

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 61: Action, Reaction

"You saved my reputation with Princess Celestia, and more importantly, you saved Ponyville! ...Or not."

There have been times in which I've reacted with excessive violence. Moments where, due to fatigue or overskilled opponents, I engaged in no-holds-barred combat to destroy my enemies. I used to look back at those times with mixed feelings, tinges of shame. They were the times I let the Wasteland win, where the power of slaughter was used instead of harmony. I tried to find another way. A better way.

This time, I didn't even blink. As the councilor's still-warm blood splashed across my head and face, I stared into Dawn's luminous green eyes, opened a door in my head, and invited the Wasteland in for tea. And while it was here, would it mind helping me massacre Glory's mother? Oh, why certainly, Blackjack. Anything for a friend.

I lapsed into S.A.T.S. as Dawn dove to the side, the magic only turning her streak into a slow creep instead of a freeze, a sign of just how fast she moved. I targeted her head and queued four magic bullets, lunging to the side as they fired to keep her in view around the cover she was trying to dive behind. The white bolts of energy streaked towards her, but the two that struck her gray, synthetic, hexagonal hide did little damage. When S.A.T.S. released me from its weird mathemagical grip, I opened fire with twelve-millimeter armor piercing rounds.

She didn't make hitting her easy; she leapt onto the wall and started running along it as casually as a pegasus hopping on a cloud. Nevertheless, I wheeled and blasted round after round from Vigilance in the absolute, eerie quiet. I didn't take time to mourn the venerable texts that exploded in puffs of tattered paper under my bullets. I had only one goal: to stop Dawn before she killed again. I kept trying to turn and stay facing her, but she was just so damned fast!

My ears crackled a moment, and then, in the midst of the silence, I heard her synthesized voice. "You're hardly being a gracious guest, Blackjack." Maybe it was because the words distracted me or maybe she'd found a way to magically accelerate herself, but I was nearly taken by surprise when she launched herself off the wall and at me. Her Core-green-glowing wings snapped together an inch from my head as I rolled to the side. I couldn't stop rolling to fire, though, as she swept a wing back, ripping great cloudy crescents into the floor just behind me.

I came to a rest against the wall, fortunately on my hooves. I voicelessly swore at her, demanding answers for why she was here and how she'd done this. But Dawn just laughed, her voice accompanied by shrill feedback in my ears. "Oh, I'm sorry, Blackjack. Too bad you don't have a transmitter in your speech center like I do." She lunged again, punching both wings right at me. "No one will hear you when you die!"

Her wings exploded through the wall behind me as I jumped up, hooked the shelves with my forelegs, then smashed both rear hooves into her manic grin. She reeled back, and I reloaded Vigilance with explosive rounds while flinging a barrage of texts at her to keep her occupied. Each book was shredded by her magically sharp wings before it hit. "I bet I know what you're wondering... why am I here? It wasn't hard. My Goddess, a *true* Goddess, knows all. And when the councilor learned that there was a Neighvarro intelligence cell here wishing to defect to her and her alone, why, the silly little dear came with only a dozen ponies for security!"

A sweep of her wings cleared her of the last of the swirling paper and put her right in my sights.

The round exploded near her face, and she fell back, protecting her head with those green-lined wings. I didn't let up, though, dropping back to the floor and keeping every shot at her face. I'd need the starmetal sword to really finish her off, but I could slow her down. Out came the carbine and, with a gun on either side, I unloaded a stream of metal and explosive shells.

But I could see her grin. "But I know more of what you're thinking. Why won't your friends wake? How could I have drugged them all in their sleep?" I hated to admit, those were some very pressing, and distracting, questions. "Well, you see, Blackjack, I had help." Who? How? She rammed forward, her enmeshed wings smashing me to the bookcases. The razor-sharp pinions rammed into the wall inches from my shoulders as she pressed her face into mine. "One of your friends has betrayed you."

She was fucking with me. That was the only explanation. It had to be the only explanation. When... how... why would any of my friends work with this monster? I pressed Vigilance into her temple, but before I could fire she ducked her head and wrapped her wire tail around the barrel, yanking it away and tossing it behind her. Around came the sword in an awkward, desperate stroke. Her wing pulled back and blocked it with almost casual ease. Green sparks flashed where one impossibly sharp edge met another.

"My Goddess has plans for you, Blackjack. Plans you are unworthy of," Dawn said with utter conviction. "She will realize I am right, in time. Especially when you are torn to pieces! I will save the Wasteland! Me!" Dawn screamed in my ears, then pulled out her other wing and started to ram it forward.

Fortunately, I was descended from Twilight Sparkle. My horn flashed as the wing ripped through where I'd just been, tearing a rent clear through the wall as I disappeared and reappeared behind her. The four feet still felt like I'd teleported four miles from the ache in my horn as I fetched Vigilance and the carbine, but the move let me get hold of something that would help even more than the guns: her tail. My teeth bit down hard on a mouthful of wire and strange synthetic-tasting hair. Still, if it would stop her, I'd eat her.

I found myself immediately reconsidering my tactic as she lifted both herself and me into the air and, with a flap of razor wings, barreled right into the nearest wall. Now, I had a vague notion that certain clouds of certain densities were used for different things. Light and fluffy clouds for clothing, heavy dense clouds for building. My notion was confirmed as she slammed through and dragged me along for the ride. The effect was rather akin to getting strung through concrete. I could have simply cancelled the cloudwalking spell, but, aside from the sphincter-loosening sensation that that entailed, I had no difficulty imagining me falling in a nice ballistic arc only to be cut in half by the cybernetically enhanced flyer.

Hadn't I gotten pounded like this already today?

I bit through the wires, prompting a cybernetic shriek from the mare and an almighty buck that sent me rolling like a wrecking ball across the foyer. The blood spread liberally all over the ground didn't help matters much. I rose to my hooves, locked eyes with the furious mare, smiled, chewed, and swallowed. Not too bad, really. She dove upon me, but I lifted my forehooves and let her collide with an impact that sent us both barreling across the floor. My ears made a pop, like a soap bubble, and I heard her gasping for breath. No fair! Why'd she get to emulate life better than me?

"WE ARE NOT IMPRESSED!" a voice thundered in my ears. For a horrifying instant, I was certain that the Goddess had somehow survived Maripony or crawled her way out of some abomination hell just to dick with me even more. But then I saw that the words had made Dawn flinch. "DOST THOU NOT WISH TO SPARE THE LIVES OF THY YOUNGEST OFFSPRING FROM THE HORRORS TO COME? DOST THOU NOT DESIRE TO SAVE ALL FROM ABJECT MISERY? THOU MUST TRY HARDER! OR PERHAPS WE SHOULD RECONSIDER OUR CHOICE OF CHAMPION?"

"No!" Dawn gasped. "I can beat her! I can! I am worthy!" Dawn pled, legs wide and wings

drooping as if she were being crushed by the weight of that voice.

"WE REMAIN UNCONVINCED, DAWN. THY CONVICTION IS MEANINGLESS IF THOU CANNOT ENACT OUR WILL, AND, IF THOU CANNOT, PERHAPS ANOTHER SHALL," the voice thundered, but it had a familiar snide tone I knew boded ill for me.

I almost pitied her. If things had been a little different, perhaps I would be the mechanical monster in thrall to a higher power manipulating me and pulling my strings. In a way, I had been. We were so much alike...

