

She had come to Stableside to make a new start. Emerald Lightning had confided terrible truths to her, and only asked to borrow her brushes in exchange for nearly dying. But still. Why did she need this donkey's assistance? Seiko was powerful, but the jennet still thought they were just thieves. She thought their fate, still living ponies, was less important than this. This. These poor woodland creatures who had died some hundred years ago by the look of it.

Granted most things that died didn't stand up and stare at her when she walked past. This must be why you don't stand on somepony's gravestone.

As the jennet had said, it made her head hurt. But she could almost understand why Sharp Wit had said the zombies didn't bother him. Everytime she looked away, she thought she saw jointless limbs stick up out of that hole, reaching for purchase, for ponies, for – but no. Looking at it just made her think the town hall was whistling tunelessly. It was not an improvement. The ground was moist, made of a strange residue of she didn't want to think about what. It didn't actually make slime trails or stick to her hooves like she was expecting. Oddly, it didn't even have a smell. For being surrounded by slowly rotting squirrels, birds, and a gryphon there was very little stench, and no flies.

No, she thought. Scratch that. The flies are zombies too. They weren't flying, but in places where ants should be crawling there were instead emptied out husks of deer flies, house flies, other sizes and varieties. Apparently placing their eggs in the corrupted bodies caused their demise, or this was what hatched. But there were no live flies trying to plant fresh eggs on any of the corpses, and Meadowlark decided she did not want to think more about that.

With the cart left in the normal jungle, everyone could walk freely. But no one was, and neither were they speaking. Just squish, squish across the tar like sponge that was where paving stones should have been. The few small stone structures she could see resembled the occupants.

Hollowed out shells, or broken pieces with the missing pieces nowhere to be seen.

A motion behind her caused Meadowlark to look back. It was the hole again, but there were no black tentacles rising from it. Poor Sharp Wit, whatever his five senses were telling him, left him pale and nearly hyperventilating. She noted he was not looking back at the tunnel he had used to enter. She surmised whatever was at work here, was stronger underground. It either didn't like the sunlight, or perhaps the warm air. "Hey?" the singer called out. "You doing okay Sharp Wit?" The diamond dog nodded too quickly. "I have seen many things in my travels, and heard tales of many more things. Sharp Wit desperately hopes Seiko can push this place off its ledge, and let it slide into decay. Decay would be a healthy improvement for this place."

Seiko, still in front, walking despite deeply wrinkled forehead for her effort, started to say she agreed. But was interrupted by the still cheerful red and white unicorn. "It's really kind of cool how the plants haven't overtaken this place. I mean, there's probably forgotten gold, and I don't know ancient scrolls it looks just like a place we'd run into Ahuizotl, or maybe Xiuhtecuhtli." Behind her, Meadowlark heard a slightly confused sounding Sharp Wit reply "The princesses bless your health."

To which, as Seiko made her way past one of the pony skeletons that turned its white skull to mark her progress, the jennet corrected the diamond dog, saying "Just say *gesundheit*. That phrase predates even the princesses by hundreds of years." The skeleton's head reset, focusing on an oblivious Flarestar as the donkey continued. "And Flarestar if you're going to hope for meeting fictional characters you should really pick just one universe. One of those was a villain of unknown breeding added to a horribly trite, and terribly recently written, fictional universe for a pegasus anthropologist to combat against."

Bouncing on all fours now, the squishing sound magnified for it, Flarestar appended "And the other is a fire god from the jungle. I'd love to meet either of them. Actually I'd like to meet them both at once because then I could watch Xiuhtecuhtli set fire to Ahuizotl." She began pronking in circles, her vector of locomotion remaining the same as before. "That would really make my day."

Again, with the tentacles, replaced by whistling. The flemish giant from the Everfree had decided to follow them in, and was cautiously examining the rent in the earth left by their burrowing companion.

