

“It was only a hopeless fancy, it passed like an April day, but a look and a word, and the dreams they stirred, they have stolen my heart away.” - George Orwell, *1984*

Crystal Odyssey

Episode 1 - “A Dark Horse Rises Up”

An Unauthorized My Little Pony Miniseries

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Mr. Teatime, Rumbling Skies and Tarnished Shields appear courtesy of their creators.

“Blasphemer, thou art hereby condemned for the heresy you have committed. Thou hast been deemed treacherous of conspiracy to sabotage. Surrender and confess thy crimes, so that His Majesty may show mercy on your wretched life.”

The trail could not falter now. The other criminals would soon be caught. Time was of the utmost essence. The primary tactic now would be to warn the others, for their alarm was paramount. Galloping hooves reverberated off the eerie, nigh-invisible glow of the uneven crystal-brick ceiling. The rampaging charge of pursuit overflowed from the floors and lobbed around ebony-walled corners to heed their quarry in bloodthirsty force. The sickly corridors of the empire's labyrinthine sewer system were pungent, but its canals of putrid, cold soup containing unmentionable refuse could not dissuade either party from their crucial race.

The environment itself, such as it was, took only the side of the clever, even as it wore down their endurance. The stench rendered orderly breathing difficult, but the earth ponies bore their fortitude well. They demonstrated no sign of stopping as they traipsed the lattice bridges spanning the intersections of wide troughs. The fetid gloop beneath shuddered from their thundering hoofsteps, which echoed in the desperate heartbeats of those now fleeing to their sanctuary.

It soon became clear that a direct chase would be impossible. Unable to quell his own frantic panting, the earth pony rebel slithered his malnourished frame through a narrow diamond dog tunnel. The maneuvering was awkward for his body to navigate, and for a moment his shape seemed to prove too clumsy to descend through this crumbling crawlspace. Risking his way through the dirt behind the tunnel wall was like burying himself in his own grave, but in the nick of time he was out of sight and beyond.

“Please, my family! Don't do this! Don't break us apart! Think what would happen to us!”

The imperial guard were accompanied on this rendezvous beneath the streets of their empire by a few spare unicorns of the inquisition. It was the magic of the latter's horns that lit the darkened conduits, and were it not for their labors to keep up with the earth pony's more athletic legs, the imperials might not have spotted the secret entrance at all.

“Of course. What a surprise,” one soldier said, gruff and annoyed through and through.

“It's not meant to be a surprise, imbecile. It's meant to be concealed.” The silky, pedantic tone of voice undermined the jibe of the insult.

Down below, dread weighted the escapee's legs like two pairs of lead horseshoes. When he heard a third voice above saying, “Let me, I'll scout ahead,” he managed to take off down the inky corridor and into obscurity.

After much grunting and exasperated sighs, the imperial guard tugged the sheepish gray pegasus Stormtrooper free from the hole she had wedged herself into against her best intentions. With an ingratiating smile and a perfunctory apology, the blonde mare allowed herself to be swept aside for the others to advance.

“Shall I?” All went dark a moment before a flickering charge of ethereal, acidic-yellow glow

danced off of the unicorn's horn and into the pocket in the brick wall. An explosion hurtled craggy pebbles and loosened dirt, gaping the opening into a feasible passage below. With the combustion, the imperial forces had been awakened, and their cries rallied one another to renewed conviction. They shouted to one another that the rebels had fled deeper, and colluded upon various routes downwards to capture their targets forthwith.

“The only family you need is that of your empire. It provides all! Answers, shelter, meaning! Thou shalt answer for thy infidelity. Expect no such mercy from King Sombra, May He Reign Eternal!”

In little time flat, the imperial forces had broken down into the lower level. Among them was one bat-winged mare, a thestral¹ with a faded gray-periwinkle coat of apathetic grooming. She landed with imposing grace, using her wings to throw off any dirt that stuck to them. Her long mane and bushy tail matched in black with an ashen indigo highlight, both combed in lazy haste until they were regal enough for display yet still sticking up here and there. Upon either hip was an identical image of a bat silhouetted against the gleaming moon. She unfurled her leathery wings, each being clad in a lightweight metal shielding that was barbed on the edges. On her right foreleg she carried an oblong shield, and concealed beneath it was a rather wide, flat spike. She also wore two pairs of rattling greaves and a rounded helmet like a comb morion, but with a samurai shikoro crinnet. This was styled in some bronze or yellowed metal with an onyx periapt inlaid upon the forehead. A formidable mask covered the entirety of the wearer's face, curved to surround the front of her skull and her muzzle. The mask's surface was virtually flat, with three inequine,² rectangular holes for the eyes and mouth. Emotionless and robotic, the mask of the night watchmare bore a disapproving glare at all she surveyed.

There had been little time to observe anything in the vast, dimly-lit corridor. A wide channel of murky water bisected the tall, domed passageway that extended into darkness in either end. The water itself was bubbling, frothing to a boil, and then with a surge of fountainous terror, burst for the ceiling in a tremendous and cacophonous rage. It was a scream of torrential laughter which cascaded up, then downwards again, crashing upon every surface in a damning collision of soaking panic.

01: “**A Dark Horse Rises Up**”

*This world is corrupt.
The time has come to stand together.
Arms against arms.*

We will take control of this world from the ungrateful scourge that inhabits it.

We cannot be divided in our crusade.

If you should fall, others shall take your place.

They cannot deny us!

They will know of our strength.

Bow before our might.

I can lead you to the valley of our promises.

This nation is defended.

¹ In the Celtic myth involving a magical horse, “N'oun Doare”, “kestrel” was the name ascribed to a fish (not to be confused with the bird). This term was likely popularized by J. K. Rowling's “Harry Potter” series. The former can reportedly be read in *Celtic Myths and Legends* by Peter Berresford Ellis (1999, Carroll & Graf.).

² Inhuman.

*Against enemies both dangerous,
and powerful beyond all reckoning.
If you should ordain my authority,
Then you shall see the light,
And this land of Equestria shall stand united!*

The Crystal Empire was the only world that Anhedonia Thistle had ever known. In those days, it was a bountiful empire whose mighty walls spanned for miles around its exotic crystalline structures. Situated amidst the empty tundra of Equestria's frozen north, this circular civilization denied its harsh, wintry exterior with a biome of loamy, chartreuse fields. Its northern farms were verdant with golden heaves of corn and other vegetables. Smaller clusters of lakes and cramped parks interspersed throughout regal main roads and crooked, narrow side streets that traversed rambling, intricate connecting alleyways like the formation of ice crystals upon beds of paved gravel.

To imply magic could not be commonplace in Equestria would warrant quizzical looks. Even in such a realm, the empire stood as a world apart, where the very nature of matter followed its own eccentric rules. All things there sought a crystalline formation, as if, so its inhabitants believed, this was a virtue of jubilant balance indicative of some anonymous blessing. So elated were they with this branding that they would take every facet of their society and celebrate it in their own tradition. This privilege became something of an obsession. Every building glittered with trapped, refracted light, for most every home or place of business was constructed foremost in crystal. Some were erected with glowing domes, and others towered to narrow, fanciful heights. Most buildings bore an organic feel, looking as if the ponies had hollowed out where the crystals themselves had been allowed to grow. As a general fashion within the empire, these were constructed of azure or amethyst-colored crystal, with some toned in muted jades. These pigments remained cold even beneath a sky petrified in everlasting sunset, like slow-burning citrus that heated the somber world below. The ambiance granted a mystical motif unlike anything else seen across known Equestria and beyond. Even the splendiferous temples of Saddle Arabia could not compare to the lustrous, mineral beauty of the empire.

From her smallish dorm window in the guards' quarters, Thistle could see the grand Crystal Palace jutting far into the orange sky. The tallest, most elaborate structure smack dab in the center of the empire, this was naturally the home of their ruler, King Sombra, who was said to be the most powerful unicorn, even beyond known history. His magic was rumored to rival that of other, far-off rulers, and even the most gifted of renowned scholars. His palace was connected to the imperial dormitories, which were ensconced within the massive magical sphere that protected the tower day and night from every direction. The tower itself was supported on three legs, with a massive, open domed space underneath. It was constructed of black, twisted crystal whose irregular shape resembled a twisting of dimensions, so that the palace bore a very otherworldly gestalt, as if it existed nowhere within reach, and always in the back of the mind. Doorways situated in the three massive legs, leading inside the palace. Approximately halfway up, the structure sported a balcony facing the southern sector. The palace was far more elaborate in those days, with a massive circular entrance hallway that led off on overhead bridges towards other towers. These included the living and working quarters for the imperial divisions, the inquisitors' tower of magical research, and the coliseum, among others.

Thistle's thoughts drifted further above, her scarlet eyes only able to imagine Sombra poised in his throne room, overlooking his reign. She lacked any such experience to guess what he might be doing up there in his spare time, concerning himself with business far more pertinent than a lowly mare

in his employ. In fact, she'd only seen him in his banners which scoured the city, reminding the citizens of his ever-present, watchful gaze. The southern balcony was so very high up, but his booming voice could be heard when he deigned to grant one of his ceremonial speeches, famed for their charismatic oration. Massive banners would unfurl on such occasions with his proud, heroic image shown off in each direction. His coat was a dark, smokey gray. Upon his back rested a furred cape of scarlet with white trim. Around his neck was a crinnet of shining platinum, and adorning his furrowed brow a crown that held his majestic mane of wavering, pure blackness back. His horn was long and smooth, curving with exemplary posture to a gleaming crimson. His face was portrayed as leonine; ferocious and commandeering. This luxury was a show of his power and his merits, bold and foreboding.

Anhedonia felt safe just to view him. Once, she had almost been tempted to yank one of his posters off from a public wall to take home with her. She could almost imagine his amplified voice booming over the streets of his domain, but for the life of her, she could think of no words he would say apart from commending the exemplary duty of their armies, or the reassurance that the rebellion was a futile blasphemy. She had never experienced the honor of a face-to-face meeting, let alone a personal conversation. As of late, she had come to ponder more and more on these troubling ideas, and could not fathom to where they might lead her. Since her recruitment to the night watch, she may have always had a fed belly, but a hunger remained within her.

I follow your every rule to the letter, she told herself. Is there something else I should, or could do? And to what end?

Thestrals made up a minority demographic, even in the bustling Crystal Empire. They numbered even less than the pegasi who resided for the most part in their sky-high cloud cities. Thestrals were not known to fly to the same heights, but remained valued for their nocturnal propensities and their natural ability to see in the dark. As such, thestrals comprised the imperial Night Watch, where it was Anhedonia's purpose to enforce the curfew and maintain order during the dark hours. Ponies whispered that there was something unsettling about the bat-winged species, that nefarious deeds came easy to them, and that they could never be trusted. Trust was one commodity the empire lacked, to be sure. As it was, ponies were motivated to return home without delay before the Night Watch began their shift. All gossip side, thestrals could be confirmed to exhibit remarkable endurance and cunning vision, in spite of old ponies' tales about being "blind as bats". When a criminals' new hideout was discovered, in all likelihood it was a thestral who tracked it down and exposed it. With this in mind, the Night Watch was an obvious choice for accompanying any missions into the sewers beneath the empire.

Cooperating with the other imperial factions was not commonplace, as each had their own specific duties to attend to, but as of late, these errands had become more frequent. Thistle's own squad leader, Glinting Fang, was present during one such briefing, but was not the one to deliver the run-down of their proposed operation. That speech was taken up instead by a member of the imperial guard.

While by technical semantics the imperial guard was composed of various factions who kept the law and order for the sake of the empire, the core of the guard was comprised of earth ponies. Of the various races to inhabit the empire, the earth ponies were by far the hardest, strongest and bravest of them all. One full-grown earth pony could do the job of any three others. For the most part, they had a keen knack for the natural land, and any that were not in the army were farmers or ranchers. Where a

unicorn could probe their surroundings in a dense forest for trouble via magic, an earth pony could rely on acute intuition. Even if pegasi could fly through the air with ease, earth ponies did not balk at rugged terrain. Furthermore, while they were known for boundless constitution, earth ponies exhibited a kind of “secular” resistance to the influence of magic. No pony was impervious, but earth ponies were known to shrug off brutal onslaughts that would render unicorns, pegasi or thestrals unconscious. Barring all of this, any pony could still prove a capable trades-pony, but earth ponies prided themselves on their toil for their hoof-made crafts.

As for their role in the imperial guard, they provided the muscle in every which way it could be needed. Whether they apprehended criminals and enforced the law, ported objects through the streets or fought on the front lines in warring skirmishes, they were formidable in every sense of the word. Their dogged perseverance was very rarely outsmarted, and their presence alone was enough to keep almost every citizen in check and compliant to out any suspected rebels.

Having said all of this, Blitzkrieg was a mare built like a tank. Confidence wasn't the only thing swelling in her: After just one glance, her hardened musculature could not be denied. Her navy blue coat ended in shaggy ruffles above her stout hooves. Her turquoise and dark mint mane was cropped short and projected forward, while her tail was left curly and frizzy as if in some menial gesture of relaxed comfort. This illusion was dashed when she walked, and her tail bounced upon the backs of her hind legs like a weapon twirled in idle threat. Upon her hips was the cutie mark of an iron ball with sharp, stubby spikes jutting over its surface. Her face was a bit more welcoming, though it was clear she did not make a habit of smiling. Blitz's amber eyes glared upon the team to which she spoke, the majority of whom were made up of other earth ponies. She did not begrudge herself in telling the same old tale of ruthless, traitorous rebels who defied the laws of the empire and hid like thieving cowards underground. She was something of a good speaker in that she wasted no words describing the plan with concise clarity. Each pony would be assigned into smaller units that would spread out to traverse the maze-like, decrepit sewer tunnels with efficiency, and each unit would consist of such a quantity of ponies that could make use of their different roles for a systematic search.

Though she did not trouble herself to look around, Thistle had noticed at least a couple of unicorns and pegasi in the meeting hall with her. It was not that she reserved any resentment for the unicorns, but she knew what to expect from them and had already overheard a few boasting away earlier. With their magic, the unicorns believed they could circumvent any need and take on any task, as if to render the other members obsolete. At the same time, they would declare in brazen posturing that the others had better not hold them back, or else their magic would have to do all of the work for everypony else. The horns on their foreheads channeled magical energy from, they said, an invisible field which persisted over the land in a force just as natural and ever-present as gravity that they likened to magnetism. Though there were still many ponies unsettled by the unicorns' ability, to lift objects with the power of one's mind could not be deemed useless. Although given towards a delicate vitality, some unicorns could project energy like lightning from their horns, or even create bombastic conflagrations of smoke and flame. Beyond this, they trained cunning minds for studying the sciences, as though knowledge was a sort of unquenchable thirst for them. Rumors of their secret studies entailed enchantments and hexes, countering each, and even the alchemical transmutation of objects into different things. On the other hoof, there was no sustenance to their shortcuts, and their methods were often refuted (under one's breath) as symptomatic of laziness.

Anhedonia neither disliked nor envied the unicorns, and even if she did, she could just remind

herself that King Sombra was one such exemplary specimen. Or perhaps she was jealous after all; the unicorns did get to work in the tower adjacent to his palace every day. Though she knew little of the details regarding what the other imperial factions did, she was aware that the unicorns were divided into the templars devoted to magical research, agents who wrote the empire's propaganda and conducted the occasional investigation, and the inquisition who dealt with interrogation and maintained the massive barrier of detection which protected the Crystal Palace. She hardly had cause to consort with them, although they were sometimes present during debriefing. As a simple opal-ranked night watchmare, she had little chance to learn how talkative they could be.

At least, as far as the unicorn known as Cauldron was concerned. Though he waited his turn to speak, when he was introduced to explain the nuances of the empire's intricate sewer system, he lapsed into a torrent of speech. He delved into the finer extraneous details of how it all worked and how vast it was, rather than concentrating on more direct information about how not to get lost. He ended up muddling vital details about navigating the hazards they were to soon face, and Thistle could not help drifting off against her best efforts to remain focused. Cauldron was an older stallion with a stone gray coat and a straight, graying black mane that was combed long in back. He carried himself with excellent posture and looked to be in fair health in spite of his evidenced experience. His flank bore the cutey mark of his namesake: A bubbling cauldron which Thistle determined indicated he worked in research. From this, she reasoned he would be expected to present the known information on the sewer system.

Anhedonia could not discern what the pegasi's role would be. Many thestrals and pegasi would remain above ground to keep an eye on the sewers' entrances and exits. There would be little overhead room to fly around down below, but at least the thestrals could see in the dark better. Pegasi on the other hoof could fly higher and longer with their feathered wings (for the most part). Their primary function lay in their inherent propensity for manipulating the weather. While any thestral could make a modest contribution in wing power (a composite measurement of speed and force) or to stand on and push clouds around, only pegasi were dependable for orchestrating thunderstorms, guiding clear weather, or clearing away the snow clouds. These tasks earned them the title of tactical stormtroopers. Their three-dimensional movement allowed them to elude their enemies as evasive scouts, spying on targets from high above. King Sombra's pride and joy was putting his stormtroopers to work guarding the vast perimeter of his empire. The wall surrounding his domain was situated by watchtowers from which the pegasi warded off any and all potential attacks.