Wait, we were alike, weren't we? What happened to me when I got upset? I got reckless. And while my head was one vulnerable point, my main power supply wasn't in my head but smack dab where my heart used to be. I could hit that a lot easier than what amounted to a small orb easily covered by wings.

I immediately adopted the most obnoxious smirk possible. "Don't worry, Dawn. Just kick back. Leave saving the Wasteland to the real heroes," I said with the cockiest grin I could. The shocked and enraged look that got was more than worth the pounding I'd taken. "Guess that silence trick's not working anymore, but then, few of your tricks do."

That got her to charge, forehooves outstretched as she flew at me like an airborne battleship, but this time I was ready. I deflected her upwards with a raised foreleg as I crouched and pressed Vigilance to her chest. For the first time in our fight, the mare let out a real scream as the round penetrated her armored hide and exploded inside her, the detonation turning a chunk of her chest inside out as hoses and wires dangled, dripped, and sparked. Smoke poured out of her nostrils and mouth as she tumbled over me across the floor, landing in a heap. Of course, I doubted that she was finished. I wouldn't have been.

Still, for all her rage and crazy, I still wanted to help her. No pony should have things like that voice thundering in their mind. If I hadn't had Lacunae... "I know you want to save your children, Dawn. I do, too. Work with me," I said sincerely as I approached, Vigilance and sword ready. "We can save Thunderhead, together." We can save you, I added silently, hoping she'd take it, knowing she wouldn't.

"No!" Dawn shouted as she charged, spitting blood, something that was decidedly *not* blood, and smoke as she swept her wings like dozens of starmetal knives at me. "They had their chance. They could have listened to Striker and me. They could have done better. Instead, they rejected me! Now they get to learn what the surface is really like!" Her wings swung in turns like a metronome, but I kept waiting and backing up, getting her rhythm. Then, when she pivoted from swinging one wing to the other, I buried another explosive bullet into her chest. This time she screamed fire.

I admit, I balked a moment at the sight, and she sprung, sweeping her wing downward towards me. I crashed to the side and brought the sword down upon her neck; the blade bit through her synthetic hide easily enough but stopped well short of decapitation. Clearly, she had starmetal in more than just her wings. Unfortunately, with my sword jammed in the back of her neck, I didn't have it to parry her razor pinions. The other wing swept around to the side and I tried to slow the strike with the markspony carbine. The weapon was torn into a half dozen chunks of metal, the magazine exploding between us as the bullets within were cleaved, but it did give me the precious second I needed to get my body clear of the attack.

I pulled the sword free, levitating it before me. "You don't have to obey Cognitum. Let me help you cut her strings," I pled, giving ground. One wing curled in front of her chest, protecting her as the other waited for the perfect moment to strike. She was learning, too.

"You haven't seen her glory! Her wisdom! Her majesty!" Dawn coughed as she swung her wing,

my sword deflecting it with emerald sparks. "She may think you a fitting champion, but I know better. You're nothing more than a self-serving fool."

Okay, the craziness here was starting to approach surreal levels. "She thinks I'd help her? She's been trying to kill me!"

"Steel Rain's opinion. And mine," she added, sparks dancing as our edges met and ground against one another. "But she's been watching you for--"

"ENOUGH," that voice growled. "STILL THY TONGUE AND PROVE THYSELF IF THOU WISH PROTECTION FOR THY PROGENY." Dawn shuddered from head to hoof, almost in the grip of an epileptic attack, then slumped.

"Yes, my Goddess," Dawn whispered. I could have killed her then, but her wretchedness stayed my wrath.

The voice wasn't finished, though. "AND THOU, SECURITY," it thundered, cold and cruel. Apparently, it had worked out that I could hear it. "WE SHALL HAVE THY FLESH, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. THOU HAST PASSED OUR CHALLENGES AND THWARTED OUR MINIONS. THOU SHOULD BE HONORED."

"I've seen one 'Goddess' die this week. I know the basics of goddess-slaying," I retorted.

"HOW DROLL. THEN REALIZE THIS, SECURITY. WE HOLD THE LIVES OF THUNDERHEAD AND THY FRIENDS IN OUR HOOVES. SUBMIT, AND WE SHALL SPARE THEM FROM THE ENCLAVE'S WRATH. DEFY, AND THOU SHALT SEE THEM BURN," Cognitum roared in my ears.

But I saw the strings clearly now. "For a Goddess, you're not very creative. You threaten Dawn's children unless she serves you. You threaten innocent ponies unless I do." I wished I could spit in her face. "You offer slavery and call it salvation. I've already had one Goddess in my head, thanks. I'm not getting another installed."

"THEN PERISH. MINION, RETRIEVE WHAT WE REQUIRE. THEN THY CHILDREN SHALL BE SAVED," Cognitum demanded.

"Yes, my Goddess," Dawn said in quiet submission, her smoldering eyes lighting once more. Two craters in her chest let out reeking sulfuric green clouds that occasionally crackled with emerald lightning.

Oh crap.

In a flash of razor-sharp obsidian, she was on me. Only luck and an already upraised sword saved me from her initial attack. Then I gave ground with every step, parrying each slash and stab of her wings with the star sword as I blocked her furious kicks and stomps with my forehooves. I couldn't even think of how to go on the offensive; it was all I could do just to stay alive! I needed something, though; the emerald blades were making nicks in my hide and steel, and eventually she'd get something important and slow me down. I needed more.

I needed my friends.

Had one of them really betrayed the rest of us? No matter how inappropriate the moment, I couldn't drive the question from my thoughts. But where I was distracted, Dawn was perfectly focused. I felt my own blood start to flow as her wingtips sliced into my neck. The music I felt in my chest made my wounds tingle and burn. "What would your children think if they saw you now?" I asked at the top of my lungs.

It was a flinch, the smallest hesitation in her eyes and motion. Then my magic bullet struck her right between her luminous green eyes and she screamed, falling back and covering her face with hooves and wings. I didn't let her recover; now it was *my* turn to give a beating. I might not be able to damage the starmetal parts of her, but I figured that, if I hit her hard enough, something important had to break. I did all I could to hammer her with my hooves, smacking her back with every blow. I didn't give her any space to dash away. Just a few more blows. Just a few more...

Her wings spread wide, throwing me off. "Enough! You cost me my husband and Morning Glory. You will not cost me any more!" she proclaimed as a gust of wind sent me sliding along the hall. I came to rest before the great, dark, stained-glass window. The synthetic hide covering her face had peeled away, flapping in tatters around the edges and revealing a sickeningly familiar amalgam of metal, bone, and tissue.

"Don't make me kill you in your own house!" I begged. "Think of your children!"

I'd hoped she could still be reached and reasoned with, but in one powerful lunge she roared, "I AM!" and put everything she had into a final attack. If I'd stood there, she might have cut me in half. Instead, I reared up, hooked my hooves on hers, and fell backwards. Dawn's eyes widened in shock as I rolled and she rose above me. Vigilance fired a third time into her sternum, the blast peppering me with blood and shrapnel, and then, as the roll completed, I kicked out as hard as I could with all four legs. With a scream, Dawn crashed through the stained glass window and flailed as she fell from view.

I flipped back onto my hooves, crouched there for a moment, and then slowly rose. I'd lived through bad stuff, but I wasn't sure just how much she could take. For almost a minute, I stared at the hole into the sky, but I readied myself to leap if she came through the floor, or the ceiling, or the wall. The cuts she'd made weren't regenerating as fast as they should; I was making a bloody mess just standing there with my sword and gun out.

