

“When you believe, or are led to believe, you are unable to act upon the greatest desires of the soul, the result is mental and spiritual enslavement.” - Iyanla Vanzant, *Acts of Faith*

Crystal Odyssey

Episode 2 - “The Frozen Fields”

An Unauthorized My Little Pony Miniseries

Written by Xanufre Zantrobis

All “My Little Pony” canon scenario, characters, etc. are obviously © their respective trademarks, or whatever it is. I just watch the show, I don't obsess over the corporate fantasy world.

As such, all original scenario, characters, etc. are © the author.

A slave is born, works, and then dies. To be a slave is to lose one's will to another, and with it, one's own capability, but such definitions have been stricken from the Crystal Empire's library. The empire's labor caste knows not of such etymology, and the majority of them cannot read, but a slave remains a slave whether he or she knows it or not.

Primrose was just another slave. In the Crystal Empire, there were no “children”. There were foals, of course, but Primrose had been a child in ways that were unfitting with the Empire's doctrine of dedicated obeisance. She had stolen her years with deviance and disorder, and the Empire functioned by law. Much of the Empire's might resided in its moral fiber, which was a simple task when they dictated what that was. Success was a simple matter when one's definition of failure was kept adjusted far beneath them. Law was equally simple; they had only to declare something as unjust to make it so. If they ever needed a new slave, any paraphernalia could by arbitrary rule be outlawed, as the stockades were a ready supply of fresh servitude.

The illusion of childhood passed with time, and Primrose became an adult. Under the law's totalitarian control, this adulthood was a sham. Once her cutie mark of a flower with large, round yellow petals had emerged, the government decided her lot in life for her. Such guidance was more service than could be asked of other demanding socializing agents, and yet, as if out of spite, it proved to be lacking in sufficiency. Primrose proved too fragile and careless in tilling, sowing and reaping the empire's vast northern fields. She also gave herself over to distraction, tending to each individual plant with such attention that her work slowed, antagonizing her supervisors.

Advantage was taken; Primrose was betrayed by an imperial guard, and then abandoned in the slums where her presence implicated her in some multitude prohibition. When others of the imperial guard discovered her alleged crime, she was found guilty by association of her foreign surroundings. Her cutie mark was scored with a cross of black Crystal by King Sombra himself. From then on, she would work the fields, but do so with a manacle.

The ground outside of the slaves' quarters was poor in quality, and the only scraggly vegetables that could grow lacked much flesh to sustain one's appetite. Every day was a death march that led into another day like a stream of consciousness. When they slept, they dreamt of the “Giddyaps!” and the cracks of the whip, so that often they would start in the night with the rousing fear that there was work to be done. There was always work to be done. Part of the ignorance that enslaved them was the fallacy that work and purpose are identical. In those sleepless nights, trapped with their self-deprecating thoughts, they could see this lack of purpose, and the empty hours became an un-prescribed torture. Only these thoughts belonged to them.

Years after the fact, Primrose lay awake on a threadbare cot in a dingy, slipshod shack with various other slaves. A frigid chill spun through the squalid little hut, awakening her to her own shivering discomfort. At first, she thought the intermittent clanging was the resounding echoes of abuse from her slumber, but after moments of dreading the oncoming work shift in but a few hours' time, she came to the realization that the rhythmic noise was very much real.

The door to their stable was unlocked and left open. The dying embers of the eternal orange sky beyond blinked at her like the fireplace of her mother's tavern. She told herself she would not go outside, only shut and lock the door lest the plantation owners should deem their suspicions worthy of doling out cathartic punishment. Though the sky was lit in forever sunset, the land and all objects below were draped under a grim shadow of the dark hours. She so much as hoped the thestrals of the night watch were not looking at her at just that moment, but she found herself transfixed with

imagining the rippling weaves of black wheat tipping the earth like a ship at sea.

Staring into this “other” world, Primrose's head became filled with echoes of tall tales the slave ponies would tell themselves. Even their masters agreed that there came a point the slaves would drop if they continued working (or else they were tired of supervising them), and it was during this time that the crystal slaves would share what little they had together. The oral traditions flourished by practice; had they even been allowed books, most of them were illiterate anyways. There was little use in listening to stories of false hopes, so instead they would regale one another with folk tales of horrors and superstitions, as if there was mirth to be found in the belief there was something worse than their daily yoke. One elderly mare in particular had a penchant for telling such stories that each time her crackling, wheezy voice whined out another cautionary fable, chills trickled along her listeners' spines. Primrose half believed that this mare was the origin of those “old pony's tales”. She shared a shanty with the very pony, whose cruel laughter kept her awake some nights, as though her insomnia needed the help.

This elder among the labor caste had often told such absurd stories, but even she had given in to yarns so hopeful they must have been falsehoods, with notions so ludicrous that the other slaves feared punishment for even hearing them. Primrose had found such fables a meaningless exercise. Their lives of drudgery did not warrant more anguish from inciting fear. What was the point anyway in reminding each other of more powerful forces lurking out there when they were trapped in their abusive doldrums for life? It annoyed her, but what hurt her was when one of her peers would give in to despair and listen to the old mare's nonsense that once, there used to be hope. Such pabulum implied there could be such hope again, when there was nothing to hope for. Learning to cope with their lot in life should have sufficed them.

Instead, the old mare would harken them to such fancies of a time before King Sombra, when a crystal princess ruled over their empire with compassion, with the power to drive away all evil and keep the monsters at bay. Such words didn't help Primrose sleep at night, and they wouldn't have helped her awaken in the morning, either.

Primrose had become so lost in such thoughts that when she saw three ponies racing across the distance away from the other slave stables, she did not know at first if they were not nighttime things that ate of the living. When she guessed that some slaves had likely found their own doors by mystery unlocked and were making a break for it, she lost all better judgment and opted to join them. As she raced alone out into the fields of pitch grain, she decided she had nothing to lose. In her mind then, even the pain of punishment would be a gain of sorts. It would be something to have, to remind her that she could still feel.

She galloped across the fields without direction, racing against the intangible as fast as she could for as far as she could. The wind buffeted around her in fitful, chilling swoops. The tall of vegetation tickled at her sides and underbelly. She lost her self in the impulse of shedding her defenses, and there was no turning back now. She was somehow certain the night watch would have noticed a stray pony scampering about in the open by now, although she detected no signs of their stealthy forces yet. Ahead of her was a spreading wall of tall crystal corn stalks, and she ducked into the throng of them without thinking.

Though nopony bothered to explain why to the slaves, the stormtroopers' task of covering the empire in clouds for twelve hours a day was for the purpose of moisturizing the crops and plants below with drizzling mist. They cast the land in a periodic darkness, but the orange glow of the outer sky

could still be glimpsed beyond. As such, Primrose was shielded in darkness, with only the scarcest view of dense, hard cornstalks swaying all around her. They rustled loudly as she pushed her way aside them, getting thwacked by their rebound as they were very resilient in their rooting. A light danced out of the corner of her eye, and when she glimpsed this anomaly for the second time, she became aware of the distinct impression that she was not alone.

Not that anypony was ever alone under the watchful eyes of the Crystal Empire. This light, however, was nothing she'd ever seen before. It was a pale, ghostly glow that wandered only through her peripheral vision. The unicorn inquisitors rarely departed from their tower, so she did not suspect their magic to be at work. Once more the light passed by her as she ran, this time on the opposite side, and she was uncertain what phenomenon was transpiring. She veered away from its presence, unaware that its actions were shepherding her further into the cornfield. With each fleeting glimpse of the emanating entity, Primrose suspected more and more that some sapient creature was stalking her.

Could it have been the “crystal princess” the elder mare had spoken of? The significance of this was lost on Primrose's poorly educated mind. Her hooves ached with each step as she pushed herself to go faster. She galloped through the thick stalks, but their bold structures kept her from pushing them over as she liked. She caught her leg against one that would not bend and ended up swiveling her whole body around. She still attempted to move in the direction she'd been going, and collided with a heavy object. The image of a pony that had risen above her as a silhouette stole her breath away. It must have been the night watch, here to capture her! This was a mistake. She'd only bumped into one of the scarecrows; a straw effigy of a nondescript pony. It was a crude mannequin with a disgruntled lack of features. She was transfixed with watching the hay-stuffed homunculus, to ensure it could not come to life before her very eyes. When it did nothing of the sort, she felt the cold light whispering past her, and once more she set her hooves to motion.

She could no longer evade the circulating light which flickered closer to the front of her vision. The instant before she burst out beyond the edge of the corn field, a horrific equine face lunged out at her without warning, screaming or growling at her. Its visage was too brief to discern any specific features from. It was white, with gaping holes for eyes and a mouth, and Primrose felt as if her heart had stopped when it thrust out at her. A rising pressure deafened her ears, and for what felt like a minute she found herself soaring through the air as if she'd fallen down a never-ending chasm. Her legs were paralyzed in mid-stride, and her body had flung itself to the ground with a painful, scraping slide.

Primrose had a dim awareness of tangling a hind leg in some low string marking the boundary of some crops, and her hip ached from being jabbed with something. She was on her right side, panting heavily, feeling grains of dirt clinging into her fur. When she realized she could stand, she did so, and she told herself she had imagined her fears. Her mind was adrift as to what she should do next, and she scanned the area from whence she had come to see if she had indeed been pursued. She panned from right to left in haste, as though determined not to see it, as if telling herself that it could not see her if she managed not to.

There it was, and she passed right by it, noticing. The manifestation was worse, off in the distance, glaring at her with its lamentable expression, always keeping its hideous death mask where she overlooked to focus on it. It was a trick of the mind, tormenting her with this repulsive image of an empty, translucent face with nothing beneath its surface. She could not stop herself from turning back to stare at the spectral figure standing amidst the cornstalks, easily as tall as they were, and therein lied the crux of her mistake. There was a seething hiss like an exhalation in reverse, and in one sudden and terrible instant, the being was upon her again, leaping into her mind at the speed of her own thought not

to look. The last thing she felt was her own scream scratching up the walls of her throat and escaping into the frigid air.

02: “**The Frozen Fields**”

*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.
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!*

Even Bluster Haze dared not be late for this meeting. The way he was bouncing in place as though he were dancing on hot coals did little to ease his companions for King Sombra's presence. Cauldron thought he might convey the need to simmer down by nagging the pegasus. “I don't know how you've done it. You're not wearing anything, and still you manage to be unkempt and unpresentable. You have feathers sticking out and your mane's uncombed. How are you supposed to be seen before the ruler of the entire empire?” The unicorn nodded his horn in indication of these faults he found, his coal-gray bangs bouncing around its spiraling base. His mane was kept sleeked backwards, the older, silver pony ever ready for such dignified occasions as this. There was a slight touch of gold to his coat that Bluster had not noticed in the dark before.

“What? I'm just warming up for whatever adventure we've got going on this week!” Bluster ceased fidgeting to notice the unicorn's attention, then stooped low to stretch out his wings and try ruffling his light orange feathers into place. His short, lime-green mane was as unkempt as ever, sticking out in every which untamed direction, and he yanked his cutie mark of a confused whirlwind of clouds away from Cauldron's accusatory horn. Chuckling, his freckled, cherubic face grinned at the others who just now arrived to stand near him.

“This week?” The earth pony, Blitzkrieg, let out a groan of fatigue already. “I honestly hope you don't think we're going to have a repeat of that giant squid fiasco that frequently. This whole arrangement with the four of us independently colluding is highly irregular. Wise by our glorious leader's prognosis, but we still have our regular duties to attend to.” The cobalt-blue mare stumbled over her words a bit on the principle that it was too early in the morning for the shenanigans of her overzealous junior officers. Her teal and turquoise mane showed evidence that it had been hastily groomed, as though its relative shortness was an excuse not to fuss over it. Her tail was straight, ending in an otherwise frizzy poof that was something of a passing fashion a couple of weeks ago. In the morning, her cutie mark of a spiked ball could take on an altogether different meaning; one that entailed she could be most acerbic if her temper was crossed at this hour.

The three of them noted the presence of, but otherwise scarcely reacted to Anhedonia Thistle.

The moody, bat-winged thestral had barely uttered more than a few sentences on the task force's only mission to date. At least she was dressed in her customary helmet and bland bronze mask, as if to demonstrate that the night watch were sticklers for ceremony. Her violet fur bore a cutie mark of a bat spreading its wings before a full moon. Her midnight-blue mane jutted to her shoulders from underneath her chanfron. Blitzkrieg assumed Anhe suffered from the opposite but similar circumstance to her own; that she was dead tired. The thestrals were known for being nocturnal, and the current time was among the early hours of light.

They had not planned to meet up together before entering the throne room, but the four of them found themselves standing in the grand foyer, awaiting the descent of the spiral stairs overlooking the central balcony. They stood in the lowest floor of the Crystal Palace, which was situated in the empire's very center. Three equidistant staircases led down through the palace's legs and outside. This room was circular in design, with an open gap in the floor's center, surrounded by a railing, that allowed a view of the mosaic square below. Anhe was staring down at the mosaic tiling which sported the image of a jagged, black crystal that radiated out from the south in various obsidian columns. The sight was akin to looking down upon a stage from a gilded balcony. There were even players of a sort thereupon in the guise of jagged black statues vaguely reminiscent of ponies.

Up where she was, numerous corridors branched off along bridges towards other towers and other sections of the palace. The ceiling was textured in organic crystalline shapes, but the centerpiece looked like someone had stuck a wedding cake upside-down there. This portion, Anhe knew, could project downwards to reveal a staircase to the public section of Sombra's palace, namely his throne room. There was no ordinary way to access it from down here, and they were forced to wait for the providence of His Majesty.

Their continual loitering here had attracted notice at last, but not from their King. Three pint-sized ponies rushed in from one of the outlying corridors, laughing boisterously and in voices most manic. The trio of foals had donned some practice armor meant for the junior squads of the imperial forces. It was about a couple of sizes too large for them, although their high-pitched chattering was louder than the clanging metal. Together, they had about one suit of armor which they shared amongst themselves. The yellow-green earth filly with the saturate red mane donned a helmet that wobbled over her eyes or onto her shoulders. The white unicorn with a curly pink and lavender mane was weighted under a flanchard that nearly reached her knees. Colliding into her because she was tripping on some oversized greaves was an orange pegasus with a rugged purple mane and a manic look in her eyes. None of these three fillies had their cutie marks yet.

"Halt! Who goes there?" The earth pony showed a lot of gall by standing up to the four older, legitimate imperial officers. She had something of a drawl to her voice that the task force could not quite place.

The unicorn interrupted their chance to answer. "Answer Apple Core when she asks you a question! Now, now, now!"

"Now, just simmer down." Bluster took a step forward, but was forced to withdraw when the pegasus filly drew a rather blunt-looking spear at him.

Blitzkrieg took his place with a humorless frown, her imposing frame looming over the three fillies. "Your armor is ill-fitting, you're holding that spear wrong, and respect your superiors!"

Bluster gave a little shake and planted his hooves on the floor. Even Anhe felt the power in Blitz's commanding voice. Eager to impress, the three little fillies stood taller, but that was the extent of their compliance. The unicorn filly scowled with suspicion, however. "You haven't answered our question! You four are mighty suspicious loitering around here!"

"And who are *you*, some sort of junior inquisitorial squad?" Bluster asked with a smirk.

"Gee, maybe *that's* what we should've called ourselves, Dinner Bell," the pegasus said to the unicorn.

"I dunno, Toodleoo. I still like the Crystal Mercenary...Crew." Dinner Bell appeared uncertain.

"Doesn't that make us sound as if we're merciful?" Toodleoo asked, misinterpreting the middle word.

"You're both wrong! We're the Imperial Disposal Squadron, because we'll dispose of anypony who gets in our way!" said Apple Core.

Dinner Bell objected. "Uh, that just makes us sound like we're gonna take out the trash."

"Yeah, the rebels!"

Cauldron interrupted. "What, the rebels' trash?"

"You stay out of this!" The three fillies shouted in unison.

Cauldron responded with a withdrawing look that said, "Excuse me, I didn't even want to get involved." The conversation then lulled to a roaring stop, and the seven of them looked at each other in awkward silence, with either group expecting the other to say something else or move along. After a pregnant pause, Cauldron spoke up. "Is there more after intermission, or will you get this show on the road already?"

An over-dramatic gasp that lasted for far longer than was necessary exhaled from Dinner Bell. "That's it! Maybe we'll discover our cutie marks early if we perform little playlets on how awesome the Crystal Empire is!"

"Yeah, that's a great idea," Blitzkrieg said. "You go and do that." At long last, the three blank-flanked fillies were enthused enough in their own manic endeavors to take off out of the task force's figurative manes. There was a sneaking hint of something derogatory in the departing fillies' giggles. Once the scraping of their spear dragging along the walls receded out of earshot, Blitzkrieg deigned to comment. "Foals. Just fill you with the warm fuzzies, don't they?"

Cauldron mumbled something off the cuff. "Try living with them sometime." Blitz responded with a quizzical quirk of one brow. The four of them resumed what could have been a lengthy silence of pretending the others were not there until the spiral staircase commenced its descent from the ceiling. What looked to be an ornate layering of concave crystal descended and separated to form a flight of spiral stairs, with the very end reaching a small gate in the balcony's barrier. The four ponies stepped through the gate and ascended to the next floor where the massive, bold doors leading into Sombra's throne room were found ajar in wait for them.

Standing in King Sombra's presence was always a harrowing experience for his imperial soldiers. An unamused expression donned his regal brow. His eyes were half-lidded with boredom that tempered his patience. His sultry black coat and his leonine mane of ebony were lit by the light which streamed between his gallant tapestries. He appeared quite relaxed, sitting upon his throne with slack posture, to the point where it was hard to tell if he could hear his secretary bickering with some earth pony who was meeting with him. What didn't quite seem to fit the scene was the flock of tiny crystal ewes bouncing back and forth, gallivanting about his throne, bleating in blissful exuberance as they gamboled about in errant circles. Some were bright cerulean blue, others candy pink or butter yellow. Up and down they hopped, cavorting freely and without recognition for whose presence they defiled.