What didn't help was the manner in which the pegasus assigned to her squad conducted himself. Even taking her own typical, aloof demeanor into consideration, Thistle was dreading the talkative, summer-orange pegasus beleaguering her efforts with his amateurish antics. As she reminded herself of her own untarnished track record for duty, she concerned herself with how young he looked. He appeared scarcely older than a colt, with an unkempt lime and yellow-green mane and his tail separated into tasseled strands. He kept teetering from side to side, brushing other ponies with his wings like a klutz, his big green eyes oblivious albeit apologetic to his invasion of personal space. Thistle preferred not to dwell on his cutey mark of twisting, dizzying clouds, but her feigned ignorance of this rambunctious variable allowed her some interest (with due apprehension) in the bow and quiver slung over his shoulders. She was not alone in hoping to be plenty far away from him should he discharge his weapon for any reason.

Of important note is that the above descriptions are blatant generalizations derived from

intrinsic racial abilities which set each group of pony apart, but at the same time also represent a social consensus of the era and region in question. There are exceptions to every rule: There were thestrals faster than pegasi, unicorns more able-bodied than each other, earth ponies who were better thinkers than doers, and any among them whose innate talents might defy their expected roles. The Crystal Empire could be considered remarkable for its time in how integrated their society was, while external tribes were still roughly divided among each differing type of pony.

“Glinting Fang tells me you're not just any rookie.” Once their mission had gotten underway, Blitzkrieg ushered Thistle to descend into the sewers ahead of the others. “According to our source, we want to head east in a hurry. Start heading in that direction, and we'll keep pace.” Blitz descended the lowered ramp beneath the city streets and into the inky darkness that awaited her group. She kept almost alongside the thestral, but could not see very far within for any signs of trouble. She reminded herself that this was too soon to expect an ambush, anticipated one anyway, and looked back over her shoulder to ensure the others were following.

If anypony was a rookie here, it was Bluster Haze. The aforementioned orange pegasus was unaware that the squadron leader had chosen to group with him on purpose to make up for his shortcomings. The overzealous colt had already drawn an arrow, but some of his excitement had been thwarted by his inability to see into the pervasive darkness that exhaled around them. The stench was off-putting to say the least, as well. “Should I fire a warning shot, just in case?” he asked.

“Why would you warn anypony?” Blitzkrieg asked. Already her patience was wearing thin, and they'd only just begun their mission. “Dangit, I can't see a condemned thing under here. Cauldron, hurry up with some light.”

The older unicorn sped his gait only enough to walk amidst the group. A light hued in acrid canary welled up within Cauldron's horn, and emanated an illuminating aura. The dark, ancient stone of the walls and walkways reflected little of the light, but the four were able to gauge their surroundings adequately enough. Several good feet of spherical light gave them plenty of distance to see, although they could not view the far end of the claustrophobic, domed corridor. Thistle had had no trouble seeing since she'd entered (though her eyes had to adjust for this new light), but there was little to look at but a dreadful entourage of perpendicular pathways stretching around them.

The four found themselves standing at the base of a descended ramp within a long sewer channel. The floor consisted of two stone walkways, each about two ponies wide, bisected down the middle with a lateral trough that was filled near to the brim with a noxious, odoriferous sludge. The gloop did not move, and its gap was wide enough that a long jump might not reach to the other side. The walls were made of old crystal brick that was no longer luminescent enough to provide vision. These walls curved into the ceiling to form a dome-like shape just high enough for a winged pony to hover over another. The maze's corridors branched off from each other at right angles, for the most part. As the group walked, they noticed that the shape of the sewers conformed to the circular shape of the empire above their heads. Any sewer conduits leading towards the center were straight, while lateral tunnels were shaped as subtle curves, so that the layout bore radial symmetry around a central axis. Any turns were placed in what seemed to be an indiscriminate or random fashion, some leading into corners or three- or four-way intersections. At such intersections, there were a few narrow, lattice bridges leading over the gunk in the channels, but it was apparent that some of these were defunct or missing.

Cauldron glanced into the channel of odious muck with a pensive hum. Bluster kept whirling around in the air as if expecting something to jump out at them at any second. He drew an arrow to his bow repeatedly until Blitz barked at him to knock it off, after which he kept twanging the string. She attempted to preoccupy herself with her armor for as long as possible, but the flanchard and crinnet fit her too comfortably she hardly noticed she was wearing it anymore. The chaffron of the Imperial Guard resembled that of a German burgonet but with two angular Viking horns jutting out from either side. Its brim was not enough to keep her disapproving glare off of Bluster Haze. As a result of not paying attention to where he was going, Haze's kettle hat scraped along the roof, jarring a few bits of gravel to tumble onto an annoyed Cauldron and his inverness cape. The latter grimaced his disapproval, and Blitzkrieg caved in to yell at Bluster again. Only Anhedonia was traipsing along in well-behaved silence, and even she was tempted to scuttle on ahead of the pack. Bluster's spirits dampened to the point where he descended to trudge along on foot at their rear.

The team said nothing, even as they approached the wall of an ominous T-section ahead of them. Blitzkrieg was surveying about themselves even though there was nothing for them to look at. The only real feature in the walls were some decrepit sconces and the occasional gaping crack. Even the other squads had spread out quite far. They did not speak to one another until they had no other choice but to make their decision on which way to turn. Thistle was the only one of them to look to the right first, but neither direction appealed more than the other. Blitz let out a sigh, and was about to just turn without consultation, when Bluster voiced their dilemma. "Which way should we go now?"

"Deeper's the only way that matters, so our sources report. You two just keep up with us," said Blitz, referring to Cauldron and herself while lumping Bluster and Thistle together.

"So what happens when we get lost?" Bluster asked. This time it was a smarter question, and yet because of this, more infuriating.

Blitz didn't have an immediate answer. "Light streams through the sewer entrances. There are more of those here and there," she said.

"Alternatively, we could have synchronized the other teams to always move in a clockwise formation," Cauldron said.

"Couldn't we have lit some torches? Or, no, I suppose then the rebels would see us coming," Bluster said.

It was time that Anhedonia spoke. The mask she wore disguised her voice so that her words were not obscured, but that it was difficult to tell from her voice whether she was stallion or mare. "The rebels' only hope is to distance themselves from imperial forces. Our search began on the outside and works inwards. It's unlikely they would conduct their illicit meeting behind us, so close to the surface."

Blitzkrieg shot Anhedonia a look. "I'm glad somepony was paying attention." She next addressed Cauldron. "Can't you draw some graffiti on the wall here to show us which way we came from? I don't want to use up too many of our torches, and I'd rather surprise these saboteurs."

“Not without paint.” Cauldron quirked one eyebrow. “Raw magical energy only persists within a certain distance and for a certain time from its casting.”

Blitz was quick to stifle the technobabble. “That’s fantastic. Just light this candle for me.” Pushing up against the wall on her hindlegs, she used her right forehoof to nudge one of the supply torches into an indentation situated high up. She cursed aloud as Cauldron projected a bullet of fiery energy at the candle before she’d quite got her hoof away. The intersection was lit by a yellow flame that blended luminosity with Cauldron’s aura.

“Of course, the principles of combustion are just mere science.” Cauldron shared a shameless smirk. Blitz shook her head, and lead her company down the left turn.

Maybe it was her. Maybe she’d just gotten up on the wrong side of the bed. In the early light hours, Blitzkrieg had encountered fellow imperial guard Tarnished Shields departing her company. “You’ve got guard duty this early?” She shuffled herself to her hooves and tried to wake herself up. She couldn’t smell any tea brewing from the adjacent kitchenette. Jade-level housing was a bit more spacious and habitable than the barracks of each division’s lower ranks, with three small rooms in each connected building. There was one main room for dining, recreation and sleeping, a utilitarian kitchen and the latest in personal restrooms. Jade being the middle rank for the imperial guard, the highest rank was said to spare no luxury in its living quarters, and the boon in privacy was a point of envy.

Like most earth ponies drafted into the Imperial Guard, Tarnished Shields was a large stallion with a sturdy build, adapted to the physical stature ideal for intimidating the enemy. His coat was murky copper, his mane tanned and left limp. His cutey mark displayed a shield with the inset of a crystal, but there was no glimmer to the faded emblem. His eyes stared back at her, glassy and hard, with the same professional brutality that would scrutinize gangly beggars and rabble-rousers alike.

She couldn’t say if hindsight was truly twenty-twenty, for doubt remained whether she anticipated his departure or been blindsided. Was the bowl of fruit undisturbed because he did not want to owe anything to a place he would not return? The fellow imperial guard stood there, gazing at the door like a guest too shy to say goodbye, and waited for her to comprehend his unspoken meaning. Her employ trained her to prepare for the worst, and the correct conclusion did not elude her for long.

“You’re saying goodbye.” Speaking that word had killed the muscles mandatory to upturning the corners of her lips.

When Blitzkrieg hesitated before speaking further, Tarnished replied, and both spoke atop each other’s words. Tarnished said, “There is no need for that.”

“I thought we’d leave this place together.” Blitz managed to snare Tarnished with her words. Another pause, and she continued. “I mean, a promotion isn’t exactly a click of the hooves away, but at least we’re getting there *together*.”

“Either you receive the promotion or I do, and all the duties that follow with it. What we want is a distraction from fulfilling our obligation to the empire.”

Blitz’s brow furrowed from confusion. Never in her life of servitude had the granted notion of

fealty excused denying her. "I wouldn't have left you behind. We're permitted to have roommates."

"And would you have grown complacent once you attained what you desired?"

"So what about the time we've spent together!? Why is it forbidden to keep going on together?"

"The past is dead. The future is unknowable."

Silence choked the air between them. Blitzkrieg was agape in disbelief. Tarnished remained standing there for almost too long until his gaze fell away from her face. Freed from her reaction, he departed.

She started grabbing everything, though truth be told there wasn't much in spite of the clutter. The box of napkins. Some strewn goblets and bits of clothing. The bowl of oranges and lemons from which one of its contents bounced to the floor and rolled out of reach. The wind chime which ordinarily hung just within the front door, but which had been removed and placed on the table. Blitz paused to think on this, then pulled everything with her into the bedroom. Now just her bedroom. She felt a surmounting need to protect her things, to guard them from vacating her company. She sat there, huddling in a mess of her meager affects, until the notion felt silly to her and she knew she would have to report in for duty.

Slouching on the edge of her bed, Blitzkrieg grasped the foreleg-mounted weapon she used. By flexing her hoof just so or pressing with the other, she could deploy a heavy ball on a chain out to a distance over ten feet. Her conscious mind decided then that today she could really stand to smash something. To break it apart and sever its integrity in twain. Just like the very crystal which built her home, the crystal which conformed itself with its surroundings. She wanted to pass the feeling on somehow.

Bluster Haze admired his own distorted reflection, transparent as it was against an inexplicable rectangle of thick glass that windowed one of the walls of the tunnels down here. It was situated a foot off the ground and about five feet high and seven across. His visage was horizontally stretched, his mouth pursed in a coo of curiosity. The others were shuffling past him without a care, although Cauldron paused to fixate an impatient look upon him. "What is this?" Bluster asked of the slightly luminescent pane. His head tipped up and his wings fluffed outwards when he saw a large, fat fish swim into view through the foggy blue void. The creature, which was smaller than Bluster's head, looked him in the face with its goggle-eyed, mouth-breathing stare. The pegasus gave a goofy laugh, then attempted to startle the fish to no avail. "Zah!" The fish kept opening and closing its mouth in silent stupor for several seconds, then of its own accord swam away out of sight.

The others were moving on ahead down the tunnel, so Bluster hurried to catch up with them. "What's a fish doing out there?"

"Well, we are underground. It's probably a koi pond," Cauldron said. "It's a sort of overfed goldfish, which in turn is a bottom-feeding carp."

Bluster was not one to be put off easily, much to their chagrin. "But why's there a window in the sewers?"

“Why do you ask so many questions?” Blitzkrieg was on the verge of snapping.

Cauldron continued to answer him, since neither he nor Bluster could be dispirited by their leader's exasperation. “Well many of these sewers are actually remnants of the old empire's streets. There was likely little need to replace it. I doubt anypony considers this today, but it could be used as a landmark, or even just a change of scenery.”

The company rounded another corner at an intersection where no lattice bridge permitted them passage. They proceeded far down one of the many crooked, ancient corridors, taking heed to pace themselves within the glow of Cauldron's light and avoid thinking about the nasty, prune-colored goop which kept the earthbound ponies from crossing to the opposite side of the shaft. On the intermittent occasion, a revolting bubble would heave forth from the surface of the otherwise immobile sapropel like a lung swelling with misplaced pride, then pop with an unsatisfactory, gaseous belch of stale wind. Anhedonia's head turned to spot something on the opposite bank, but no pony heard her feeble mumbling.

“Condemn it all! I've got better things to do than wander into dead ends.” Blitz snarled at the uneven, desolate wall that emerged into the radius of Cauldron's horn-light. “Turn around, start heading back.” Cauldron sighed. Bluster groaned.

Anhedonia was now ahead of them, and decided to speak up a second time. “There's a bridge across the way.” She added, “I think.”

“What was that?” Blitzkrieg hadn't understood Thistle's words through the thestral's mask. “Speak up, Onyx!”

Anhedonia cringed, but came back with greater force. Her words began in the same tone as before, but grew in volume as she was stared down by the others. “I said I saw a bridge on the opposite side of this tunnel.”

Blitzkrieg never sounded as though she were outright losing her temper, but her words remained commandeering. “Well why didn't you say so sooner? I thought you bat-mares could see in the dark. We don't have time to be wasting!”

Cauldron scolded her on similar terms. “Yes, Anhe, you need to speak louder. Or are we far too garrulous for you?”

Even Bluster had a go. “It's just 'cause you guys are so mean to us lower-ranked soldiers! She's just afraid you'll snap her head off. Isn't that right, Annie?” At least he sounded sincere, even if she could have done without the cutesy nickname.

Though she could have gotten away with it, Anhedonia refrained from scowling at the three of them from behind her mask. All they would see was the rounded slab of bronze gazing back at them with those three black, rectangular holes for her eyes and mouth which only she could see through. “Do you wish me to go fetch it or not?” The mask had the effect of stifling the annoyed lilt in her voice to a despondent near-monotone.

Blitzkrieg jerked her head towards the pegasus, then towards the opposite wall of the sewer tunnel. “You. Blubber. Go help her.”

“That's Bluster.” The pegasus relented, his wings dragging him up off the floor. Anhedonia lifted off as well, and the pair glided with ease to the opposite end of the tunnel. Although they cleared the distance without incident, the ceiling was rather low, and the loamy mass of sewage below them looked closer than it was, as if it were ready to swat them down into its oily suction without warning. Blitzkrieg and Cauldron followed them from the other shore as they made their way along the path. Anhedonia had seen one of the lattice bridges laying up against the grit-stained wall. It appeared to have been removed from its position spanning the intersection a little ways further along.

Bluster attempted to whisper low enough so that the chamber wouldn't echo his voice to their superior officers. “You know, you shouldn't let them get to you. The higher ups always rag on the new guys. They just know better. I make mistakes all the time, and I just shrug it off. Like, 'derp, whatever!'”

“I am not bothered,” Anhedonia said, making herself sound as succinct and clear as she could. She said as much, but she could not decide whether the others had gotten under her skin or not. She could have done without Bluster Haze blabbing at her the whole time as if she were younger than him. Had he no sense to fear the armor she wore?

This was a question asked of Bluster many times (albeit not word-for-word). On one such occasion, Bluster had made the mistake of allowing some storm cloud escape from its hold within one of the many towers situated along the wall that bordered the Crystal Empire. He'd been holding the tower door open to call up to the pegasi stormtroopers above, confirming what they had ordered for their midnight meal. One of them shouted down to Bluster in anger, “Look behind you, confounded idiot! You're letting the storm clouds loose!”

“Ha ha! Oops, sorry!” Bluster had shut the door, very nearly catching his own tail, and chased after the escaping gray mass of fluff in a tizzy. The dense mist teased him, passing just over the ground at a smidge more velocity than the pegasus could muster by running. When it pulled away from him with a tear of acceleration, Bluster called out to it and lifted off the ground with his wings. A moustachioed pony who was tugging a cart of his wares home was overcome by the sample of localized storm, and being somewhat imbibed, he was quite taken by surprise as the amorphous plume of static and haze smothered him. He let out a daft yelp as the cloud passed around him, leaving his mane, tail and mustache frizzed out in a most undignified fashion. A moment later, Bluster whizzed past him in such haste that the bystander whirled around on the spot. The pegasus let out a perfunctory apology, and when the other was done spinning around, he shook his hoof in rage.