From the foyer came shouts and yells, and then purple-uniformed pegasi stormed in through the front door. Dozens of magical beam weapons hummed as they pointed at me, the ones with mouths free shouting at me to drop my weapons and surrender. I turned slowly and their shouts trailed away to stunned silence as I locked eyes with them. One shot by them, one sneeze by me, and the manor would get a whole lot bloodier. I could hear the blood dripping off my sword in soft pats.

"That's enough," a stallion said from the front door. Slowly, a dark gray stallion approached. Stratus, from the Rainbow Dash Skyport, stared at me with an inscrutable expression. He glanced towards the library and pressed his lips together in clear anger before glaring at me once more.

"I don't suppose saying I didn't do it would mean anything, would it?" I asked in careful, low tones.

A round, apple-like device rolled under me. I barely caught a glimpse of blue before there was a flash of crackling magic and everything went dark.

* * *

When consciousness returned, I found myself in a tiny room. Being a security pony, I recognized a jail cell when I saw one. The walls were a meshing of metal and the darkest cloud I'd ever seen, and the steel cot and hard 'cloudcrete' toilet were a dead giveaway. The energy field across the door dashed any plan of chewing through bars to make my escape. For several minutes, I just lay there and let my nerve endings inform me how much Dawn's wings sucked. The Enervation damage was healing, but it was taking its sweet time.

Still, I couldn't lie there and do nothing. I opened my PipBuck, but the device had been tampered with. The only thing that appeared was an Enclave symbol and the notice 'Electronic Interface Lockout

4227', and no amount of banging or button mashing would make it work. Apprehension began to rise in me. I tried to teleport through the field and spent the next ten minutes lying on my back, my body spasming from the magical feedback.

A tiny, singed purple mare in my mind flipped through her notes and observed that teleportation through magical energy fields was hazardous to my health. The diagram of me plus a purple flash equaling a skull and crossbones made it fairly clear. I was just going to lie here and do nothing for a little bit, till the twitching wore off.

"Good. You're awake." Stratus's voice came in through a speaker in the ceiling, and I looked around. There, in the corner, was a reinforced camera. The black lens peered at me as I glowered up at it. "I must admit, when I heard that the surface terrorists had been located, I was quite surprised. I hadn't anticipated such a weak performance. I suppose I should thank you for sparing me the tedium of an evening filling in work-related death forms."

"Moonshadow--" I began, trying to haul myself to my hooves before a spasm sent me flopping over onto my opposite side.

"Please, don't try shielding them," Stratus cut me off abruptly. "The young twins may escape exile if you cooperate. The earth pony filly might be granted clemency as well. Moonshadow and Dusk will be held for treason and conspiring with the surface. The adult earth ponies' fates are unimportant. I anticipate that they will be executed along with the traitors, or given flying lessons. That leaves you and the Rainbow Dash clone."

I stared up at the camera as he went on, feeling cold as a corpse. My aches and pains were shoved away by cold rage. "You are a terrorist wanted by the Neighvarro for your presence at the Maripony attack. I anticipate a great deal of goodwill from Neighvarro for handing you to them, but not nearly as much as from handing over the Rainbow Dash clone."

Enough lying down. Even if I was damaged, I rose to hooves with a rush of adrenaline. "Don't you dare!" I shouted, slamming the wall with a bang much like the ringing of a bell. "She's not Rainbow Dash! She's Morning Glory!"

"Oh, my mistake. We'll be sure to try her with her siblings, then give her to Neighvarro for sentencing," Stratus chuckled.

I stared at the camera and scowled. Something was off about this. "Why are you telling me this?" But there was no answer. Something was very off. "Why gloat? Why not just let me find out in sentencing?"

"I just wanted to thank you for all that you've done for me," Stratus said in clear amusement. "Now, behave yourself. When the Neighvarro fleet arrives, this will all be wrapped up quite nicely." I sat down hard on the uncomfortable metal bunk, staring straight ahead. My friends were all going to die, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Storm Chaser had given me a window to work out a settlement between Neighvarro and Thunderhead. Stratus had found himself a shortcut by handing us over on a silver platter. But I still didn't understand why the councilor had been there. Why come in the middle of the night? If she'd wanted to arrest me, she could have sent others to fetch me to her. If she'd wanted to talk, she could have simply waited for our meeting in the morning.

"Is that you, Babe?" a familiar voice asked, not through the speaker but from underneath me. I lay down and found, in the gap between the bunk and floor, an air vent. I peeked back up at the camera, but really, I couldn't stop him from watching if he was. If he wanted to send in ponies to stop me, that was

fine with me.

“Chicanery?” I asked back, keeping my voice low. The screws on the vent cover were loose; I magically twisted them and pulled it aside, along with a wad of dust that made me sneeze. Inside, I spotted something I never would have expected inside the duct: a tiny, weakly-glowing memory orb. I extracted the dusty globe and peered through the duct at the vent opposite mine.

“The one and only. Looks like my producing career might be clipped along with my wings. Intelligence goons came for me ten minutes after you and Legerdemain left. Threw around the word ‘terrorist’ with every other sentence.” He sighed. “And I really was looking forward to the ‘Wastelander!’ premiere.”

“Are any of my friends with you?” I asked, hoping to hear Glory or P-21 reply. I needed smart-pony help.

“Just the white earth pony. Blue, I think you called her,” he replied.

I relaxed a little. “That’s Boo.”

“That’s it. She was put in here an hour or so ago,” Chicanery replied. “Not a very talkative cellmate, but she’s a demon at tic tac toe.”

“Right.” I considered my PipBuck a moment. “You wouldn’t happen to know how to lift an electronic interface lockout, would you?”

“Oh, my favorite malware,” he drawled sarcastically. “The Enclave’s way to lock down anypony discussing ideas like clearing the cloud cover or clandestine trips to the surface. If I had a terminal and a couple of days, maybe. That’s more Leger’s field.”

Too bad. But speaking of the operative... “What happened to Lighthooves after I... left?” I asked. Falling screaming through the floor counted!

“He dove out of there shortly after you did. Just took the Perceptitron and told me to get to the Tower right away. Said I’d be safer there than anywhere.” He sighed. “Of course I hadn’t even had a chance to pack anything before Stratus’s ponies stormed in and arrested me.”

Wait. Either Status’s special talent was perfect timing, or the stink in Thunderhead wasn’t just down to interloping Wastelanders. “You say that Stratus was there as soon as Lighthooves left?”

“Yeah. Pinched me good,” Chicanery said with a rueful chuckle. “If they’d been a minute quicker, they would have gotten both of us. So, what are you in for, Babe? Aside from terrorism, ‘cause that’s a given. Capital Trespassing?”

“They’re blaming me for the murder of the councilor,” I muttered sullenly.

“What? Gazer’s been killed?” Chicanery gasped.

“By a surfacer I know named Dawn. Stratus showed up right after I threw her out a window,” I said, frowning. Again, the timing was good. Too good. If one of his security ponies had seen me fighting Dawn, could he have locked me up and handed over Glory? “With the councilor dead, who takes over?”

“Aw, Babe, you’re forcing me to remember government class? I slept through half of that,” Chicanery whined, then sighed. “Okay. Let me think. If the councilor dies, the lieutenant councilor takes over, but he resigned last week. Sex scandal. Three wives and six kids. Even for Thunderhead, that’s too much. There was supposed to be a special election next month to replace him.”

