time. I suspected it was some kind of alcohol.

“I was...” She finally answered.

My heart started beating faster than I’ve ever felt before. I was excited to finally meet her, but she certainly was nothing like I expected. I had always pictured a mare in respectable armor with a strong spirit, before me however sat what appeared to be a broken old drunk.

“What do you mean?” I questioned.

“I mean I’m not the Rainbow Dash you may have heard about. That was almost another lifetime ago. I’ve left that life behind me; now I’m just an old mare waiting for the end to finally come.” She sighed taking another gulp.

I was in disbelief. The Rainbow Dash that Dipper described would never give up, she’d have kept trying even when it was impossible. She was “The Miracle”, after all.

“What about the Knights!?” I was almost yelling.

“Twilight still handles their affairs. I don’t have anything to do with the Knights anymore. I left many years ago.” She seemed uninterested in this conversation.

I dragged myself over to the table with her. She could see my struggle and poured me a drink then offered it to me. Not wanting to be rude I took it, despite not having a taste for alcohol. It smelled like fairly strong liquor as well.

“What about Trixie?” I asked innocently.

Dash seemed to be very angered by the question. She tensed up quickly and smacked at her glass, sending it across the room only to shatter against an empty bookcase. She picked up a second glass from the floor in her teeth and hurled it in the same direction, achieving the same result. She looked around for another to throw, but when she found none she simply uttered “worthless bitch.” Clearly her hate towards Trixie was left unchanged.

I decided to change the subject. “What exactly caused this war? A friend had told me much about it, but he never exactly explained why all the fighting began in the first place.”

“Pass me another glass, kid.” She instructed.

I did as told and slid a glass from my side of the table over to her. She smiled half-heartedly and poured another drink.

“The truth is that no one really knows how it all started.” She spoke.

I tilted my head in confusion. “How is that possible? Just one day you were fighting?” I questioned.

“Well, you’ve probably heard of the darkness right?” She answered my question with another question.

“Of course.” I said.

“Well, the story goes like this...” She took a sip before continuing. “For some reason, and nopony is sure why, but for some reason the darkness appeared in Equestria. Nopony knows where it came from, or what created it, but one day it just somehow fell into existence.”

“It just... Appeared? Just like that?” I asked in shock.

She nodded. “At first we didn’t even know it was there. It sat there doing nothing for a long time, so most of the normal citizens weren’t informed that it was even present. They didn’t want to invoke panic among

the commoners.” She was rather tense. “By the time the darkness did something it was too late. Several ponies left to go serve the darkness, and just like that it had an army built up, and a sizable one at that.”

“Why didn’t somepony go and destroy the darkness?” I asked curiously.

“We couldn’t. The darkness has no physical form, fighting it is impossible. Not even our strongest magic was able to affect it. Because it has no physical form, it relies on servants to do most of its dirty work for it. It creates agents to command those mindless servants after that.” She explained.

“Agents?” I asked.

She paused for a moment and looked up at me. For the first time I could see her magenta eyes. She had a beautiful face that was ruined by a scar that extended across her right cheek. The mane on the actual pony was a lot longer than the one in the flyer I had. She clearly hadn’t done much to tame it. She still looked very appealing though despite these flaws.

“Agents like Trixie...” She answered.

“So Trixie commands the darkness?” I was putting the pieces together slowly as she talked.

“She partially controls it I suppose. She is still a servant to the darkness itself, but she commands its minions. They say that once you accept the darkness it takes your mind and makes you into its thoughtless slave. Agents however get to keep their free will, this way it ensures its agents are only the most evil of ponies.” Dash clearly was upset just mentioning Trixie’s name.

“So when the darkness formed its army, what did you all do?” I asked.

“At first, nothing. Celestia had never expected anypony to actually try and go to war with her, so she took a strong stance of not making the first assault. Once the armies of darkness attacked, they did as much damage as they could before retaliation was made. They burnt most of this village to

the ground, and several around it. After that Celestia formed the Knights of Celestia to fight this darkness, and before we knew it we were entering the first battle with them.” She seemed to be reliving painful memories.

“What happened at that battle?” I asked very nervously.

She seemed to be a bit angered by the question. “We got our asses kicked. We thought we could send them back using our strongest magic, but it proved to have almost no effect. We weren’t prepared for them; they brought something to the fight that we hadn’t expected...”

“Which was?” I was afraid to make her remember anymore almost.

“Guns.” She answered plainly.

I tilted my head in confusion. I wasn’t exactly familiar with military technology.

“They’re weapons that fire metallic objects called bullets at things. They can kill many ponies with only a few shots, and from far away as well. You’ve seen them out in the wasteland sort of.” She explained.

“Is that what Pinkie Pie had on her front hoof?” I asked.

“Sort of, see in order to keep up with our enemies we managed to take one of their weapons and reverse engineer it. The result is the guns that you see now carried by ponies. We went a step further though and attached blades to ours.” She said.

“So how do they work?” I asked.

She giggled a little, which was the first time I heard her laugh. “Well they are controlled by very simple unicorn magic.”

“Then how can you use one? Or Pinkie Pie for that matter? You’re not a unicorn, nor is she.” I quickly pointed out.

She hushed me, and gave a gesture for me to slow down. Clearly she intended on explaining that as well. “We have a little device called a U.M.S.A. You may have seen the one Pinkie Pie had?”

I thought back to the senile old mare, then recalled the black band on her left hoof which would glow a teal color every time she used her weapon. I had never given a thought to what that contraption was until Rainbow Dash mentioned it now. I nodded to acknowledge I understood what device she was speaking of.

“Right, well the proper name for it is the Unicorn Magic Simulation Apparatus, not exactly catchy, but that’s why we call them U.M.S.As. Anyway the device is designed to simulate unicorn magic for basic operations. It was specifically designed for use of weapons, but it’s effective in everyday operations as well.” Rainbow Dash spoke.

“I don’t suppose you have a spare one that I could use then?” I inquired.

She levitated a metal band identical to the one on her left hoof over to me. The moment it touched my left hoof, it appeared as though it just phased itself right through it and when it reappeared it was right on my left hoof, like magic almost. I could feel a great bit of magic coming from the band, so it made sense that it would have such properties that allowed it to do what I just witnessed.

“Thank you very much!” I bowed in gratitude.

She waved her hoof around in a manner that suggested she was not comfortable with my gesture. “No need for that.” She said. I merely nodded in response.

“Guess you’ll be on your way to the Knights then?” She suggested.

“Well, with my injury I don’t think I could make such a long journey on foot...” I sighed.

She was silent for a moment then let out a quiet, “You can stay here if you want, I guess...” She didn’t sound terribly inviting, but it was a genuine offer.

“Well, I don’t want to be a burden, perhaps you can just fly me there and I can get out of your mane?” I suggested.

She turned her head in shame and sighed. "I'm afraid that's impossible."

Suddenly she seemed very depressed. Perhaps my request was out of line?

"That's okay, I understand if it's too dangerous. I don't want to be any more of a pest than I already have been up to this point." I apologized.

She laughed gently, and looked back in my direction with a soft smile on her face. "No, it's just... My flying days are long over." With those words she flipped the right side of her cloak up revealing what appeared to be the remains of a right wing. It appeared as though it was hacked off right at the point where it met her body.

Chapter 5

Rainbow Dash; I couldn't help but think about her as I lay in the bed she surrendered to me. She insisted on staying up most of the night; I rarely saw the mare sleep, insomnia had bitten her it would seem. When the restless mare finally did slip into a slumber, it was one clearly troubled by nightmares. I recall once waking up to see her tossing and turning relentlessly. Sweat was coming out of every pore, and she looked pained. Never had I seen a pony so troubled in their sleep, not even Dipper on his death bed. Rainbow Dash probably never got a peaceful sleep.

My thoughts carried to her wing, and the dark secrets behind it. I never asked how she lost it, how could I? Asking her would only make her relive what she has already been through, and surely she wouldn't reveal her secrets so easily to a stranger. I'm sure only time would tell me the story of her lost wing.

I glanced over at her sitting at her usual spot at the table, just glaring out the window into the rain. It had been raining for several days, it was almost unnatural. She had on that same cloak she always wore, but despite it being old and tattered, she looked very heroic in it. I could only imagine what she must have looked like in her Knight armor. Part of me was curious if she'd look like the flyer, but chances are she'd look far better. Her left ear had a small slice in it, clearly a battle wound; she had the scars of courage about her.

She was always watching diligently outside, despite the fact that Pinkie Pie always guarded this area. Rainbow Dash was the kind of pony that didn't take many chances on anything, and didn't like leaving much work to Pinkie Pie on the account of, "all her marbles aren't there".

I pulled myself up and went over to her. She didn't seem to notice my movement in the slightest. Carefully I sat down next to her and observed her. She was a hair shorter than me, and not as stocky, though being female that was ordinary. She looked well nourished for a pony that lived out in the wasteland.

“What’s wrong?” I asked in a nearly inaudible voice.

“Well, not sure if you noticed, but we live in a destroyed wasteland caused by a war with our own kind.” She clearly wasn’t in a good mood.

“Well the war is over at least right?” I tried to lighten the mood.

She sighed and turned to face me. “The war is far from over.”

“What do you mean?” I tilted my head.

“I mean that it’s not over until they kill us all. Trixie and the darkness will never rest, they want this world one way or another, and they won’t rest until we’re all dead.” She said.

“They’re still fighting!?” I was a little shocked by this news.

“Of course they’re still fighting, they’ve already got us pinned down, they’d be stupid to just quit now. They are all just sitting nice and cozy at their fortress in former Manehattan, while the rest of us scrounge up any resources we can find just to set up a defense; Trixie as well...” She nearly growled at the name.

“You really hate Trixie don’t you?” I asked stupidly.

“I can never forgive her. For everything that’s she’s done, not just the war.” Rainbow Dash appeared to be getting far more serious.

“I find it ironic that she probably shares the same insomnia that I do. That she’s probably awake somewhere right now, maybe even thinking about what she’s done as well.” She commented.

“What do you mean?” I was a tad confused.

“You ever heard the saying ‘ain’t no rest for the wicked’, kid?” She asked.

“Can’t say I have, what’s it mean?” I replied.

“It was a song a long time ago, but it basically means that the sinful don’t get to go to sleep. They have to stay awake always on their guard. They have to live waiting for their sins to catch up to them, always looking over their shoulder for that day...” She sounded like she had told this story before.

“What sin have you committed?” I daringly asked.

She sighed. “You wouldn’t understand”

I left it at that, and changed the subject.

“When do I get a gun?” I asked.

Rainbow Dash turned and gave me a strange look. Her face then turned into a smile, as if she was waiting for me to ask that question.

“That is a very good question. Guns aren’t exactly that easy to come by out here, I got mine from the military, which is pretty much the only way to get one. Lots of dead bodies might have them, but most probably aren’t in working condition, and many of dead aren’t soldiers, but civilians who got caught up in this.” She explained.

“Fortunately, I had a stash not too far from here around the time I joined the military. I figured one day I might need it; should be a considerable amount of ammo there too.” She added.

This was the first bit of good news I had heard in a while. I wasn’t exactly looking forward to killing another pony, but if it came to it, I’d rather at least be armed in that situation. I found that out here I was forced to amend my morals and values on a regular basis.

“I can take you to it, but we might need some help from Pinkie Pie to get there. I don’t want us outnumbered by those damn savages, and have only one of us with a weapon.” She said.

*

Pinkie Pie was leading us, which didn’t exactly set me at ease. Her ability to think rationally was questionable at best, and her constant almost

schizophrenic behavior was enough to keep one on the edge, but part of me was glad. I was for some reason a little fond of this mare. She had a good heart, and I suppose that's all that counted. I found myself even laughing at her from time to time.

I glanced over at Dash next to me. I noticed her blade again. It was almost sparkling from the light bouncing off of it. The word "Colors" really seemed to stand out to me, and I could only guess as to the significance it had to her.

"Tell me about your weapon." I finally managed to ask.

"Curious about that?" She responded.

"A little I suppose" I replied.

She began telling a story. "Well, during my time in the military I was originally issued a standard gun-sword just like every other pony who joined. When I rose to a commanding officer rank though, I was sent on a mission in the forest area. We were vastly outnumbered; I had a troop of only ten soldiers up against maybe two hundred."

I was listening rather intently.

"Well, sure enough orders from headquarters told us to retreat. We turned around, and sure enough we were surrounded. We had no way out, and we were outgunned. I glanced over at my troops, and raised my blade to the air and proclaimed that if we were to die, we'd die fighting. After that I bolted into battle and slaughtered them. We were able to fight our way out and press the enemy back enough to get back to the castle. After that they promoted me to field commander, and had this honorary weapon crafted for me out of the crown of Celestia." She said.

The crown!? Rainbow Dash's blade was made of the crown of Celestia itself? Celestia was willing to sacrifice her royal jewels in gratitude of Rainbow Dash?

"Is that where you got the nickname 'The Miracle', then?" I asked.

She nodded.

“What about Pinkie Pie?” I asked gestured towards her.

Pinkie Pie was far enough ahead to where she couldn't hear a word we were saying, then again I somehow doubt she would understand what we were talking about anyways.

“Well, like I said, she got shot in the head it looks like, and she's been here ever since, just now she acts bat shit insane...” She paused, “Come to think of it, perhaps she hasn't really changed at all...” She joked.

That meant Pinkie Pie was always this strange. I somehow pictured her to be that way though.

*

We arrived at a rundown old shack a few miles from the Ponyville ruins. It wasn't too impressive, but it held together through the war it appeared. Rainbow Dash knocked the door down with little care, I suppose she didn't plan on returning to this place anytime soon after this.

Inside there were several firearms decorating the walls. There were enough there to start a war within itself. They all seemed about the same in appearance, which supported my theory of them being mass produced.

Rainbow Dash levitated one from the wall and loaded it up from a nearby crate. After she finished preparing it, she started fastening it on my front right hoof.

“It works very easily; you just use the U.M.S.A. on it like you would anything else. Concentrate on pulling the blade out and it will follow. Give it a try.” She instructed.

I took a step back and held out the weapon. Focusing on it, I mentally commanded it to extend its blade out. Just as quickly as I had thought it, it obeyed. The blade jumped out with a sharp slicing noise. I then commanded it back in, and sure enough it followed.

“Excellent, shooting is the same way. You point it at something and use the U.S.M.A. to command it to fire. I'd tell you to try it, but we don't

want to attract unwanted guests, so you'll have to take my word for it." Dash joked. It was good to see that she still had a sense of humor.

Our lesson was interrupted by a crackling noise within the structure. I glanced around to find it was an old radio that sat on a table. Rainbow Dash took charge and began to speak over it.

"Who is out there?" She asked.