The sprig of dark cloud had a poor turning radius, and it billowed against a building exterior before it could change its direction down an adjacent street. Bluster was too clumsy to catch it, and he nearly careened through the front door of a shop in his failure to notice the obstacles around him. By the time he had righted himself, the storm cloud was already turning down another corner. This time Bluster hooked a hoof around the pole of a torch blazing with green and purple and was soon catching up on the errant wisp. The royal hues of crystal buildings whizzed past Bluster as he soared just above the streets. His body banked wide on the turns, nearly touching hooves to doors and windows as he

sped past them. Archways interrupted the orange, immobile sky above as Bluster was enveloped in their shadows and that of the Crystal Palace's spire. He weaved in and out among various citizens and by the windows of tightly packed shops, missing a collision with a moving tool cart by mere inches.

The high-spirited chase did not cease when the billowing black tuft pushed through a tavern's front door that a duck was attempting to enter. The yellow water fowl squawked and lost a few feathers as it jounced out of the way in time for Bluster to zoom inside. This tavern was one of many hotspots for the empire's night life, where imperial soldiers and the citizenry alike wound down from their busy days of servitude, spending their Sombits³ on food and drink. As such, the rowdy conversation within was interrupted by the pegasus and his rambunctious intrusion. The thunderous little cloud was running out its steam, and Bluster's wings had stopped flapping to swoop below the low ceiling. Tipping them backwards into a V-shape, he cruised above the bar counter, came in too low, and scattered the contents placed upon it in every direction. The bartender caught the jar of crystal pickles, but a salt lick clattered into pieces on the floor where several tattered ponies tried to pinch some.

As he skidded across the wooden counter top, upsetting dishes and mugs left and right, Bluster hooked his hoof into the handle of a glass cover which had been placed over a stack of quiches. With a punctuating “Tonk!”, he trapped the runaway cloud beneath the glass and blew a sigh of relief. After a couple of seconds had passed, he took notice that everypony in the joint was staring at him in an uncomfortable silence. A gray griffin wearing a fedora had reached his talons into his duster jacket. A zebra sitting in the opposite corner had pulled her hood down over her face so that only her muzzle was poking out, and she was reaching one hoof underneath the table at which she sat. More apparent to Bluster were the three imperial officers sitting right beside him.

Of all the crowd in the tavern, nopony dared move or speak. Even being a novice, Bluster's position of imperial stormtrooper, evidenced by the aquamarine inset upon his kettle hat, warranted reverence from the citizenry. The fellow imperial troopers, on the other hoof, outranked him, both by technicality and also in general tact. Two pegasi sat on either side of a navy-blue thestral. Looking quite perturbed, these two bookends were swift to chew Bluster Haze out. “Now you've gone and done it! You've ruined our dinner! And the crystal carrot crop hasn't been doing well this year, either.”

“This here's a member of the night watch. I wouldn't close my eyes during the dark hours anymore if I were you.”

The thestral did not seem to share their sentiment. Instead he gave a most apathetic-sounding laugh as if he were shrugging the matter off and said, “Well, you've certainly made quite the spectacle of yourself.”

Bluster's laugh was involuntary, and he was uncertain if it would be permitted. “I suppose I did there.” He was in awe of this thestral, for the most part because he never knew the night watch ever removed their masks. He was even more surprised that the thestral looked so relaxed in attitude when they were notorious for their severity.

“I'm Rumbling Skies,” the thestral said. Bluster introduced himself, and Rumbling spoke again. “What say I give you a few pointers? I'll be taking pot shots at some targets over in the coliseum.”

3 The currency of the empire under King Sombra's rule.

Bluster slipped a plate underneath the glass dome he still had the cloud trapped beneath. “I think I’d better go return this first,” he said. The bartender looked annoyed that his dinnerware would be treated with such liberty, but voiced no complaint.

“Sure. No problem. I’ll be there whether you can come or not.” Rumbling gave a small shrug. Bluster found it strange how the thestral’s eyes never seemed to pay close attention to him. Before he sped off, he took note of Rumbling’s cutey mark: An aiming reticule overlapping a target’s bulls-eye.

Bluster faced little objection (or notice) to his skiving off from work. At this hour, the coliseum was available for open-ended training exercises. Imperial soldiers and griffin mercenaries made routine use of it even then, and Rumbling had set up a slew of wooden, circular targets among some high columns towards the unoccupied end of the stadium. Bluster did not question the enthusiasm with which he was allowed here by his stormtrooper superiors.

Rumbling Skies had to call down to him to garner his attention. “Up here, slow coach!”

Bluster raced vertically to meet up with the thestral, ascending up one of the tall, grooved columns as if he were walking up them. The pair of them each stood atop separate pillars, where Bluster found Rumbling firing off arrows at a single target hoisted some feet below and even more feet away from their position. The thestral wielded a hoof-carved oaken bow with a taut cord of resilient silk, and he appeared to be seeing how many times he could consecutively strike the bulls-eye of a circular wooden slab, painted with concentric red circles. The hoof-loupe held fast around his left foreleg, and he was swift to concentrate his aim. He had found his mark, and, without re-aiming, was doling out many arrows in stoic succession. Bluster said nothing as he watched until Rumbling had dealt the target five more arrows and paused. None of the arrows stuck into the target, and each bounded off and plummeted to the stone far below them. Bluster couldn’t readily discern from this distance, but the white spots caking the center of the target’s rings were in actuality a semblance of powder for marking their collision.

“Hey, can I give that a go?” Bluster asked.

Rumbling looked back at him a moment. His saddlebag was slung to his right and crammed with feathered arrows. Over his left shoulder, he had another, smaller bow. It was this he slung off with a smile and tossed to Bluster, who just managed to catch it with both forelimbs. The pegasus could see it was not as ornate as Rumbling’s preferred tool, but it was crafted solid enough.

The next item Rumbling presented Bluster with was an arrow, which the pegasus wouldn’t have caught if the toss had been any farther away. To Bluster’s confusion, the arrowhead was not a sharpened point of flint or stone, but rather a small bag tied around the shaft and coated at the front with a dense white powder. Before Bluster could put together the words for the question brewing in his mind, Rumbling explained. “Sometimes ponies sit in the bleachers there and watch us train. I don’t care to cause a scene by accidentally impaling somepony when I miss. Plus, if they stick in, makes ’em harder to retrieve without breaking to reuse.”

“What’s this filled with?” Bluster prodded at the baggy as if he was hungry for whatever it might contain.

“Just sawdust. Coated with powder for marking. Go ahead, take aim.”

Distracted, Bluster spoke again. “I bet you could fill it up with smoke dust or whatever that makes your target have a coughing fit or something.”

Rumbling quirked his head with a thoughtful glance. “Playing with the weather not enough for you pegasi?” A crooked, harmless smirk gleaned across his muzzle.

“So I just pull back on this and let go?” Bluster was wildly jerking his bow around as if fascinated with how the world looked down the arrow's length. He kept pulling back on the string as if oblivious to the risk of snapping it.

“Or, if you wanted to *hit* anything.” Rumbling rolled his eyes at Bluster's amateurish antics. “You could try being patient and taking a look first. These things take practice.”

This time, Bluster attempted to imitate Rumbling with more accuracy. He was determined to get this right. He held his posture like a statue, keeping his aim steadier than his coworkers could ever have believed. He pointed the arrow at the target for what, to him, felt like a full minute. He willed himself to do this. He liked pleasing Rumbling Skies, the thestral who treated him better than his pegasi superiors. Then he eked his angle downwards by ever so slight an inch and let fly with it like a bullet. The arrow punched the target's edge, sending the suspended plank spinning on the axis by which it was rooted to the column.

Bluster laughed at the outcome of his intentions. “See that? It's still spinnin'!”

Rumbling quirked a brow at the realization Bluster's aim had been “off” on purpose. “You're gonna knock the enemy for a loop, huh?”

That had been well over a month ago by now, at least. Since then, Bluster had trained diligently for the sake of Rumbling's company. In that time, his mistakes had grown less careless, although his greater distraction made up for it. Either way, his reputation remained unaffected, and the other stormtroopers had learned that they could pawn Bluster Haze off as somepony else's problem from time to time. Which was an effective reason for why they sent him off to traipse through the murky, unhygienic depths, out of sight and out of mind beneath the streets.

The missing section of latticed stone bridge was lying up against the wall beside the low outlet of a drainage pipe. The texture of its walkable surface criss-crossed like the wide bands of a pie crust. Working together, Anhedonia and Bluster managed to slide the bridge down from its propped-up position against the wall, and settled it carefully onto its four legs, like a table. They could feel its burdensome weight, and Anhe knew this was to keep its structure sturdy. Bluster hastened to try and lift his end of the rectangular bridge, and in so doing, felt like he might have a hernia. He considered that he might have played hooky for one too many flight trainings, because this bridge was much heavier than any of the weights the stormtroopers would use. He let out a pathetic wheeze and went limp as he struggled to regain his composure at the effort.

Across the trough, Blitzkrieg slapped a hoof to her face in shame at the dismal display.

Cauldron hummed to himself, regarding the others with an out-of-place smile. Anhedonia faced the same difficulty in her attempt to lift the bridge, but at least she maintained her dignity. She boggled at the weight and only managed to raise one end of the bridge about an inch. She could not hold it up for long. When Bluster counted to synchronize their lift, they managed to hoist the bridge off of the ground by their front hooves, and toddled an uneven route towards the edge of the walkway.

“Uh, how are we going to position it across?” he asked.

Anhedonia stopped to think, staring across the pit of unsavory sludge. “I’ll have to float it across,” she said. If she took too much time, she might lose her strength and, in the worst case scenario, end up in the mass of whatever that was filling the sewers.

“I’ll help you,” Cauldron said. “Just bring it a bit closer, first. The closer it is, the easier I can levitate it.” He then whispered sideways to Blitzkrieg. “Or did you wish to impart them with a tad more discipline first?” He was about to begin an explanatory diatribe on the differentiation of magic ability between individual unicorns in order to taunt the earth pony with his polysyllabic vocabulary when he was interrupted.

“Yeowch!” With a dull thud, Bluster had dropped his end of the bridge. Anhe puffed out her cheeks behind her mask as she fought to keep her end up. She gave in and placed it down as gently as she could hope to.

“What happened over there? Did you drop it on your hoof?” Blitz asked.

“Something grabbed my tail!” Bluster shouted. He had spun around, dancing on his hind legs and grabbing his posterior as if to guard the offended appendage. His lime-green tail looked frazzled, but not out of the ordinary as far as his companions were concerned. As he dilly-dallied, bouncing about and checking on his tail, the others grew more exasperated by his skittish actions.

Before any of them could yell at him for behaving like he was scared of a horsefly, Anhedonia spoke out. “Behind you!” Lurking in the darkness on the edge of Cauldron’s light was an amorphous limb growing out from a pipe down the wall. Bluster looked confused at Anhedonia, then turned around to face the insidious, grappling appendage. With a thick splatter, it mashed its palm-like extremity directly into the pegasus’ face.

“Ghack!” His front hooves came up in a desperate bid to wrench the grotesque, fleshy thing off of himself, but there was nothing for him to grab on to. His muffled yells bubbled through the gloop whose protruding shape wound like fingers around his skull and ears. It inflated itself and surged like a breathing, undulating mask of musty slime. Bluster tumbled back in a panic, and the ooze rolled down his body, grasping for his hind legs. As he was dragged across his backside towards the narrow pipe, Anhedonia vaulted across the stone bridge at him. The technicolor slime was quick, and it pushed its own self outwards to stretch the pipe against its bindings, forcing the channel to open wide enough to swallow up Bluster’s legs. Just as it did, the thestral grasped Bluster’s front hooves with her own and tugged with all her might against the suctioning, predatory jelly.

Blitzkrieg cursed loudly as this went on, pacing back and forth on the opposite bank. Cauldron’s own reactions were a mite slow, but he followed Bluster and focused his light upon him. He

shouted to Anhedonia, “Grab him, quickly!” He started charging ethereal energy into his horn which for the moment dimmed his luminescence. He fired off three quick shots of scalding chartreuse energy at the pipe, but his aim was poor. The first two shots went wide and the third nicked a screw in the pipe's joint. A hiss altogether unlike steam issued forth, and a tendril of the slime's body could be seen for a brief second feeling outwards, then sucking itself back in again.

Anhedonia turned her body over, pushing her hind legs against the lips of the pipe's mouth. Bluster was whimpering something awful, flapping his wings as hard as he could to try and pull himself free. Anhedonia too began beating her wings at the air, but out of sync with Bluster's own. The dense gelatin exhibited frightening strength, but was still pushing the pipe apart by expanding itself. Bluster felt his body be yanked up to the forelegs, his wings folding upwards against his body. His quiver and bow were pushed up his arms as his body was soon being gulped into the narrow passage like prey to a snake. For a second, Anhedonia was transfixed with horror at the gruesome spectacle, but found herself spurred to wave her wings ever faster to fight the egress into the pipe. As Bluster yelled in terror, she thought she might be drawn in with him, and when his front legs were devoured inwards along with his head, she was forced to lose her grip.

“Oh, enough with this!” Blitzkrieg glanced to the arched ceiling above the wide trough of sewage that separated her from Anhedonia. A pair of pipes ran parallel to the walls in nearly the center of the tunnel. On her right hoof was equipped a her weapon: A spring-loaded device that could launch a spiked ball just smaller than a pony's skull, attached to a retractable chain. The chains rattled as she ejected the thorny sphere from its receptacle, hooking the flail around the pipes up above. Acting fast, she leapt from the walkway right over the conduit of sludge. If she hadn't the tool to swing herself across, she would have never made it. The spiny weight bounced back and unraveled the end of the chain from the pipe (which nearly broke) and freed the flail once more. As the earth pony's hooves landed with a clatter to the stone shore, she retracted the chain and summoned the spiky orb back into her weapon's socket, resetting the spring with a punch to the floor.

As the slime fled, it suctioned its body back together to tug the old pipe closed again, distorting its original structure in the process. The pipe leading up the wall branched into two perpendicular directions. Bluster's muffled pleas for help could be heard, along with the desperate clang of his hooves on the expanded pipe's interior. He was rather a small stallion, and the slime pulled a clever ruse in expanding both branches of its escape route so that nopony could discern on sight which pathway he was being drawn into. Anhedonia listened carefully, her ears twitching to hone in on the sounds transpiring from within. Her acute thestral hearing enabled her to pinpoint exactly which direction Bluster was being pulled in, and even his specific position.

“He's heading right!” Anhe pointed her hoof a foot ahead of where Bluster was carried, indicating where Blitzkrieg should attack. The earth pony reacted accordingly to the signal. She fired the metal globe with tremendous force, smashing a section of pipe that had been filled with a segment of the slime's gelatinous body. Like a broken yolk, ooze spilled down the wall in a messy stain, the shambling mass quivering in its escape. The punctured pipe had been ripped in two from the force, but Bluster had not yet been freed.

Just as Anhedonia pointed in the other direction, a massive burst of saffron energy hurtled into the alternate section of wall pipe. On contact, a brilliant flash tore the pipe section out of place, melting the ancient bolts which had held it together. The tube succumbed to the tumultuous vibration and, with

nothing to hold it up in place now, the T-shaped section clattered to the floor with a loud bang. Bluster was caught within the top horizontal portion, and though he squirmed half of his body through the opening, he could not extricate himself from his predicament.

The sentient muck which had attempted to steal Bluster away escaped through the other end of the pipe now and inflated itself like a misshapen balloon, or as a threatened cat defending its territory. It rounded upon Blitz and Anhe as if to attack. Blitz called to Cauldron as she tossed one of her torches to Anhedonia. With another shot of incendiary energy, Cauldron ignited the torch head from afar, and Anhe now waved a jaundiced flame towards the monstrosity with threatening defiance. The slime flinched and retreated, leaving its prey behind, and withered into the darkness with alarming speed.

"I'm stuck." Bluster struggled against the air, but there was no method by which he could pry himself free. Anhedonia observed the way he was trapped past his midsection, and in her head she was devising a plan to separate him from the pipe. Bluster was showing difficulty breathing as the pipe compressed around his abdomen and lower chest. Blitzkrieg grasped his forelegs, instructing Anhe to hold the pipe fast in the other direction.

"If I could but reach that side, I would be glad to help," Cauldron said. The three looked to the unicorn whose horn was still radiating ripples of heat from usage. His horn light faded, Anhedonia's torch remained lit, and Cauldron instead charged his horn with a vertical vitality. A laser extended forth from his horn like a long blade of seething light, humming with intensity.

Bluster's eyes widened at the prospect of being cut out. "I can get out, I can get out!" He squirmed and wriggled, drawing in his breath as he strained to free himself without hesitation. When he did, the pipe seemed to exhale, as if it would cramp around him, but the cheap, rusted metal was still too stretched from the slime's outward pressure. With Blitz's and Anhedonia's help, Bluster was able to slip out and hobble onto his hooves once more.