"So who is running Thunderhead *right now*?" I asked tensely, fearing I already knew the answer. It was the same person who always ran things when official ponies in power died.

"Internal Security? Intelligence? The judiciary? I don't know. One of those three," Chicanery replied. What did I want to bet that Stratus was the head of one of those agencies?

"What do you know about Stratus? Is he head of Enclave Intelligence?" That would be the icing on the cake.

Chicanery chuckled. "No. He's like... director of Thunderhead Security. He's a midlevel bureaucrat connected to Enclave Intelligence, so he's one with a lot of pull I suppose. No, I don't know who the head of Enclave Intelligence is. Nopony does, except maybe the GPE leadership in Neighvarro. Probably some general or something."

I sighed, shaking my head as I lay there next the vent. "So, what's your story?"

"Me?" He sounded surprised.

"Does this vent connect to some other pony?" I asked with a sardonic smile.

"No. I'm just used to telling other ponies' stories. Not my own." He was silent a moment. "My mom is a unicorn. We were born in the Tower and grew up there. We explored every inch of that place. There were labs for all kinds of experiments and storage during the war. Lots of Ministry of Awesome stuff that I don't think anypony ever realized was going on." He sighed again. "When Lighthooves was old enough, he sailed right through the tests and joined the Enclave. Then he made me promise I wouldn't join him."

"He did?" I asked in surprise. "Why not? I thought he was devoted to it."

"Didn't want me getting hurt. He's devoted to Thunderhead. But I think he hates Neighvarro for two centuries of lies and excuses. He said stagnation was our greatest enemy. He once calculated that if we'd ended the isolation policy fifty years after the bombs fell, we would have prevented almost a million deaths and hundreds of millions of bits wasted in rationing. He always thought of Neighvarro as a threat, and he was always talking about going down there and finding something to help Thunderhead get its independence once and for all. A balefire bomb. A megaspell. Something." A plague, I thought silently to myself.

"Do you think he'll use it? That bioweapon?" I asked.

Chicanery was quiet for a long time. "Yes, he will. *How* is another story. I want to say he'd never actually fire it... but, honestly, I'm sure he would. Then he'd do some rationalizing about him not having any choice. But he might have some other plan in mind." Chicanery sighed. "I hope he does."

I hoped I could figure it out, too. "And you?"

He chuckled. "I was the younger brother, Babe. All the freedom in the world. Since service was out, I got creative. Made the usual films glorifying the Enclave and soldiers. Usual propaganda droppings. But when I got the Perceptitron working... damn. That was the best."

Glad lives of bloody misery are so inspiring, I thought sarcastically. "Did Lighthooves know you did?" I asked, wondering how long he'd been able to spy on me.

"No," he said with a sigh. "Not till recently, when I came out with 'Wastelander!'. I think he thought I was tapping into little flying robots. Someone down there is apparently infamous for that. He didn't know I could access *you* till today." So his brother hadn't been watching me every second. I wondered if he was watching me now, though. Chicanery fell silent as I thought, then asked, "You've got

a plan out of this, right? You've always got a plan?"

"I'll let you know soon as I do," I replied, trying not to share the pit inside me. As far as I knew, I was screwed every way I looked. Couldn't teleport out. Couldn't chew through the bars because there weren't any. Without Lacunae, I didn't have anypony I could plan through. I didn't even have my figurines. All I had was a movie producer. I glanced at the dusty little ball. It'd probably been stuck in that vent for decades or more. "What the heck. Maybe I'll get lucky," I muttered as I climbed onto my hard steel bunk and levitated the memory orb above me. "Tell me there's a secret passage out of this cell or something."

Then I touched my horn to it and let the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Now this was a familiar sensation. It was the second time in the last twenty-four hours that I was in Rainbow Dash. This version, however, was different from her in her prime. Her body, while strong and fit, had dozens of niggling little aches in the joints. Still, it certainly didn't slow her down as she trotted down a hospital corridor. Through the windows outside, I saw the skyline of Manehattan. The nurses and other patients all had instant reactions when their eyes met Rainbow Dash, some grinning in delight and others scowling sullenly. She simply wasn't a mare you could ignore.

She approached a door where a mare and stallion in pink M.o.M. uniforms stood attentively. The tall, thin unicorn mare and wide, beefy brown pegasus stallion both brightened when Dash approached them. "Pumpkin. Pound. How are my favorite set of twins?" Rainbow Dash asked, greeting the pegasus with a hoof bump that made the stallion smile a little more, even though the question caused some clear distress.

"We're... we're okay, Rainbow," he said, but their eyes went to the closed door.

Rainbow Dash sighed. "And how's Pinkie doing?"

"The doctors say she's stable... medically," the mare said, her blue eyes full of worry. "They pumped her stomach and used magic to detoxify her, but it was a lot of PTMs." The unicorn glanced at the stallion and chewed her bottom lip.

"Where's the rest of the pony gang?" Dash asked, looking around.

"She didn't want us to contact them. Only you," Pound replied. "Since she woke up... it's been bad. She won't let the doctors see her. She won't come out. She's been working all night, sending out messages, but none of them are to anypony important. Why would she suggest that an old groundskeeper invite an astropony and her kid over?"

Pumpkin nodded. "And she's made special orders, but none of them make any sense either. Like sending Braeburn a box of bobby pins? He's a stallion!" Her eyes swept up and down the hall, and her voice dropped. "I don't know how long we can keep this from Princess Luna."

Rainbow Dash frowned. "Just say she's got a nasty case of the pony pox," Dash replied. "I'll talk to the doctors. Make sure they don't make any public statements." Then she glowered. "Or did Scarface take care of that?"

"Goldenblood spoke with the hospital administration, yes," the pegasus said in a low voice, averting his brown eyes.

"Was he involved in this?" Rainbow Dash asked, pointing at the door with a wing.

"I..." Pound looked at his twin; she gave a small nod, and he continued. "We're not sure. We

don't think so. He's the one who called the paramedics, but some of the things she's said since she woke up..."

Rainbow Dash gritted her teeth. "I'm going to kill him."

The door to the room cracked open, and a wide eye with a tiny pupil and thin blue ring stared out the gap. "Don't be silly, Dashie. Come in! Quickly!"

The eye disappeared, and Rainbow Dash nodded at the pair before pushing the door open and stepping into the dark hospital room. Only the few slits of light penetrating the blinds offered any illumination, and when Rainbow Dash hit the light button with her wing several times, nothing happened. "Oh, this is familiar," Rainbow Dash muttered to herself as she stared at the room. The bed and most of the medical equipment had been shoved in a corner. At one small table, a game board rested, half covered with chess pieces and half covered with checkers. A bag of flour with a pipe shoved in the middle sat in one chair, opposite a bucket of turnips with a derby hat on top. A shadow whisked by the corner of her eye.

One wall was covered with scribbles, circles, and arrows pointing from one to the other. They fanned out like an enormous spider web that stretched from wall to wall and in some places crept out onto the floor and ceiling. In the middle of the web were the six cutie marks of the ministry mares, circled, surrounding a seventh circle with a huge question mark in the middle. Other predominant landmarks in the web of concepts were 'four stars', 'Military Endgame', 'Enclave', 'Maripony', 'Goddess', and 'EoS' in bold letters. I felt my insides lurch as I read, 'Littlepip', 'Blackjack', 'Zebra(?) filly(?)' in that nest of connections. 'Hugs for Murky'? What's a Murky? A large pile of rocks rested in a stack like a plinth, a monocle perched near the apex. Somepony in the room made a noise that was a mix of the worst parts of a laugh and sob.

