

“We lose 'em?” Muffs said.

“Don't look back, doofus, just keep runnin'!” Brother yelled at Muffs, whose headphone-wrapped head was just a few feet in front of us.

Brother glanced behind us at the crowded lobby and muttered a dirty word. Fast, heavy footfalls joined ours in the hallway. A grownup yelled.

Muffs pulled open a side door and sped up the stairs, me and Brother right behind.

“What're we goin' UP for? You *want* to get stuck on the roof?” Brother roared.

“Theater balcony! We can get down! Wanted to dodge any goons-” Muffs fell and Brother pulled him up and pushed him ahead. “-sorry. Any goons that came in a different door than we did!”

“Shut up and climb!”

I muttered, “You shut up,” then sent a prayer of forgiveness to Mom and Dad.

Muffs jerked open the metal door at the top of the stairs. Looking at how scrawny he is, he shouldn't be that strong. He's older than me by an entire half-year, but *I'm* bigger.

The balcony was empty. Rows and rows of seats, with just a windowed box in the middle to break them up. To the right a mess of catwalks and stage lights hung from the ceiling, and an identical mess hung by the far wall.

I leaned over the railing. A rainbow of t-shirt people milled in the aisles. Easy-listening music milled even more aimlessly.

“There!” Brother said, and pointed at a glowing exit sign on the other side of the balcony. They ran, and I ran to catch up.

We were only a quarter of the way across the balcony when the two tailing us slammed onto the balcony. My backpack was digging into my armpit, and I loosened the strap. Should I ditch the pack? What good were a change of clothes, a music player and *The Hobbit* gonna do us if we got caught? Could I chuck the pack at one of the goons to trip him up?

A few feet from the warm glow of the exit sign, *those* doors slammed open and a couple more goons charged towards us.

Muffs yelped and tried to turn, I braked, but all three of us slammed into a wall of camo covered muscle.

I was bearhugged. The guy on the left grabbed Brother and Muffs. Brother smiled wickedly and kicked him between the legs. The goon's eyes bulged and he bent over like he was going to throw up, but he let go of Muffs and slapped Brother across the face. Muffs scampered away as Brother screamed.

My goon rumbled, "Shut him up!" and produced handcuffs from a cargo pocket. He yanked my arms behind my back and slapped the cuffs around my wrists, despite the scratches I left on his.

Instead of covering Brother's mouth and getting bit, Brother's goon simply pinched Brother's head. Brother's yelling reduced to a loud buzz, so he stopped.

"Hope nobody down below heard that," my goon said. One of the goons from our doorway shouted. We all looked towards him.

Muffs was standing on the balcony banister.

He held out both arms like a traffic cop. The two goons pounded to a stop a few feet from him. One of them told Muffs to take it easy while the other told the walkie-talkie he carried that we were on the balcony.

Walkie-talkie Goon clipped it back on his belt and waved at the two goons that manhandled us. "Get down below, see if you can find a ladder."

"What about these kids?" Brother's goon said, and gave Brother a shake.

Walkie-talkie sighed and pulled at his face. "Brandon only cares about the one on the banister. Stash the others somewhere so they don't cause trouble. Especially that bigger one."

Muffs blurted, "If I get down, will you let them go?"

Walkie-talkie looked surprised. Brother buzzed angrily.

“What Brother is trying to say is that the flunkies just said they don't care about us, so they're going to let us go whether you give yourself up or not. So don't be a hero, stupid.”

Brother hummed his thanks.

Walkie-talkie rubbed the back of his neck and muttered, “Of course it couldn't have been that easy. Thanks, you two.” His head snapped around and he roared at our two goons, “Now could you *please* get them out of here?”

Brother and I were dragged to the windowed box and carefully set inside. It was a soundmixer's spot. Cabinets with blinking lights lined the walls and a long board of sliding switches sat at the window. The goons closed the door. Clicks and snaps came from behind it for a few seconds.

“Ha!” Brother said. “Idiots. The door doesn't have a lock.” His hands had been cuffed behind him, too, so he had to back to the door to grab the handle. The door swung toward him – for half a foot. A chain of handcuffs went from the nearest seat to the outside door handle.

One of them raised his hand and the other one slapped it. Neither so much as twitched a smile. Then they jogged towards the stairs.

“Crappit!” Brother swore and kicked the door shut.

“Wait, keep it open. Maybe we can hear what they're saying.”

He looked like he was going to tell me to keep my ideas to myself, but instead he fumbled it open.

Another man was walking towards Walkie-talkie and the other goon by the banister. This one wore a polo shirt and smooth khakis.