The pegasus caught his breath, then thanked the others with a chuckle. He was silenced by the disapproving visage of Blitzkrieg's cold posture looming before him. "Listen to me closely," she said to him. "I won't permit the loss of anypony under my command. Is that understood?"

Bluster Haze stood there with a dumbfounded look upon his face. Blitzkrieg didn't wait for a response from him. She and Anhedonia moved away to finish pushing the lattice bridge section between the two shores of the sewer pathways. When Anhedonia managed pull the heavy stone structure into the air over the odious pit, Cauldron sheathed his saber into his horn and offered his kinetic magics to aid in levitating the bridge the remainder of the way. Once set into the stinking sludge below, he joined his companions on their side of the tunnel and turned his power back to illuminating their immediate vicinity.

Bluster shook himself in disgust and tried to scrape any traces of goo from his mane. "Yuck! What was that thing, anyway?"

"I'm sure it would merit volumes of study were it containable. But officially, it's nothing. After all, nothing exists which threatens our indomitable empire." Cauldron shared a scathing smirk with the others to revel in their reactions. Anhedonia's mask hid her thoughts, and Blitzkrieg merely gave him a knowing grimace. Bluster was confused, as per usual.

“I don't think that was nothing!” Bluster's life-threatening experience merited an out-of-line reaction for him.

Cauldron's eyes turned severe and he stepped close to intimidate the young pegasus. “You would dare contradict His Majesty's Inquisition? King Sombra (Beholder of All) has deemed their words the truth.”

“Uh. Well. Maybe not. Sorry.” Bluster tried to shrink himself into a little ball.

Cauldron exhaled a short laugh. “It would seem the monsters have indeed been proliferating as of late.”

As they resumed their march through the sewers, Bluster regained his confidence in conversing with Cauldron. “You mean like that ursa minor that the imperial guard captured a few weeks ago?”

Cauldron responded with a nod. Anhedonia next asked, “What could have caused a sudden spike in their population?”

The unicorn paused as he considered this. “Sudden?”

The Tower of Inquisition was connected to the central Crystal Palace by a long bridge. Its interior consisted of a clockwise staircase stretching from the very top floor to well underground. The tower was built at least fifty floors tall, and each floor contained either a storage space for magical research (from artifacts to information), or workrooms where unicorns performed their secretive experiments. Most often they worked together, sharing space in their laboratories. Higher up there were a few personal offices devoted to single higher-tiered unicorns who could focus on their craft in privileged solitude. Magical devices would be stored above. Down below and in the basements, scribes would set to work creating propaganda and storing a library of routine information.

A week ago, Cauldron had been working in one such laboratory, poring over some text borrowed from the Crystal Library, which only the inquisition was permitted to access. A chalkboard positioned near the wall was scrawled with the Fibonacci sequence, and his desk was littered with papers and frothing flagons and amphorae. On the center of his desk, a bright purple crystal stood surrounded by stacked books and such in order to somewhat guard it from jealous eyes. It was shaped like a narrow obelisk, almost rectangular from top to bottom, but towards its apex it swelled outwards then receded to its steep, flat peak. Even the Garnet-ranked unicorns such as himself did not chance to work with such pure specimens of crystal themselves, but Cauldron had tread a fine, lucky line of nagging to test his hypothesis.

Cauldron's career had been a lengthy one, and it had taken quite some time to find a niche from which he could carry out his work. When his job's focus met his own, the resources were not provided. When the resources were not provided, his colleagues were not amicable. By the time this last point had been (for the most part) remedied, the serious work had been passed on to fresh blood and Cauldron's tenure granted him leeway to conduct his own experiments, albeit not always during his free time. The unicorn on the far side of the huddled desks was a semi-plump stallion who was often quiet and ever complacent to transcribe systematic cross-references of the mundane. On the downside, after

particularly long shifts of work, he could become prone to distraction to exercise his weary mind. These occasions were when he was wont to pester Cauldron with meaningless interjections, as though pining for the glory days which had, like the blind leading the blind, motivated him to his current stagnant position. To reciprocate, Cauldron did use this other pony (named Stillpond, with the cutey mark of an irregular reed-lined pond) as a sounding board for when he needed to think out loud, even if his company's pseudo-solicited responses never aroused much revelation.

Bookish and secretarial, Stillpond peered over his glossy spectacles at Cauldron. "Did you attain permission to borrow one of the pure crystals?" He curbed his envy well, but the disguise itself was obvious.

When Cauldron was entrenched in his own fascination, he had little patience for such questions, even if he happened to hear them. "Oh," he said, already mustering his sardonic wit. "Have you already finished with your day's work?"

Stillpond's dismay at Cauldron's snide remark was evident, though his composure was set. He held neither the stamina nor the pointless self-importance to combat this surge of attitude. At any rate, his curiosity had been whetted, not sated. "I'm only wondering what more can be gleaned from our nation's bounty."

"I wouldn't dare take them for granted." Cauldron made his voice sound as though he were agreeing with Stillpond, but again he was being contradictory. "But never fear, I have responsibility for this one." He almost bumped the crystal with his nose as he peered through its near-opaque translucence. The interior angles were not entirely obscured by its rich magenta hue.

A third voice entered the conversation, this one dripping with saturated, demeaning scorn and flinty glee that deflated Cauldron's playful sarcasm to shame. "Oh, but they are granted. The slaves and diamond dogs have had to dig so very far down to mine new crystals. Their growth simply cannot keep up with the war effort's demands." Mr. Teatime was a tall, lithe pony with a menacing leer that put off anypony unfortunate enough to work with him. As of late, the powder blue unicorn had been spending an uncomfortable amount of time around Cauldron's work, though the latter had heard rumors Teatime had gotten on the nerves of their mutual superiors. Teatime had his withered blonde mane combed straight to one side of his face, his tail trimmed to a similar shape, and his horn sharpened. His cutey mark bore a most unnerving image of an empty, topless skull.

Worse than that, Mr. Teatime had a way of getting under anypony's skin. He did this for his own clear amusement, with such erratic nuances as imploring that the correct pronunciation of his name was "teh-ah-tee-may". Further rumors maintained he had only achieved his high, private office because nopony could stand to work with him. At the same time, the more sensible unicorns who knew him better felt close supervision could do him no harm, yet, as if they were superstitious, they would not speak of him.

Cauldron felt a sudden urge to fireproof everything on his desk. Stillpond, naïve as he was, felt compelled to correct Teatime. "You mean the labor caste. Even as a joke, that's off-color. Only the empire's enemies spread such uncouth propaganda."

Teatime chose to ignore Stillpond's existence. He reached across Cauldron's property and

jabbed at the crystal perched on the desk. “And why do we have a rock? Hoping for intelligent conversation?”

“Preferable to what passes as rhetoric for you.” Cauldron moved the crystal a few inches away from Teatime's prying hoof.

“Still a waste of time.” Teatime elbowed some of Cauldron's parchments as he withdrew his foreleg.

“Well you have that effect on ponies. I wonder if you could even comprehend the intricacies of subcutaneous magical input.”

Stillpond looked dumbfounded. Teatime looked bored. Gathering the anticlimactic looks upon their faces, Cauldron looked up from what he was doing and said, “Well, somepony has to do some actual work around here.”

“I don't understand,” said Stillpond. “Our empire boasts the finest magical advances in all of Equestria. What more could there be to learn? We should focus on using our technology rather than playing with it.”

“‘Subcutaneous’? Would you be performing surgery on a crystal? I could show you how it's done,” said Teatime.

Cauldron was inundated with disappointment for them both. “You must think more than that. You are not some spoiled country fillies poring through the contents of the village library because she cannot find herself a date. Have you both taken leave of your imaginations?”

Teatime decided to leave, smug as a bully on his way to detention. At the start of his next shift, Cauldron was surprised to find the crystal he had locked away the prior evening; or rather, that he didn't find it. A black scorch mark now marred the crystal's usual place on his desk, and large bits of scarlet-pink rock were strewn about the entire laboratory. Before he could rationalize what at first appeared a subtle change in scenery, Cauldron was assaulted by questions from his fellow inquisition templars. It was about as fun as one might expect. He noticed Stillpond sweeping up crumbs of shattered crystal from his own desk, keeping a paranoid eye on him.

“Garnet Templar Cauldron. Why has the crystal lent to you been damaged?” asked one of the inquisitors. They too were garnet-ranked, but their professional function bestowed them with higher authority.

Cauldron now examined the crystal's wreckage in further detail. It looked to him as if the crystal had been stood up on his desk, then exploded with a particularly careless spell. “‘Damaged,’ you say? It looks to me as if it's been *destroyed*.”

“So you admit to this?” The only emotive expression the inquisitors divulged was an intensifying of their brute ferocity.

“I admit it's been done, but what you seem to be conveniently omitting is that I had no cause in

this.” Cauldron narrowed his eyes as he recollected the previous day's events. “If you ask me, and you haven't, I would say Teatime is behind this misdeed.”

The inquisitors looked at each other without turning their heads. “Whether or not such an accusation has merit, why was the crystal not properly secured when not being studied?”

“For being inquisitors, you keep asking the wrong questions. It *was* locked away. That doesn't stop a unicorn like *yourselves* or I from getting something he wants. And besides, isn't this tower meant to be heavily guarded?”

Both templars chose to ignore this counter and instead asked, “What was the nature of your experiment?”

With a heavy sigh and a roll of his eyes, Cauldron explained. “I was attempting to further examine the inherent properties of magic by honing the aim of my magic through the crystal. As you know, common practice is only to cast upon the surface of an object, either to move it, or to alter the shape a crystal grows into. My hypothesis is to demonstrate that magic is more than an energy manifestation of a unicorn's will, but also shares some curious properties with light itself. Of course, in so doing, I believe I stumbled upon something crucial about a crystal's reaction to magic.”

The inquisitors stared at him in dumb silence as he spoke (as if to himself), but soon cut him off when they'd heard enough. “This will be reported to your superior.”

“*What* will?” Cauldron asked. “Teatime's sabotage? Will you even confront him about this?”

The inquisitors remained firm on their stance. “If you cannot keep safe the empire's property, then your privilege will be revoked.”

Cauldron paused to form the next words to pass his lips. “When you practice your questions down there in your armory, do you ever stop to consider why the crystal ewes are among the few ungulates not to have evolved the ability to speak?”

This query elicited an obvious annoyance from the guards who considered they had better ways to spend their time. “They have no purpose for the divine gifts granted to ponykind.”

“Even that's more cause and effect than you'll merit me! That sociopath, Teatime, is a disruption to our work!” The inquisitors would not hear Cauldron out, however. He waited for them to depart before fuming about this grievous insult. “No better than crystal ewes or pigs they treat us! Is it any wonder those never evolved a capability for speech!? They would be denied all chance to make use of it, and I would lose it but to hear them again!” He slammed his hoof down upon his papers and felt his temper sap away from him. His last words echoed in his mind.

It had been quite a long time since Cauldron had thrown himself into a rant, and he calmed himself before looking towards Stillpond again. “The crystals are more than just receptive to magic. They may literally consume it from the outside. I believe we have grown complacent to forsake an inherent scientific truth we've no place to deny.”

His work colleague offered a helpless shrug, then averted his eyes to his own desk. “The crystals are harmless tools. King Sombra (His Will is Might) says they're the nation's greatest strength.”

“King Sombra says.” What did that imply?

Just when he thought he couldn't sink any lower, Cauldron found himself on the receiving end of this odious hoofwork. He would beat no bushes that meandering about in the dark, foalsitting these reckless ponies amidst the dank, scum-filled tunnels beneath the Empire's streets was a form of punishment. Gazing into the channel of sewage nearby, he relented that perhaps he could indeed sink lower after all.

The four ponies marched in sullen silence through the artificial interior of the sewers. The maze-like tunnels, gravitating towards the empire's center, were reminiscent of a dank, hollow esophagus, rife with malignant phlegm and stifled by a stagnant, invisible humour that clung to their pelts and sagged their manes. By now their eyes had well adjusted to the darkness to the point that the other three could almost see half as well as the thestral. Cauldron contemplated the age of the building materials and some subtle differences in the ceiling, though he was no historian. Every so often Bluster would flick out some speck of goo from his feathers or mane. His wings felt heavy, and he took to ensuring he did not step on any cracks as he walked, as a sort of game to keep himself occupied. Both he and Blitzkrieg were growing restless, though she did not share his fatigue. She was slowing down and speeding up while walking along the outside of the group, attempting to pace them to avoid another needless separation. Up ahead, Anhedonia worried that with each step forward the offending rebels would elude them further. She tried to guess at the group's corresponding location above ground, and she began to wonder if she'd recognize when they'd completed their current mission. They were wiling the entire day away on this mission, and the monotony of travel was getting to her.

After further navigation of the sewer's tunnels, each of them were now questioning how much longer their task would be carried out. Just as doubt was settling in their minds like a spent hourglass, they made contact with one of the other search parties. Only Bluster could be described as close to startled by their appearance around the next turning. The others were snapped out of their pensive malaise to meet up with four other ponies. Oopsie Daisy was a blonde-maned, gray pegasus mare with a bit of a lazy eye. Even Bluster knew her to be on the clumsy side, and he could hardly comment given his own track record. Sociable was an egg-white unicorn stallion with a dashing physique, a groomed golden mane, and the cutey mark of two intersecting speech balloons. Anhedonia recognized the thestral as her superior, Glinting Fang, in spite of his similar mask. He had a royal blue coat, a sticking-up mane of greenish-gold hidden beneath his helm, and a very short tail like a spurt off an ear of corn. His cutey mark, like so many others during this era, showed a weapon—a spear aiming forward and downwards, towards the ground. The earth pony, much to Blitzkrieg's chagrin, was Tarnished Shields.

Tarnished was quick to get to the point and showed little to no sign of familiarity. “How have you fared?” He spoke without remorse for his break-up with Blitzkrieg that morning. He acted as though he hadn't even met her before. His callous professionalism may have cut like a cold knife, but it cauterized her wound all the same.

Instead of asking him what he cared, Blitz replied in kind. She had no idea if she was

successful in hiding her boiling rage towards him. “No sign of the rebels yet, but we have encountered a hostile monster presence. It's been slow-going. These tunnels aren't exactly in tip-top shape.”

Fang reciprocated with his own group's report. “All we've seen are some loitering mendicants and a pair of unhelpful diamond dogs skiving off their mining duties. They pointed us in this direction. We believe the rebels, or at least signs of their habitat, could be close.”

For the time being, it was agreed the two groups might as well merge. The closer they came inwards on the empire's center, the fewer routes there were to take. This way, they could coordinate strategies should the time come for them to move in on a suspected target. Blitzkrieg and Tarnished had nothing to say to each other, and their mutual berth to either side of the walkway was deliberate. What was not was Cauldron's perception that the two did not get along. Thistle and Fang gravitated towards one another, as did Bluster and Daisy. Sociable recognized that unicorns fared well to stick together, and demonstrated that he was by name as he was by nature.

“Salutations! Sociable's the nom de plume. I work as a proofreader for (Glorious and Exalted!) King Sombra's speeches. Those allocutions don't just write themselves, you know.”

Cauldron did not seem want to talk shop, but Bluster took an interest. “Oh wow, really? Say, I've been thinking, you really should put more jokes in them! What do you think?” Bluster was being genuine in that he did not intend to come off as disrespectful.

Sociable caught his drift, and laughed at the silly suggestion. “I don't believe our esteemed and fearless leader had that sort of parlance in mind. It's not quite his idiom, you see.”

Glinting Fang lured Anhedonia to the back of the group so that he could whisper to her. Either of their voices could be kept quite low and still be heard by each other. “Anhedonia Thistle. You've been in the onyx rank for quite some time, haven't you?”

“Since joining the night watch.” That was all she said. Some time ago, Anhedonia had the opportunity to overhear an imperial guard chewing out his inferior. No matter what the novice said, his superior officer always rebounded with some denigrating contradiction, even past the point of hypocrisy. Anhe reminded herself of this as sound reason to keep her responses terse. Of course she'd been at the lowest rank since she'd joined the night watch. This was a non-response. The Night Watch were trained to be evasive in such a manner.

“Have you no aims or goals?” Glint was being rather direct. Was he trying to catch her off guard?

“If this is where and how I'll serve the empire, so be it.”

Fang continued walking forward, watching the path ahead all the while. “Hard work is its own reward. The empire only doles out promotion to those it trusts.”

Thistle stopped in her tracks. “Have I betrayed the empire's trust in some way?”

Since she wouldn't budge, Glinting turned around to face her. “Trust must be earned, not taken

for granted. As it stands, you're an exemplary soldier, but that's about all we consider of you."

Anhedonia said nothing. She just stood there, keeping her mask pointed ahead, but her eyes drifted off to stare into space. When Glinting gave up waiting and caught up with the group, she spoke to herself. "That's all I am. Nothing more."