A voice from the other side answered her question. "This is Octavia, I'm a resident of the Canterlot area, and I was kidnapped by some of the savages. I managed to escape, but I'm trapped down in a cave at Horseshoe Rock. I need assistance right away." She sounded like an older mare.

"It's your lucky day. You happen to have reached Rainbow Dash." Dash responded.

"Rainbow Dash!?" Octavia answered.

"Yup. You just hold on tight, and we'll be down there to get you, just try not to get killed before we get there. We'll get you out of there, but you're on your own in getting back to Canterlot." She replied.

"That will be fine; I should be able to make it back just fine after I get out of this cave." Octavia said.

"Alright, just hold on tight then, we're on our way." With those words Rainbow Dash hung up the radio and gestured for the door.

"We're leaving right now?" I asked.

"Every second counts, what choice do we have?" She said.

I nodded and accepted the command. I would finally be able to see Rainbow Dash in action, so I had little to complain about.

Chapter 6

“Are you entirely sure that bringing Pinkie Pie with us is a very good idea? I mean this is supposed to be a rescue mission and no offense to her but... She’s kind of...” I was trying to find a polite way to voice my protest for bringing the obnoxiously pink mare.

“Bat shit insane?” Dash was quick to finish my sentence in a manner that I was trying to avoid it appeared.

“Well, I was going to put it lighter than that, but... Yeah, she’s completely out of her mind, are you sure it’s safe even having her around?” I gave up on not being rude.

Dash laughed lightly and shrugged. “Not sure actually; I definitely feel weary around her at times, but she’s the best shot in Equestria, so I’d rather have her gun protecting this place when I’m asleep than none at all. Though I hear you on the whole not feeling safe with her around; there’s a reason she doesn’t sleep in the house...” Dash turned away at that last part, clearly insinuating that she too had some kind of concern about Pinkie’s condition.

Coming up to her side, I tilted my head at an angle to get another look at Rainbow Dash’s face, hoping to get her attention again. She did as predicted and turned to face me again.

“Has she ever tried anything strange...?” I asked.

“Like I said kid, she was always strange, but I assume you mean strange even for her. One night I was sleeping and for some reason I woke up; I can’t remember why, but there she was standing over me.” Dash explained.

Her pause lead me to believe there was more to that story than that. “What’d she do?” I nudged her verbally to continue.

“Nothing happened per say, but she was just there breathing really heavily. We stared at each other for like five whole minutes. Finally she turned around and walked out the door without saying a word. She returned to her patrol for the night and we never spoke about it.” Rainbow Dash finished.

“Where does she sleep?” I questioned.

“No idea. I’ve never seen her go to sleep actually.” Dash shrugged.

“Speak of the devil.” She pointed to the door.

“So, we’re off on an adventure are we?” Pinkie Pie asked rather loudly.

Her voice was loud enough to wake every savage in the Equestrian ruins and bring them to us. She had a way of speaking that got one’s attention, though not in the way that Rainbow Dash spoke. Dash spoke with a voice that commanded, a voice fit to lead an army.

“Pinkie Pie, we’re going to rescue a pony named Octavia from some savages. I need you to not fuck around here, as this is a delicate operation.” Dash scolded the pink pony.

“No problem, delicate is my middle name... Actually it’s Diane, but that’s beside the point.” Pinkie gave a half assed salute to Dash.

Rainbow Dash sighed and shook her head in a manner that suggested she knew that anything she was saying was going in one ear and out the other for Pinkie Pie. I got the impression that this exact scene had played out several times between the two before.

“I suppose we should head out. Stay close, and try not to get killed.” Dash announced.

Rainbow Dash clearly knew how to keep one at ease, that or she was exercising a crude sense of humor, one that I probably couldn’t appreciate not being a part of the world the war created for very long.

“So... Pinkie Pie... Do you remember at all what happened to your head...?” I tried to make conversation with the delusional pony during our walk.

“My head?” She asked curiously. “Did something happen to it?” She added while taking a glance upwards.

“You know... That scar...?” I hinted.

“What scar?” She turned her attention right back to me.

It was useless; this pony clearly wasn't even living in reality anymore. It was better not to force her either; who knows; maybe she'd snap and go on a killing spree or something. She didn't look too stable right now as it is. I still firmly believed that she had good intentions in her heart, but part of me wanted to believe that they could be easily forgotten by her apparent brain damage.

“Hey you two shut the fuck up will you? We're here.” Dash interrupted.

She gestured a hoof at a cave not one hundred yards from where we were standing. It didn't look too special, though signs of being inhabited were all about it. Graffiti decorated much that was visible from the outside, and there were droppings of random garbage of possible savages. It wasn't exactly very well hidden, but judging from the savages I had run into up to this point, I could assume they weren't exactly the smartest bunch.

“Alright, here's the plan...” Rainbow Dash gestured for us all to duck down lower while she whispered.

“Pinkie Pie, I want you to go in there and clear out any savages that are keeping guard trying to take care of any intruders. We'll follow behind, that way I can cover the kid in case things get too... Colorful...” She glanced at me for a brief second as she mentioned that last part, as if she was trying her best not to offend me.

“Oki Doki Loki.” Pinkie agreed almost too quickly and eagerly for comfort.

Un-hesitantly she wandered over to the cave in a very nonchalant manner. The way she trotted over to it, it was as if she didn't even realize that there may be a group of cannibalistic savages waiting for her in that cave.

Sure enough my instinct was correct. Soon a group of filthy colts bolted out of the cave surrounding her as she came only a few feet away from the entrance. Dash and I were using the brush to sneak up carefully while Pinkie Pie stood in a standoff with the group. She was very unmoved by their hostility, and appeared to be as casual as always, I couldn't tell who I was more afraid of.

"Looks like we got some fresh meat here..." A drooling savage spoke as he gripped an old rusty axe between his teeth.

"Hello, my name is Captain Hamster... No wait... It's... Pinkie Pie! That's it! Yes, my name is Pinkie Pie!" She responded gleefully.

Another of the group snarled up a response. "Looks like this one is a few marbles short boss..."

There were six total circling her, all of which armed with some kind of crude melee weapon which they looked plenty experienced with.

"My friends and I would like to pass, as we're on a mission. So if you'd let us through that would be most excellent!" Pinkie completely ignored their comment.

"Oh good, you brought us more snacks to go with our meal. You're too kind." The one with the axe hissed.

Without even a moment's notice, Pinkie Pie raised her front right hoof and let her gun blast the axe-wielder's head clean off his shoulders. Not even the slightest hesitation on her part, but looking closer I could see that her expression did a complete 180. The fun loving and loveable idiot Pinkie Pie disappeared within a second. This new face seemed demented and sinister; I was getting the chills just looking at her.

"You shouldn't talk that way about my friends..." She warned.

With amazing speed she pivoted and shot another right through the neck. He fell choking while the other four lunged at her. She was able to avoid their swings and take out another with a single shot. In the confusion the remaining trio tried to circle around her and attack from all sides, this too was met with failure, as Pinkie was quick enough to squeeze out two shots and fell two more before their attacks could hit her, dodging the final attack proved simple to her.

Pinkie aimed her gun at the last colt, but a clicking sound was all it produced. She tried to fire it several times again, but only received more clicks.

"Looks like you've got a jam." The last colt smiled deviously.

"Y'all ain't got no more weapons now..." He laughed.

He clearly was mistaken. At those exact words Pinkie lunged her whole body at the colt with full force. Tackling him she dug her teeth into his neck bit down and began to tear. The colt screamed and panicked in pain and agony as Pinkie continued shredding the skin right off of his neck and face using only her teeth.

Pinkie kept tearing and shredding at the corpse before her attention was grabbed by Rainbow Dash.

"Pinkie, that's enough, he's dead already." She scolded.

Pinkie ceased and a piece of the colts flesh dropped out of her mouth as she looked up to Dash. She smiled happily as if nothing happened and nodded to the blue mare.

"Sorry Dashie, got a little carried away." She apologized.

"That's fine, but tone it down a notch, you're scaring the kid." Dash instructed as she scouted on ahead with us close behind.

Scared would be an understatement, more like mortified. I had never seen a pony actually cannibalize another pony before. I had been threatened to be eaten myself, and heard plenty about cannibal ponies up to this point, but I had never actually witnessed it happening. The last thing

I expected on top of that was the pony who saved me from cannibals to be one herself.

Out of fear I stuck close to Rainbow Dash, I was practically rubbing up against her. Catching onto my fear she glanced back at Pinkie Pie and gave her a quick order.

“Pinkie Pie, wait outside and keep guard. If we need you, we’ll yell.” She told.

Pinkie Pie nodded and pranced back towards the cave entrance happily, with blood still dripping from her jaw.

“I didn’t think she was capable of that...” I admitted.

“Yeah, she’s pretty wild sometimes. Doesn’t like ponies threatening her friends, I’m just glad she remembered I was one of her friends and didn’t try to rip me a new one the first time I came back here.” She said.

“She ate him...” I was very quiet.

“Well, she was more or less trying to kill him and got carried away, but yeah, I’m pretty sure that bullet to her head really fucked her up.” Dash tried to make light of the situation, which was just like her; after all, she had probably seen far worse out here.

“Let’s just look for this Octavia...” I sighed.

“Keep quiet. Lesson one about the ruins, never assume that you’ve killed all in a group, there could still be more of those assholes in this cave...” Dash hushed me.

Her being the veteran, I decided to just shut my mouth and obey. I followed behind her silently as she lowered her body close to the ground and crept through the cave. Moving the way she was, I noticed she was completely silent with her steps. It must have taken years to master such a method of movement that would eliminate her sound entirely. I did my best to mimic her, though I wasn’t half as good as she was.

Dash extended her blade and angled it around a corner as she glanced at it. She must have been using it to see around the corner. Pulling her blade back, she gave a glance over to me and a gesture that I interpreted as "wait here." With haste she tip toed around the corner while I inched towards her direction to get a better view.

I was only able to catch a quick glimpse, but just enough to see Rainbow Dash sneak up behind a mare and slit her throat with her blade. She didn't even wait for the body to stop moving before tossing it aside. Blood spurted out of the new opening on the mare's body.

Dash ignoring the suffering of her fresh kill gestured for me to follow her. Still moving as stealthily as she was earlier we could see the flicker of some kind of fire up ahead. Once again she instructed me to wait as she cautiously inched ahead.

"Don't move!" A voice called out from up ahead. I recognized right away that it didn't belong to Rainbow Dash, which caused me to dart towards her direction.

A brown mare stood holding Dash at gunpoint. Her jet black mane looked like it normally was well kept, but had gone several days without being maintained. She looked tired and haggard, probably been awake for several days.

"Wait... Rainbow Dash?" She said lowering her weapon.

"The one and only." I replied for Dash.

The mare let out a sigh of relief and approached us both carefully.

"Thank Celestia, this gun isn't even loaded." She said.

"I apologize for my rudeness, I've been held up here for a while now and I couldn't take any chances. You can't imagine how relieved I was when I heard the famous Rainbow Dash was coming to my rescue." The brown mare complimented.

Dash sighed with annoyance. "We cleared out the cave, getting back to Canterlot manor shouldn't be too difficult now. We'll stock you up with some ammunition and food and get you on your way."

"Miss Dash, I must say I am very thankful for your assistance, Twilight Sparkle and Luna speak very highly of you. After seeing you myself, I must say that their words clearly are the truth; won't you return to Canterlot with me?" Octavia bowed her head.

Dash seemed to get angry at the request. "Like I said before, we could only help you out of this cave, getting back to Canterlot if your problem. You can tell Twilight that Rainbow Dash has no interest in playing soldier anymore." She hissed.

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After hiking back to the old library where Dash was staying she sacrificed some of her ammunition and rations to Octavia. Before she was sent on her way, she begged Dash to return with her to Canterlot one more time. Dash of course refused and Octavia took her leave with a look of disappointment on her face.

"Thanks again Pinkie, you're a true friend." Dash patted her on the back.

"No problem Dashie! Always glad to be of any help to my friends!" Pinkie replied.

"Can you do us a favor and resume patrolling outside? I want to catch some rest; I'm not as agile as I used to be..." Dash yawned.

Pinkie Pie gave another of her awkward salutes and rushed back outside without another word. A part of me still felt awkward about entrusting her with protecting us, but then again I was already aware of what she was willing to do to anypony who tried to cause harm to her friends.

Dash planted her rear onto the floor and let out an exhausted sounding sigh. She pulled a glass off of a shelf and filled it with the flask left on the table. All in the same motion she took a big gulp of the drink.

“You seem pretty worn out...” I said as I approached her.

“I’ve been worn out for years, kid.” She replied.

“I thought you were the fastest in Equestria?” I asked.

“I was, but that’s just the thing, I was the fastest in Equestria, the years have not been good to me that’s for sure.” She took another gulp.

“You could earn your title back with ease. You already have the mark to prove it.” I gestured towards her flank.

She laughed heartily, and lifted part of her cloak revealing her flank followed by the word, “Where?”

It was completely empty. No cutie mark whatsoever. I had seen her mark before on posters; a cloud with a multi-colored lightning bolt coming out of it. Sure enough though, no such mark existed on her body.

“What happened to your cutie mark!?” I exclaimed.

“I told you, I’m not the fastest in Equestria anymore.” She sighed, letting her cloak fall back over her flank.

“So your cutie mark just...?” I started.

“Disappeared. Yup, I found out that can happen. Apparently if a pony loses their talent, then their mark goes with it. Now I’m just a worthless good for nothing waiting for the end.” She sighed.

I said nothing. I couldn’t find any words that I thought would add anything to the situation. Rainbow Dash had sacrificed more than I originally thought for this war.

Chapter 7

For the third night in a row I had been awoken by a disgruntled looking Rainbow Dash. For the past three nights she had gotten up and decided to get me up with her, and ask if I wanted a drink. Ordinarily I would tell somepony that they were being rude waking me up every night, but seeing as how I was the guest, I let it slide. I would decline the drink but stay up with her anyways.

Every time it was the same; she'd pour herself a drink, and down it in one long series of gulps without coming up for air. Then she'd sit there at the table with an appearance that suggested stress was weighing down on her. Sweat was pouring off of her like a garden hose, and she looked terribly shaken.

It was no different tonight, but for some reason I felt it necessary to say something this time instead of sitting there quietly during this whole process.

"What's wrong? You've been waking up like this almost every night. You hardly ever get enough sleep." I asked daringly.

She took another gulp of her drink and let the glass clank on the table. "Nightmares, that's all..." She was clearly trying not to tell me too much.

A part of me decided that I needed to know more. "What kind of nightmares?" I asked.

Dash glanced over at me and made solid eye contact. Her gaze was powerful, enough to probably kill a pony just by looking at them. I held still while she stared, until she sighed and looked back down at her glass.