"Pinkie?" Rainbow Dash asked warily as she looked around. In the corner of the room, before a large heap of lint wearing a fancy hunting cap, were pictures, photos, and other odd collections of objects. I recognized all the ministry mares, the Princesses, Goldenblood, and other ponies from the time before the war. Clippings from newspapers were interspersed with them, some going all the way back to Nightmare Moon's return to Ponyville. I saw an old piece of paper upon which was an ominous black alicorn, rearing and kicking the air, silhouetted by a massive, sheer, flat-topped crag. A crescent moon banner fluttered above her.

Then hooves grabbed Dash's shoulders, and Pinkie Pie hissed in her ear, "I am not crazy! Do you understand? I. Am. Not. Crazy!" Her voice trembled with desperation.

When Rainbow's gaze turned to her, I disagreed with that. The mare I saw looked positively deranged. She was thin; huge shadows surrounded her eyes, and her trademark poofy hair hung in pink and white streaks over her face. Tiny pupils stared from bloodshot eyes. "Sure, Pinkie. Why don't we step outside so we can see the doctor and..." Rainbow Dash began in those tones reserved for crazy ponies. Then tears welled up in Pinkie's eyes, and she began to sob, burying her face in Rainbow Dash's chest as her friend held her.

"You have to believe me, Dashie. You have to. Please. Everything... everything... depends on you believing in me," she said as she trembled. "None of the others will. Only you. Please."

Dash held her friend and patted her back awkwardly. "Okay. I believe you. You're not crazy. But you just had an overdose on those PTMs," Dash said, then her voice hardened. "Did Goldenblood try to do something to you?" Pinkie Pie shook at his name, and Dash hissed, "I'll kill him."

"Yes, he did, and no, you won't," Pinkie Pie said with a sniff as she rubbed her swollen eyes and

looked away. When Dash turned away for the door, Pinkie pulled her back. "You can't."

"The hell I can't!" Rainbow Dash retorted. "I can think of half a dozen ways to take him out on my own. A dozen more with my ministry."

"If you tried, you'd be thrown in jail, and even if you got him, it wouldn't change anything. I know. I *know*," Pinkie said with terrible urgency. "There's bigger... worse... horrible things going to happen soon. Terrible bad things and there's only a few ponies I can trust to stop it."

Clearly, the haggard mare needed her friend to believe her. On the other hoof, a small vicious part of me wanted to cheer the blue pegasus on. Finally, Rainbow Dash sighed. "If we go to Luna and tell her how Goldenblood attacked you..."

Pinkie grabbed Dash's shoulders and gave her a shake. "You don't understand! Goldenblood is nothing! *Nothing*! I'm nothing. Fluttershy is nothing. Luna only needs Twilight and Rarity. Even you and Applejack are expendable." She sniffed and released Dash. "Besides, Goldenblood is going to get his in a month or so. I need you to help me with something much more important."

Rainbow Dash was silent for several seconds before answering. "Okay. What?" she asked with a small frown.

Pinkie Pie's eyes moved left and right. "No, I can't tell... achy hoof... flank flick... eye twitch..." Pinkie gave a sick smile that made her look as if she might vomit. "I can't..." Again, she winced. She sat and hugged herself. "If I tell you... will you promise to hear me out and not think I'm crazy? Please?"

Rainbow Dash glanced to the door again, and Pinkie seemed on the verge of bawling. I felt Dash's body start to shift, then stop. She shifted back. "I'll try," Rainbow said, her voice heavy with skepticism.

And now Pinkie was crying, punctuating it with occasional thank yous.

Pinkie trotted to the corner and retrieved a purple velvet box, then opened it up. Inside were six memory orbs, each one emblazoned with the cutie mark of a ministry mare. "I need you to collect a memory about each of our friends. She'll need them."

"Who?" Rainbow Dash asked as Pinkie Pie fished out the memory orb emblazoned with a thunderbolt.

Pinkie Pie didn't answer for several seconds. I wondered what she was feeling as she twitched there. "LittlePip. She's going to need these memories," Pinkie Pie mumbled as she looked down at the lightning cloud orb. "They're the only thing that matters now."

"Who?" Rainbow Dash asked again in bafflement.

"She's... don't ask. Please. Please, trust me! The more you know about this, the less you'll be able to do it," Pinkie begged as she held out the memory orb. "In this, you need to put the memory of the Single Pegasus Project meeting you had with Apple Bloom and the Princess. Pumpkin Cake will help you. She knows the spells. But you have to get it from her. Say it's for security or something."

"Buh... the... how do you know about that?" Dash gaped, then frowned. "Have you been spying on me?"

"No! Well, yes, but no. This isn't that. You have to do it. She has to know if she's going to take over the Single Pegasus Project," Pinkie said. "Please, don't ask more, Dashie."

"This LittlePip is a pegasus in my ministry?" Rainbow Dash asked in a baffled tone.

"No, she's a stable pony unicorn who in two hundred years will use the Single Pegasus Project to defeat the Enclave," Pinkie Pie blurted, then covered her mouth in horror, like she'd said something dirty. The two stared at each other for a minute.

"Okay... are you sure you won't see the doc--" Rainbow Dash began, but then met Pinkie's pleading gaze and deflated. "Fine. It wasn't that critical a meeting anyway. Just an overview." Rainbow Dash sounded surprisingly bitter about just an overview. "Wait... two hundred years?"

Pinkie rapidly scooped up and pressed the diamond orb into Dash's hooves. "Don't worry about that now!" Rainbow Dash blinked, then looked down. "You need to get this one on Rarity. It's the memory of her splitting her soul into those statuettes she gave us. Snips or Snails should give it."

"She what?!" Rainbow Dash blurted, horrified. "You mean those little..."

"Yes. She did. They are. I know, I felt the same way too," Pinkie Pie said as she hung her head. "Please don't ask too many questions. She thought it'd bring us together, but it's too late for that. Too late..." Pinkie Pie closed her eyes and sniffed, then scrubbed her eyes. She stared at the shafts of light coming through the window. "You should give your Rainbow Dash figurine to Scootaloo. I know she'd enjoy it."

"Yeah... I... okay," Rainbow Dash replied in a light, shocked tone. Then, when she was given the star orb, she asked, "What do I need from Twilight?"

"She's going to do an interview with Trixie next week. You need that memory from Trixie. It's what will trigger the Goddess to remember herself. Otherwise, LittlePip is doomed, and Blackjack with her." Pinkie looked away. "You and Pumpkin could say it's a background check or something."

"LittlePip? Blackjack?" Rainbow frowned. "Which Goddess. Luna?"

"Don't ask. Even I don't fully get it. Well, Go Fish, but she changes her name," Pinkie said, then waved her hoof. "Don't get me started on her! LittlePip will be bad enough!"

"No surprise with a name like that," Rainbow Dash asked, then frowned. "Wait. Will be? Going to do an interview? You mean this stuff hasn't *happened* yet?"

