

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 60: Civilization

"Here it is: the greatest city in the sky!"

There were pictures in books of what civilization once looked like. They ranged from the well-lit glass and steel towers of Manehattan to the elegant and classical buildings of Canterlot to the cozy, rural surroundings of Ponyville. There'd even been a picture of Cloudsdale; I remembered it as being rather white and boring-looking on the page, but now, staring at Thunderhead, I appreciated it a little better.

The city was built on the inside of a massive, hollow horizontal torus of cloud, like an empty wagon tire lying on its side. I saw, as the *Fleur* edged up into the city from below, that the bottom lip of the tire extended in towards the center farther than the top, creating a sunlit ledge that supported actual living parks! Well, if they could figure out how to make crops grow in clouds, why not grass and flowers? Large, impressive buildings were built into the thick circumferential wall of the torus, and these were decorated with Corinthian columns, friezes of pegasi and griffins in combat, and grand statues that appeared to be marble. Along the ceiling of the hollow tube, hanging down like icicles, were hundreds of plain, cloud-hewn apartments where, from what Glory told me, the poorer folk lived. Equidistant around the city were six immense buildings that ran like pillars from the lip of the upper rim to the border of the park ring below; these, according to Glory, were the houses of Thunderhead's government.

I'd been worried about how we were going to sneak into the city. I'd been imagining the 'city' as a place like Tenpony, or even the Society. A building, a cluster of buildings, or even a stable were what had crossed my mind. Places with big, guarded doors where everything going in and out was looked at carefully and judged. Here, there were so many ponies coming and going that entering had been as simple as moving up over the top rim. There were flights of power-armored ponies flying around, but they seemed occupied with something else. The only interference we had was when a gray pegasus pony with a stubby chin flew over, inspected the 'cloud', and told Boomer to "Get that good, heavy cloud to the work site pronto."

And then he flew on, because there were other ponies doing similar things.

This was how the world was supposed to be. How it once was. Ponies working, living, laughing. It was like a soap bubble that had persisted for two hundred years, protected by its mighty tower and advantages over its neighbors. There weren't ponies scrabbling for their next meal, worried about monsters, or just trying to keep from being robbed, raped, or ripped in two.

Once we were inside the ring, Glory'd directed us towards the far side of the city. At first, I couldn't tell one part from another, but now I could see that different sections of the city had some subtly different decorations in the form of colored motifs. The busiest was red, which she said was the business and entertainment sector. We were headed to the blue section, right in the middle, which seemed to have the largest and fanciest homes with the fewest ponies hanging about. As we reached the wall she'd pointed us to, she quickly flew out, nipped over to a control panel, and tapped a few keys. A side of the wall swung up, revealing an immense garage, perhaps more of a hangar, even, with an impressive gold-and-silver-surfaced sky carriage supported by hooks in the ceiling. Though we scraped off most of the storm cloud getting through the door, Twister, Boomer, and Glory were able to tie the *Fleur* to the same supports.

"Wow. I can't believe we're really up in the sky!" Scotch Tape said, jumping eagerly over the rail.

"Wait!" Glory shouted, but too late. Scotch Tape's glee turned into a shriek of terror as she

plunged straight through the floor. I reached out with my magic just before her tail disappeared from view and grabbed. The filly emerged slowly, hanging upside down as she hugged herself and trembled. My horn strained; had she been full-grown, I wouldn't have caught her. When Glory picked her out of the air and deposited her on the *Fleur*, Scotch rushed to P-21 and hugged him tight.

"Don't get off the boat. Not getting off the boat," Scotch Tape murmured over and over again as I let out a sigh of relief.

P-21 held her as she dealt with that minor breakdown. "This might make walking around a little difficult."

I frowned and levitated out Twilight's magic primer. Now I was glad that it wasn't just useless magical exercises for foals. "She has a spell here that she says will let non-pegasi walk on clouds." I read the details... it didn't seem all that difficult. Definitely nothing I would have tried a month ago, but... "Who am I going to try it on, though?"

"Eh. What's the worst you can do to me?" Rampage asked as she trotted in front of me.

I screwed up my face and concentrated. Imagine happy, fluffy clouds on the ends of her legs. Happy, fluffy clouds... I felt the magic discharge. "Huh... you don't look any different. Maybe Boomer can bring in some of that thundercloud we scraped off and--"

"Banzai!" Rampage shouted as she jumped off the far side of the ship. Her cry trailed away to silence as all of us stared in shock.

"Oh Celestia," I muttered as I slowly walked to where she'd jumped. First Lacunae and now Rampage... "I... I should have known better. I thought I cast it right!" Falling... and falling... and sure, she wouldn't die, but who knew what we were over this second? We were near the Core! She could find herself impaled on a ruin, or--

Then a striped pony launched herself over the rail and landed atop me. "You did. I was just messing with you," she said smugly as she lay atop me, then frowned and tapped my metal reinforcements. "Whoa, how do you and Glory get your sexings on? Don't these chafe?"

"A bit, but so long as I'm on top, it's not too bad," Glory replied as I worked to re-establish my ability to speak.

"Rampage! I'll kill you!" I yelled as I tried to punch her.

"Promises, promises," she drawled as she almost casually pinned my metallic legs under her hoofclaws. She looked over at the traumatized Scotch Tape, then down at me, and I saw a shadow in her eyes. But then she grinned as she fought it back. "Hey Scotch. Watch this." She opened her mouth and let a giant dollop of saliva roll along her tongue.

"No! No no no! Don't you dare, Rampage!" I shouted as I tried to heave her off. "Do not drool on me, Rampage! I'm warning you!" I glanced at Glory desperately, but apparently the ickiness of earth pony saliva wasn't worth her coming to my rescue.

Rampage sucked the glob back in, grinned down at me, and snorted loudly before letting a wad of something awful slowly begin to drop towards my face, swinging and wriggling like some vile pendulum. "Rampage, what are you, a filly?" Glory asked in disgust. Rampage froze, a glob of slime dangling from her lips as she looked at Glory, and then she sucked it back into her mouth. "That's better," Glory said with the air of a foalsitter. "Honestly..." Rampage smirked.

Then, like a steel-plated jungle cat, she launched herself at Glory, pinning the pegasus on her

back. "What are you doing? Get off!" The phlegm glob appeared once more. "No! No no nononoNO!" she pled helplessly as the Reaper let the mucus swing lower and lower. "Blackjack! Help!" I glanced over at Scotch, who was beating back her recent trauma with amusement. Then Glory's shriek reached glass-breaking levels as the spit bomb landed. "Rampage!"

We all... save for Glory... broke into laughter. "Relax, Glory," Rampage smirked. "Scotch is laughing now. So chill."

"I'm back in grade school again," Glory said in exasperation as she sat up, but she was mollified a bit by the sight of the laughing olive filly. Her continued attempts to wipe the spittle away just smeared it into her coat, though. "Oh, gross! Is this mucus? This is mucus! Rampage!"

"What is going on?" a young mare said from the garage doorway. Her coat was a darker gray than Glory's and her mane a deep indigo. I was reminded of a pegasus Homage, except a pair of glasses lay before her lighter, blue, and currently very wide eyes. "What... how... who *are* all of you?"

"Moonshadow?" Glory said as she stared at the uneasy mare. Then she swooshed in and hugged the mare every bit as fiercely as Rampage pouncing. "Moony!"

Moonshadow struggled to push Glory away. "Rainbow Dash?" Her lip curled, clearly uncomfortable with the gooey embrace. "Who... what..." Her eyes turned to the *Fleur*, then to all of us. "What's going on?"

"It's me! Morning Glory! I'm home!" she said with a grin. But it quickly faded as Moonshadow pushed her away. "Moonshadow?"

The mare shook her head slowly, "...no. You can't be--"

"It's Morning Glory, Moon," Dusk said loudly as she stumbled onto the deck and faltered to the rail. She glanced at me, her lips pursed, and then she awkwardly fluttered down to the floor of the garage. Her bandages had been removed, revealing the swollen, livid injuries to her head. I hadn't remembered exactly what I'd done to her... apparently it had involved ripping her helmet open and nearly crushing her skull. The swelling had gone down, but skull fractures took longer to heal without magic.

"Dusk? What happened to you?" Moonshadow asked as she rushed to swaying pegasus's side. Feeling awkward, I got to casting the cloudwalking spell on myself and the others. "And... Rainbow Dash?"

"Got hurt down below," she replied. "But yeah, that's Glory. Come on. I'll explain everything." Then she rolled her eyes a little. "Actually, I'll just hit the important parts. I can't begin to explain *everything*. But let's go inside."

Moonshadow looked from Dusk to Glory and back again. Glory grinned sheepishly and added, "And I'd really like to wash my face. Really..."

But Moonshadow wasn't smiling. The dark gray mare's blue eyes turned and regarded the rest of us coolly. "I see. Very well. Welcome to the Striker estate." Frowning, she led us all inside. A cool welcome indeed.

* * *

I don't know what I expected Morning Glory's home to be like, but I certainly hadn't imagined a palace in the skies. The soaring great room rose up for three stories with balconies reaching out like clamshells from between Corinthian columns. Rainbow-paned windows cast a polychromatic light across the floor, which was engraved with a relief of trees, clouds, and birds. As Thunderhead rotated, the light

played slowly across the surface, the shards of color illuminating one spot and then another so that what was a blue bird one minute would be a blue lake ten minutes later.

Scotch Tape stared at the architecture around her with literal jawdropping awe, her fear of falling miles to the ground forgotten. She raced back to the *Fleur* for some scrap paper and charcoal and immediately began sketching what she saw and writing notes. I observed a few particularities as well: no stairs. Thank goodness there were toilets on the ground floor.

There were also not a lot of people for an estate almost half the size of my stable. Four pegasi, two mares and two stallions dressed in formal black attire, were apparently paid to keep the place neat and tidy. They stood by, clearly unsure of what to do but ready to act if Moonshadow, Dusk, or Glory needed them. I noticed a great deal of wrinkling noses, and I felt embarrassed for bringing the stink of the Wasteland into this vast and amazing structure. Then I put it out of my mind, as I had bigger things to worry about.

We'd moved into a library where enchanted, vaporous shelves held books old even before the war began. A tapestry of some kind hung from the ceiling to the floor, showing generation upon generation of ponies stretching back centuries. I'd never realized that Glory's family, through her father, went back even further than my own through Twilight. Two identical young dove-gray fillies with pink manes listened to Glory and Dusk with matching expressions of awe. Her siblings, Lambent and Lucent. Moonshadow listened to every single word with focus, asking few questions and simply taking it all in. From the firm frown on her lips, she wasn't happy with any of it. When we got to the part about the Enclave and Lighthooves, Dusk suggested that Lambent and Lucent show Scotch Tape the rest of the house while the butler brought her an aspirin.

The three went out, along with a maid to supervise, while we were left with a table of stale desserts and oddities. The water was lightly flavored with lemon. Boo seemed somewhat disappointed with the bland sugar cookies provided.

Then we told Moonshadow about the plague and the upcoming attack. She took it all stoically, even more so than I thought possible given her sister's appearance and company. Her blue eyes closed thoughtfully, and I gave Rampage a stern glare before she could start making snoring noises. A minute later, Moonshadow opened her eyes again, and she did not look happy. "I need to speak to my sisters alone." Then her gaze switched to me before she added, "You can stay. You seem to be in the middle of all this."

"What? What are we supposed to do?" Rampage asked as she panned from Moonshadow to Glory. "Come on! If you're going to fight, I want to see the action. Don't just leave me with the play by play!"

"Rampage," I said with a shake of my head.

She started to whine again, but Moonshadow told one of the servants, "Show her to the media room. If you insist on watching drama," she then said to Rampage, "I suggest viewing *By Dawn's Early Light*. Quite a tearjerker."

"Aw, yeah," Boomer nodded. "I love the scene where Captain Silverwing gets shot and has to lie on the mountaintop while his squad pulls back!" He adopted a gruff tone and said, "'Fight another day, boys. Fight for me. Fight for us. But do it tomorrow. Me, I got a dance to keep.' And they go and then the griffins start to swoop in on him and..." he trailed off as he realized that we were all staring at him. "What?! It's a heartbreaker of a scene. 'Specially when it cuts back to his special pony back home..."

Rampage looked at him blankly, then smiled. "Well, you sold me. I'm game." Then she turned to

the butler pony and said grandly, "To the boob tube, Jeeves!"

"My name is Droplets, ma'am," he replied stiffly. "This way." Together, she and Boomer left.

P-21 turned to Twister and frowned a moment. "Maybe you and I can talk till they're done. I'd like to know more about Neighvarro. It might help me understand what all the fighting is over."

"Skybright?" Glory said to one of the maids. "Why don't you show them to the kitchens and make them something to eat?"

The sky blue mare nodded and trotted to the door, smiling as she opened it for the pair. "This way, please."

I looked over at Boo, the blank blinking confusedly now that ponies were leaving. Or maybe she was just struggling to chew on one of the stale white disks they called 'cookies'. "Go with them, Boo. They might have Fancy Buck Cakes." I don't know if she understood me, but she perked up a little, tossed the half-eaten cookie back on the plate, and trotted out after them, seeming quite pleased. Such a bizarre mare...

When it was down to four of us and the one remaining servant, Moonshadow frowned as she regarded Glory, myself, and Dusk. "So. You've been through a great deal. What is it you plan to do next?" Moonshadow asked archly as she sat on a fluffy white couch. "Get yourselves arrested and hope that they take a bunch of surfacers seriously enough to give you an audience with Councilor Stargazer? Or were you planning on having the public show of us being exiled en masse for breaking quarantine be enough for some sort of public appeal?"

"Well, that is one way to contact the authorities," Glory said, a touch confused and defensive.

"Um, I don't think you understand," I said to Moonshadow with a concerned frown. "Neighvarro is coming for the Tower. If they have to shoot their way in to secure the place, they will. I think you have to look at the bigger picture."