Meadowlark had looked back because of Sharp Wit's words, at first. What they been? Oh, yes. "Sharp Wit thinks all fires make Flarestar's day."

"To which end," The earth pony almost missed the jennet's words, as she was walking closer than she had expected to one of the plain skeletons, this one of a gryphon. It's upper beak had broken off, so a small & strange cup followed her progress as Seiko spoke. "If we have need of more fire, I'll be sure to call on you. But I suspect it is not the right ingredient, fellow mage." The unicorn stopped pronking and went back to walking normally, her head just a little lower than it had been a moment before. Meadowlark was surprised by how far back the gryphon's wings attached to the spine. It appeared there was a second set of shoulders just for operating the wings.

At the largest building, their destination, seven desiccated skeletons sat on their haunches, or would if they had any, in a semicircle in front of the entrance, facing inward with their heads bowed as if in prayer. The living ponies assembled in front of the door at about the same 15 hoof distance as the worshipers, and Seiko lifted a hoof to indicate the entrance.

Their heads didn't move, but from some distance back the not too rotten gryphon's voice could be heard. "We will not stop you from entering, but we tell you not to wake the slumberer."

Seiko just nodded, and groaning as she stepped closer, levitating the door open. It was solid stone two thirds of a hoof thick, and the hinges were made of amethyst deposits worked into a proper shape by an early unicorn engineer. The door squeaked, anti-mute testament to the corrupting power of this place. While gemstone hinges weren't often used anymore because of their brittleness, particularly when foals of the household reach their difficult teen years and start slamming doors behind them. But they never wore out; squeaking shouldn't even be possible. Like most of the rest of this place.

Since the roof was still intact, and there were no window opening low enough to give any meaningful light inside, Seiko caused a ball of light to float above her head, near her eartips. Flarestar just set herself on fire, making it difficult to stand too close to her but she put off a lot

of light – so long as burning dust didn't engulf them in flames.

In the center of the rotunda the floor had been cracked open, and a giant molehill of dirt, large rocks, gemstones, and bones. At the top, alternating black as night, or covered with brilliantly colored flashes of light, was a cylinder. Probably three hooves across, and about four tall. The rest of the area seemed devoid of more than a few stray bits of some forgotten era. Even the tapestries had faded to tattered, moth eaten shreds of debris. Considering the time and money that went into just the hinges, Meadowlark assumed the pigments should have been enchanted, but she couldn't sense any kind of magic in this room at all. The dead roots that kept turning into small tentacles when she looked away implied the story was deeper than what she could see.

"Foot and a half, two tall. Must weigh four hundred pounds." Unless the rabbit had come this far, Sharp Wit was the last in, just behind Meadowlark. Their kind must use the same principle for measuring, but their feet were bigger than pony feet. "How we release rainbows out of dark stone?"

"Ideally," replied Seiko after a surprisingly short gap of silence. "We would use the blood of the poor fool who summoned their slumberer to this place. But I suspect it's all long since been drained into the soil."

"And eaten by worms from there." explained the walking torch pony.

Meadowlark found herself almost hyperventilating, much as Sharp Wit had been earlier. "How do you know so much about it? Have you seen this kind of thing before?"

Seiko shook her head, no. "Only in my young companion's poor choice of reading materials." Which was all the encouragement she needed to launch into a defense of penny serials. "So, that's an altar to an elder creation, and they're all really mad about being forgotten for so many thousands of millennia so when they can poke their withered hooves through to our plane of existence they kill any and everyone they can but we have really good defenses like, uhm, rainbows and candy, and" Seiko scratched her ear with her left forehoof. "Anyway if you arrange to break a hole in the world and talk to them first they give you extra power until they get tired of you not actually breaking a hole or until you actually do, when they kill you because they can't be expected to tell one living pony from another we all look the same to the oldest of creations. I wonder if the bones would be enough fuel to make a bonfire to melt the rock?"

