

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 59: Turbulence

"I simply cannot imagine why the pegasus ponies would schedule a dreadful downpour this evening and ruin what could have been a glorious sunny day."

The *Fleur* floated whisper-quiet through the air as we cut our way through the clouds, the wet vapor coating everything in a layer of shininess. Occasionally, we passed into a dip in the upper surface of the clouds and broke into open sky. Scotch Tape and P-21 ignored Glory's warnings against staring at the sun, marveling at the amazing azure that arched overhead. For me, on the other hoof, looking up produced a feeling much like looking down. I envied both of them; they'd shaken 99's agoraphobia far more quickly than I, if they'd ever had it to begin with. Boo also seemed quite impressed by the sun and stretched out her hoof as if she could nudge the glowing orb aside. Of course, then we would plunge into the clouds once more. It was definitely for the best, though, as we'd spotted at least one Raptor off to the northwest.

As we were crossing another of the cloud valleys, my attention turned to Lancer, who was keeping to himself by the rail. I trotted over, and I noticed him leaning away a little more with every step I took. "Oh, stop. I've already got my curse cooties all over you," I teased as I sat down beside him. That certainly didn't cheer him up, so I commented on the sky. Sure, looking up gave me problems, but if I just stared down the valley at the horizon... "Celestia, that's beautiful," I said as the sun washed over us. Then I glanced back over at him and saw his indifferent shrug. "You don't think so?"

"It's the sun. I've seen it before," he commented quietly, then met my skeptical gaze. Huffing softly, he rolled his eyes. "Do you think your pegasi keep our homelands cloud-covered as well? Sun. Moon. Stars. I've seen all the skies have to offer." He turned away, but then added, "It is... nice."

"Right. Nice," I said, feeling the awkwardness grow. To spare him, I averted my eyes. "So, what are they like? Your lands, I mean."

"Save your breath, Maiden. I have no wish to speak with you. I hate and despise everything you are," he growled. P-21 and Glory looked over at us as he began to build up steam. "You are the ruination of everything you come in contact with. You... did you see what you just did? You kill Goddesses!"

"That wasn't my kill, Lancer," I countered, frowning at him. "The Stable Dweller got the Goddess. I was just along for the ride."

"Yes! Along! Wherever you are, death and destruction follow!" he said, then looked around, his eyes widening. "I want to land. Let me off."

"You get off when we're clear of any Raptors. If we drop below the cloud layer, we'll be visible for miles," Glory said, trotting up and looking around at the *Fleur*. "I talked to Storm Front during the Gala about it. Raptor radar is tuned to detect high-density objects like dragons, flying tanks, mountains, and missile casings. If they get a return off the *Fleur*, they'll hopefully chalk it up to two-century-old radar systems and write it off as a glitch."

"They could not detect our Tempest," Lancer sneered at her. Oh... that didn't sound good.

"That was a myth," Glory countered with a sweep of her hoof. "Living storms do not exist."

"Keep telling yourself that," Lancer replied with a smug look. "You ponies had your 'Thunderheads'. We awakened the storm itself."

"Do you have anything like that now?" I interjected. "Or is this a two-century-old prickwaving dickfight of who *had* the deadliest toys?"

He cooled a bit, seemingly caught between discretion and arrogance. "Well, Thunderheads still exist," he commented with false levity.

"Right..." I turned to Glory. "And these were..."

Glory sighed, rubbing the bridge of her muzzle with a wingtip. "According to some conspiracy nuts, balefire bombs weren't the only megaspells in the zebra arsenal. Only the most prolific. There were rumors... myths... war stories... right before the end that the zebras had used megaspells to create super talismans that... well... had *excessive* effects. Whole mountains that would advance on pony positions. Living storms and cyclones. Behemoths of vegetable matter." She then glared at Lancer and tapped his chest. "But they were *just* stories. They're used as plot devices in our war dramas!"

"The superweapons of your side still exist. Why do you suppose that ours do not?" he retorted with a scowl. "Ponies were right to attack first before we could deploy them offensively. The elemental forces were encased within the greatest talismans ever created, and those could then be smuggled into your greatest cities or fired on missiles into the heart of your lands."

"Oh, so the ability to devastate an entire city wasn't enough? What could your mega talismans do that your balefire bombs couldn't?" Glory asked with a roll of her eyes.

"Go off more than once while not targeting us," Lancer retorted grimly. "A Tempest would tear your clouds apart and break your control of the weather. A Behemoth could prowl through your forests, hiding like a hillock during the day and savaging your towns by night. A Colossus would walk over your armies, resisting any megaspell you threw at it. And when the war was over, we could use them to reconstruct and rebuild."

"But... why?" I asked, pleading for him to see the madness of it all.

"We knew that the balefire deterrent wasn't going to last! Someday you'd have all your megaspells ready, and you'd attack. And you did!" he snapped, pointing a hoof at her. "In an instant, Roam was gone! The fire still burns! You liquefied the Atori Islands in minutes! Millions dead, and the radioactive slag is still toxic today! And that, by our accounts, was from just one megaspell! You turned the sun against us! Why would we not turn the sky and land itself against you?"

"And you have one of these... mega-talismans?" I asked lightly, afraid that the Legate was going to move up several orders of magnitude in importance very quickly. Maybe it was something in my eyes. Maybe it was something in my tone. But Lancer seemed to realize very quickly that I was shifting my priorities against the Remnant.

"...no." He said the word like he was extracting a tooth. "Father sent representatives back to the homeland to find one. We'd not made more than a dozen before the spells struck. If we'd had another year..."

"We'd have had some other horrifying superweapon to terrorize you with," I replied... but maybe we wouldn't have. Maybe Twilight would have resigned... maybe Rarity and her other friends with her. Maybe the war effort would have collapsed. Maybe one of the zebra weapons would bite them in the ass. Something had to break, sooner or later. I scowled at him. "You guys weren't any different from ponies. Always looking for that one thing that would let you win. That one advantage. That one... whatever... that'd let you kill more ponies than zebras. You used dragons. We made Raptors. We made power armor. You made armor piercing bullets. We made megaspells. You made balefire bombs. We made Thunderheads. You made Tempests." I hissed sharply through my teeth. "It's annoying."

"Yes, well, you've never had to deal with a pony who defies everything thrown at her," Lancer countered.

"Excuse me?" I asked, my eyes widening.

"You always win," he said with a scowl.

"I do not... always... win..." I muttered, glaring back at him. The tension inside me began to grow more acute. I looked over at my friends, but even they seemed unsure how to respond. That made the wires in my head draw even tighter, and then Lancer laughed harshly.

"Oh, please. Deus faced you, and now he serves you. Sanguine opposed you, and now he's dead. The Harbingers brought all they could, and you've fought them off time and time again. You just survived a balefire bomb!" he declared. "What more can be thrown at you?"

"I don't always win!" I shouted at him, springing atop him and yelling in his face. "I only survived the bomb because of my friend, and I lost her! I saved my stable only to have to kill it! Beating Sanguine didn't bring Priest back! I broke the link, then had to kill forty helpless children." Every win came at a price, and honestly, looking back, it sometimes made me wonder if I'd been right to win at all.

I wanted to rage! Damn this body! Pant! Gasp! I wanted a heartbeat to thunder! I wanted to feel like something other than a machine. Suddenly, I realized his face was screwed up in pain as my metal hooves ground his body into the deck. Just as quickly, I backed off. "Sorry..." I muttered. "I just... I don't always win. Not... not like you think."

He glowered at me but was apparently uninjured. "I hate you," he growled. "I hate all of you," he said as he glared at each of us on the ship. "Especially you," he added with a look at me. I sighed and dropped my eyes; oh, well. He wasn't the first. Then an unexpected voice spoke up.

"Let's take this topic off Blackjack. You want to talk about hate?" P-21 asked casually as he stepped up towards the larger zebra. Lancer seemed surprised by P-21's advance. "I know a thing or two about hate. You know what I've hated? I hated seeing a dozen helpless zebras, some of them children, being gunned down by a coward. I hated seeing him shoot the pony who'd saved their lives, and his, in the back. I hated and will *always* hate any world in which fuckers like him could get away with that."

Oh Celestia, they were doing this now? "Coward?! How da--" Lancer began, and then P-21 swung his head around and smashed Persuasion across Lancer's face. The surprised zebra fell down, looking at him in shock and rage. But there was no bellowing rage in P-21, only a cold hatred I hadn't seen in weeks.

"You *are* a coward. You're afraid of everything. You kill from hiding where you can't be seen and from a distance where you won't be hurt. You're afraid of Blackjack, what she can do and what she represents. You're afraid of powers beyond your control. You're afraid of your own father. You're afraid of everything, but most of all you're afraid to admit it," he said as he looked down at Lancer.

"You came to m--" he began again, but he was again silenced by a blow from Persuasion. This time the zebra blocked the barrel with his hoof, but he still closed his mouth and stepped back.

"*Glor*y went to you," P-21 snapped, "on the off chance you were behind Blackjack's disappearance. She was desperate. I wanted to implant a grenade rectally and watch you try and get it out," P-21 seethed, then glanced at me for a moment. "Blackjack might be able to forgive you. Blackjack lets go of shit that I can't even imagine. But I don't forgive you, Lancer. I saw a coward murder more than a dozen of his own kind, including his own mother and sister, in cold blood because he was too afraid to do the right thing and tell whoever gave that order to go fuck himself. Or simply let them live and

then lie about it. You're a coward and a murderer and I don't expect that that will ever change."

Lancer looked like he was about to explode, but P-21 didn't look away. "You... have no idea..." the zebra said, searching for words.

P-21 actually smiled a little. "Oh? You think that I don't know what it's like to be afraid? I've been afraid almost every damned day of my life. Afraid for my life. Afraid for the life of someone I care for. Someone I love. So afraid that I wanted to die just so I wouldn't have to deal with the fear anymore. And yeah. I hated it too. Hated it and everything that made me scared. Everything that hurt me was my enemy, and everything hurt me." He glanced at me again, then back at the zebra. "But hate doesn't make the fear go away, and it doesn't make you strong. It makes you mean. And that doesn't get you anything but pain and misery."

He pointed a hoof at me. "That mare that you hate so much? The one you accused of winning all the time? She's gone through stuff that I can't even imagine, and suffered things that I know nopony should. And she will always do what is right. Right for her friends. Right for ponies. Right for zebras. Even right for hellhounds. No matter how much it hurts her or how afraid she is. And sure, she fucks up. But she keeps moving ahead. And as long as she can keep going, I can too. No matter how afraid I am."

I stared at P-21 as he walked away from Lancer, turning his back on the zebra. Lancer bored a shooty look into his back as the blue stallion walked over to Scotch Tape and gave her a firm hug. I felt a little lightheaded after that and stepped between them. "We'll get you down right away," I said to Lancer.

"Don't do me any favors out of pity," he snapped, his eyes full of rage as he glared at the smaller stallion. Finally, he turned away. "He speaks truthfully... that's what is so intolerable. I've been afraid of my father every second I've known him. Afraid of his approval and what it would mean. Afraid of his disappointment. Afraid of his wrath." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Do you... do you ever think of those you killed, Blackjack?"

"You could say that," I replied. "Especially the ones that were my fault. Killing someone in self-defense is one thing, but someone dying because of a choice I made... I can't ever forget those. And I hope I never do."

"I see," he muttered. "Your friend was right. It was cowardly of me to slay my own people. One should never kill the helpless."

I closed my eyes, the ghostly tune of a song returning to memory. I'd thought I'd forgotten, but now I could hear it as if I were singing it once again. Hush now, quiet now... "You're not the only one who's done that. And you're right... we never should." Even if they were crazy.

For a moment, he was quiet, and then he said, as he looked off at the clouds, "Father has a balefire bomb."

"I know," I replied. "Xanthe told me."

He glanced at me. "I was... proud... we had it. When we dragged it out of that silo, stabilized it... I was thrilled. A weapon to end the evil city and the Maiden all at once. But... he never really said he was going to use it on the city. It was implied, but he talked about others. Your Goddess. This Red Eye and his army. Something called the S.P.P. up in the skies. And now, after you two battled, I'm questioning everything he's told me and what I did for him. And that is what I hate you for most of all. Making me doubt." For a moment he just stared out at the passing clouds. "I wish that I had been stronger when we first met. I think I could have caused far less harm."