Moonshadow wheeled on me with undisguised contempt. "Excuse me. This isn't your house, your home, your place, or your business. Do not tell me what I should be looking at."

Morning Glory bristled. "Do not address her like that, Moonshadow! Blackjack is my marefriend."

"Congratulations," Moonshadow retorted, full of scorn, "you discovered fornication." She rose and turned away to gaze out the window. "Maybe next you might discover familial obligation."

"What's gotten into you, Moony?" Glory asked, clearly at a loss.

The gray mare smacked her hoof on the table beside her, making the china rattle. "Becoming the head of a household when Father and two of my siblings disappeared 'got into me'," she said without turning. "Something I don't expect either of you two to understand."

"Hey," Dusk groaned, scowling as she started to rise. Then she touched the side of her head and leaned back in her loveseat, but she continued, "Don't talk to me about family."

"Oh?" Moonshadow whirled, glaring at her. "You ran off to join the military the first chance you could get. I understood that. Following in Father's hoofsteps and all that entails. But did you ever think about who would head this family when you just left to do your security training? There was an attempt to bring scandal on us by saying that Glory had gone Dashite!" Her hard blue eyes turned to Glory. "And so you did. More Dashite than I'd thought possible."

"I had no choice in that!" Glory began as she launched herself from my side and hovered in the

air, pointing a hoof at Moonshadow. "Lighthooves branded me, and magic weeds transformed me into this. I never asked for this trouble!"

But Moonshadow, faster than I expected, launched herself into the air and poked her hoof hard into Glory's chest. "Oh, but you did! You had every choice in it, Morning Glory! You could have stayed up here. You could have married or dated anypony you wanted, or none at all. You could have continued your studies. You'd have been a doctor in a year if you'd stayed. But no. You had to pine for Mother and continue her hopeless crusade of helping the surface. You even got Father to endorse the Volunteer Corps! Well, where are Mother and Father now? A mechanical abomination and trapped in some surface stasis pod!"

Glory backed away, looking as if Moonshadow had just bucked her upside the head. "Moonshadow, how can you say that?"

"How..." She gritted her teeth and hissed in frustration. "Have you even thought about Lambent and Lucent, Glory? Or me? Or anypony else?" She pointed a hoof damningly at Glory. "If it were just your life, oh well. I'd be sympathetic. But your sojourn to the surface hasn't just affected you, Glory. Have you realized that?" She gestured at Dusk. "She kept us from exile when it was released that you were dead. I admit, I cried when I heard. But you're not dead. You're here. And you're Rainbow Dash! Are you trying to get us all arrested and exiled?"

"There's more at stake than our family," Dusk pointed out grimly.

"I realize that," Moonshadow retorted. "But unlike the two of you, I am not prepared to sacrifice myself and my youngest siblings as if we're nothing!"

"And when the Enclave comes here and starts shooting, what then?" Glory snapped.

"There's lots of folks in Neighvarro who won't shy away from civilian casualties. Heck, some of them think that the whole population of Thunderhead are traitors," I pointed out.

"Then we sit tight, surrender at an opportune moment, and demonstrate our loyalty." I gaped at her in shock. She met my incredulity with sincerity. "The Grand Pegasus Enclave is the legal, elected authority of our people. Yes, the system has severe problems, but that doesn't excuse criminality. If there are elements defying the law, then the Enclave is right to step in and stop them! They're criminals. If Thunderhead won't stop them, then the Enclave as a whole should," Moonshadow countered.

"Right," I said as I stood. "Glory, get a rope. If she's not going to help us, then she's going to be a liability."

Moonshadow stared at me in disgust. "Brilliant. And what are you going to tell my employers at the university tomorrow? I have never taken a sick day in my life. And what of our servants' families? What are you going to tell them?" Then she asked, cool and contemptuous, "Or are you just going to kill us?" I sighed. This was going to be a lot more difficult than I expected.

Glory sighed as well, slumping, clearly defeated, "Moonshadow, if you're not going to help us--"

"Oh skies above, of course I'm going to help!" she said in eye rolling exasperation.

There was a round of absolutely baffled expressions on everypony's face. "You are?" I asked in befuddlement.

"You think I'm going to stuff my head into a cloud and let you go about whatever foalish scheme you come up with and finish this family off? No," Moonshadow stated firmly. "I refuse to let you, your... friends... Mother, Father, or anypony else ruin Lambent's, Lucent's, or *my* life!" She flew up and once

more poked Glory in the chest. "But don't think that I'm happy with you bringing this on us, Glory."

Glory took a deep breath. "Help me with this and I'll leave and never darken your skies again," she said, clearly fighting the tears.

"Oh for the love of clear skies, no!" Moonshadow said, throwing her forehooves over her head in outrage. Then she seized Morning Glory by the shoulders. "You're family! This is your home. Just start thinking about how what you do is going to affect the rest of us for a change. Otherwise, you're just like Mother." She sighed and landed, then pressed her wingtips to her temples. "Ugh, I'm getting a migraine. Jamboree, I need an aspirin." Rather than trotting over fifteen feet to the bottle on the table, she waited for the butler to fish out two tablets with his wingtips and deliver them to her. Once they were ingested, she sighed again. "Now, it's late, and I have work to finish up, dinner to eat, and calls to make," Moonshadow said crossly. "Is there anything else you need to tell me?" she asked as she looked from one of us to the next.

"No," Morning Glory said, looking away.

"Fine. Give me until tomorrow morning to get things taken care of, and then we'll see what we can do for you and your friends. Ah, and I'll have to find out if the Feathers will take Lambent and Lucent if things go bad."

"Ugh, the Feathers?" Dusk groaned. "They're so stodgy."

"And they're the least likely to be lined up against a wall and shot. They're well-connected here and in Neighvarro. And they *like* me. Just because you didn't want to marry their son is no excuse," Moonshadow said primly. I just *had* to introduce her to Grace if she ever went to the surface. They'd get along smashingly!

"Gay," Dusk complained flatly.

Moonshadow snorted. "Oh, as if that's any reason to call off a perfectly good arranged marriage," she said with a roll of her eyes, but she finally smiled. Then she turned to her servant and said archly, "I trust your discretion?"

He bowed his head. "Yes, ma'am. I shall be sure to get it from the others as well."

"Good," Moonshadow said as she pushed her black-framed glasses back up her muzzle. "Now, I need to get these reports finished. Particularly given that we might be at war any day now and I'd hate to have incomplete assignments hanging over my head. Excuse me." And with that she rose and exited the library, the servant following in her wake.

"Ten Raptors are coming here to seize the tower, and she's worrying about paperwork?" I asked in bafflement.

Dusk shook her head, then winced. Glory sighed. "She's always been the responsible one. I... I didn't know how angry she was with me, though. I thought she liked me."

"She does, Glory," Dusk said with a smile. "She's just cranky. Moonshadow is a perfectionist, if you hadn't noticed. Smart, sure, but organized too. I used to amuse myself for hours nudging her picture frames off level and then watching her drive herself crazy. Or sharpening one pencil a *little* more than the rest."

"That annoys me too," Glory said with a frown. "Well, it did. After the Wasteland..."

"Yeah. But Moonshadow I could see trying to organize the empty cans in order of rustiness or

something,” Dusk said with a tired smile.

“I can’t believe she yelled at me, though. I didn’t think Moonshadow *could* yell,” Glory said ruefully.

“You never rifled through her desk. Could have been worse. At least she didn’t try and kill you,” Dusk said quietly. “Sorry about that, by the way.” She rubbed her head and winced. “Stupid skull fractures.”

“Healing potion didn’t help?” Glory asked with a concerned frown.

“Helped a lot. Spending a week or two locked to a gurney and being questioned half the time didn’t. Hopefully my brain will get the memo and stop hurting.”

“It’s nerves in the bone and muscle or meninges. Brain tissue doesn’t have...” Glory trailed off in the face of the flat look from her sister. “Right. Sorry it hurts.”

Twister and Boomer came back in. “So, what is the plan for meeting with the councilor?” Twister asked Glory. “I mean, y’all got some sort of family connection or something. Right?”

“Actually,” Glory rubbed the back of her head. “I was expecting Thunderhead Security to knock on the door five minutes after we arrived. I didn’t think we’d actually make it all the way here.” We all stared at her with expressions of shock. “What?” she said defensively to me. “You’d disappeared to Maripony, so I just figured I’d do what you’d do and make it up as we go along.”

“Glory,” I said plaintively. “My ideas are terrible! They’ve always been terrible. Why in Equestria would you do that?”

“I’m sorry, alright!?” she burst at me. “I’m not a leader! I don’t have... whatever it is that *you* have that lets you do things. I just figured we’d get up here and, one way or another, we’d get in contact with the councilor. Maybe she’d find a bunch of surfacers interesting enough to chat with.” She bowed her head and crumpled before my eyes, hugging herself with her wings. “I know stuff, Blackjack, but I can’t do stuff. Not like you can.” Finally, she averted her eyes. “You have no idea how jealous I am of you for it.”

Dusk sighed. “Let Moonshadow mull over it, Glory. Not only is she smart, but she hasn’t been gone for two months. And the very important ponies like her better.”

“What’s your plan?” I asked Dusk. She regarded me coolly. After Yellow River, I doubted we’d be friends anytime soon.

“Once my head stops throbbing, I’m going back down to check on Lightning Dancer and Father. I think we’ll need both of them here. I need Dancer, and I’m pretty sure Thunderhead is going to need Father. Then we’ll see,” she replied. “Have to be able to fly for thirty seconds without vertigo sending the world onto the dizzitron first.” She stood and winced. “I’m going to go lie down. You two should probably do the same. Nopony is going to see the councilor after hours, and it’s late.”

“Hmmm! I got it! We sneak in under the cover of darkness and talk to the councilor in her bedroom!” I suggested, grinning ear to ear.

“Blackjack, Enclave councilors have round the clock security,” Dusk said in tones that implied she thought everypony should know this. “And Stargazer’s husband fought with Father during the dragon attack years back. One shot, one alarm, and things go bad very quickly.”

“Maybe... there’s a secret passage? Or do you have a photograph of her bedroom? I can teleport in! Maybe?” I looked from one to the next, then groaned. “Ugh, I really don’t want to put myself

in a position to get arrested just to talk to them about their illegal bioweapons!"

"Leave it to Moonshadow," Glory said with a sigh. "She's smarter than I am." That said a lot.

"Yeah, but she doesn't have your heart," Dusk said with a small smile. "Or my guts. She'd never go to the surface. She likes a nice, predictable life. No wonder she's pissed. Who could have predicted us?"

I gave her a hug and a nuzzle. Moonshadow might be smart, but I didn't quite trust her. Still, for Glory, I could give it a try...

* * *

Nothing much happened that evening. Rampage broke out bawling while we were in the kitchen with P-21 and Twister. Apparently the movie had been all Boomer said and more. Scotch Tape was speculating how much of the manor she could copy with surface material. Boo was quite put out at the lack of fine snack cake cuisine in the household.

That night, all of us except Twister and Boomer slept on the *Fleur*. Twilight's book said that the spell would last for three days, but I wasn't as good at magic as she was. There was no way I was going to get to sleep with the thought of plunging down through the clouds without warning, so we cleaned up the beds for the night. Glory and I spooned together, me stroking her wings gently till she drifted off.

It took me a while to follow her. I never thought I'd miss being tired. I knew, abstractly, that I needed sleep. I just didn't *feel* like I did. I breathed in the clean smell of her mane... purple or rainbow-striped, she still smelled like my Glory... and let my brain gradually shut down as the *Fleur* quietly creaked around us.

What was waiting for me? Nightmares? Memories of Lacunae's passing? Worse? I guess I would see...

~ ~ ~

"Blackjack! Hurry up! You're going to be late!" Mom called from the living room, up the stairs, where I struggled with my golden armor. The dang buckles were stuck, again! I finally just teleported right out of it and into the shower. Hah! *Take that, buckles*, I thought as I turned on the shower.

Oh. Wait. The armor was still on me. Curse you, buckles! Curse you.

I dumped the saturated armor on my bed, gave myself the briskest rubdown in history, and would worry about it later. I raced down the stairs so fast that I barked my shin where the stairs took a corner. I raced past the living room, where my little sister Boo waited impatiently in her soft pink dress. "You're not dressing up? You should dress up. Mom, make her dress up!"

"Ugh! We don't have time," I groaned. "He's not going to care if I'm not all frou-froued up!"

Mom looked at me and smiled. "Blackjack. Go dress up."

Defeated. I returned upstairs, selected a red dress, and wiggled into it. "There! I'm dressed!"

"Brush your mane too," Boo insisted.

"Mom!"

"Brush your mane. You still have plenty of time." I sulked spectacularly as Boo took a brush and ran it through my mane and tail a few times.

"There. Now can we go?" I asked. A royal guard wasn't supposed to look all prissy. We were supposed to be tough and loyal and never give up! We saved ponies.

"Makeu--" Boo began to say, but I levitated a pillow off the sofa and bapped her head with it. "Mooooom! Blackjack is using magic to pick on me again!"

"Boo, she doesn't need makeup. Blackjack, don't use magic on your sister." Mom was used to negotiating between us. We finally headed off towards the door. "Have fun."

"Yes, Mom," we said in unison as we stepped outside into the warm afternoon light.

~ ~ ~

The creak woke me. It wasn't like most of the noises on the *Fleur*. Those were soft, repetitive, soothing things. This was one, singular, groan of a plank on the side of the bed that I was facing. One eye opened, and I stared at the empty air above Glory. Nothing. Go back to sleep, Blackjack. Six sleepy ponies in my head all agreed. It was far too early for this.

But something had made that board creak. I stared at nothing while Glory slept like a log beside me. Then, not making a sound, I drew my sword from its scabbard. It floated slowly over Glory, illuminating her features. I waved it slowly through the air along that side of the bed. Then the air on the other side of the bed gave the slightest of shimmers. A pony with a StealthBuck was standing right next to Glory...

I tensed, ready to strike.