"So, how we stop elder creations, unicorn?" Sharp Wit was turning out to be an odd mix of practical, and mystical. Meanwhile her back was twitching like something was slithering across it. She fought the urge to spin violently to shake it off, but even knowing there wasn't anything there it was hard.

"Huh?" the bonfire turned to face the crowd behind her. "No, you don't stop them you just run away. They're too big." Meadowlark facehoofed. The smack echoed several times around the stone structure, and she almost thought she saw the mound shift in response.

Seiko was the only one here wasn't visibly frightened, although her expression of sheer pain didn't leave Meadowlark feeling jealous of her experiences in here. The donkey took a deep breath, and said "Before anypony asks what we're doing here if running is the preferred solution, let me explain. Bad novel writing aside, we have a way to combat at least part of this, and I believe it will cascade from there. But we will all need to donate a drop of blood. I can use levitation as a knife, if no one has one handy."

This time she was sure she had seen the mound shift at one point, although there was no cascade of debris. But she didn't say anything when Seiko raised her right fore, and suddenly it began bleeding from a cut at the inside of her coronet band. Chanting in what sounded a lot like sandwrit that the skeletons had greeted them in, she walked, eyes closed, up the mound to the stone, and laid her right front hoof on the top of the stone as well as she could, given the steep angles involved. After a couple seconds, and still chanting, she turned and skittered carefully down. No debris fell, and Meadowlark didn't see anything move with that ball of light right there between the donkey's ears, but the jennet was very worried about her footing.

"Please, the rest of you. I'd take that rabbit's blood too if I thought I could force it to bleed on the rock." With that, she went back to chanting, head down, eyes closed as Flarestar began the ascent of what had originally looked like no more than twenty hooves up. It was hard to follow her passage since all of her was so bright, but she was galloping, and took too many steps to get there to Meadowlark's quickly tiring eyes. Once up there, a tiny, precise flame erupted from her horn, and she wielded that like a knife, managing several drops of blood before the wound selfcauterized from the tool's heat. Again, turning and slip-sliding down like Seiko had done.

"Ground rumbles. Do you feel it earth pony? A great burrower approaches. Slow, but very very large. Building-large." He wiped a claw from his right hand, across the outside edge of his left forefinger, and began the climb. "Mage Seiko, make this work. Ground is very unhappy with us." With that cryptic advice, and with Seiko still chanting what sounded like a six or seven verse poem, Sharp Wit dropped to all three, keeping his slowly dripping finger in the air.

A tapping at Meadowlark's right forehoof nearly sent her through the roof. The glowing green bug almost got stomped out of instinct until she recognized the Fleming giant rabbit, whose eyes were themselves a viable source of light in this evil room.

"Cut me. Rabbits don't carry knives."

Meadowlark blinked. Several times. Then laid herself on her belly to be sure she could smell, touch, verify beyond reproach this was a rabbit, albeit a very large one, at her hooves. "Dear? Did you just speak to me?"

It nodded, loose ears flopping. "I heard the donkey girl. I want to help. Cut me." It held up its left forepaw, looking inquisitively at the earth pony.

Quite certain she was insane, and hoping she would wake up in a mental institution where the nice ponies in white coats would explain how she'd never made it to Tastes of a Broad Winged Owlbear because her train had crashed and she'd suffered a massive head injury and started rambling utter nonsense, Meadowlark reached into her pack and brought out a small camp knife. Holding the rabbit's leg in place with a hoof, she wielded the small knife as best she could and stabbed the poor thing, going clear through the wrist.

It screamed the rabbit death cry and bolted like a hydra had just taken notice of her as its next snack.