"You know why I joined the military?" She asked.

"To help Equestria?" I answered stupidly.

“Before the war, my parents had another daughter. She looked a lot like me, just the most adorable sister I could have ever asked for. They named her Colors, and I just fell in love with the girl to where I just wanted to watch her grow up.” She said.

I could feel a story coming on; I let her continue without interrupting.

“Well, only about a year after she was born, they died in an accident. So I became her legal guardian. Losing my parents was hard, but I got through it with her. I raised her like she was my own child really, even though she was my sister. I had to play the role of big sister and mom; it wasn’t easy, but I loved that little girl so much...” She went on lost in her memories; I could even see a smile start to grow on her face.

“What happened to her?” I asked.

The smile on her face quickly disappeared. “It was about seven years ago, when this whole war began. The darkness had been growing steadily for a long time, but we didn’t even think that anything would become of it. We were wrong on so many levels though. Trixie initiated the first attack that started the war; she sent a large set of troops armed with guns to assault Ponyville.”

“W-what happened then?” I was hesitant to ask.

“Well it sure wasn’t a battle, it was a massacre. They gunned down any and all unarmed citizens. They showed no mercy to anypony, and murdered them all. Colors and I were sleeping at the time, but Trixie happened to notice that I was in the town, so she came knocking at my door. Before I knew it, she pulled me outside and her soldiers held me down at gunpoint. I’ll never forget what she did next though...” Dash paused for a moment and appeared to be choking on her words.

“She had her soldiers pull Colors right outside next to me. I begged her to leave her out of it, but she didn’t listen. She looked me right in the eye and told me to send a message to Celestia; to tell her that her kingdom was about to come to an end. Then to show me she was serious, she ordered one of her colts to ‘Kill the kid’ right there and then.” Dash stopped, tears started forming in her eyes.

I didn't know what to say, words wouldn't come out of my mouth.

"She had them kill her right in front of me. I couldn't stop them..." She was breaking into a full sob now.

I had never imagined I would see her like this. Every time I had heard about Rainbow Dash, I never once thought about a more sensitive side to her.

"It wasn't your fault Rainbow Dash. There was nothing you could have done..." I attempted to soothe her pain.

She ignored my offer and continued. "I looked her right in the eye. I promised her right there and then, that I would return the favor; that I would be the one to kill her." Dash's eyes filled with fire to go with the tears.

"And you have nightmares about it every night don't you?" I asked curiously.

Dash wiped her tears and turned away fairly embarrassed. "Among other things..." She commented.

I decided that I didn't want to pry too far; after all it was enough to make her relive one bad memory. I approached her and placed a hoof around her and smiled trying to cheer her up.

"We can't change the past, but don't worry. We can still win this war; we can make them pay for all the lives they've taken." I explained.

She thwarted my hoof away and took a step away from me.

"You don't get it, kid! Our enemy doesn't give two flying fucks about anything but winning! They don't give a fuck about casualties, they don't give a fuck about who they're up against, they don't give a fuck about you, and they sure as hell don't give a fuck about me! Our enemy just wants us all dead, and they'll stop at nothing to accomplish it. They'll throw as many bodies at us as they need to until we're all dead." She was on the verge of shouting.

“You make it sound as though we’ve already lost...” I lowered my head.

“Have you looked around us lately? We have lost. Everything is fucking destroyed, and we’re all just sitting here hiding. They’ve got some of the greatest hunter-killers that ever existed, and they’re out there right now, searching the land looking for ponies like you and me, to either turn to the darkness or slaughter and toss on the body piles with the others.” Dash was getting tenser still.

I tried to calm her down, but to no avail. “But you are ‘The Miracle’; we stand a chance with you.” I said.

“Fuck you!” She hissed.

“While you were up there in Skyvale just sitting nice and cozy, I was down here fighting. I fought every day, every night, just nonstop fighting. I watched ponies die left and right for days on end without even a second in between. I didn’t win those battles alone, I won them with my comrades, and I lost a good share of my comrades in a lot of those battles. What makes you think that my existence changes anything?” She growled at me.

I was quiet with my answer. “Because you were my hero... I dreamed of coming down here and meeting you. I wanted to help you in any way I could... I still believe in you Rainbow Dash...”

She was speechless. She turned away without a word and I saw myself out. I hoped that a night without me there to pester her would allow her to sleep peacefully for once.

Outside Pinkie Pie was keeping a watchful eye on our surroundings; it was kind of strange to see her just walking back and forth with that serious look on her face where that dumb smile of hers usually was.

“Aren’t you the least bit tired Pinkie Pie?” I asked curiously.

“Not in the slightest friend.” She responded rather enthusiastically.

Maybe Rainbow Dash was right, and Pinkie Pie really didn’t sleep.

“Hey Pinkie... What do you think about Rainbow Dash?” I questioned.

“Rainbow Dash? Well I think she’s pretty amazing really. I’ve never had a friend as great as her, she’s the best!” She replied.

“Why do you think that?” I continued quizzing her.

“Dash has done so much for me. She’s always taking care of me, sharing her food with me, and checking up on me. She’s the only pony who puts up with me. She even keeps the cabbages away, which I’m very grateful for.” She explained.

Ignoring her delusions, I could sort of understand where she was coming from. I couldn’t imagine that many ponies would want to put up with a girl like Pinkie Pie. She wasn’t exactly a pony that I could say that I’d have spent as long with as Rainbow Dash did.

Standing out here with her now, I could see she had a twitching problem. She appeared to be shivering quite often now that I thought about it. It wasn’t that cold out.

“Are you cold...?” I asked quietly.

“Nope, why do you ask?” She replied while shivering some more.

“You’re shivering...” I answered.

“Oh, I hardly notice anymore, it’s a side effect of eating ponies.” She smiled.

Eating ponies. I had forgotten all about that, Pinkie Pie had cannibalized that other pony a few days ago. The body responds to eating the flesh of your own kind by some kind of twitching and shivering. It was your body’s way of telling to that it wasn’t natural to devour your own kind. The fact that Pinkie was *used* to this meant that wasn’t the first time either.

“How many ponies have you... Eaten...?” I asked hesitantly.

“I’ve eaten ponies?” She asked dumbfounded.

I sighed, remembering that I was trying to carry on conversation with a girl with some severe head problems.

“Say, can I show you something?” She either was changing the subject, or honestly didn’t remember what we were talking about.

“Um... Sure.” I shrugged.

She tilted her head suggesting I follow her. I obeyed and she began to lead me down the remnants of the streets that once paved this town. Not only five minutes down the road she halted in front of a building marked “Sugar Cube Corner”, but a crude old sign decaying with age. Once I had caught up to her, she bolted right inside and I followed cautiously.

The inside of the building was far more impressive than the outside. Much of the interior looked very intact and most of it seemed to be repaired. It was clearly in the process of being restored.

It was a nice little bakery, almost nice enough to fool me into thinking it was still operational and the owners were just waiting in the back ready to take orders.

“What is this place...?” I asked.

“This would be Sugar Cube Corner, I used to work here.” Pinkie responded as she stood behind the counter and leaned over it smiling at me.

“How’s it in such good condition?” I said.

“I’ve been working to restore it for years. I got a lot of it operational, hopefully once ponies return to Ponyville I can open it back up and we can start seeing customers again.” She responded.

“You did this all by yourself...?” I was fairly amazed at the amount of work put into this place.

“Nope. Rainbow Dash helped. She gathered spare parts and building supplies from all over to help me get this place back in working condition.” Pinkie Pie said.

I suddenly felt bad. It looked like Dash still did care about something, despite trying to make it appear as though she didn't. No matter how much she treated Pinkie Pie like she was just a loon that kept guard for her, she clearly cared about her more than she let on.

"Pinkie, do you think that Dash can change the world?" I asked, this time however I was accepting the fact that Pinkie may not even realize a war was going on.

"Of course I do. Dashie can do anything that I'm sure of." Pinkie smiled furiously.

"Me too..." I smiled back.

Chapter 8

“Hey Rainbow Dash, I’m sorry about last night... I didn’t mean to be disrespectful or anything and you were right... I don’t understand what war is like...” I apologized for the previous night. Pinkie Pie’s words had really gotten to me.

Dash only sighed and shook her head in disappointment to me, then opened her mouth for the first time in hours. “No, don’t be sorry, it’s not your fault, it’s mine. How could you have known? They sealed you away from the war, it’s not like you were hiding from it, hell the fact that you’re here now shows that you didn’t want to hide from it. It takes a lot of courage just to come down and choose this life over that one...” Dash complimented. Rarely did I catch her speaking in positive regard to anypony.

“I am sorry that happened to you though... I have a sister myself...” I commented with my head hung low.

Nodding, Rainbow Dash wandered back over to her usual spot and levitated a familiar flask to her lips. Taking a large gulp she placed the flask back in place. It was rather astonishing how much alcohol this mare consumed really.

Our silence was broken by the door being thrown open with a loud thud.

Almost instinctually, Dash drew her blade and took aim towards the intruder. Despite being constantly buzzed she had a set of reflexes and aim that served her true to her title. She may have not been the fastest flier anymore, but she was still just as quick as she once was.

The intruder showed nothing towards the gesture. She had a rather emotionless expression which was assisted by her sunglasses covering her eyes. A dark purple in color, it was impossible to see through them on our end. With a wild blue mane combed in a rather rebellious haircut she looked very tomboyish for a unicorn. Most tomboys I had met in my days

were pegasus or earth ponies like myself. The unicorns were primarily upper class before the war, so it was odd to see one like this.

Her coat was pure white, but soaked in splats of blood left and right; clearly her trip over here wasn't a peaceful walk through the ruins. Upon further examination of her body I could see that her cutie mark was a double quaver. A bit of jealousy overcame me as I remember my own empty flank.

"So, you really are still alive out here. I guess I can't say I'm too surprised, after all if anypony could last out here in this hellhole it would be you. Long time no see though Dashie." The unwelcomed guest spoke as she waltzed in making herself at home.

"I know you didn't come here just to check up on me, so what do you want Vinyl?" Dash replied lowering her weapon.

Vinyl? This was the pony from the tapes from before? That meant that she and Rainbow Dash served in the Knights together.

"Why so uptight? I thought you'd be excited to see me Dashie, I mean what's it been? Five, maybe six years?" Vinyl commented.

Dash held her gaze. Vinyl got the message that Dash wasn't interested in catching up, and just wanted to get to the point.

"Twilight sent me." She admitted shamelessly.

"Well you can go back to her, and tell her I said to go fuck herself." Rainbow hissed.

"I'd do that gladly, but I think you should do that yourself when we go back together." Vinyl smirked. Clearly she loved the idea of telling authorities what's what.

"I hope you have something to back those words up..." Dash prepared to draw her blade once more.

Vinyl laughed heartily and threw herself onto the old couch with continued laughter. She turned back to us and grew what appeared to be an honest smile.

“I see you’re just as much of a hard ass as you were before, it’s refreshing to see really; however I can’t exactly force you to come back if you don’t want to. After all, you’re probably the only pony alive who could best me in battle. I may be crazy, but I’m not an idiot, I know when to pick my battles.” Vinyl replied.

Dash lowered her hoof and sat down to relax once again. Pulling the flask to her mouth again she slurped down another vile sip of the liquid inside. Placing the flask back onto the table she sat quietly for a brief few minutes; Vinyl did likewise.

“So you must have some other reason for being here then. You and Twilight would both know that you couldn’t drag me back there even if you tried, so why bother wasting your time coming here?” Dash asked breaking the silence.

“A certain point of interest has come up that we felt would be of relevance to you...” Vinyl came to her hooves and trotted over to the table and rudely poured herself a drink as well. She had little house manners, but it looked like Dash didn’t mind it.

“I’m listening.” She said in between sips.

“Trixie has kidnapped Applejack.” Vinyl said plainly.

Dash dropped her drink mid-sip. Her eyes grew more attentive as she leaned in with interest. “What did you say...?” She asked.

“We were as surprised as you were. We hadn’t heard from her in years, since before the war even, we didn’t even know if she was alive, but by the time we found out Trixie had already claimed her for her own. Sent us some nice little threats about how she wants somepony from the Knights to meet her and discuss her demands for Applejack’s return. We figured since you would have personal interest in this situation that you’d be willing to offer advice on our next course of action.” Vinyl explained.

Dash was hardly listening. She was obviously still stuck on the fact that Trixie had Applejack as her hostage.

Banging her hoof on the table she stood up and stared down Vinyl. "Vinyl, you tell Twilight that I will go and meet Trixie myself. This is my fight, and I won't have Twilight interfere." Dash exclaimed.

Vinyl didn't seem too surprised by Dash's reaction, and then again she knew her fairly well I could assume. Her and Dash had a lot in common, but Vinyl definitely had a much cockier attitude than Rainbow Dash.

"I'll deliver the message to her. I assume it's going to take you a matter of hours to get to Fillydalphia to meet with Trixie? After all, you're the fastest flier in Equestria." Vinyl did the bragging for her.

"Only have one wing now. Flying is out of the question, I'll have to go on the hoof-express." Dash joked.

"When'd that happen?" Vinyl leaned in.

"It's not important; the point is I'll need about a week to get there and back. Do you think you could meet me back here when I return?" Dash answered.

Vinyl just nodded in response. An unusual smile played her lips, perhaps she was just pleased with herself for being able to get Dash to fight for them again.

"I'm setting out right away. Flare, I want you to stay here." She commanded.

My ears perked up at the mention of my own name.

"Huh? Why can't I come with you?" I protested.

"You're tough kid, but you're nothing in a fight against the armies of darkness, or Trixie for that matter. You'd only end up getting yourself killed and wasting yet another life to Trixie." Dash explained.

She had a point, in a fight I was barely formidable, and that was with both the help of Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie. I would not even last more than three seconds against a hardened soldier probably. I would get diced up in a matter of seconds, but it didn't stop me from wanting to go with her.

"Dash, I wasn't aware that you had a mate, you sly girl..." Vinyl smirked deviously.

"Fuck off Scratch; he's from Skyvale. He's just staying here because if he tried to make it on his own, he'd just get slaughtered and made into a quick meal. When we found him he was almost made into a snack by a bunch of savages." Dash explained to Vinyl.

Thanks for the nod of confidence Dash.

"I need you to stay here though, Flare. I want you to watch out for Pinkie Pie. I don't like leaving her entirely by herself; she's not exactly safe that way." She instructed.

Pinkie Pie's safety? She was the best shot I had ever seen, and on top of that a ruthless cannibal. I would like to see the pony dumb enough to try and pull something with her. With her mental stability I think it would be reasonable to fear for one's personal safety more especially when she was around; having her around put me at less ease than being alone sometimes.