"Yeah, but if you'd come with us then, you'd have been dragged through a world of misery and angst. Trust me. You're better off. And you and I would have had sex eventually, and that would have

complicated things with Glory, and--" I started to say when he actually chuckled.

"Maiden, no offense, but your horn aside, you're missing far too many stripes for us to ever be intimate," he said with an actual honest smile. It looked good on him.

"Oh, really? 'Cause back at the Society, you didn't seem to mind. Besides," I said with a smirk, "ever hear of body paint?" Well now, that was quite a look of surprise!

A smack to my backside made me yip, and I turned and grinned sheepishly at Glory. "Oh! Um! Hi. We were..." Don't say sex.

"Talking about sex," Glory finished as she walked up next to me and sighed. "What am I going to do with you?" In the short term, the answer was apparently 'smile at her and nuzzle her neck'.

"Well, you were off to a good start," I replied, glancing towards my rear.

Lancer's smile had been replaced by wariness. "I don't think the legends of the Maiden could cover this part. My mother told me many stories, but none of them mention the Maiden getting her hindquarters paddled."

An image of Princess Luna entered my mind, and I snickered. Scotch Tape and P-21 approached, though, and the filly asked Lancer, "Can you tell me more about zebras? I mean, I heard a few things, but most of the lessons in the stable were about how you were all bloodthirsty barbarians that ate young fillies."

Scotch Tape looked up at P-21 and gave his foreleg a nudge. He glanced at Lancer, turned away, and finally sighed and said grudgingly, "I have to admit, I'm a little curious about the zebras as well."

Scotch Tape smiled up at her father proudly, then asked Lancer, "Do you have a Wasteland there?"

"Now... wait." Lancer frowned. "I am a warrior, not a storyteller."

"Be both," I suggested. "Can't hurt to branch out, can it?"

He seemed to weigh the choice between telling us and blowing us off, then answered, "Fine. I suppose I can tell you about our people. Better than hearing just your pony propaganda."

"Ours is a different sort of Wasteland. Your Wasteland is stark, cold, and empty. Ours is harsh and wild. Equestria did many terrible things during the war. There are still places where the megaspells rage. A pillar of fire that wanders a shattered plain of glass, seeking out any intruders. A city that traps the minds of any who sleep within its limits in endless dreams. There are many other places where industrial works still poison the land. There are mines deeper and more vast than any valley, gouged into the earth and now filled with pollutants. And beasts... some native and others introduced during the war... they stalk and hunt us. The cities are too dangerous or contaminated to live in. And, of course, the tribes constantly bicker and fight."

"Some things never change," I muttered.

"No," he said harshly. "Some things should not change. Some change should not be allowed." Lancer met my eye again. "My mother told me stories when I was young of the good times. Before the war, when the twelve and one tribes worked in unity to survive and prosper. But all that changed."

"Twelve and one?" I asked with confusion.

"I doubt you want to hear the story," he said with a flush. But we did. Soon, we'd moved over by the wheel so that Scotch Tape could steer while she listened. I didn't know why Scotch Tape was our designated pilot, but she seemed to be handling steering well enough; we hadn't hit any mountains yet. We'd even opened a little trapdoor so that Rampage could listen in as she pedaled below.

"Once, there were the sun and the earth. Both were lonely, but they could not be together for long. Many times the sun came and made love to the earth, and when he did, life was born. Twelve times they coupled, and each time a new tribe was born. But then the moon saw their lovemaking and waited till the sun was away. The moon was wicked and pale, for his illumination was not nearly as bright, and so he took the earth by force. From the coupling one tribe was born, along with all the beasts and monsters that hunt under the cover of the darkness. When the sun saw what the moon had done, he was outraged, and from then on chased the moon across the skies so he would never get another chance. But occasionally the moon would lay a trap for the sun, and all the world would turn dark as they battled. But each time, the sun would be victorious and continue the hunt."

Glory looked over at Scotch Tape with an expression of worry before the filly quipped, "Is this story a little too saucy for you?" Flushing, Glory returned her attention to Lancer. I gave her a little nuzzle. She gave my ear a little bite. Ah, good times. If only Lacunae could have been here to share them...

"The twelve tribes are the children of the sun. The one are the children of the moon. Each coupling, the land gave rise to the tribe. The Achu were born of the high and fiery mountains. The Propoli in a village. The Carnilia on a fertile plain. The Mendi in a deep wood." I couldn't help but smile at his tone as he seemed to get into it. "The Zencori were born on a wind, the Atori on the islands, and the Eschatik in the deserts. Even the southern snows birthed the Sahaani, and the ice has always borne the springs of steaming water heated by their passions. The swamps birthed the Orah and the jungles the Tappahani. The final two, the Logos and the Roamani, were sired in a library and on a battlefield."

"Wait. Sired?" Glory asked skeptically. "I'm pretty sure that violates every code of conduct in every library I've ever been in."

"Nah. All the best libraries have got great orgies going on," Rampage drawled sarcastically from below. "You just have to fuck really quietly."

That made us all laugh, and Lancer sighed. "It is a story. Believe it or don't. The story doesn't care." He snapped his tail and then smirked. "Or can you ponies tell me your origins with greater veracity?"

He had us there. I had no clue where ponies came from. Everything was rather fuzzy prior to the Princesses. "Ah..." I looked at Glory, and she gave a little shrug. "Not so much."

"Then accept the story, or I can be silent," he said with a frown. "I'm likely making mistakes all over. I can't tell stories like Mother, starting everything with 'that reminds me of a funny story.'"

"No no. Go on," I said, mollifying him a little.

"For a time, the twelve tribes lived and spread all across the land. They worked together to fight the many beasts of the wilderness, but unlike ponies, we did not seek to tame nature. We respected its might. In the homeland, once, were great tracts of wilderness as far as a zebra could walk in a year. But then the tribes encountered the children of the moon. The Propoli invited them into their village. The Mendi healed their wounds. The Tappahani cooked a fine banquet, the Atori danced, and the Zencori told stories to the newcomers. But the children of the moon remained aloof, mysterious, and arrogant. They claimed they had a power greater than all the twelve tribes put together, and that the twelve were to

be slaves of the one. Thus, the twelve went to war with the one.

"For generations they battled, for the children of the moon were numerous, but cold. Hard. And they had learned many foul magics to bind spirits and souls. Their armor would not fail and their weapons could not break. Even in death, their mightiest warriors fought on. They enslaved and killed the twelve in a mad pursuit of their dark powers. Their lies turned tribe against tribe for a time, and nearly destroyed the twelve. But the twelve rallied, united, and pushed back. In their desperation, the one tribe called down the power of the stars themselves... madness. For the stars came. They fell all across the land, shattering the great and dark cities of the one tribe and the armies of the twelve. But when it ended, the twelve remained and the one had broken. The twelve cried for blood, but the earth begged the twelve for mercy, for although they were sired violently, they were still her children. The one tribe was marked; all who bore their blood would have their stripes marked in glyphs of warning. And thus the one tribe was named Starkatteri, 'star branded', and shunned."

"What tribe is the Legate?" I asked, curious.

Lancer opened his mouth, then closed it again, frowning. "He is one of the last Achu."

"He is not," Rampage said below, her voice becoming oddly accented. "He does not fight like an Achu."

"He claims he is Achu! Who are you to deny that, Proditori?" Lancer snapped.

"Does that mean you are Achu as well?" P-21 asked. All this talk made me want to say 'bless you'.

Again, the question made him grimace. "No... blood passes from mother to child, not father to child. I am Zencori." I thought of telling him that his mother was alive, but decided against it for now. Still, storytelling was a big improvement over killing people. "My tribe were wanderers and storytellers. We sought the lore of the world. Many came and settled in Equestria long before the war."

"Why did the zebras fight the war?" Glory asked. "I've never heard your side before."

The question seemed to shock him. "You want to know?" he asked, looking from one to the next, as if he'd never seen ponies interested in it before. "Our people were not ruled by immortal royalty. We elect a Caesar from the tribes. All thirteen tribe elders get a vote, and no tribe could have consecutive Caesars."

"Wait, even the evil tribe of star and moons gets a vote?" I asked, surprised.

"Of course. They are a tribe. A cursed, evil, conniving tribe that none would trust, but a tribe. Their elders used their vote to protect their people from the wrath of the twelve. Better to keep one's wicked in the open where they can be watched than to force them from sight where they can be forgotten and allowed to plot in the shadows," Lancer said quite matter-of-factly.

He continued, "The Last Caesar was elected amidst great controversy. There were four tribes with strong candidates, and each had three votes. It was the Starkatteri who decided the election, which did the Roamani candidate no favors. Thus the Last Caesar was terribly weak when he came to power. There was even talk of breaking tradition and re-voting with only two candidates, but tradition is tradition. The Roamani are soldiers, one and all. They have fought against dragons, the Mokele, and other great beasts and reptiles. They did not take the disrespect well.

"When some Atori bandits captured a boat full of pony tourists and demanded a ransom, the Last Caesar insisted that the Roamani would handle it. But the Atori lived on islands, and it took much time for the Roamani army to board ships and make the journey. It was a terrible mistake. A band of a half dozen

Achu warriors, or even Atori fighters, would have sufficed. But the Last Caesar wanted glory and respect. Your Princess grew impatient and sent in the flyers you call the 'Wonderbolts'. They succeeded in freeing the hostages, but four of the pegasi died. It was a terrible blow to the Last Caesar. There was even talk of holding a special election to replace him. But tradition is tradition, and he remained. He treated the pony interference as a terrible insult to our people and demanded that the trade agreements we signed with your people be suspended."

"So, wait, that's why the war started? One zebra's bruised ego?" Scotch Tape blurted.

"It was more complicated than that," I said. "Equestria was also being pushed into it by nobles and businessponies who would never actually have to fight a war." This earned me my own surprised looks. "What? I saw it in a memory orb."

"Cheating unicorns," Rampage muttered below.

"For us, the war began with your Princess. When she seized a coal shipment, it was a great insult to our people. An insult the Last Caesar used to call for war. At first, only one tribe answered him: the Roamani. They are a martial tribe, what many think of when they think of the war. Duty and sacrifice are their creed. The other tribes abstained from war at first, but as the fighting dragged on, the Propoli eventually joined as well. They were a powerful and influential tribe. With them came the Carnilia and the Atori. Still, even while we were at war, our mightiest tribe, the Achu, and our most respected, the Mendi and Logos, spoke against the war," Lancer said, speaking more now than I ever imagined he could. He had a certain rhythm and tone that was just pleasing to listen to.

"There were zebras who protested the war?" I said in shock.

"Proditor," Rampage said from below over the squeak of the wheels.

"Many, though few declared it so brazenly as the Proditor. There were Equestrian sympathizers throughout the conflict. Thousands of Mendi, Eschatik, and Zencori were arrested for their support of the enemy. But you see, the sun is sacred to us. Many zebras, especially ones who had made Equestria their home, saw your Princess Celestia as the incarnation of the sun. They questioned the wisdom of fighting against her. In fact, the fighting had become so terrible that the Last Caesar was nearly forced to surrender by the other tribes," he said as he bowed his head. "Then the sun was ambushed by the moon."

"You mean Luna taking over?" I asked, remembering the dream memory of Littlehorn. The dreams of Psalm were now more like memory orbs; I remembered experiencing them, but the experience was no longer so raw and personal.

He nodded, raising his head up with a glare. "The Princess of the Moon, the Maiden of the Stars; when we heard she was assuming control, it was the greatest gift to the Last Caesar. There are tales about the moon and stars' evil back to our creation. From the actions of the Starkatteri to the horrors of the Maiden." He gave me a very skeptical look. "The first Maiden of the Stars blackened the world while she was challenged by Celestia. To be fighting her was... intoxicating. It brought all the tribes fully into the war. Even the Mendi reluctantly joined, though they constantly called for peace."

"I never really understood that. How could Nightmare Moon keep the sun from rising? Does the sun really just go away?" Scotch Tape asked with a small frown.

"No no," Glory replied, matter-of-factly. "The sun and the moon orbit this world, as do the planets, due to the fundamental attraction of magic. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna just gave the sun and moons little nudges to keep them moving on time. Since they've... gone... the length of days and nights has varied year by year. The moon is much closer than the sun, even though they look about the same

size. When the moon and sun are in the right position, the moon blocks out the sun. Position the moon just right, and it can darken a large area of the world.” She grimaced. “The first time we saw that... well... it was unsettling, to say the least.”