Then the shimmer disappeared entirely as they moved away from me and the bed. Were they just backing away to fire from out of range? The door opened with the slightest of rasps all on its own, and, as quietly as I could, I slipped out of bed. Something was very amiss here. Thankfully, Glory's snores covered the creaks of my own hooffalls. I looked out into the hallway, checked in one direction, then the other. A tin can rocked slowly back and forth by the stairs leading to the deck.

Step by step, I walked out into the open. If this was an assassination attempt, they could have dusted me a half dozen times before now. I swapped from glowing sword to glowing revolvers. "I know you're here," I said quietly as I turned around slowly on deck. "I also know you probably could have killed us down there before I woke up. Or in the hall. Or now. But you haven't yet. So I'm guessing you're here for some other reason." Still nothing. Had they gone? All I could hear was the sound of wind outside the city.

Then the air flashed and the pony showed themselves at the prow of the *Fleur*. I'd seen Enclave power armor before, but I'd never seen power armor like this. It wasn't the clunkier Neighvarro style of armor nor the smoother lines of Thunderhead, and instead of a uniform black, it was mostly purple. It had a black cape and a wide-brimmed hat, of all things! The eye slits glowed pale blue as a breeze made the cape flow dramatically behind. All in all I gave it a 9.

"You need to leave," the pony said in a low, synthetic voice that raised my hackles. Make that 9.5.

I gestured to the airship. "It's my boat. You're the one trespassing." I didn't see any guns on the armor, so I lowered mine. "What's your name, friend?"

"No pony you need to know," they replied. "You're not LittlePip, are you?"

"No. I'm Security. Blackjack, to my friends." I saw the mare start at my name. "You've heard of me. Sorry. I promise I'm not here to blow anything up."

"Blackjack..." she narrowed her eyes a little. "You need to leave."

"Afraid we just arrived. And it wasn't an easy trip," I added as I approached.

"Congratulations on getting here. Now go home."

I sighed, shaking my head. "So soon? But I really wanted to look around and see the sights. And we need to meet with Chancellor Stargazer and deal with Lighthooves," I answered. I suspected that this wasn't him. He wouldn't bother with disguises. "Who are you?"

"The pony dealing with the situation. Leave," the dark pegasus replied. Stallion? Mare? Well, it was hard to tell with power armor and robo-voice. "You're not one of the bad ponies, but I can't let you stay if you're going to do what she said you would."

She? She who? Dawn? "Crazy thought here. *You* could work with *me*?" I said with a grin, gesturing at them with outstretched hooves and then back at myself. "Help me out, oh mysterious one?" The pony didn't answer. "Come on. Who are you with? Thunderhead? Neighvarro? General Storm Chaser? Lighthooves? What?"

They approached me. "I'm the one telling you to get out of here. I don't know if she was right about you or not, but I can't risk you throwing everything off. You're trotting on stage, thinking you know the steps to this dance. You don't. Trust me. Go home. Lighthooves and the Enclave are being handled." They turned away.

Well, somepony got an A in their 'be cryptic as possible' class. "We can't do that. I came up here to help Thunderhead. To help the Enclave too."

The pony stopped. "I can appreciate the irony, and the sentiment. I also appreciate how asinine your position is. However, you should leave. Thunderhead law enforcement will be occupied tomorrow, so you should just pad your ship again and go home. You have your own problems to worry about."

"Thunderhead is Glory's home. And I can't just leave when everything is about to go wrong. I love her," I finished. There. I said it. Now they had to help me!

The mysterious black and purple pony stopped. "Well. That's admirable." Then they looked back at me. "Go home. I'm told you're supposed to do big things down there. Like the other one. If you don't leave, I'll have to tip off security, and you'll be spending your time out of the way till this is over." And with that, they disappeared in a purple flash.

* * *

"I'm telling you, I saw her! A power-armored pony with a cape and a hat!" I said as we sat around the fancy dining table. Breakfast... well... I didn't want to offend, but I'd had better down on the surface. Sky food was a mix of bland with bland and a side of bland. No Sugar Apple Bombs or Fancy Buck snack cakes. I'd gone over my meeting in the middle of the night, but I was facing far more skepticism than I'd expected. "And they had a StealthBuck and they could teleport and..." there was a soft snicker from Dusk. "What? I saw them! And they told me like a dozen times to leave."

"Sure you did," Dusk said with a grin. "The Mysterious Mare Do Well. Who hasn't?"

"That's an urban myth, Blackjack," Glory said absently as she went over some papers and drawings that Moonshadow had drafted. "The Mysterious Mare Do Well's been seen for almost two centuries now just about everywhere."

"Originally the mare was a wealthy transvestite recluse named Spruce Mane. He dressed up as the Mysterious Mare Do Well and flew around Thunderhead trying to arrest criminals... until the Enclave

got sick of it and locked him up. A few years later he tried it again with 'Batmare'," Moonshadow said matter-of-factly. For some reason, a tiny blue pegasus in my mind rolled over laughing at the other five.

"We've had Mare Do Well sightings in Neighvarro, Las Pegasus, over Baltimore," Twister counted off her pinions. Then she grinned at Boomer. "Remember Councilor Whatshername? The one that wanted to send the entire fleet after Mare Do Well for sneaking into her bed? And it turned out to be her marefriend doing some kinky play."

"But I... she..." I sputtered. "She was here! I mean... I had no idea who Mare Do Well was before this morning. I didn't imagine her."

"Well, you do have a tendency to see things no one else did. And you were a part of the Goddess. Who knows what might have been left over in your head," Rampage said as she carved her pancakes with her hoofclaws. "Folks down below see her too. Every now and then when there's a fight with some slavers or raiders and your ass is toast... bam! She appears. Some say she soars by and kicks the heads clean off of her enemies. Others say she uses a gun. Or magic. But then she's gone..." She smirked at me. "Very... mysterious. Wooooo..."

"But I wasn't fighting. And why was she in my room watching me? If she wanted to take me out, she could have done it just then. I'm sure of it. And why tell me to leave? If she's with Storm Chaser she should help me. And if she's with Lighthooves she should stop me. I'm not seeing a third side here," I grumbled.

"Well, I believe you," P-21 said thoughtfully.

"Thank you!" I said loudly and with great satisfaction.

Then he went on, "But it doesn't change anything. We can't trust them, and we're still at a loss for how to contact the councilor without ending up dead or in jail."

I looked over at Moonshadow, and the indigo-maned pony pushed her glasses up her muzzle with a wing. "Well, I think that I might have a solution. If we had a few days, I could make an appointment and get in to see her. Politicians always make time for campaign contributors, eventually. But there might be an even faster way." She looked over at Glory. "Dr. Morningstar is the councilor's secretary of science. If we talk to him, he might be able to get us in to see her today."

"He is?" Glory blinked in surprise. "He has more letters after his name than anypony I know, but I didn't know he worked with the councilor too."

"It's not something he brings up. You know how much he hates politics," Moonshadow said with a shrug. "He's been in bliss researching and cataloging the surface samples. I see him fairly regularly, and you were one of his favorite students."

"I don't know. He might not be happy to see me," Glory said, chewing her lip. "Or he might be too happy to see me."

"Why not?" Scotch Tape asked from where she was smearing around her Bland Flakes.

"Various reasons..." Glory hesitated a bit before answering. "He didn't want me to go to the surface. Said that it wasn't safe. He preferred to stay in the lab and have other ponies bring samples to him for study. I wanted to go out in the field and save the surface with Enclave science and technology. We didn't part on the best of terms."

"Well, plan B is trying to sneak in. Plan C is getting arrested trying to sneak in," I replied. I wasn't opting for plan D, which was letting General Chaser clean it up herself.

Glory finally sighed and nodded. "Alright."

"Good. So... how are we going to get there?" I asked. I looked around at the hapless and thoughtful expressions as we tried to think of how to get one cyberpony, three earth ponies, two Neighvarro pegasi, and one Rainbow Dash across Thunderhead.

But Moonshadow only smiled.

* * *

The city of Thunderhead rumbled around us with the life of fifty thousand ponies. Glory told me the city itself offered about eight square miles of living space within the torus, and I wondered how there could be any room left for the dozens of shops, restaurants, and other attractions. We passed theatres and a music hall, and I just wanted to stand there and soak it all in. Small, economical parks were tucked in between colonnades and boulevards; I again could only imagine how they'd managed to get grass to grow on clouds.

And almost all of it was made of clouds. Clouds! Cloud clothing and cloud furniture and cloud buildings and cloud theatres. What I took for glass and ceramics were, in fact, rainbows. The idea of it, taking something so beautiful and putting it to practical use, blew me away. What metal was in the city was largely out of sight in the form of electrical wires. Even the plumbing was made of congealed rainbow the consistency of plastic or rubber. Despite it being the middle of the day there were lights of all colors flashing and advertising and informing. Scotch Tape asked where they got the power, and Twister had amusedly reminded her that the sky was where they kept all the lightning.

A lightning-powered city! Made of clouds. And rainbows!

But it was the ponies that really made it special. Ponies talking, eating, laughing, and strolling along. The only ones I saw who were armed were a half-dozen police ponies who nodded respectfully to us as we walked past. I saw foals. Old ponies. Mares and stallions... and none of them were killing each other over bottlecaps and a half-full box of two-century-old cereal. Even Twister and Boomer seemed surprised by all the ponies living inside this wonderful bubble.

We had a few hours to kill till we could meet with Doctor Morningstar, so the six of us simply did whatever seemed interesting. We nipped into a coffee shop where we listened to three stallions and two mares recite their poetry. We browsed a shop full of clothes that only Grace and perhaps Velvet could properly appreciate. Finally, I begged Rampage to give us an hour in a concert hall, where I listened to actual ponies playing music while she alternated between grumbling under her breath and giving a professional critique. It wasn't a full orchestra or anything, but it was civilization. It was how the world was supposed to be.

Of course, it wasn't perfect. We were deciding where to go for lunch when a skeezy tan pegasus in a large coat walked up to us. "Hey. Hey. Want some B's?"

"Some what?" Scotch asked in confusion.

The pegasus grimaced. "Come on. Some B's! I got a fresh batch. Blue. Straw. Boys. Rasp. I got it all," all he said, and then he spread the coat wide to reveal dozens of small baggies filled with roundish colorful objects. "Straight from the surface! Best shit you ever tasted!"

Ah, civilization...

"Everypony keeps staring at us," P-21 muttered as we ate at a bizarre noodle café. A huge screen over the counter flashed advertisements for feather straighteners before going to some game involving two teams of flyers trying to maneuver an ovoid cloud through a ring. Trying to follow their

moves gave me a migraine. The café was crowded and noisy enough that we could talk without being heard, but empty enough that there wasn't much risk of somepony running into me. The meals seemed to be noodles and apples, noodles and potato, noodles and beans... I gnawed on a cyberpony cake.

"Cause you're a handsome hunk of stallion," Rampage said with a smirk, then slurped a noodle in one long suck. Or it could have been the fact her body was white but her mouth stained with purple.

"Stop it," P-21 growled as he frowned at the crowds around us. "Is it my horn? Is it on straight?"

"It's fine. Wonderglue never wears off. You'll wish it did when it comes time to take it off," I assured him in low tones. I didn't think the pegasi around us would hear a patch of empty air talking, but why take risks? The horns came courtesy of a 'Pretty Princess Alicorn' play kit. Scrape off the sparkles and the blue horn matched almost perfectly. There'd been a green one for Scotch Tape and white ones for Rampage and Boo. Hopefully nopony noticed that their magical glow was all the same color as I manipulated things around them from under Lancer's cloak.

"She's right, Daddy. You look good as a unicorn," Scotch assured him, then blinked and hastily amended, "I mean, you're a good-looking unicorn. Yup! Real good." She appeared a little young for an Enclave adjunct in her purple Enclave coveralls. Flustered, she glanced at her fork and cleared her throat in annoyance. I made with the magic, twirling the utensil in the bowl and popping it in her mouth with a little more vigor than warranted.

"I'm surprised nopony's stopped us or anything," P-21 said with a frown. "Our plans don't go this well."

"Of course it's going to work. It's not my plan," I reminded him.

He glanced in my direction, then snorted. "Your plans aren't so bad." Did he forget the last month?

"Well, you are being escorted by three ponies in power armor," Boomer said. "Might be that's keeping them back. Though I have to admit that I prefer our old armor. It was a bit more... buckish."

"It's still your old armor. Blackjack just altered it to match Dusk's. That's all," Twister said casually. I'd spent nearly an hour casting and recasting and tweaking Grace's alteration spell. I felt like I had an army of Rampages kicking my skull trying to get the magic to work. I'd only *seen* it once, and Twilight's primer had more on turning apples to oranges than making Neighvarro power armor match Thunderhead armor. Still, I'd managed to make their pair look less like the former and more like the latter. "I don't mind the smoother lines, personally. You do a good job with magicky stuff."

"It's genetic," P-21 said warmly. Two compliments in two minutes? Was he feeling well? Then he turned to Dusk, who seemed to be on the mend after a day out of Enclave custody. "So ponies are intimidated by the armor?"

"Partly," Dusk said in low tones, "but mostly, it's that you're what everypony expects to see. Unicorns here to do a job, with a standard military escort. I've done it five times myself. Babysitting detail. The unicorns gape and stare, like you are. I know what the paperwork looks like and the lingo and most of the security ponies by name." Her smile faded and she frowned at the crowd. "Honestly, I'm a little surprised none of them have stopped us."

"My visitor last night said they wouldn't," I muttered. That got a fresh round of skepticism.

Dusk sighed and shook her head. "Well, I'm still technically MIA, so I can't call in and verify."

"You should go to the hospital," Moonshadow said in concern.

Dusk scowled at her. "I've been locked in a med bay for more than a week. And the second I trot into a hospital, a whole lot of ponies are going to have a whole lot of questions for me to answer," Dusk said sharply, then groaned and rubbed her temples. "I want to get back down there and see Father and Dancer before I spend a month in debriefing and medical treatments." Then she glanced over at her other sibling. "What's the matter with you, Glory? You keep fidgeting."