Sombra's secretary was a unicorn mare by the name of Cold Shoulder with an icy blue body and a straight azure mane. Her tail resembled a cluster of icicles, and her mane rippled high and gentle over her head, panning forward into a long, curly lick. She wore a pair of sad-looking crescent-shaped spectacles (that likely aided her to read in the typical darkness of his throne room), and a stiff collar with a frilled ascot. Her cutie mark resembled a coalescing stalactite of solid ice, with a dollop of water dripping off the end. "We're all very aware of the importance of the Crystal Empire's agriculture, Mr. Whiplash," Cold Shoulder was saying to the earth pony. "Our benevolent ruler, King Sombra (His Wisdom is Eternal), is the last pony who needs to hear that." She spoke with a clear, almost booming voice that was excellent for grabbing the listener's attention with crisp volume.

Whiplash was a crotchety-looking earth pony with a tan coat that looked mangled enough to have sweated a hard day's work in his lifetime. His shiny, jet mane was a tad unkempt, but raised high in front to be combed back where the idea was that it should curl off into neatly, albeit lazily cropped strands. It was not too unlike Cauldron's own manestyle, but had the look of physical enterprise rather than orderly conduct. Whiplash's cutie mark was akin to his namesake; a curved whip was striking something unseen.

Whiplash sputtered to break Cold Shoulder's concentration, and spoke in a gruff, commanding voice of his own. "What kind of blanket sentiment is that? Look, the plantation council just told me to come up here and say that there was some trouble at the north fields, that's all. I didn't expect a kind of imperial inquisition."

It was at this point that both Cold Shoulder and Whiplash noticed the task force's arrival. Amidst their paired expressions of mutual annoyance, they appeared somewhat surprised at the four's entrance. "Were you not expecting us?" Cauldron asked in this regard.

Cold Shoulder balked at this lack of formality. The task force's formation was still unorthodox, at least in her eyes, as evidenced by her own lapse in protocol. "The four of you will have to wait outside. His Majesty is clearly entrenched in an important meeting."

"Please. I insist." There was something unsettling about King Sombra's bid for manners. His aloof idiom of saying "please" might have seemed like a sign of weakness among lesser ponies, but it elevated him to a state of superior maturity. There was no mistake that despite his linguistic choice, he was commanding attention, not requesting it. Even the crystal ewes bounced into the background like subtle details which had played their part. "This happens to be just the sort of *interesting* predicament that I formed the task force for." Sombra crossed one foreleg over the other, allowing himself to get more comfortable in his chair. His demeanor was eerily impatient, but he permitted himself a delayed, taut smile.

Cold Shoulder bowed low. “Understood, Your Highness.” She then addressed the task force. An air of professional demand snapped them all out of the delusion that today would just be another tedious routine. This was going to be a long day of unknown trials that lay in store for them. “During the last dark period, an anomalous phenomenon transpired in the northern sector. The precise time is unknown. The cause is unknown. The motive and perpetrator are unknown.”

“But we know something happened, right?” Cauldron could not resist interrupting. It was a daring move in Sombra's presence, the others thought, but Anhedonia could have sworn she saw a subdued smirk play across the king's face.

The secretary pursed her lips in annoyance before continuing. “Yes, we know that much. There is a giant ice-like crystal sitting in the northern pastures. It hasn't responded to melting or breaking. As we have not yet gauged the threat of this situation, Mr. Whiplash has deemed it necessary to place the crystal ewes under protection.” Judging by her distended grimace, Cold Shoulder had little tolerance for the hopping, winsome animals that now chose to frolic in her direction.

Whiplash interrupted her, as if he found her assessment of the situation insubstantial. Their lackluster rapport was written all over their shared looks of consternation for each other. “It's smack dab in the middle of our crystal carrot crops, and this whole situation's made the labor caste skittish and even more of a nuisance to manage than usual. We're dealing with a bit more than an inconvenience here.”

Cold Shoulder donned a mask of incredulous apathy when she said, “Perhaps the task force can offer you an objective view on the matter.”

Whiplash scowled at the aforementioned quartet, and both Blitzkrieg and Cauldron couldn't help thinking Cold Shoulder's remark was not prone to facilitate an amicable cooperation with the earth pony. Worse yet, there was little else for them to discuss, leaving the crystal empire task force with little details to work from. Whiplash excused himself to tend to his daily business, for there was still work to be done in spite of the enigma, and the four were dismissed with their vague goal set of investigating and eliminating the phenomenon. Efficiency had to be upheld, after all. There was an awkward moment when both Cauldron and Blitz simultaneously acknowledged the commencement of their task to King Sombra. The two exchanged uncomfortable glances, and the group bowed in reverence before dispatching themselves from his audience. Anhedonia stole one final glance over her shoulder to witness the doors shutting in Sombra and the chancellor.

The group reasoned that they might as well have a look-see for themselves about this ice crystal that couldn't melt or chip. That was about all they could agree upon. “Uh,” Blitz said, for the purpose of tuning up her instrument. “Just for the record, I'm in charge here.”

Cauldron was ahead of her on their way down the stairs. “Oh? Would you like to go in front of me, then?”

Blitz did not take well to Cauldron's acerbic jibes. “I was in charge of our squad during the sewer expedition. The Imperial Army has the training for the sort of situations we'll be up against.”

“What *are* we doing, exactly?” Bluster asked. He was ignored.

“We’re both of equal rank in our respective vocations,” Cauldron said. “Besides which, now we’re appointed as the official Crystal Empire Task Force. And wasn’t it Anhedonia who technically routed the delinquent rebels?”

Anhedonia lifted her head, revealing that she had been paying attention; at least once her name had been mentioned. The others could not read her surprised and sheepish expression, so they assumed she did not object. “Perhaps she should be our leader,” Cauldron said with a smirk.

“I don’t...” Anhe started to mumble an objection, but she didn’t know what to say. Perhaps she’d been obedient for far too long to object to anything. She was still trying to wrap her head around this new appointment.

Bluster spoke up. “I thought the issued statement from the Inquisition was that we all helped.”

Cauldron said, “Yes, well, you can’t control the facts so easily if you’re sweating the details.”

Each of them only now noticed that the stairs were beginning to ascend before they’d quite gotten off. They quickened their pace, and Blitz hopped off before the staircase had finished departing from the foyer balcony. “Let me make this simple for you,” she said. “I’ll be in charge of all the important decisions, and you just do what I tell you. We’ll go take a look at this silly ice...thingamaguffin, and sleep on it. Sound fair?”

Nopony rebutted this. Either it was too early in the morning to argue with such hard-headed mentality, or none of them were concerned with her declaration of authority. Bluster remained in good spirits at any rate. “Maybe I should be the leader!” he said. Nopony bothered to challenge him, either. That would have required validating his proposal. “Since I can just fly over there and get there first!”

“Mustard, you’re not gonna--” Before Blitzkrieg’s interjection could register, Bluster was already soaring down through the opening in the base of the Crystal Palace. He veered in the approximate direction of north and was soon out of sight from them. “Condemn it, what if it falls over on him or something?”

Once they exited from the Crystal Palace, Cauldron stepped aside to allow Blitzkrieg to take point. She granted him a suspicious look, but moved on ahead. Cauldron said, “Lead on, leader,” then imitated her every motion to a T. He stopped on a Sombit when she paused, and he trudged on her heels when she set off again. When Blitz caught wind of Cauldron’s larking, she flashed him a withering glare, but as soon as she looked back he had dropped his game of mimicry.

When the party resumed their forward march, he smirked to Anhedonia who blushed behind her mask. He frowned as if he had expected to merit some reaction from her. “Do you really require the use of that mask at all times? I’ve never quite understood the practicality of it. It seems more for show than anything else.” He sure was talkative in the morning.

“Sometimes we’re required for stealth operations,” Anhe explained. “The masks discourage ponies from begging for sympathy.”

“Yes, the Inquisition wears something similar for intimidation. But doesn’t it leave room for doubt, to keep something hidden? How is a mask stealthy, anyway? At any rate, your cutie mark is still visible.”

“We apply cosmetics to change it.”

They had to stop talking then. They did not need to walk too far north from the palace to find their point of interest. The fields were flat for the most part, and a funny shape was visible even at this distance, jutting high above the tallest stalks of crystal corn. As they drew closer, more of its features came into view. The crystalline structure had a clear upwards burst pattern to its shape, with jagged peaks frozen in all directions, as if a puddle had been obliterated by a heavy rock. The object lacked symmetry; its axis leaned at a very slight tilt. As they came nearer, Cauldron likened it to a fulgurite—a solidified lightning strike, here rendered as a violent ice sculpture. It was either that or a meteorite that had become stopped in time at the very moment of its impact. It sprouted high above them, two stories at the very least.

The one-and-a-half-story bolt of ice was barely translucent, and upon closer inspection, one could make out the indistinct silhouette of a pony immobilized within. The misshapen monolith was not alone. Two imperial unicorns could be seen inspecting the puzzling edifice. Far off from this pair, working in the fields, Whiplash was supervising an extensive chain gang of labor caste ponies tending to the crystal berries. The ornery stallion gave a snide glance their way every so often, but the task force opted to focus on their own work.

Blitzkrieg was the first to notice something was amiss. “Where in Tartarus is that nincompoop, Shoestore?”

“Buh bame ib Bubba.” The voice, obviously impeded from the sound of it, originated from the opposite side of the frozen structure. When the other members of the task force peered around it to inquire why its source had such a strange mode of speech, they found the pegasus propped up on his hind legs with his tongue stuck to the icy surface.

Their reaction was less than impressed. “Bluster, *why* would you do something so careless?” Cauldron had not seen such a display of brazen foolishness in quite some time. From the tone of his voice, Anhe couldn't tell if he wasn't just a tiny mote impressed.

“Bi buhboe,” Bluster said. Annoyed, Blitzkrieg decided against prevaricating further, and she gripped Bluster around his midsection to commence prying him from the frigid xenolith. She grunted in frustration as she fought against his tongue's adherence, and Bluster made pained yacking sounds as he feared losing a good deal more than a few taste buds. After a second longer, Anhedonia joined in, tugging on the oafish pegasus while Cauldron stood and watched in a most unhelpful fashion. He was tempted to concede his aid just when the three managed to yank themselves into a painful heap, scrunching some of the crops underneath their weight. He caved in to the urge to press his hoof to his face in dismay.

“My tongue feelth fat.” Nopony heeded Bluster's complaint. Now that his nonsense had been dealt with, the collective task force could notice the aura of the frost-laden glacier. There were tiny plumes of smoke wafting off of its surface, like when one sees one's own breath on a chilly day. Each of them even felt a distinct chill in the air, a drop in temperature which had been so subtle that none of them noticed as they approached. Anhedonia and Bluster wrapped their own selves up tight in their respective wings while the older two of their group frowned and bore their discomfort.

Blitz addressed the two templars who'd been watching them in polite (awkward) silence. “So,

what's the story here, gents?"

The templars were ponies of action, and tended to relate well to the earth ponies of Sombra's army. The butter-yellow unicorn with the curly orange tail spoke up. His cutie mark was that of color bending through a prism. "So far, this bloated icicle's not acting like ice. We've tried kicking it and melting it, but nothing's done the trick. Cinders here is our hottest torch, though. We're gonna see if he can't turn this neve into a mound of slush tout suite."

Cinders must have been the dark scarlet unicorn standing with him. His cutie mark showed a white-hot flame upon his flank. The task force took a smart step away while Cinders stretched himself out, rolling his head upon his shoulders to relax his muscles.

"Maybe you just didn't kick it hard enough," Blitzkrieg said. She too was stretching out, reaching her hind legs in turn as far as they could go. Everypony waited as she positioned her tail towards the enormous icicle, and then drew in her hind legs. She kicked backwards with both at once, bucking mightily at the standing iceberg with all her renowned strength. There was a noisy "doong" sound as her hooves collided with the glacial body which reverberated and grew in sound. Like an echo, her hind legs shook in response, and her whole frame started wobbling against its will. She toppled to the ground with a dizzied expression. "The heck's that thing made out of? It's harder than diamond!"

"Methinks the lady exaggerates a bit much," Cauldron said.

"You bibn't eben mayg a bent," Bluster said. Cauldron and Blitzkrieg threw him a look before the latter stood up.

Before the unicorns had yet to deploy their own attempts, Cauldron had another question. "So who's the snow cone?" He was referring to the silhouette trapped within the lopsided, spiky pillar.

"Hm? Oh, some labor pony. Probably escaped in the middle of the night, then got caught in this. She's gonna be in big trouble when we demolish this thing."

"Quite," Cauldron said, observing Cinders testing out a jet of bombastic flame that spurted from his horn. "Have you tried any other methods, apart from burning it?"

"Like how?" asked the butter-colored unicorn.

"Perhaps dissolving it with acid or something."

"Ooh, are you gonna melt it down, Cauldron?" Bluster's voice was starting to regain its coherency.

"Well, I didn't bring any such solutions with me," said Cauldron. "One can't just spontaneously generate material. But at any rate, that wouldn't do, or you'd damage the pony inside. How about pouring water on it?"

Only Anhedonia did not balk at Cauldron in confusion, and this was because of her mask (as usual). In actuality, she was the only one who trusted him to explain for her benefit. The others dared to look incredulous, as if expecting some brand of obtuse joke. Cauldron swallowed the lump of chagrin in his throat and elaborated. "Well, as you may know," (doubt occurred to him then,) "water only

becomes ice below a certain temperature. It remains water while above this point. Even if fire is hotter, the rate of heat transference is greater with a fluid than with a gas. Just pour some water on this obstacle and the coefficient of thermal expansion ought to crack it right open in no time flat.”

Bluster, Blitz and the two unicorns eyed one another as if each thought he or she had missed the punch line. After a moment, they dispersed. “Yeah, we’ll try that right after we sing a lullaby to it, too,” Blitzkrieg remarked.

“I like my licking it idea,” Bluster said. The feeling must have been returning to his tongue. Blitzkrieg griped over her lack of a sledgehammer, thinking the mace cannon on her right foreleg might not have enough spring to it.

Cauldron just looked bored with the lot of them. For now he had spent his questions, and stood by to watch Cinders attempt incinerating the object. As he predicted, the unicorn was showing little reward for his efforts, which only sparked a suspicion that this grotesque lance of ice was indeed of unnatural origin. If the frozen blight was not prone to melting or blunt force trauma, they would have to up their ante. After a pensive silence, Cauldron dared to speak again. “Bluster, I don’t suppose the pegasi scheduled a localized, freak hailstorm, did they?”

“Uh, I don’t think so, but I could ask them.” Bluster took a few running steps, then leapt into the air.

“I’ll order the rookies around, thank you very much,” Blitzkrieg said. Bluster screeched to a halt and came sailing back down to the group.

Cauldron’s face was inflicted by a perpetual grimace today. “By all means. How do *you* propose we solve this issue?”

Blitz bore a similar ill humor. “We just let these templars take care of it. I’m sure they’re more than capable. We shouldn’t expect giant octopodes to attack us every time King Sombra (Genius Ruler of All) makes a request.”

“It was a squid.” Nopony was listening to Anhedonia. Bluster looked shocked at nothing in particular, but no pony was paying him any mind, either.

“And we simply repeat ad infinitum every time a new ice structure emerges? We still don’t know what caused this phenomenon. Covering your mouth when you cough doesn’t cure the common cold, you ken.”

Blitzkrieg’s patience was also dwindling. “Well I don’t know! How about this: We each just do what we think is best. Then we report back to King Sombra (Forever Wise!) tomorrow morning.” Behind them, Cinders continued spraying the shining conglomerate of ice with flame to little or no avail.

“Ah. A deadline. Our priorities are intact.”

“Er, what should I do?” Bluster asked.

Another burst of flame heated the air around them. Blitz gritted her teeth. “You go ask the

stormtroopers what they know about any strange weather phenomena last night, and have them clear the clouds over this area.”

Cauldron almost succumbed to making another snide remark, but decided he was chiding himself more than Blitzkrieg through them. He severed his antagonism and turned tail instead. “I’ll be in my lab, researching.”

“Pfft. Egghead.” Blitz watched the older stallion go, herself now left behind with only Anhedonia and the two busy templars. The thestral looked back at her, so she said, “Alright, Thistle. We’re gonna guard this thing all dark shift if we need to. For now I think these unicorns have matters under control, so be ready by evening.”

Hours of study passed at Cauldron’s desk. Weathered tomes of yellowed parchment were stacked upon his desk so there was little room left but for the book he was at the moment perusing. He had had them organized to begin with by books he hadn’t yet opened. He’d created a stack of books he’d looked through already, a secondary stack for books he wanted to get back to, and then divided the original selection into books he wanted to read afterward because the pile was still too tall. The portly unicorn, Stillpond, who worked across from him was himself engrossed in the pages of some daily reports for the sake of transcribing some mundane minutiae for cross-referencing. All it took was time, and Cauldron’s mind would meander to contemplating why Stillpond had not yet been transferred down below with the other mediocre scholars. He did not think he could bear the disruption of certain dubious colleagues taking his place. Stillpond may have been a bore, but he was most respectful.

Boring. Could they bore into the ice sculpture and weaken its structure from within? He frowned to himself, thinking that if he’d been in charge, they would have had numerous methods attempted long before requesting the task force’s aid. Perhaps King Sombra (Never Knowing Fear) desired to see how they would fare in their unexampled responsibilities. If that was the case, then perhaps it would have behooved Cauldron to be studying more pertinent research, as opposed to digressing as he was into other such disciplines as the possibility of a pony surviving being frozen solid.