Pinkie sighed. "I know. I know! It doesn't make sense, but it will. It's all one big ball of... of... wibbly-wobbly... timey wimey... stuff!" She slumped and spread her hooves wide. "Please. Trust me. Believe me."

Another long moment. I wondered if my friends ever felt this way about my explanations for things. Dash rubbed her face with her wings. "Okay. What about the apple one?"

"This one is easy. There's a security mare down in the ICU who's in a coma. She's going to die in a few hours, but Pumpkin Cake can get the memory of Applesnack killing Zecora last night," Pinkie said as she bowed her head. "I almost asked her myself, but she's going to have to get used to working with you."

"What? Zecora?! But how... why? Was it Goldenblood?" Rainbow Dash asked. "He was a Marauder! Maybe--"

Pinkie Pie grabbed Dash's face, silencing her and making her lips bulge. "Didn't you hear me? Forget about Goldenblood. This is bigger than him."

Rainbow pulled her face back and rubbed her cheeks. "Okay, okay. But we both know he's up to something. Somepony in the O.I.A. is sending secret ministry information to the enemy." I mentally growled in agreement.

"You have no idea," Pinkie groaned, and shook her head. "But no. It was a completely random chance. LittlePip just needs to know why he and Applejack broke up. Oh, but Blackjack needs to know that Zecora learned a pony was passing the Projects to a spy."

"Who?" Rainbow Dash said eagerly. "Who is it?"

"Oh, I can't tell her that. *When* is as important as *what*." Rainbow Dash's eyelid twitched. *What?* But I... she... buh... This was giving *me* a headache.

In a display of extreme patience, Dash took a deep breath. "Okay," she said, then looked at the balloon orb. "Can't you get this one yourself?"

"No. You need to get that from me next week, right before I raid Four Stars. Just tell me that I told you to tell me to give the memory of the mirror to you. I won't understand... because I'm going to have Pumpkin Cake erase what I know so that I can't mess things up. Which I have... so badly. But I'll give it to you," Pinkie Pie said softly. "You're my friend."

"But... why?" Rainbow Dash asked.

Pinkie stared at Rainbow with a piercing gaze. "I know what you did in Roam," she said, her voice low.

Rainbow looked away this time. "I had to," she said in a haunted voice. "He was a traitor."

"I know. But you did it. And I don't want to know. I don't want to think of my friend doing something like that, and that's one of a kajillion things I don't want to know."

Rainbow closed her eyes and nodded. "Timey wimey... stuff. Okay," Rainbow Dash groaned and slipped it into her saddlebags.

Pinkie Pie removed the last orb. "This one you'll have to get from Angel Bunny at Zecora's hut... after the bombs fall. You'll... you'll have to get Pumpkin Cake to go with you after the bombs fall." Pinkie stared straight ahead with her pinprick eyes. Rainbow Dash's own pupils contracted as she stared in horror and Pinkie said in a hollow voice, "The memory will tell LittlePip how to get the Black Book..."

"Wait. What bombs? What are you saying?" Rainbow Dash asked as she rose her hooves. "Are you saying the zebras are going to do a first strike? My ministry doesn't have any info on that!" Rainbow Dash turned to the door. "I'm going to meet with Twilight and Luna and--"

But Pinkie Pie grabbed Rainbow Dash around the neck from behind and with surprising energy flung Dash against the wall and pushed her back against it. Pinkie hung her head, her mane falling in her face. "We can't stop it," she muttered.

Rainbow Dash stared at her. "Horseapples. If you know, we can stop it."

"No. We can't," Pinkie Pie whispered.

"The hell we can't! How can you say that?!" Rainbow Dash demanded.

"Because I've seen what happens if we try!" Pinkie Pie cried out in anguish. "We get arrested, and everything dies! Everything! Or we win, and everything dies! Or you try telling our friends, they don't believe us, and then everything dies. I've had combos so clear and so..." She sobbed and slumped

against Rainbow Dash, who suddenly had to hold the pink mare up. "Don't you understand? The bombs falling are the *best* chance for us. In two hundred years, there will be another chance for other ponies to do better. To make this world right again! LittlePip will be the first. Then Blackjack. Then others! It's the slimmest of slim chances, but it's the only chance there is. But I can't do what needs to be done because I'll be dead in Manehattan!" And to my horror, she started laughing so broken heartedly that I wanted to hold her.

"Pinkie," Rainbow Dash said as both slowly sank to the floor.

Pinkie Pie trembled in Rainbow Dash's hooves. "I can't wait for Pumpkin to take all this from me. I don't want to know it. I don't! But I do. My Pinkie Sense... I know! We're going to die, or worse. And you know what? We deserve it! We do. The things we did for the stupid war. The ponies we've hurt. The zebras! Defeat would have been better! But it's too late now. Too late for us. Too late for them. It's going to take two centuries of death and misery as penance for what we've done. And for some of us, it's going to take so very much more." She sobbed and shook. "I wish it were a horrible joke... I want to say it's all a big prank. Just a great big prank. But I can't do it alone. I can't! I need your help."

Rainbow Dash held her in her hooves and then closed her eyes. I wish I knew what she'd thought in that minute, before she opened them again. "Okay."

Pinkie Pie gave a little hiccup before looking at her. For the first time, the mare's eyes seemed to be returning to normal. "You'll do it?"

Rainbow Dash nodded, then said, "I'd *really* like to talk to Twilight about this. Or any of our friends. But you're right. Twilight probably wouldn't hear me out once I mentioned your name. Even the others might have trouble believing it." She rubbed the back of her head with a hoof. "I hate to admit, I have trouble wrapping my head around all this."

"But you believe me, right?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"I believe you, Pinkie," Rainbow Dash reassured her. "I may not understand you, but I believe you." Rainbow Dash smiled and nudged her shoulder with a hoof. "Though I am going to try to make you wrong. No offense. At the very least, I'll make sure the S.P.P. will be all set up and ready to go." The aging blue pegasus sighed. "Honestly, I'm still gonna pretend that this is one huge prank. I'll go cross-eyed otherwise."

"In a way, it is. When you get all six, you need to take them to your ministry's storage in Canterlot and make sure they're well protected. And in two hundred years, if everything goes perfect, we'll get a punchline that'll fix the world," Pinkie Pie said, smiling at her friend, and then she blinked. "Oh. And you're going to have to copy the memory of me telling you all this, too. Put it in the vent behind cell twenty-one in Thunderhead."

"Um... do I want to ask why?" Rainbow Dash said warily.

Pinkie Pie's candycane mane was curling a little before Dash's eyes as she smiled. "So I can tell Blackjack to remember what Lighthooves did to Glory." Then she blinked. "Oh. I guess I just did." She rubbed her eyes and looked away. "Dawn wasn't lying, but just because somepony does something bad doesn't mean they've stopped being your friend. And sometimes, if two babies are determined to fight, sometimes you have to take away what they're fighting over. Oh. And congratulations," she said, then shook her head. "I wish I could tell you about Horizons, Blackjack, but you're going to find out soon enough... and..." she paused, her smile twitching a little before she said in a cracking voice, "I know you'll pull through. I believe in you." She shook her head once more, looking utterly exhausted and drained, but happy. "That's enough. I need Pumpkin Cake."

"Pinkie, are you..." Rainbow started to ask as she held her up.