"Keep her alive until I get back please." Dash asked kindly.

I couldn't refuse. I didn't want to let Rainbow Dash down.

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"Flare? Flare, get up." A stern voice scolded me in my slumber.

Still half asleep I rolled out of bed and landed onto the hardwood floor with a crash. When I turned my body around to get a glimpse at who had awoken me, I was surprised to see Pinkie Pie standing over me.

Something about her was different though, her mane specifically. Instead of being the normal puffed up ball of cotton it usually looked like, it

was completely straight. It fell over her figure a lot more gracefully this way, and to be honest it seemed to look better on her. She looked collected and put together, if she didn't have such a serious face on right now.

"Pinkie...? What are you doing?" I asked with a yawn.

"There's no time. Come with me right now, I'm in need of your assistance and we haven't a second to wait." She placed a hoof over my mouth.

I nodded and rose to my hooves without further questioning. She gestured towards the door, and ran directly outside without further hesitation. I followed, trying to keep low like she was doing. Stalking through the open land just outside of Ponyville she lead the way cautiously. She was acting very strange, and for Pinkie Pie that was saying something. For some reason she was being cautious and tactical now, rather than as she normally traveled with a free spirit and a carefree demeanor.

"Where are we going?" I finally asked after nearly thirty minutes of wandering around.

Pinkie turned and faced me. She gave a quick response then returned to leading us to our destination.

"The factory." She said.

Seeing as it was Pinkie Pie I was dealing with, I decided not to bother trying to squeeze more information out of her, as chances are she had no idea what she was even talking about.

"Does this have something to do with the cabbages?" I asked jokingly.

She didn't answer, she just kept moving silently. It wasn't until we arrived at a rather large looking run down building that she opened her mouth again.

"Welcome to the factory, Flare." She invited me inside.

This place smelled more rotten than anything else I had caught a whiff of out here in the ruins. I couldn't help but gag and cough just getting near the place.

Pinkie extended a hoof to assist me up, and commented, "You get used to the smell after a while." With a rather serious tone.

Taking her offer, I allowed her to pull me into the lair without caution. Even though Pinkie Pie was almost completely out of her mind, I still trusted her enough to not to lead me into anything that would be too dangerous. I made a slight miscalculation.

Inside the walls of this building was something I had never seen before, something that was worse than everything I had seen up to this point in the Equestrian ruins. Lined up against the walls were dozens of other ponies, chained in place unable to move farther than maybe a foot a piece. Most of them were covered in what was clear to be their own fecal matter as it was all over the floor around them.

It was obvious that many were beyond malnourished judging by how emaciated a majority of them were. Some of them were even dead lying on the floor, and some of those among the dead appeared to be rotting for probably a few days now.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing, it was like a live slaughter house for ponies, and Pinkie Pie had brought us here.

Many cried and moaned upon our entry, Pinkie gave a nasty glare to the general direction of all the commotion then issued a threat.

"I suggest you all shut the fuck up, we have a guest here today." She spoke in a normal amount of decibels, but her tone was far more commanding than it usually was.

A majority of them turned away and accepted her threat, a few just whimpered and broke down into tears.

The walls were filled with so many different kinds of ponies without prejudice. Unicorns, pegasus, earth ponies alike all lined up down those

walls. Fillies, foals, mares, and colts everywhere, it was clear that no mercy was spared on anypony for any specific reason.

My mind quickly returned to the wretched stench that was filling the entire building. The mixture of urine and death was a unique smell that I could never forget.

One of the more rebellious ponies on the wall line up decided to take a stance against Pinkie, no doubt he'd regret it only seconds later.

"You fucking cunt! I'll slit your fucking throat!" He screeched at her.

Pinkie halted and turned to face the colt. She approached casually while not breaking eye contact with him. You could feel the fear building from him more and more as she inched closer and closer with just a plain expression. The lack of emotion was far more intimidating than if she was expressing anger or rage.

"Say that again." Pinkie was just as calm as ever.

The colt didn't even breathe. He was trembling now that she was so close. Only a moment ago he was brave and ready to fight her head on, but now that she was right next to him he was cowering in fear. The only condition that had changed was her location; perhaps though he only lashed out from pure passion.

Pinkie jabbed him in the chest with her left hoof, and the moment he expressed the pain from the impact she clobbered him in the face with the right. Pulling a large stick out of her bag with her mouth she cracked it down on him repeatedly, aiming for the head every time. He would be beaten and scream in agony for several minutes before she would cease. The colt was left on the floor with blood leaking from his skull.

Leaning down Pinkie began to speak to him softly.

"That's what I thought you worthless piece of shit. You're here because of your own volition, and don't think otherwise. Just remember every time that you try to be a fucking hero..." Pinkie kicked him in the throat before continuing.

“That you’re here because of you. It’s your own fault why you’re here, and nopony else’s. I have no sympathy for you, and I have nothing against ripping your fucking entrails out and STRANGLING YOU TO FUCKING DEATH WITH THEM!” She kicked him again, he responded with a grunt of pain.

“DO YOU FUCKING UNDERSTAND ME!?” Pinkie yelled.

He nodded furiously.

“Good, I hope we don’t have to have this conversation again.” Pinkie rose up and gestured for me to keep following her.

I tried to block the scene I just witnessed out of my mind as we approached the back room. It was more homely in there than the rest of the factory. There was a table, a bed, and several appliances in this room. Despite it being old and covered with rust, it was fairly cleaner than the rest of the building. Pinkie Pie clearly had made a second home out of this room, and it looked at the very least, inhabitable.

“Sorry about that, the cattle can be a bit out of control at times, but if you don’t show them discipline then they might try to cause trouble; I try my best to avoid that.” Pinkie explained plainly.

She was very nonchalant about the fact that she nearly beat a colt to his death in the other room two minutes ago; she was laughing it off and calling it controlling her cattle. The fact that she referred to them as cattle was a bit more unsettling. At this point though, I just wanted to remain calm, I didn’t want to give Pinkie any reason to think that either of us should be alarmed about the situation.

“It’s alright...” I managed to get out.

That’s all I could say.

“So Flare, what do you want to drink?” Asked the pink mare as she searched through some bottles in her cabinet.

“We have water, and I think I might have a few sodas lying about, that is if you don’t mind them being a little warm. I know you’re used to that

fresh stuff, but down here most of the sodas are about 6 years old, so I hope you're okay with that." She rambled as she offered me a drink.

"You're not Pinkie Pie, are you?" I changed the subject.

She paused in her search, and turned around to face me.

"Yes, and no." She answered.

"What does that mean?" I questioned further.

Sighing she gestured for me to take a seat at the table with her. I obeyed and sat adjacent to her.

"I've been referred to as Pinkamena, and I suppose that's the name I've adapted to myself." She began.

"Pinkamena?" I tilted my head.

"It's Pinkie Pie's proper name, but I suppose it fits me as well. Whatever you want to call me though, I am an entity inside of Pinkie Pie. I'm a creature that gives her the strength to do what she couldn't do on her own." She explained.

"So, like a split personality?" I asked curiously.

"Sort of, I suppose. I still have my memories of Pinkie Pie, and my emotions and thoughts come from hers." She spoke with such a plain expression.

A second Pinkie Pie?

"So... When you got shot...?" I pointed to her forehead.

"Nah. I was like this long before that accident. To be honest I'm not entirely sure why I'm like this. Perhaps my childhood wasn't all that great? Maybe my parents never loved me enough? Hell, I'd even submit to the idea that I was just born with a twisted mind. Whatever the reason though, I exist as I do now." Pinkamena said.

It was hard to believe that anything before the war could happen to a pony to drive them this insane. What could have possibly been worse than the war?

“So what’s all this about then...?” I asked cautiously.

“Progress.” She responded simply.

I couldn’t gather any words to respond to that.

“It’ll make sense in time, but you’ll just have to trust me. You do trust me, don’t you Flare?” She gave me a rather innocent looking face.

I did trust her. I couldn’t explain why, but I just trusted her. Maybe it was the fact that she saved me when I first came to the ruins of Ponyville. Maybe it was me trying to see the good inside of anypony, but whatever the reason I trusted her, even as Pinkamena.

“Yeah, I suppose so, though the whole operation out there has put some doubt in me, that’s for sure.” I admitted.

“I can understand that. Like I said, it’ll make more sense in time, but I’m glad to hear that you trust me, not many do.” She gave a weak smile.

“You must be very tired, I woke you up to bring you here, but I suppose we can continue this conversation in the morning.” She added.

I nodded. I was a little dazed from being woken up, but I was wide awake after seeing what I did here. I wasn’t sure I could sleep again, especially in this place. Knowing what was just outside this bedroom was a bit too much to just go to sleep around.

“I’m not sure if I can sleep though...” I replied.

She patted a bed in the corner with her left hoof calling me over to it. I came over to it as she suggested and climbed into it. To my surprise she climbed in right next to me.

Pinkamena pulled me close to her and wrapped herself around me. She was a tad larger than me, which was expected as she was significantly

older than me. There was a unique feminine scent to her, one that I had never noticed before; perhaps because I had never been this close.

“Maybe you can sleep better knowing that I’m here.” Pinkamena explained her actions.

She was right. I felt safer lying there with her.

“Yeah...” I managed to get out.

Neither of us said another word. Pinkamena and I would just lie still until we both drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 9

Surprisingly my slumber wasn't plagued with nightmares as I was expecting. The previous day was needless to say a bit overwhelming to me, and more than just "a lot to take in all at once." My eyes upon opening revealed a set of pink hooves wrapped around me. I was pulled up nice and snug against a soft mare behind me.

Pinkie Pie or rather Pinkamena? I couldn't truly tell which she was anymore. There was no doubt in my mind that she was both of these characters, but it was hard to tell where one started and the other stopped; the line between the two was very blurred, almost frightening really.

She looked far less harmful while she slept. The long pink mane on her head wrapped around her in many thick strands, which somehow seemed to suit her. Looking at her as I did at that moment I couldn't see either of the two characters that I knew her to be. I couldn't see the random spontaneous attitude of Pinkie Pie, or the cynical serious demeanor of Pinkamena; the mare just looked silent and innocent. I was fairly amazed at how different she appeared in her sleep, though I shouldn't have been surprised, as I had experienced a similar phenomenon with Rainbow Dash. During the day she would look tired, haggard and stressed, but when you did catch her in those brief moments enjoying her dreams that weren't corrupted by her many nightmares, she looked peaceful, relaxed, and dare I say, beautiful.

Pinkie and Dash however had little in common beyond that and their ability to slay their foes with precision accuracy. It was obvious where Dash picked up her skill, but the scary part was thinking about where Pinkie got hers'.

Pinkie awoke with a delicate yawn, and adjusted her eyes and head position so that she could get a better look at me. She appeared calm and quiet, this was still Pinkamena.

"Good morning, Flare; did you sleep alright?" She asked kindly.

I nodded.

“That’s good to hear, how about some breakfast?” She asked.

“What do we have to eat around a place like this?” I asked sort of fearfully.

Pinkamena pulled herself out of the bed and wandered over to the kitchen area where she pulled out a rather disgusting looking meat from what appeared to be an old refrigerator. The meat must have been at least three days old, but looked edible enough if it was cooked.

“This is all we have; I can cook it for you if you want.” She offered.

I nodded again. I had meat before since I arrived, and I guess I wasn’t above eating it again if it was all that was being offered.

She ignited a flame over an old stove near the fridge and threw the meat into a pan as she began to roast it. It gave off an odd odor, clearly from its age; she would have to cook it fairly long to have it done thoroughly with its condition.

I approached her cautiously and stood next to her as she cooked. We both stood in silence, never making eye contact or speaking, just standing with each other. It carried on that way until she had finished cooking the vile meat to the best of her ability. She threw the chunks onto two makeshift plates and placed them both on the table using her levitation.

We both took a seat on either side and began our meal, perhaps the only meal we would have throughout the entire day.

The first bite I took I gagged. It never occurred to me to ask Pinkamena where she acquired this meat before now, or how long it had been in her possession, or even what it was from. I noticed she had little to no trouble chowing down on the disgusting thing.

“Pinkamena...” I started hesitantly.

I almost didn’t want to ask her.

"What kind of meat is this anyways...?" I was nearly trembling at the thought.

She paused her chewing and swallowed what was in her mouth whole before looking up to me slowly. Her expression looked plain and ordinary.

"It's pony." She let out easily.

I couldn't contain myself any further, I felt my throat push forward, and out came a stream of vomit all over the floor; tears welling up in my eyes as I tried to hold back more vomit, but with little luck. All the contents of my stomach were emptied on that floor.

How can she say that so nonchalantly!?

"Excuse me!?" I exclaimed. I almost wanted her to tell me she was joking.

"You heard me." She said taking another bite.

This wasn't happening; I didn't want to *believe* it was happening.

"You're telling me, that you just hacked up some poor soul, threw his meat onto a frying pan, cooked him up and now you're eating him!?" I was panicking.

"More or less." She shrugged.

"And you don't see anything wrong with that?" I asked.

"Do you want me to give the bullshit answer; the answer that's expected of me because of moral value and social correctness? Or do you want the truth? Because the truth is, there is nothing wrong with it in the slightest, just morally. It may not exactly be good for your health, but it's not as bad as it's made out to be." She explained.

"YOU'RE EATING YOUR OWN KIND!" I accused.

“Yes, however you’re only looking at it from what you’d know from that sky city, and the old kingdom. In the ruins survival becomes the biggest priority, those who are willing to do anything to survive get to live, and that includes eating. I’m alive because I am willing to make that next step to live. I am willing to eat those who aren’t willing to eat me, thus I am alive and they are not. You won’t last long out here if you just stick to the morally correct way of doing things.” She justified.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Surely though there is more food out there than this!?”

“Of course, but it’s scarce. I refuse to skip several meals just because I want to nitpick on what I’m willing to eat and what I’m not. If we don’t eat them, they’re going to eat us; I thought you would have learned that from when we first met.” She continued with her meal.

She had a point sadly. Those savages had no remorse about making me into their next snack; on top of that Pinkamena had been surviving out here for nearly a decade before I came, clearly she knew what she was doing, and what it took to live out here.

“You’ll get used to it, you won’t even notice after a while.” She assured.

Begrudgingly I took another bite of the slab of cannibalism. It tasted awful on the tongue, but worse on my mind. I wanted to spit it out, but kept chewing, enough for me to swallow it and keep it down. My whole stomach was disagreeing with my choice, but I forced more down slowly and surely.

“There you go.” She smiled, but no emotion seemed to show through that smile.

I managed to devour the entire chunk of meat without upchucking it, but to keep it down I drank my weight in water. Pinkamena just finished it off like it was a bowl of cereal in the morning.