“When the Maiden of the Stars took over the war, the twelve tribes united. It was no longer about bruised pride; this was a war of good triumphing over evil. With her ascension, the Last Caesar gave greater orders and passed sweeping laws more radical than any before in the Empire. Always, the justification returned to defeating the armies of the Maiden. The establishment of the ministries, the weapons produced, and the megaspells... all became further justification. And as the death toll rose, it seemed impossible to surrender.” He sighed and frowned. “Truthfully, many felt the war glorious. Virtuous.”

“What about trying to abduct Celestia?” I asked, almost using the word ‘assassinate’.

“We did not try to abduct her!” he retorted. “The Mendi, Celestia, and the one mare called Flutterbye all worked to bring an end to the conflict. They were attempting to help her defect!”

“Defect? Celestia?” P-21 asked skeptically.

“Yes. She knew her mistake years after it was made. If she had left with us and denounced the Maiden, then Equestria would have abandoned the war. A peace could have been negotiated between her and the twelve tribes that would have bypassed the Last Caesar entirely!” Lancer said heatedly. “The war would have been over!”

“Funny. Our histories say you attempted to assassinate her,” Glory countered, and I groaned.

“Equestrian propaganda,” Lancer said with a wave of his hoof, “something that your Ministry of Image excelled at.” Glory bristled, and even P-21 frowned at the thought of Celestia betraying her sister and abandoning Equestria to ‘save’ it.

I couldn’t say which was true. Celestia hadn’t looked like she’d been all that willing to be taken, but the zebras also hadn’t been outright trying to kill her, from what I’d seen. I supposed the exact truth would never be known, unless somepony decided to ask Celestia’s ghost. I started to ask another question to head off the argument, but then I saw Boo’s ears twitch.

I froze, watching her. Her ears flicked again, and she frowned, looking at the clouds around us. “Shh!” They continued to argue as Boo’s frown turned fearful. “Shut up!” I snapped, cutting off their squabbling. “Stop pedaling!” I said briskly down into the guts of the ship. Rampage frowned up at me, but she stopped. The propellers and wings slowed, then went silent.

“What is it, Blackjack? We’re still hours from the lightning rods,” Glory said in confusion. I reached out hoof and silenced her. Boo’s ears were still twitching as her pale eyes peered out at the clouds. She cringed... and at once I was on my hooves and scanning the clouds myself. Nothing... but they knew the range of E.F.S.

I froze, and the silence deepened. Every ear twitched, and more than a few eyes looked at me with blatant skepticism. I couldn’t hear anything as inertia carried us through swirling mist. Only Boo’s skittish nature and my own creeping mane gave any indication that anything at all was amiss...

That was good enough for me. “Lancer. Put your cloak on Glory. Now.”

She scowled. “Blackjack, if you’re worried about detection, we should put it on you!”

This was simultaneously with Lancer saying, “I do not take orders from...”

“Put it on her, now,” I commanded as the clouds began to thin. We were drifting into a gap.

Lancer gave one last defiant look, then pulled out his cloak and draped the shimmery garment over Glory. When the blue gemstone clasp was closed, she seemed to blur away from sight.

Scotch Tape reached out with a hoof to where Glory had stood. "Ooooh," she giggled as the 'air' bunched up under her hoof.

"Scotch Tape, stop poking m--" Glory said as we broke into another open gap between clouds. On our left, barely beyond range of my E.F.S., was the long, dark form of a Raptor. Dozens of black specks, wings of power armor, flew in wedge-shaped formations next to the long, lean, lethal machine. Beyond it, I could make out a second Raptor. I could barely hear the hum of their motors, somehow muffled from detection. Nothing so big should be so quiet.

"Blackjack!" Scotch Tape warned. I glanced behind me and saw two more on the other side of the *Fleur*, one even closer than the first I'd seen. It appeared filled from one end to the other with red bars. I slowly leaned out, looking down at the silently swooshing props of a Raptor below us. I looked up past the balloon to see a half dozen beam turrets pointing down at the tiny *Fleur*. Two above. Two below. Two to the left. Two to the right. We were flying smack dab in the middle of a wing of Raptors, any one of which could reduce the *Fleur* to kindling.

I closed my eyes briefly and then looked back. From the cloud bank behind us burst the twin muzzles of a great warship's forward energy cannons, the dark thunderclouds to either side of the following hull trailing streamers of white. The quiet propellers flung off chunks of cloud as it closed in behind us. Maybe my luck would have them all be completely blind to the ancient giant purple airship flying through the air in front of them.

That hope was cut off by the wings of black power armor moving in slowly and deliberately from all sides.

Rampage popped her head out of the hatch and glanced around. "Huh," was all she said before dropping back down belowships. "Down worry, I got this!" she shouted. The wheels below began to shriek as the propellers buzzed behind us and the *Fleur*'s wings began to flap wildly. A minute or so and we'd be in the clouds. Hopefully that would do something...

Then the clouds ahead of us exploded as another Raptor, facing us nose-on, gunned its engines and leapt out of the clouds like a massive sea beast lunging for its prey. The wind from its speed blowing us back was the only thing that prevented the *Fleur* from smashing itself to pieces against the great ship's armor. Spinning wildly, the *Fleur* pirouetted out of control. The four Raptors to our sides began to circle, turning inward to present bank after bank of energy weapons. The one to our rear glided to a halt while the one before us turned like an implacable wall in the sky, 'Castellanus' painted in imposing stenciled letters on the bow in front of the thunderclouds. There were so many red bars in my E.F.S. that I turned the damned thing off.

I reached out and felt my hoof connect with solid air. "Ow! Blackjack, I..."

I grabbed Glory and pulled her close. "Whatever you do, do NOT get out from under there. Remember what Sunset tried to pull. These guys are likely to go crazy if they see you, so stay under there, understand?"

"Y... okay," Glory stammered.

"What are you going to do?" Scotch Tape asked as I walked past her towards the bow of the airship. As I passed Boo, I tugged off her captain's hat and set it atop my head.

"Let me down! I'm not with them!" Lancer began to shout when P-21 grabbed him around the

neck.

"Unless you want them to drop you, shut your mouth," the blue stallion said, then looked to me. "Trust Blackjack. She knows what she's doing."

That made one of us who thought that.

I walked up to the prow and looked up at the Raptor across our bow. The breeze from her props caught my mane as I stood upright, put one hindhoof on the rail, and rested my left foreleg on my hind knee. I levitated out my sword as I examined the massive Raptor and took in her name. Dozens, possibly hundreds, of beam weapons from power armored ponies all pointed right at me as I switched on my broadcaster and turned it to the channel that had gotten me in trouble at the Rainbow Dash Skyport.

"Raptor *Castellanus*," I said formally as I pointed my starmetal sword at the colossal machine. "This is Captain Blackjack of the airship *Fleur*. Heave to and prepare to be boarded!"

* * *

"To be honest, this really wasn't what I expected at all," I admitted as I sipped a cup of rather bland steamy brown water, but, given that my host could have thrown me in a cell or simply reduced me and my friends to crackling clouds of rapidly dissipating meat vapor, I kept my beverage opinions to myself. "I mean, I know I told you I was going to board, but I didn't expect you to actually let me."

"Occasionally, the unexpected is the most expedient," the general said as she inspected some papers on her desk. Of course, I'd only been let on board unarmed, and I had two guards watching me. To the general's credit, though, she knew how to pick them. Twister and Boomer flanked me, the two Neighvarro Enclave I'd be least likely to kill. The brown stallion had swapped his missiles for beam guns, too.

General Storm Chaser reminded me a lot of Mom: mature, intelligent, and giving me the feeling that if I didn't watch myself I'd be in far more trouble than I'd like. The gray pegasus mare with the white mane watched me with a steady gaze that said that she knew more than I'd prefer her to. Her office on the *Castellanus* was comfortable and tasteful, with everything neatly organized on shelves rather than in heaps. The pictures of ponies on her desk suggested a family. Children, certainly. She wore only her dark purple Enclave uniform; if I killed her, my friends would be vaporized. The Enclave were all over the *Fleur*, and all I could hope was that while I was here there wasn't a Rainbow Dash sighting. The *Castellanus* had apparently been tracking the *Fleur* for more than an hour before they'd swept in to catch us. Wood might not have had much of a radar profile, but my cybernetic body had been a red flare to their sensors.

"I've received several interesting reports of the goings on down below. The Enclave military wing may not have as extensive an information base as our intelligence wing out of Thunderhead, but we're not blind. We've been keeping apprised of things going on below for generations now. Generally from afar, of course; less risk of entanglement." She sipped her cup of tea slowly, then sighed, staring at the curls of vapor rising from it before glancing up at me. "Unfortunately, now it seems the surface is insisting on entanglement with us."

"I don't have any issues with the Neighvarro Enclave," I said defensively.

"I can vouch for her, ma'am," Twister said respectfully. The general gave the mare a long stare, and she drew herself more rigid. "Sorry, ma'am..."

Storm Chaser dropped her eyes back to the neatly organized papers. "Testimony from the Maripony facility just before detonation suggests otherwise," she said as she reached over for a clipboard with a wing. She looked at it a moment. "Blackjack, aka Security. Stable mare. Appeared in the

wastelands roughly two months ago. First identified by 'DJ Pon3'." She flipped a page. "Prioritized by Enclave Intelligence as an alpha level threat following a megaspell discharge at Miramare Air Station. There's a memo that you might have had contact with a Spike Observation squad, but no confirmation." Her eyes glanced at Twister, who stood so straight that I imagined that not even a balefire bomb could knock her over. "Reprioritized as a gamma level threat two weeks later. There's a note that you might be an asset to Intelligence. Re-emerged at a surface skirmish in which you destroyed the Pre-war battleship *Celestia*." She glanced up at me from over the top of the clipboard. "Impressive."

"Yeah. Blackjack does things like that," Boomer chuckled. The general's eyes locked on him, and he coughed. "Sorry, ma'am."

I flushed a little. "I had help. And I cheated..."

"You won," Storm Chaser replied, then returned to the clipboard. "Disappeared for several days and was redetected by Neighvarro intelligence assets at the Fluttershy Medical Center while we investigated the fate of an intelligence squad we sent to spy on the Volunteer Corps's activities. You were in possession of several unidentified cybernetic augmentations and in the company of an alpha priority target tentatively identified as a Rainbow Dash clone. Mane clippings proved inconclusive."

"She... changed back. The spell wore off. Killing joke; it's fickle stuff," I said as I gave the best bullshitting grin I could manage.

She stared at me without comment for a long second that had my grin sliding off my face like soft tar. Heck, now I was standing more at attention! Then her eyes returned to the clipboard. "Next reported at Yellow River where you helped extract three Neighvarro troopers investigating allegations of a biological weapon. You confirmed these allegations." She stopped and then read slowly, with emphasis, "Allowed Neighvarro troopers to report this information." She looked at me sharply. "Given your association with one Morning Glory, third child of Sky Striker, I'm surprised. I would have expected you to side with her by default."

"Bioweapons are wrong. Those things killed my stable." With my help. "If I can't stop him, you'd have to." She didn't reply, but I got a feeling that she was pleased by my answer as she read on.

"Possible presence at the Rainbow Dash Skyport; unconfirmed. Re-encountered by the squad you helped in Yellow River. Encountered the synthetic being known as Dawn and fought her and a zebra Behemoth class tank... in hoof to hoof combat?" She paused again and looked at Boomer with an arched brow. "Is that right, Corporal?"

"Yes ma'am. I mean, I know tanks don't have hooves, but she beat it. No clue how, but she did," Boomer confirmed with an eager nod.

I flushed, waving a hoof as I tried to set the record straight. "Technically I lost. I only survived because the tank was being controlled by the brain of a stallion who raided my stable and tried to kill me..." I trailed off and waved my hoof at her clipboard. "Look, that report doesn't really... there's a lot of stuff you're missing..."