We all looked over at the third suit of power armor. All anypony could see was a blue muzzle and wings. Everything else was enmeshed in steel. "I gotta go," Glory muttered.

"Go where?" I asked with a frown. But at the question, three mouths suddenly grinned. "What?" I asked in bafflement as I looked from Dusk, to Boomer, to Twister.

"Oh, first time's so precious," Boomer chuckled.

"Shut up. How do I... I mean..." Glory stammered. "This is an emergency! How do I..."

"You just do," Twister replied a little sympathetically.

Boomer was silent for a moment, then he sighed, "Like that." Scotch Tape went bright red and covered her mouth with her hooves as she giggled, her eyes bulging.

"Wait... what?" I asked in confusion.

"I can't go here! I... that's disgusting!" I blinked at her and looked at her bowl of noodles. Sure, they were a little bland but... why was a purple unicorn covering her face with her hoof?

Rampage gave an 'oooooh' of comprehension. "Power armor handles that?"

"Oh yeah," Dusk said with a nod. "Unless you really piss off your mechanic. Trust me. You only fly with those talismans disabled once."

"I always wondered how they went," Rampage mused.

Then I made the connection and blurted, "Oh! You have to go take a dump?"

A half dozen conversations stopped as every table around stared, wondering which of us had made such an uncivil comment in a civilized setting. Even though I was hidden beneath the invisibility cloak, I still felt my cheeks burning as I sunk down between P-21 and Glory's chairs.

Glory gave one of her long suffering 'Blackjack' sighs. "I will... be right back," Glory said as she turned and trotted away, walking a little too stiffly for it to be just her unfamiliarity with the armor.

As conversations around us returned to normal, I struggled for something else to talk about. "Hey, Twister. Hoarfrost and Afterburner? Are they... well... typical Enclave captains?"

Twister blinked and frowned. "Well. You generally get three kinds. The first are poor folk looking to get an updraft in life. Like me. My home, Brokenwing, has only two hundred ponies in it. We're dead last on the requisition priority list. The only way we get anything is if we sign up and serve. It gets us training and money to send back home."

Boomer spoke up. "Then you get ponies like me. We're believers. We serve because we want to. It's a good gig as long as you don't mind being told what to do, and the Enclave needs fighters. Besides, mares love a pony in power armor," he said with a grin at the table beside him. The mares giggled and played coy. "Lot of us are military family. I serve. My dad served. My grandfather served. Grandmother too."

Twister then frowned. "But then you get families that are... well... *special*. They're connected.

They get the best equipment. They fly up the promotion ladder. They land all kinds of cushy jobs as administrators that don't do anything besides sit in their office an hour and then go to meetings in the officers' club. A few are all right, but I can count them on my hooves. The worst, though, want command. And they get it, too, not because they know what they're doing but because they know the right ponies. And once they have command, they want to use it. They'll take a Raptor out and blast a griffin nest because they can. They love ordering the military around like it's their personal toy."

"Chaser wasn't like that," I pointed out.

"No. If they were all that way, the GPE would have fallen apart years ago." Twister paused in consideration, then went on. "General Chaser's one of the commanders with actual combat experience. There's a few like her, all older ponies. Ponies who knew better two generations ago. Lots of them were pushed out when Harbinger skipped over and was appointed High General, the first High General with no live combat experience. Most commanders get a yearly war game, which boils down to bragging rights. But General Chaser's fought Talon assault squads and driven off dragon incursions. She was front and center during the windigo incursion in the north thirty years ago," Twister said with a smirk. "You might not realize it, but bumping into you has made us practically combat vets. If we live through this and the shit doesn't hit the fan, we might even be bumped up ourselves."

Boomer chuckled, "I'll finally make Sarge. And Momma said it'd never happen."

"I didn't know that. I thought that all Enclave soldiers were well experienced," I said quietly.

"Well-drilled. But drills only take you so far. Then you run into a unicorn in a restricted area and you try to detain her and she thumps all three of you and rides you off into the Wasteland," Twister said with a frown. "Thank goodness we were able to gloss over the details of that."

"Fact is, Enclave's in trouble. Most ponies know it, but we just don't think about it. Live fer today and don't think about what's goin' on. Hell, I was like that before bumping into you. But nopony's doing anything about it till now. With Thunderhead bucking the system and Maripony--" Boomer began, but then the screen lit up just as one of the stallions kicked the cloudball straight at the ring like a bullet.

The game was interrupted by a special bulletin, and the café erupted in boos and gripes. Still, the volume was more than sufficient to hear over the outcry. A somber gray stallion held paper in his fetlocks as he stared soberly into the camera. "This is TNN with a breaking report. We have just confirmed that the explosion on the edge of the Everfree No Fly Zone was in fact a balefire detonation device. The military has stated that the weapon was an obsolete citykiller equivalent to the device that destroyed Cloudsdale two centuries ago. While there are no civilian casualties, Enclave military has yet to confirm or deny rumors that several Raptors were critically damaged in the explosion."

The screen cut to green pegasus mare in an Enclave uniform. "This is our official statement of events. The Enclave discovered the presence of a zebra balefire weapon being stored at a prewar facility and deemed it a critical threat to Enclave civilians. In the course of disarming the device, it detonated. Minor radiation spikes were detected in the settlements of High Cloud, New Pegasus, and Hightown. No civilian casualties reported. If you suspect you have been exposed to balefire radiation, please report to an Enclave medical facility."

"Here it comes," Dusk said with a roll of her eyes, "the reminder."

The green mare droned on, with pictures popping up in the corners of the screen. "The Enclave military believes this should be a lesson to all citizens of the GPE that the surface, even after two hundred years, remains exceptionally hazardous and beyond our ability to return to for the foreseeable future. While we doubt there are other weapons such as this, the possibility persists of catastrophic damage from the surface. Biological, chemical, and radiological hazards abound, as well as barbarity and

lawlessness.” The pictures showed ominous black and white images of two raiders standing over a corpse, an emaciated pony foaming at the mouth, a brahmin, and a hellhound crouched and ready to pounce. “We encourage everypony to keep to the skies, safe in our Enclave. Thank you.” Dusk said the last line verbatim under her breath, perfectly in chorus with the green mare.

Most of the ponies in the café who had been listening returned to their conversations or watching the hoofball match, but a few looked concerned or angry. I noticed there’d been no mention of alicorns, Raptors lost, casualties, Red Eye, or LittlePip. I supposed that the Enclave would have liked to cover it up entirely, but when a balefire bomb went off, some ponies were likely to notice.

Then a pink mare approached our table. “Excuse me. I... I was just wondering... my husband was on the *Wind Cutter*. He said he’d contact me a week ago, but I haven’t heard from him. Do you know...” the mare trailed off as she gazed in equal hope and nervousness at Twister.

Twister looked at Boomer a moment, then back at the mare. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I can’t say.”

“Oh... I... I’m sorry. I just thought...” She sniffed and averted her head. “Excuse me.”

When she’d left the café, I said, “That was one that was lost at Maripony, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was,” Twister said, her lips in a firm frown. “I had some friends on that ship too. Good ponies.” She sighed and shook her head. “Damned Stable Dweller.”

“LittlePip didn’t know,” I said immediately, getting some more looks. Hopefully the patrons would think ventriloquism was a unicorn trait. “If she had, I know she would’ve done something different.” Actually, I didn’t know. Maybe LittlePip would have found another way. But she’d killed hundreds, maybe thousands, of hellhounds with that bomb... maybe she would have blown it anyway.

Twister sighed. “I’m not saying she did. But that’s hard to swallow, stacked up against friends I’ll never see again.”

Glory trotted back to the table. “We’ve got to go.”

Dusk sighed, “For the love of clear skies, just go. The armor takes care of it. Trust me.”

“Not that!” Glory hissed. “I overheard the waiter putting a call in to security.”

“Not all at once!” I said as we all started to rise in unison. “P-21, Scotch, Twister, you go first and meet us back at that park with the rainbow waterfall thingy. Rampage, Boomer, you go next. Take your time. Glory, Boo, Dusk, and I will head out last. Give us five minutes. Moonshadow, go pay the bill,” I rattled off at once.

“Why me?” Moonshadow frowned.

“Because of all of us you’re the only pony not a fugitive, from an enemy faction, or from the surface,” I replied as softly and seriously as I could manage. “And if anypony asks, you can blame it all on Dusk.”

“Gee, thanks,” Dusk said dryly as P-21 and Scotch Tape followed Twister towards the door while Moonshadow trotted to the counter to pay the bill.

“Hey, I’d take the blame, but I don’t think Thunderhead knows about me yet,” I replied.

“I’d say they do,” Glory said in a faint voice as she stared up at the television screen.

A flashy, bold animation done in brilliant colors was starting, and I froze in bewilderment as I stared at an animated copy of myself blasting away raiders... or were they mutants... with a shotgun and

a maniacal grin. Next to me was an annoyed-looking LittlePip. A cocky Calamity flew overhead while P-21, far more sulkily handsome than ever, blasted a whole battalion of feral ghouls with a missile launcher, then coolly blew his bangs out of his face. And where'd he get that bandana? A vapid Homage and gray-coated Glory hung in the background. Most incomprehensible of all was a strange pink filly with a toy gun that somehow brought down beams of light from the skies. Rampage seemed cast as a villain, wearing bladed armor and grinning psychotically. The animation ended with the bold title of 'Wastelander!' and that it was coming next month to the 'Fantasy Channel'.

"They made me into a cartoon," I muttered in a daze. "They... who... how... buh..." I sat down hard. I had nothing... My life had officially become *entertainment*.

Unfortunately, I was so entranced by the surrealism of seeing a cartoon of myself that I missed the waitress walking behind me with two trays of food on her extended wings. Being invisible, it was easy to forgive her for walking right into me and dumping a half dozen bowls of steaming noodles all over me.

Really, I'd been hurt by worse, but I made a sudden discovery: zebra stealth cloaks don't work when soaked in broth and coated in wiggly noodles. The waitress gaped at me, every bit as stunned as I'd been a second ago. She took in my metallic limbs and plates fused to my hide and had a completely rational reaction to a cybermare appearing out of thin air: she screamed at the top of her lungs as she backed away as rapidly as possible.

And then everything went mad.

The crowd tried rushing out at the same time that blue uniformed pegasi were trying to get in. I looked at Glory and Boomer. "Get out of here. I'll find you later." I held up my foreleg with my PipBuck.

"Right!" Rampage said as she glanced at the scrum at the door, then at the wall. "Mmm. That wall doesn't look all that structural."

"Got it," Boomer said as he pointed his beam rifle at it. The tips glowed bright red as the weapons let out a hum of charging up. "But it might tak--"

Rampage charged across the floor and slammed her hooves into the wall again and again in a fury that tore the wall to pieces. The white surface disintegrated into fog, and she trotted back to Boo and casually hefted her onto her back. "What? They're *clouds*," she said scornfully, then trotted out again.

"Wallop my withers. Are all earth pony mares like that?" Boomer asked, then shook his head hard. "Nevermind. See you later," he said as he trotted out. I saw Dusk and Moonshadow by the exit, the latter making a good enough show of panic that they didn't notice the former ducking her head in pain.

That just left... "I'm not leaving without you," Glory said firmly.

"Yes, you are," I contradicted. From the laying-back of her ears, I knew I was in some pretty big trouble. "Glory, they just freaked out because they saw a cyber unicorn. How will they react when they realize there's a Rainbow Dash in Thunderhead?" I grabbed her and kissed her firmly on the lips to forestall any argument. I could hear very authoritative shouts outside. Why did it feel like Mare Do Well's 24 hour leniency was suddenly a lot shorter? "Don't worry about me."

"Worry about you? I'm worried about Thunderhead! Bad things happen when you're on your own, Blackjack!" she said as she smiled, then hugged me. "I am worried about you."

"Hey!" I said as I levitated off the cloak and wrung it out in the vain hope that that would fix it. "Things were way too quiet anyway. You go meet up with the others and talk to Doctor Whatshisname. I'll keep everyone busy."

"Try not to blow up my home by accident. Please," Glory said before giving me one last parting hug and rushing out the hole Rampage had ripped open. I put my guns away. These were security ponies, just like back in Stable 99. I wasn't going to shoot them... but I was going to make them *earn* their noodles today.

I burst out the front door and beheld the one skywagon and the half dozen officers around it. They stared at me. I grinned at them... and then things rapidly went downhill from there as I pounced into the midst of them like a cybernetically-augmented jungle cat. I ducked my head under a mare who was yelling something about me surrendering right before I rolled her across my back and launched her up into the air with a buck of my rump. She smashed into an airborne blue stallion, and they both went tumbling to the ground in a heap of clouds.

"Catch me if you can!" I yelled as I raced in a direction away from my friends. I'd have to hide someplace till I got the cloak working again. I didn't dare lead them towards Glory's home or the university... so I travelled in the general direction of 'away'! Only Glory could have been more conspicuous than an augmented unicorn. I raced along the street, yelling, "Clear the way! Excuse me! Coming through! Madmare on the loose!"

I raced through a sidewalk café, lifting tables, chairs, and pegasi above me and dropping them down as I rushed past. Of course, that didn't do much for ponies who could fly, but still. It was attention on me. I dove into a shop and tore out the other side trailing a half-dozen garments. Really, polka dots? Those had to have gone out of style two centuries ago.

"Halt right there!" a burly red stallion shouted as he landed right in my path. Unfortunately for him, he may have been larger than me, but he was nowhere near as dense; I ploughed right over him like a train through a fog bank. "Or... continue. That's good too," he groaned behind me.

"Sorry!" I bellowed back at him as I jumped over a table and the startled ponies eating lunch. Oh yes, it seemed like I had quite shaken things up. A half-dozen police dived at me from every corner. I could have killed one, made a hole, and evaded... but if I was going to start down that road, I doubted I'd kill just one.