Cauldron had become so immersed in his reading that he never noticed Bluster enter the room. Instead of announcing his presence, the silly pegasus flitted up behind Cauldron and read over the older pony’s shoulder in silence, or at least tried. In due time, Cauldron became dismally aware of heavy, obnoxious breathing, and he turned to fix the hapless junior stormtrooper with a half-lidded stare. After watching Bluster’s eyes rove up and down the page in all the wrong directions, Cauldron spoke up. “Could you keep this a laconic visit? I have quite a bit of revision to get through here for our current quandary.” He did not mention his blooming lack of faith in the research tower’s security. Stillpond looked over at them, but minded his own business, demonstrating an exemplary affinity for focusing his attention despite the audible distraction of conversation.

“Oh. Right. I just came here to tell you that the pegasi definitely did not have any sort of unusual weather plan or accidental munitions discharge. The tower turrets don’t even point inwards that way anyhow.”

“Hm. Do you do much reading, Bluster Haze?” Cauldron asked.

“Hah, no, not really. The stormtroopers showed me everything we’re supposed to know: How to identify different types of clouds and determine precipitation. Things like that.”

Again Cauldron hummed in thought. “I was thinking that slave—er, labor pony who got trapped inside the ice could possibly describe the anomaly as it occurred. It's unorthodox, yes, but when you're not privy to the truth, sometimes one must chisel away at it.”

“But isn't it a little late for that?”

“Well, I've found no record of survivors encased in ice, but there are a fair few tales of ponies enduring similar conditions; either in the severe cold or else with all bodily activity reduced to its bare minimum. It seems unscientific, but stranger things have occurred.” Cauldron slipped one of the binding-sewn bookmarks in between the pages of his current text and shut the tome with a heavy thud. “What we could really use are the censored resources in the Crystal Library, but even we unicorn come under scrutiny to visit there let alone borrow material.”

Bluster had stopped paying attention some time ago. He was now flipping through Cauldron's books, searching for any pictures whatsoever. He must have found one, because he let loose with a loud, voracious laugh that startled both unicorns in the room with him. “Look at this! It looks like a chicken with a snake body! Who came up with that one?”

“A pony named Cockatrice who liked it so much he named himself after it,” Cauldron said. Bluster couldn't tell if he was joking or not, and the jest sailed straight over the pegasus' head. “I suppose I was rambling, but at least warn me when I'm wasting my breath. I do so enjoy the sting of shame.”

“I was listening!” Bluster was using the liberal sense of the word here, as listening is more active than just hearing someone. By a sheer fluke, he had caught wind of some of what his superior had said. “What good're the books in the Crystal Library? Aren't they all forbidden?”

“Except to those of the highest order of Templar. They contain dangerous knowledge, but I'm not ready to go overboard just yet.” Cauldron noticed Stillpond peering around his papers and past his spectacles at him. He was going to be the snitch of him one day, wasn't he? “Here in the research laboratory, we keep our own pertinent repository for convenience's sake, so it's just right for our practical needs.”

“Oh, right! You test stuff and stuff here, and other things like that, right?” Bluster's wings jutted out as he scanned the room with a renewed zeal. These days, it looked more like they did little else but while away the hours reading, perhaps to jog the memory of some higher-up when such a pony came calling. Though there were books crowding the desks along with organized files and quills in jars of ink, the workbenches and shelves that lined the room were strewn with noxious tinctures and curious odds and ends. There was more than one abacus (one looking fairly broken with its beads missing and railings uneven), weights and measures to match, and even a small tankard with a bendable tube of sorts now lost in the corner and holding other scientific objects. Much of it was covered in dust, a lot of the labels on flasks now cracked and faded out of legibility. Upon close inspection, Bluster even spied a window hidden behind some outcroppings of shelved trinkets, its glass smudged and dirtied to permit only the dimmest hues of light to pass through. Bluster wondered how long some of this bric-a-brac had been deposited here, and it did not dawn on him that Cauldron and Stillpond were not permanent fixtures.

“Mainly our patience.” Cauldron muttered this beneath his breath. He had just opened a book to trawl through the rote subject of alchemy when Bluster dropped a most curious black crystal upon the

page. “What's this?”

“I found this down in the sewer, when that overgrown fish splattered ink all over me,” said Bluster.

“It's a mollusk, actually.”

“I thought it was a crystal.”

“No, no. *This* is indeed a crystal. It looks the wrong shape for onyx. More like a radial beryl.” Cauldron observed the prism's ebony luster and branching, clustered shape. It was a diminutive specimen, and when he plucked it off the paper to feel its weight, he was dismayed to find a puddle of ink staining his book. He clunked the crystal onto a narrow patch of open desktop and dabbed fierce, nervous gestures at the ink with a hoofkerchief. Stillpond made a subtle move to slide his work further onto his own desk. Extracting solvents wasn't a trifling matter, even for the magically inclined. “Have you been carrying around this filthy thing for all this time?”

“I dunno. I don't have any ink on my hooves.” Dirt and grime, sure, but other than that, Bluster's walking extremities were devoid of black, indelible goo.

Cauldron had to look thrice to consider these ramifications. “Spontaneous generation? Even that's beyond us unicorn.” He drew a blank piece of parchment and sat the inky stone upon it. “Witness a small experiment, Bluster. Every mystery has a method to it. It's all a matter of avoiding assumptions and instead making rational observations. Unlike some of my contemporaries, I choose not to see things in absolutes.” Cauldron paid no heed to Stillpond's grimace at these provocative words.

Bluster was slack-jawed with interest. At Cauldron's behest, he gave the small crystal another prod, keeping his hoof upon its irregular, jutting surface until his bodily warmth fed into it. Cauldron was amazed at what he saw, although there was little to see. Around the somewhat flat base of the crystal, beads of rich, black ink formed. When Bluster noticed this himself, he raised the crystal off the paper where more ink had pressed into a definite icon, much like a stamp does. Black coloring soaked the parchment, and noticeable white lines were formed in the shape of an ear of crystal corn.

“That reminds me, I'm hungry!” Bluster said.

“Tell me, would I be correct in asserting that food is at the forefront of your periodic thoughts?”

“A little butter, a little salt. Boil the water first, *then* let the corn soak. Delish!”

Cauldron sat up on his rickety stool so that it rattled beneath him. “Bluster, fetch me the canister marked 'NaCl'. ”¹

The task was a trifle for the pegasus, who flitted up to the high shelf and back down again with the container in question. Of course, he had almost upset the adjacent phials and decanters in the process. “One 'nackle' coming up!” He slammed the jar down on Cauldron's desk. “What is it?”

“You've said it yourself.” Cauldron turned open the lid and revealed the mound of white

¹This notation is a technical translation from the Old Equestrian language.

granules within. “Not many ponies bother to know of the Empire's history, in spite of the dregs downstairs writing it so diligently, but in olden times, it's said the Empire was founded around massive salt deposits, and salt is one of the earliest crystals of the Empire's expansive history.”

“So we *are* having corn?” Bluster appeared dubious. “And what's the story on my crystal?”

Cauldron shook a little sample of salt into its container's lid to show it off. “Your magic rock will have to wait. We're going to use this to thaw some ice. That is, if Blitzkrieg sees fit to using what we know, as opposed to what we don't.”

Thestrals had a keen sense of the passage of time. In that era, timepieces were quite primitive compared to today's mechanical devices, and therefore could not be relied upon heavily. Without such rote measurements available, most creatures had developed a sort of innate internal clock. When the Crystal Empire was shadowed in pervasive darkness, the thestrals surpassed the performance of any other imperial soldier, as they did not require a light source.

In response to Blitzkrieg's deadline of returning during the dark hours, Anhedonia had returned to her quarters to rest up. Conserving energy was a conflicting chore to schedule when three members of her squad operated at the opposing turn of the hourglass. She had the good habit of waking early to prepare for her night's work in both body and mind. With the spare time available to her, she toyed with the idea of reporting in to King Sombra what little progress they had made thus far.

Did she even have anything to report, really? They hadn't broken the ice; neither had they discovered the cause of the anomaly. For a fleeting instant, she felt it would be good to speak with King Sombra at any rate, but it did not dawn on her that this was a personal desire rather than a utilitarian one. Getting an audience was not a simple matter. As she approached the retractable staircase in the palace foyer, Anhe recollected that any such visitations were the sole decision of Sombra's whim. Even though she had made the active decision to wait in the grand foyer, she still was much surprised to see the staircase descending just for her presence. Apprehension slowed her ascent step by step, and she exerted the force of climbing a small mountain just to pull herself to the next floor.

Anhe couldn't even feel her own breathing. She knew this wordless invitation was more than happenstance. Her trust for the king was implicit, and yet treading up these steps deafened her. Her own hoof steps reverberated upwards through her legs in a way that numbed her. Dull thuds pounded in her ears in a repetitive drumbeat, the source of which she knew not where. It left a strange kind of empty void right in the middle of her, in as specific a region as her chest. It was a cold lump, but one she could not pinpoint as it shuffled about when she walked. In the process of dreading all these worrisome sensations, she found herself standing outside the ludicrously tall doors that shielded the throne room.

Anhe dared to tread up close, and discovered the door was open just enough for a pony to squeeze through. The night watch mare's urge to peer inside with delicacy was too strong to resist. When she gazed inwards, the room was cast in darkness, the windows were all open, and she couldn't see anypony within. At least, not at first. When she heard King Sombra's deep, rich voice bidding her, “Come in,” she spotted him standing in the shadow of his throne. He was all alone. There wasn't a trace of Cold Shoulder or any other pony within. Without hesitation, she obeyed. He spoke again, not wasting his words. “Tell me of the task force's progress.”

He truly did know what was on her mind, she thought. She did not linger in the doorway, and approached him, bowing a respectful distance away from him. “Your majesty, we have observed the

anomaly. It resists great heat and pressure. We believe a pony of the labor caste may be frozen within. Cauldron has been researching alternate methods of disposal. We...have not disposed of it, nor discerned its causation.” Her voice faltered when she assessed there was no substantial progress to speak of.

As she spoke, King Sombra moved over to one of the enormous stained glass windows and peered through its glossy surface through which the orange sky's light was transmogrified. Anhe allowed her attention to drift up this particular window. Using state-of-the-art glazier techniques of the period, a full pictorial scene was depicted in its multicolored glass. The depiction may have been crude, almost to the point of abstraction, but to Anhedonia, the image's significance was apparent. A fierce and terrible dragon, etched out in all its vicious height, had its jaws and claws turned skywards. Its spiked tail was lashing like a mace for the unmistakable likeness of King Sombra himself, whose magic was radiating outwards in the most intricate rings of emerald, ruby and amethyst. The dragon was set upon its own wings, with an unidentifiable hole of insufficient size waiting to swallow up the voracious beast. Its jet-gray scales appeared flexed into readiness, like the fur along a frightened cat's back. Anhe knew this as the scene of King Sombra's earliest, most important triumph, in subjugating the mightiest of the dragons to protect the Crystal Empire itself.

The next window over could not have been a month old, and yet Anhedonia had no recollection of construction occurring to install this one. Its image depicted four imperial soldiers surrounding an enormous long-tailed, bear-like creature by each corner. Chains connected the ponies to the ferocious central figure in order to bind it and cease its rampage over the suburbs of the southeast sector. This event *had* transpired in Anhedonia's memory, and though she personally had not been in a position to lend any crucial aid, she could still remember the terrible roars and the thundering booms of fighting and stomping. Such recollections made her blood boil. To threaten the empire was an offense. Above all, she could also recall a pressing need to serve her empire, the compulsion to join in the occasion to fight, to war, to do violence on her monarch's behalf.

“I'm sorry,” she said aloud. “Progress has been slow. I do not know what I should do.” She was scared to move, but she had followed Sombra towards his window nonetheless.

He turned back to her, his mellow expression giving her the impression that his gaze could always penetrate the mask she wore. “As always, you should choose to do as you believe, and to believe as I do. To serve me is to serve yourself. That is duty.”

Anhe always had to wait to respond to him. She would not intend to disrespect him through ill-chosen words, and yet to her, he was so deliberate in speech. “I could never be as capable as you, my lord.”

Sombra looked back through a translucent pane in the window. The light from outside bathed his hide in muted color. “The position I have placed you in pits you above your allies. You should enforce the law, not fear to disobey it. I formed the task force with the express purpose that you would rise above hesitation.” He turned his eyes upon her once again because his next words were important. “By your fealty, you must comprehend the reason for your limits.” By looking back out of the window, he was leaving Anhedonia to muse over what he had said.

Was he telling her that, within sanity, the task force should go above and beyond their call of duty? That was how his words sounded to her, but she could not imagine what he might explicitly meant by them. “My lord, what if I should fail you?” He gave her an astounded look. “Never in fealty,”

she added. “But in the doing of this task?”

He showed her an assured smile. “There can be no failure for you, Anhedonia Thistle. The Empire subsists on everypony fulfilling their role. It exceeds the sum of its parts. I would not mourn the loss of one labor pony, were I you. Lost sheep long for their shepherd.”

Blitzkrieg waited at the edge of the northern fields. She too had taken a rest, albeit a nap of further brevity than Anhedonia. At first she intended to wait with stoic determination, unmoving until the thestral's arrival. Distraction came from within, and spontaneous thoughts crowded her mind, asking her what she hoped to prove by making herself immobile. Did she think she could out-soldier a certain somepony else, who had once been a professional partner of sorts, and abandoned her to become her rival? Tarnished Shield's schism still stung in her mind, reminding her that one day she could be replaced. The opinion that she could be obsolete was a most unpleasant thought to imagine.

She decided such self-deprecating ponderances were unbecoming of her. Instead, she became impatient for Anhedonia's arrival, even though the night watch mare was not yet due to show. Realizing that there were more productive things to do with her time than standing around humbling herself, Blitzkrieg set off to patrol the perimeter of the northern fields. It was a vast production to feed an entire empire, and it took many squads of labor ponies to tend the whole thing in a day. The dark hours came upon her before she could finish one lap, and she decided to cut the patrol short in favor of meeting with Anhedonia. The thestral in question was already loitering in the cold by the time Blitz got back.

“Ready, rookie?” was Blitz's greeting.

Anhe gazed in the direction of the glacial landmark, unchanged from how it had looked this morning (other than lighting aspects). “Have they made no progress on the anomaly yet?”

“Not a budge. Cauldron made some remark about a supply run, then alluded to being certain the problem would sort itself out.” Blitz narrowed her eyes in the direction of the templars' tower. “We don't need his help, anyhow. It's time for us to do our job. We shall patrol the northern sector all shift if we have to, keeping an eye out for suspicious scoundrels, conniving criminals, irascible rogues. That sort of thing.” The two opted to walk as they talked, and they headed in the direction of the labor housing whilst doing so.

“Speaking of patrols, did the night watch mares not see anything last night?” Neither of them could come to terms with mentioning how daring Blitzkrieg had been to ask such a question. Even the lowest-ranked members of the night watch warranted fearful ostracism by the other legions of the imperial army.

At any rate, Anhedonia demonstrated no qualms against answering. “Last night I did not have patrol duties, and I typically watch the east sector, so I would say, evidently not.”

“What, none of the other night watch mentioned anything? You thestrals sure aren't a talkative lot, are you?” Blitzkrieg cocked her head to one side, but Anhedonia's statuesque repose answered her question for her. “I guess not.”

The sky was orange with twilight all of the time. The Crystal Empire was lit by high torches of green and violet flame, but for half of the day, two massive beacons were ignited atop two watchtowers that stood situated on either side of the Crystal Palace. Adequate lighting demanded the luminosity of

both watch towers to save on overstocking flambeaus throughout the empire. These were extinguished for half of the day to replenish the magical energy required as expenditure for their lighting. Another reason was that during this period, everypony was expected to be at home after curfew, usually asleep. “Day” referred to the period while these torches, Deimos and Phobos, were lit. “Night” identified the time during which they were unlit. More often than not, these were just referenced as the “light” or “dark hours”. Simply rotating which torch was lit would not have been expedient, and the imperial infrastructure had grown accustomed to its routine.

The night watch, made up of thestrals with acuity in dark vision, watched over the night, while subdivisions of the earth pony law authority maintained the day watch. A few earth ponies would carry lanterns of luminous bugs or sometimes flame as Blitzkrieg now carried, or the inquisitorial templars would rely on their magic horns to light their way. Pegasi did not have a large role in internal security. The duties of the stormtroopers were to keep the skies clear or rainy as the crops' needs warranted, and to keep a watchful eye on the borders.

The rural pastures of the northern sector were devoid of nightlife. Even Anhe could not detect the presence of her fellow thestrals, although she could have pointed out likely perches with ease, where they would lurk in patient observation of any rule-breakers down below. The open spaces of farmland meant such vantage points were few and far between, and when she and Blitz passed between the fields of wheat and crystal corn, their wavering stalks grew too tall to see much over. Anhe pushed off the dirt and glided in near-silence a couple of feet above Blitz. To Blitzkrieg, all the colors were muted in the darkness, constrained to a dim, green-gray hue. To Anhedonia, the brilliant, earthy colors appeared to glow, separating each differing object from one another. Anything within her field of vision could be picked out with ease, while Blitz relied on the flickering light of her lantern to shine her own way.

“See any snipes yet?” Blitzkrieg muttered this sarcastic riff underneath her breath.

Anhe's excellent thestral hearing heard her, however. “I see no birds of any kind,” she said. Blitz chose not to reply, and without speaking, the two continued their search for any suspicious activity. The next thing to happen was Blitzkrieg's lantern dimming and fussing, as though it were losing the impetus to remain alight. Anhe chose to give her wings a brief respite, and landed beside Blitz. All the recent nagging from the task force had incited an urge within her to attempt conversation. “If it would be more practical, you could leave the dark hours to the night watch.”

“The leader of this task force should be involved in its efforts. In the imperial army, the soldiers I lead are my responsibility. This is no different.”

“I think of King Sombra (May He Reign Eternal) as our leader.”

Blitz was caught off-guard. “Well, naturally. We operate like an extension of his will.”

“I thought, then, we'd just perform our duties as we see fit to serve him. I suppose we could also just follow the leader's instructions.”