"No. I'm not. But neither are you. But I will be. And so will you. And Twilight. And everypony. After all," she said as the world started to blur away, "You're my true, true friend."

oooOOOooo

When I came out of the memory, I felt like my *brain* had been tied into a timey wimey ball of wibbly wobbly stuff. Pinkie Pie had overdosed on PTMs and saw... me? LittlePip? Other heroes? How had she known those memories would help LittlePip? Why didn't she tell me what Horizons was? Or which of my friends had betrayed me? Why hadn't she marched up to Luna and told her what would happen in a month?

She'd believed the bombs were what they deserved, but everypony? Dash must have been a really good friend, because Pinkie sounded pretty crazy to me. I wondered just what she might have arranged before Rainbow Dash arrived. Memories sent out? Messages? All so that we could have a chance now to reverse the course set during that stupid war. I wondered if she might have made suggestions to Scootaloo for certain ponies to go to certain stables.

Checkers vs. chess. I was hopeless at the latter, but I knew that sometimes in checkers, sometimes, if you were lucky and could get everything lined up, you could jump from square to square and sweep the board. I wasn't sure if I felt uneasy or reassured that Pinkie Pie, of all ponies, was helping LittlePip and me two centuries later. Finally, I settled on reassured. No matter how unstable she'd appeared, she'd wanted to help. So, I'd take it however I could. If she didn't tell me, it was because I either didn't need to know, or she knew I'd find out eventually.

Still, I really wish she'd mentioned what Goldenblood was up to.

The fact this orb was in the vent said that Rainbow Dash had done what she wanted. That was a leap of faith and friendship that staggered me. It would have been easy for Rainbow Dash to simply write off her friend as cracked. Heck, it would have been more rational than actually helping as she had. "Hey, Chicanery, guess what I just found out?" I said with a smile.

Silence. I frowned and rolled off the cot to peer through the vent. "Chicanery?" No response. "Oh, this can't be good." Then I looked over at the... powered-down energy field, and my eyes widened. A bloody heap lay in the doorway. "*Definitely* not good," I said as I walked to the door and peeked out into the hallway. Down at the end of the hallway was a stallion lying in a pool of blood. A trail of bloody hoofprints led straight to my cell. I sighed, closed my eyes, and thumped my head against the wall. "I just got here. I wanted to catch a movie. Maybe listen to another concert. Why, for the love of Celestia, can't I just have a little less blood in my day?"

I stepped out into the hall and checked next door. "Boo?" I asked. She poked her head out from under the cot and rushed to me, hugging me fiercely. "It's okay. Where's Chicanery?" But she just cocked her head at me, and I sighed and looked around for myself. The other cell doors were off too, the rooms empty. Then I came to the last door. This one was metal, its surface bulged and buckled. 'High Security' was written across it, and I gave an experimental knock with my hoof.

With a metallic shriek, the door fell right out of its frame and landed atop me with a clang. Then a pony stomped on the other side. "Lock me up, you sons of mules? I'll kick all your asses! Your horses and camels too! Bring it on!" Rampage said from atop me, then continued in a slightly confused voice, "Hey. Where'd you go?"

"I'm down here, Rampage," I groaned from beneath the steel door.

She lifted it with one rear hoof. "Oh, hey, Blackjack. What are you doing?" A heavy metal collar

and shackles dangled chains from her neck and limbs. "Where is everypony?"

"At this point, I have no idea," I groaned, answering both her questions. She flipped the door up with a kick of her hoof and then jammed it back into the frame. "Where are the others?" I asked, sitting up.

"Uh, no clue?" she asked with a little smirk. She trotted over to Boo and gave her a nudge. "Hey, Boo." The pale mare gave a nervous, hesitant smile. "When I woke up, I was locked up. I figured if I just beat on the door long enough, somepony would come, and I could beat them up for answers. Or just beat them up. Or pulverize them into a fine red paint. That'd be good too." She looked down the hall at the dead guard. "I see you had the same idea?"

"That wasn't me," I replied with a frown as I stood. "They must have the others somewhere else."

I walked slowly along the blood trail to where the guards lay in crushed heaps, something I would have done if my magic bullets didn't kill them outright. No alarms, which was even more ominous. The first guard was armed only with a baton; it brought back memories as I took it. I followed the bloody hoofprints to a door wedged open by two more security ponies' bodies. These were shot in the head by high-caliber bullets.

On the far side, I saw why there weren't any alarms going off. A security post lay on the far side of the door. Somepony had smashed through the reinforced glass... or transparent cloud... smashed one pony's head into the console, and impaled the other's throat on the shattered glass partition. The trail led to an access hatch, just beyond the security station, that had been beaten in. Down two halls to the left and right, I could see more active cells. Elevators were against the back wall.

"So, you're *sure* you didn't do this?" Rampage asked as we walked by the security cell in the center, pointing with a hoof. It was reinforced plastic on three sides, with a locked door in the back. I guessed it controlled all these cells.

"I am..." I paused. Well, I couldn't say I was completely sure. I'd been taken over before, but I *really* hoped somepony else didn't have the keys to my body. "I'm mostly sure." She smirked and arched a skeptical brow. "Ninety percent." Eighty-five percent sure... sureness levels dropping...

"Right," Rampage replied. "Then you need to bust that ten percent out more often," she said as she shoved the body back into the security cell, hopped through the hole, and started to search it. I walked around to the door and twisted the deadbolt from the far side. Pegasus security really wasn't much for unicorn abilities. She opened up a case with some emergency bandages and peered at a bottle of tablets. "'Isosteroprophenhol'? 'Buck' is a lot easier to say. Ahhh!" She immediately beamed and extracted a second jar. "'Precognazine'! Come to me, my minty beauties," she said, shaking some into her mouth. After chewing and swallowing, she sighed, then looked at me as I examined the monitors for some sign of my friends. "Hey, Blackjack. Why haven't you killed me yet?"

The question was like a wrench thrown into my thought processes, and I froze in the act of pulling the smashed stallion off the controls. "You're asking this now?"

"There's a better time?" Rampage asked idly. She had a point, but I avoided looking at her as I tried to figure out how to work the controls. "You know I want to die. You could have killed me with that Folly thing, but you didn't."

"I don't generally kill my friends," I replied.

"Even when they want you to kill them?" she asked casually.

"Especially then," I answered.

"I don't ask for much, following you around. You saved me from a life of being a buffet. You've given me hope that maybe, somehow, things might be okay. But the fact is that, even if it is, I'm going to live while all of you die."

"I'm a cyberpony, Rampage. I might live centuries," I said evenly.

"And this soul talisman might last millennia. Or longer," she replied. "And you might be killed in five minutes. You're tough, but I haven't seen you come back from being disintegrated. It's practically a joke for me. But if you die... that's it. I don't think I can make it. When Lacunae bought it... I envy her so much that it hurts." She turned away. "I don't want to bury everypony I know."

I stared at the screens but didn't really see them. "I thought that you were doing better with the recollector and those memories I've found."

"Oh, it's interesting, I guess," she said with a roll of her eyes. "But they're still other ponies' memories. Other ponies' souls. I don't have a single memory of a childhood that's mine. I haven't seen anything that indicates I'm more than a thing."

I paused, then told her, "I can't kill you, Rampage."

"Horseapples. You kill better than I do, and I like it," Rampage said to me flatly. "So I want to know, if you find a way to end me, will you tell me? Some spell. Some device. Something." I looked over at her and saw in her eyes doubt and need. She needed something I couldn't give. Even now, I wondered if the star sword could do it. It cut through almost everything else. Maybe one slice and she could live a normal pony's life. Grow old. Die. Or it might kill her instantly.