"We got you!" a mare shouted as I closed my eyes and concentrated. Come on horn, you can do... apparently it couldn't, as the six ponies piled on me from every side. I focused. Pushed as I was driven to the ground under the mound of ponies. I think more were piling on top of them! Even a cyberpony has her limits.

Then a flash as I made fifty feet. I staggered back and forth, double vision dancing in my sight. I looked back at the very un-thrilled faces of the Enclave security. From the black on my horn, no, I wasn't going to be teleporting again soon. I hoped I had enough resiliency to keep my telekinesis. From the grim expressions on the law enforcement ponies' faces, I was going to need it.

Unfortunately, things were getting crowded. There were a lot of civilians along this street. I spotted a skywagon lifting off and rushed to it, leaping into the back. Again, small inconvenience to ponies who could fly, but it was getting me away from where I might accidentally maim somepony. The mare pulling it looked back at me, her eyes wide and not quite believing what was on her wagon. "Give me a lift?" I asked with a grin, gesturing upwards with a hoof.

She screamed and rolled upside down, dumping myself and half the wares in the wagon onto the streets below. I grabbed an unrolling bolt of brilliant red cloth in my teeth, forehooves, and magic, and the fabric suddenly went taut and slowed my decent. I soared over the crowds, many of whom were gaping and whooping in amazement. The blue uniformed security ponies, however, had had quite enough. They flew over the top of my improvised parachute, hooked it, and lifted. The cloth jerked me up, and I hung there until they set me down in a plaza of some sort. They'd gotten beam guns, too... that wasn't good.

They might not kill me with those, but it was way too crowded to risk bystanders.

"I give up!" I said as I dropped to the clouds. "You got me. I surrender." When my horn was rested up, I'd teleport out of custody, meet up with Glory, and...

Then the crowd erupted in cheers, and a white stallion with a silver mane and a spectrum burst for a cutie mark pushed his way forward. His eyes were hidden by opaque black glasses. "That was magnificent! Exactly how BJ would do it, Babe." He put a hoof around my shoulder and waved to the crowd. "But you weren't supposed to start the publicity stunts until next week!" I noticed he had a fancy-looking PipBuck on the waving hoof.

"Huh?" the security ponies around me said, too baffled to notice that I said the same thing as well. One covered her face. "Don't tell me that this is *another* one of your damned publicity stunts, Chicanery."

"Hey hey hey! I'd say this was a good stunt. A damned good stunt. Maybe a little premature. Gonna be hard to top it before the release." He turned to the crowd, who were now quite amused by my madcap charge through town. "You want to see the same or better? Tune in to 'Wastelander!' next month! Guaranteed to blow your mind!" He gripped me a little firmer around the shoulders and whispered, "Wave to your audience, Blackjack." I gave a sickly little smile and waved.

"Damn it," the mare who spoke earlier swore under her breath. "You're lucky this was just a spectacle, Chicanery. If one pony reports so much as a bent feather or a bruised hoof from this, I'm going to fine you so hard you'll never work in this town again!" She turned to the others. "Come on. False alarm." She lifted off and pointed one last time at the white pegasus. "This is going to be reported, though! Don't think it isn't!"

"Report away, as long as you watch!" he replied gaily, then turned to me. "Come on. Let's get my actress out of sight, Babe! That was stupendous!"

I went along as far as getting out of sight of the officers before I just looked at him flatly. "Who are you?"

* * *

Spectrum Studios had been a movie production house before the war and had seen no reason to stop when the world ended. The office was filled with canisters of film, slides, and dozens of movie posters. Many of the most carefully preserved were from before the war. "Good thing we're in Thunderhead. Neighvarro would have destroyed them. They don't even like admitting that there *is* a ground unless it's to remind us that we'll die if we get within sniffing distance," he said as he took off his glasses and trotted over to a sofa, flopping down and grinning at me. "Wow. Blackjack. I mean... wow. I don't know what to say."

"You can say how you know things about me?" I replied, happy that he'd gotten me out of trouble but really wanting answers.

"Right! Good question, that." He rose to his hooves. "I've been a huge fan of the ground. I mean... I'd never go there myself. I'd last all of five minutes down there. Look at me. Glory's tougher than I am," he said with that dazzling smile. "Would you like something to drink? Snacks? I got berries."

I'd ignore the saliva responding to that statement. "I'd like to know how a pegasus who never goes to the surface knows about me. You called me by my name, not Security." And he'd mentioned Glory.

He sighed and then ran his hoof through his elegant mane. "Well. I suppose I owe you that much. I mean, I'm planning to release a whole Life of the Lightbringer in a year or two." He lifted his hoof and

tapped the PipBuck. "It's because of these."

"Come again?" I frowned.

"PipBucks are wonders of technology. Storage and processing aside, they're constantly taking in and putting out signals. That's how they work. Say you pick up some junk... well, the PipBuck might not know what it is, so it asks another terminal. And if that one doesn't know, then it'll ask another and another. And in almost an instant, it'll identify that thing. Then it might average out trading prices to tell you, in general, how much it's worth! Astonishing!" he said with an eager grin.

"Where'd you get yours?" I asked, nodding at his navy blue broadcaster. It made his smile waver a little, but a second later the grin returned.

"Heirloom. But it's not what made me able to follow your adventures," he said as he stood, trotted to a wall, and lifted down a poster to reveal a safe. When he opened it, he pushed the stuff inside to the sides and then pushed a button in the back. The wall behind me gave a click, and he closed the safe and trotted to another poster... and behind that was a hidden panel. "I know, you might think me paranoid, but when you see this..." He pushed the panel in and slid it into the wall. Then, carefully cradling it with his wings, he withdrew and presented to me a silver helmet. It had all kinds of lightbulbs, talismans, and wires coming off it. "This is the Perceptitron."

"Your own invention?" I asked with an awkward smile. It was the most ridiculous looking gadget I'd ever seen. It had a little fan whirling at the temple!

"Hardly! This was developed by Stable-Tec and the Ministry of Awesome for use in the S.P.P." He turned it so I could see the winged thunderbolt on the front. "I think this was a prototype. I found it in a lab in the Tower when I was a kid. Took me years to get it to work right."

"And how *does* it work?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at it.

"It allows the wearer to spy on the experiences of a pony wearing a PipBuck," he said grandly. "Wicked, huh?"

"It... what?" I asked, somewhat stunned and a little baffled. And he'd been using it to spy on me?

"Well, there're limits. They have to be in range of the MASEBS towers, and cracking the encryption takes forever. Some PipBucks have only vision and others give me nasty feedback. I've only been able to do it with a dozen or so ponies. But when DJ Pon3 started talking about all of you heroes down there, I had to see for myself." He was so enthusiastic that I didn't know if I should be impressed or beating him soundly about the head and shoulders. Maybe both. "It took me four days to access the Stable Dweller. Three days for yours."

"And what have you seen?" I asked archly.

He caught my tone and coughed awkwardly as he looked down at the helmet, "Only bits and pieces. It's only good for fifteen or twenty minutes before it starts overheating. But I saw you in Hightower fighting that ghoul. And when you faced those Harbingers at the sandpit. And a few other things. Nothing intimate... intentionally. I have some standards," he said with a slightly nervous smile and got himself out of a thumping.

"Intentionally?" I asked, arching a brow and watching him sweat.

"Well... I just happened to jump in while the Stable Dweller was with a pony named Homage? Wow... just... wow..." he said with a sheepish grin. "But nothing I'd ever put in film! Probably. Most likely."

"Uh-huh," I replied dryly as I surveyed the studio. "And you used this Perceptitron thing to look at the Wasteland?"

"For the last two or three years," he nodded and walked to the studio window. "For a while, I was completely baffled. Every report the Enclave gave us was either a gross exaggeration or blatant turd rain. But when I realized that they were lies, I couldn't exactly call them on it. If they found my Perceptitron, then they'd take it and destroy it. And me with it." Then he gestured to the studio. "But I could use what I saw to make films about the Wasteland."

"Come again?" I asked with a frown. "Wouldn't they ban those too?"

"If they were documentaries, sure. Faster than you can say 'redaction', Babe." He grinned even more. "But all my films are 'fiction', and so long as I show lots of horrible raider ponies and brown on the surface, the Enclave doesn't mind. A few might question how I get so accurate, but I'm seen every day up here, so they can't accuse me of breaking quarantine." He wore a smile ear to ear at his own cleverness. "But I can show more than just horribleness. I can show struggle. I can show heroism that's not out of a propaganda piece. I can give them a taste of what's down there." He polished his hoof on his chest. "Doesn't hurt that my films have made me a lot of money, too."

For some reason, I found myself scowling at him. Something about his eagerness and smugness rubbed me the wrong way. "A taste? Which? How about my friend getting his face melted off by a ghoul? Or my other friend sacrificing her existence so her kind might have a chance? Or my love's mother almost killing her father right before her eyes?" I caught his flinch. "Oh, you saw that one, did you? Did you see the aftermath where she tried desperately to save his life, or was that not fun?"

He held up his hooves. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like life down there is fun." His grin was gone, and he lowered the glasses to look at me in the eye. "It's just that life up here is... it's like everypony is asleep! It's the same pro-war yet isolationist stories every day, every year. It's not living. You live more down below in one day than some ponies their entire lives up here."

"Chicanery, be glad it's boring. Because if the Wasteland ever made it up here, you'd wish for boring. You'd *crave* boring," I said as I stared at the device, then at him. "You know about Glory?"

He gave a wary smile. "Oh yeah. The Rainbow Dash thing? Far out. But too far out, I can't use it. Nopony would believe it."

"Can I use your machine thing to make sure she's okay?" I asked with a frown.

He licked his lips, frowning in thought. "If you got her PBT, we can try, Babe." 'PBT', I realized, was 'PipBuck Tag'. He put the heavy helmet on top of my head and started attaching wires to a cloud terminal. As he worked, he went on and on about this S.P.P., a massive weather control device. I'd heard snippets before, but to hear about a system that let one pony control all the weather across the Wasteland was a bit overwhelming. Chicanery talked eagerly and enthusiastically about it, seeing it from the perspective of a young stallion in love with stories.

Me? I'd seen what secret super-projects could do. I added dealing with the S.P.P. somewhere on my list of things to do before the world ended. "Why would Rainbow Dash want it, though?"

"Well, Stable-Tec had the machinery to put a pony's mind in a machine. Wicked cool, huh Babe?" I thought of Horse's knockoff and merely grunted. "Well, RD wasn't interested in that. So she got some stasis thingy and made an interface for the S.P.P. She was supposed to be able to see all across the country and control the weather though it. This works the same way, but it accesses the sensory info going in and out of a PipBuck."

He knew me, so I assumed it worked. "I just want to check on her," I said as sent the tag info to

the terminal.

"Sure Babe. Hold on. It's going to be a crazy ride." There were a few beeps, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

This wasn't a wild ride. I'd done this before; a whole lot before. It was the same sensation I had in the dozens of memory orbs I'd been in. The difference was, instead of being from years or centuries ago, this was live. It also wasn't a perfect experience: the colors were all shifted a little towards the red, and there was a persistent feedback noise in my left ear.

It was also the first time I appreciated what it meant to be Rainbow Dash in her prime. This body practically thrummed with strength. I wanted to fly, and I wasn't even a pegasus. The power armor she wore moved like a second mechanical skin that I felt very familiar with as well. Glory was in some kind of official-looking building; the walls were that particular pale beige that spoke of serious ponies in serious suits having serious meetings and nodding seriously at the choice of a serious paint color and the serious number of forms needed to implement it.

"I'm telling you, that alert shouldn't have been called off. Blackjack running like mad should have brought in a wing of Intelligence ponies at least," Dusk said irritably as she limped along. "If it had been a publicity stunt, they should have hauled in Chicanery by his balls and taken them as a fine."

"Chicanery does this all the time," Moonshadow said calmly from in front of us. "You remember that griffin he dressed up as Gilda for 'The Last Stand of Rainbow Dash'? Nearly caused a panic, but you have to admit that he sold tickets. Him getting a tower unicorn to pull off a pony from his next series isn't unthinkable."

"He'd be a star in Neighvarro for his own execution," Twister said from somewhere behind Glory. "I think there's a standing warrant for his arrest."

"Well, this isn't Neighvarro," Moonshadow said sourly. "We actually have rights in Thunderhead."

"I just hope Blackjack is okay," Glory said.

They walked into a reception area where a green stallion with large wire-framed glasses greeted them with an eager smile. "Sweet, Professor Moony! Did the college finally spring for some unicorns to fix those talismans?"

"Something like that," Moonshadow said with a glance at Glory. "Could you find out if Doctor Morningstar can speak with me a moment, Beryl? It's urgent."

"About the signal?" he said as he picked up a phone.

"No. But it's really important," Moonshadow said as she walked through a door and into a room with a dozen terminals scattered around strange equipment. Some of it looked vaguely familiar; I thought I'd seen things like it in Professor Zodiac's planetarium. The machines all hummed quietly and made strange beeps. Two stallions on the far side of the room waved at their entry before returning to their work.

Glory looked back at Rampage, P-21, and Scotch Tape as the blue stallion said, "What signal?"

"The hundred-thousand bit question," she said with a sigh. "It's something the Tower picked up a few weeks ago, being transmitted from space." Rampage and Scotch Tape immediately perked up, but Moonshadow went on, "Don't get your hopes up for ponies with antennae. There's lots of defunct

equipment up there. Even some really big weapon satellites are still in orbit.”

“Of course there are,” Rampage drawled sarcastically. “They ran out of places on the surface to put guns, so why not put more of them in space?”

“Relax. There were only a few put up there, and only one of them has ever fired. It would take a genius to figure that one out,” Moonshadow said, then added, “Besides, what makes you think all of them are ours?” The three earth ponies looked quite uneasy at that little tidbit, as was I, but Moonshadow continued as if it were no matter at all for an astronomer, “This signal, though, wasn’t some old communication lodged in a buffer and finally kicked out. This was a machine message seeking something called EC-1101.” The gray mare sighed and shook her head. “Unfortunately, after a month of analysis, we still don’t have a clue what this EC-1101 thing is.”