“There is a difference between leading and commanding,” Blitz said. “And there are ways of getting the most use out of one's assets. Rest assured that I will find your strengths as well, Onyx

Thistle.”²

Anhe could think of no reply. She gave Blitzkrieg a wider berth, and after a few steps further, she took to her wings again. This time, she noticed some activity coming from the direction of the dilapidated little shacks that constituted the plantation housing.

Any other type of pony might not have picked out the shadows moving through shadows, but Anhe could see they were ponies. Escaping laborers, by the looks of them. “Shirkers,” she said to Blitz. “Heading into the fields.”

Blitzkrieg broke off into a gallop at Anhe's direction. “I will never understand their abandonment for their duty,” Blitz said. “If you or I betrayed our work, it would put the empire's safety in jeopardy.”

“They've gone in different directions. They're attempting to lose us in the vegetation.” Anhe split off in one direction, while Blitzkrieg took another. Gliding overhead, Anhe had the superior view of the rustling plants below her. She dove down close, hovering above the flagellating stalks where she estimated the fleeing slave to be. She waited to ambush him or her upon emergence from the wheat, but a stone came hurtling upwards within an inch of her wing, forcing her to angle away from her target.

Blitz had to still her own hooves and focus on listening for where the escapees were disturbing the crops. The lighting was only adequate, and dashing around, making the lamp's light swing around like so did not improve visibility. She skirted the perimeter of the plot of crystal corn, but she soon admitted that there would be little hope of catching up to the deserter if she did not delve within. Pushing between the myriad evenly-spaced stalks reminded Blitz of being submerged in water. The imperial infantry trained its soldiers for every manner of passable terrain. In point of fact, during one such training session, Blitzkrieg had had to rescue a fellow trainee from drowning. Pushing against the pressure of water on all sides had inspired her to similar exercises by which she honed her strength. She did not flinch in the slightest now when the thick, rough stalks battered against her after she pushed them aside. Tracking may not have been her forte, but the cluttered terrain failed to slow her down one iota.

A lingering wind swung low, teasing the tips of the crystal corn and tossing the budding ears into a rhythmic chorus of motion. The colors may have been a sight to behold, but their beauty meant nothing to the thestral. Anhe could no longer discern the fleeing pony's location at a glance, and her tracking skills were pushed to their limits. As her certainty dwindled, she zigzagged through the air, indecisive about what her next move should be. She flew up high to expand her field of vision, and waited for the deserter to emerge from some side. This was a poor tactic, for she could not see in every direction at once and had no ideal method of guessing in which way the pony might attempt escape, and he or she no doubt planned to stage a clever retreat if possible. Her luck would hold out for now as her peripheral vision caught sight of a figure bursting out into the open, only to recede into the neighboring acre of high foliage in the blink of an eye. Hovering up here and watching him or her dart about below was of little use; Anhe knew she would have to dive in after her quarry sooner or later.

Leaves swatted across Blitzkrieg's face no matter how she tried to push them away. She barreled through the corn without concern for the crops' well-being. Soon she was no longer relying on sight so much as determined hope that if she kept on going straight, she might collect her target. Up ahead, a

²Referring, of course, to Anhedonia's rank.

pony had become pinched between two hefty cornstalks, his stamina wearing thin from fighting his way out. Blitzkrieg caught him in her sights and forced her way towards him, only to be blind-sided a couple of feet away by a sudden tackle to her side. She was caught right behind the ribs by a mare she had not expected, and in spite of herself, Blitz found her hooves tangled around broken eaves. The mare stood there in shock until realizing she would have to use every instant to muster an escape from the formidable soldier.

“Run!” the mare shouted to the stallion. “Whatever happens, I *will* find you!” The stallion obeyed, and the pair of them took off through the cornstalks, fighting their way through for their very lives.

“That's *my* line!” Blitzkrieg shook off the impact and kicked her way upright. From what she had seen of the pair, they both appeared young. Perhaps younger than herself, not that she cherished the thought. Both were earth ponies; the stallion was scrawny and pale, and the mare was of stockier build and blue hue with a contrasting mane. Blitz knew that a split second could be all that was needed for them to choose another hiding place, and once she bustled out of the corn field, following only noise, they were nowhere to be seen in front of her.

Almost beyond her periphery, Anhedonia spotted a fugitive. She had been looking towards the opposite direction, and if one more second had been spared in the deserter's dash, Thistle may not have caught sight of him at all. Even so, she could still hear his hoof-beats pounding against the dry dirt paths that squared off each massive acreage of dense crops. He must have decided that hiding amongst them would slow his escape, and perhaps this was not as foolhardy a strategy as Anhe expected. The escaping stallion could run quite fast, and even gliding after him by gravity's aid did not shorten his distance from her.

That did not mean he was out of her grasp. Anhedonia unholstered from her opposite foreleg a weapon that resembled a sickle attached to a long chain. Since she had procured this blade from beneath the sewers when the rebel Forlorn Hope had lost grip of it, Anhe had it polished and refurbished to service her own needs. She had little time for taking aim or whirling the chain about to feel the right momentum. When she hurled the sharpened sickle towards the fleeing pony, the chain whipped around wide and entangled around his back right hoof. He kicked out at the air as his leg was held in place, his body upturning and collapsing to the ground with a grunt. He fell on his chest and banged his chin upon the earth. Anhe closed in, and at the same time reeled in her weapon.

That was when an impenetrable, dark fog burst in front of her face. Anhe's field of vision blurred into pitch darkness that even her thestral eyes could not pierce through. She almost gave up her hold on her weapon, at first trying to wipe the eyes of her mask in case they had been covered. She sputtered at the dryness of the air around her as it crept underneath, and realized some form of dense, heavy smoke was clouding around her very being. In blindness, she swayed off to one side, further and further to her left, but the shrouding matter would not dissipate. She could feel the tension of her weapon slacken, and there were several tugs to it, but she would not rescind her grip. The chain went limp, and she realized that her prey had gotten loose.

Grunting in annoyance, Anhe felt the ground rush up under her hooves. She could not find the extent of the smog's vicinity, and when enough seconds had passed for her to take proper stock of her new situation; she started beating her wings at the air around her. By minute gradations, the darkness thinned out, and she could confirm that some manner of powder lingered in the air and on herself. Somepony had struck her blind for a time with this black dust, and she hadn't even noticed the slightest

clue of their definite presence.

Blitzkrieg grew furious at her momentary failure. One brief slip-up in keeping her eyes on the prize, and she now found herself immobilized with indecision, peering every which way into the night to spot her prey. Little time was spent before she commenced a search for the freshest hoof-prints by the light of her lamp, but every second was precious to the chase.

Though many a pony had come and gone throughout the course of the light hours, their hoof prints were uniform. They indicated a slow, plodding movement in linked droves which walked back over their own paths at the end of the long day's hard labor. Thus it was not difficult to discern the heavy indentations of hooves running in a panic in any which way. Blitzkrieg spotted what appeared to be a single set of tracks leading further off into the fields. The follower could have mimicked the leader's steps to throw her off. The only other imprints headed back towards the labor shacks. With minimal deliberation, Blitzkrieg sought the destination of the latter.

Yard after yard, Blitzkrieg raced along the exterior of the shacks. She saw no other laborers daring to escape into the gelid night, but she saw no other ponies besides. That was until between two of the flimsy wooden shacks, she came across the pair that had eluded her in the corn. She didn't spot them at first, but heard their whispering. She only ascertained smatterings of their speech, the sibilance too berated by an indifferent wind.

"We should split up. At least you might escape if I'm caught."

"If I'm caught, I won't stop trying to escape until I've found you! I'd face any trouble for you, even if I'm punished again a thousand times!"

Blitzkrieg did not notice the silence that followed. She had become entrenched in offended thoughts, nipping at her brain like ravenous, suckling piglets. Where had the labor caste concocted such dramatic nonsense? They spoke as if the empire did not have their best interests at heart. She did not dwell on such musing for long, knowing their capture was in reach. They had proven cunning, hoping to hide in an unexpected place until she'd passed them by.

"Trying to be clever?" Blitz stepped out into the open and shone her lantern on the pair. "It was a good attempt. Now come with me." Behind them, the shanties were fenced in. The only way out would be through her.

"I won't let you hurt us!" the mare said. The stallion's stance made it apparent he shared a similar sentiment.

"I don't *need* to hurt you. Now come with me, so we can all end this night early." Blitz was unsurprised that they did not budge. "Strange things are afoot. You are not safe out in the open."

"The only danger to us here is you," the mare said. "No matter where you chain us, you cannot chain our love!"

Blitzkrieg's impulse was to roll her eyes, but then something happened. The two ponies in front of her...changed, somehow. In that moment, she could not have readily delineated the occurrence, only to say that they were as ordinary as herself at one instant, and in the very next they had somehow become different. If she had the luxury to stand there and consider the issue, she could have described

how all at once the two ponies had become transparent. She could not see inside them, but rather behind them, and they were still very much visible in front of her. They radiated a light that could only be termed magical, for it did not imitate the fire or even the glow of fireflies. It was as though something had lit up inside of them with beams of numerous colors. The texture of their bodies, too, had undergone some inexplicable transformation to a sleek, geometric pattern not unlike the very crystals which formed the empire's countless edifices. Their manes lifted and tucked in the blink of an eye into conservative albeit glamorous coifs. Their bodies were so much more solid than they had ever been, looking possessed by this crystalline light that emanated from the very core of their newfound beings.

Blitzkrieg's initial diagnosis was that something was dreadfully wrong with them. This ghostly hue, their gleaming faces. No pony was meant to look like this, she knew. For perhaps the first time in her life, at least the only time she would have been able to identify, Blitzkrieg faltered. She was unsure if she should grab her weapon, but her hostile proclivities felt useless to her now. The laborers were very sick, she told herself. Was this how the other one had been swallowed up by a mound of invulnerable ice?

Anhedonia could hear the screams all the way out in the fields. They sounded like an inequine wailing, a horrific, shrieking din that was cut short with brutal swiftness. Her own trail had grown cold, and this was but another reason to double back and meet up with Blitzkrieg. Where were the other imperial guards? These escaping laborers were too numerous for only two ponies to round up, and they evidenced tricks and resources that should have been beyond their permissions. Before she could ponder her suspicions, she had to return to Blitz. En route, almost a flash after the retching screams, Anhe's ears balked at a cacophonous crack of thunder. This was accompanied by a flash of blue-white light that lit up the area of the labor housing, and followed by a series of similar rumbling crackles.

It was to here that Anhe altered her trajectory. She soared high at first, wanting to dodge any more traps of blinding powder, but with each beat of her wings her semblance of urgency surmounted. The screaming had at least alerted other members of the night watch, and she could hear their wings flapping from afar, soon to gather up the other escapees. Anhe tightened her jaw to think that King Sombra would not be pleased with these bungled events.

A light flickered between two of the wooden little shacks from a lantern which lay discarded upon the ground on its side. It had rolled into a small rut in the dirt and wobbled until it came to rest leaning upon its handle like a brake. Spurring into a jagged, misshapen monolith towards the ochrous sky above was another flowering spike of steaming ice. Anhe could see her within the as-yet unfogged glacier. With her head turned over her shoulder, her teeth clenched and her brow furrowed with determination, Blitzkrieg stood imprisoned inside of the icy cluster, unmoving, unblinking, and quite impenetrably frozen.

Morning came, and still the unnatural monument stood. That night, a few of the night watch had been dispatched to the Inquisitorial Tower to report the new anomaly, with Anhedonia in tow as a witness to awaken Cauldron. Though he was in shock at the loss of the task force's member, he lamented that he had no workable solution in time. His sense of urgency was too strong for him to feel the exhaustion at being woken in the midst of the dark hours, though he still gave a fatigued yawn or drag of his hoof. He assured Anhe that, come the light hours, he may have a viable remedy to the matter at hand, but just as with the first massive icicle in the fields, there was little they could do but wait. Cauldron allowed himself to rest in hopes that his slumbering mind would waken brimming with new ideas.

Now that the beacons Phobos and Deimos had been ignited to warden in the daytime, the three remaining members of the task force, including Bluster Haze, gathered in front of the frozen earth pony. There was probably a good foot of solid ice on all sides of her body. To see her still wearing the same aggressive expression as when she had been discovered transfixed Anhedonia. The thestral examined Blitz's whole posture now, and considered that she looked caught off guard, yet still ready to defend herself. To think that whatever unnatural cause perpetrated this crime had been too much for the weathered soldier did not comfort Anhe, but why should Blitz appear ready to face down whatever threatened her on what evidenced as such short notice? She hadn't even fully turned around. Was she tough as nails, through and through, or perhaps she had discovered the catalyst for these incidents before her last moments?

Bluster was frenetic with grief. He had arrived at some assumption that Blitzkrieg would be their natural leader, and so to find her in this predicament came as a demoralizing shock of the utmost degree. He had screwed things up before, but never something as serious as this. The failure had struck Anhedonia Thistle on a far more personal level, but she wore the luxury of a mask to hide whatever instinctive fears she felt.

Bluster behaved like he expected the culprit to jump out at them in broad daylight, and to no surprise he could not keep his trap shut. "She'll be alright once we melt the ice, right? She could still be alive! I've heard stories of ponies being chilled through out in the Frozen North, only to thaw out again."

Cauldron was ever the pragmatist. "Unsubstantiated folklore. I'm afraid that is only a theoretical possibility, at least where nature is concerned, although, the effect of this freezing is most unusual. To freeze in an instant like so is unheard of, except perhaps in the most extreme circumstances of unicorn combat, and even then, the ice is not so indestructible, nor permeating. Nor is it at so dramatic an output.

"I know not yet what it is we're up against, but Bluster and I may have come to a particular remedy. It was not easy gathering enough resources. This empire may have once been founded on salt production, but it's famous for entirely different crystals today. Salt pubs are dens of iniquity, and not likely to carry too much stock at any given time. With any luck we should be able to commandeer as much as I estimate will be necessary."

For a moment, Bluster appeared to have forgotten all about the salt, but he did not forget to be optimistic. "I'm sure that Blitz will survive. She's the toughest pony I know!"

"Aside from King Sombra (His Might is Forever!), of course," said Anhe. She turned to Cauldron. "Are you sure salt will have any effect on this ice?"

"Well it may be a touch more subtle than risking setting the entirety of our crops on fire, but it's worth a try. You see, the pegasi keep it too warm for ice to stay solid. There should be a very fine layer of water coating this glacier. The salt actually changes the properties of water it's mixed with, preventing it from refreezing. It's rudimentary alchemy, really. There's clearly magic at work here, which in all likelihood explains the consistency of the ice."

The timing was impeccable. From the suburbs, two stout ponies pulled a wagon off the smooth pavement and onto the dirt pathways. They lugged with them a vast collection of salt, two barrels full, some of it tied up in great sacks, and more than a few solid blocks piled slapdash on top of one another.

Bluster was growing impatient, and remarked that it would have been faster had some pegasi drawn the carriage over the buildings. Cauldron's rebuttal entailed that the direct route might have sacrificed the cargo for lack of stability.

As circumstances turned out, there was a plenitude of salt available here for both Blitzkrieg and the other ice formation out in the crystal carrots. At least, this was the initial estimate. Cauldron shifted about the disorganized collection of salt using his telekinesis and hoisted a barrel into the air. With just a couple of shakes of a lamb's tail (so to speak), he gave a liberal dusting to the towering, irregular feature. The sprinkling salt resembled minute chunks of powdery snow, seeping around the slippery surface and sifting around the jutting spikes and other portions. Some littered to the ground and formed a ring against the frozen fulgurite's base. Bluster could not help likening the sight to a sugary pastry, specifically a type of crumb cake sold in the southern sector.

Cauldron capped off the barrel and hovered it to the ground beside him. "And now, we wait." Cauldron sat first, and the other two followed suit on either side of him. They all watched the glistening, miniature glacier in stoic expectation.

For Bluster, this period of repose lasted for about half a minute. "Arrrrgh! Why isn't anything happening?"

The patience of Cauldron's reply indicated that he had expected Bluster's outburst. "Well, this is going to take a while. The both of you might as well find something to occupy ourselves. I'll stay here and reapply the salt as it washes away when the ice melts."

"Oh." Bluster did not budge. Anhe was similarly rooted. For a time, the three of them remained quiet, though the effort taxed Bluster the greatest. None of them were willing to speak on their decision to stay there by Blitzkrieg's visage, like hatchlings beholding expectations for a mother hen. In this manner, time passed. Each one of them began to lose patience in turn. Bluster was the first to slump over and seek some distraction in stretching his legs to the skies in some improvised exercise. There was no surprise there. Anhedonia slouched and parked her hind quarters upon the ground, preoccupying herself with her bladed sickle. If Blitz's weapon had no effect upon the other enigmatic glacial crystal, then attacking this one would likely be a fruitless effort as well. She decided to inspect every single link in the chain that connected sickle to handle. Even Cauldron could not bear to sit in one place, staring at some singular object in this sedentary fashion as though awaiting some kind of enlightenment to spring forth from its shiny surface. At least he had brought a book with him to review.

Further time passed, an agonizing stream of minutes spent in the same place, with the seconds piling up as if in a sieve, with no explanation as to why the hours did not come. Bluster Haze coaxed Anhe to join him for naughts and crosses drawn in the dirt, but to no avail. She was on the verge of caving in to participation when Cauldron awoke from his reading and moseyed over to the gargantuan, upwards icicle to inspect it.

"Demn³ it all." He swept a hoof along a juttied portion of ice near the formation's base. "Dry as bone." Anhe got to her hooves. Bluster had rolled onto his back out of boredom, but goggled wide-eyed at Cauldron.

"This is getting us nowhere," the older unicorn said. Such a remark did not sound natural to

³Condemn.

Anhedonia. Not coming from Cauldron, at any rate. Though he was not raging by any interpretation, she could see on his face a look that, for him, spelled frustration. She felt some urge to deny this, but a question piqued her obsession—how could she discern how he felt? This was the fallacy of contrived denial: In questioning the matter, some better impulse within her sought an answer, and she could not ignore the temptation to know.