She was silent till I shut up, then only answered with an "I see," before looking back down. "Next report at the Grimhoof Army Base where you helped confirm Thunderhead's acquisition of several long range cruise missiles. Killed one of the three who attempted to accost the clone. Let the other two return to report." The general tapped her chin with a wingtip as she gazed at the paper. Then she went on without looking at me, "Final appearance was at the Maripony facility immediately prior to the detonation of a suspected Mark III 'Chernobog' class balefire bomb. Presumed dead along with High General Harbinger and the surface terrorist known as LittlePip, aka the Stable Dweller." She reached over with a wing and lifted a clipboard that was as thick as mine. "Since you're here, I suppose we'll have to wait and

see if those other two are actually alive or not.”

“Pip might be. Harbinger... isn’t,” I replied, feeling a little sickly as I remember him being torn to pieces. “I saw him get killed prior to the bomb going off.”

“I see. Was the balefire bomb an attempt by this LittlePip, Red Eye, Thunderhead, or the entity known as the Goddess to assassinate the leader of the Enclave military and decapitate our command apparatus?” Storm Chaser’s cool tone reminded me of when I’d asked Lancer if he had a mega-talisman.

I could withhold, lie, or tell the truth. As General Chaser looked me in the eye, I had the distinct feeling that the first two were extremely risky. “The Goddess was using LittlePip to get some sort of black magic. LittlePip turned the tables and used the bomb to kill the Goddess and the book. I don’t think the Goddess intended LittlePip to live, but she got distracted. Your High General was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I see.” She set LittlePip’s clipboard down and then set mine next to it. “Well, if you see her again, congratulate her on causing more havoc in the Enclave command structure than we’ve endured in a century and a half. High General Harbinger’s death, the *Triumphant* being severely damaged, the loss of two other generals aboard the four Raptors destroyed, and the loss of two colonels has thrown the whole chain of command straight into a cyclone. Half the remaining leadership is busy pointing at anypony else to blame while covering their tails, a quarter is claiming they’re the legitimate heads of the military now, and the remainder are actually doing their jobs. I’ve got three councilors blaming me for not physically stopping the High General from going in there, or for not demanding that he take a whole Raptor squad with him.” She folded her hooves on the desk before her as she looked at me evenly. “And, according to you, there’s a rogue intelligence element with a bioweapon pointed right at the Enclave’s citizens from one of our most secure and sensitive military facilities. You’ll forgive me if I’m a little skeptical that all of this is just one big coincidence.”

“Yeah. I know. But sometimes life is like that,” I replied with as much levity as I could manage. “I’m sure if LittlePip had known you were going to come in unannounced, she... nope, actually I don’t think she could have managed it more perfectly. Maybe she might have gotten the *Triumphant* too. But really, she didn’t know. Unless she did know and removed that memory so the Goddess couldn’t read it... she is scary good like that.” I grinned sheepishly at the general’s flat gaze. “What? I’m telling you, it probably wasn’t intentional.”

“Forgive me if I’m not reassured.” She finished off her cup and set it beside the teakettle and hotplate. She looked at my clipboard again, silently reading it, then glanced at me once more. “Blackjack. You’ve put me in an awkward situation where I’m going to have to creatively interpret my orders. Officially, I’m to bring you, and anypony involved in the Maripony attack or associated with such people, to a secure facility for interrogation. Or summarily execute you.” I could teleport behind her and use her for cover... The general then gave a little smile. “Well, I’m not going to do that.”

You could feel the tension drain out of the room. “Thank you, ma’am,” Twister blurted.

“I understand. I wouldn’t want to try to execute somepony I’d fought with either, Sergeant,” the general replied.

“No, that’s not it, ma’am,” Twister replied.

“I’d rather tackle a Talon squad naked than try and force Blackjack to do anything,” Boomer replied.

“Naked and unarmed...” Twister agreed.

"And covered in barbecue sauce," Boomer added.

"I'm not that bad..." I muttered. "I mean, that one time I was half psychotic from lack of sleep. I'd have to really work to kill a half dozen pegasi now." The three of us were drawing some very uncertain looks from the general.

"Be that as it may, you seem like a pony who wants to avoid as much death as possible in this situation. If it wasn't for you, Lighthooves could have deployed his bioweapon at his leisure, and you've helped us in the past. Right now, with our leadership so fractured, would be an opportune time for him to attack. Autumn Leaf will be mopping things up on the ground. My mission is dealing with Lighthooves, his weapon, and Shadowbolt Tower. Will you assist us?"

I rubbed my neck nervously. "That depends on what you had in mind."

"From all our reports, you're a superb combat specialist. If you can help us seize the tower, we'll be able to avoid engaging the city directly," the general said. "I'd like you on the vanguard raiding the tower and neutralizing its defenders. Once the biological weapon is under our control, disabled, or destroyed you'd be free to go."

"Neutralize. You mean kill," I replied.

"That is the standard euphemism," the general replied with a little bit of amused confusion. Her lips curled up a little. "Would you prefer 'take out'? 'Eliminate'? 'Terminate'?" It still tasted sour to me. "What is it? You've killed before. In fact, according to your dossier, you're rather effective at it."

"Exceptionally," Boomer agreed.

I frowned back at him, then returned my attention to the general. "Just because I'm good at it doesn't mean I like it. I'm not as good as you think I am, anyway. I... I don't want to hurt people," I said, looking down. "I'm Security. Not 'Soldier'. Security saves ponies."

The general didn't answer for a moment, then asked coolly, "I see. So security defends, whereas soldiers attack?" When I nodded, she pursed her lips a moment, pressing her hooves together before her mouth as she studied me. "Interesting. Do you think I am attacking Shadowbolt Tower because I *want* to, or because I am trying to defend my people against a pernicious threat that you are familiar with?" When I didn't answer, she gave a little smile. "I assure you, it would be much simpler to simply attack Thunderhead, take the populace hostage, and demand Lighthooves's surrender while summary executions begin. That was Harbinger's plan before mission creep set in."

Okay. Neighvarro definitely slipping on my scale. "I get it. I do. It's just a lot more offensive than I'm comfortable with," I admitted.

"I see," she replied calmly, with a small smile. "If only you'd been born a pegasus."

I blinked in confusion. "What's that?"

"Nothing," she said as she dropped her hooves to the desktop. "I am a soldier. One of the few command officers with actual combat experience. While many see us as attackers, the reality is that a soldier's life is to defend. If we existed to kill and slaughter, we'd be little different than the raiders who infest your surface. If we wanted to simply kill ponies, we could do so with impunity." She paused, then asked with a small smile, "Have you known any soldiers?"

"A few," I said, thinking of the Marauders. I could see her point. None of them had been bloody butchers... well, maybe Doof, and Applesnack I honestly didn't know. Twist... Psalm... Big Macintosh... They hadn't been fighting to kill. They'd fought to protect their homeland. Their Princess. Their family. "I

see your point, and I apologize. I'm just... not a soldier."

"We'll have to disagree on that," Storm Chaser said with a sigh and a small frown. "The Enclave needs ponies like you. We've got far too many who are eager to attack. High General Harbinger was a symptom of a disease, and after Maripony... I don't know what the Enclave will be like in the coming months."

My ears drooped; I felt like I'd disappointed her. Why should it matter, though? I wasn't a pegasus or a soldier. "Sorry," I muttered. She waved her hoof like it was no matter. Then I frowned, "It's also something else, though... it feels like..." I faltered.

The general frowned at me, but gestured with a wing for me to continue. "Feels like what?"

But I didn't have time to finish, as the doors to the office were opened with a loud bang. Two mares and a stallion, all dressed in the same dark purple uniforms, stormed in. The mares were red and blue and looked enough alike to be related. The green stallion hung back, his black mane cut short and a trimmed black mustache curled above his top lip. "Is this her?" the red mare with the orange-and-yellow-striped mane demanded. "Is this the terrorist scum that killed the High General?" Her orange eyes blazed at me as she answered her own question. "I'll drop you back in that irradiated gravel!"

"Enclave directive 122639J demands immediate and summary execution of all parties affiliated with the intentional death of party leadership," the blue mare said with a smug smile, her lovely face framed by her lavender and ivory mane. Her wingtip curled down and pulled a beam gun from her holster as she said coolly, "This will only take a moment."

Indeed it would. Smash red feathers, grab her as a shield, ram the blue one, crush her head, throw red at green. Finish both if need be. Twister and Boomer looked from the general to the trio. "Don't kill them, Blackjack," the general snapped, making all three of them pause. The general clenched her jaw as she rose behind her desk. "Captains Afterburner, Hoarfrost, and Crosswinds... your timing couldn't be more ironic. How dare you interrupt my interrogation?"

The three stiffened somewhat. The green stallion still smiled a little, though it was hard to see beneath his mustache. "My apologies, General. As soon as we were aware that one of the terrorists from Maripony survived, Captains Afterburner and Hoarfrost both insisted on seeing you," he said with amused tones. "There's four others who are very keen to know what you'll do with her."

"Yes. A pity that information couldn't have waited till the interrogation was complete, Captain Crosswinds," the general snapped.

"I'm going to cook you. I'm going to light your pretty little ship on fire and watch you dirtside burn or jump for what you did to the High General," Afterburner said with a grin. I could have dropped her with five magic bullets through her head, so her menacing expression lost some of its edge.

"The law is patently clear on the matter, General Storm Chaser," Hoarfrost said primly. "As are your orders."

"Captain Hoarfrost, if you bite that weapon, it's you who will be summarily killed, by me," the general replied, making the pale blue mare freeze. The two power-armored ponies turned and directed their weapons at the three, to their surprise. Afterburner hissed through her teeth as the general pinned her with a glare and continued. "I understand that you are upset. All of you had a... personal... relationship with the High General. Right now I am ordering you to set that aside and to conduct yourselves with the duty and professionalism the Enclave expects of its officers! Is that understood?"

The three seemed to weigh the order a moment, and that was when I understood just how soft General Chaser's position was. Maripony hadn't just destroyed ships. It had shaken the Enclave badly.

The well-oiled military rulers had just been reminded that they could die. They'd come to the Wasteland, been touched by it, and now knew that the Wasteland was coming for them. The trio of captains finally stiffened at attention, but Afterburner kept her eyes locked on me. If she'd been a unicorn, I had no doubt that she'd be lighting me on fire with her mind. "Yes, General," the three said solemnly.

"Now get back to your posts, immediately. We're on high alert, and you won't do your ships any good if you're here!"

"She killed the High General! Everypony knows it!" Afterburner raged as she glared at me. "I swear, Stable Dweller, if it's the last thing I do, I'm going to see everything you love burned to ashes."

I should have just kept my yap shut, but for once not being the not-smart pony made it impossible to resist. "One, I just love the flame motif you've got going on here. Really. Well done," I said as I approached her with a smile. "Two. I'm the 'Security' stable mare. Not the 'Stable Dweller'."

She rolled her eyes. "Pfft. Security. Stable Dweller. Whatever!" Her gaze narrowed. "I'm going to see you pay for what you've done!"

Was it a bad sign when I was more mature than a 'captain' in the Enclave?

"You three are dismissed. Are you going to leave on your own, or am I going to have to have you escorted out?" Storm Chaser challenged.

Captain Afterburner opened her mouth, but Hoarfrost, having returned her beam pistol to her holster, covered the red pony's mouth with her wing. "We'll be leaving. Come along, Sister. And we'll be filing a full report, immediately, General." Afterburner seemed like she wanted at least a few more threats and bit down hard on her sister's wingtip. The blue pegasus just shivered and smiled, her wings poofing a little. She looked at me. "Oh, incidentally, Blackjack? I find it very hard to believe that the Rainbow Dash clone you are so attached to isn't with you. I'll be keeping a very close eye out for her."

"You do that," I countered, just as coldly. The pair turned and walked out, Afterburner starting to argue aloud as soon as they cleared the door. The green stallion grinned, saluted Storm Chaser, and followed them. As the door closed, I could hear him laughing.

"So! You were saying?" I brightly asked the general as she sat down hard behind the desk and rubbed a temple with a wingtip.

"Those three... why couldn't they have been assigned to Autumn Leaf?" The general shook her head. "I have until one of them gets on a radio, so we'll have to wrap this up quickly."

"They seem awfully young, and not quite what I pictured a captain in the Enclave to be," I said delicately.

"Well bred," Twister said sarcastically.

"That's enough, Sergeant. They're still your superior officers." She tapped a button. "Captain Racewind? Delay the three captains however you can. Jammed hatches. Stuck cargo. Be creative and don't let them anywhere near a radio."

"Yes ma'am. Please disregard any fire alarms you hear," a stallion said through a speaker.