“Blackjack’s PipBuck program?” Glory asked, and Moonshadow froze.

“You know what it is?” Moonshadow asked archly. When Glory nodded, Moonshadow rubbed her temples. “Four weeks of driving ourselves nuts trying to figure it out, and you just know.” She took a seat and picked up a clipboard with her wings. “Out with it.” And she picked up a pencil in her mouth.

“Well, I don’t know exactly, but according to Blackjack it’s a special program that Luna put out when the bombs fell. It basically passes leadership of Equestria to whoever has the program. It’s a megaspell of some kind and you can use it to take over any system that’s been locked down,” Glory said, and Moonshadow wrote it all down.

“Interesting,” Moonshadow said with a frown when she’d finished and set the board aside. “Near as I can tell, there’s at least five people trying to send a signal back to space to talk to it. Even a communication or spy satellite would be a huge asset today.”

“Five?” P-21 said with the exact same worry I felt.

“We’ve been trying to talk to it,” she said as she gestured to the equipment with a wing. “We’ve been using our transmitter, but it’s ignoring us. I picked up the Enclave’s Starwatcher transmitter on Pinnacle Peak, so Neighvarro’s trying to chat with it as well.”

“I thought they scrapped that,” Dusk said to Twister and Boomer.

“Heck if I know. PP is a red zone. We’re not allowed in,” Boomer said, then grinned at Scotch and Rampage. “They’re always looking for unidentified flying objects.”

“The last three are... strange. Two are coming from the Core, but one of them is gigasparks stronger. I almost couldn’t pick out the second signal. The stronger signal, though, is a doozy.” She stretched over with a wing and tapped a terminal. “Where is it...” she muttered under her breath.

Then the scream began, only instead of hearing it inside my head I was hearing it with my ears. One long, continuous garbled screaming noise. Even though the volume wasn’t loud, it still unnerved everypony. Moonshadow grinned. “Pretty creepy, huh? It’s machine speak. I can’t even pick through a hundredth of the junk to find out what it’s actually saying.” Moonshadow killed it, but I could remember it.

I’d heard it before. I heard it all the time down in the tunnels. The scream of Enervation. That it was a signal too was even more unnerving. It was like speech that melted flesh.

“What about the last one?” Scotch Tape asked. “That’s only four.”

“Last one?” Moonshadow blinked at the filly in confusion, then her eyes widened. “Right. I always seem to forget about that signal. It’s coming from Black Pony Mountain.” She announced it, and immediately I felt a strange indifference fall over me. It wasn’t important. That was just a boring chunk of

black rock. Nothing special about it at all. And clearly everypony agreed.

The door opened, and Beryl poked his head in. "Professor? Doctor Morningstar says he'll be between test strings in an hour. That's your best chance to talk to him."

I wanted to listen more, but the feedback whine was growing unbearable. "Hey, Chicanery. Unplug me from this, will you?" I said aloud; at least I hope I did. "Chicanery?" I hoped I wasn't going to have to do a manual override and break the damned thing. Then the world swirled away once more.

oooOOOooo

I let out a sigh of relief as I returned to my own body. "Thanks. That was... interesting." I pushed the helmet off my head and turned to the terminal.

"Oh, it's just starting to get interesting," a stallion said, a stallion who shouldn't be here. He smiled his kind, polite smile. The same smile he'd worn when he'd ordered Glory's cutie mark burned off.

Lighthooves.

"I saved Glory's life," Lighthooves said in a rush moments before I slipped into S.A.T.S. It had the effect of tossing a wrench into delicate, whirring machinery. I hissed like ruptured steam pipe as I looked at him; he wore some fancy new white power armor. Something about it seemed... familiar. I couldn't see any weapons, and he wasn't wearing a helmet. Four magical bullets to the head and my job here would be made so much simpler. All I had to do was kill an unarmed pony. I tried to dig deep down, find my inner Rampage, and take his head off. Ten seconds later, he still had his head. The armored stallion relaxed noticeably. "Glad to see you still honor a debt."

"Leger?" Chicanery said from the door. "Oh. You're here. I thought I heard your voice." The white pegasus looked from Lighthooves to myself and arched a brow. "You two know each other?"

"Indeed we do, Cannery," Lighthooves said as he trotted over to a cupboard and opened it with a metal-covered wing, fished around with two pinions, and extracted a bottle. "Here. I think Blackjack will be needing this. I think her headache is only just beginning."

"You know him?" I demanded of Chicanery. "Do you know what kind of a monster he is?"

That took some of the amusement off the director's lips. "Well, I didn't have much choice in the matter. He's my brother," Chicanery said with an amused smile, then turned to Lighthooves. "Nice armor. What brings you from the Tower, Leger?"

"Wait!" I snapped, interrupting him. "Brother? Leger?"

"It's short for 'Legerdemain'. A fancy griffin term for 'sleight of hoof. Or claw, as the case may be.'" He chuckled and opened the bottle for me before setting on the desk beside the Perceptitron. "You don't think I took my code name for the illumination of my feet, did you?"

"Brothers?" I asked, frowning from one to the other and really wishing Glory was here. "I didn't think ponies who didn't exist had family."

Lighthooves laughed, "Oh, please. Any good intelligence agency has operatives off the books. The good ones don't get caught and the bad ones never had anything to do with the intelligence agency in the first place." He smirked at me. "For the most part, I've never had to deal with witnesses. Your group is the only exception I've made." He turned to Chicanery. "I came because of a bizarre report I heard that you were using a unicorn look-alike for Security. When I heard it, I simply had to check for myself."

"When I saw her tearing through the market, I knew she was the real deal," Chicanery said with a grin. "I was right."

"Indeed you were," Lighthooves replied with a calm smile. "And I think that Blackjack might be just the thing I need for the coming conflict with Neighvarro."

"Wait!" I waved my hooves at him. "Stop right there! You think I'm going to work for you?"

"Why not?" Lighthooves replied, having the gall to appear surprised at my rejection.

"Because you're the bad guy!" I shouted, exasperated that I couldn't just kill him. "You made Glory a Dashite, almost got her sister to kill her, and you've got all the parts you need for a biological attack that could kill thousands!"

"I apologize. When we first met, I honestly didn't expect you or your friends to be as effective as you were. My actions with Glory were to stymie the Volunteer Corps. That failed. When you destroyed the *Celestia*... well... your potential increased exponentially." He leaned towards me. "I saw you at Yellow River. I know what you're capable of."

I growled at him. "You were the one that flew away." He nodded once. I turned to Chicanery. "Do you know what he's done?"

"Babe, I don't want to know and he doesn't tell me," Chicanery said with a firm shake of his head. "Leger has always done what needed to be done. I don't know what his history with you is, but I know it's for a good cause." But the white stallion looked worried as he looked at his brother, as if searching for confirmation.

"All I've done is to try to prevent an attack on our home," he said calmly. "My methods you might not agree with, but I think that you should agree with my aims. Thunderhead must take over leadership of the Enclave."

"The Enclave is coming to break your wings and shove those missiles up your ass. I saw what they're bringing against you," I warned.

"They'll fail. The zebra missiles are more than capable of evading their patchy, ill-maintained tracking systems. One demonstration should make that abundantly clear," Lighthooves said confidently. "The missiles will be a deterrent, not a weapon. They'll make the Enclave back off, and time will make certain that they fail. Thunderhead will make new weapons with the resources of the Hoof, and as their Raptors fall to pieces, we'll take our place leading both the Grand Pegasus Enclave and the surface."

"And if they do attack anyway?" I asked sharply.

"Shadowbolt Tower has defensive weapons," Lighthooves replied, but his smug smile vanished.

"But you're not certain they can deal with what's coming, are you?" I asked, then looked at Chicanery. "When the Enclave and Thunderhead had your first conflict, how many Raptors did they send?"

"Four," Chicanery replied.

"They're sending ten," I replied.

"Ten?!" gaped Chicanery, before turning to a grim-faced Lighthooves. "Leger, that's almost a quarter of the entire fleet!"

"We have other weapons," Lighthooves replied, his smile returning. "We fought four Raptors to a

standstill last time they came. They won't risk it."

"Have you met Captains Afterburner and Hoarfrost?" I asked, "Trust me, they'll risk it. It won't matter how shiny and new your power armor is. They want to risk it. Harbinger was going to attack you anyway despite your weapon."

Chicanery took off his glasses, his red eyes pleading with his brother. "Leger!"

"Quiet," Lighthooves replied as he turned away. "The situation is being managed."

"By who?" I asked as I trotted back in front of him. He glared at me, and I pressed the question. "Who's calling the shots here? Is it you? Somepony above you?" I asked with a frown. "This all feels... off. The whole plan feels like it either wasn't thought through, or somepony is mucking with things. This bioweapon deterrent isn't the real deal, is it?"

"You don't know what's going on, Blackjack," he muttered, turning away again.

"Story of my life!" I said, levitating him up and turning him around to face me again. "So why don't you tell me?"

"Why don't you tell me too, Leger? It'll make for a great story," Chicanery said with concern. "We grew up in the Tower. It was our home. So if there's something going on there, I want to know too."

"Blackjack, if I tell you, will you promise... on your life... on Glory's life... to help us in the fight with Neighvarro?" he asked.

"Will you give up all your biological weapons?" I countered.

"No. I can't," he said with a fatalistic smile.

"Then you know I can't," I replied.

"Legerdemain, what's going on?" Chicanery said in a horrified tone. "Tell me!" Lighthooves still didn't answer. "Damn it, stop trying to be the smug pony in the room and tell me what you're planning to do!"

Lighthooves whirled on him. "You like stories? Once upon a time, there was a pony who loved his home very much. But his home was threatened by idiots who were jealous of their plenty. And for years they've threatened, insulted, and derided that pony's home and everypony living there. And that pony decided he would do anything to stop them. But the idiots only respond to threats and force, so he would create a threat. A real one."

"But... Leger... that's crazy," Chicanery replied.

"No. It's sane. It's the only thing they respond to. The Enclave leadership knows that they don't have the resources to control the populace, fight Thunderhead, and deal with an outbreak of a deadly pandemic. They'll negotiate," he said grimly. "And they'll ask for the pony responsible."

"You," I said. "You're setting yourself up as a villain to take a fall for Thunderhead."

"But I am not an idiot. If the Enclave has the audacity, the stupidity, to attack my home, then I have made certain that they will suffer for it," he replied grimly. "I will see a dozen of them eating and tearing each other apart for every one of my people they harm. And that is why I can't give the weapons over to you."

Right. I needed to pull the plug on this nightmare right away. Either Councilor Stargazer or that Director Stratus would need to rein him in. Somepony couldn't have had all the facts here, or else they

were even crazier than Lighthooves. "Does the councilor know about this plan?"

He sniffed. "The councilor would wet herself if she heard of it. She'll be informed by certain important ponies when the Enclave arrives." I thought the councilor needed to know about it well before then. Like right now. The urgency of getting in touch with her was definitely growing greater by the second.

"But ten Raptors," Chicanery breathed. "That's a scary amount of firepower, Leger."

"We will manage it. Blackjack herself gave us the weapons we need," he replied. Wait, what?

"What weapons?" I asked with a scowl. But he gave that insufferably smug smile. I grabbed him with my magic and hefted him up, slamming him against the wall of the office. "What weapons!"

Then he reminded me that his hindlegs were metal and my pelvis, while slightly reinforced, still had plenty of nerve endings. The impact of his leg sent me down and curled up fetally on the ground. He stomped hard on my prone body, smashing me into the cloud layer. I lifted my head to blow his damned face off, like I should have when I first saw him, but got a faceful of steel hoof that made all kinds of stars erupt in my sight. "Stop it, Leger! You're going to kill her!"

"Yes, that's the general idea," he said as he stomped my skull once again. "She's far too dangerous to be left as an unknown." I blocked another kick with my forehooves, but my E.F.S. was sending all kinds of warnings that my head really couldn't take more of this damage. Lighthooves hovered over me though, his hooves falling with sharp, nearly surgical blows. If I covered my face, he smashed my stomach. If I curled up, he smashed my spine. If I looked at him to get a magic bullet off, he beat in my skull. And he was fast! I'd never fought him before, and I was learning that he moved like a dancer. Each motion was cool, clean, and efficient.

Calmly and deliberately, he was beating me to death.

"Stop it!" Chicanery shouted as he tried to tackle his brother, but Lighthooves struck him neatly in the side and sent his brother to the ground, coughing and gagging for breath.

I used the break and levitated out my dueling pistols and fired blindly, but he darted to the side and kicked me with his rear hooves, sending me rolling across the floor of the office. "Contrary to what you might think, Brother, the real world doesn't align itself neatly into heroes and villains," he said as he pulled out a beam pistol with his tail. "Some of us must perform the necessary evils in order to make sure that good prevails," he said calmly, not taking his eyes off me as I struggled to focus enough to strike back. Given that I was seeing two of him swirling in my vision, that wasn't a good sign. "Goodbye, Blackjack. A pity we couldn't work together." Then he tossed the beam gun into the air, caught it with his mouth, and pointed it right at my head.

And I couldn't cast a spell to save my life...

But I could end one.

With a thought, a basic counterspell targeting myself, I scattered the magic that allowed me to walk on clouds and gravity took me. My last sight of Lighthooves was his eyes widening in shock and a flash of crimson before I disappeared into the white fluffiness. A second later I tumbled through the room beneath his office. And the room after that, missing a mare by feet. I barely heard her shout before I passed through the floor. I focused all my energy on restoring my cloudwalking spell. Clouds were fluffy, right? And the magic wouldn't magically trap me between floors like Mini stuck in a wall.

Right?

A tiny purple unicorn and blue pegasus in my head looked at each other and simply shrugged.