“This ice isn't melting at all. I have to go back to the drawing board,” Cauldron said. He started to walk away as Bluster groaned, but Anhedonia stopped him.

“What about us? We still have yet to discover the source of this scourge.”

“Well how do you propose to do that? You were not witness to Blitzkrieg's demise. Who else do we ask?”

“Whiplash is responsible for the laborers. He has a duty to keep an eye on such resources so that they are not wasted.”

Cauldron smirked. “My, my, Miss Thistle. Such an unexpected streak of defiance from so quiet a pony. How much authority do you suppose the three of us have?”

“King Sombra (In His Infinite Wisdom) says we're to exercise every method we deem necessary.”

Cauldron was silent for a moment. Did he doubt her? Was he impressed? A willful smile crossed his muzzle, and he set off towards the fields. “Let's have a word with Whiplash, then. The sooner, the better.”

Bluster got to his feet after all this time, trying to fling the dirt that clung to his feathers. “Are we going? Where are we going?”

They found Whiplash supervising a long row of forty or fifty labor ponies over by the crystal berry harvest. He was not the only pony in charge of keeping watch over them, but considering his earlier meeting with Sombra, he was a likely candidate to be the one in charge. On closer inspection, he was a bit younger than Cauldron. When the trio approached, he regarded them with an unmistakable expression as though he did not believe they belonged there by any means. They were not dissuaded by this.

“Good morning. May we have a word with you?” Cauldron feigned his best politesse. Anhe and Bluster stood on either side of him like his little helpers, eager to peddle some form of tertiary convincing.

Whiplash's regard for this cordial salutation was a look of wary bemusement, as though he considered the three of them to be quite insane. After all, he was a busy pony with an important job. Usually ponies who spoke to him while he was working were responded to with the crack of a whip. A few sidelong glances from the nearest berry pickers were symptomatic of this. In Cauldron and company's favor, they were wearing some semblance of imperial armor, and he did recognize them from earlier yesterday morning. His opinion of them had not improved.

“Walk and talk. But make it quick.” Whiplash looked out over the hunched ponies who were

systematically rifling through every crystal berry bush. He followed them at a snail's pace, staring at them as they moved through the fields, plucking berries from thorny bushes with just their bare hooves. His job was oh so very taxing. Not only did he have to risk wrenching his foreleg striking any pony who did not act by uniform obedience, but he had to put up a sweat if any did try to run (and they never were successful). And that meant more corporal punishment.

There were too many variables that could go wrong. If one of them worked too slowly, that hurt production. The labor ponies were all manacled and chained together, and had to work at the same pace. Otherwise they would have to be beaten. If they were clumsy and crushed any berries on a flimsy pretense such as being tired or careless, they would have to be beaten. If they were greedy and decided to eat a crystal berry, they would have to be beaten. It was tiresome work having to provide so many beatings for every mistake they made in order to correct their misanthropic behavior, and the fact that they only continued making more must have been because they were just so stupid, of course.

The weather at least was mild enough. The pegasi were responsible for keeping the weather fair or rainy as necessary, and the torches Deimos and Phobos never burned hot enough except to keep out the cold of the tundra surrounding the empire's walls. Other atmospheric barriers were in place, typically monitored by the stormtroopers. At any rate, there were plenty of other sources for discomfort when one had to remain upright and hunched over with but one brief break to eat in the middle of a sixteen-hour shift.

Crystal berries were a beloved staple of Crystal Empire diet. There were numerous acres devoted solely to their harvest, spanning even more land than the crystal corn (which grew in greater quantity). The berries themselves were similar to raspberries in appearance, coming in ranges of red-violet hues with gem-like facets texturing their surface. They hid themselves in bunches among leafy, pliant stems that formed shaggy bushes almost as high as the average pony. The source of discomfort came from the jagged shape of many portions of the plant's growth. Though the stems were pliant, they grew out of stiffer limbs that behaved like a chain link of pointed crystalline branches, and were sharp like thorns if somepony were to prick him- or herself.

Whiplash agreed with himself that he worked hardest out of anypony in the northern sector. Why did they have to make his job so hard for him? He could not waste time with trivial matters that were beneath him, such as the law! Still, this method of operation was much more convenient than to have to pay a bunch of ponies to commute in to the fields with the only motivation being the selfish acquisition of *his* money. "I've a lot of work to get done," Whiplash said. "I'm down several laborers, as you ought to be well aware."

"More frozen ponies, are there? I thought there had only been two."

Cauldron's remark elicited a seething glare from Whiplash, who continued to speak. "Not to mention these cowards turning tail at the first sign of danger. If I had more help, there'd be less deserters." He then dared to glower at Anhedonia. So long as he could not see her face, it was easy to imagine she was cowering behind her mask from his scathing implication.

"Troubling incident, that. How many *did* you manage to catch last night? After all, this was the second curfew in a row that your workers had broken, so naturally, expecting more of the same, you would have been ready for them."

Whiplash rounded on Cauldron, his nose very nearly touching the other's. Both older stallions

stared down one another, Whiplash bridling his rage and Cauldron mustering his stoic demeanor. Both Bluster and Anhe expected the plantation supervisor to unfurl his bullwhip and lash it upon the unicorn, but he did not. Whiplash could quell himself no further, and had to let loose his anger in some form or another. “You do not presume to tell me what my job is.” Spittle flecked outwards past his lips. “I am responsible for feeding an entire empire. Every day I do a hard day's work, more so than you have ever done in a lifetime. I see no purpose in hiding yourself away in some gaudy tower, performing magic tricks all day. Meanwhile, I'm out here, working my hooves to the bone to provide sustenance to a nation. The three of you put together could never hope to be half as important as me.”

There was a moment of silence in the wake of Whiplash's soliloquy. Bluster was aghast, his wings drooping under the weight of the words that struck him. Anhe was dumbfounded for a different reason. She could not fathom how to respond to such a speech. Why couldn't he somehow be more helpful to them so they would not need to spend one more second with this disagreeable, hot-air buffoon? She couldn't deny he had a point, but this was not helping their investigation. Now what? Cauldron only tilted one eyebrow upwards and refrained from a sardonic round of hoof-stamping applause. He was the one who dared reply to such an onslaught. “Well, then we'll be agreeable to take some of that yoke off your shoulders and interrogate your laborers in your stead. Perhaps one of them can tell us something.”

That took even Anhe and Bluster by surprise. What possible help could one from the labor caste be? To the best of their indoctrination of Crystal Empire society, those ponies were either criminals or unintelligent. Their lot in life was to harvest and weed vegetation day in and day out. What could they possibly know of danger and strife? If the imperial army didn't know the cause of the freak ice formations, then why should these simple serfs be able to enlighten them? The very idea was almost insulting.

Whiplash had had enough of their offense. “If you dare impede my work, I'll take this to the highest authority, and they'll see to it that you're the ones picking berries from now on!”

Anhedonia took her turn to stare down Whiplash. “It is under the decree of his lord and majesty, King Sombra, May He Live Forever, that we conduct this investigation for the safety and order of the empire. There is no higher authority. Thou shalt not obstruct justice.”

That shut Whiplash up after all was said and done. He backed off, grating his teeth in fury, and the three trotted in the other direction, following the line of slaves as they proceeded into the crystal berry bushes. “You get a real kick out of that, don't you?” Bluster asked Anhe. He directed his next remarks at Cauldron. “But what good is asking these miscreants gonna do? All they know is picking plants all day.” He shined a blissful, tragic smile.

“Now, Bluster. Their duty in life may be far less noble than ours, but they're still ponies like you or me. We'll ask the labor caste if they've seen anything suspicious.” Cauldron approached a pair of ponies at the farthest point between Whiplash and the next supervisor over. One of them was an earth pony, the other a pegasus with his wings weighted by small sprouts of black crystal so that he could not fly away. Both had dark crystalline crosses upon their cutie marks to indicate their roles as members of the labor caste. They did not hide their self-conscious awareness of the task force well, and as they continued to work, their tails belied their nervous dispositions by flicking from side to side.

“You two. We'd like a word with you.” Cauldron changed tact to brusque authority. He and his companions had to follow the pair of anxious slaves who were manacled to their coworkers.

Furthermore, the impetus to continue working at any cost had been driven into them with effective measure by their drivers. The addressed ponies looked over their shoulders as a sign of response, but were otherwise one-hundred percent submissive in awaiting the inquiry. Cauldron's apathy did not permit him to await an invitation to speak to one beneath his station. "You will tell us if you witnessed anything out of the ordinary last night."

The slaves exchanged furtive looks, and further laborers down the line also turned sidelong glances. The ripple effect that worked its way along the lengthy chains that bound the ponies did not go unnoticed. Anhe thought they might be whispering to each other, but only the faintest of sporadic peeps could be heard. Gossiping the day away was likely another offense, as if they could steal the very essence of time itself away by idle chitchat. This was yet another of many methods by which the mind could be caged. As if scared to respond on cue, or afraid of talking even when prompted to do so, their words shook out of them like a strange, remorseful hiccup. "We don't know nothin'," the pegasus said.

"We know *that*," said Bluster. "Just tell us what you *know* about last night!"

"Bluster, please." Cauldron swept his compatriot aside with a foreleg. "I am certain that at the very least there is one among you who can say what transpired." This phrasing earned him some blank stares. "Occurred." Though he corrected himself, again the looks of confusion came from all around. "Happened? Ugh, look, the incident last night took place practically right beside your beds. If you're all too cowardly to speak, then at least tell me of some pony who *is* willing."

Again, the laborers were too craven to answer him. They were more gutless than recalcitrant; they could very well see that giving him "I don't know" for a reply was insufficient, but what could they do that would not result in another inevitable lashing? Their work was stuttering because of this accessible paranoia, which in turn was garnering the notice of the rather easily-rankled Whiplash who looked like he might be fancying a hair trigger.

Cauldron, too, noticed the slave driver easing his hooves their way, and instead adopted a more patronizing tone for his next words. "It is apparent that ponies of your caliber have only each other to look out for them, but you're not going to stave off this phenomenon by keeping silent. Whatever is happening is happening to you."

By now, any of them could see the sour look upon Whiplash's begrudging face. The slaves still did not look inclined to help or even utter a sound. Then, the earth pony spoke. "The old mare in shack twenty-three. She talks too much." When Cauldron glanced to whom had spoken, she had already gone quiet.

Whiplash had finished his approach. In a guttural drawl, he spoke to the task force. "I think it's about time you all stopped weighing down my work." The words may have sounded civil, but a threat was inferred in tone of voice and context that implied the going was good to get now.

"Yes, it's rather hard to carry on a conversation with so many distractions." Cauldron reveled in Whiplash's narrowing eyes as he led the remaining members of the task force away from the fields. He had to pause for a second. "Bluster." He drew out the name for a second.

"What?" Bluster had caved in to temptation, and was munching on a sprig of crystal berry bush. Eating just the berries themselves would probably have tasted better. Much of the plant's body lay in non-fruiting vegetation, and the leaves and stems were rather bitter despite the rich sweetness of the

berries' taste. Bluster choked on some of the stiffer portions of the greens, and spat out what he could on the ground much to everypony's distaste at the spectacle. "Yuck!" He stuck his tongue out, complaining of pain from the raphides he had foolishly bitten into. They would dissolve just fine, but his tongue was having a rough day.

Ignoring Bluster's showboating, Cauldron and Anhe set off for the slave shanties that housed the labor caste. Each was numbered as a matter of protocol keeping strict census over the work force. "Let's see, sixteen, fifteen, nope. Must be the other direction." As Cauldron led the way, Anhe and Bluster exchanged looks, not that either of them gleaned much between the mask and the dangling tongue. In that instant, they were taking note of how easily they allowed Cauldron to take command. They both assumed without argument that as their elder and ranked superior, there would be no issue about him being the leader, and as they remained silent, they could not ponder over a discussion on the matter.

Cauldron was mumbling to himself about some such idle observation, something along the lines of how refreshing it was to take in the open air for a change. Perhaps the bracing air was what enabled him to take charge as he did. Though he kept his eyes front for the most part, he was not oblivious to the preoccupation of his wards. On purpose, he strolled past shack twenty-three just to see if they were paying attention, but he could not tell because they were following him so without question as to make any decision on their own part a pipe dream. He spoke louder to check their attention. "Perhaps what we could try is to salt the glacier and have Bluster lick it. After all, his tongue only got stuck because of fluid adhesion. Perhaps if we're patient, it will melt that way."

Bluster tried to stare at his own still-dangling tongue, and retrieved the oral appendage back inside his mouth. "I don't want to do that anymore."

"Anyway, we're here." Cauldron doubled back to approach the door to shack twenty-three, then barged in without knocking. Anhe and Bluster followed without comment.

The warped wood was dry as a husk and rattled easily as they came in through the flimsy board of a door. The walls did not even consist of finished planks for the most part, instead irregular logs no good for proper construction, and above this foundation were shoddy scraps of beams. The walls were drafty to boot, with visible gaps that would leak in light from the outside. The roof looked solid enough, but was of a thin, cheap caliber that would soak in water and drip if it rained. The aroma in the air was less than hygienic, as if a stale, malodorous sweat had lacquered every surface. Meager partitions jutted perpendicular from the wall, looking ready to snap off with a strong gust of wind. Their purpose appeared to be to separate cramped segments of the interior where each had a flimsy box lined with moldy straw.

There was a floor. It was not dirt, for ponies would have clawed their own hooves off trying to tunnel through in desperation. What comprised it was known as "crystal rough", the typically hard substance that the empire's crystals had to be extricated from when mined from their natural underground habitat. Tools could pick apart the substance like brittle stone, but it molded together into slag at high enough temperatures, and a few inches' worth of thickness could easily deter weary ponies from attempting any futile digging.

The task force saw these things, but only their own comfort occurred to them. They did not empathize for one second that it was a miserable state to live in, barely a step above not having any roof at all. They had been trained to aspire always for greatness, to associate material achievement with

personal success, and on some ingrained, robotic tier of logic, they confused merit with prestige. They saw these things, but there was still so much more that they did not see.

This talkative, olden pony to which they had been directed was not readily apparent to them, either. At once, the three split up to investigate each stall, but there was very little territory to cover, and so anything out of the ordinary could be spotted at once. At the northernmost corner, beside the window, sat a lump wrapped in woven blankets of frayed material. At first, Bluster thought something had been piled up here, perhaps food to be hidden and stored. The notion that it could have been the meager scraps the labor caste had to their own passed him by. The high mound, to his perception, was piled upon some misshapen stump that had been worked into the crooked opinion of a rocking stool. Even Bluster was not oblivious to the prospect that this could be the pony they were seeking.

“Hey!” The pegasus reached his hoof out for the figure's shoulder and spun it upon its seat. A paper-thin shawl fell away, and Bluster recoiled at the horrific sight that bewitched him. He could feel his insides withering up, wrinkling and folding upon themselves as he witnessed the cold, leering face before him. A gaping, toothy grin was plastered upon the crone's doughy face, with two cataract-laden eyes bulging out from her rubbery visage. Her mane had not just gone gray: It was like some wiry, gossamer growth that sprung from her head like whiskers on a cabbage stem. A substantial element of what had made Bluster jump and fall back onto his flank was the shrieking, cruel laughter choking out of her throat, rasping the lilting dust lingering in the window's beam of light.

The screeching cackle was enough to bring Cauldron and Anhe to Bluster's sides in a flash. They dropped their guard when they saw the source of Bluster's fright. The old mare had a faded red coat, and what remained of her mane was tied back in a bun. Wrinkles pruned her face, and she ground her gums together while she got as good a look as she could at her visitors. Her cutie mark was a jumbled, frayed clump of yarn, so it appeared. Even as the task force took in the sight of her, she was shaking her head in dismissal and speaking. “No, no. I'm much too old to work now. Can't n'even see my hooves in front of my own face. Well, get up off the floor, young'un! T'ain't clean to speak of! No, no, these old joints ain't much use fer walkin' anymore. Geh heh heh.” She appeared sprightly enough for her age, but they could see well enough that she was no longer in working condition. Her utility as a laborer had come to pass. What could she be now, but a room fixture? She only had time to waste, and putting her to some use would be a brief respite.

While Bluster picked himself up off the floor (only to sit back down again, as did the others), Cauldron took charge. “We're just here to ask you a few questions. Your fellow laborers seem to think that you have all the answers about frozen ponies.”

“Ponisicles,” Bluster said.

Cauldron rolled his eyes before elaborating. “We don't need any riddles, we don't need any sound effects, and we don't require any fourteen-line stanzas that end in a rhyming couplet. We just want the facts, not to waste our time with inflated production values or trendy clichés.”

“Aww.” Bluster pouted as he nibbled a couple more pilfered crystal berries. “We never get to have any fun in this gig.”

“I'll be sure to tell Blitzkrieg you said that,” said Cauldron. “I'm certain she's not having any *fun* right now, either.”

“So you *do* think she'll be okay!” Bluster helped himself to a self-assured smirk.

“Foals today.” Cauldron shook his head and looked alarmed at the change in the old mare's face. At first he thought her consciousness had blinked away into distraction, that her mind had drifted away. Her expression had come upon with dire ferocity, and in spite of Cauldron's preemptive protests, she lapsed into a lengthy folk yarn the likes of which she had spun for her fellow slaves before.

“There are creatures that exist by forbidden creation. There are things that be, since beyond time, and that which act and think but do not feel nor live. There are entities without body, but a shape to mimic ponykind, and though they traverse through the same world we live in, they are not solid as you or I. Just a chill wind that runs up your back, sprouts goose pimples on your skin and sets your fur standing up on end.”

Cauldron interrupted. “I did say no riddles.” He was summarily hushed by Bluster, and when he noticed Anhedonia turning her head his way as if in protest to hear more, he gave in.