Oopsie Daisy and Bluster Haze had struck up an accord on how difficult it was to fly in these low tunnels. For all their youthful exuberance, they were both eager to spend their stamina airborne, even where it was not practical. "I hope we find these criminals soon so we can get outta here. My wings are cramping up down here," Bluster said. "Say, what were they supposed to have done again?"

A heavy sigh was shared by the two earth ponies and unicorns. Blitzkrieg didn't want to stop their march, but she knew she had to set the record for certain. "Our contact assures us that today, several terrorist cell leaders will be colluding in the Crystal Empire sewers. An opportunity like this to capture several key members of the criminal alliance doesn't just fall into our hooves every week. All you need to worry about is helping capture the fugitives. Is that understood?"

"Oh yeah, it's understood," Bluster said. "I get that they're criminals, of course."

Daisy apologized with a smile. "It's just that I'm a bit forgetful is all." She blushed.

Tarnished Shields looked annoyed, but Blitz just ordered everypony to continue onwards. As they resumed walking, Cauldron looked to his fellow unicorn, then decided to elaborate further. "Some of these conspirators are also suspected of smuggling that ursa minor within the empire walls. If you'd recall the official reports released by the Inquisition and (May He Live Forever) King Sombra's speech, the terrorists attempted to damage the empire's defenses, which considering the ongoing war effort, are a crucial matter of national security. They lost control of their beast which rampaged through a good portion of the southeast sector before the imperial guard finally managed to subdue it."

Blitzkrieg aimed to keep her distance from Tarnished, but realized too late that her efforts were far too obvious. Tarnished shot a disappointed look over to her as though it was his place to do so, and asked, "You've selected quite the paltry crowd for yourself. Is this an attempt to shirk your duties?"

Blitz grimaced at the accusation that she would use the others' inexperience or unwillingness as an excuse to slack off. "These rookies happen to need my help the most. That's why I chose them. I suppose you assume to fare well no matter who you choose."

"I'm strong enough not to rely on their support. They're only here to fulfill their roles."

"And if I'd answered that instead, what would your comeback have been to one-up me?"

"I don't need to say anything. I'll just do it."

Quietude would have behooved them, for their mission was no snipe hunt. Many hours had passed to formulate their net and snare it this far, and their quarry knew he would soon be within reach. Only a few tunnels farther on, an earth pony was engaged in the vertiginous evasion of the various forces now closing in around him. He knew these tunnels well enough to keep from stumbling in the

dark, and he wore sod shoes to dull the sounds of his hoofsteps upon the crystal-stone floor. He had to suffer through the pitch black, treading with care and keeping a conscious effort to stick to the walls and never stray too near the gaping pit of ripe sewage.

His aim could only be to elude the imperial authorities, and his assets were few. The habiliments of darkness were a double-edged sword. He could maybe outrun the imperial guard earth ponies, but the thestral night watch and pegasi stormtroopers would be a problem, not to mention the tricks the unicorn inquisitors could pull. In his favor, he was now so close to escape, where he could meet with his allies, but the downside to this was a pressing need to get past the imperials on his route. Driven by desperation, the earth pony found a sharp intersection, turned himself away from the wall, and struck back with his hind hooves in full force, kicking the weakest of the low cornerstones.

Still some ways away, Glinting Fang's ears twitched. Anhe's also perked up in attention. "Do you hear something?" Fang asked the group.

Aware of the noise he had made, the hidden earth pony changed tack. He banged both hooves against the old, black crystal brick again, and this time it gave almost half an inch. Instead of continuing to kick with both hooves at once, he struck with the pair of them in tandem, rapidly bucking the brick out from its position in the wall. Crumbs of dirt and rock tumbled out from the cracks, but soon the crystal brick was on the verge of falling out to the floor. He pivoted about on his hind legs and yanked the crystal brick free from the wall using his front hooves and all his strength.

These limbs were not ideal for grasping. The hooves of ponies had evolved with only enough tactile motility to squeeze the toe and quarters less than a centimeter inwards, allowing for a noticeable grip of suction that was not often relied upon. The earth pony had to grip the heavy crystal brick upon the shins of his forelimbs. This cornerstone was smaller, but the dense sewer bricks on average measured an approximate six inches in height, twelve across and seven back. This was the extent of the earth pony's prowess: He lifted the heavy brick with little struggle, lowering his hold to reassert his strength. He hoisted the brick well above his head and hurled it maybe a good couple of yards into the sewage. The projectile made a terrific splash in the murky, textured refuse which splattered its sickening drizzle upon the surrounding stonework and sent frantic ripples coursing down each channel.

Keeping to the wall, the rebel inched his way in the opposite direction from the splash's epicenter and kept an eye out for any signs of light in use by the authorities. He scurried his way down an adjacent dead end and waited for the roving lights to pass him by. When they collected in the vicinity of where he had thrown the crystal brick, he backtracked to the nearest crossing, sped across the lattice bridge with some unavoidable clatter, and raced as fast as he could down the tunnel.

Although he had enough of a head start to turn out of their line of sight, he was in closest pursuit from Tarnished Shield's and Blitzkrieg's respective sorties. Any other imperial troops had foolishly spread out from the vague location of the splash and risked losing themselves in the tunnels. "This had better be the anarchist scum," Blitzkrieg said. "I don't want any slip-ups. We'd better not be chasing our own tails here."

Tarnished harrumphed and dashed ahead. Performing his duty had become like a race to him. It was a strange breed of apathy, where nihilism was vacant, and he instead sought the most convenient purpose to motivate him, without any further consideration of the matter. Blitzkrieg glowered at him

and willed herself to push harder, moving faster to keep up with him. She cast aside the weight of their once amicable relationship and accepted his rivalry. As soon as she affirmed within herself that rivalry and friendship were two inherently separate notions, she shook off any lingering hesitations as if her health had consolidated itself.

Amidst the clatter of their hooves upon stone, Glinting Fang could hear that their prey had changed tracks and crossed to the parallel side of the sewer corridor. “Turn up ahead!” By his lead, Anhedonia and the two pegasi leapt from the path and swooped sideways, landing upon the matching walkway along the other wall. The pegasi had to follow on the thestrals' back heels in the dimmer light. The ambulatory ponies remained separated until they came across another latticed stone bridge, and they turned as sharp as they must to cross it.

A sharp cry sputtered into a gross squelch of chowdery sewage. Even the flying ponies careened to a halt to see what had transpired. Sociable the unicorn had failed to keep his turn angled as tight as required, and as a result he mis-stepped off of the bridge and tumbled into the unsanitary sludge that now threatened to pull him under. As Sociable thrashed about, Tarnished turned away and shouted. “Darnit, they're getting away!”

Blitzkrieg did not waste time in shock at Tarnished's abandonment, nor was she surprised. She hurried to the edge where the thestrals and pegasi swooped to grab for Sociable's struggling hooves. They had sunk in first, and he could not reach them free of his engulfing sewage. There was no pipe up above here to grapple with her mace, so she couldn't lower herself down. If she reached its chain across the gap, there was no guarantee the mace could support a grown pony's weight long enough to drag him out of there. The spiked orb was not made for grabbing, but even if she could toss it to Sociable, he would have to catch it so as not to lose its location in the deep gunk. There was the very real presence she could be dragged down with him if the others did not help to pull, and Sociable proved incapable of pushing in any direction against the consuming sludge. The group could only watch in horror as the unicorn sank further down into the dark, undulating surface. His horn gave off a pitiful light just before he inhaled his breath and dipped forever out of view.

He did not emerge. Blitzkrieg swayed in either direction. “I'm going in there,” she said.

Cauldron was quick to chide her. “Do that and you'll never get out again! I guarantee you. Your little toy can't breach the pressure of this pollution, even if you do find him in time. He's gone, and so too will be our fugitive.”

They paused for a second longer, but there was no time for them to lament the unicorn's untimely fate. The six of them set off much in the same manner as they had been, though each more determined to make up for lost time. To the side of them now was an interminably long wall with no breaks, although there were very few passageways that had caved in. Up ahead, Tarnished was peeking into each of these arched doorways, but none were clear enough to walk through.

Like the remaining unicorns accompanying the other imperial troops, Cauldron kept his horn light shining. As he fought to keep up with his airborne and earth pony companions, he passed by a distinct hole towards the base of the wall: A gash in the dirt beyond some misplaced crystal bricks. “Take a look at this!” Alerted to his notice, the others doubled back.

“Of course. What a surprise,” Tarnished Shields said.

“It's not meant to be a surprise, imbecile. It's meant to be concealed.” Cauldron's displeasure stemmed from overhearing Tarnished's unflattering remarks earlier.

Oopsie Daisy volunteered herself. “Let me, I'll scout ahead.” Fortune did not favor her, for the pegasus only succeeding in getting herself stuck inside of the narrow passage. After much grunting and exasperated sighs, the imperial guard tugged the sheepish gray pegasus Stormtrooper free from the hole she had wedged herself into against her best intentions. With an ingratiating smile and a perfunctory apology, the blonde mare allowed herself to be swept aside for the others to advance.

“Shall I?” All went dark a moment before a flickering charge of ethereal glow and acidic-yellow hue danced off of the unicorn's horn and into the pocket in the brick wall. An explosion hurtled craggy pebbles and loosened dirt, gaping the opening into a feasible passage below. With the combustion, the imperial forces had been awakened, and their cries rallied one another to renewed conviction. They shouted to one another that the rebels had fled deeper, and colluded upon various routes downwards to capture their targets forthwith.

Tarnished still wore a disgruntled sneer upon his face. “Let us split up. There are still openings leading downward further along this route. You four climb down here, and I'll take what remains of my group a different way.” Tarnished snatched the torch Anhedonia had passed to Bluster, gathered Daisy and Glinting Fang, and together the three of them ran off in search of a passage leading to the lower level.

As Blitzkrieg regarded them with doubt, Anhedonia Thistle proceeded into the still-cramped crawlspace, folding her wings up nice and tight before shimmying through and downwards. She squirmed on purpose, scraping herself on some small gravel rocks in the process, but gaping the single-occupancy shaft that much further open during her descent. In little time flat, the imperial forces had broken down into the lower level. Thistle landed with imposing grace, using her wings to throw off any dirt that stuck to them. She unfurled her leathery wings and surveyed her immediate surroundings as her allies emerged one by one via the hole in the upper portion of the wall.

The group found themselves standing in a most dissimilar corridor. The bricks here did not appear to be made from crystal, or certainly not the same as the sewers above. The shape was slightly off and the color was much lighter. In fact, the natural presence of lighting down here was unexpected. Torches appeared to decorate the high walls with even spacing, but upon closer inspection these “torches” were in actuality protruding sconces covered in green domes and filled with coruscating, bioluminescent gnats of some kind. This grand hallway, though not decorated in any further notable way, mimicked the structure of the sewers above in that it had a massive channel of water bisecting a parallel center between two narrow shores of walkway. Indeed, the sewage did not flow here, although the murky water did not look any sort of sanitary.

To her right, Thistle observed a massive, solid wood portcullis that spanned from one stone shore to the other. Walls blocked off what lay behind it, and jutting halfway within them were two wooden turn wheels connected to ropes that stretched to some obscure device within the walls. In the opposite direction, the buzzing lanterns did not illuminate well enough to disparage the gradient darkness that filled the vacuous tunnel. From this direction, the thestral was certain that she could hear

something, but it must have been quite a ways off. There was nothing for them to do but pursue it.

Before they could move a step, the group found a curious object lying at their hooves. Not too far from their hole in the wall was a book, spread-eagled upon the floor, both its covers showing up at them. “What’s that?” Bluster asked. He let out a gasp. “Maybe the rebel dropped it! Maybe it’s a coded message about where they’re meeting up?”

Cauldron picked up the book and uncreased its pages. Bluster was impatient to ask what it said, and the others looked at the unicorn in expectation. Cauldron’s eyebrows rose, and one fell. He appeared quite flustered, then lidded his eyes as if in deep focus. Consternation wrinkled his brow as a frown set itself across his jaws in an expression of contemptuous disbelief. He read the title aloud: “‘The Cutey Mark Choice’. It’s a motivational piece of tripe written to mollify the young with sweet lies. Just what sort of infantile social deviants are we up against?”

“A fairy tale for foals?” Blitz asked. “With a vulgarity like ‘choice’ in the title? All fate is ordained by King Sombra (His Wisdom is Infinite). Just why would he be carrying a book about how to earn a cutey mark?”

Bluster Haze was quick with a suggestion. “Maybe he’s trying to figure out a way to change his cutey mark, so that he can disguise himself!”

“That’s completely impossible,” Blitz said.

Cauldron shut the book with a soft thud. “Such a preposterous notion could never occur. A cutey mark is an indelible brand of a pony’s purpose. Once its function has been interpreted, that pony’s service to the empire has been decided for life.” A wry smile crossed his lips in a moment of nostalgia. “I still recall when I earned my own during my studies with the Templars. I’d just discovered a rudimentary albeit fascinating new potion.”

“We’re wasting time.” Blitzkrieg hushed Bluster before he could chime in again. “They ought to already know we’re coming. Let’s take our time and see if we can’t throw them off guard. Keep an eye on those side tunnels.”

Bluster could not resist the urge to ask questions, but at least he kept his voice to a low whisper. “What is this place? It looks totally different.”

“Stop hissing,” Cauldron said. The gravity of their situation did not escape the unicorn, but the temptation to theorize conjecture as to their current surroundings was too great. “We must be almost underneath the Crystal Palace now. It’s said that the current empire was built directly atop the old one, many generations ago. Even before Lord Sombra’s rule. These sewer tunnels may very well have all been built upon its ancient streets, before crystal construction was developed.”

Blitzkrieg hushed them. “Thistle hears something.” She was right; Anhedonia’s ears were turned forward as though listening with diligence.

Far ahead and out of sight, the lone earth pony paused to reassert the strap of his right saddlebag. It had come undone as he squeezed his malnourished yet burly frame through the gap. The

emblems on its seals matched his cutey mark of a cracked, bronze bell. His frayed pelt was an almost chocolatey brown that ended in shaggy ruffles above his sodded hooves. Above his round face grew a mane of curly, golden brown hair, and his tail billowed like a trail of sand and dust. He was dressed in a tattered purple vest with about two leg bands per leg. He hung his head in grave disappointment upon discovering the loss of the book, and he muttered a heartfelt apology to himself. It was gone, and there was no going back for it now or any time soon. This pony's name was Liberty Rings.

The bug lamps were missing from where Liberty was standing, but a dull green glow still illuminated the shape of a stone bridge arching its way between the two shores. It trailed into an inky void of darkness before his very eyes, and he tread forward across it to speak with the emptiness before him. "Is there somepony there?"

Silence answered him for several tingling seconds. Even his own panting breath grew still, and a ringing started to well up within his ears. After he lost the sensation of his own heart beating, a hushed voice spoke, but its owner remained unseen. "I'm here."

Liberty wracked his mind for a moment, then asked a curious question. "How may I peek at the world when it thinks I'm not looking?"

The cold voice answered after a pause. "Then you might not like what you will see."

A strange look of fearful relief rose and fell upon Liberty's face. He spoke again with the invisible voice reaching back to him from nothingness. "I tried to find this place as fast as I could, but it wasn't easy. The imperial guard are everywhere. Somepony must have tipped them off."

"Where is the other one?"

"I don't know who else was supposed to show." Liberty looked confused, but was unable to turn his head too far away from the vacant shadows before him to glance around. "I was nearly caught, and I'm certain I'm still being followed. I'm sorry about all this." Again he hung his head.

"Let me guess. If we're caught, it'll never happen again." A thestral stepped out into the limited range of Liberty's visibility. "As it happens, I've already been made aware of the situation." She had a grayed periwinkle pelt that was only somewhat dirtied, as if she had been quite careful with herself. There was no love lost in her glaring orange eyes, and her mane and tail were hued an unsaturated, faded pink. Her mane was kept in a thick, long braid so as to keep it out of the way, and no care had been wasted in grooming it beyond this. He couldn't quite see her cutey mark, but it resembled some odd sort of pictograph: A circle was crossed by two sharp, diagonal lines that connected at the very top, and these latter two were bridged by a third that cut the circle in half, almost horizontally.

Liberty was alarmed to see a thestral, unmasked, and where he had expected to meet up with the rebels. He was relieved when two other ponies showed up who were undoubtedly his allies—he hoped. A unicorn approached behind the thestral, and behind himself an earth pony arrived. "Isn't this a bit risky, us dodging imperials to meet up like this?" Liberty asked.

The thestral scowled. "Of course it's too demned risky. It's too demn risky just to have so many of us grouped together at once. That's why only a select few from each collective were summoned like

this. We're calling this whole scheme off. But it sure would be nice to know just who sold us out, wouldn't it?"

Liberty felt the other earth pony's presence closing in on him from behind. "Well it wasn't me," he said.