“Hey!” Brother yelled. “That's the guy that gave Muffs the hearing test!”

“Do what?”

“You notice anything when My Little Pony's on, do ya? Miss Bale talked with him, introduced

Muffs, then a couple of those body builders brought in microphones and stuff, and they all went into the office.”

I muttered, “I was watching the toddlers, who were watching My Little Pony.” Brother just kept glaring at Polo Shirt.

“When they came out,” he said, “Miss Bale announced that Muffs had been accepted to a boarding school far away.”

“I remember that part, 'cause half the toddlers started bawling. I missed how Rainbow Dash got her book back.”

Brother rubbed his face. “...Since when do boarding schools hire muscle to round up new students?”

Polo Shirt was talking. “...you see that you aren't unique? There are others like you. Not many-” Polo Shirt one hand out to Muffs like he was Darth Vader.

“Sheesh! The average arm on that 'sound crew' is thicker than my chest.”

I shushed him.

“-more and more are being born. The rate is increasing, which means it's more pressing that we understand this phenomena. Your score's not great, but good. Come with us, and you'll be helping yourself and your country at the same time. Please, little boy, what could be better?”

“Going home!” Muffs yelled. Polo Shirt flinched and a scream came from the main floor. The crowd noise swelled. Someone shouted for a ladder.

Walkie-talkie pulled Polo Shirt away from Muffs and whispered something. Muffs edged sideways, glancing between the catwalk near the wall and his feet. The spare goon sidled over to cut him off. Dang.

“Aw man, this is bad.” I said to Brother, and looked around. “They're gonna try to nab Muffs instead of talking him down. If he falls...”

Brother juttled out his jaw. "They might not catch him."

I nodded. Walkie-talkie rested a hand on his belt and glanced at Muffs. The goon covering Muffs shook some sweat off his hands. Muffs wrapped his arms around his head.

"How much noise does Muffs' muffs block out?" I asked Brother.

"Those shiny things? Pretty much everything but people talking. He let me try them on once, I could hear him just fine but the train going by home just-" he swished his head, "-poof."

"Okay. We need to get my music player out of my backpack."

"Uh..." Brother spread his hands behind his back.

"It's not like I'm any better. Can't even get my backpack off, the dummies."

"Which pocket is it?"

"The smallest outside one."

Brother got behind me.

Walkie-talkie turned the volume down on his radio and held it to his ear as Polo Shirt approached Muffs again. "So what's it gonna be, kid? A place where you belong, or that moldy hole of an orphanage I rescued you from?"

I rolled my eyes. When we don't give the answer they want, adults just ask again. Muffs looked over Polo Shirt's shoulder at me, so I gave him my best impression of Brother by puffing out my chest and sticking out my jaw like an orangutang. Or like a smart orangutang, anyway.

"Hey, quit moving around!" I told Brother I was sorry, and let myself have a small smile.

As Muffs opened his mouth a goon's head rose behind him.

"Behind-" I shouted.

The goon shoved Muffs into the waiting arms of Polo Shirt. The crowd cheered. Muffs thrashed and knocked Polo Shirt on the jaw, but Walkie-talkie stepped over and wrapped him up in a wrestler's hold.

“Got it!” Brother said.

“Plug it into the ox cable on the right side of the sound board! It's like a headphone jack.” I kicked the door shut, which muffled Muffs' screams to the level of a conversation. I threw myself into a chair, which rolled backwards, and it took precious seconds to drag myself back to the board with just my feet. Polo Shirt leaned close to Muffs and whispered something, a confident sneer on his face. Muffs stopped screaming, so Walkie-talkie set him down. They all started for the doors we had come from. I kicked all the sound board sliders to the top.

A goon pushed open the stairwell door.

I slammed my head against the chair back. “Come *on*, Brother! How hard can it be to put in a stupid cable?” That was way too loud in the small room. I prayed two times for that.

I kicked one of a set of switches underneath the sound board. The massive white stage lights flared to life, glaring even in the pre-concert halfnight. Polo Shirt's gang paused to look, and I imagined the audience below clapping and smiling, thinking that the show was starting early. Oh, we'll give 'em a show.

I kicked more. Blue, red, orange, green and even a pink flower-shaped light blared onto the stage. Polo Shirt glared at our box.

“Gotcha! It's-” Brother couldn't see Polo Shirt about to get away.

“Down, down right plays! Hit it and try to cover your ears!” I mashed my ear into my shoulder. Muffs saw me and clapped his hands over his own headphone covered ears. I swear he trembled, like a kid about to be paddled.