“These are no ghosts or spooks to remind us of those long since passed,” the old mare said. “They are specters of emotion who must feed when ponies bicker, and when dissent consumes the living. You can feel them cling to you like a frigid shroud that burns away cold, lapping at your body with a hundred icy tongues, lurching your very scorn back at you, though you cannot hear them. Little by little at first, they'll sap away at your smiles, torment your thoughts with terrible dread, and worry all hope from your soul. Then, like an avalanche of powdery snow, you'll be stripped away of everything you've known in yourself. Your body will exude their same deathly cold, and they'll have devoured every ounce of happiness you've shed away. They are the *windigos*!

“Far to the south, before this land was named, rose a kingdom of tropical delights. Their princess, Fire Dancer, was spoiled by her parents. Nonetheless, she was the inheritor to their Flame of the Hearth, an eternally-burning torch atop a wrought iron scone and the symbol of their dynasty's providence. No kingdom survives without heirs, and so suitor after suitor was tried before her, but none could be found suitable. Some were exotic foreign nobles, others defenders of their country. Many were smitten more with their own achievements, pompous for their strength or upbringing, but there was at least a small wagon's worth of those who admired her from afar as the spirit of her realm. Though her dancing was a spectacle at every ritual of the flame, her heart burned cold for the stallions her parents wished upon her.

“Although most of the prospects' aspirations were no more flattering, she exploited their company. She had them fetch her things to get them out of the room, or displayed them like accessories at social gatherings. When she grew tired of them, they became obsolete, like they were old hats gone out of style. She was cruel in disposing of them, and each was so desperate to inherit her family's name that they could be equally unkind, even when they, too, were abandoned by her fickle favor. Whenever a new stallion came along, more successful, rich and self-sufficient than the last offer, she would treat herself to his conspicuous wealth until she grew bored with him.

“Her sadistic and selfish mistreatment of ponies, and their resentful avarice, summoned the windigos, even to as warm a climate as her kingdom. Their chill winds froze the citizens and realm to the quick. Though one brave soul fought the wraiths back using the kingdom's symbolic torch, the Flame of the Hearth succumbed to the omnipresent sorrow and was extinguished. Flame Dancer herself was consumed in ice, never to unleash her greed again. Their dynasty had come to a tragic end. So it is that wherever there is meaningless conflict, pointless fighting or emotional strife, the windigos will

hunt, and dance, and turn everything to dire cold.

“You see, this is what lurks in the fields of our very own Crystal Empire. The workers toil all day long with only a brief respite for a meager meal. Their masters beat them for the smallest of infractions. There is no hope among them. There is no joy. There is no reason to aspire. This is what claimed the first pony who escaped from this very hut that night. Primrose was her name. She lived a terrible existence. Everything had been robbed from her. Even her own foal was taken away. So it is that what you call the labor caste are a rich crop in their own right for the windigos.”

Indignant reactions were shared among the task force. Bluster rolled his eyes like a foal being lectured by his parents, although up until the end he had been cowering behind his wings. Cauldron scoffed outright in annoyance. “Spare us your bleeding heart drivel. The only rose garden you've been promised is the one you're deemed to tend. Life is hardship, and we all have much to be thankful to the empire for. As for this pony's foal, she should be proud that it would be raised by the capable teachings of the imperial military.”

Anhe sulked. “What purpose does joy serve? You should be satisfied in serving your king. If not for your comrades deserting, a member of the imperial guard would not have fallen victim to these 'wraiths' you speak of.”

The old mare cackled with a start. “Oh, but it's those runaways who prove my tale true! Your friend was chasing them through the dark hours. Two ponies, lovers, have found freedom with each other. There is no greater happiness in the world than to find another soul compatible to your own needs. It is only through knowing that one is not alone, not useless, not unworthy of feeling, that one may oppose the frigid fate of the windigos. The heritage of the crystal ponies glowed from within them, and they were protected. Your friend had no such protection, and met with a terrible fate. So it is that without joy, you cannot live.”

“Shouldn't that be 'glew'?” asked Bluster, tilting his head at an exaggerated angle. He then tilted it in the opposite direction. “Or maybe it's 'glown'?” It was neither.

Cauldron rubbed his chin with a front hoof. “I cannot think why citizenship of the Crystal Empire would make a difference, considering that one slave and one soldier thus far have been put on ice. This talk of happiness or sadness sounds rather saccharine. These ponies were performing their duties. Whether they enjoy their work is moot; their jobs need to be done. And as for Blitzkrieg, I have no doubt she would say the same were she with us here.”

Anhedonia was her typical obdurate self, but she looked to Cauldron with a question. “But the old mare implied that two other ponies survived an encounter with this 'windigo'. Tracking the area, the other thestrals and myself found evidence that would support this.”

The pair continued to speak as if the old mare were not there. “I suppose this may be a case of a weed of truth in a garden of folk legend. But where do these roots take us?” Cauldron looked to Bluster and pondered on what the pegasus had said. “Perhaps she means they 'glowed' literally. There is some information on a debilitating disease which may affect some ponies. It's an unknown but dangerous variola in the Imperial Archives which may cause ponies to appear translucent, or as if they were radiating light. Very little is known of it, but it's classified as a highly volatile infliction.”

Both Bluster and Anhe stared at Cauldron with grave expressions, as though the notion of some

potentially communicable and excruciating malady did not sit well with them. Though the Crystal Empire was remarkable in its day for its scientific advances, medical techniques of that period were still far behind our modern standards.

Anhe voiced her objection. "Surely you wouldn't suggest we give all the laborers a day off. I will not allow any more to escape, if I can help it."

Cauldron dropped his voice to a whisper, though whether the elderly pony could hear him anyhow was uncertain. "Of course not. If they don't work, they don't eat. The Empire are not murderers. At any rate, we should not take this old mare's word at face value. It does seem likely that these afflicted ponies do exist, and we could very well conduct an experiment this same night."

The three of them now huddled together in close facial proximity. Anhe considered the matter, and it went against every fiber of her being to risk a further loss. Everypony had a place to be, and to be sure they were in it at all times would assure that order was maintained. On the other hoof, she had King Sombra's earlier words to consider, about going above and beyond the call of duty. She could not predict whether their plan would be successful or not, so she deferred to Cauldron's more educated judgment. She found her thoughts most distracting, and she gazed beyond Bluster and towards the high, crooked little window on the wall. Through it, she could spy the exterior of the next shack over, which looked as gray and bleak as this one.

"Time is of the essence," Cauldron said, and he was about to resume his tactical hypothesis when he noticed the glassy disposition that had come over the ancient nag. The old mare had petrified like a portrait. At first sight, something was amiss with her. Though still recognizable for what she was, she had become indistinguishable from any inanimate object such as the chair she sat upon. A beguiling smirk still stretched her wrinkled dimples as though she had more to say.

Bluster broke the somber silence to stutter. "Is she..?"

Only Anhe became distracted. She spun on her back legs as though changing her mind halfway through a somersault and dashed for the door. The wood that constituted the shack threatened to come undone by the rattling her departure invoked. Bluster and Cauldron called out to her, and had to rush after her to keep up. They almost failed to notice she had whipped around the building's exterior in the same direction they had come from. Anhe turned a tight corner into the gap between the two shacks and stopped on a dime. Bluster and Cauldron nearly collided into her and with each other when they discovered she had not gone far out of sight.

"Uh, what's going on?" Bluster asked. He received no immediate reply. Cauldron could deduce Anhe was searching the immediate vicinity for something. He did not have to wait long enough to question the situation before the thestral spoke.

"Somepony was eavesdropping," she said. "Their tracks disappear, so they're likely airborne."

Bluster soared straight into the air, and then drifted back downwards again. "I don't see anypony," he said. "Just the laborers way off thataway."

"I think they might have been here last night. They threw up some powder that blinded me. I was unable to keep track of them, and that must have been approximately when Blitzkrieg was attacked."

“Is that your instinctive opinion?” Cauldron asked. He was prone to lifting one eyebrow in a gesture that could be interpreted as skeptical and sarcastic, or else intrigued and inquisitive. Perhaps it was some technique of the Inquisition. “There aren't a lot of places a pony could hide behind if they kept low enough,” he said to Bluster, stepping beyond the shacks and peering to either side. He turned back towards Anhe. “Well I don't see anypony now. They must be very good at eluding you, or perhaps you were mistaken.”

Anhe picked her gaze up off the ground and turned to the unicorn. She was only able to curb the annoyance that percolated within her by keeping hidden behind her mask. “I heard somepony out here. They must have been listening in on us.”

Cauldron responded with a helpless shrug. Bluster rubbed one front hoof against his other foreleg in awkward silence. Neither of them was being very supportive of her intuition at the moment. “Never mind,” she said.

“So,” said Bluster as the three of them emerged from between the shanties. “Who are we speaking to next?”

Cauldron let out a prolonged sigh and rubbed his forehead. “Unless Anhedonia wishes to chase shadows, I suppose nopony. We may not have much to go on, but we have enough to make preparations for tonight.” He scoped out the area surrounding them and spotted one of the long aqueducts that extended from the crystal palace all the way to the distant wall surrounding the empire. “We shall need to procure more salt and find a high vantage point. I have the feeling that tonight we'll not receive much help from our allies again. We've little headway to make on our agenda other than to hope we find this 'windigo' tonight.”

Anhe lingered a few paces behind as they made their way back towards the dormitories of the imperial armies. She came to the decision that rest would benefit her before the dark hours arrived. She did not know what to expect from this dubious phantom of which the old mare had spoken her last, but she did suspect that whatever rebel had evaded her would find *them* at the appointed place if she or he cared to.

Sleep came with ease to Anhedonia, and before she drifted off, she lingered in the hoary netherworld of fatigue brought about by the day's events. She asked herself why sleep should find her as opposed to her having to fight for it. Although she yearned for unconsciousness and could sense it was approaching fast, the thoughts that reeled themselves through her head were altogether engrossing. The task force's leader had been encased in ice, perhaps for the rest of her existence, and she felt no closer to tracking down the culprit, nor the deserters to boot.

The other matter regarded the task force's leader. She could not think to care who assumed the role as long as they remained decisive. Thistle would be content to follow orders, but she realized she did not question Blitzkrieg's leadership. The earth pony was a logical choice. Cauldron was smart to cut to the heart of the matter, but Anhe guessed that Blitz would have been more trusting of her instincts. Perhaps that was the heart of the matter which King Sombra had proposed for them.

Anhedonia awoke with a start, entangled in the bedsheets and no longer facing the ceiling. She kicked whichever legs were pinned underneath her own torso and sat up. For reasons she could not explain, pangs of remorse clutched at her insides, and she was imagining that King Sombra was roaring

at her, enraged by some trespass or failing she was unable to identify. The sensation was fleeting, and after a moment she could no longer reach that feeling or even recollect it in detail. The impetus to get moving took its place, and she assembled her gear from her bedpost in haste.

She returned to the area of the central promenade that encircled the Crystal Palace just outside of its ever-present force field. She found Cauldron where she expected him, standing before the row of wooden labor housing in the northern sector. He had adorned himself with a multitude of small woven bags that hung from his saddlebags and in all likelihood filled them within. Anhe was the first to speak. "Has Bluster Haze not arrived yet?"

"I set him out on another errand in the meantime. He should standby to accomplish it when the time is right, and until then he is keeping an eye out from the next aqueduct over. Even so, I gave him a couple of these." Cauldron levitated a few of the small sacks towards Anhedonia. She did not need to ask him what they were, for he explained. "Salt, by tradition, is renowned as a crystal of purification, which is supposed to entrap incorporeal spirits of all variety. If the old mare's words have merit, then tossing the contents should cast the monster away. One needs not be a unicorn to deal with the supernatural, so long as one comes prepared."

Anhe clipped the bags to her armor where they would be available to her reach in a pinch. "How much preparation helped Blitzkrieg? It looked to me as though she had been overcome in an instant."

Cauldron's expression did not change, but his entire idiom slackened in posture. "Whatever attacked her, she did not see coming until the last moment. We know a bit about what to expect, and so we must be vigilant, even with only uncorroborated evidence on our hooves." He heaved a weary sigh and averted his gaze from Anhe's mask. "I regret the loss of her guidance. Ideal strategy adapts to circumstances on the fly. It doesn't come out of a book, and these are capricious situations with little known precedent for which adhering to the rules may not always be an option."

Cauldron began walking, and Anhedonia followed in the pale visage of his shadow. The darkness of the dark hours was unsatisfactorily bright, as the skies were still the orange of sunset, or perhaps sunrise, as though the citizens of the empire were cheated of the night. They marched in silence towards the labor housing up until Anhe could no longer be kept in suspense of their mission. She inquired, in her typical systematic fashion, what the details of their plan were.

"We still have a pair of ponies to interrogate, remember? Now that Whiplash is no longer riding our saddles, we should be free to question each worker regarding last night's affairs."

"How long until the light hours resume?"

"We can cut the work in half by splitting up and questioning every other shack. Being thorough takes time." This was the plan by which the pair operated through the night. Interrogation was easier when the laborers were not contrived under a nervous, robotic adherence to their work. It was not more fruitful.

The unicorns of the Imperial Inquisition were among the most educated sect among the empire. The laborers were, for the most part, the least. There was little need for them to have any education other than to discern the appearance of a weed and the fruiting bodies of the crops to be harvested. Nothing good could come of their cleverness, as they were in no position to make significant decisions

throughout their society. Therefore, deception would not even occur to them, let alone come easy. There had to be some manifested individual will to fabricate a contradiction to the singular truth which King Sombra ordained for them. There had to be something to gain. There was not. Honesty was not a concern among these hopeless dregs, even those drafted from among the criminal element.

This did not warrant knowledge. Ignorance spread like a pandemic among the laborers, for keeping their lives simple kept them out of trouble and safe from the unknown. Frequent was the case in which their lack of information was genuine, and there was little they could report that was not already known by the imperials. After all, knowing all which transpired between the walls of the empire was in the domain of its grand army.

Like ignorance, fear was also a noteworthy hindrance. Cauldron had a way with words and an instinct for looking past extraneous details and cutting to the chase. Dumbing down his words aggravated him, but there was simply no getting around it. Anhedonia was lacking in certain social graces. Though she was neither curt nor rude, stealth had always been a core operation of the Night Watch. Apprehending deviants was an aggressive task, and the thestrals were feared on all levels of superstition and common sense.

Though they both spoke Equestrian, Anhe was left with the distasteful suspicion that she and the laborers had been speaking different languages. She only committed to leave each shack because she was reminded that Cauldron was making quicker progress than her, and she did not wish to be left behind. Every time she stepped out of one of the cold, creaking shacks, she reflected back on last night. Out there in the surreal, colored darkness, she expected one of those rebels to return. Whoever had gotten the better of her was still out there, and Anhe had no idea who this pony was or how to deal with them when the time came. The thought that she should be on her guard was distracting, and she no longer wished to question these slaves when she should be out there, tracking down enemies of the empire. She had never conceived such a dichotomy before. It was offensive to her, to think that there was something she would prefer doing to what she had been ordered to do. She could see the merit to either task, and yet never in her memory had she contemplated such a significant choice before. Her steadfast attendance to duty should have been infrangible.

“Miss Thistle, come here.” Cauldron was standing outside on the dirt between the shacks and the first field of crystal corn. His horn was glowing, as were two front hooves of the two earth ponies he stood with. Their adjacent front hooves were held together by Cauldron's kinetic magic for lack of a manacle. The stallion was scrawny (most laborers were malnourished) and the mare was atypically rotund for her lot in life (perhaps a glandular issue, or whatever the excuse was). Neither of them appeared enthusiastic to be there, but between the unicorn and the thestral, their departure was unlikely. Cauldron was tired of holding their ankles together, and so dissipated his magic grip which, to explain in secular terms, was feeling “sore” from grasping them so tight for so long.

Cauldron introduced the pair to Anhe. “The other laborers who were closely aware of last night's transgressions were quick to identify these two for playing party to last night's shirking of duty. Finding them was a piece of cake, really, once Whiplash was no longer on our heels.” He turned to look at the pair. “Tell us: If you escaped, why did you return?”

The stallion stammered, but could not get the words out to say anything substantial. The mare shifted her weight as if too scared to stand in front of him like a shield. “There was something out there. Some kind of a monster. It does exist, as sure as we're seeing you now!” Her voice wavered with more force than she had intended to eject. In the pregnant pause that followed, she cringed at nothing. The

fear of the two ponies was palpable, but they dared not make a move toward the shacks in the presence of the unicorn and thestral.

When he was certain the labor ponies were not prone to continue, he spoke again. “In spite of your fears, you showed great judgment in not panicking, and instead returning to your assignments. Trust in the Empire, and it shall protect you.” He jerked his head toward the shacks. “Get along back to your beds. It would behoove the lot of you to stay *indoors* tonight. That way some of us can do our jobs around here.”

“Hah!” An explosion sounded like the crack of dawn. The noise alone was so sharp, so vivid, that those who heard it felt a phantom pain seize their spines. All attention was drawn to the pony who wielded the whip, the plantation head, Whiplash. Of all the nights to return to do his duty, he had to choose the day when he had been reprimanded for his gross neglect. The two laborers lived in constant fear of him and his whip, but Anhe and Cauldron had grown complacent with the confidence they could accomplish this task without his help. Now he was naught but a burden to them.

What was Whiplash to think? Two of his ungrateful slaves were outside past curfew, and two imperial officers were meddling in his business. In an instant devoid of thought, he decided then and there that the two interlopers were operating outside of their jurisdiction. He chose to ignore them for the time being, as the laborers were a simpler matter to contend with. He wrapped the whip he held in his mouth around his left foreleg and threatened to brandish it again. “It seems I have to show these bumbling pests how we’ve been dealing with disobedience outside the Crystal Palace.” Whiplash approached the two slaves with thundering, outraged hoof steps. The two earth ponies quivered in place beside one another as Whiplash shouted, his voice like a gust of torrential wind that chased them down.