She frowned at me, then leaned back. "They were all extremely, inappropriately, close to the High General. If they hadn't been out here getting ready for operations, they would have been at Maripony. That would have been quite a burr out of my feathers. All three are from military families, all three are privileged, and none of them have been in serious combat. Oh, but they want to."

"Raiders with Raptors," I sympathized, and shivered.

"Apt analogy."

I looked back at the door, then gestured towards it with a hoof. "Was that intentional? That whole fire... ice... thing. I mean, seriously?"

She gave a mirthless smile. "Oh yes. They've been like that since they were fillies. Twins, you know. Absolute terrors. I know their father." She sighed again. "And thanks to their connections, they're now in charge of the *Sirocco* and the *Blizzard*. Given how much they shower their crews with bonuses, I can only hope they'll follow orders and stay in position."

"And the stallion? What's his deal?"

"Crosswinds? Less blatant nastiness and more callous amusement. He doesn't have the seriousness his position warrants, but he was remarkably proficient at ferreting out information for the High General. As a reward, he was bumped to being put in charge of the *Galeforce*." She sighed and leaned forward, frowning at me. "They're what I'm trying to prevent. The Enclave is not a clubhouse for overprivileged idiots to play with war machines."

"I hope you're right," I answered. Had those three not made an appearance, I might have signed on. As it was, I couldn't. I didn't have a soldier mentality... maybe I could have been, if it had been an army commanded by Storm Chasers, but I had an inkling that there were more Harbingers in the Enclave than there were Storm Chasers. "Now... about stopping Lighthooves. I can't be your soldier. But I do want to help, and maybe I can in a way outside the Enclave." We were short on time, so I'd have to cut to the proverbial chase.

"I see." She narrowed her eyes a little as she considered me. "What did you have in mind, then?"

"What about contacting Thunderhead's government directly? Work with them to close him down?" I suggested, and the general frowned thoughtfully. "Now that the High General is dead, you have a chance to engage in good faith without him calling ponies traitors and stuff like at the Skypoint."

The general stared at me, then rubbed the bridge of her muzzle. "Clearly your dossier is incomplete. It didn't mention that you have a tendency to listen in on highly classified diplomatic exchanges."

"I have a way for getting into systems," I said with a small smile. I wasn't as sharp as my sword, but even I knew better than to mention EC-1101. If it really came down to it, I might be able to simply turn off the tower's defenses.

"I can see that. But as for your suggestion, if Lighthooves has gone completely off course, what makes you think Thunderhead can bring him back? Even assuming that they're willing to try." The general shook her head. "There's no guarantee that they'll be any more capable than we are. Meanwhile, Lighthooves could launch at any second."

That comment made a niggling little connection in my head. I frowned as I thought a little about the smug pony launching an attack while the Enclave was disorganized. "I'm not sure he will, General. I think he's waiting for you. In fact, I bet he'd give everything up to his own people at this point."

"Excuse me?" she asked with a frown. A beeping began to ring somewhere above us, but the general ignored the shrill notes.

"Look. Lighthooves and Thunderhead have one thing right: long term, they're going to win. You

just lost a bunch of ships, and unless I'm missing something, you can't replace them. A first strike biological attack on all the other settlements would work against him. Think about it. He'd be the ultimate villain. Thunderhead would be guilty by association." I tapped my forehooves together. "But what if he's *stopped* by Thunderhead? Gives everything up. Makes his impassioned speech about how he did it for the long term survival of the pegasus people... in front of all the cameras?"

"You're suggesting that this is nothing more than a self-sacrificing PR stunt?" the general asked in low, skeptical tones.

"Sure. Thunderhead can't win a shooting war. You have the ships and the firepower. But what if he can influence enough settlements to shift the civil authority? Your Enclave is a democracy, right? So what if everyone votes to back the government that just stopped one of their own from going too far?"

"That vote would never happen. The military wouldn't allow it," she said quickly, but then her eyes narrowed. "Ah..."

"Right. Folks realize that their democracy isn't. Then your choice would be to either hand over control to Thunderhead or risk a civil war," I said, hoping that this wasn't all just desperate guesswork. A little purple unicorn in the back of my mind gave a prim nod. Lighthooves was too smart... too smooth... to just be a classical villain.

"Unless you're wrong and he *is* going to use the bioweapon. It'd take us years to clean up the mess. The famine alone would be intolerable," General Chaser said with a frown.

"My guess is that he will if you attack Thunderhead. A plan B. Then Thunderhead takes him down, and Thunderhead becomes the vital food source to address the famine. They're the ones with the extra food. Thunderhead is a hero. And if you do too much damage, Neighvarro looks like the villain." Lighthooves wanted to save his home. I had to believe that. If he just wanted death, then all I was doing was getting ponies killed.

General Storm Chaser closed her eyes. "Ordinarily, I'd prefer to take time and work something out, but Maripony has thrown everything into the air. You saw Afterburner and Hoarfrost. Some of the Enclave leadership is convinced that Thunderhead was behind the balefire bomb. Originally, we were going to destroy Red Eye's army below and then call for unity. Put some of our own security in Thunderhead and winnow out the bombs. I can only hope that Autumn Leaf uses some discretion until I get finished in the east."

"Then that's his plan C. I bet that if you contacted him, you could work out a deal. Lighthooves wants Thunderhead to survive. As long as he gets that, he's won." But that led me to a disturbing thought. What if he offered to trade the weapon to the Neighvarro for Thunderhead's survival? Storm Chaser might be decent, but I had no problem imagining what a pony like Afterburner or Hoarfrost would do with a biological weapon: they'd use it. Even if it could infect pegasi now.

Crap.

"Interesting," Storm Chaser mused. "I'd planned on a surgical strike. Five Raptors doing long range, pinpoint strikes on the tower's air defenses, with a picket line to intercept the missiles. Odds are seventy to eighty-five percent, depending on how lucky we get with our deployment and if he fires them one at a time or in volleys. Once they're down, we storm the tower and Thunderhead. Make sure it stays under our control this time." She closed her eyes again and sighed.

"Even if you got most of them, all it would take is one missile getting through. This disease makes ponies eat other ponies. I saw it happen to my stable. I had to gas all of them before they ate the Wasteland," I said as seriously as I could, hoping she believed me.

The beeping stopped. "General, they're off ship. Ten minutes before they're aboard their vessels," the stallion said through the terminal speakers.

"I can do it, General," I promised.

She sighed. "Very well. Given that you seem to have lost both fliers, I'd like to assign the sergeant and corporal here. You've worked together in the past."

I looked at the two power-armored pegasi for a long minute. They hadn't blabbed about Glory being Rainbow Dash. I nodded once to the general.

"Great. Well, at least we won't have to worry about hellhounds," Boomer muttered.

"Don't be so sure. You wouldn't believe some of the rumors coming out of R&D about some intelligence programs. I've heard stories that there've been hounds spotted in Neighvarro," Twister replied.

"Yeah, yeah. Nopony's crazy enough to bring one of those things up here," Boomer chuckled.

"You've got five minutes to get on the *Fleur*. We'll need some StealthBucks to hide our energy signatures from the lightning rods. Otherwise, you'll have to leave your armor and energy weapons behind," I said to the pair, then turned a questioning expression to the general. She considered a moment, then nodded. The pair looked at each other and immediately ran for the door.

"Sweet! Field work!" laughed Boomer.

"I got my bag packed just in case we got permission!" Twister said happily. Well, I supposed most Enclave soldiers weren't detached for 'special missions' as often as they.

Then I remembered... If she was still here... "Also... we're going to need one more pony..."

* * *

She was an absolute wreck, even after two weeks. *They don't have unicorn medics*, I reminded myself as I carefully carried her upon my back and a duffel bag of Dusk's belonging in my jaws. My telekinesis wasn't up to levitating it all, and it'd take too long to let the others transfer her; if only Lacunae were here. Not just for her confidence... she'd also been telekinetically stronger than me!

A little orange earth pony and a little white unicorn in my head told me to buck up and stick it out. I had to be stronger and tougher now, and while there was nothing wrong with missing her, there was no point in me tearing myself down over it. Then the pair started quibbling over if I needed to be stronger or more enduring...

Soul jars were weird.

Aboard the *Fleur*, Glory was still out of sight. Any stuff we'd had had been thrown all over the deck; the Enclave version of a 'search', I supposed. Boomer and Twister were coming with their power armor deactivated; they'd have to reactivate it once we were past the lightning rods, but at least they'd be able to bring it along. We were also bringing Dusk's armor, which had already been shut down; apparently its repair talisman could repair the faceplate. Rampage saw my injured burden and immediately got a look I didn't like at all. I directed P-21 to head her off with a toss of my head, though I wasn't sure just what he'd do if she tried to press the issue and 'help' her pain.

"They thrashed the pedal system," Scotch Tape complained as I set the bag down on the deck.

"It's okay," I said as I looked at Twister and Boomer.

"What?" the brown pegasus stallion frowned. "Do y'all expect us to push this thing all the way to Thunderhead?"

I smiled a little wider.

"Come on, Turkey. Like back in basic. Hup one. Hup two," Twister said as she flew to the back of the *Fleur*. The pair began to flap their wings hard, and the ship moved off at an even quicker pace than when Rampage had been pedaling! The power armor paced us as we moved back into the clouds, but it finally veered off as I carried our disabled passenger down below to the old cabins. Whatever those three captains had planned, we'd deal with it another day.

There wasn't much space, but it'd be more comfortable than being on deck while P-21, Rampage, and Scotch gathered up our belongings and put them away. The clouds were becoming so thick that it started to feel like I'd just stepped out of a cold shower. I ducked into one of the cabins that was relatively intact, kicked the junk on the floor aside, and then used my telekinesis to slide her onto the bed.

Dusk groaned, half of the dark pegasus's head bandaged up. Given what I'd nearly done to her... The air beside me shimmered, and Glory appeared. "Oh sweet Celestia!" she said as she took the cloak off. "She should have been in a hospital. A real hospital. What happened to her?"

"Me," I replied. "This is what I did at Yellow River. I tore off her helmet with my metal fingers," I said shamefully. "She got off easiest. The rest didn't survive."

Glory went through her usual cycle of emotions for when I screwed up. Anger that I'd hurt her family, acknowledgement that at the time I'd been half out of my mind, and acceptance of these new facts. I was lucky she wasn't throwing me through a wall again. "I should have sat on you rather than let you run off alone. At least sent Rampage with you," Glory said as she began to dig out healing potions and trickled them into the unconscious mare's mouth, waiting for her to swallow before giving her more. "You shouldn't let her see you, Blackjack."

Yes, I supposed that seeing her near killer might cause a bad reaction. I wanted to apologize... but really, what could I say? Dusk. Boing. Those survivors who'd stuck it out in 99's reactor maintenance area. How did I apologize to them? After the second potion was empty, Dusk let out a groan, and one violet eye opened up. "Who..." Dusk groaned, then looked up at Glory. "Rainbow Dash?"

"It's me. Morning Glory," Glory said as she moved between me and her sister.

"Buh... must be drugged..." she said weakly. "Can't be."

Glory sighed. "When I was young, I used your secret Wingboner magazines for illustrations for my health and biology presentation. I got an A-, and you got grounded for a month." I fought the urge to snicker as she huffed and muttered, "I would have gotten an A, but I didn't know that Playmare wasn't a noteworthy source." ...Huh?

Dusk's lip curled a little. "Oh yeah... it is you..." She raised a hoof and brought it down in a limp smack atop Glory's head. "That's fer getting me grounded..." she mumbled as she blinked up at her sister. "That's... a much better disguise..." Dusk muttered softly. "Where're we going? And why do you look like Rainbow Dash?"

Glory smiled and took her sister's hooves between her own. "We're going home. We're going to get you fixed up. And I have things to tell you... about Father... and Mother..." Glory shielded me from Dusk's sight with a wing, then smiled at me and glanced at the door. I nodded, kissed her cheek, and stepped out. They had a lot of catching up to do.

I moved out into the hall and helped clean up some of the mess... Well, I collected the mess into

piles for other ponies to clean up. I didn't find anything valuable. There were some old newspapers with pictures of Rarity at some social event alongside a dashing-looking gray-maned stallion sporting a monocle. I caught sight of a certain scarred individual accompanied by the dusky lavender pegasus Eclipse in the background. The caption under the yellowed picture read 'Princess Luna a no show at the Canterlot Garden Party.'