My throat screamed at me; commanding me to hurl the flesh out of my body, but I held back. I couldn’t believe what I was doing.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it after a while.” Pinkamena came to my side and placed a hoof on my neck.

Through coughs and gags I tried to response. “I don’t know... How you can say that...” I managed to get out.

“You have to pull yourself together, we have something to talk about here, it’s rather important.” She changed the subject.

I nodded and tried to catch my breath.

Pinkamena sat back at her spot at the table and looked across towards me plainly. We both sat there with solid eye contact, neither of us saying a word. The silence was finally broken by a question on her end.

“Aren’t you wondering why we’re here? What’s going on perhaps?” She asked.

“I was a little hesitant to ask...” I admitted.

She nodded. “I suppose that’s understandable...”

“Well, I can honestly say that I am doing sort of a service to Equestria here, well at least I will be soon...” She smiled.

“No offense Pinkamena, but what kind of service could you possibly be providing from a place like this...?” I didn’t realize how rude it sounded until the words left my mouth.

Her face became stern and serious; it almost made me regret my statement.

“I know that it may look bad from your end, and I won’t deny that there is evil in what I do, but it is for a greater cause, I assure you this.” Pinkamena replied.

“Explain.” I requested.

“Well, you already saw all the ponies locked up in the other room, they are a key part of this experiment so to speak.” She began.

“And how is that?” I asked curiously.

“I’m getting to that, just have patience.” She winked.

I nodded and sat silent while I waited for her to explain her story.

“See, you may have heard of a plague being spread, well many in the Canterlot region die of the plague. It’s a fast acting disease that will kill a pony within six months of catching it. No pony is sure how one catches it, or how to treat it. As a result, many die on a regular basis, and little advances are made, due to limited resources in medical science.” She explained.

“So, what does the plague have to do with what’s going on out there?” I asked raising a brow.

“Well, they are going to help cure the plague.” She smiled deviously.

“How can a group of captive savages do anything to cure an incurable disease?” I questioned.

“Well, I discovered some time ago that every pony has a little chemical inside their body that I like to call ‘The Essence of Life’, and that it’s a special chemical used by the body which possesses healing properties. This is more than likely the chemical that helps the body repair itself when damaged, and maybe even the chemical that makes life itself possible.” She explained.

“So you believe this chemical can be used to create medicine that would be effective on the plague?” I put two and two together.

“Bingo, but there’s only one problem.” She said.

There is always something.

“And that would be...?” I was hesitant in asking.

“Extraction; the only way to obtain this chemical is from living ponies, and the only way to get it out of them is to kill them.” She sighed.

“So, killing them to save lives...?” I tried to put together the illogical argument.

“Well, these ponies are already savages, beasts that can never be phased back into society. They chose to resort to barbarianism many years ago, and have no usefulness to Canterlot. They’re going to be wiped out eventually anyways, so why not make use of them. Travelers like you and me are just going to blow their heads off whenever they try and make a meal out of us anyways.” She justified.

She had a point, though I wouldn’t call it a solid one.

“If you want nothing to do with this operation, I’ll understand.” She spoke softly.

“Rainbow Dash knows nothing about this does she...?” I asked.

She shook her head.

I looked down at the ground in thought for a moment. Pinkamena was hacking up ponies... To save lives? Peering back up at her, I could see she had anguish in her expression; she was afraid I would reject her.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked.

A smile lit up her face almost instantly.

“Well, I invented a machine that can extract the chemical from their bodies. The process is rather gruesome though I warn you...” She said.

“I’ll do it.” I assured.

“Alright, well we’re going to need a lot of ponies. Then we have to remove their entrails quickly and put them into the machine while they’re still fresh. We must be quick to get the essence out of them, or it’ll corrode at an incredibly fast rate. The machine will then grind up the organs and separate the chemical from the guts. We’ll need at least one hundred ponies for this next serum I’m making...” She explained.

It sounded absolutely disgusting.

“Alright, where do we begin?” I asked.

“Let’s get to moving the cattle to the operation room, shall we?” She smiled as she trotted out the door.

On her way out she purposely flicked her tail in my face in a flirtatious manner. Perhaps that was her way of making light of the situation.

The “moving” process was interesting to say the least. Pinkamena would first inject her victim of choice with some kind of numbing agent; this apparently was to create no resistance from them, thus making transportation to the operation room quick and painless on our part.

The chosen colt wasn’t exactly compliant with our wishes; naturally he decided to kick up some rebellion.

“DON’T TOUCH ME YOU STUPID BITCH! GET AWAY FROM ME!” He screeched at Pinkamena.

She retaliated with a swift slap to his face. Just as quickly as contact was made, she injected the needle into his neck only a fraction of a second later.

“We’ll have to be quick, this numbing agent only lasts for a few minutes, so that gives us just enough time to take him to the back room and strap him down. Help me get him up onto the moving cart.” She instructed.

Unlocking his chains, we quickly hoisted him up and onto a large metal cart.

“Kid, you have to help me. This girl is crazy; you’re not going to let her cut me up are you?” He was almost in tears as he begged me for help.

“Don’t feel sorry for him Flare, I originally found this one raping a young filly, isn’t that right?” Pinkamena gave a sneer look at the colt.

“If you want to spare him though, you can...” Pinkamena sighed.

I looked the colt up and down, then back at Pinkamena. For some reason, I trusted her judgment, despite how crazy it seemed to be right now. This colt meant nothing to Equestria, and I was willing to convince myself that. He was just a worthless rapist savage with no direction. I couldn't believe I was willing to justify killing like this; perhaps my time in the Equestrian ruins changed my morals and values, or maybe it was Pinkie.

"No need. He won't be missed..." I managed to utter out.

Pinkamena smiled happily and continued to roll the cart towards the ominous back room that nopony in this factory besides her has ever come out of.

"YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE! WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE WHO DESERVES TO LIVE OR DIE!?" The colt screamed as we hauled him in.

Upon entering the room, I noticed the floor was stained with dry blood on top of more dry blood. The stench was high, but I somehow was able to overcome it. In the center of the room was a rather large cylinder like machine. Many pipes were attached to it, and it appeared to have some kind of chute on one side.

Pinkamena strapped the colt down with thick, tight leather belts. Then, using her levitation pulled a reel of duct tape from under the table he was strapped to. Pulling a strip off, she placed it over the colt's eyes.

"The pain will be unbearable as it is, less we horrify him in his final moments as well." She explained.

"You're sick ponies... Both of you..." The colt whimpered.

Pinkamena leaned over him and stroked his blue mane gently. A look of regret appeared on her, and she stood there in silence over the broken colt. It almost looked like she was trying to comfort him.

"Be still... Do you want to die only thinking of regret?" She attempted to soothe.

He responded with crying.

“We must work quickly, Flare. Get your knife and help me here.” She instructed as she gestured to a nearby counter top.

I did as told. As the two of us stood over the helpless victim, we both lowered our knives to his stomach area. This was it, we were about to disembowel this pony. My heart was racing back and forth, I almost couldn't breathe. Part of me didn't think I was going to be able to go through with it; I was already thinking of ways to back down and not do it.

Ultimately though, I didn't think my way out quick enough; when Pinkamena's knife touched the flesh, mine followed almost in perfect sync. With a swift cut, we created an opening in the chest cavity for extraction. I remember the screaming of the victim piercing my ears, the plain look on Pinkamena's face, but mostly, the sight of the guts.

Pinkamena scooped up as many as she could and gave a quick and powerful jerk, ripping them from their host's body and into her possession. My mind was blank, I was blocking out everything that was happening, every last bit of it. Brain dead, I followed Pinkamena's example and pulled the parts she missed out, and carried them as she did.

The two of us dropped the organs into the chute for the machine in the middle of the room. It started whirring wildly as I heard gears start up their vicious cycle. Grinding noises came and I could hear the organs being mulched. Pinkamena out of excitement ran to the other side of the machine and beckoned me over to watch. I followed, and found her staring at a small glass canister on the other side of the machine. A few drops of a clear liquid dripped into the canister.

“This is what it's all about, Flare. This is the essence I was talking about.” She smiled heartily.

I could now see what she was talking about with needing to kill a lot of ponies. There couldn't have been more than two drops extracted from that colt.

The rest of the day continued on that way, just us bringing more and more ponies into the back room, robbing them of their guts and grinding it up to take out a drop or two of essence. Pinkamena in the spirit of not

being wasteful would from time to time slice off a slab of meat or two for food later and throw them into the refrigerator.

It had finally happened; I was complete desensitized to the horrors of Equestria now. I was willing to slice ponies open to get two drops of a liquid with unknown qualities. The strangest part though, was that I didn't mind it.

*

There was only one shower in the entire building, and that was back in the living quarters where we slept and ate. Pinkamena insisted on just rinsing off together, which I complied to; I wanted to rinse the blood off of myself as quickly as I could.

Pinkamena levitated a bar of soap over to my backside while I was turned away from her and pressed it against me. I could feel her approach me carefully.

"You missed a spot; don't worry though I got it." She spoke very softly.

Pinkie Pie was very predictable in the sense you could always assume she would go from one random thing to the next, and always stay peppy about it. Pinkamena though, she was far more spontaneous than Pinkie Pie in a way. Pinkamena would seem cold and emotionless at one point, but then delicate and loving at the next. It was impossible to predict her.

"Thanks, I appreciate it." I said plainly.

She seemed troubled by something it seemed. Leaning towards me she whispered into my ear softly.

"Say Flare... I was just thinking about something..." She whispered.

"What would that be?" I asked.

She responded with a quick push, and pressed me against the wall of the large walk in shower. Holding me there with terrible force she brought her face close to mine. She was quick, probably as quick as Dash was.

“You’ve never known the touch of a mare before have you...?” She asked just as quietly as before.

I said nothing.

“You seem to show nothing towards anypony I noticed, even me. You clearly show that you trust me, but somehow you remain detached from me. Perhaps you’re interested in prettier mares?” She interrogated.

“You’re plenty beautiful.” I said plainly.

It was the truth too, Pinkamena was an attractive mare, even with that scar on her forehead, she was still something impressive to gaze upon.

“Yet I can see it in your eyes, that you have no desires...” She smiled deviously.

I said nothing yet again.

“You’re looking for love, not satisfaction.” She concluded.

I honestly had no clue what I was looking for at this point. Romance wasn’t exactly on my agenda at this point.

“You’re very interesting Flare... I don’t think I’ve ever met a pony quite like you before.” She complimented.

Leaning in slowly she pressed her lips against mine. Her lips were soft and tender, which wasn’t what I was expecting. For some reason I would have guessed her for a colder and dry kiss, but that might just be because of her demeanor.

I didn’t know how I should have been reacting, but I ended up just doing the first thing that came to mind. Simply closing my eyes and not resisting, not out of enjoyment, merely out of respect more or less. I

followed along with her lead for the brief few moments that she held me there, trying to keep up with her.

When she pulled her lips away, she opened her eyes slowly, as did I. Making solid eye contact she began to speak.

“You’re a pretty good kisser.” She teased.

“Thanks.” Was all I could think to respond with.

“What was all that for...?” I questioned.

She shrugged. “I’m not sure really. I mean it’s pretty obvious you have no feelings for me, and I can already tell I don’t have any for you. I guess I’m just curious is all.” She smiled.

“I’m sorry...” I apologized.

She placed her hoof to my lips and smiled.

“Don’t be. I can see it in your eyes. Right now, your love is your passion to help Equestria, and I respect that.” She said.

“I’m glad you’re here Flare, I’ve been really depressed for a long time...” She admitted.

I leaned in more intently, trying to listen better.

“I’m not sure why, but for some reason I just can’t seem to find anything that eases my depression. I’m just wandering from one thing to the next, without any kind of aim in life...” She admitted.

“You need a hero.” I interrupted.

“What?” She raised a brow.

“I spent a lot of my life in Skyvale just purposeless. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with myself, or what I was good at. I thought that I was the most useless pony in the city for the longest time. It wasn’t until I came down here that I found something.” I said.

“And what might that be...?” She asked curiously.

“Rainbow Dash. When I saw her, I wanted to be just like her, I wanted to help Equestria in any way I could. I looked up to her, and I still do...” I spoke.

“Everypony needs a hero Pinkamena...” I added.

She sighed and nodded.

“I suppose they do.” She smiled.

Chapter 10

I recall waking up in a room that I was not in when I went to sleep. This room was bright with artificial light, and light colored walls. The amount of dried blood on the floor was significantly lower than the rest of the factory that much was certain. A pane of glass stared at me from the left wall, next to a door that I could safely assume is locked. There didn't appear to be any kind of exits in this room.

Trying to grasp my surroundings I neglected to notice Pinkamena on the other side of the room at first. She too had a look of confusion on her face, clearly she didn't understand how we got here, however she obviously was keeping calmer than I was.

"Where are we?" I asked, fidgeting while I did so.

"Looks like one of the old containment rooms in the lower levels... We're at least ten floors from the surface." She commented.

"Why the hell are we down here!?" I was shouting.

"Calm down and I don't know how we got down here. I recall falling asleep in the bed and then waking up down here." She explained.

She was far too nonchalant about this situation. We were locked in a containment cell in the basement when we were both certain that we'd not been down here the day before. This alone should have been alarming to her; however it didn't appear to be phasing her in the slightest.

Pinkamena crept over to the window and peered outside. It was mostly pitch black out there, but she must have seen something, as she turned around and nodded.

"Looks like we have a rebellion on our hooves." She smirked.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

“Well, one of the captives escaped, and he must have unhooked the rest of them, and they threw us down here. My guess is they’re preserving us to give us some of the same treatment we gave them; want to watch us suffer I suppose.” She explained.

My spine tingled at her words.

“How do you know that...?” I asked cautiously.

She gestured with a hoof to the window.

“I saw a colt out there that I recognized from the captive room. Somewhere out there I saw some of the medical supplies were brought here. There were no medical supplies on this floor prior, so it’s clear that they brought them down here themselves.” She explained.

She was very calm; she must have had a plan. Knowing this information let me calm down.

“So, how are we getting out of here?” I asked.

Even with Pinkamena’s intelligence, it would be difficult to get out of this locked room; on top of that we had to worry about the dozens of ponies upstairs trying to kill us for at least ten floors.

“Well, the glass is bullet proof, so we can’t just kick our way out... But I have an idea none the less.” She smiled deviously.

I wasn’t a big fan of the type of smile she was giving me right now. It usually meant she was about to do something insane.

Approaching the glass gently, Pinkamena brushed her right front hoof against it carefully and closed her eyes. Leaning her head back she hurled it forward into the glass with great force. The glass responded with a loud thud, but didn’t move in the slightest.