But to Meadowlark's great relief, and in defense of her sanity, if indeed she still had any, the rabbit was running up the mound, toward the rock. There was a faltering in the chant as Seiko saw this, but more frightening was the rumble that now Meadowlark could feel. Also, even looking straight at the mound she still saw what looked like tiny tentacles of darkness writhing at odd angles from the mound. By the zig-zagging the rabbit, still bleeding profusely from its mangled limb, was taking, it saw the same tentacles and thought them worth avoiding. At the apex of the mound, the rabbit took a mighty leap, and surprisingly did not reach the top of the rock except for all of its foreclaws. Scrambling against the surface of the odd cylinder as colorful strobes continued unaffected beneath the lagomorph. The rabbit scrambled up without needing a second jump, and it trotted all around for a couple seconds, patting its bad leg everywhere it could then screamed again and leapt as high as it could, seeming to fly outward before collapsing in a heap at the base of the mound.

Her turn. She didn't really want to use this knife again. Partly because she didn't want to share blood with a ... talking rabbit, partly because it was so dull it was bound to injure her too. So she walked to Seiko and held her left fore up, and winced quietly when a sharp pain indicated she'd been prepared.

As soon as she set hoof on the mound itself, there came from all around – so far as she could tell – a thrumming, as of drums. And an insane piccolo player accompanied it, and the mound jumped on some of the beats as if it were, itself, the drum being struck by the mad band. The tentacles were twice her height now, and her training in enchanted items kept wildly flaring, as if this bone, that gem, the rock over there ... were enchanted but blank – powerful artifacts of no effect, then the sense would fade as quickly as it flared.

Senselessly the mound had grown. It was a small mountain now, and easily fifty hooves up. As she galloped to her destination, hoping to reach it before her wound closed itself naturally, she heard Sharp Wit bellow something from below. She couldn't make it out but he was hurriedly closing the doors. Twenty strides at a full gallop, and she was only half way. Forty strides, and she was about two thirds up. Sixty strides, and still much too far to jump even in a normal sane dream. This nightmare she was having made no sense to her, and she was terrified. But she had to get the blood to the stone so it would wake up. That small mantra became her focus, her reality. She couldn't hear the chanting anymore, couldn't see her friends with her night vision all wonky from the frequent multi-hued strobes of angry light from her destination.

There were eruptions on the mound. A foul smelling stench and a sticky looking fluid would burst as if the world had a canker sore that had just been lanced. At one hundred and twenty strides at full gallop she was within reach of her destination but the wall was too much. The mound had become a sheer cliff, placing her escape route too high to even scramble, or jump. The sides were too smooth to even think of climbing it.

Dodging another canker volcano, she stood up on just her hind legs, and placed them as close to the stone as she could. She could almost get her forelocks across it but no more. She was wondering if she was successful in bleeding on the stone and she could wake up now, when a dried root from the other side reached across and grabbed both her legs and yanked her up. On the other side of the mound was darkness. Here the piccolo was maddeningly loud, the drums only a sensation the bones could acknowledge, so drowned out were they by the screaming wind instrument.

She drew her small knife and hacked wildly at the tentacle / root thing that had her. Almost falling down into the depths of the far side where tentacles wailed rhythmically and poisonous ooze flowed freely. Not knowing what else to do, she braced her self as best she could on the tiny island of sanity, brightly colored though it had become. Her four hooves balanced inside a stone circle barely three hooves on a side.

What more did she need to do to wake up? WAKE UP! she shouted at herself and she knew not if it was aloud or in her head or if there was a difference anymore. WAKE UP MEADOWLARK THIS IS A NIGHTMARE

At that a bomb went off. The rock's skin fell away and a brilliant rainbow, having no ends and no real directions, just colors, exploded with the force of a thousand suns. Meadowlark was launched skyward and blinded at the same time. I hope I don't hit my head on the ceiling too hard. Aren't you supposed to wear helmets when you go rock climbing? were her last thoughts before realizing she was actually falling down, not up. Then she hit the mound of loose bones, rocks, and sharp gems. She also hit her jaw on the light bulb thing at the top of the mound, and it jarred her head hard enough that the stars were very quickly replaced by darkness.