By Ace Buckley- It's the society season in Canterlot, when all the nobles trot out to Canterlot for their *parties de rigors*, charity auctions that don't address the people needing help, and other social gatherings that are only important to ponies whose lives revolve around the getting and not getting of invitations. One has to wonder a great deal about an event like this. How do they eat all that caviar? Is it possible to bore a pony to death with endless prattle? Can association with the urbane cretins passing for aristocracy drive a pony to madness? And, most importantly, what grave crime could Equestria's most humble investigative journalist have committed to be assigned to such an event and ordered to write an article documenting every excruciating detail?

Really, Rarity, you have been putting on a little extra padding, but did I truly deserve this? Fortunately for me, this column is going up before those trolls at the Ministry of Image can polish, nip, tuck, remove, edit, and redact all my wonderful words. There's nothing like a weekend print deadline to really slip past the gatekeepers in the final frenzied rush.

So what did yours truly notice at the most *ahem-ahem* social gathering in all of Equestria? Well, there were plenty of fine, overpriced garments on mares who, quite honestly, couldn't pull off the twentysomething look if they had a zebra stealth cloak, an old picture, and a Flash Industries projector. Lots of stallions compensating for... honestly, most of these folks are so rich that if they can't afford male 'enhancement' spells they wouldn't be here, but clearly there's some reason for all the fancy frivolity. The new money was in full swing; rest easy knowing Equestria's finest profiteers are doing well. So plenty of movers, shakers, editors, and newspaper owners who will go unnamed were in attendance doing what they always do: little to nothing worth as much as they imagine. So I'll spare you the more odious details.

The canapés were okay.

But do you know what struck me as I listened to a portly *gentlequus* complain about 'the declining state of affairs', nodding my head spastically at appropriate times to feign interest? The party was missing some of its usual A list material. No Ministry Mares; for the first time ever, Madame Marshmallow Buns didn't grace us with her genteel presence. Pinkie Pie, ever one to crash formal and stuffy events with party cannons and spot arrests, was also a notable absentee. Applejack, who's never far from family members raking in bits right, left, and center, has been a no-show for months now. One would expect Rainbow Dash to pop in to an event with little thought and mass public exposure, but the skies are clear. And while no one has expected Twilight Sparkle to do anything social for the last four years, Fluttershy almost always makes an appearance where she can make appeals on behalf of the widowed, orphaned and maimed. After all, if she doesn't, how will the audience nod sympathetically and then ignore her?

But you know who's really been gone? No, not Princess Celestia. I know. I know. It's been four years since that mess that got Big Macintosh killed, and she's still in that school of hers. No. It's the other alicorn. The big alicorn. The one who's supposed to be sitting in seats of power and making the grand speeches and cutting ribbons, launching ships, and running the country. The dark one.

Where the heck is Princess Luna?

It's been nine years since Luna assumed the throne, and I can count the number of appearances she's made this year on my hooves. Oh, there's always the obligatory fifteen minutes she spends at the G3. We might get treated to a canned Hearth's Warming Eve broadcast. But getting the mare herself to show up to any kind of social gathering is like trying to raise the sun or get an article like this past a gauntlet of Image editors: impossible for all but the most exceptional of ponies.

Now, I know what you'll say. Oh, she's a Princess. She doesn't have to leave the palace. She's probably far too busy. Well, if she is busy, nopony can say what exactly she's busy with, because so few ponies have access to the Princess. Thirteen requests by yours truly this year for an interview have been denied by the Royal Guard with no reason given. Sixty-four requests through the M.o.I. were also turned down. I've spoken with dozens of other journalists who have had similar experiences: denials, refusals, or 'scheduling conflicts'.

The lights are on in the palace, but there's nopony answering the door. Somepony is getting work done there, but you'd be hard pressed to find out who it is. Is the Princess deep in conference with her Ministry Mares, or is it, as some have alleged, that the Princess meets with them only to approve specific projects and proposals? We don't know. Is she working closely with generals to win the war or simply passing on instructions through bureaucrats? We don't know. What is Princess Luna actually doing to run the country?

We don't know.

So this is Ace Buckley's report from the Canterlot Garden Party. Very boring. Okay canapés. No Ministry Mares. No Princesses. And if this is my last printed article, let me say this, Ministry Mare Fatflanks: you can silence, censure, and fire me, but don't think that by getting me assigned to the Canterlot 'social pages' you can stop Ace Buckley from asking the hard questions.

I smiled as I glanced at the yellowed picture of an emaciated-looking earth pony stallion. He was completely bald, and his eyes were concealed behind round, dark glasses. His jaw was covered in stubble, and I had no problem imagining him reeking of booze. From the sneer of his lips and the scowl of his brow, I imagined his favorite line to be something on the nature of 'Fuck you. Give me the damned story!'. Best of all was the rumpled, ill-fitting tuxedo he'd been crammed into and the way he had each forehoof clenched around the neck of a well-dressed mare and stallion who seemed to be verging on asphyxiation. 'Ace Buckley, social pony' read the caption at the end of the article.

There were other papers strewn along the floor, most of them too smudged to be legible. I squinted and tilted my head as I made out Rarity's name.

Rarity,

I'm so sorry to hear about the difficulties you've had recently with Sweetie Belle and Blueblood. I'm afraid he hasn't abated his mudslinging one bit; it might not make it into the papers, but word is getting around. However, he has something new. He claims that he has some exclusive stable reserved for the finest ponies. I was skeptical at first, but he's getting the attention of some exceptionally well to do ponies. The price tag is an extravagant ten million bits per reserved seat.

I'm skeptical about anything involving him, but Vanity has confirmed, if grudgingly, that this 'Redoubt' exists. He has stated it lies somewhere in the Hoofington region, is protected by magics far older than most, and will withstand even the strongest megaspells. May I be blunt? I know your finances are not excessive, no matter what the common slob may believe. If you wish it, I will procure additional spots for you, your sister, and your parents. I hope that you will

But the letter was unfinished. I could only assume that the author was the 'Fancy Pants' who'd once owned the *Fleur*. I thought about what had happened to Rarity. How she died in Canterlot, her hoof fused to a window... I wished she'd escaped to some remote stable with Fancy Pants or Vanity... I wished as many ponies as possible had survived that mess. I knew better...

I sighed, Lacunae's memory walking into my thoughts as casually and gently as the mare herself once did. For an instant, she'd been Twilight. I'd wanted to tell her about Big Macintosh. Wanted to let her know that she had a child, if via Marigold. I wondered... would she have been proud of me? Or would she have covered her face in embarrassment at her barbarian descendant? Pure Twilight... gone. Lacunae... gone. As if she'd never existed, like she'd insisted.

"You idiot," I sniffed. "I miss you, so you existed. Damn it..." I wished she was here. With her magic and wisdom and silent confidence and... just... here!

"Are you all right?" Lancer said from behind me, making me start. I needed to put a bell on him!

"I think this is the first time you've snuck up behind me without shooting me," I said as I turned to look at him. "What's up?"

"You said you've killed ponies who didn't deserve it," he said as he walked into the cabin I was 'cleaning'. "How did you... How...?" Clearly, he wasn't sure how to ask the Maiden this.

"Did I go on?" I prompted. He bit his lip and nodded. "I almost didn't. But then a friend told me something I'll never forget. You make your life about making up for that death. You devote yourself to doing the right thing and helping as many as you can. And you hope... hope as hard as you can... that when you die, you've made up for a tenth of the life you took." I sighed, rubbing the back of my head. "Unfortunately, I am not the smartest or safest of ponies to be around. Maybe there is something to your Maiden story."

"Perhaps. I do not know. You still scare me," he admitted. Maybe there was something about candor that was a zebra thing.

"Why did your father order you to kill them? What did your mother do?" I asked quietly.

"I..." he opened his mouth, then closed it and thought a moment. "I cannot say for certain anymore. Since that duel, nothing is certain. We were told that they were cowards who spread falsehood and lies. But now... now I cannot recall Mother saying anything about Father before she fled. His other

wives said nothing, but simply agreed with his claim.”

“Other wives?” I asked with a grin.

“Yes,” he said baldly. “Is that a problem?”

“No. It’s just...” I couldn’t help myself, “How many wives?”

“Eleven, now,” he answered.

“Wow,” I murred. “Wonder how he finds time to sleep.”

He shook his head. “Father is a great warrior. He has slain dragons with his bare hooves. Conjugal duties are hardly taxing.” Lancer looked towards the window, frowning. “The day before she fled... they hunted a balefire phoenix... a great and dangerous prey. Something happened, but I know not what. Only that when Mother returned, she said she’d done something terrible. Then she left with my little sister and begged me to come with her. I refused. Two days later, Father returned and said that Mother had tried to kill him. When I told him she’d asked me to leave with her, he sent me to kill all the traitors.”

I sat on the ruined bed, facing him. “Lancer, do you know anything about the zebras around the Hoof? What is your father planning?”

“I do not know,” he answered quietly. “Most of those at the far camps are the Brood. They are... terrifying. They come from no tribe. They barely speak at all, and yet they have the knowledge of veteran warriors. No fear. No questioning. They obey Father’s every wish.”

“But where did they come from? I thought they might be from your homeland,” I ventured.

He shook his head firmly. “The passage across the strait is perilous. Only a few small ships will risk a megalodon swallowing the vessel. It would take a year to ferry the numbers he has found.” He closed his eyes. “For the last year, Father has frequently gone out alone. He says there was an ancient prize to be had in the Hoof. A weapon which would allow us to sweep the valley clear. For a time, I thought he meant the balefire bomb... yet that was found far from the city. Then, one day, he emerged from the tent looking more overjoyed than I’d ever seen him. He said half of it had been unsealed. Then, one night, he laughed long into the night. He said it was the beginning of the end.”

Well, that certainly sent chills down my spine. “Did he ever elaborate?” I asked, hopeful. From somewhere, I heard the long low growl of Hoofington thunder. A deep, bassy growl that seemed to be welcoming me home.

“No. But soon after, he went alone into a bunker in the southeast, near Grimhoof. I am not sure if it was zebra or pony in origin. It was hidden beneath an empty warehouse. We waited outside the star-marked door. For hours he was inside. Then he emerged with a dozen of the Brood. Some of the warriors protested, and Father had them killed on the spot. Since then, whenever Father leaves, he comes back with more of the Brood. Dozens. Hundreds. ‘A gift of Four Stars’ he calls them.”

“Four stars? What four...” but then I remembered something Boing had said. They’d been camped outside a bunker with four stars on the door. Those events were thankfully blurry for me, but I thought there might have been one somewhere else, too. Inside the foundation of some building in the midst of construction. And Bottlecap had talked about a bunker up north. I’d thought she’d been talking about my stable...

“Can you wait just a minute, please?” I’d have loved to ask Lacunae this right now... Instead, I flipped open my broadcaster and thought of who I could bug. Pinkie Pie had mentioned something about

them too, hadn't she? Bad ponies...

I found the right terminal address and established the connection. "Security to Watcher. Security to Watcher. Come in you big, handsome, purple guy." There was a hiss of static, followed by a click, and the connection went dead. Instantly fear ran through me. Was the Enclave, or somepony else, trying to raid Spike's cave? I peered down at the PipBuck screen. 'Connection manually interrupted, MASEBS Tower #19.'

What? Manually? Somepony out there was dicking with me. I smiled sweetly. "Dealer? Dealer? I need your help." I looked around. So often he just appeared. New fears bubbled up inside me. First Lacunae, now Dealer? "Dealer? Come on..."

"I'm here," he rasped slowly. I peered around again, but I couldn't see him.

"Are you okay?" I asked in concern.

"Just tired. EC-1101 wasn't meant to be crammed into so small a PipBuck. It's been a strain. Hopefully you'll get... well... nevermind. What's wrong?" he muttered in my ears.

"I need to know about 'Four Stars'. I wanted to ask Spike, but somepony is blocking the connection. Can you do something about it? With EC-1101?" I asked, for some reason my eyes being drawn up. Lancer was giving me that funny expression again. "Yeah, I talk to things only I can see and hear. Wacky, huh?"

"That is a word for it..." he replied as his ears folded back.

Dealer was silent for a long minute. "Try now."