I watched as Pinkamena began to repeat this process six times. Each time the glass started to vibrate more and more than the last. Finally by the fourth time, a crack was starting to appear on the glass. Smashing her skull

against the glass a few more times I could see a trickle of blood coming from her forehead, but she kept at it with gusto.

It wasn't long before the glass shattered to the force of Pinkamena's head. I couldn't believe what I was seeing though. Pinkamena had just shattered a pane of bullet proof glass using only her skull.

"Let's go." She insisted.

"I can't do this..." I whimpered.

I had more than I could take. This all was becoming too much for me to handle. I didn't even know how I justified it to myself up to this point. Part of me should have told me this was a bad idea from the start. I was crazy to even offer to help Pinkamena in this factory in the first place.

"Yes you can Flare, I believe in you." She reassured.

"How can you be so sure...?" I spoke quietly.

"I wouldn't lie to you Flare. I know I've put you through a lot, but I promise that it wasn't all for nothing, but it will be if we just sit here and wait for them to kill us. Either kill them, or they kill us; that's how it's always been and it's no different now." She explained.

"I suppose you're right..." I shrugged.

"Damn it Flare, what is wrong with you...?" She scolded.

My ears twitched at her sudden outburst. I turned all my attention directly to her. She had on a serious face which looked rather ominous with the blood trickling from her forehead.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You bend too easily. You agree to just about everything even if you don't want to do it. What the hell is wrong with you?" She scolded again.

"I don't know, I just don't know anything about living out here, so I thought I'd follow the experts..." I suggested.

She shook her head.

“You can’t just assume we always know what’s best. What’s *your* opinion? How do *you* feel about all of this? What do you *really* want to do out here?” She asked.

I hadn’t really thought about it beyond finding Rainbow Dash and helping the Knights. I was just winging it up to this point to be honest. At first I thought that I just wanted to help ponies in general, but being out in the actual ruins made me realize that I felt some ponies were better off dead. I wouldn’t have even let the idea cross my mind back home, but I had never seen these savages up close before then.

After a brief second of soul searching I had an answer I was willing to accept, at least for now.

“I want to help Canterlot and Rainbow Dash. I’m willing to do anything to do that, which I guess is why I decided to do this in the first place. If this serum really has a chance at helping ponies with the plague back in Canterlot, then I’ll kill the entire savage population for that.” I answered.

“And how do you justify that? The savages are ponies too you know. There are even savages with the plague out there.” She commented.

“The savages would just destroy any new Equestria built by the Knights anyways. It’s clear they don’t want to change, so I don’t care about them.” I said.

She was silent for a moment. She then gave off another of her devious smiles.

“I misjudged you Flare...” She smiled.

“How so?” I questioned.

“When you first came out here, I thought you were just another overly righteous colt trying to better Equestria through peaceful means and understanding and all that rubbish... But now I can see that you have other

things on your agenda... I suspected as much when I was able to convince you to help me." She replied.

"My goal has always been to help Equestria, by any means necessary. When I left, I wanted to join the Knights, and I knew there was an off chance they would still be fighting. I was ready to fight, maybe not mentally, but in my heart I knew that if anything tried to harm the Knights I could muster up the courage to stop it." I said with pride.

"And how about when you ate the flesh of your own kind? It was rather easy to convince you to do that too..." She had a curious tone about her.

"I'm no good to Equestria if I'm dead." I said plainly.

Pinkamena burst out laughing.

"So, the true colors shine through. Well I'm glad to have you at my side then. Stay close and we may actually get out of here alive. I happen to know where I hid some weapons down here that we can use." She gave a gesture to follow her out the new exit.

I obeyed and jumped through the shattered window after her. She bolted down the hallway that we could not previously see through the window, and kept silent about it. She reminded me of Dash with her ability to move silently even while running.

Approaching the end of the hall she halted me with her right front hoof. Giving a gesture for me to stay where I was she approached a female guarding an area just up ahead. Without saying a word she slowly crept up behind the mare. With great dexterity she was able to quickly wrap her right hoof around the mare and cover her mouth while holding her in a lock.

"Come quickly Flare." Pinkamena commanded.

I darted over to the situation as fast as I could. Pinkamena pulled the mare over to me and commanded me to help her hold her.

"This bitch wanted revenge. She wanted to do us in and cut us into pieces I bet. Well, we can't take that standing down now can we!?"

Pinkamena had a crazed tone about her; her pupils seemed to become very small with insanity.

“We have to return the favor now!” She suggested.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit excessive...?” I asked.

“Not in the slightest. First though we need to make sure she doesn’t scream for help, let’s cut her tongue off!” Pinkamena appeared to be having far too much fun.

“We don’t even have a knife.” I reminded as I held the struggling mare.

“Then help me pry her mouth open...” Pinkamena said as she leaned in.

Without much further question I pressed against the mare’s cheeks causing her to spit her tongue out. Pinkamena, wasting no time bit down on the mare’s tongue. Pulling with all her strength, the tongue snapped right off, blood gushing out of the leftover stump. The captive squirmed and made noises that would signify she was in pain.

“Let’s eat her...” Pinkamena suggested as she looked up at me.

The pony struggled even more viciously at her words. I held her tightly though, preventing any escape.

“No. There’s no reason to take this that far. Our focus is on getting out of here, remember?” I reminded.

Pinkamena sighed and nodded.

“I suppose you’re right. Let’s just kill her and be done with it then...” She replied.

Without a second thought, Pinkamena strangled the helpless pony for several minutes. It was only a short two minutes after she had begun that the mare stopped moving and struggling. Pinkamena eased up on her and dropped her to the ground then.

“Come with me, there isn’t much time to waste.” She gestured to me to follow her to a closet.

Inside, she kicked at an old wall repeatedly. It looked eroded and flimsy from years of poor maintenance, but I would soon discover that it gave that appearance to hide something. After about four good bucks from Pinkamena’s hind legs the wall crumbled and gave way, exposing a fairly large metallic box hidden behind it. Pinkamena popped it open with haste and started rummaging through the contents.

She tossed a new U.M.S.A. to me, and I watched as she fastened one to herself as well. I was concerned as to how we were going to escape without them, but it was apparent that Pinkamena had planned ahead. We had a bit of magic on our side now, simulated magic but I would take it.

Pinkamena pulled out a blade and strapped it to her right hoof. This blade was different from her previous one, this one lacked a fire arm, and instead of a sharp piercing sword it was a large hook-like blade. Still it was better than nothing.

“I got a special weapon for you Flare.” She had an excited smile about her.

Reaching into the crate once more she tossed an odd looking gun blade my way. I caught it and began attaching it. It appeared to have a wide barrel on the bottom, some kind of spread shot I assumed. I recall Rainbow Dash referred to them as “shot guns”. The top had a fairly long retractable barrel with a long range scope attached to it; a sharp shooting weapon. It was perfect; I was mediocre at combat, so being able to pick off enemies from a distance was much more in my favor than approaching them directly, however the spread shot weapon would make that possible if the situation arose.

“This is an impressive weapon...” I commented.

“I built it myself. I like to call it ‘The Punishment’, you’ll see why later. It’s quite the improvement over that rusty old pea shooter you had earlier.” She smirked.

“Let’s get moving, we have some cattle to herd.” She added.

I nodded in agreement before chasing after her. She moved rather quickly, it was astounding that she was not in the military.

With a little backtracking we made it back to the end of the hallway we could see from the holding chamber earlier. Pinkamena made short work of the colt guarding the elevator. Pulling him around to face her, she jabbed her hook into his jaw and tore it clean off.

Pressing for the elevator she was silent. We waited for a solid twenty second in silence as nothing happened. The elevator clearly wasn’t coming.

“Guess we’re taking the long way out.” She said.

Before I was given the chance to reply she kicked open an air duct near the elevator and knelt down to the appropriate height to enter it. I followed her lead and began to crawl through the ducts with her.

We must have crawled for a solid twenty minutes in silence, the only sounds we heard were those of the commotion going on in the rest of the factory around us; no doubt the captives making use of the facility.

Pinkamena stopped up ahead and peered through an air vent in the duct to the level down below. I couldn’t get around her to see what was going on, but I could hear it just as well.

“When we find those two I can’t wait to get a taste of them...” A gruff male voice echoed.

It was obvious now that they were well aware of our escape now.

“I’m gonna’ suck the small one’s eyes clean outta’ his skull. Then I’m gonna’ break every one o’ his legs...” A crazed voice replied to it.

“I can’t wait until we catch the pink one... She thought we were bad before, wait until she sees what we’re going to do when we catch her...” The gruff one said, clearly he was in charge.

“What are we gonna’ do boss?” Replied another.

“Well, I think she cut up a lot of our buddies and held us here as hostages, so she should service us to return the favor; I think she owes us that at the very least...” He chuckled back.

“I like that idea. We fuck her in every hole then we eat her!” The Neanderthal sounding one cried back.

Pinkamena apparently was finished listening to them propose her fate to each other. She burst through the vent blade extruded, impaling their leader on her landing. The others gasped and quickly came to her attention drawing their weapons.

“You want me? Come get me. I dare any one of you to try and take me.” Pinkamena challenged.

A large brutish looking colt charged her, only to meet her blade just as quickly as he charged. Pinkamena was too fast for them, that much I had already gathered though from her previous fights.

Taking advantage of my strategic point in the vent I decided to offer a hoof to Pinkamena. Aiming my fire arm I blasted a spread shot that took down two at once that were preparing an attack. Unfortunately the shot was so loud that it alerted the others to my position. Given no other choice I jumped out of the shaft and joined Pinkamena in the fight.

“There’s no way we can take them all out...” I warned.

Pinkamena ignored my warning and quickly darted into the crowd sword drawn. With great finesse she hacked her way through a large group in seconds. With a quick upper jab at one of the bigger colts she slit his stomach open; with haste she pulled his entrails out of his gut and wrapped them around his neck and pulled.

I was almost taken off guard by a bigger mare with a knife in her mouth. With a few quick slashes she tried to make contact with me, but failed. Even with challenged speed, I was still fast enough to be more than a match for her.

Aiming my shotgun again I blasted her at point blank range. Her face melted right off at the shot, causing her to fall like a ragdoll.

Another colt came from behind me and swung a stick at me. I was able to block it with my fire arm with just enough time. I recalled that my weapon had a special “surprise” to it that Pinkamena told me about. I decided that now was as good a time as any to try it out. I extruded the melee weapon attachment to hear a revving noise begin to echo in the room from my hoof.

The stick was shredded to pieces by my weapon. When I looked at my front hoof I noticed that a chainsaw blade was hanging off of my weapon. This was the surprise that Pinkamena had told me about; it was perfect.

Swinging wildly I hacked through several in my way. The Punishment ripped through them with ease, splattering their blood all over.

Pinkamena leapt right over me and landed on a giant colt blocked our way up a flight of stairs. She landed right on his back, causing him to violently try and throw her off, but she held on. Holding on tightly, Pinkamena sunk her teeth down into the top of his skull. He screamed in agony, but kept trying to throw her off. I could see Pinkamena’s teeth clamp down harder on his head, and then suddenly I could hear a crack. His head began leaking; Pinkamena cracked through his skull with her teeth alone!

He frantically began screaming as Pinkamena created an opening in his head, then began to feast on his fleshy pink brains. With each bite she did her best to pull more and more of the organ out of his head in strands. It was only a matter of seconds before he fell.

“This way Flare!” She pointed towards the stairs.

The two of us raced to the top as fast as we could. We must have gone up at least five flights of stairs before we could see a recognizable floor. Pinkamena barged right through the door without hesitation.

“ALRIGHT ALL YOU WORTHLESS FUCKS! YOU WANTED A CHANCE TO GET BACK AT ME!? COME GET ME!” She threatened to the wide room.

After peeking my head into the room I could see that dozens of the captives inhabited this room.

Pinkamena rushed right into the group and began to work her magic on them. She was dropping ponies left and right; the most amazing part was that she was left untouched by any of them.

*

Words couldn't fully describe how amazingly she had taken control of the factory again, but sure enough within a matter of minutes Pinkamena had diced up a majority of the ponies opposing her and already began the process of dropping their guts into the grinder; with my assistance of course. The rest fled to escape the mad party pony.

With the newly "acquired" guts were enough to pull together a large serum, larger than anything Pinkamena had been able to make prior.

"This is perfect Flare..." She smiled.

"What do you mean?" I asked curiously.

"This is enough to continue my research further. I have big plans for this..." She said as she placed the vial in her bag gently.

"Pinkamena, there's one thing I still don't understand..." I asked.

"What is it Flare?" She turned to face me.

"What was all of this for...?" I questioned.

Pinkamena simply smiled and placed a hoof on my blood stained mane. She gave an expression of gratitude and kindness.

"You'll understand later." She replied.

*

I wish I could tell you how Pinkamena won that fight, but in all honesty, I don't think your heart could take it; I know mine couldn't. I had witnessed some of the vilest actions ever committed to ponykind that day. That's the kind of thing that happens in the ruins though; you see things you can never un-see...

Chapter 11

“So, it’s good to see that you’re back Dashie.” Were the first words that Vinyl Scratch let out upon the arrival of both Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie and I.

Vinyl had apparently been here for some few hours now waiting for Dash’s return, while Pinkie and I were off at the factory. I was starting to see a pattern in her character.

Rainbow Dash had apparently just returned moments ago from her trip to meet with Trixie and Applejack.

“So, don’t leave us hanging, what happened with Trixie and Applejack, Dashie?” Vinyl Scratch rudely interjected yet again.

Dash didn’t look up at her during this whole conversation. There was something off about her demeanor this entire time.

“I’ll tell you on the way back to Canterlot... I am requesting an audience with Twilight.” Rainbow Dash uttered.

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“I am impressed stranger, Twilight Sparkle was serious in meeting me here, clearly she sent her best. I have never seen anypony able to decimate over twenty of my armed guards by themselves, what might I have the pleasure of calling you?” A sky blue unicorn asked a hooded stranger whom had just destroyed her attempt at an ambush.

The unicorn had been adorned with a black cloak and a hood to hide her head. Upon further inspection one would be able to see the word “Trixie”, carved into an onyx bracelet she wore on her left hoof. She was neat and tidy which was odd for anypony living out in the Equestrian Ruins.

The stranger lifted her hood to reveal her rainbow colored mane along with her fierce magenta eyes. She stood silent making eye contact with Trixie.

“Rainbow Dash... My, my, my... I haven’t seen you in over six years have I? I thought I had seen the last of you, I must say I am a little surprised to see you here of all ponies...” Trixie smiled deviously.

Rainbow Dash answered with silence.

“Mare of a few words still I see; I like that. So I take it Twilight sent you to negotiate with me didn’t she? She probably thought she could scare me if she sent the great Rainbow Dash to thwart my little ambush?” Trixie pried.