“Here we go!” Brother yelled. An electronic beat started, with notes sliding up and down. Polo Shirt and the others looked puzzled. Brother roared, “This your freaking My Little Pony techno?”

“Cover your ears! This is just the intro!” My voice cracked.

It crescendoed to the singing, bits of autotuned MLP clips. *You know she's not a tree, right?*

*She's not a tree, Dashy!*

BASE.

The window shook and the goons collapsed, clutching their ears. Fluttershy sang, *I would like to be a tree-tree-tree-tree. AhooahooOoohoo.*

Muffs was the only one still standing. “Almost makes you feel sorry for those thugs, 'ey bro?” I yelled.

“Ya. This song is terrible!”

I grinned and fake kicked him from my chair.

Muffs smiled weakly and started towards us, hands over his headphones. Fluttershy petered off as the chorus ended. Polo Shirt staggered upright. I jerked up in my seat and jabbed a warning with my head.

Snarling, Polo Shirt lunged at Muffs. Muffs screamed as Polo Shirt grabbed the top of Muffs' headphones and ripped them off, then jammed them on his own head.

Walkie-Talkie was up too, and rammed a couple earplugs in. The other goons fled into the stairwell. Walkie-Talkie yelled at them, but none came back.

Muffs jumped for the headphones. Polo Shirt simply leaned back.

*Fill my soul, fill my soul...*

“Turn it down!” Brother yelled. I scrambled to swing my feet back up to the switches. I slid two rows at a time, and glanced up at Muffs.

As the tiny kid's head slammed into Polo Shirt's nose.

Polo Shirt fell backward. Walkie-Talkie roared in disbelief and lunged at Muffs. The kid didn't even look behind before he jumped backward, launched off an armrest and grabbed Walkie-Talkie's shoulder in midair. Muffs' legs flew over his head in a graceful arc as the tug twisted Walkie-Talkie backwards. They both disappeared below the seats.

*I would like to be a tree-* Muffs' elbow flashed above the seats before swinging down-*tree-twice-tree-three times-tree-four.*

Muffs stood up. His body trembled with each beat. He wasn't even trying to cover his ears. Polo Shirt yanked the headphones off and held them out to Muffs while backpedaling. Muffs ambled toward his prey, then hopped onto a seat back and leaped to the next like a cat. Polo Shirt was pleading and babbling, his face super white. He tripped, his head slammed into the railing, and the headphones flew into the air.

Muffs sprang, touched the floor once, then launched himself off the railing as Fluttershy wailed. Muffs and the headphones met in the air, amidst the booming base and stage light rainbow.

Just as he passed under the catwalk, his hand snapped out and snagged the bottom rail. Brother and I cheered him. Muffs hung there for a few beats, then slowly pulled himself over the railing and collapsed onto the catwalk. He slipped his headphones on.

The chain of handcuffs clattered to the floor. Muffs nudged the door open. It had taken forever for him to find the catwalk door and get back to the balcony. He had been too chicken to jump again.

Muffs uncuffed us both with a small key he'd taken from the still unconscious Walkie-Talkie. Polo Shirt had staggered down the balcony stairs while Muffs was making his way to us.

Muffs jogged for the stairs opposite Walkie-Talkie. I glanced at Brother, but he simply snatched up my music player and followed with a grin.

"Uh, pretty sweet moves you had back there." He didn't reply. We galloped down the stairs and dodged a couple stage workers hurrying toward the balcony. One of them glanced at us, but that was it.

"What about Brandon?" Muffs said. Oh, Polo Shirt.

Brother snorted. "He won't come back for a second beating."

Muffs looked grim. "I think he will. He's not going to stop. He hunts for kids like me with his



hearing tests.”

“So he'll go find another one and leave us alone.”

We entered the lobby. I had to raise my voice to be heard. “He should, right? But it'll take time for his goons to find another one.”

Brother nodded. “So we shouldn't go home just yet. We can hide out for a while, maybe someone that's aged out of the orphanage will let us crash at their place.”

Muffs hummed agreement.

Someone's gotta chase the techno out of his head and face reality. “Will Miss Bale take Muffs back? Last she saw of Muffs he got in a car to go to a fancy boarding school.”

Muffs smiled wickedly. “Never jumped out of a car before, that was awesome.” I started to roll my eyes at him but stopped myself. He made it sound like the car had been speeding down the highway, not stopped at a red light.

“Oh, Muffs can just look at Miss Bale with his great big puppy eyes and spin some story. Maybe they found out all the dormitories are full, or some are being fixed up or something so there's no room for him on accident.”

I sighed. I guess we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. “It'll be good to be home,” I said as we walked out into the afternoon sunlight. Together.