"Security to Watcher. Come in," I said, now with no joking around. There was a distant flash through the portholes; miles off, but still a bit too close for my comfort. The thunder rolled through the clouds.

Fortunately, almost immediately a deep, ominous voice growled out. "Blackjack! You're alive? This is great! I've been frantic since Maripony. I haven't been able to contact anyone! Someone is blocking me out of the MASEBS, and my remote links are all compromised. I'm blind here!" The voice made Lancer's mane and tail stand nearly upright.

If the Enclave thought that LittlePip and I were terrorists, and knew we'd associated with Spike, it wouldn't be hard for them to put two and two together and try to cut off Spike. Maybe even draw the dragon out with worry. "The Enclave is going nuts right now. The Stable Dweller accidentally killed the head of their military, as well as a whole bunch of other important ponies. I don't know what they're going to do, but it appears like they've tried to cut off access to the MASEBS network." I paused and added, "The Stable Dweller is all right, Watcher. She survived too."

I heard the breath let out in a great gust. "Thank Celestia. Thank you, Security." There was a pause, and the deep growling was replaced by the tinny synthetic voice. "I'll keep working to break through their interference. They must have done something at Tenpony to have this kind of access. I hope DJ Pon3 is all right."

"Me too," I said, now wondering if I should... ugh... no. I had my own crisis to worry about. "The Stable Dweller can handle it. Listen. I need to ask you a question. Does the word 'Four Stars' mean anything to you?"

"That's two words," Spike and Lancer replied simultaneously. I rolled my eyes and then gave the stink eye to the one I could see.

"Before the war, Four Stars was a transportation company. Big connections. They were plugged into the import business. Pinkie Pie was dead set on taking them down. She started with a raid in Manehattan, but they were going to storm every holding from Hoofington to Las Pegasus," Watcher replied.

"Why?" I asked, glancing over at Lancer. The *Fleur* began to creak as the wind picked up outside.

"Zebra sympathizers. A whole network of ponies who ended up helping the enemy. Major players. Right before the bombs fell, Pinkie focused on them. I don't know if it was the raid that set off the attack or not. They had built bases of operations all over Equestria, smuggling in weapons and even enemy soldiers. Funny thing is... nopony is sure who owned it. Maybe Pinkie or somepony in the M.o.M. knew."

I frowned. Bases all over Equestria. Bunkers hidden in buildings under construction. "Why four stars? And do you know if they were connected to the O.I.A. or Goldenblood?" After all, the O.I.A. did seem to be the Ministry of Secret Underhoofed Deeds.

"I don't know. I never heard Goldenblood mention them. I think..." Spike was silent a moment, then went on, "Wait. I *do* remember something. I remember way back, when Twilight first travelled to Ponyville, she thought Nightmare Moon was going to return. Nopony seemed to believe her at the time. Twilight found a passage in one of her books, right before we left Canterlot. It said 'The four stars shall help with her escape,' or something like that. And then Nightmare Moon showed up the very next day." He trailed off a moment. "It was when we first met the pony gang. That's why I could recall it..."

If I could give hugs through a radio link... "And you're positive that these folks were working *with* zebras? And they named their company after something that set Nightmare Moon free?" I frowned as I regarded Lancer, to see if he thought that was as messed up as I did. From the bafflement and disgust on his face, I thought so. "Well, thanks for telling me that. How are you doing?"

"I was chewing my claws till you called. I knew Litt- er, the Stable Dweller was in the area of Maripony, and... well... I'm just glad to hear from anyone right now. The Enclave have control over the EBS now, so I'm struggling just to network spritebots together and carry a signal."

"Well, keep your eyes open, and watch out for her as soon as you can, Watcher. I got my own mess to deal with out east. I'll try to check in soon. I want to know what's going on as much as you do," I said, looking gravely at Lancer.

"Take care of yourself, Security. Watch out for your friends," Spike said, then cut off.

"That makes no sense," Lancer said sharply. "When I saw the stars on the door, I thought it was simple pony decoration. But this Watcher... setting the Maiden free! No zebra would do such a thing."

I frowned. There was something not coming together. "The zebras wouldn't have known about the four stars reference. That was a pony myth. And the ponies wouldn't have known about the Maiden of the Stars... that was a zebra myth." There didn't seem to be any overlap, except for one. "Lancer, what did the Starkatteri tribe do during the war?"

The question clearly disturbed Lancer. Stark lightning threw his face into sharp relief as the thunder boomed seconds later. "The Starkatteri were laborers. They toiled in mines and factories. They were forbidden from fighting in the war. They suffered and died in toxic, poorly ventilated conditions instead."

"But would the Last Caesar have used them and their dark knowledge?"

The question insulted him. "Absolutely not!"

I stared at him. "Are you certain? Without a doubt?" I glared into his eyes as the storm played in the distance. There was doubt there before he dropped his gaze. "There were two wars being fought," I muttered as I slowly walked towards the windows. "The first one was the war we all knew. Soldiers and weapons and battle and megaspells. But there was a second war being fought, too. A hidden war. Goldenblood on one side... somepony else on the other. Secrets and lies... using the battle between your people and mine to cover what they were doing."

"What are you saying, Blackjack?" he asked, clearly shocked.

"I'm saying that the war that we all thought was fought over borders and resources... someone used it. They used you, and they used us for their own ends." I stared out at the flashes of the gathering storm. "What if the last war... didn't end?"

"It ended! Your spells! Our bombs! It is finished!" he cried out as he stepped beside me. "Even the Remnant admits that, if in hushed tones. The last order is simply a reason to go on."

"I'm not sure. Since I left Stable 99, I've been running into the past more and more. Something bad happened then, and it's been like an oozing wound ever since. The more I learn, the more relevant that secret war feels. Secrets and lies and old ponies not quite dead." Through gaps in the clouds, I could see flickers of a distant green glow and just make out the black towers biting the clouds.

What was it? Security saves ponies, but from what? What was the peril that scratched at my mane and whispered in my ears? Goldenblood's Project Horizons? Lighthooves's plague? The Legate's balefire bomb? Cognitum in the Core? Why couldn't I have enemies that I could just face? Opponents to battle and overcome? The Enclave... the Goddess... Red Eye... Remnant... Brood of Coyotl... I wanted to rage! Damn this body! I needed to feel pissed off!

"Come at me, you motherfuckers!" I screamed, slamming my hooves against the window and splintering the glass. "Come on! Face me!" I yelled, rearing again and smashing my hooves till the glass shattered and cold, rainy wind blew in. "I'll kill you! I'll smash you to pieces!" I bellowed towards that distant green glow as I kicked again and again, knocking out the window frame in my fury. The thunder rumbled before me, and to me it was the laughter of that distant spire and my enemies. "Face me! Fight me! You Goddesses-damned motherfuckers!"

"Maiden!" Lancer shouted. I stood right at the brink of the hole I'd kicked in the side of the airship, and at the word I glared back at him. The Maiden glared back at him with a rage that made him step back in fear and awe. Bringer of chaos. Destroyer of people. That was me. "You cannot fly," was all he said.

It would be nice if my body had some kind of calm down mode. But in that terrified yet respectful expression in his eye, I saw that I really was on the verge of something bad. I sat, slumping before the hole as the cold rain spat in at me. I regarded the distant towers of the Core, wishing I could destroy them with my glare alone, before I hung my head. Defeated. Impotent. And I could hear the black towers laughing.

The door opened and P-21 and Rampage ran in. They viewed me and the hole I'd bashed and Lancer. "Um, if you want to throw him off the ship, the deck is right up there."

"I... don't. I'm not," I said as I covered my face. "I'm just... it's been a long day. Sorry."

"Right," P-21 said as he looked at me, then at Lancer. "Well, don't make that hole any bigger. It's an old airship." He turned and walked out. Rampage glared at Lancer and said something in Zebra, then pointed her hoofclaws at her face, then at him, before she backed out. A second later, her head popped

back around the doorjamb, repeated the gesture, and slowly withdrew a final time.

"Your friends are concerned about you," Lancer said. And him too.

"Sorry," I said, a word that was a bit threadbare for me. "I'm just... really sick of this place. I hate it more than you do, I think." He didn't approach me as I sat before that hole. "So. What are you going to do?"

He thought a moment, then answered, "I don't know. My whole life has been the Remnant. My whole reason for living was to make Father proud. Now... I do not know. But I do not wish to follow in your wake, Maiden. I know that much."

He deserved a chance. "What if I told you that your mother and little sister were still alive?"

"What?" he hissed in shock.

"Glory got to them before they died. They're still alive. Both of them."

"W...why didn't you tell me sooner!?" he demanded, shocked.

"One day ago, you tried to kill me. Two days ago, you were your father's right-hoof zebra," I said as I jabbed a hoof at him. "And you shot me in the face, I might add! So don't get indignant that I didn't let you know you didn't finish the job. For all I knew then, you'd go back and kill them just to get back in with your father!"

He drew back. "I apologize. You're right." I watched him think a moment, and then he replied. "If... if I could see them again? Well, I'd apologize. And then I would listen to whatever she wished to tell me... better than I did before she left."

I approached him, keeping my eyes locked on his. "I like your mom. She's weird, but I like her. So if I tell you where she is, and you do something bad to her, I promise you that I will show you just how much a Maiden of the Stars I can be. Do you understand? I am sick of being responsible for good ponies dying."

"I understand," he answered at once, with complete conviction as opposed to fear.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "She's in the town of Chapel. Right across the river from the Core in the southwest."

"I see," he replied, unable to hide his shiver. Then he turned and started towards the door. Then he paused and regarded me with an odd smile. "Thank you, Blackjack." He bowed his head to me, then walked out.

I walked to the hole and peered out. The towers were gone behind the clouds, but the thunder still rolled. It was more distant now, sullen sounding. "I'm coming. Just you wait."

* * *

We settled down on the outskirts of Hoofington to let Lancer off. We weren't far from Stockyard, where I'd once killed monster lizard things. How far off that felt... when big animals were a threat. I'd promised that we would let him off before the assault, and hopefully he'd go and make up for his mistake back at Brimstone's Fall.

The inhabitants of the farthest west settlement in the valley were all gathered up on the hillside. There were more than thirty ponies and easily a dozen brahmin. More than a few stared in awe, while the rest were wary. We had to be quite a sight... if only Lacunae were here to finish off the image of wacky

weirdness that was our group. All blue bars. Stockyard had gotten the same treatment as Brimstone's Fall when Sanguine had been searching for me. Either he hadn't gotten everypony, though, or newcomers had moved in. Either way, better than more death in the Wasteland.

Lancer stepped out into the rain. I'd seen so much more of him than Lancer the Killer. Lancer the Storyteller. Maybe even Lancer the Friend. All I could hope was that he'd continue in a direction away from his father and the Remnant. That was all I could ever hope for.

Dusk joined us on deck. The bandaged mare could barely stand. Glory supported her every step and kept a wing around her. Another mare who'd once tried to kill her sister... she kept her eyes turned away from me, and I couldn't blame her for that. Much as I wished it, Yellow River wasn't all that far in the past.

"Here," I said to the zebra as I levitated over his invisibility cloak. It was useful, to be sure, but it was his.

He contemplated it a moment soberly, the rain hissing around us. "No. You hold on to it for now. I think it will be more useful to you where you are going than it will be to me." He glanced over at P-21. "I believe it will be good for me to hide less. Yes?"

"Maybe," P-21 said as he held Scotch Tape between his hooves. "Just be careful. Don't be so eager you turn around and become Blackjack. She gets shot a lot."

"By my friends too, oddly enough," I said with a little smirk.

"I will try to keep things in moderation," Lancer replied.

"Remember," I told him. "Make up for it. Help, however you can." And I didn't add for him not to make me regret my leniency. I didn't need to. He walked away from the *Fleur*, heading east. Maybe to a better life. He paused and turned back, smiling at me.

Suddenly Boo trotted out after him with that ridiculous captain's hat on her head. What the heck was she doing? She moved right up next to him and plopped the hat atop his ears. "Boo..." I began with a helpless smile.

"Fucking move," I heard on the wind, caught by my augmented hearing. The voice was tense and angry. I turned my head, glaring up at the settler ponies with a small frown. My eyes picked out several weapons... not unusual. The ponies were all still blue on my E.F.S.

But there was a weapon not pointed at me.