Dash held to her strategy and kept her mouth shut, giving Trixie no information. Trixie didn’t seem to mind the lack of direct response however and continued to pester the pegasus.

“Take a look at your friend Applejack, I think you’ll like what I’ve done to her...” Trixie gestured to the mare on her left.

Applejack had a black essence about her. Her entire front side, including her face had a black mist like substance radiating from it. Her eyes unrecognizable, in their place two pure red orbs just staring down Rainbow Dash; they looked emotionless, lifeless even. Her front hooves had spines leading up to her shoulders, which added to her sinister appearance.

Dash took note of her flank, her cutie mark was gone; either removed, or vanished like her own, and it was safe to guess either.

Rainbow Dash remained silent, even at the realization of Applejack’s fate. She didn’t want to give Trixie the satisfaction, Celestia knew that she had already taken enough from her, less she give her one more thing.

“Turned out pretty great if you ask me!” Trixie joked.

Dash didn’t give in to her humor, instead just stood facing the ground trying to avoid eye contact with Trixie.

“Listen Rainbow Dash, I know you’re a pony who understands the value of life, so I’ll cut to the chase. You and I both want the same thing you know?” Trixie attempted to engage Dash in conversation with no luck.

The pegasus didn’t even twitch, Trixie continued regardless.

“If Twilight continues to fight then we too will continue to fight. If you all just surrender then we can assimilate you all. The darkness is going to help us better ourselves as a species. It has power and knowledge that we can’t comprehend in our current state; we can become better than what we are now if we just choose to accept it.” Trixie said.

Dash remained silent.

“What do you say Dash? Will you join us and help change ponykind forever?” Trixie had a hopeful tone about her.

After remaining silent this entire meeting Dash finally opened her mouth to speak to her.

“I won’t ever forget Trixie...” She uttered under her breath.

“Forget what?” Trixie asked curiously.

“I won’t ever forget what I am forced to do because of you...” Dash spoke up.

Trixie took a moment to ponder the meaning of Dash’s words; during that same moment Dash drew her blade and darted in Trixie’s direction.

Trixie flinched as she was not able to react fast enough to Dash’s lightning reflexes. She closed her eyes and expected the pain of Dash’s fierce blade. Squeezing her eyes tightly closed she braced for an impact that didn’t come. The sound of a slice was heard, but no pain came with it.

Opening her eyes, she could see that next to her lay a dead Applejack, bleeding from the neck. Standing above her was Rainbow Dash with a bloodied sword. The front of Dash’s coat was stained in the same blood.

She didn't know how to react. Her jaw hung open in shock.

"Y-You killed her!" Trixie Exclaimed.

"Yes, I killed her." Rainbow replied plainly.

"I can't believe it... You actually killed her..." Trixie stuttered.

"I'd rather she be dead than corrupted by whatever twisted your sick mind. It's better for her this way; she can die before she becomes like you." Dash responded.

Trixie couldn't comprehend all of this at once. Rainbow Dash had pulled the one move she wasn't expecting.

Snapping herself out of her dazed state she looked up at Dash confidently.

"Rainbow Dash, I must say that even I am surprised by your actions here. Let it be known that I will not underestimate you again..." Trixie bowed her head.

Dash turned away in disgust.

"You tell Twilight that I am impressed, but that her days are numbered." Trixie smiled arrogantly.

"Don't forget my promise Trixie..." Dash spoke as Trixie was turning away.

Trixie turned her head back to her direction and nodded.

"Yes I know, my death will be at your sword. I haven't forgotten." Trixie replied.

"I must say that I'm as shocked as Trixie is Dashie... I can't believe you killed Applejack..." Vinyl responded to Rainbow Dash's story.

"At least she's free of Trixie's clutches now..." Dash replied.

A part of me felt sorrow for Dash's predicament. She was put in a situation where she had to either kill a close friend or watch them suffer. It made me question myself a little, musing the idea if that was me and Torch. Would I have it in me to kill her to end her suffering?

"Didn't the two of you have a thing for a little while there?" Vinyl asked.

I noticed that Vinyl had a bad habit of asking inappropriate questions at even more inappropriate times. It didn't seem to dawn on her that perhaps reminding Dash of her close connection to Applejack would probably make the situation hit her even harder.

"Something like that..." Dash admitted turning away from Scratch.

Something like that? She had once harbored feeling for Applejack? It was difficult to think of Rainbow Dash in any kind of romantic situation, despite the fact that she had mentioned before she was in love a few times before the war. It must have been the fact that I only knew her as "The Miracle", and not a common pony that I could not imagine her as anything but a warrior.

"Don't worry Dashie, Trixie will get what's coming. We'll take turns beating the shit out of her when we get her. I reserved a special place on the bottom of my hoof for her..." Scratch attempted to console Dash.

"I just want to get to Canterlot and leave. I've had enough war for one life time." Rainbow sighed.

"I'm sure ol' One Eye will love to see you again. Bet she'll do a god damned backflip." Vinyl laughed.

"Ol' One Eye?" I asked.

Scratch laughed heartily.

“That’s the nickname that a lot of gave the general.” Vinyl enlightened.

“Why do they call her that...?” I almost didn’t want to know.

“You’ll see when you meet her.” Scratch smirked.

“Would you all happen to be talking about Twilight Sparkle?” A voice called out to us.

The three of us halted in our tracks and moved our attention over to the origin of the noise. To our surprise a pony-like creature came out of the shadows.

This wasn’t like any pony I had seen before. Its left front hoof had some kind of black coating that appeared scaly with some kind of spines leading up to its shoulder. It was clearly a unicorn, it even had a cutie mark; a yin yang. Her mane moved like it was alive; it was a black untamable animal that moved unnaturally. Her tail was the same. The rest of her body was adorned with a dirty looking white coat.

The oddest feature of this pony was her eyes. Her irises shined a pure red; they looked as though they may even be glowing.

Scratch and Dash both drew their weapons to the mare.

“I come in peace.” She assured.

“Not looking like that you don’t.” Scratch hissed.

“State your business.” Dash commanded.

“I apologize. I overheard you all talking, and when I heard you were going to Canterlot I started following you. It was rude of me, however I figured you might be able to help me and I didn’t want to lose you...” She replied.

“How exactly can we be of help to you?” Dash asked.

"I wish to gain an audience with Twilight Sparkle, and possibly join the Knights of Celestia if possible." She said.

Vinyl laughed.

"Don't think that's going to happen." Scratch teased.

"I know my appearance can be a bit offsetting. I am a victim of Trixie's madness just like you are though. I was an experiment to try and imbue ponies with darkness that had not yet been turned. Though my body is corrupted by the darkness, I assure you that I am in complete control of my being." She replied.

Dash lowered her weapon.

"Why should we help you?" Dash asked.

"Due to my appearance, I am not welcome anywhere I go. I just thought that you would understand my situation after hearing your story." The mare answered.

"Forget it, we don't trust anypony with darkness just radiating off of them." Vinyl Scratch spoke adamantly.

"Very well, you may come with us, and I will gain you an audience with Twilight personally." Dash gestured for the mare to join us.

"WHAT!? Dash are you fucking insane?" Vinyl protested.

Dash slapped her in the back of the head. I laughed softly, finding this fairly amusing.

"Canterlot is protected by an anti-darkness barrier. If she is really controlled by the darkness then it would have to have tainted her heart. If that is the case, she'll die the moment she enters Canterlot." Dash informed.

"Plus, I trust her... Something tells me she is being honest." Rainbow Dash smiled.

“Do you have a name, friend?” She asked.

“I was given the project name JWL48.” The mare replied.

“Jewel then?” Dash stuck a nickname onto her.

The corrupted unicorn smiled at the name.

“Jewel it is.” She smiled.

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Canterlot was nothing like I imagined it to be. Much of the lower civilian quarters appeared to be under repair, possibly constant repair at that. It looked as though the royalty invested a majority of its extra manpower into keeping the civilian area inhabitable; though it was obvious there wasn't much they could do. A lot of the buildings in the lower area were run down and fixed up with old plywood; many ponies lived in makeshift homes.

I had been to Canterlot once when I was a foal, but it looked nothing like it did back then. The formerly elegant roads were decorated only with cracks and broken streetlights. The grass in many areas appeared to be receding, though still better than the ruins where there was none.

The castle was still as impressive as always, though it too was showing signs of poor maintenance and age. Much of its vibrant colors were starting to fade and chip off. The marble used to build much of the structure was chipped away, and I noticed an entire tower was destroyed entirely.

Even in its lessened state however, it still stood as the most magnificent structure to stand in the ruins. It still hung over the civilian quarter like a watchful hawk; it definitely still could scare away its enemies, that was certain.

The moment we arrived we were escorted by the royal guards directly to the castle. Twilight clearly wanted to keep Rainbow Dash out of the public eye for a moment; she wanted to be sure to be the first to see her

clearly. Dash had made it a priority to keep her hood up and hide her face, it was clear she too wanted the same.

“Rainbow Dash... It has been a long time, who’d have thought you’d be alive after all that time in the ruins...” A mature voice echoed through the royal hall to us.

We all pivoted to meet our eyes with a rather interesting unicorn. Purple in color, with a pink highlight right down the middle of her mane. Her body wasn’t impressive by any means that was for sure, she was clearly the intellectual type, and one could gather that from the first glance. She was slender, but in poor athletic shape. Her figure was complimented by some interesting white robes that she wore. Her hooves all decorated nicely with golden shoes.

My eyes wandered to meet with her eyes; I then realized why they called her “Ol’ One Eye” at that moment. Her right eye was an interesting purple that matched her coat nicely; her left eye however was a completely different story. The left oculus was a bright yellow in color, and appeared bloodshot as well. From her forehead down to her cheek right through that same eye was a terrifying looking scar. The scar looked medical however; must mean that she had some kind of surgery at some point.

“How’s it going Twilight?” Pinkie Pie chimed in.

“Pinkie Pie?” Twilight turned her head to get a better look.

“Yes ma’am!” Pinkie smiled brightly.

“So, it looks like you brought some friends...” Twilight smiled back.

“That girl over there is Jewel; we met her on the way here. She may look terrifying, but she wants to join the Knights. I know you don’t normally accept anything to do with the darkness, but I thought you could make... An exception...” Rainbow Dash spoke.

Twilight nodded.

“Well, if you trust her then I suppose I have no choice don’t I?” Twilight grinned.

Dash bowed.

"I appreciate your understanding." Dash replied.

"It's no trouble, however she won't be able to be a part of the military directly, but I think we can find some work for her to help out with. We'll discuss it later." Twilight said.

Jewel lowered her head respectfully before replying with "thank you."

Twilight trotted over to my direction and looked me up and down carefully. To my surprise both of her eyes moved, meaning that her second eye wasn't fake.

"And who might this be?" Twilight asked gesturing towards me.

"A visitor from Skyvale." Dash summarized.

"Skyvale you say? We haven't seen anypony from Skyvale in years... What's your name friend?" Twilight asked eyeing me closely.

"Flare." I replied.

She seemed satisfied with that answer.

"Well Flare, any friend of Dash's is a friend of mine. Feel free to make yourself at home here. It may not be as flashy as Skyvale, but I think you'll find Canterlot to your liking." She smiled.

"He's been staying with me and Pinkie Pie up until now." Dash interjected.

"Ah, so he's your student then?" Twilight turned her head back to face Rainbow.

"Something like that... Anyways, I would like to speak with you privately if that is alright?" Dash changed the subject.

Twilight stood up straight and walked back to Dash's position and gestured for her to follow her.

"Right this way then." She instructed.

Rainbow Dash turned back to my direction.

"I wish to speak to Twilight alone for a while, Flare. Go check out the city, I'm going to be a while, so you can meet me back here at the castle later." She said.

I nodded.

Part of me was excited just being here. This was the home of the Knights of Celestia, the capital of Equestria, and the main stronghold of the resistance. I could hardly even believe I had made it here in one piece.

I knew though that the moment I arrived that this was just the start of something bigger, bigger than me, bigger than Rainbow Dash, even bigger than the Knights themselves.

Chapter Twelve

“Come on Twi, you have to let me out there to fight with Dash, I want to join her in drinking Trixie’s blood!” Vinyl Scratch drooled.

“It’s talk like which does not allow me to put you on the battle field, Lieutenant. You have your orders.” Twilight scolded the overzealous unicorn.

Vinyl wasn’t ready to give in just yet.

“Are you serious!? We have the battle of our lives on our hands right now, a chance to finally make Trixie pay for all she’s done, and you’re going to have me on fucking babysitting duty!? This is absolute bullshit, put me out there so I can do my job, *ma’am*.” Vinyl made sure to put extra emphasis on that last word.

Twilight shook her head and gestured for the lieutenant to give up and leave her office.

“It’s not babysitting duty, you’re to fly the chopper and rescue any wounded soldiers that you can. Those are your orders, and I’m sticking to them. Now get out of my sight, lieutenant.” Twilight scolded yet again.

Vinyl Scratch sighed but decided it wasn’t worth her time to argue with Twilight. The general was always stern on her decisions and even a pony as stubborn and arrogant as Vinyl Scratch couldn’t sway her once she’d locked in her choice. It was clear that she learned more from Celestia than just magic. Vinyl Scratch, before completely exiting though let out an inaudible “bitch” under her breath; her way of relieving her own stress on the situation.

Twilight was playing it safe as always. She didn’t let her victories over Trixie for the past few months get to her head. They had managed to turn the tables on their foes and turn the war around in a matter of weeks. What seemed to be a lost cause has turned into a sure victory on their part. They owed it to many factors though; their reverse engineering of the enemies

firearms, their powerful military leaders, and most importantly, to their determination. Even still though, Twilight couldn't help but shake the idea that it was too easy. Trixie was arrogant, but she couldn't have been dumb enough to back herself this far into a corner, that's the only part that had Twilight worried.

Before she could collect her thoughts any further, she was interrupted by a familiar face. A pony that usually gave her a harder time than Vinyl Scratch, but a pony she trusted more than any other living creature in Equestria.

"Vinyl seemed extra pissy, I suppose you and her had a talk?" Rainbow Dash smirked.

Twilight laughed lightly at Dash's joke before replying.

"Yes, well although she is a formidable soldier, I cannot ignore her mental evaluations. I don't think being on the front line or in combat is good for her. She's already dangerously unstable as it is, the last thing she needs is more reasons to snap." Twilight explained.

"You mean she hasn't already?" Dash joked again.

"That's debatable." Twilight played along.

"Anyways, I didn't come here to talk about Vinyl and whatever has her pissy today." Dash explained.

"You're asking permission to kill Trixie yourself, right?" Twilight jumped right to the only logical conclusion.

"How'd you know?" Dash raised a brow in surprise.