“We had an early start to get to tomorrow, but now it looks like the plantation will be operating on a loss of sleep. Wake the others up! I’m going to make an example of you both for them to see.” Whiplash slapped his whip against the ground as if eager to let fly with a severe lashing.

Cauldron spoke up, however. “We’re the ones who requested these two come out to speak with us. They’re here by proxy of an official task force summons.” He was making the policy up on the spot, but hadn’t King Sombra granted them this responsibility for just such a purpose? “We have the situation perfectly under--”

Something inside of Whiplash snapped. No pony could ever dare to be so presumptuous toward him. As he bellowed angrily, spittle flecked out from his mouth, and the cloud of cold breath that emanated forth resembled the smoke of a rampaging dragon. “These are *my* crystal slaves! They obey *me!*” It was an odd thing to say, and it threw Cauldron and Anhe off their guard. Neither of them could manage to interrupt against the vehement storm of rage parading out of Whiplash’s grinding jaws. For the most part, he was repeating his earlier threats to awaken all the slaves and demonstrate the utmost brutality his authority could muster. He drew a foreleg back, waving his whip which he had secured around his pastern, making as if ready to lash the two slaves here and now.

A white entity careened out of the tall, wavering crops. It had been lurking there just out of view, on the boundaries of peripheral vision. Somepony screamed as a spectral figure lunged like a billowing sheet thrown upon Whiplash. Taller than anypony they had ever seen, the windigo had a ghastly hue about it, a faint transparency of immaterial, and hollow, sunken gaps for eyes. Its mouth bore sharp, inequine fangs and led to a murky abyss devoid of color. There was a clap of thunder as its entire form bore down upon Whiplash in one fell swoop, and with a cacophonous crash that came from nowhere,

as if some nether plane had just met reality in a rough collision, a bolt of ice cascaded upwards like an explosion of furious fire. It swallowed the plantation manager whole, and flecks of sharp ice blew every which way, beating against Anhe's mask like hail and one even scraping along the male slave's cheek.

He nearly fainted, but his fellow laborer supported his nimble body against her husky frame and carried him off and out of sight toward the shacks. Her hooves sped as though not once touching the ground and Cauldron could only glance in amazement at her haste. "Demn. Demn!" Cauldron cursed, remembering to keep his eye on the immediate danger before him. Much to his and Anhedonia's dismay, the windigo had gone. Like a reversal of absence in smoldering ruins, frigid air swept away from the glossy spear of ice that now contained the immobilized Whiplash. He had been captured at a most definitive moment, his jaws wrenched wide in bombastic fervor. His eyes had bulged and turned in an awkward, incongruous angle to where his snout was pointed, as if at the last instant he had noticed the attack. Despite the horrific implications of the scene now sublimated into posterity before them, Cauldron shouted into the empty atmosphere like a mad pony, trying to summon the windigo back. "Condemn it, come back here!"

Even this was enough to fluster Anhedonia. "That came out of nowhere! How are we meant to protect ourselves against such agility?"

Cauldron raced from one side to the other of the open area surrounding Whiplash's impromptu monument. "The air cooled rapidly before the incident. Perhaps that can be a warning to us of the windigo's approach! Condemn it. It's only struck once a night thus far. Please, let's end this now!"

Anhe still could not feel accustomed to seeing Cauldron in this agonized state. She herself felt a pang of indecision at letting the two serfs out of sight, but there was always the inclination that, trained by fear, they would hide within the flimsy cabins and cease to be an issue. A strong impetus to make sure tugged at her hooves, and she, too, paced in a similar fashion as Cauldron. Though fear blasted like a cannon within the trunk of her chest, Anhe was still able to rationalize the situation. Wary, she cantered back tail-to-tail with Cauldron. The servitude of a pair of slaves, she weighed, did not measure up to losing another member of the task force and the prospect of ending what could be a costly incursion down the road. The ghastly spectacle of the frozen Whiplash portrayed a frosty blue reminder of their sorry predicament. This was the moment that the idea dawned on Anhedonia: They would have to learn to work together. Even having an alternate target for the windigo did not present itself as a viable solution. She may not have had the learning of the templars, but that much seemed certain.

Lost in this analysis, Anhe did not expect the next attack. In truth, neither did Cauldron. She had not yet noticed her visible breath panting out through the lowest slit of her mask when the discordant shriek bellowed out from behind her. Cauldron made the strangest noise she could think to hear from him; a kind of pained, breaking whimper that made him sound like a frightened foal rather than an experienced stallion getting on in his years. He expelled all his strength with a grunt and whipped a small sack of salt out at the air in front of him. The windigo had charged him like a candle ignited, but as the sodium crystals collided against its ethereal appearance, it blew in the opposite direction into a formless cloud of pale white smoke and dissipated into thin air. Tongues of wind licked at Cauldron and Anhedonia, and settled like cobwebs into stillness.

The two remained shocked for a moment longer, then scurried tail-to-tail with one another yet again. They paced in circles, strafing sideways with an impressive regard for the other's positioning, so that neither had their rear unguarded. With only the two of them, their flank remained vulnerable.

“Miss Thistle, your weapon. What is it made of?” Cauldron asked.

“I'm not sure. I found it in the sewers. The rebel had been using it.”

“Yes, I recall. I'm hoping in that case it's made of iron. Those reprobates would be hard-pressed to find legal access to a forge, so in all likelihood they can't use steel weaponry.”

To accommodate for the peripheral blind spot of their sides, the pair turned in circles, orchestrating an intermittent counter-clockwise rhythm. Anhe now faced the crops. “Are iron weapons not inferior to steel?” she asked.

“It depends upon what it is you're hunting.” Cauldron focused his will through his horn into a cone of light which he swung upon the dark recesses between the buildings. “Think back to the old mare's story. The windigo was fought off with the symbolic torch made of wrought iron. This material has sometimes been an able repellent for certain monsters.”

“That's if such a tale has any merit. It's all indulgence to me. And wouldn't the torch's effectiveness be due to the Flame of the Hearth being a symbol of hope? Hah!” Anhe felt a trickle of cold solidifying in her chest, like a sudden pang that stopped her muscles. The windigo had manifested itself in the corner of her eye several yards away. She glanced down to ready one of the pouches of salt in her hoof, but when she looked up again, the empty, shining white face of the specter was but a foot away in the center of her vision.

Taking a step backwards, she bumped into Cauldron and pitched a clumsy bag at the gaunt, pallid horror. She had not unfastened the sack properly nor thrown it quite right, and the salt sifted out like a trickle at all the wrong angles. Where it did collide with the windigo, the entity flickered and hissed. Its approach continued like a swarm of pestilential bugs, and Anhe shoved Cauldron aside to try and keep her distance. Panic rose within her and tickled her legs, and with a terrified yelp she felt her body turn so horribly cold, like she might expel her own heart through her mouth like a chunk of ice. She flung her chained sickle forward without aim and cleaved the windigo at an upward, horizontal angle. The weight of the transparent ghoul buzzed through the metal as the windigo was split apart. The wraith broke in twain and twirled into formless smoke off to the side. Just an instant after the strike, Cauldron had expended another sack of salt that scattered across the dirt as useless grains.

“That answers that question,” Cauldron said. “Give me some of your salt. I don't have a weapon like that to defend myself with. As I was about to say, if we're to put any stock into such hokey fables, it should be in the material details, and that which can be examined and tested.”

Anhe passed him almost every salt sack she'd been given. “In the end, Flame Dancer still failed. I expected a happier ending from these morbid laborers.” She then moved back behind Cauldron without delay.

Cauldron frowned as he counted up the remaining pouches. “Then the story would lose its impact as a cautionary tale. At any rate, the Crystal Empire's army will not fail.”

“We don't seem to be making any sort of impact. All we seem to do is push it away, only for it to come back.”

“That's the reason I sent Bluster to--” Cauldron went silent. He was staring at his own breath as

it billowed from his mouth in droves. Reminded of the dropping temperature by this sight, he shivered and chattered his teeth.

The pair looked all around themselves, but there was no visible sign of the windigo. They stood very still, expecting the windigo to make itself known. They strained to remain apprehensive in the dread that this tense inaction would lull them into a false sense of security. Anhedonia could make herself still, so that even her mane and tail only flickered in the swirling breeze. Cauldron scraped an uneasy hoof against the barren dirt. He noticed the clouds of dust kicking up around himself, flowing in a clockwise fashion to circumference both him and Anhe. The sounds of gusting wind became apparent, swirling among the ether above their heads, and Cauldron craned his chin upwards to follow it with a discerning stare. "Look out above!"

The windigo was above them, swimming through the air with a riotous whirl of wind trailing in its wake. A funnel of gelid current was expanding to engulf them, and blips of frosty color were exuded from the spirit's mane and tail. This phantasmal energy coalesced into the center of the windigo's trajectory, and within the peak of this spatial column, a condensed blizzard stirred into being.

At the first snap, Cauldron could feel his hind legs turn to lead. His bottom lip was still clutched between his teeth to pronounce the end of his warning. He had pushed off the ground in a frightful leap, but felt as if the moment sank into an agonizing vat of molasses. He was shoving his way through the open air, at the same time reaching his tail downwards to tuck it safely between his hind legs. Behind him, Anhedonia had thrust her own body in the opposite direction with a clap of her wings. Her leathery dorsal appendages bore the full toll of yanking her weight forward. She had been quick to react to Cauldron's words, and was aware of a keen fear that one rear hoof was hanging back a bit farther than the other. Her front hooves were pressing against the ground to fling herself, and though the moment seemed frozen then and there to her, she had the vivid sensation her heart was pounding a million times over in her chest. Between the pair of them, a screeching bolt of sizzling cold energy crackled down to earth. A thunderous cacophony of crackling split the night as the jagged fulgurite of ice careened downward like lightning, freezing the air in place as it plummeted into the ground. A hypothermic corona rose outwards like a shock wave from the bullet-like blast of ice that exploded upon the dirt, and it thundered on the heels of the remaining task force members. With all the din of a hundred tumbling boulders, a sadistic, spiked glacier emerged from where the windigo's magic struck the ground, almost exactly like the ones that had trapped three ponies to date. Unlike them, this one remained empty.

Anhe tumbled and rolled along the hard ground, but righted herself with aplomb. Cauldron skidded across the dirt and almost fell over. He trotted a few steps ahead with a slight limp, then shook the awkward pain from his hoof and turned about. "Don't let it escape! Get after it! Try to lead it away from any cover!"

The windigo sailed through the air like a sheet on the wind, propelling itself by no methodology known to ponykind. Anhedonia froze for only a second. She could feel the cold grip of fear within her like the flecks of frost that melted now from the tip of her tail. She had to remind herself of how her weapon had cut the enemy in twain, driving it out of her sight. She felt a little less afraid for this, and the imperial doctrine of superiority, of invincibility, was ignited once more inside of her head.

Anhe leapt with speed formerly unbeknownst to her. The crescent-shaped sickle of her weapon breezed through the near-darkness of the ever-present twilight. This time the windigo acknowledged her as more than just a target and dodged by a wide margin up and to the side. Now that she could see

the entity had something to fear, Anhe could feel an intense rage building inside of her muscles. She may have missed, but she remained determined to strike again, reeling in her weapon and whirling it around at her side in a threatening fashion. The windigo let out a hiss as it swooped in towards her, its face etching itself with hideous varicose lines, like fractures coating the surface of a frozen pond. Anhe felt her body grow still, an apprehension trickling through her joints. She fell about three or four feet before she kicked her wings to life again.

In that time, the windigo changed its mind. It departed from the thestral, abandoning her in an obscuring pogonip that left her shutting her wings against her sides and plummeting to the ground with her teeth chattering. Her joints ached from the instantaneous onset of cold, and when she noticed the hoarfrost creeping up her limbs, she tried to swat and brush it off in haste.

The windigo gave chase to the fleeing Cauldron, its hooves beating against thin air while an unearthly whinny echoed forth in a ghastly voice with such command as though the sound sought out the unicorn and nothing else. Sparse gravel crunched into dry, gritty dirt underneath Cauldron's hooves as he veered in between a pair of shoddy wooden shacks. Ahead of him was a section of stone wall maybe twice his height, and behind him was the windigo in pursuit. Flinging open one of the sacks of salt with his magic, Cauldron shook the white grains upon the ground to form a kind of barrier spanning the narrow alley between the two buildings. He knew this was a gamble, considering the windigo's penchant for sneak attacks, but by a stroke of luck his estimation would pay off.

The windigo could not take the direct route across. It stood there, a soulless apparition that sucked the heat right out of the surrounding air. It scraped its hoof against the ground, its sunken-eyed stare glowering unblinking at Cauldron. The unicorn stared back for a moment as if in awe of what he was faced with. "So you really are allergic, aren't you?" Yellow-green light swirled through his spiraling horn as he commenced to focus his magical potency. Before he could get off one shot, the windigo let out a mesmerizing, rippling scream that forced Cauldron's ears to fold and sounded capable of peeling the wood off the surrounding shanties.

This was accompanied by a deafening wind that pushed against the barrier of salt. Only some particles were blown away, but overall, the partition was degrading. Cauldron was already trying to reassert another spell when a cascade of ice rose from the ground on the opposite side of the salt line. It careened upwards like a looming, frozen tsunami, crackling and tinkling as it formed an erose wall stretching past the rooftops.

By this time, Anhe had caught up and she wasted no time in cutting through the windigo with her sickle as soon as she was in range. The monster blasted away into wisps of dwindling light and she took its place, gazing through the mostly transparent wall of ice that separated her from Cauldron. Before she could take action to test the sheet's durability, Cauldron shouted to her. "Behind you!"

In a way, she did not need to be told. Instinct told her the windigo was launching a counterattack. She turned her head, and at the first glimpse of that angry, stalking face, devoid of sapient thought other than implacable condemnation, she leapt backwards toward the sky. She whirled herself upright, expanding her wings, and chased the floating windigo higher and higher. She was finding it difficult to wield her weapon in mid-air as effectively as on the ground, and every time she would whip her scythe out at the entity, it would blink out of her vision and reappear several meters to the side. On the third or so try, she lost sight of the windigo completely. She bounded higher still and landed upon one of the mighty aqueducts that connected the Crystal Empire's borders to its center.

The aqueducts were a feat of engineering that carried water from the snow-peaked mountains of the frozen north through the Empire itself. On its very top, Anhe stood upon one of the sides of a vast trough of rushing water that stretched far into the distance between the Crystal Palace and the circular wall surrounding imperial territory. The water here was used by the pegasi Stormtroopers guarding the border, the farmers of the northern sector, and the palace itself. It was further distributed among the other sectors for whatever purposes they might have, stored in wells and the like and providing a crucial resource to all the Empire's citizens.

Somehow, Anhe just couldn't allow herself to be bothered by the interminable cold at this point. She was distracted for the moment by the lofty view afforded to her, but knew the windigo would come after her soon. Dread and frustration were stewing inside of her, and she had caught on to the specter's aggressive need for these negative emotions of hers. She wanted to defeat this thing that could not be called creature or being, but all she had accomplished thus far was to cast it aside as though chasing a persistent fly.

Although she had presided over countless dark hours in her duties as a night watch mare, she could not recall succumbing to the chill as she did now. Her body shivered no matter how she willed herself to become still, and listening to her own teeth chattering so became a recursive contradiction to distract herself from how cold she felt. The numbness was creeping all over her, reaching in through her pores to her bones, and she wondered if she'd be able to detect the windigo's oncoming presence. She turned to check behind her at the stretch of rushing water that led towards the Crystal Palace, and then aligned herself perpendicular to the aqueducts. This way, she only had to glance left or right into her peripheral vision to get a decent view in either direction. Despite the shape and appearance of her mask, it afforded an inconspicuous amount of vision, although it was indeed aimed at improving forward sight. She knew, however, that because the windigo was capable of hovering in the air, it might very well turn up right behind her. It could even be above or below her to keep out of sight. Or perhaps this was not entirely the case.

A subconscious apprehension wound its way around Anhedonia's neck. She drew a sharp, quiet breath in through her mask and held it, kept it like a frail creature she yearned to prevent from fluttering away into disaster. She honed her view on the water rippling past her hooves with orange-white twilight. The sound of its trickling harmonized with the wind billowing at this height. At first, she became entranced. She spaced out, staring right through the grim, glowing face peering up beside her own disjointed reflection. Her mind was keen on the fallacy that if she ignored the spectral face, then it wouldn't be real. With a stretch of willpower, Anhe acknowledged that the windigo was somewhere just above, looking down upon her with all its empty fury transposed throughout the pallid mask of its face.

Cauldron's horn exhaled a kind of effervescent vapor that rippled like a heat wave through the air. A sizzling soon followed, along with a scattering trail of small, airborne explosions. These flaming conflagrations burst like fireworks that tore through the wall of ice ahead of him. With a few well-placed kicks, Cauldron clambered through the opening and emerged from between the shacks. He did not have time to muse over the weakness of this ice as opposed to the variety which wholly ensconced its victims. He was able to find the light above that was the glowing, gaunt shape of the windigo. Not too far away, he made out the sight of Anhe, whose limb body was hurtling in an arc through the air above the aqueduct.

A wordless grunt formed in his esophagus, and Cauldron rushed in the direction of the aqueduct. He knew the high structure was much too far away for him to catch Anhe in time, but still he took off on a mad gallop straight in her direction. He could see from his lowly position, however, that she did

not plummet to the ground, and though his heart leapt in his chest to imagine a pony falling from such a height, his fears were admonished at knowing she must be alright—present danger excluded. The easiest way for a unicorn to ascend would be to dash all the way back to the Crystal Palace grounds and climb one of the service platforms' staircases. His gallop veered straight for this next destination, still some ways away. He had to chide himself for wanting to slow down and think things through. Self-levitation spells were not quite the same as kinesis, and such an elevation took greater magical prowess and focus than he could muster given the situation. Furthermore, they were impractical in daily life, and so Cauldron had been one of many who had neglected to study such a branch. He chided himself for such distracting thoughts and hurried on his way. There was a monster to prevent escaping, and Anhe was a crucial asset as a distraction.