Now I really wanted to start screaming as I passed out the floor and into a reception area where a half dozen pegasi gaped at me in horror and confusion. I really, really wanted to get this spell off. I wasn't the best at magic, but I was Twilight's descendant and I'd really shown a lot of improvement in casting, hadn't I? It was just a cloudwalking spell! Just imagine happy clouds on your hooves! Happy clouds! I clenched my eyes closed, trying to push out the magic! I could do this! I could--

My horn gave an anemic little spark as I whooshed through the floor.

"Damn it!" I shouted as I fell out the bottom of the building and into open air. I saw the building that had housed Chicanery's studio hanging like icicles above me, and growing rapidly smaller. Now, I was too scared to scream, or maybe I was screaming and I just couldn't hear it over the wind rushing in my ears. I tumbled end over end, seeing the buildings far below coming closer and closer.

And presuming I didn't hit metal in the floors of those buildings, I doubted the ground would be all that accommodating! There wasn't anything I could do. I wasn't imagining happy clouds. I was imagining cyberpony painted across the wasteland a mile down.

"We got you!" a mare shouted. "Stop swinging your hooves! Go limp!"

I forced my eyes open to see four pegasi flying around me. It took all my effort to do so. I had to trust they were here to help. If they wanted me dead, they could have simply let me fall. One by one, they took my hooves in their own and arrested my tumble and then slowed my decent. As we approached the bottom of Thunderhead, I glanced up; I couldn't even tell which of the hanging buildings had been Chicanery's studio.

As we approached an open plaza, I said, "Wait! I need a second to cast my cloudwalking spell." For once, I was glad my body was mechanical. I'd likely be hyperventilating if it were all flesh and bone. It took me several tries to get it right, but the pegasi were patiently supporting me till the clouds were able to.

"That was a rough fall," the mare who'd grabbed me said calmly as she supported my left while I tried to get the spell going again. "Are you okay?"

I pushed a hoof down and the cloud finally, obediently, supported my weight. "I am much more okay than I would have been in a minute or two," I said to them. "Thanks for catching me."

"No problem. It's what ponies do, right?" she replied, with such open honesty that I couldn't help myself. I hugged her. This was how the world was supposed to be... and it was nice to see it as normal for a change.

"Ugh, you sure you're okay?" she asked in clear concern. She was now taking in my horn and my cybernetic legs. "Are you an actress?"

"I... yes. Yes I am," I said simply. The truth was simply too far off to believe.

"Oh," she looked at my legs. "That's an amazing costume. Those legs look like they're really made out of metal."

I gave a sheepish laugh. "Yeah. Really amazing costume. Took me forever to get into it, and sometimes I feel like I'll never get it off again. But I need to get to the university. Can you take me there?" Plus, I really didn't want Lighthooves to follow me down and continue the fight. Not even the Legate had hit me so precisely or quickly.

She looked at the other three and then back to me. "You're sure you don't want to go to the

hospital?"

"I'm sure. The sooner we get to the university, the better," I said as I glanced up, feeling like any second a white-armored pony could swoop down and finish me. What was the weapon he'd mentioned? Had he found Folly? That might be good for one Raptor. Or was it something else? Ugh, head trauma did not help with the thinkiness!

I still had my sword, the cloak, Vigilance, and a markspony carbine in my saddlebags, but I didn't know where Duty and Sacrifice had fallen to. Were they still up in Chicanery's office, resting on a floor or rooftop somewhere, or lying far below in the wasteland? I also had Penance packed up in its case in my magical saddlebags. I'm sure Lancer would have had it out and sent a bullet straight through Lighthooves, but that wasn't my style.

Next time I saw Lighthooves, though, I was definitely going to shoot first. Maybe a little maiming would slow him down? Ugh. I needed to discover a middle ground fighting style between good-natured punching bag and Reaper psycho.

* * *

Skyshine, the mare that helped me get to the university, seemed to know something was amiss. While I drew stares, Skyshine intercepted them with an explanation of me being an actress... but I suspected that she had other ideas. "So, are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital? Or the police? Or check in with the Tower?" the teal mare with a gray-and-aquamarine-striped mane asked for the sixth time. "Cause I had a friend and her coltfriend got pretty rough on her. I'm just saying there's nothing wrong with going to the authorities if you need help and--"

"I'm fine," I groaned as we approached one of the six large central pillar buildings.

She rolled her eyes. "I know! I know you're fine. It's just she said she was fine too. But I mean when he hits you once you know he's going to do it again and--"

I stopped, took her by the shoulders, and stared right into her blue eyes. "Skyshine... I'm not an actress. I'm a surfacar who's come up here in order to stop a battle between Thunderhead and the rest of the Enclave. This isn't a costume. I'm a cybernetically augmented unicorn. I was beaten to a pulp by a secret agent who possesses a biological weapon that could kill tens of thousands. Okay? I was not beaten by my coltfriend. I'm gay, anyway. All right? That is what is going on." A little inaccurate, but I'd had a rough day.

She blinked at me, then tapped her hooves. "Really?"

"Yes. Really," I said with a sigh of relief and waited for the freak out or the accusations of me being crazy.

"So... your *marefriend* beat you up? Because most mares I know would find some other way to get at their very special somepony." I just stared at her. Really? Did she really just go there? Then she brightened. "Unless you are into that, which I am totally okay with. I once had a colt who liked me to bite his flanks, and while it was weird, I mean, the things we do for love, right?" she asked me with a wide grin. I felt an eyelid twitch.

I stared at her a second and then turned on my hoof and trotted for the door. "Take care of yourself, Blacksnack! And tell her to take it easy next time. Or get help!" she yelled after me.

Thank you for saving my life, but... sheesh.

Inside, four uniformed pegasus stallions stared at me. Lies, the truth, and everything in between

all rolled up in a huge ball inside me and I sat down hard. "Look. Call Professor Moonshadow and let her know that Blackjack is here for her meeting with Doctor Morningstar. I'll take a seat." And I trotted over to a couch and sat down with a huff. At this point, I was seriously considering Glory's 'get arrested and questioned' plan. It seemed better than my plan that wasn't my plan. The four watched me and made a call, talking in low voices.

I sighed, imagining one enormous train roaring down a track, a second enormous train racing down the same track in the other direction, and a tiny Security and her friends in the middle when the two trains collided and went splat. All I could hope was that the councilor could throw a switch and prevent the two from ramming into each other at full speed. And perhaps most annoying of all was how each train wanted me to be on its side.

"Blackjack?" Moonshadow said from down the hall. I sighed and slipped off the chair, walking past the four and imparting on them a little of the surreality that was my day. The indigo-maned mare looked at me in concern as I walked to her and the elevator. "Are you okay?"

"That is the wrong question to ask Blackjack," I said as I walked past her and into the elevator. "Blackjack doesn't understand the word 'okay' anymore." My third person talking was making her face grow even more worried, so I went on, "I'm okay. I was just given a reminder that there's a whole world of messed up stuff coming and I'm in the middle of it."

"I can imagine," she said with a small smile.

Could she? "About that signal you're getting. From up there?" I saw the sympathetic smile replaced by sheer bafflement. "Yeah. That's how my life's been lately. Anyway, you say you're getting a signal. And it's asking for EC-1101? Does it mention the words 'Horizons' or 'Project Horizons'?"

Now Moonshadow looked positively spooked. "But... how could you know that?"

"Magic," I replied, which didn't put her at ease at all as she pushed a button. "You talked about weapon satellites. Could this signal asking for EC-1101 be one?"

"How... but... I..." she stammered as the elevator started to rise. "I suppose it could. We don't have an exact count of everything up there. The official record is far less than what we've counted by eye."

"How big are these weapon satellites?" I asked with a small frown. "How powerful?"

The smart pony question settled her a little. "Well, there's no official record of how many or how powerful. That's all been lost. Neighvarro claims they're all either defunct, failures, scrap, or under their control depending on which pony you ask, but we did record one firing a while ago. The beams were ten terasparks each. That's strong enough to cut through a Raptor, or a dragon. Ruffled quite a few feathers."

I grunted, scowling. "That doesn't seem big enough," I muttered.

"Not big enough?" She seemed disturbed. "Bigger than that falls into the balefire bomb or megaspell range. I suppose there could be something like that in orbit, but I'd like to think we'd spot something big enough to do that." I supposed that that made sense. The megaspell chambers beneath Hoofington had been huge.

The doors pinged and opened. 'Arcane Biotechnology' was written in bright pink on one of the sterile white walls. "Come on. Doctor Morningstar is waiting."

I walked along, gazing into windows and expecting to see... things. Monsters in cages or strange

bubbling chemicals. Instead, the rooms behind appeared more like Moonshadow's lab: lots of terminals and lab equipment. I guessed only secret projects were allowed to actually look cool.

The doors opened for us, and we walke--

Blue tendrils of Killing Joke lunged at my face! Out came Vigilance and up went S.A.T.S. before I realized that the slithering blue vines had slammed up against a clear glass barrier. A large glass jar full of Joke sat in the middle of a lab that was far closer to what I'd been expecting. In one pen was a snarling wooden canine. A brahmin sat indolently in a pen, one head chewing while the other one spoke with a researcher in a white labcoat. The most disturbing specimen was a green sac... thing... that was spitting black sludge against the glass.

"Blackjack," Glory said from the corner of the room. I looked around for the others, but only Glory was present. Given that she'd removed her helmet, I'd missed that revelation. The pony she stood with wasn't quite what I'd have expected of a doctor. In my experience, most doctors wore glasses, were generally anal retentive, and didn't last long outside of a lab.

Doctor Morningstar looked rather like he wasn't all there. He was yellow with a wild white mane and tail which, having not decided on a particular direction to grow, grew in every direction all at once. This was exacerbated by an equally tangled beard which seemed just as animated on his face as the Killing Joke in the bottle. His thick glasses magnified to the point where it looked like he was staring at me through two pools of water.

"Doctor. This..." Glory began as I approached.

"At tat tat tat!" he said rapidly as he started to circle me. "Do not disturb my observations! It is very important not to form a biased impression of the subject!" He walked around me several times as Glory sighed impatiently, tapping a hoof. "Unicorn. Mare. Interesting. Showing signs of dermal trauma and restoration hinting at magical regeneration. Cybernetically augmented with a clear focus towards combat capability. Eyes and limbs are completely replaced. The rest of the body shows signs of thorough reinforcement. Hmmm." He stopped scratched his chin. "Hmmm... are you..." he leaned in, lifted his glasses, and blinked his owl-like eyes. "...Security?"

"...Yes?" I replied slowly, not quite sure after his examination, like he might have found something that suggested I wasn't.

"Yes, you match the advertisement perfectly!" the doctor crowed. "'Wastelanders!' And that LittlePip! Ooooh, she can fix my toaster any day." He then blinked. "No. Really. She can. Darn thing has been broken forever!"

"Doctor," Glory sighed, covering her face. "That's not why we're--"

"You must forgive Morning Glory. Always in a rush," he said as he trotted towards the jar holding the Killing Joke. "And look what it's done. Turned her into Rainbow Dash. Tsk tsk tsk. If she would have stayed in the lab she never would have turned into Rainbow Dash. Likely exposure to the Killing Joke would have given her an egg for a head. Yes? Egg head?" He laughed at his own joke and shook his head. "But she is always hurrying. Hurrying to change the world. Hurrying to get results. Science must be patient."

With my augmented hearing, I heard Glory grumble, "I'll patient you upside your head, you patronizing old fuddy-duddy."

"I saw you observing several of the specimens we've collected from the surface. Fascinating samples. Truly fascinating. The potential of this arcane plant in particular is amazing." He trotted over to a table and with a wing lifted a vial filled with rainbow liquid. "For instance, the fluids we've extracted

could be used in a variety of treatments, and perhaps even aid in the manufacturing of arcane goods!”

I'd seen it before. It was Flux, the sort of thing that turned a pony's bones to jelly. “Unless it can turn me back to normal, you should toss it out the nearest window. Over the ocean,” Glory growled, then frowned. “Actually, you should probably burn it. Who knows where that stuff can thrive?”

“Ack, Glory. You sound like Neighvarro!” He tisked again. “How can we use it? Destroy it if we can't. Phoewy! Do you know what we might do with this?”

“Turn you into a Thunderhead Rumbler's cheerfully?” Glory suggested.

“Oh, that would be fascinating!” the doctor said immediately, grinning in his brushy beard, making Glory groan once more. “But no. We could use it to replicate spells normally cast by unicorns. Perhaps even spell effects by other creatures. This substance is infinitely flexible.” And he eyed Glory a moment before adding smugly, “And our dealing with it has led us to explore ways of ending its effects.”

“You mean a cure?” Glory asked, clearly stunned.

“Indeed.” He trotted through a door and into a second lab room. This had fewer specimens and more lab equipment. There were also quite a few books on tables and stands. Many appeared quite old. “When we encountered that particular plant, I recalled a book I'd studied when I was a disobedient, angry graduate student chafing under my superior's brilliance.” He grinned at Glory once more, and she growled at him again. He looked at the shelves and selected a green book. “Here! ‘Supernaturals’.”

“Is it a magic book?” I asked eagerly.

“Unicorns. You think everything is associated with magic,” he snorted scornfully. I began to understand Glory's annoyance. He flipped open the book. “No! ‘Natural remedies and cure-alls that are simply super.’ Natural! Not magic. And there is a plant in here with strange metamorphic properties that I believe may be related to the Killing Joke called ‘poison joke’. Perhaps exposure to radiation triggered a mutation. Perhaps zebra shamans intentionally changed the plant. Who can say?” Then he looked at Glory and grinned. “But...”

Glory sighed and said as if by rote, “But if the cure worked on the weaker version, then it may work on the stronger version.”

He patted her on the head. “Good grad student.”

I stepped between them before Glory could snap his hoof off. After all, she needed that cure. “And you have all the things for this cure?”

“I do,” he said, then nodded primly, walked over to a counter, and lifted a beaker with his wings. “I was wishing to try this out. I was going to use a researcher who was exposed to the Killing Joke and became sexually irresistible, but he has told me that so long as he is not mobbed he is not opposed to the effects.”