"Why else would you be in my office right now? All you've talk about since this war began was getting her and mounting her as a trophy. I even recall you once mentioning you wanted to mount her rear end as a second trophy and let everypony take turns bucking it?" Twilight sat down at her desk lifting her glasses to her face.

Dash got a big grin across her face.

“That’s one of my personal favorites.” She commented.

“Yes, well I’m afraid the answer is no on that question though. Your orders are to lead us to victory and bring Trixie back alive if possible.” Twilight instructed.

“Come on Twilight, that’s bullshit! After all she’s done!?” Dash growled.

Twilight nonchalantly began writing letters as she listened to Dash. The sudden change from giddy to enraged didn’t seem to affect her in the slightest, she was used to Dash’s rash behavior at this point.

“Believe me, I understand that Trixie is a cold-hearted conceited bitch, but we have a little something called civility here. Everypony has the right to a trial, and judgment before the crown; if we didn’t have laws or rules we’d be no better than Trixie’s army.” Twilight preached.

“Horseshit.” Dash spit.

“It’s not ‘Horseshit’, commander, its proper civility. We cannot allow ourselves to stoop to the level of our enemies, if we allow such things to happen it’s only a matter of time before we become our enemies.” She lectured again.

“Spare me your lectures; I’ll follow your stupid orders.” Dash rolled her eyes.

“Glad we understand each other commander.” Twilight didn’t even take her eyes up from her papers.

Dash understood it was Twilight’s way of saying their conversation was over.

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“So, I want all of you to understand our orders, none of us are to kill Trixie unless there is no other alternative; seems as though Twilight is pussy-hoofing around the situation.” Rainbow Dash explained to her team.

"I can understand why Twilight is being so cautious though..." A soft spoken pegasus replied to Dash.

"Although I agree partially with Twilight on the sense that we don't want to come off as the same ruthless animals our enemies are, I think she fails to understand it from the point of view of those of us actually on the fields fighting." Replied another of the group.

"Believe me Rarity, I know. Twilight doesn't realize yet that while we're stuck to rules and regulations, our enemies are allowed to do whatever they see fit to win. None-the-less she's in charge, and we'll have to put up with that unless Celestia says otherwise. These are our orders, and they'll be carried out as stated. I suggest you all get ready, we're leaving within the hour." Dash commanded the group.

Dash's ability to take command still caught Rarity off guard from time to time. She could be cool and collected one moment, and then turn into a drill instructor on the next.

Rarity approached Rainbow Dash cautiously as the rest of the group dispersed. Oddly she appeared more chipper than she normally did before a battle. Rarity assumed it had to do with the fact that Trixie would at least be apprehended soon.

"Rainbow Dash, may I speak with you?" Rarity spoke at a nearly silent level.

Dash turned to face her with a smile.

"What's on your mind Rarity?" She said.

"It's about Sweetie Belle..." Rarity lowered her head.

She knew it was always a touchy subject to bring up one's sister around Rainbow Dash, especially knowing what happened to her sister.

"Still no sign of her; I know it's frustrating Rarity, but I'm almost certain she's okay, her and Scootaloo both." Dash smiled.

Rarity sighed.

"I'm sorry Rainbow Dash..." Rarity bowed respectfully.

Dash tilted her head in confusion.

"What for? You've done nothing wrong." She asked.

"Your sister died that day, right in front of you, yet you still managed to gather up my sister and her friend Scootaloo and get them to safety regardless. You saved their lives when you didn't have to..." Rarity had a very soft tone.

Dash shook her head and placed a hoof on Rarity's shoulder, a gesture of comfort.

"Rarity, I did what was right that day. I would have liked to save my sister, but conditions didn't allow. I wanted to save those who were alive and had a chance of getting out. My only regret is that I went back in to save more ponies and lost sight of the two. I am almost certain though that they're alive, and that they're together; it sets my mind at ease, because if they're together then I know they'll be safe no matter what happens." Dash comforted her.

Rarity allowed a smile to cross her face.

"Thank you Rainbow Dash. You're a good friend." She replied.

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The air outside of Canterlot felt moist and thick as it blew roughly through the green blades of grass that covered the land. That same grass was to be soaked with blood today.

Many of the Knights took an interest in the upcoming challenge between Rainbow Dash and Trixie. The two had made a wager almost a year ago now, and now one of them was to pay up in their own blood. No pony was certain who would come out with the other's head, but all were certain that both would not walk away from this battle.

“KNIGHTS OF CELESTIA!” A confident commander screamed to a hall full of the Knight’s finest soldiers.

The crowd cheered loud enough to call thunder from the heavens.

“As many of you know, I am Rainbow Dash.”

They let out another roar of excitement.

“I will keep this brief before turning it over to my lieutenant.” Dash commented.

The crowd grew silent at the sound of Dash’s voice.

“War is no joking matter, we’ve all seen that. Trixie is evil and ruthless, so I ask you all to think of your families while you’re out there. Don’t try and be a hero out there, less we lose more than we have to. That is all...” She spoke.

Dash gestured for Vinyl Scratch to come forth and deliver her speech. As Vinyl approached Dash began to retreat off of the balcony overhanging the hall.

“This darkness has committed crimes against ponykind. It is a menace to our way of life, and it must be punished for its actions!” She began.

The crowd roared once more. Vinyl Scratch clearly had the ability to command a crowd that could even rival Rainbow Dash’s.

“It cannot be reasoned with, there is only one thing that it understands, and that is death. Let us show it that same death then! Let us show it that it has not even begun to understand what we’re capable of! Let us destroy it and all who assist it!” She yelled.

A wildfire had sparked in the crowd below; they were screaming and yelling with delight louder than they had ever before. The room was ablaze with vigor, determination and excitement. Rainbow Dash just wanted quietly from a distance.

“This Trixie, she is a traitor to her own kind; a coward that hides behind her shield of darkness to keep us from getting to her!” Scratch continued.

The cheers had grown so loud that they filled the whole castle at this point.

“BUT NO MORE! LET US SHOW HER WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU BETRAY CELESTIA! LET US DRAG HER BACK BY HER HIND HOOVES!” Vinyl screamed with delight.

The crowd replied in the same manner.

“WE WILL RIP HER APART AND DRINK HER BLOOD! LONG LIVE CELESTIA!” Vinyl finally screamed.

“LONG LIVE CELESTIA!” The crowd rejoiced.

*

BANG!

Dash’s firearm roared as it felled another from a distance. A clean shot right through the skull; she had learned to grow fairly used to this occurrence. She had been trained to be the best shot she could be after all.

Flapping her wings furiously she brought herself closer to the ground where she would then bring her sword to contact with more of her enemies.

Around her she could see blood flying from every direction. There wasn’t a patch of dirt that wasn’t stained with blood around her. Everything would be soaked without prejudice, including her.

The screams of bullets and battle cries were all that could be heard through the air. One couldn’t even hear themselves speak with the conditions around them. It was exactly as Dash recalled every other battle she had been in up to this point: Hell.

Two heavy built stallions charged Dash from the front hoping to overpower her. Their efforts were wasted, as with great haste she impaled

one in the head with her sword and with a quick jerk was able to pull it off of his shoulders with it still attached to her blade. The neck of the stallion began to spurt out red goo like a sprinkler. She then hurled the skull at the other with such great force that it broke his neck on impact.

Dash charged through the crowd with blade drawn, hacking her way through anything that would try and stop her. Her weapon was more than a match for any would-be warriors trying to block her path; it cut through them like paper.

“Trixie, I know you’re out here...” Dash thought out loud.

Dash took lift off mid stride and began scanning the ground from above for anything that even resembled Trixie. She knew that Twilight said not to kill her, but Dash was certain Twilight had no problem with her being dragged back by her jaw, and if she did Dash didn’t care.

In the far distance Dash could see blue figure in what appeared to be a cloak standing at ease a far distance from the actual fighting.

“Found you.” Dash smiled.

At that same moment Dash heard an ear shattering scream behind her. Quickly she turned to locate the familiar cry.

Rarity had been grabbed by one of the enemy pegasus and had managed to shoot her way free, but now was falling from Dash’s altitude. Without a second thought Dash abandoned her plans to pursue Trixie and bolted after Rarity.

“I’m coming Rarity!” Dash screamed.

She was getting closer, only a little bit further now. Flapping her wings as hard as she could she was trying everything she could just to get a little more speed.

A sharp pain struck her from her wing all the way down her spine. At that same moment she stopped flapping and began to fall through the sky like a comet. She had been shot in the wing.

Tumbling to the ground Dash rolled down a steep rocky slope hitting every jagged rock on the way down. She could feel each rock hit her, each like another individual bullet ripping at her skin. When she finally reached the bottom of the slope she opened an eye to see Rarity only a few feet away.

Dash forced her body to allow her to stand upright and stammer her way over to Rarity. When her eyes adjusted she examined Rarity.

Blood was gushing out of her right side like a hose. She whimpered at each spurt but did her best to hold in her cries. She had been shot.

Tearing off a piece of cloth off of her uniform Dash began to wrap the wound as best she could. She was no Fluttershy, but she knew a thing or two about covering wounds. A short double knot later the wound was covered at the very least. It would have to do until she got her to Fluttershy.

"Can you walk?" Dash asked.

"I don't... Think so..." Rarity coughed between words.

"Then I guess I have to carry you." Dash responded as she lifted Rarity onto her back.

"Just leave me here Dash; I'm only going to slow you down now..." Rarity requested.

Dash grunted but began making an ascent back up the hill she had fallen down to reach Rarity. Her body was weak from her own injury, and the weight from Rarity wasn't helping; regardless she pressed onward as quickly as they could.

"Rainbow Dash, just leave me here..." Rarity insisted.

"No soldier gets left behind in the Rainbow Raiders, and that's not about to change." Rainbow Dash hissed at Rarity.

"Stubborn as always..." Rarity sighed.

Only a few steps up the hill Dash's legs gave out. She and Rarity both began to fall back down the hill and roll into the nearby lake.

Dash struggled to swim to Rarity and keep them both afloat. She held on tight to the unicorn.

"Rainbow... What's that...?" Rarity asked gesturing behind Dash.

Dash turned her head instinctively to witness a black line reaching out to the sky off in the distance. The line began to expand in width before the bottom swelled up in an orb that expelled itself outward. It was some kind of explosion.

"Shit!" Dash cursed.

"All units fall back, I repeat fall back! Retreat to the castle right this instant! Get away from that beam! This is an order!" Dash hollered into her radio.

A gust of wind snapped the grip that Rainbow Dash had around Rarity causing her to be pulled by the current. Frantically she attempted to swim to her direction but her body was still weak from being thrown around so much.

She was only moments from slipping out of consciousness when she felt a hoof grab her and pull her out of the water. Her ears could hear the sound of propellers spinning.

A moment later she realized she had been pulled into a helicopter piloted by none other than Vinyl Scratch. Turning to look for the one who grabbed her she recognized a familiar purple unicorn. Frantically she looked left and right for Rarity, only to realize she wasn't in this helicopter.

"TURN AROUND! WE HAVE TO GET RARITY!" Dash spit out.

"Negative, we are heading away from what appears to be some kind of new weapon." Twilight commanded.

Rainbow Dash quickly pivoted and jabbed her front hoof right into Twilight's face. Twilight being as frail a fighter as she is fell without much effort.

"You fucking bitch! You should have saved her, not me!" She growled.

"We didn't have time to save the both of you, it was either you or her, and you were more important than her." Twilight justified.

"More important!? I'LL KILL YOU!" Dash picked up Twilight and held her against a wall by her throat.

"What... Good will... Killing me do...?" Twilight spoke between gasps.

"You should have saved Rarity... Not me..." Dash loosened her grip on Twilight.

"Could of and should of gets us nowhere. The fact remains that we didn't save Rarity, we saved you." Twilight reminded.

Dash looked up at the unicorn and noticed her face for the first time during this encounter. Her right eye was held closed tightly with blood seeping from it.

"Did I hit you in the eye...?" Dash asked nervously.

"It wasn't you. On my way out here I was careless... I got slashed in the eye by an assassination attempt... They were counting on me to go save you. Fortunately Lieutenant Scratch was there to take care of the assailant." Twilight explained.

"I see..." Was all Rainbow Dash could manage to get out.

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It had been days since Rainbow Dash left her quarters. Ever since their return from the last battle they had she had locked herself in her quarters and refused visitors or even meals. Twilight's concern only grew with each passing hour.

“Dash, open this door or I’m going to have it broken down.” Twilight demanded as she pounded on her door viciously.

To her surprise, Dash complied. The door creaked open only a hair, but Twilight darted inside before Dash could change her mind.

“Rainbow Dash, you can’t just stay locked up in your room all day, we need you out there.” Twilight gestured towards the door.

Dash was hardly listening to her. She sighed and poured herself a drink on the nearby table.

“They don’t need me out there anymore...” Dash sulked.

“Yes we do, you’re the fastest in Equestria, and the best commander any of us have ever seen. You’re vital to our success.” Twilight protested.

Dash scoffed at statement. Setting her drink back down on the table after a few large gulps she approached Twilight. She grabbed the blanket wrapped around her with her teeth and wrenched it off with great force, tearing it as she did so.

The first thing that Twilight noticed was the absence of a cutie mark on her flank.

“I’m not the fastest in Equestria anymore...” Dash replied solemnly.

“Rainbow Dash, your cutie mark didn’t make you who you are, you did. You just need to believe in yourself-“ Twilight was cut off.

“No, not anymore... I wasn’t fast enough to save Rarity, and for that reason... I have decided I never want to fly again...” Dash turned to reveal her other side.

Her wing, it had been hacked clean off; blood still dripped from where it once was.

“Y-you cut your wing off!?” Twilight responded.

“That’s not all. I’ll be leaving the Knights; I want nothing to do with you and your war anymore.” Dash answered.

“Dash we need you!” Twilight argued.

“Look around you Twilight. We’ve already lost...” Dash said.

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I didn’t know what say. There weren’t any words that could capture how I felt about this information.

“Anyways, that’s all I know, and I only know from what Twilight has said.” Vinyl explained.

“So, that’s why Twilight and Rainbow Dash don’t get along?” I asked.

“Well, they’ve always had a heated relationship, but that’s how it came to be like it is now.” She replied.

“Thank you Vinyl Scratch... This has really opened my eyes...” I bowed.

“No need to thank me, I figured since you were Dash’s friend you deserved to know. She’s not like the rest of us in the Knights. Dash has seen more hardship than any one pony should...” Vinyl said.

“Even you?” I asked.

She chuckled.

“Well, that’s debatable.” She smirked.

I suppose that I hadn’t fully earned Vinyl’s trust yet, at least not enough to get her to show me her secrets just yet.