To reach the ascending access to the aqueducts, Cauldron had to first cross the central sector of upper class housing. This was a very brief segment, as there were few ponies which filled an upper stratum above the rest under Sombra's rule. He then had to pass through the constant force field that surrounded the Crystal Palace and the various imperial agencies, such as the military dormitories and the Inquisition's tower. By the time he found the stairs, he told himself that catching up to the windigo now must be too late. Nevertheless, for the sake of scientific truth, he could not forsake following through on this plan.

The staircase in question was a rectangular, winding structure slated against the back of some army dorms. Its steps were frighteningly steep, but just wide enough for two ponies to traverse side by side. Cauldron dashed up the stairs, around and around the narrow stone scaffolding. He galloped quickly so that he could not turn as tight as he ought to, but his hoof only slipped once or twice on the upward journey. When he rounded the next turn, a visage of bright orange shot up in front of him, and he very nearly tumbled off the steps in shock.

“Bluster! Where are the foals I told you to bring?”

“Down there.” The pegasus nodded towards the ground in indication. “What exactly did you need them for?”

Cauldron almost started back down the steps again. “Never mind that,” he said. He stopped, turned to face Bluster again, and tossed the pegasus a few small sacks of salt. “Follow the aqueducts and find that windigo. Time is of the essence!” Without looking back, the unicorn hurried instead down the steps.

Bluster almost caught none of the tossed salt sacks. He dipped below to scoop one more into his hoof before it could fall to the ground. “Wait, you found that thingamadiggy? What’s it look like? Is it scary?”

Cauldron raised his head to glare at Bluster. “It’s horrific and has no eyes, like the face of death itself. Now get going!” He was already yelling over the wind that swept this far up the structure, so he punctuated his command with a dose of repulsive magic. His horn glowed, and a wave of kinetic force shoved Bluster back a few feet. Getting the message, the orange pony flew onto the aqueducts where he gathered his possessions for easier carrying.

Huffing loudly, Cauldron regretted the years he had spent behind a desk performing magical research. He was fit within reason, but refused to chalk his lack of breath up to his age. Somehow, this topic became even touchier when he met with those who waited at the bottom of the stairs. He felt

chagrined to find the so-called Junior Inquisitorial Squad running amok in every direction, shouting at the darkness.

The three little fillies behaved as though they'd ingested a load of sugar and were now exerting their limitless energy upon the ground as if in personal vengeance. Apple Core was barking orders to the other two. Toodleoo was dashing about in circles, yelling at nothing. Dinner Bell was on the verge of upsetting a parked wagon and setting off a chain reaction of mischief. For such a late hour, they were brimming with exuberance. To his fortune, Cauldron did not need to round them up, for the three of them gathered together when Apple Core noticed the older unicorn's presence. "Halt, intruder! We are the Valiant Filly Defense! Explain your business here!"

A skeptical quirk took to Cauldron's brow. "I don't have the luxury of time to play your silly arguments. There is adversity ahoof and you three must come with me."

The three fillies pouted up at Cauldron with threatening gazes. "That bumbling pegasus promised us crystal berries!" Apple Core said. Cauldron groaned in annoyance.

Bluster Haze zoomed along the top of the aqueduct, his wings whirring similar to a hummingbird's. The water running through the top trough rippled violently as the billowing air around the pegasus pushed it in the opposite direction from its flow. Through the twilight darkness, Bluster could see nothing up ahead, and he soon became distracted by the image of his own reflection a few inches beneath himself. Cold air rushed around him, buffeting his ears with rampant noise. He flew a smidgeon lower so that the tips of his hooves skated atop the frigid water, and minute drops would spritz into the air behind him, flecking beneath his tail.

Those few minutes Bluster spent speeding down the aqueduct were agonizing in their protraction from Anhedonia's perspective. Thestrals are said to blend into any shadow with ease, and Anhe was lurking upside-down just underneath a top-most arch of the aqueduct. She wrapped her wings tight around her sides, and her Spartan mask helped to repel the image of her as an equine being by covering her face. How much of an effect this would bear upon the spectral entity of the windigo, she could not be certain. To stifle the pounding of her heart, she puzzled over the prospect that the windigo was unlike any living creature in its unnatural powers and ghostly figure. It stalked its prey with such stealth as to exceed mere cunning. Yet, she was sure it had responded to the stimuli of their resistance as if by sight. She had to admit that so much about the creature only ever *seemed* to be the case. She could not feel certain about anything.

Anhe wished she could keep an equal watch on either side of the aqueduct, but she needn't worry. Either the windigo would move about unseen as it seemed to do before, or the light of its own eerie glow would be cast upon the surrounding area as it did now. She remained paralyzed not by fear, but by indecision. What was there to do but risk her neck for an endless cycle of pursuit and flight? She only ever repelled the windigo thus far—there had been no indication of lasting damage to the thing. She stared at her own breath which now grew heavy as her body became colder. She was nearly startled from hiding by the cracking of ice that formed far too fast in the water above. Next, she heard the voice of Bluster, unaware that he was alone with the creature as Anhe hid underneath. "What is that thing?"

She pinpointed the sound of his hooves settling on the stone, a few yards away from the crackling ice. He had trod in the water a bit, eliciting a telltale splash. She surmised he must have been loading an arrow onto his bow, because he announced as much aloud. "You could use a little salt, you creepy phantom! Why not taste my arrow?" Anhe expected his weapon to be useless; her own had

passed right through the entity, only pushing it aside and never cutting it. Her ears twitched outward at the sound of his arrow whizzing through the air. She didn't bother to heed the tiny slosh a moment later because of the ghastly wail that followed in the next second.

Anhe kicked to the side and beat her wings. She changed trajectory like a ricochet and flung her sickle and chain forward the instant she rose above the aqueduct. The blade flashed like lightning against the stone edifice with a terse "clang!" while the windigo was cast into an unsatisfying puff of evaporating mist. The blade clutched the edge of the aqueduct, and she used its pull to guide herself atop the structure. Bluster couldn't keep his mouth shut. "Anhe! You're okay!" She said nothing in return, but slid in behind him to watch his six. He turned about to look at her. "You are okay, aren't you?"

Anhe turned an about face to notice Bluster was not watching her back. "Look!" she said, exasperated, and Bluster let out a shriek when he did look and found the windigo seeping up through the aqueduct as if it was not there. Bluster's clumsy hooves splashed in the water, and as the windigo inhaled deep of the air around them, the particles of water turned to small flurries or bits of ice which clattered on the stone. Anhe shoved Bluster sideways off of the aqueduct just as another "thunderbolt" of ice careened along the top of the trough, crepitating as it formed a diagonal blast several feet onwards, stopping up the flow of the water.

Anhe kicked off of Bluster, unable to carry his weight, and flapped off toward the ground. Bluster took a second longer to get his wings in motion, and when he did, his jaws soon followed. "That ghost scared me half to death, and I thought you were gonna scare me the other half!" Anhe was glad to hide her scowl beneath her mask.

Cauldron carried out the unwieldy task of escorting the three rambunctious fillies into the fields where he noticed for the first time that night how strange, errant streaks of white frost bit at the crops and grounds. It was a light dusting of white, the sort that would fade before the light hours, and the dire situation only permitted him to guess that this essence might form the trail of where the windigo had skated about. When he reached the first glacial structure where Primrose had been frozen two nights prior, the Junior Inquisitorial Squad, or whatever they were calling themselves today, were bickering amongst one another over which interrogation techniques they would get their cutie marks in. Cauldron craned his neck at them with a severe expression and bellowed at them. "Will you three just be quiet?" As if his voice was not loud enough, olive and yellow-green sparks fizzled and clapped about his horn for attention. The three fillies shrank to try and hide behind one another.

Cauldron examined the mare trapped in the ice, but he was running low on ideas. "Now what?" he mumbled to himself beneath his breath. "There's no indication the frozen are aware of their surroundings. Even their expressions are immobile." He gave the obstruction a few punches with his front hoof then turned when he heard the fillies speaking to him.

"Why's she in there?" asked Dinner Bell. "Did the Inquisition put her in there to punish her?"

Cauldron rubbed his chin in thought, but laughed. "Ha-ha, no. If they wanted to put you on ice, they'd just summon you to their tower directly. She was trapped in there by a ghastly creature, and if you look over there, fillies, you'll see it's coming this way, now."

The three foals looked over that way and were pitched with such a fright as to reveal their transparent bravado. Flashes of hoary white frost clapped in between two ponies wheeling through the

air on either side. “Is that what’s gonna happen to us?” asked Apple Core.

“Most definitely,” Cauldron said.

The next thunderous crack did not originate from the windigo—at least, not directly. All Cauldron could do was inspect the outside of the glacial structure, to observe and attempt to break through its surface. He had no idea, then, no contact to speak of, with the occupant within. Though her surface was as ostensibly immobilized as the ice which trapped her, a single tear was shed from Primrose’s face, and the salty fluid was enough to cause a chain reaction of refractive cracks throughout the object’s interior. The somewhat foggy transparency was now obscured by blistered, white gashes and diffused light. More light radiated from within, and within seconds, the gnarly pillar was not just breaking apart; it was melting at an alarming rate. Cauldron and the fillies had their attention drawn away from the speedily approaching monster as they stepped away from the crumbling freeze.

The mare of the ice stepped out, her body translucent and textured in geometric edges that frightened the fillies and repulsed the older unicorn. She looked to each of the foals with a somber, far-off look, as though she were a ghost departing from the realm with a final good-bye. She turned to the windigo which was a few yards off in the air and thrashing its front hooves while emitting demonic screeches. As Primrose’s body glowed brighter and brighter, a flash of light radiated through the specter and terminated its existence. The brilliant shine dissipated, and Primrose was back to her original self. Her next act was to faint upon the ground. “Why?” she asked. “Why did you have to save me? I can’t be saved.” If anypony had deigned to inquire further, she would have refused to speak.

When Anhe and Bluster came to a landing at the scene, they had to take off again at the sound of more crackling. Cauldron took to his hooves, leaving the fillies to fend for themselves with the unconscious mare laborer. The two flyers passed by Whiplash first, ignoring his confused utterances asking what happened and turning about in fright as he remembered what had happened and wasn’t quite sure it wasn’t still happening. When Cauldron ran past him, he quipped without even stopping, “You’re welcome.”

The four members of the task force reunited ahead of the shacks where labor ponies had been awoken by the noise and peered meekly through the windows, trying not to be seen. Blitz was shivering from the cold and trying to shake the ache from her head. “Demn, demn, demn. Is it over already?” She was a trooper, being the only victim still on her hooves after her imprisonment.

Bluster was the first to run at the mouth. “We were fighting it pretty good, giving it the old one-two! It didn’t stand a chance between me and Annie. Then there was this strange light coming from a pony on the ground, and it was gone, and all the ice broke! It almost looked sorta like that labor pony was glitzing for a moment.”

“Bluster,” Cauldron said in a stern tone. “Leave the scientific explanations to me, hm? Speak no more of this, lest you injure your mouth a third time in as many days.”

Blitzkrieg tried rubbing her front shoulders in turn to work the stiffness from her joints. “Sounds as if you three did pretty alright for yourselves. You didn’t think you were better off without me?”

Cauldron looked to her, and then exchanged glances with Anhe and Bluster. “Never crossed our minds. In point of fact, I found myself at one point trying to emulate your strength. I don’t think it was

quite me.”

“So spill the beans,” Blitz said. “What goes into our report on this one?”

“And so, your majesty (may you reign eternal), the task force operated with vigilance in enacting my strategy. We waited one more night to ensure the windigo would not appear again, and will continue to keep an eye out.” Cauldron was alone with King Sombra in his throne room to deliver that report. Cold Shoulder was nowhere to be seen, and the crystal ewes were long gone, returned to their pens in the north sector. Blitzkrieg was recuperating still, and the other two had stuck to their own routines, having little to add for what they could not explain.

“Explain to me again what defeated this creature. Even a good ruler desires to listen to his subjects.” Sombra had barely glanced in Cauldron’s direction during his thorough recap until he mentioned the strange light which Primrose’s body had given off.

Cauldron looked surprised then bowed in apology. “Well, that remains beyond my humble knowledge, my lord. The windigo was truly a creature of idiosyncrasy.”

“Spare no detail,” Sombra insisted. “Your task force exists to bestow me a unique perspective of my empire. Be my eyes and ears, and lend me your words. Speak what is on your mind.”

Cauldron took a moment beside himself and swallowed some air. He had theories, of course, but the most obvious which Bluster himself had called out was urban legend far beneath the paragon of a ruler. He cleared his throat and went through with his master’s request. “I admit it was unorthodox by every standard, but the folklore of the labor caste was the only knowledge I had to go on. Picking apart their words, I theorized that something which appears like an emotional response would be the crux in dispelling the creature’s effects, if not the being itself. I learned the laborer, Primrose, had had a child illegally, and the presence of the fillies might stir such humors within her. It was a risk, not knowing if she was awake in there, but the pronatalist urges are strong, even in her caste.”

“Lost sheep long for their shepherd, but you’re still dancing around the issue, are you not?” Sombra’s expression hadn’t changed, but it filled Cauldron with fear nonetheless.

“Um.” Cauldron’s eyes fell, but he tried to give himself a shrug and a small chuckle. He tried to manipulate his own feelings to throw off his own dread. “Well, such dreck rumors and breezie ballads are frowned upon in the Inquisition.” Realizing he was about to throw words to the wind again, he came out with it. “But the strange allergic reaction which Primrose demonstrated is colloquially referred to as ‘glitzing’.”

“Indeed.” Sombra’s face underwent subtle changes, but his emotional state appeared unmoved. The light of interest had waned from his eyes once again. “The empire’s most prominent inner circle of medical scholars is aware of this, and the knowledge is best left to them. I have yet other tasks for you to investigate on my behalf.”

Daring to speak, Cauldron added, “I’m not certain how to reliably duplicate the effect should more windigos plague us for whatever reason.”

Sombra looked upon Cauldron one more time. “These others in your group. They look to you for advice in all workings magic, correct?”

Cauldron nodded. “That they do, your highness.”

“Like the populace of the empire and the world beyond relies upon the studies and findings of our Inquisition. You explain the functions of life in ways which they will understand.”

Again, Cauldron concurred.

“That is why I withhold this knowledge from the masses. I appreciate the refreshment of a curious mind, but make sure you are organized from distraction, for I have yet need of you all.”

Next Time: **False Prophet**

About: **Blitzkrieg and the Imperial Army**

Among the Crystal Empire's multitude triumphs that earned its formidable reputation, of most worthy note is its Imperial Army. As a whole, the army is divided into four classes which play upon the strengths of the earth ponies, the unicorns, the pegasi and the thestrals. The core of the direct combatants—the army proper, known also as the Imperial Guard—consists almost exclusively of earth ponies, making use of their characteristic fortitude and raw strength.

Earth ponies in the imperial army typically occupy positions of soldier, scout or enforcer. Scouts were a position shared among each division, regardless of race, and earth pony scouts were adept at crossing the roughest terrain to survey locations of tactical interest. For the most part, these were given rudimentary tasks to be carried out that did not necessitate direct combat. Instead, fighting was foremost the duty of the soldiers, who would be decked in armor and armed to the teeth. Enforcers covered a sort of middle ground in the regard that they acted as a general police force for the empire. They would investigate crime and apprehend criminals, as well as function as jailors. While soldiers could share such duties outside of wartime, they just as often would be stationed outside of the empire, such as at outposts of the frozen north. The enforcers would hold jurisdiction within the walls of the empire. Constables shared much of the same practices as enforcers, albeit in a technical, demilitarized capacity, and with a focus usually in one of the five sectors.

Ranking in the imperial military is ordered from peridot, to jade, to emerald. The corresponding gemstone is worn by each pony. Very few ponies attain emerald rank, most notable of these being Centurion, supreme captain of the military, and Jurisprudence, head supervisor to all enforcers.

Blitzkrieg is a jade-ranked soldier. At times, she is responsible for commanding a modest platoon of peridots, and on occasion supervises their training and educates them in the arts of combat. Like just about all new recruits, Blitzkrieg was not necessarily constrained to just one objective at a time. By exhibiting the most persistence and efficiency in her scouting duties, Blitzkrieg earned the notice of her superiors. Though her arrest counts were low, it was soon discovered that her presence and maneuvers, in concurrence with her allies, were successful in lowering crime rates for the areas which she patrolled.



Blitzkrieg's cutie mark matches her weapon: A spiked ball on a chain which she can eject from

and reel back into a sort of cannon attached to her front right greave using a primitive sort of spring. She practiced with numerous weapons in her training, and found the flail, an uncommon choice among the soldiers, to be most appealing for her to handle. It wasn't until deploying the weapon in the field that she earned her cutie mark. This event occurred during a near-unbelievable bust in which a lucky shot ricocheted the ball around a trio of criminals, entangling all three at once in the chain.

Through continued hard work as mentioned above, Blitzkrieg was eventually promoted to jade rank where she flourished and made a name for herself, taking to her duties like a fish to water. Blitzkrieg's new role made her new, less interchangeable friends. Tarnished Shields became something of a mentor to her, and taught her ways to be efficient with her energy. By addressing her adversaries, she could find ways to demotivate them as he was most effective at doing. Though common parlance on the part of the soldiers was to denigrate or frighten the enemy, Blitz demonstrated a flair for an alternative approach in expressing the hopelessness of the situation. In the end, Tarnished Shields parted company from Blitzkrieg in the risky pursuit of limited availability in promotion. Seeing for the first time that his pessimistic speeches to his enemies were something more, this marked a turning point in her idiom. Without sacrificing her aggression, nor by succumbing to outrageous leniency, Blitzkrieg would lull her opponents into a false sense of security using mercy.

Fonts made available by dafont.com. Pony image manufactured courtesy of GeneralZoi's Pony Generator contrivance.