"I don't even know your name." The thestral narrowed her eyes at Liberty, and he braced himself in case she thought to attack.

"I'm Liberty Rings." As he introduced himself, he steadied his hooves upon the bridge, concentrating himself into an immovable object.

The thestral grumbled with annoyance. "It's better if we don't exchange names." Instead of knocking him into the drink, she said, "Oh, I don't suppose it was any of us here. It's funny how they always try to sell us out for so little, always underestimating that we have ways of finding out who they were. I'm betting it was that--" She stopped talking and turned her head down the vast corridor in the direction of the distant portcullis. "We'd better get lost."

"Hold on a second! I didn't risk my neck down here just to say hi!" Liberty nosed his way into his other saddlebag. "I brought food and things, because I heard some refugees were hidden down here. I know it's not much."

The thestral was on the verge of leaving, but instead sighed. "These days there's less to give out to, but they can use every little bit they can get," she said. When she reached for Liberty's saddlebag, he withdrew from her, bumping into the earth pony behind him. The thestral scoffed with impatience. "Look, you shouldn't expect to trust any of us. Just call me Forlorn Hope, and the pony behind you calls himself Bear Hug."

Liberty hesitated before sliding his saddlebag off of his back and hanging it on his foreleg. "I understand, but sometimes I think we would be stronger if we were more united."

"We would be more vulnerable." Forlorn whipped her head around to stare down the corridor once again.

By the time Liberty registered hearing the angry whiz of air rushing towards him, he had already felt the heavy thud which struck his hanging saddlebag. His left forelimb was wrenched sideways and his grip on the strap was lost. The pouch flung out of reach and dropped with a discordant splash into the chilled, murky depths beneath the narrow bridge. He dropped flat and swung his arm far too late, only catching the spike of frigid water that splashed upwards at him.

Bluster was already loading up another arrow. Forlorn took to the air, jumping well away from where the arrow had flown. Cauldron fired off two rounds of electricity at the nearby sconces, illuminating their surface with a static glow and attracting more bugs. Bear Hug stomped off the bridge and stood before the approaching imperials as though fashioning himself an impenetrable wall awaiting their collision. Blitzkrieg noted the fourth member of the rebel party and called out to the familiar unicorn, Sociable, who appeared worse for wear if a bit unhygienic after his unexplained escape from the sewage. He stood on the opposite shore and wore a smug, but not overconfident smirk as he

charged his horn up with malleable blue energy. Anhedonia was dumbstruck to see the thestral among these criminals—almost every thestral was known to join the Night Watch and be trusted with the empire's closest guarded secrets. Liberty scowled at the authorities, still caught in the middle of the bridge, though he was making his way to the side where Bear Hug and the imperials stood.

Blitzkrieg assessed the situation. If she could take charge of these misfits, she hoped she could take command of the situation as it transpired. First she needed to determine Sociable's allegiance here. “Let me get this straight. Double-agent? Taking the plunge was all a ruse, or am I wrong?”

Sociable shrugged and smiled. “There's no putting one over on you, I'm afraid.”

As they parleyed, everypony eyed one another uneasily, as though preparing for a surprise strike. Blitz laughed. “Sorry to hear that. This is not gonna end well for a traitor.”

“Given where you get your information from, I'd say it works out fair on either side.”

“Enough chatting with the imperial scum!” said Forlorn. She settled back onto the stone bridge.

“Your side's outnumbered,” Blitz said as though addressing each of them. “You should surrender yourselves now. That way we don't bruise up your pretty little faces.”

“I only count the four of you. If you think we can just let you leave, you've got another thing coming.”

The rebels were prepared for what they had to do, even if it meant facing down an “invincible” opponent. They awaited to counter the first strike, being ever used to eluding the law rather than confronting it directly. The two rebel earth ponies telegraphed their intent for a physical altercation by marching with a wide berth towards Blitzkrieg. Blitz lead her team, although the four of them shuffled about in awkward anticipation. Cauldron was trying to keep an eye on the entire scene at once, watching to assist Blitz, but also contemplating what Sociable's and Forlorn's roles would be. At least Sociable had confessed, clearing up any chance of a surprise attack on his part. Bluster drew another blunt arrow to his bow and aimed it indecisively towards every pony, while Thistle weighed the retracted blade she wore on the cuff of her hoof-guard.

Blitz struck first. She had been standing there almost as though she had no intention of fighting at all. When the two earth ponies were close to flanking her, she leapt backwards and at the same discharged her weapon. The spiked mace of her spring-loaded flail rocketed towards Liberty with the speed of a cannon, its trailing chain clinking and flexing behind it. Liberty was almost too slow to roll sideways, but he shook off collapsing onto one leg and the ball and chain smashed into the stone floor, radiating jagged cracks around the point of impact.

The two rugged rebels were now free to close in on Blitz and her inactive allies. Even though his aim had only just turned on Bear Hug, Bluster let fly with an arrow that scraped right across the rebel's snout and forehead. His target growled in anger, then charged past Blitz towards him. The pegasus let out a “Whoa!” of alarm and took to the air, hovering over the low, deep waters. Blitzkrieg missed at tripping Bear Hug, but she wound the retracting reel on her flail and had her right foreleg free enough to counter the first vicious strike Liberty threw at her.

"I don't need your backup here, Clutter!" Blitz shouted. "Go and make sure those other two don't escape!"

Bluster and Anhedonia snapped into action as though they had been daydreaming. Each of them pushed for the opposite shore, and this grandiose tunnel was far more spacious, allowing for easier flight. Bluster kept well above the water, always quick to ready another arrow if not fire it. Anhe's hooves stepped upon the opposite shore, and she extended the wide, triangular blade of her cuff. The brass weapon had an almost flat surface, making the shaft look more like a shield than anything else. Sociable looked nervous, but still welled that potent glow into his horn, ready to strike.

"Cover me!" Forlorn swooped across, landing in between Sociable and Anhedonia.

"Cover you in splinters, maybe!" Bluster trained his next arrow on her, but as the it soared through the air like a bullet, Sociable's laser of magic struck the projectile, knocking it dead into the cold water. With only minor hesitation, he drew another arrow from his bountiful supply, but this one too was struck down in midair by Sociable's blue bolt of pure force. In spite of the situation's futility, Bluster was ready to draw another arrow.

"Aim for their unicorn!" Blitzkrieg paused as though staying herself from dispensing a frustrated insult. "He's going to keep doing that as long as he can!" Blitz stole an opportunity to buck at Bear Hug while she fought Liberty's attempts to wrestle her foreleg away from her face. Her elbow was growing sore from flailing about in nigh-desperation, and at the last moment she whipped her extended chain around his legs. She succeeded in tripping him up, but he rebounded to all fours after slipping free. She would have been in graver peril had Bear Hug not decided Cauldron would be a more vulnerable target.

Cauldron was studying the situation to the brink of indecision. On one hoof, he could plainly see the opposing unicorn batting away every arrow Bluster launched as though the volley were mere play. On the other, he was now being engaged by one burly, thick-furred earth pony with a bone to pick and more muscle than a clambake. For the moment, Cauldron knew he would have to focus on protecting his own hide if he wanted to prove any use to the others. Since his horn was no longer required as a source of light, he was free to charge this extension with a different sort of spell. An acrid shaft of light grew from his horn as if to extend it into an emanating blade. He bowed his head, brandishing the sharp, magical implement in Bear Hug's direction, and the earth pony was wise in keeping his distance to avoid getting cut. Though not too agile, Bear Hug danced left and right, awaiting an opening to scuttle past the thrumming energy blade.

Anhedonia advanced upon the enemy thestral, brandishing her cuff blade. When she rose her hoof and swung down upon Forlorn, her arm clashed against a globe of transparent force that only now spread out around Hope's body. Thistle's entire foreleg shook like a concentrated seizure, a numbing vibration rattling her cuff and giving her the sensation that everything she touched with it was trembling as well. The actual sting only lasted a moment, but the resounding aftereffect was desensitizing.

Back on the opposite side of the room, Blitzkrieg was going hoof-to-hoof with Liberty, and the two earth ponies were very well matched in strength. Their forelimbs met in practiced unison, striking

and deflecting one another's attacks in a tumbling of blows. They were both adept melee fighters, and when Liberty gained the upper hoof in the offensive, Blitz was able to guess where his next attack would aim. She asked, "Do you really mean to sacrifice your lives for your disobedience?"

"We have no lives under a tyrant's rule!" Liberty swatted Blitz's right foreleg down, forcing her weapon's aim to the ground. "And if we should fall, others will rise to take our place."

Blitz saw an opportunity to buck her hindlegs at Bear Hug who was still trying to circle Cauldron. She clonked him upside the flank, and he stumbled forward so that Cauldron could slash him across the chest and shoulder with his magical horn saber. Bear Hug gasped in pain, although no actual cutting had been done. Instead, a long gash-shaped burn stung along the path of Cauldron's acidic blade. Bear Hug recoiled, but bore the searing well, even as it penetrated deep inside of him. With his bolstered vigor, he risked further injury in tackling the unicorn to the ground. Cauldron grunted as he hit the floor, skidding far enough so that his head was hanging over the open pit of inky, black water. Bear Hug pushed one foreleg against Cauldron's neck to prevent him from pointing his horn upwards, and the unicorn's eyes bulged out in agony as he choked for breath.

As this transpired, Bluster fumbled to lodge two arrows upon his bow at once. He could not aim them well as they clattered together at crooked angles. The shield around Forlorn filled the space between the wall and the gap, preventing Anhedonia's passing by her, and when the night watchmare rose to fly overhead, Forlorn too would hover off the ground to block her route. Forlorn could not shield Sociable from both Bluster and Thistle at once, and the pegasus drifted to a proper angle for knocking out a pair of arrows at the opposing unicorn. The force shield faltered when Sociable shot down one of the bullets, and the second bounced against his horn with a "doink!" and scratched his head. The shield spell fizzled out in entirety, leaving Forlorn vulnerable to attack once more.

"I'm warning you, you're surrounded," Blitzkrieg said to Liberty. "I'm offering you mercy here! Our allies will not hesitate to use lethal force for the sake of the empire's citizens."

"You have no mercy to offer! We are prepared to die for the sake of the empire's citizens. You keep us as slaves! You forbid us free thought! You deny us wholesome lives!" Liberty's hooves clasped to her own as one tried to push the other over. He twisted her forelegs, but she bore the sharp motion without a crack, elbowing him in the chest. They separated.

"It's always the same old story *every* time with you felons!" Blitzkrieg loosened her mace without firing it and swung it around in vertical circles to build up centrifugal motion.

"But told with thousands of individual voices!" Although Liberty was backing away from Blitzkrieg, he did not cease taunting her. "And we are to be known as rebels!" Liberty rolled sideways when Blitz brought the heavy mace crashing into the floor where he'd been standing only a moment ago. Before he could close in to counter, she'd already started waving the spiked ball above her head.

With Sociable's protection over Forlorn faded, Anhedonia swept in for a second onslaught. Forlorn proved not to be defenseless, however. The rebel thestral flipped open one wing and from beneath it, slipped a weapon onto her front right pastern. Though Thistle was quick to duck beneath the weapon's swing, she didn't see what it was as it passed over her head and nearly grazed her wings. She thought she could hear it slice the air as if burning its way like a flash into the wall.

Sociable looked to be panicking now as he fired off quicker, weaker volleys of blue lasers past Bluster. They fumed like firecrackers by his ears, but the pegasus proved to be adept at changing directions on a dime, even if he didn't appear to dodge the bullets by any more effort than sheer luck. In point of fact, the tips of his feathers were close to getting seared, and Sociable's flustering temper didn't render the unicorn any less of a threat.

Forlorn knew just when and where to grip tight on the chain tethering her weapon to its cuff. She did so to swing the hook-shaped blade as if the chain was elastic, twirling it away from the wall, upwards, and then downwards again. Anhedonia collided with the stone wall in her evasion of the deadly hook and held her own melee blade before herself like a shield. With little way to predict where Forlorn might land the point of her miniature scythe, all Anhe could do was back off and formulate a new strategy on the fly.

The first sign of further intrusion came from an edifice along the west wall only a few yards ahead (the side on which the earth ponies currently fought). A cloud of dust and grit coughed out from the corridor entrance, followed by a staccato, clamorous drumbeat. About a second later, great squarish boulders came tumbling into the chamber as though rolled down a sloping incline. They bowled out with enough momentum that the first few spilled into the water below with a series of bloop and splashes, although the irregular shape turned most of the other heavy rocks aside. This virulent din warranted the notice of the combatants, though the shouting and trailing hoof beats were yet indistinct. Without much delay, a pair of imperials trundled through the gap: Tarnished Shields and Glinting Fang. There was no sign of Oopsie Daisy.

“Now who's outnumbered?” Blitzkrieg shouted.

Liberty stole a moment to realize he would soon be pincerred between imperial soldiers. He fell back from his position, retreating to the stone bridge that arched across to either shore. Here he had Sociable at his back, and at least the grounded enemy forces would be forced into single-file should they engage him. “Where are *our* reinforcements!?”

Bluster made an effort to zip from side to side and barrage Sociable with more arrows, but by now the unicorn had grown clever and summoned a shield of turbulence to spout from his horn and wither away any further projectiles. Forlorn interpreted Anhedonia's hesitation as weakness, and chose to ignore the thestral. With a rueful glance, she whipped her chain hook upwards and towards the center of the room, and gouged a groove between the stones with its tip. Anhe leapt upwards to pounce upon Forlorn Hope, but the rebel thestral's lateral movement was by far quicker as she could swing out of harm's way.

Since the commencement of their hostility, there had been little time to take notice of their surroundings. The water itself was now bubbling, frothing to a boil, and then with a surge of fountainous terror, it burst for the ceiling in a tremendous and cacophonous rage. It was a scream of torrential laughter which cascaded up, then downwards again, crashing upon every surface in a damning collision of soaking panic.

Glinting barely evaded the column of surging white bubbles that exploded around the underside of the bridge. His trajectory was interrupted, and he was sent sprawling against the ground and wall.

Bluster, likewise, span out of control and collided with the opposite wall, though he kept from sliding to the floor. Liberty had been standing in the center of the bridge, which was wrought asunder beneath his legs and flung to the ceiling. The rampaging waters felt like hundreds of hooves punching against his body, and he lost track of how he'd turned head-down. He plunged into the water with a gruesome smack and departed from sight. This aquatic eruption was sufficient to steal Bear Hug's attention away, loosening up his pressure upon the pinned Cauldron, who returned his strength in pushing and bucked upwards into the earth pony's abdomen. In a swift shake of the head, he slashed with his acidic saber, leaving an impermanent scar across Bear Hug's face as the two of them rolled in opposite directions. Forlorn was still rotating in a circular swing with her hooves set to intercept Blitzkrieg, but the tremendous geyser gave her cause for alarm. She beat her furious wings to alter her kinetic motion, and ended up hanging dead over the water by her hooked flail.

The explosion of the bridge threw Blitzkrieg aside, and her body slammed into Tarnished who was attempting to ignore the drenching rain. The couple sprawled to the floor and hurried to stand up. Tarnished shoved Blitz off of him with a snarl. "Get off of me, nuisance!"

Blitz stood, and despite Tarnished Shield's scathing attitude towards her, she asked, "Is everypony alright? Report!" Before she could hear an answer, she saw that their problems had transgressed beyond the mere issue of routing some rebel scum.

Risen out from the water, an aquatic homunculus of glistening, sickly pale fish flesh filled the span of empty space that reached to the ceiling and from walkway to walkway. Its veined, varicose girth reached a triangular tip at its top end that flopped over in one direction. Further distending this highest portion was a misshapen, discolored welt of considerable size, though identifying this was difficult given its slimy sheen and abnormal shape. On both sides were two hideous, glaring circles that looked more like some mocking caricature of eyes than the real article. What they interpreted as the front of its "face" (if it could even be called that) held a protruding, circular snout, though this did not appear to be a mouth. The collective ponies could count six wavering tentacles, each perhaps as thick as their own individual bodies. Shaped like flamboyant spears, they rippled like streamers in the air, displaying their heaving, irregular suckers with all the enraged glee of a spoiled foal ready to gobble down sweets.

"What in Tartarus is that thing!?" Blitzkrieg shouted as loud as she could, sensing the others were as transfixed as she was with the hideous sight now threatening them.

Cauldron had to gape for a moment at the monstrous creature before responding. "That there's a kraken, but it only belongs in the sea! It's akin to the giant king of the squid. It has multiple prehensile limbs for locomotion and grasping."

"Tell me something I can't see!"

Bluster interrupted. "Why foals love the taste of crystal berry crunch?"

"Time and a place, Fluster!" Blitz said.

Cauldron continued. "It has a ravenous appetite, so expect hostility. It could swallow a pony whole. It has a habit of shooting fluids from its snout, whether high-pressurized water, or an obscuring

ink used when it needs to elude a predator.”