"Get down!" I shouted, a blast of lightning cutting the sky and flooding the hillside with its harsh glare while the boom drowned out everything but the sharp crack of a hunting rifle. I stormed up the muddy hillside, giving the shooter something far more pressing than taking shots at Lancer to think about. Cursing as loudly as I could at the gathered settlers, I fired my own guns into the air. They screamed and ran for the shelter of their buildings.

I slowed and stopped, my muddy body sliding slowly back down towards the *Fleur*. "Is everyone okay?" I called back.

"We're fine. Lancer almost pulled a Blackjack," Rampage drawled as she helped him to his hooves.

"I'm a thing now?" I asked with a frown.

"Sure. It's what happens when you're so in love with the Wasteland that you get your head blown

off,” Rampage said with a smirk. “I’m thinking of patenting it. Maybe making shirts. ‘I pulled a Blackjack and lived to tell about it.’ Kinda catchy.”

If Boo hadn’t fouled their shot... “Ha ha,” I said as I turned to Lancer. “You should have your cloak back.”

“No. It was a good lesson,” he replied soberly. “I should remember to always be vigilant. Perhaps this will make me a better survivor.” He adjusted the hat atop his head and then smiled down to Boo. “Thank you for your gift.”

She just beamed back at Lancer. I had to wonder why she’d darted out just then. If she hadn’t... I had images of his smiling face exploding. “Just take care of yourself,” I said with a small smile.

He nodded and once more moved off through the long grass, this time ducking down so that, in a few seconds, all but the hat disappeared. It moved off like a shark fin till it too disappeared from sight.

I frowned up at the hill. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to have a few words.”

* * *

We never found out which of the settlers had fired the shots. A few condemned the gunfire as cowardly, but no pony gave up the shooter. There were a half dozen hunting rifles, and I couldn’t spank the owners of all six. The settlers were more shocked that I’d gotten so upset over attempts to ‘off a stripe’. Lancer was ‘just a zebra’. Apparently they’d thought I was going to do it, till I let him go. When they thought that I wasn’t listening, I heard more than a few angry mutters about stripe-lovers. They didn’t know how I heard their every word.

I’d been happy to see a settlement of ponies. I’d assumed that that was a good thing.

Twister and Boomer stayed with the *Fleur* while I tried to lecture them about doing better. Not all zebras were the same. Not all of them meant harm. My words were wasted as I was given sullen nods and angry glares.

“Let’s just go, Blackjack,” Glory said. Since it was clear that my lecture wasn’t going to be accompanied by a body count, the settlers were scattering back to their afternoon routine.

As we re-boarded the *Fleur*, I found a rail and slumped against it. There wasn’t a sign of the settler ponies. They had had their fill of Security, and I had had my fill of them. The only ones I could see were the brahmin, approaching the *Fleur* with dull curiosity.

“Ahem,” one said as his heads looked up at me.

“We just wanted to say sorry ‘bout the shots at yer friend,” the other head said lowly.

“Yeah, sorry,” agreed the first one.

“Thanks,” I answered with a small smile. “Do they treat you okay here?”

“Oh, sure,” nodded the first. “Ponies is good folks... more or less. Milk and cheese brings more caps than meat and leather. So they watch out fer us.”

“Good. Good,” I said, gritting my teeth as I felt unsteady once again.

“Take care ‘o yerselves,” the second head said as he moved away. “Yer good folks too...”

“Thanks,” I croaked as the *Fleur*’s bag filled with lifting gas began to rise into the air. I buried my face in my hooves. Good folks? If they were good folks, and we were good folks, then why did good

folks keep doing bad things? Any good feelings I'd had at Lancer agreeing to do better had been robbed by the muleheadedness of a bunch of bigots who couldn't see anything wrong with killing a zebra just because he was a zebra! I ground my teeth and sulked till Glory hooked my collar with her wing and led me belowdecks to an intact cabin.

We lay together on the bed; there wasn't any sex. After Lacunae's death and Lancer being shot at by 'good folks', I couldn't be further from the mood. She was just with me. Helping me deal with it. As always.

"Blackjack. When was the last time you slept?" Glory asked me as she brushed my cheek.

"I dunno... twenty four hours ago," I muttered.

"You need to sleep," Glory reminded me.

I closed my eyes. "Yeah..." I knew that too. But I didn't want to. I wasn't tired... and besides...

To sleep... and maybe to dream. That was the trick. For in sleep, what dreams would come?

* * *

I didn't sleep. There were too many things to do in the meantime. Too many things that could go wrong. Lancer's parting gift had one benefit: it would hide me from the energy sensors of the lightning rods well enough, so no need shut down and plug into Rampage. Anything else that might set them off was given to me and hidden under the cloak as well: Pew-Pew, PipBucks, and the energy supplies from the three suits of power armor had all been put in my saddlebags. We'd thought that deactivating the armor would be enough, but better safe than sorry. I dolefully chewed on one of Glory's cyberpony cakes. I might not have felt tired, but a little sustenance couldn't hurt.

In seconds, we were in the skies of Hoofington, and even as a unicorn, I could feel the difference. The clouds far away had been white, fluffy, ephemeral things. These clouds swirled like dark waters. Lightning flickered deep in the depths, and thunder growled every few minutes. I felt like I was trapped beneath the *Celestia* once again, despite the fact I could breathe. The saturated clouds soaked everything, and we had water streaming off the balloon and the deck within minutes. The clouds were moved by strange breezes I couldn't quite pin down. While Boomer and Twister pushed, Glory made constant adjustments against the heavy, drab gray clouds she'd packed against the hull to ensure that as much of the *Fleur* as possible was covered.

"I hate these skies," I heard Boomer mutter.

I hated them too.

Suddenly, the clouds parted, and we saw a bright yellow glow blinking and flickering in the gloom. It was a colossal black needle perhaps fifty feet long hanging down from an immense black storm cloud. Glory hurriedly finished making a shell of cloud between the deck and balloon, then ducked inside, out of view, as the winds carried us towards it. Only narrow holes let us see out at the ominous spire.

"Damned crosswind! Why'd it kick up now?" Twister complained. The *Fleur* groaned as the two forces of wind and pegasi fought over it. We were going to pass by the rod far closer than I liked. Every second made the needle grow larger and larger. Yellow lightning flickered along the black metal, and every now and then a bolt leapt off of the blinking talismans and crackled through the surrounding storm clouds. At the top, where the metal connected to the cloud, I could see clusters of cameras peering out in the storm clouds. *Celestia* only knew how they could see anything.

We passed a stone's throw from the lightning rod, blinking talismans the size of my head flooding

the inside of the shell with a harsh glare. I only hoped that Glory's work had made us resemble just another cloud. I watched as a band of lightning crackled off the nearest talisman and stretched towards us a moment with flickering fingers, as if reaching for us. We might just get blasted by accident. Then the bolt thudded down the shaft and discharged off the tip in a yellow fork.

"I *really* hate these skies," Boomer amended.

I could also appreciate General Chaser's problem of attacking the tower. Any motion would have to be above the cloud layer. It would be suicide to try and take a Raptor through these clouds. They would have to travel through open air, easily detected and targeted by the tower's defenses. Lighthooves would have time to prepare, and he could send missiles on flight paths where the Raptors were more spread out.

"Take us up," I said, wanting to avoid another brush with a lightning rod.

The balloon hissed as Scotch Tape pulled a lever, and we lifted up. The dark clouds began to lighten a touch, and Glory flew back out and continued to work on the cloud layer. Suddenly the *Fleur* lurched and groaned. Dozens of pink orbs showered down onto the deck. "Take cover!" I yelled as one tumbled down and struck me right on the head. It burst open. "I'm hit! Is anyone else hurt?!"

"Calm down, Blackjack," Glory called from above. "We just hit an apple tree is all."

I blinked and picked up one of the mushed pink globs. It was... vaguely... appleish. I heard rustling above us, and then brown branches flopped off to the side of the ship. They resembled ropey tendrils studded with the fleshy pink globs. "That's an apple tree?" P-21 said skeptically, and Scotch Tape appeared a little insulted.

It was an apple tree... if an apple tree had been made to float. Where the trunk should be was an immense, swollen, oval sac much like the gasbag of the *Fleur*. Atop it were hundreds thin branches with filmy leaves attached. The 'roots' of the tree, and the fruits growing off them, acted as ballast. "That's not an apple tree," Rampage declared flatly.

"It is too," Glory said, defensively. "A lot of our food is grown on top of the S.P.P. towers, but we couldn't begin to feed all our people with such a small area... so we turned to cloud farming." We skimmed along the cloud layer, Glory pulling the viewing slits into windows now that we were above the lightning rods. I took a bite of a cloud apple and nearly gagged. It was like eating glass... barely any taste at all. Like faintly apple-flavored paste.

"Takes really wet clouds to sustain cloud crops, though," Twister said. "You need lots of water and cloud cover. But Thunderhead's always got the clouds for it; no need to irrigate with the S.P.P. at all." She sounded a little jealous. We were floating through a veritable orchard of 'trees', all bobbing on top of the clouds. They weren't so much rigid wood as flexible fibers, and so they yielded for our passage with barely a problem.

The tops of the clouds had a strange terrain to them. There were hills and valleys filled with the bizarre floating biomass. All of the plants sported some sort of gasbag. Cloud wheat was thousands of balloon-sized clumps with pale yellow grain on top and long roots on the bottom, like bobbing heads. There were cloud potatoes... that didn't seem much different from their apples. Cloud corn was similar to wheat, except the ears all had their own bubbles to tug them upright. "That is so weird," I remarked as we passed spidery bean plants.

There was more than just plant life up here, though. There were ponies working, too. I could make out a half dozen teams of pegasi loading crops onto skywagons in the late afternoon light. The area up here was so large, though, that I didn't have any fear of them spotting us from so far off.

"Where's..." I began to ask, but as I turned I saw that everypony was staring at it.

Shadowbolt Tower.

It was utterly impossible to miss. The tower was a black hexagonal shape rising out of a massive, dark, green-lit pit of clouds. It had to be the tallest structure ever built. Each segment had talismans at every level, blinking bright blue. Shielding talismans? Levitation? Magic had to be the only way such a feat of engineering was possible. The tower didn't taper off, it widened. The higher I gazed, the bigger and more elaborate the tower became. At the top was a massive blue dome, like a jeweled scepter. There were long, black fingers stretching out into the air, landing docks for Vertibucks, Raptors, and Thunderheads, I supposed. Where the tower started to widen, each side I could see of the hexagon bore an enormous panel decorated with the winged rainbow lightning bolts of the M.o.A.

"Wow. That's really... really... big," I muttered weakly. It seemed to stretch for another mile up into the sky, but I couldn't be sure.

"That is the Equestrian Air Command. Shadowbolt Tower. The one target that, thanks to the Core's anti-missile beam technology, never got destroyed. And they tried," Glory said proudly.

Twister and Boomer were less impressed. "Y'all could refit the entire fleet with the metal in that thing."

"One, lots of it is the same ceramic as the rest of the Hoof. Two, you could easily get that metal by trading with the surface for scrap metal," Glory retorted.

"That's gonna be a much harder cat to swing after Maripony," my hearing caught Twister mutter.

"Where's Thunderhead?" I asked, peering at all the fluffy white globs above the cloud layer. Lots of it seemed to be gathering and holding stations. Others were cloud... factories? Well, they had to create those fluffy cloud terminals somehow! I looked for a tire-shaped cloud but couldn't see...

"Um... Blackjack?" Glory said as she smiled and pointed past the cloud factories at a huge, curved wall of white slightly above us. It was so large, I'd dismissed it as simply the background. "Welcome to Thunderhead."

We'd finally, truly, left the Wasteland.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Whew. Well, when moving and job plans fall through then there's always getting the next chapter out. We're now into the enclave arc, where we get to see the consequences of Operation: Caulterize out east. I still don't know what's going to be happening with work and the like, so every bit donated is especially appreciated right now. I'm going to start temping soon if I can't find somewhere to teach.

Huge thanks to Hinds, Bro, and Hidden Fortune for getting this done in record time. Seriously. Four hours. New record for this year. Check out Hidden Fortune's fic [Treasure Hunting](#) if you have the time. It will be worth your time. Huge thanks to Kkat, as always, for making this awesome world for us to explore and enjoy. Huge thanks to folks who leave feedback. It's greatly appreciated. I hope to have the next chapter out soon. Finally, time to leave the wasteland!)