Glory frowned and then gasped. “Wait. It wasn't Breakwind, was it?” The doctor nodded once and Glory giggled and blushed, covering her mouth.

“What? I'm missing the joke?” I asked as I looked at her.

“He was... shall we say... overweight and homely?” Moonshadow said calmly. “He also used to say a phrase when things went wrong... which they often did. What was it, again?”

“What? ‘Fuck me?’” I suggested. Moonshadow rolled her eyes and Glory fought her laughter.

Okay. I could see Killing Joke pulling that one. “And now he’s sexually irresistible to everypony?”

The doctor sighed, “Not my first encounter with a stallion, but he was such a baby about it. Hardly scientific at all. If he’d simply relaxed...” The doctor tisked and shook his head. “Well, he’s in quarantine now and much more satisfied with his nurses.” I felt a shooty impulse... but it wasn’t like the doctor had planned it. He passed the beaker to Glory. “Now, what do you say?” He grinned once more.

She bristled a moment, then sighed. “I will keep a log of all my experiences, follow protocol, and keep consistent data points so that my work can be replicated later,” she said in the slow drawl of a student repeating a rote.

The doctor began to lecture her on how the contents of that beaker were supposed to be topically applied, but I wasn’t paying attention. A sample in the back had caught my attention. It was a strange golden tree, not very large at all. The leafless growth sat in the back corner, but I’d seen it before. “Where did you get this?” I asked.

“I did not get it. It is a biomagical construct of some kind, retrieved from the surface. I haven’t had much time to study it. The blue one is far more exciting!” I wasn’t really listening though as I trotted out and retrieved the vial of Flux. Walking to the tree, I saw that it was really a cutting; a broken-off limb planted in some dirt to help it grow. When I floated the vial over to the tree and let one drop of the rainbow substance fall on its bark, the entire limb quivered. The yellow bark took on a brighter glow, and the tree seemed to sprout new roots to dig into the soil. The doctor approached. “Fascinating,” he breathed.

I pulled out my sword and pricked my shoulder. Then I flicked the drop of blood on to the bark, where it instantly was sucked inside. A few more drops of Flux, and I saw the telltale swell of a bulb at the end of one of the drooping limbs. The milky sack didn’t get much larger than a hoof before it quivered and split open... dropping out something spherical and white. I caught it. An eye with a bright red iris looked back at me.

My eye.

“Extraordinary,” the doctor breathed. He put his hooves around me and hugged me to him. “My dear, you may have opened up entire new fields of science! This is a breakthrough on par with the wing to thrust ratio!”

“Thank you,” I replied evenly, then glanced at Glory, who was staring in awe. From the expression on her face, she was clearly torn by recent events. “Now, perhaps you could help me?”

“Anything!” he replied. “Those two were jabbering on about some political thing. I really wasn’t paying too much attention. What was it you needed?” Both Glory and Moonshadow bristled at the infuriating stallion.

“I need to meet with Councilor Stargazer. Urgently. It’s an emergency,” I said in slow tones.

“Yes, yes, yes. Very well. I’ll get to it. Eventually,” he said as he looked at the limb of the Project Chimera replicating tree with longing.

I levitated him up and turned him to face me. “Now. Please,” I added.

Who said I couldn’t be diplomatic?

* * *

The doctor had put in the message and I hadn’t let him go until he’d gotten a reply confirming she’d meet with me as soon as possible at Glory’s. Only then did I let him go back to toying with things

best left unpoked or prodded. Still, he had a point. Perhaps Killing Joke could be used for something good. Maybe the Blank tree would lead to new breakthroughs that would help ponies. It was nice to imagine science producing helpful things rather than monsters and weapons of war.

We returned to Glory's residence. The cloak might not have been working, but the simple cloth hid my augments well enough that I was just another unicorn in the middle of our group. The ponies of Thunderhead went on about their lives in blissful happiness. They talked and ate and played and enjoyed so many things that I was both in awe and saddened. I remembered the party we'd thrown for Scotch Tape when she'd gotten her cutie mark. Or the concert I'd played in with Priest, Medley, and Lacunae in Star House what felt like ages ago. Just a few miles down, life was so fleeting and precious that any joy was treasured. These ponies took it for granted.

And yet, why shouldn't they? They'd escaped the carnage of the last days. They had their plenty through their tower. Why shouldn't life be good for somepony in this world? They'd even, perhaps grudgingly, acknowledged that their plenty should be used to help others. They weren't bad ponies; I knew that Lighthooves had to be an exception rather than a rule. They were just privileged and sheltered.

Back at Glory's house, they ate a meal that was marginally better than the others; I had a cyberpony cake. Boomer, Scotch Tape, Lambent, and Lucent all played some kind of electronic game involving shooting ponies for fun. Scotch Tape just gave me an almost pitying look when I peeked in. P-21 and Twister talked in serious tones about what the Enclave would do when they arrived. Glory took a bubble bath in the name of science.

Me, I wasn't feeling like having fun. I found a window that faced out from the outer wall of the Thunderhead torus at the setting sun. The clouds were arranged in rings around the Tower, rising from that dark eye in the middle. If that was natural, I'd eat my horn. I could almost make out the flickering green glow, despite the brilliant red and gold painting the skies as the sun set. Boo curled up with me. She'd been quite happy when her horn'd been removed. On the way back, I'd gotten her some 'raspberries' by taking them off the dealer -- who'd he report me to? -- and her white muzzle was smeared with purple as she dozed on a cushion beside me.

One benefit of synthetic eyes was that I could stare out at the sun all I wanted. It moved around the planet without its goddess. Maybe it always had. Maybe it always would. It would be easy to simply dismiss the question and stop asking. Before leaving 99, I wouldn't have even thought of it. I would have simply accepted things and that I couldn't change them.

"Can I change this?" I asked no pony in particular.

"I think so," rasped a familiar voice. I turned to the side around and spotted the Dealer there, also staring at the sun. I supposed that being a mental-projected-soul-image-spell-thing gave similar sun-staring abilities. The Dealer seemed tired, but he smiled. "I missed that sight," he said as he looked at me. "Spending centuries in a computer as a spell makes you miss the little things."

"How are you doing?" I asked as I sat up a little bit.

His smile faded. "Just tired. Souls can get that way, I suppose." He closed his eyes. "So, are you doubting yourself again?"

"No," I said, then smiled a little. "Okay. A little bit. It's just... between Lighthooves and the Enclave... I don't know. It feels like just before the *Celestia*, you know? Trying to stop a war. Only this fight is so much bigger. The stakes are so much higher."

His grim lips curled slightly as he tugged down his hat. "So that's it. Folks are doomed. Game over. Might as well pack up."

"No," I said with a snort, and he lifted his head to meet my gaze with a smile. "Just because it's impossible doesn't mean that I can't do it. I just have to find a way."

"And you will. I believe in you, Blackjack. You're like your great great grandfather. Big Macintosh never let anything stop him if he thought it was the right thing to do," he said, but then his smile faded a touch.

"Even though it got him killed?" I asked, and he nodded. I sighed and looked at the red orb sliding slowly below the horizon. "I guess we'll see if we have that in common. I will stop Lighthooves. And I will save Thunderhead. Somehow."

He nodded, and we sat together, Boo snoozing on my thigh, watching as the golden light dwindled away.

~ ~ ~

"Honestly, Blackjack, you take forever," Boo said as she trotted beside me. I answered with assorted slobbering noises as I masticated a wad of assorted greenery I'd snatched out of the kitchen. "And you eat like a pig!" she added. Finishing chewing, I replied in the most sublime way I could: swallowing and belching loudly. She flinched back and waved a hoof in front of her face. "Ewww!"

"It's a tough world out there, little sis," I said with a grin. "Full of belches, farts, and other unspeakable things. Maybe someday, when you can handle it, I'll tell you where little ponies come from."

"I know that!" Boo said as her cheeks blushed furiously. "Not all of us slept through health class."

"Oh. I know you know," I said, my smile stretching even more. "But there's health class, and then there's what's really involved." I watched her go from pink to scarlet and gave her a hug, laughing. "Honestly, Boo, there's worse ponies than me."

"Death from above!" roared a mare, landing on my back and driving me into the ground. Rampage laughed, wrestling me into a hooflock. "A royal guard getting ambushed? Celestia would be very disappointed!"

"Uncle! Uncle!" I cried, slapping a hoof against the ground as the striped mare bent my body farther than it ever should go.

"I'm not yer uncle!" Rampage roared from atop my back.

"Hey, Coach," Boo said with a smile.

"Hey Boo-ger," Rampage replied as she sat on my back and twisted my hind leg between hers. "Is BJ here giving you trouble?"

"I didn't mean nothin' by it! I swear!" I wailed.

"Well, she was," Boo said with an arch smile. "But I think she's learned her lesson."

"See? And you said I'd never be a good teacher," Rampage said as she released me. I wasn't exactly certain being a coach was the same thing as being a teacher, but there was no doubt she loved working with little kids.

"Are you this rough with your students?" I asked with a huff, getting up and making sure she hadn't broken anything.

"Well, that's the thing, Blackjack," she said as she put a hoof around my neck and pulled me close. "See, I'm exactly as rough with them as I need to be... and I know their weak spots." Then, with no

hesitation, she stuck her tongue in my ear.

"Gyaaaahhh!" I flailed back once more, felled by a lick. "Honestly, Rampage, that's gross!"

"Do the words 'Pot' and 'Kettle' mean anything to you, Blackjack?" Boo said with a smile and a roll of her eyes. Together, we shared a good laugh.

~ ~ ~

A movement on the bed woke me. Not a Glory movement; she always slept like a rock. She'd given herself the bath treatment and had checked herself like clockwork for the change to end. Personally, I didn't think that something called Killing Joke would be reversed by a bubble bath, but I'd been wrong before. The *Fleur* was silent, not even creaking tonight. I felt the movement on the bottom of the bed and saw Boo's pale, almost luminous eyes looking back at me. Her ears folded back as she trembled.

Boo scared... I pulled Vigilance from its holster and my sword from its sheath, then reached over and shook Glory. "Hey. I think something's wrong."

She didn't wake. I could see her breathing, but unless this was a side effect not mentioned in the book, this was bad. I rose to my feet and carefully walked to the next cabin. P-21 and Scotch Tape slept soundly. Too soundly. They didn't wake when I knocked or when I shook them.

I went to the next room. "Rampage? Rampage!" The striped mare gave an extra loud snore, muttered, and then rolled over. I glanced at the scared Boo and carefully walked from the ship into the manor. The beautiful mosaics were cold and washed out, the colors seeming to bleed together in an incoherent mass. I knocked on Twister's door, then Boomer's. In a chair was one of the servants. All asleep.

A laugh, distant and haunting, sounded in my ears. I couldn't tell the direction, though. I couldn't see anything...

Then I smelled blood. After Roseluck farms, I'd never mistake that coppery reek.

I switched on my E.F.S. immediately and saw a single red bar. I didn't have to go there to find the source of the sanguine scent, though. Lying in the foyer were two still bodies, one propping the door open. Outside were two more bodies, these decapitated. The blood was pooling around them, running down the fine marble steps. More blood smeared along the wall and floor, as if something had been dragged. I walked to the slain ponies. All well-dressed and armed. Only one had her beam pistol out of its holster, the weapon split in two. Their blood-soaked clothes looked professional and formerly clean. I searched them and found an I.D.

'Frost Feather, Councilor Security.'

No. We weren't meeting with the councilor till the morning. Why would she send ponies here in the middle of the night? I looked at the trail of blood leading further into the house, towards that red bar, and pressed my lips together. Step by step, I followed the gore. It led straight to the library. How had I not heard these ponies being killed? Not a yell for help? A single scream?

I stopped at the door and glanced at Boo again. The silence all around me was deafening... no. Not silent. Not completely...

I could hear faint screams from within. A scream I hadn't heard in person since I'd come to the clouds. "Stay here, Boo," I said... or I meant to say. My lips moved, but not a sound emerged. I blinked and knocked my hoof into the wall. Silence.

The door to the library wasn't completely closed. Another security pony, quartered, kept it from closing. Carefully, I pushed the door open. Instantly, a pony sized mass came hurling straight at me. I raised the sword and my hooves to deflect it, but the throw did little but splatter me. Gross, but I'd had worse.

I raised my gaze up in the direction the heaved body had come from. There, on the desk, sitting oddly upright, was a pegasus washed in slaughter. The scream in my head matched the green glow coming from her eyes as she stared with a mad grin on her face. "Welcome to my house, Blackjack," Dawn said calmly, "Can I get you a drink?" Cradled in her lap was the severed head of the mare that I'd hoped against hope would be able to stop this train wreck. Blood-soaked but still recognizable as the mare Lacunae and I had seen in that meeting. Councilor Stargazer.

The Wasteland had come to Thunderhead.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Well, I'm glad I could get this out before heading down to Vegas for good. I really want to thank folks for their help right now. I was really stressing out with all the expenses of getting moved and set up. Akhmetov, Donovan, Janne, Stepan, Ryan, Chris, and Martin; thank you. Your help really got me out of a jam. I appreciate every last bit I get. Till I get a teaching job, I'm subbing. One missed day is bad.

Something that's been suggested to me is to write a story in serial similar to what I've been doing in Horizons. Apparently that's becoming more of a thing and I could publish it on Amazon. We'll see. I need to get Horizons finished. I hope that Thunderhead will post the link be finished in 1-2 chapters, the core in 2-3, and the story in 5. Then done... hard to imagine. But if I do get an original work going, I'll be sure to let folks know. It won't have ponies, but it will be all my IP.

Anyway, huge thanks to Hinds and Bro for helping me fix this up to make it decent to read. Trust me. If it weren't for them... well... it'd be ugly. I hope next chapter will have Hidden too. Thanks to Kkat, as always, for creating FoE. I hope that she gets to read chapter 34 and 35 and get a laugh out of it. And last but certainly not least, thank you everyone for reading, giving me the feedback and encouragement to keep going, and the generous tips to deal with all the real life crap thrown at me recently.

Thanks.)