“I'd hate to see that thing's predator,” Bluster said. His voice faltered, betraying the worry that frittered within him.

Before they could waste more precious time determining the kraken was not some hallucination, they were under attack. Sociable's terror had provoked the beast, his inequity cry cut short when all six of the raised tendrils smacked down with quaking strength upon the ponies. The corridor shook beneath the fleshy slap of those gargantuan arms, and while most of the ponies only ended up knocked aside, Sociable was pressed flat to the floor. He thought the incredible weight alone would be the full brunt of it, but as the slippery appendage twisted about his body, lifting him off the ground, he groaned out a horrified shudder. He kicked and flailed his legs in futility, gasping as the coil seized tight enough to bulge out his ribs.

Forlorn hung right in front of the kraken's face. Its eyes, nearly at opposite sides of its body, glared inwards at her. Its body filled just about every inch of her vision, as though reminding her who was where on the food chain. Expecting its tentacles to clap in on her from either side, she yanked on the chain suspending her, but it held fast to the ceiling. She instead wriggled her leg to free herself, only to be struck by a jet of water spewed from the massive squid's blow hole. Though she had extricated herself from her weapon, she thought she would be impaled by the water's force, and she was blown backwards into the churning waters as the pain socked her gut.

Tarnished Shields was incensed. “Condemn it, you won't get away from me that easily!” He did not quite act as though he grasped the situation. The kraken was launching itself forward, though lacked the space and position for any real velocity. Its manic splashing pushed the waves behind itself, striking up a frenzied flow further off into the darkness. Tarnished imagined seeing some dark outline moving away from the monster, and so he opted to dive in after it out of desperation. He was so determined not to allow even a single rebel to go free that he would once again abandon the more pertinent danger.

Cauldron cut clean through the flagellating tendril with his horn saber, but of course he could not sever it. Nevertheless, the feeler did recoil in pain, and Cauldron could escape the claustrophobia of being trapped between two of the kraken's appendages. When he turned to face the enormous entity again, he could see Sociable on the opposite side, being flailed about in a most deranged fashion. Even without being throttled so, the rebel unicorn was too hysterical to aim with any success. Most of his shots went wide, but considering he was surrounded in the majority by his enemies, there was little risk of “friendly” fire. As the others were still thinking about how to tackle such a formidable foe, Cauldron retracted his magic saber and prepared to barrage the monstrous squid with lasers.

The kraken's wavering, provocative dance continued in the midst of the onslaught. It had little room to move, but showed little caring for the ponies' collective suppression. Its rampant motions churned the water like white rapids that lapped and spurned over the parallel edges of stone. Once Blitzkrieg surmised there was little time to act lest the floor would be wiped with them, she sprang her mace in a direct assault. The jagged sphere struck a crushing blow against the side of the kraken's cranium, meriting the creature's notice for certain. It bellowed out a ghastly howl, like no noise heard on land before, from deep within its confounded internity. The water bubbled incessantly from underneath itself as the pained lament issued forth from its submerged maw. It ignored Bluster's

arrows scraping in futility along its slick, rubbery membrane and retaliated against the shore Blitz stood on.

The kraken's eyesight may not have been too good, or its focus was likely inept, because it did not avenge itself against Blitzkrieg. She wound her weapon's chain in haste, and the aquatic colossus hurled Sociable's body straight for Cauldron. The two unicorns collided with a pained grunt, and Cauldron was pinned in a heap beneath the fainting rebel. Now stepping up its offense, two of the kraken's tentacles closed in around Bear Hug from either side, pinching him with their suckered mass. The rebel struggled to pry them both apart, but not only was their muscular weight an ordeal even for an earth pony to move, but their moist adhesion rendered the challenge even more Sisyphean.

Glinting Fang was beside himself in shock, and had little to accomplish other than dodging the flogging limbs of the monster. He couldn't believe Tarnished's overzealous bid for capturing the rebels when faced with such danger—he recognized it had not been a cowardly gesture, but one of foolhardy stubbornness. Fang broke free with ease and hovered back to the air where Blitzkrieg saw him out of the corner of her eye. She had to shout over the din of thrashing water and horrific, inequine cries. “Don't just flap there, hit it with something!”

“What good's my rapier on a beast this size!?” Glinting demonstrated the whisper-thin blade he wore.

The weapon was so thin that Blitz didn't think she would have noticed it up close, and only saw then that he was holding something out. “That's a weapon for an assassin, not a soldier!” she said.

So many things transpired in quick succession, and many of them with simultaneous disassociation. The ponies had been cut off from one another, and Anhedonia was barraged by thunderous, pounding appendages. She could not see a viable opening to get in close, but she could spot several alternatives. If she could not join her allies in their offensive, then she decided to bound sideways instead. One thrust of her wings gave her the added lift to grasp onto Forlorn's forgotten weapon. Its chain remained dangling from the ceiling, but the hook above was loosened enough for Anhedonia to pluck it free.

As Anhe glided to the opposite shore, the kraken rose its two front tendrils from underwater, whipping upwards at her but missing by the hair of her tail. Instead of facing the rampaging nightmare of non-Euclidean geometry, she turned her back on the dismal, violent scene and whirled the hook and flail about with her left front hoof. Peering deep into that darkness, her thestral gaze could make out the wheel mechanism lodged into the wall which controlled the floodgate. She whipped the hook out towards the contraption ahead of her, but its blade missed the intended target and clanged against the stone wall.

Bluster was far too liberal with his arrows. Though he could swoop over and snatch up any that landed upon the floor, these were infrequent, and dodging the dancing tendrils was a taxing exercise. Just as he aligned another shot, the gruesome visage of the sewer kraken turned upon him. From its ventral snout, a jet of shiny, black fluid fired upon him like a napalm cannon. Bluster cried out, horrified as the liquified stream sprayed across his face and body and splattered in lewd fashion around his hooves. Where the ink struck, it sublimated itself from a weak, watery constitution to a dense, sticky goo. Bluster's initial reaction was to wipe the ink from his eyes, but even if his hooves weren't

coated in the same muck, the adhesive only stretched and spread across his face rather than smeared away clean. Not wanting to crash into anything, he kept to the floor and dared neither fly nor move.

Blitzkrieg could not let her diminishing resources distract her. She deployed her mace once again at where she estimated the kraken's head to be, striking somewhere behind where the prior impact had left a bulging, ugly welt. Out of nowhere, the sea monster whipped one of its massive arms and caught the chain of the weapon. The mace whirled around the roving white flesh a couple of times and was entangled by the beast's grasp. Blitz cursed, tugging as hard as she could in some hope of wresting the appendage to the ground, but her strength was proving feeble. Her hooves were sliding along the ground, even as she fought to maintain control. She shouted to Bear Hug, whom she could see out of the corner of her eye. "Help me, and I may be able to vouch for leniency!"

Bear Hug only recoiled with angered distrust. If he would change his mind, it was too late. Another tentacle seized him, pinching his body between its prehensile muscle. He was hoisted high to the air, then slammed hard against the ground, twice. The kraken beat him to the floor as though cracking open a clam shell. He groaned, and when he went limp, the kraken released him.

Still prone after shoving Sociable's weight off of him, Cauldron's spine ached so sorely that he thought he could feel each jagged vertebrae grinding against one another inside of him. He offered his assistance to Blitzkrieg from afar, the orpiment hue of his magic rippling into view around her weapon's chain. He directed the kinetic flow into her hoof as though joining her side in some tug-of-war with the enormous monster. Some shambling misdirection in the sewer horror's body language piqued Cauldron's second-guessing suspicions. His kinesis departed from Blitzkrieg's aid and instead unraveled the end of her chain pinching around the vile squid's limb.

Anhedonia dashed closer towards the large vertical turnstile beside the floodgate as she made a second attempt to grip one of its spokes with her procured hook. At this closer range, her aim was more sure, and the curved point of the hook clutched into the bottommost wooden peg. She had not thought it through, but now hoped that the wheel would turn in an upwards fashion to open the gate. She set to work trying to tug the chain upwards, but the wheel would not budge.

"Anhe, what are you trying to do?" Glinting Fang had ample time to notice her activity, but soon realized her intent. "Oh!" He could see the other wheel on the opposite side of the gate and knew that both must be turned at once in order to lift the heavy wooden slab. He zipped over in this direction, but the whip-like force of the kraken's sudden lashing stung his entire body. Like a swatted fly, he careened into the wall with a sickening, audible thud. For the moment, it looked as though he too had been rendered unconscious, but he pried his face from the stone bricks with a pained groan. His mask had a terrible dent folding it now, but it remained intact.

The next thing the kraken did was to withdraw its tentacles into the water, wiggling them about and spinning them in a circular fashion around its own body. The creature looked as if it were celebrating its sure victory with a mocking dance. Around and around the tendrils went, twisting and cavorting in a clockwise fashion while the central body bobbed in place. The water lapped and surged from its movement while the numerous appendages rotated faster and faster. Soon enough, it had twisted its limbs around themselves as far as they could go. The kraken let loose at once, and with all the zeal of a blender on a turntable, its tentacles whirled about at high speed, spinning in the opposite direction they had been wound. The kraken gathered such momentum that its own body could keep up

by hovering over its limbs so that they would not twist again, and instead they kept twirling clockwise in this fashion. As the speed continued, the water in the sewer trough rose up its body, until it gushed into a rising flume around itself, forming a standing whirlpool that reached the ceiling. The monster came to an abrupt stop, and the water was flung outwards in that moment, crashing upon everypony within its range like a solid wall of tremendous power.

Even Blitzkrieg had been knocked over by the rapid force. Bluster slumped to the ground against the wall, but as the water soaked him for the umpteenth time, the ink on his body reacted to it and dispersed into foggy clouds of black. He turned his whimper into a moan, and his hoof stretched across the floor to see if he could still feel anything. It came into contact with an odd black bit of jagged crystal he hadn't noticed before, and still inquisitive in the heat of battle, he snatched it up.

Anhedonia had fled far enough from the shockwave to evade its full force, but she too was drenched in its surf. Coming to the same conclusion about the wooden gate as Glinting Fang had done, she also realized that nopony would be quick to help her. She lashed the hook-end of Forlorn's flail to the bottom peg of the immobile wheel, then carried its handle over the water and onto the opposite walkway. There, she tied the other end of the chain to the bottom peg of this second wheel, and ensured that it was as taut as could be. Then with desperate strength, she pushed upwards on the wheel as hard as she could. Her entire body trembled with exertion, and the weight felt painful to grip with her hooves for reasons she could not fathom. She muscled through anyhow, but leverage did the most work in moving the wheel by the length of just one spoke. Something clicked into place, and the enormous gate creaked, but it did not move far enough to breach the water.

That was when an aura engulfed the secondary wheel, and Anhedonia's job became that much easier. She glanced sideways to notice Cauldron had managed to pick himself up and hobble down the path towards her, completely drenched as they all were.

Water was draining but slowly through the growing gap beneath the wooden gate. The speed at which it flushed through into the hidden chamber was increasing with every groaning clunk of the hidden mechanics. Pretty soon, the current was so strong that it was dragging the massive creature along with it. The kraken's limbs flailed at nothing, jabbering across the room's walls. Every surface was far too viscous to hold onto, with puddles drenching the floors as far as any of them could see. The towering beast teetered backwards and fell with a shrill, thunderous splash into the water. Its ten hideous tendrils fanned out, grabbing to stop itself against the floodgate. Anhe stuttered as she glimpsed one large, vehement eye glaring up at her from below.

She reacted to her intuition with such aplomb that it could have been mistaken for premonition. The kraken struck its tentacles out at her in rapid succession, punching them like jagged spears into the solid wall. She took to her wings, zipping upwards and downwards in an evasive scrimmage. The monstrous appendages thundered into the wall around her, crushing straight through the stone in a din of destruction. It was the longest stretch of three yards she'd ever flown in vivid memory, and she deemed she would not be able to survive the maneuver again if she had tried. With a screaming gargle of noisome water, the kraken was flushed beyond the half-open wooden gate into the unseen void beyond.

"Now! Close it!" Anhe and Cauldron worked together to turn the wheels back down and shut the gate closed. A pair of limpid tendrils reached beneath the gate and rose up from under the water's

uneven surface like two soggy white asparagus. Anhe and Cauldron held down on the gate's wheels with all of their physical and magical might, but they proved to be no match for the brute strength of the monster. Another arm was already snaking up under the gate, and Thistle whined out an angered "No!" of terror when she felt her body lifted up with the turning wheel. Doused and slathered in ink, Bluster grappled turnstile and pulled as hard as he could until Anhe's back hooves once more touched the ground. On Cauldron's side, Blitz, looking thoroughly depleted of patience, grabbed two spokes of the mechanism's wheel and hurtled the turnstile downwards with tremendous effort. For a time, they were winning the strong arm contest with the kraken's tendrils, but the gate soon shook and rattled before heading upwards again.

Thinking fast, Anhe unraveled the chain from around the wheel spoke and replaced it around the top-most peg instead. With Blitzkrieg taking over most of the work, Cauldron mimicked Anhe's plan with the other shore's wheel as well. In this regard, perhaps the chain would bar the wheels from being able to turn any further upwards than they already were. Bluster flapped his wings, hovering himself so that he was standing against the wall and facing the floor. With gravity's aid, he pushed downwards as hard as he could, eliciting an earnest groan from within. The gate made a similar sound as it creaked downwards, pinching the kraken's arms under the heavy gate. There was an unearthly screech and the limbs withdrew. Once Anhedonia was sure the creature had been locked on the other side, she and Cauldron unspun her procured weapon tying the two turnstiles together, and she raveled the hooked flail up.

As the sloshing of the water died down into silence amidst intermittent dripping, a wave of nauseous pain swept down upon each pony. They each remembered they had to breathe, but somehow this sped the aches that gripped their internal organs with paralysis. What was more, everypony was soaked to the bone, heavy with sopping wet. Even Bluster was imparted with some caution before testing his wings to see if he'd be able to float back to Blitz and Cauldron. Cauldron limped over to Blitzkrieg who was already struggling to bind and manacle Bear Hug and Sociable together.

She looked to Cauldron and shook her head, knowing he intended to use his magic to ease their pain. "Don't bother with me. Might as well see if these rebels can walk."

"So long as they can't run?" Cauldron asked. He was implying that it would not behoove them to aid the criminals for any potential escape.

"Well, I suppose they could use a rest for what's coming to them, but I'm sure as hay not gonna carry them. Go check on the others. You won't get any whining from me."

"Now, now. If you don't complain, how will I ever know how you feel, or where it hurts?" Against her word, Cauldron spread his feeble light into Blitzkrieg's body. He could ease her pain for the time being, but any substantial recuperation would require patience and dedicated rest. Bluster's novice fatigue was a tad more obvious, and Cauldron gave him a double dose of the soothing aura.

Glinting took a bit longer to rejoin them. He dared not fly further than to walk to the broken bridge and leap across the short gap between both edges there. "I cannot believe Tarnished dove into the water just to capture a couple of felons." He tilted his head from side to side, gently tapping the upper portion to urge the water to drain from his ears.

“Eh. I'm sure he'll be fine.” Blitzkrieg shrugged upon finishing binding the two rebels.

“All in all, I'd say this went over rather *swimmingly*,” Cauldron said. “Let's all do this again on the next side of never.”

The second time Bluster asked, “Where'd Anhedonia go?” the others looked around. The floodgate shuddered in volume, rattling in its stone frame amidst indistinct sounds from the other side.

Anhe no longer required her acute hearing to listen to the screams of terror echoing through the tunnels. If her sense of direction was spot on, the side-tunnel dug through the wall was leading around to the other side of the floodgate. This tunnel looked to be burrowed as if by diamond dogs, not that she stopped to admire any claw marks or the like. The confining caverns branched off in multiple directions, tailor made for ponies to hide out in or escape through. She did not digress from the main path, following the woeful cries ahead of her.

At long last, Anhedonia found the gathering of fugitives who had been living down in the sewers all this time. This chance encounter with them was one of mixed fortune. Almost a dozen of them were gathered in one gaping crevasse looking out into a vast chamber. Grouped together as they were, she could pick out a majority of earth ponies of various ages, a couple of older mares, and at least a pair of foals. She could readily discern the escapees of the labor caste by the crystal brands upon their cutie marks: A cross-shaped inset of ebony crystal, said to be cast there by King Sombra (Powerful and Supreme!) himself. Anhe could see through the opening into the sewer chamber that their exit was barred by the infuriated kraken. When the group turned away, knowing escape lay not in that direction, they came face-to-mask with the night watchmare.

Anhe swept open her armored wings, obscuring the only other route available to them. “Blasphemer, thou art hereby condemned for the heresy you have committed. Thou hast been deemed treacherous of conspiracy to sabotage. Surrender and confess thy crimes, so that His Majesty may show mercy on your wretched life.”

One of the earth ponies dared to speak up. “You're arresting us? Really? Shouldn't you be protecting us from that monster out there?”

Anhedonia turned her mask towards him. “If you surrender yourselves, I can protect you from yourselves as well.”

An older thestral mare made herself known by speaking out among the throng. Peering out beyond her legs and wings were the two meek foals, curious in spite of their sound fear. Anhedonia felt her wings stiffen with apprehension while the kraken's enormous tentacles thundered against the outer wall. The homeless thestral's mane was already turning gray, and her face was visibly streaked with tears. Her leathery wings were devoid of color and speckled with bits of black crystal that effectively grounded her. The whole facade was nothing short of pathetic. Here was this old, gray mare, surrounded by foals and the weak, facing certain demise from one direction and assured imprisonment from another, and she was going to plead to her merciless superior. “Please, my family! Don't do this! Don't break us apart! Think what would happen to us!”

Only the mask Anhedonia wore, silent and cold, and devoid of all expression, stared back. “The

only family you need is that of your empire. It provides all! Answers, shelter, meaning! Thou shalt answer for thy infidelity. Expect no such mercy from King Sombra, May He Reign Eternal!”

Fizzing white water exploded across the wall and crashed into their edifice like the surf of the perfect storm. Unlike their rebel counterparts, these ponies were not prepared to sacrifice their lives to elude the law. The entire structure around them lurched when the tendril punched through a corner of the stones around their opening and reached inside. The ponies ran for their lives, only to be stopped by the convenient arrival of Thistle's traveling companions. The tentacle was writhing and squirming like half a worm wrought in paroxysms of agony, and the ensuing panic made identifying who had been caught difficult. There were indistinct shouts, blasts of explosive magic, yells of pain and screams of terror. The clank and scrape of metal died down in Anhedonia's memory as she was left with the final striking image of the kraken's glowering and grotesque eye peering in through the gap at her. Though it appeared a glossy, abominable mockery of an eye, she never felt more as if it were watching her, accusing her of grave crimes for which the only recompense would be threatened vengeance.

Anhedonia omitted her personal feelings when she gave her report.

Trepidation yawned over her like a dream, and the surreal phobia of treading into the Empire's throne room for the first time was cleansed away when her last hoof stood upon the crystalline floor. Anhedonia was afraid to lay her eyes upon King Sombra himself, and so looked anywhere but at his throne, though she had glimpsed him already from the corner of her eye. She instead gazed all around the interior as the others spoke of their deeds. This chamber must have been over two or three stories high, rising up to an ornate ceiling that appeared like an optical illusion: Whether the lengthy bas relief indented upwards or hung inwards like a dangerous stalactite depended upon how one looked at it.

Tall windows exaggerated almost the full height of the room, but the glaring orange sky beyond them was curtained by flowing, reddish-violet tapestries. Even the sight of them appeared heavy and foreboding, and each one was textured with an exacting, uniform pattern of hexagons. They were difficult to see with their ripples, but each tapestry depicted a scene of some staple of the empire, whether it be their formidable army sweeping across the canvas, or a collection of their agricultural products. For the most part, each one looked bare and empty, as if first and foremost their function was to cast the room into shadow—at least the area of the room where King Sombra lay.

Thistle was the quickest (but not the first) to offer her salute to Sombra, and the last to finish bowing before him. Soon she could no longer avert her eyes from him. In his banners strewn about the empire, he had always appeared so noble, so fierce. He always looked to be leading the viewer to conquering the skies while keeping a keen and stern watch upon his citizens below. Seeing the actual pony was different. Merely standing in his presence was like a feat of endurance, as though he expelled some aura of gravity that rendered visitors inanimate. The king was laying across his throne with exemplary poise, decked out in full regalia of his shining platinum crinnet and greaves. He wore a cold, gray crown with several symmetrical horn-like protrusions and black fittings that eased down his forehead and temples. He donned a scarlet cape with white furred trimming that nestled around his torso like a dignified blanket of blood. The king himself was a large and imposing figure of a stallion, with coal gray fur and a black, leonine mane. His tail was groomed into a subdued wisp, while his horn was like no other: Smooth and sharp, it curved into a crimson, ethereal point that looked as if it was forever brimming with magic of unrivaled potency. Melded as his appearance was with the shadows cast over his tall and lonesome throne, the effect was as if he filled the entire room by himself. He was

aloof to the point of looking bored with these proceedings, but for Anhedonia, this was a moment of unbelievable reckoning.

To be accurate, Cauldron did most of the speaking on their behalf. Listening to the recount of the past was odd. It was strange to hear what had already come to pass now dredged up in the present as a former shadow of itself. None of it seemed real to her any longer. Even the recaptured slaves and the rebels Bear Hug and Sociable, all manacled together in solemn dread, were distant in Anhedonia's mind (and in all likelihood, they wished to be). Only Cauldron concerned himself with them enough to worry over the unthinkable: That not just one, but two thestrals would rebel against the empire. Such treason was far too uncharacteristic for their kind, and far too many secrets were beknownst to them.

When at last the account had been given, King Sombra deigned to speak, and everypony anticipated another of his trademark charismatic orations. Even lounging across his throne, his presence remained commanding, like a tidal force that bit down and silenced the throats of his audience. "Truly, this world is corrupt. But no matter how many times they recidivate, we shall contain these rebels. They have allowed the fear of our enemies poison their hearts."

Here, Sombra stood tall, departing from his throne and throwing open his cape to adopt a regal stature. One subtle signal was all it took, and soldiers who had been standing idly by now blew into crystal flugelhorns, the bold tonality blaring out for miles like a signal calling for rapt attention. In little time at all, heralding bells within the empire rang out, summoning the citizenry from the farthest reaches in the empire to spectate another of their ruler's exultant speeches. King Sombra marched in pride to the palace's south balcony from which he would oft delivery his words of import. The spherical, magical barrier around the palace faded in hue and projected the monarch's image upon its bubble-shaped surface. The imperial troops stationed within were eager to gaze upon their leader from below in bated anticipation of his next words.

"The time has come for us to stand together. These tiny nations would spy to steal from us our glory. But we can safeguard ourselves, arms against arms if need be. It was not long ago that ponykind need fear the monsters and dragons that roam beyond our empire's walls, but we will take control of this world from the ungrateful scourge that inhabits it.

"We cannot be divided in our crusade. We are composed like a single, living organism. If we are wounded, that wound shall be healed! If you should fall, others shall take your place. The Crystal Empire can never fall, for our enemies will see us rise a thousandfold higher! They cannot deny us! They will know of our strength, and bow before our might. Even the villainy of the sorceresses who robbed nature of our very sun and moon will learn to cower before the Crystal Empire!

"I promise our country victory! I promise it freedom! I promise it order and triumph in Equestria's hour of need. I can lead you to the valley of our promises. Know that this nation is defended by the righteous against enemies both dangerous and powerful beyond all reckoning. You need only to follow me. If you should ordain my authority, then you shall see the light once more, and this land of Equestria shall stand united!"

The uproarious hoof-stomping applause was thundering to the heights of the balcony. King Sombra stayed there to revel in the magnanimous ovation only a minute or two, and still it continued even when he retired into his chamber and returned to the matters before him. The prisoners did not

have long to scowl before they were lead away for interrogation, reprogramming, then reintegration into the labor caste.

King Sombra was not yet finished with his minions, however. He returned to his throne before addressing his soldiers once again. His booming tenor softened to one of business-like calm, without losing an ounce of his decisive clarity. "Today was an interesting experiment," he said. Blitzkrieg, Bluster Haze, Cauldron and Anhedonia Thistle dared to throw one another wary, intrigued glances. Sombra amused himself with their apprehension before continuing. "Your success was unexpected, to say the least. Your alignment goes to show how every pony has a role under my empire. For that purpose, I hereby declare the union of a joint task force, to utilize their strengths in crystal-like harmony, and investigate the unspoken ails that dare threaten my kingdom. And the four of you shall hereby be promoted to that alliance. When there is some specific need of the empire, you shall look into and remedy it. The sum of the empire's strengths shall transcend its whole."

Blitzkrieg and Cauldron shared a look of surprise on their respective faces, even if the unicorn could retain some subtlety. At first Bluster's face lit up from giddy excitement, but this dimmed to speculative doubt when he recalled the recent events which had transpired. Anhedonia's helmet masked her expression as usual, but even within it would have been clear that she did not know what to think. King Sombra himself was personally tasking her with some important, unknown mission. What if she couldn't handle the challenge set before her? What if she failed her infallible lord and master?

When King Sombra dismissed them, Anhedonia offered a farewell salute of gratitude. Sombra raised one eyebrow in a pensive expression, and waited for the four of them to turn away before calling the thestral back to him. She stopped as though she had misheard him, questions filling her mind then and there. To have the pony who wielded the greatest power she'd known in all the world command her attention frightened her. She was afraid that the longer she spent in his presence, the greater chance there would be for her to disappoint him, for him to take a long, hard look at her flaws. In trying to stem her own anxiety, she realized she could guess no better at what he might want of her as what she might want herself.

King Sombra was on his hooves again, walking close to Anhedonia to inspect her. He stared hard into her mask, and Thistle suspected if he could see right through it at her. She wanted to remove it for him, but did not feel brave enough to do anything he did not command of her. "Come." He led her out onto the balcony overlooking the grim, dark crystals of the empire's construction. Although Anhe had flown many times above the streets, never had she done so to partake of the sights below. Not only did the buildings and ponies look small and toy-like, but she could see so much of the area below. Even the vastness of the empire felt to be within the viewer's grasp. She could even see glimpses of the frozen wastes just beyond the walls of the city, and the crests of the sloping mountains that lay beyond that.

"So by the word of your allies, you captured the escaped rebels single-hoofedly." King Sombra's majestic mane ruffled in the winds that swept this high up against the exterior of the palace.

"I had their help," Anhe said. She spoke softly and stammered. Was she mumbling? Could he even hear her?

"Tell me, where do your loyalties lie?"

Anhedonia looked at Sombra in shock. What had he just asked? She stared at him, unable to find the right response.

“With the thestrals? With the empire?” He stared back at her, a rigid expression on his face that Anhe could not identify. She could read nothing about him. She found her expectations were, in a strange, unanswered way, being met.

She cleared her throat, worried her voice might break. “With you, your majesty.”

“And are you willing to obey me, no matter the danger, no matter the monsters you must face, no matter how many ponies beg for your weakness?”

Anhedonia gave a shudder. Of course she would, but she could not speak. She was too busy wondering why he would ask her such questions, as if there was some doubt as to her worthiness. Maybe...maybe saying yes wasn't the correct answer? Perhaps there would be some reason to say something else? She couldn't decide what that was, still. “Yes, I swear it.”

King Sombra smiled his satisfaction. It was an eerie expression. He leaned down close to whisper into Anhedonia's ear. “Do not be afraid to hesitate. I appreciate that you can think about it and still say yes.”

Anhedonia had thought it would be an honor to speak with King Sombra, to meet with him and pour her respects out for him. She had not considered the pressure of fruition, nor what attaining that goal would really entail. The worry that she would fail him melted away as she spent that silent moment gazing down upon the military dorms from his balcony. Her failure no longer mattered to her, so long as she could serve him in any means to any end. Without planning for it, she had made her decision despite concern for her fears, and a whole new world now opened up before her.

Until Next Time: **The Frozen Fields**

The following text is an expository on the background from which the Crystal Odyssey draws its inspiration. While it attempts to draw from televised canon, it is at the same time intrinsically speculative, and thus may not be consistent with the aforementioned material. As stated above, this is an unauthorized work (which is not to say it doesn't have an author).

About: **Crystal Empire Time Line and Infrastructure**

Bear with me, because the Crystal Empire sure does adore its “crystal” branding: Crystal corn, crystal ewes, crystal berries. In short, brace yourselves for having to read the word “crystal” about umpteen-billion times.

The Crystal Empire was a monarchy that existed over a thousand years ago, before the Celestial calendar became the standard measure of time. The Celestial Accord's ultimate victory over the Crystal Empire is said to have been the decisive factor in solidifying Princess Celestia's rule over Equestria, allowing Canterlot to be named the continent's capital. For this reason, the fall of the Crystal Empire is

said to have occurred in the year 1 B.C.E.⁴, and the following year was 1 C.E.⁵ Although the Crystal Empire was lost to antiquity, this style of measurement is colloquially assigned to Princess Celestia's successful unification of Equestria. Years within the Crystal Empire were measured from the start of each ruler's accession to power, thus marking King Sombra's first year as ruler as “Sombra 1”. It is known that both Princess Celestia and her sister, Princess Luna, were a decisive factor in the empire's downfall. It is difficult to assert from this information what year televised canon takes place in, due to the reason that there is likely some margin between Celestia's reunification under her crown to Princess Luna's thousand-year banishment to the moon. Even time within the context of the television program may not necessarily be consistent with real-world time. If it was, and assuming at least a decade to transpire for sisterly relations to decay (for argument's sake), that would equate the Crystal Empire's fall as no more recent than 1000 C.E.⁶ in our time.

The Crystal Empire is located in the lands known as the frozen north, situated near to the Crystal Mountains. This region is inhospitable due to its harsh winds, subzero temperatures, snow and ice. The region of the empire itself is something of a topographical anomaly. Since its rediscovery, geologists and other contemporary scientists surmise that in prehistoric times, localized volcanic activity occurred deep underground. This would attempt to explain the radically deviant temperatures as well as the crystalline growths which are unique to the area. In fact, the Crystal Empire is named for the proliferating, mountainous crystals which naturally grow out from the region's surface. Technically, a crystal can be any type of substance with its atoms arranged in an ordered pattern. Ice is water formed like a crystal, and it is for this reason that the Crystal Empire (outside of Sombra's rule), uses a snowflake as its emblem.

The Crystal Empire itself is one of the oldest settlements in Equestria. What little is known is that it was founded for the purposes of salt production, and from there flourished quickly, with faster population growth than any other settlement at the time. When crystals with magic-enhancing properties were discovered soon after, what was once a sleepy hamlet faced another population boom. Using its new-found resources, the city grew into a small mercantile kingdom, and from there expanded through vast technological progress.

Originally, ponies lacked the capability to use the crystals effectively, but eventually they devised methods of hollowing out the crystals to create habitable structures. By Sombra's era, ponies had learned to handle and manipulate crystals to such ends as to create building blocks and even tools of numerous varieties. Three conditions factored into the depletion of crystal resources by the time of Sombra's rule: Population growth, the discovery of new uses for crystals, and the war effort with outer Equestria. This is said to be indicative of the phenomenon dubbed the “tragedy of the commons”, and by then, most feasible stocks of naturally-occurring crystal were found deep underground where it was mined. When the Crystal Empire vanished, this resource was allowed to gradually replenish itself, albeit not to its former glory.

Although history is written by the victors, identifying King Sombra as anything but a definitive tyrant is difficult. In spite of his harsh totalitarian rule, the Crystal Empire was a remarkably advanced nation, both feared and admired for its astounding leaps in scientific (or magical) progress. In its heyday, it was renowned as the most powerful nation in all of Equestria. Regrettably, the sum of its

4 Before Celestial Era.

5 Celestial Era.

6 Common Era. Because of its shortened length, season 3 is counted here as only half a year.

knowledge and achievements was lost with the empire itself.

The Crystal Empire attracted much diversity for its reputation, and was one of the few civilizations in medieval Equestria in which various pony tribes, as well as non-ponies, could be seen living in close proximity to one another. Each tribe gravitated towards fulfilling specialized roles based upon innate racial abilities, forming the empire's extensive caste system. While slaves were often conscripted from criminals, they were more accurately considered the “labor” caste. While the Templar Inquisition was an official designation, its unicorns comprised a “scholar” caste. The scholar caste was beheld as equal but separate from the “warrior” caste divisions that comprised the majority of the imperial staff. Those not directly employed in Sombra's multifaceted army often fulfilled various roles as merchants or mercenaries, the latter particularly the case for non-ponies. Those who were not slaves or imperials often performed duties which by today's standards would be considered the service industry or managerial or secretarial positions. Many of this civilian caste supervised plantations of the empire's chief agricultural products, or were granted more prestigious non-crucial duties, such as construction, city planning, or anything else which a slave could not be trusted with.

Crystal ponies are a collective heritage, and in the scope of the “Crystal Odyssey” series, not a unique race of pony. Though televised canon primarily showed earth ponies in the modern Crystal Empire, viewers witnessed multiple species shining with translucent power (sometimes referred to as “glitzing”) on the show—pegasi, unicorns, dragons, ewes—in the presence of the Crystal Heart. In fact, the first pony witnessed as “glitzing” here was Rarity—a unicorn from Ponyville—and she performed the visual effect seemingly by her own magic. As of this writing, there has been yet no definitive evidence that crystal ponies are their own species, but rather a society which shares a rich affinity to the Crystal Heart. What this could mean is rich with veritable speculation, and as such the artifact known as the Crystal Heart is deserving of its own article.

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