I slumped and sighed. "I'm sorry," I said quietly. She didn't say a word as she turned away again. "I'll help you any way I can, but that. I'll help you find memories. I'll be here for you and I swear to you that for as long as I can, I won't leave you alone."

"Mhmmm," Rampage said indifferently as she trotted for the door. "Well, you were searching for the others, right? Better get to that," she said coolly. "Wouldn't want them to die or anything..."

I watched her step out, chains jingling. Then I laid one foreleg on the controls, buried my face in it, barely muffling my scream of frustration as I banged my hoof against the panels beside me. Why couldn't Pinkie have told me more? Some answer to make things go smoothly. Just for once, with the lives of thousands on the line, I wanted them to go smoothly! Boo patted my shoulder; she'd seen the gesture enough that I supposed I should be glad she knew it.

"Who's there?" P-21 said through a speaker. "What's that banging noise?"

I looked up at a screen that showed four cells, and in one of them were P-21 and Scotch Tape. A red light next to the word 'Intercom' indicated that the cell's speaker was on. I brightened, rising up, and the red light winked off. "Hu...bu... wa?" I stared at the bloody, banged up control panel before me, trying to find the 'open' button. What button had I pushed? Where had my hooves been? I watched the pair talking silently. When in doubt, push buttons! "Come on. Which one is it?"

A green light appeared next to the word 'mic' on the screen, and I heard Scotch Tape say, "Don't change the subject, Daddy. You were having sex with Blackjack and Glory during the Gala, weren't you?"

I froze. Suddenly, the concerns of tens of thousands of ponies seemed much less pressing. P-21 crossed his forehooves and looked away. "I think that I'm starting to get why Glory gets a headache when 99 and sex come up together." Scotch Tape tapped her hoof impatiently, and he sighed. "I was

drunk; first time ever. It was a one-time thing.”

“You were drunk and *happy*, Daddy,” Scotch Tape retorted.

P-21 sighed and smiled. “Yeah. I was. Happier than I’ve been in a long time.” I felt strange fluttery feelings that had no place in a cybernetic body.

“Do you love Blackjack?” Scotch Tape asked.

I leaned towards the screen a little, my eyes wide.

Then my hoof slipped and the green light winked out as his lips started to move. Something in me snapped as I shouted “Arrrgh! Stupid, frigging blood-covered buttons!” I mashed the control panel ruthlessly. I glanced up in time to see Scotch Tape cover her mouth in shock, and then I punched the control panel even harder. I needed to hear his answer. The control panel was nearly smashed to scrap as I snarled, “Turn on! Turn on! I need to hear what he says!”

“Detention Block AA-23? What’s your status?” an angry, official-sounding pony asked tensely. “You’re five minutes late for your check in.”

Not the channel I’d hoped for. “I... uh...” I stared at the bodies. “There was a... a weapons malfunction! Yes, slight weapons malfunction. But, uh, everything is perfectly alright now. I’m fine. We’re all fine here, thank you,” I said, and then added lamely, “How are you?”

“We’re sending a squad in,” the pony said peremptorily.

Oh crap. What’s something that’d keep me out in 99? “No no no, don’t do that. We had a... reactor leak up here! Yeah! Radiation everywhere! Give us a few minutes to lock it down. Large leak. Very dangerous,” I said desperately, willing them to believe it.

“Reactor? What are you talking about? Who is this? What’s your operating number?” the pony demanded.

I looked at the controls and finally just stomped them as hard as I could repeatedly, showering myself in sparks. Boo staggered back and hit a pair of large red buttons marked ‘fire’ and ‘emergency release’. “Boring conversation anyway.” I turned to the door. “Rampage! We’re going to have company!” An alarm began to sound and I saw the magical fields on the screen wink off one by one.

“Good,” Rampage said, then started taking tablets of Buck. “I’m in the perfect mood for company.” Okay, I’d better hurry and get her out of here before she painted the walls in pony.

A young stallion jumped out as I trotted to the left hallway. “Oh yeah! Riot! Ri--” And he froze at the sight of me. A few other criminals emerged too, only to balk at the bloody cyberpony before them. “Oh shit...”

“Yeah. It’s that kind of day,” I replied. “Back in your cells. There’s no fire.”

A few of them looked around. “Aw, come on, I was--” he started to say.

“Nope! Not hearing it! Back in your cells and behave.” He opened his mouth again, and I silenced him with a raised hoof. “Any other day, I’m sure your sob story would convince me to let you go, but right now I am just not in the mood. Besides, there’s a squad coming. I doubt you want to run into them.” Or Rampage. “So, in your cells. Now.”

Muttering, they returned. “Boo? Blackjack!” Scotch Tape squealed from behind me. The pair raced down from the other hall of cells, the filly almost tackling me. Then she realized what I was covered

in. "Ew... Blackjack..."

"You've been busy," P-21 said casually, looking over the mess.

"I didn't--" I started to say, when there was a ping from the elevator. "Get out! Follow the blood," I yelled as two elevators opened almost simultaneously. A pair of ponies in power armor stood in each, their beam weapons humming as they charged up. Their first mistake.

"On the floor! Now!" they bellowed. Their second mistake. Granted, I was already interposed between the elevators and P-21 and Scotch and Boo as they raced for the open access hatch.

Rampage stood before one elevator, completely unarmed save for her shackles. She tilted her head and gave an almost blissful smile, Buck dust around her lips. "You guys are exactly what I need right now," the striped mare said in a voice approaching seductive. The two armored ponies looked at each other. Their final mistake. The striped mare leapt the ten feet separating them, landing in the elevator. Beam blasts sizzled as the doors closed, but I could hear the smash of metal against metal and the screams of pain.

The other pair had a perfect view of the three of us dashing for the open door with no cover. I couldn't think of anything to protect us except... my horn flashed, and a door and frame appeared in the air before them. Then it swung shut in their faces with a slam as we scrambled for the open portal. An instant later, gatling beams blasted the flimsy impediment into flaming shards of wood, but it had served its purpose. We got through the access door before their gatling beam guns turned us into four piles of glowing ash. I slammed my hooves against the door, shoving it closed.

"I hope Rampage will be okay," Scotch Tape said. The access door led to a dimly-lit spiral staircase. The trail of blood led up. Down was a locked grate that I probably could have chewed through if we didn't have power armor banging on the other side of the door. I smashed the keypad beside the door; hopefully that would slow them down.

"She'll be fine. I'm more worried about Glory." Actually, I was also worried for us. Whoever had left this trail of blood couldn't have meant me any good. "Up, I guess," I said, glancing at the others. My eyes met P-21's, and I immediately flushed. "Oh... uh... I..." Huh. I could blurt out questions about bowel movements and make casual comments about sex that curled Glory's feathers, but the simple question about how he'd answered Scotch Tape turned my tongue to clay. "Um... It's good to see you, P-21."

He blinked back. "Likewise?" The door beside us banged loudly. "Shouldn't we get moving?"

I looked from him to the door to Scotch Tape to Boo and finally just gave up. "Today just keeps getting better..." I muttered, taking the lead up the stairs. The twisting ascent would be a bitch for them to navigate in power armor. And up. And up. And up.

Every twenty feet was another access door, each with the access panels smashed. "Odd," P-21 observed.

"That describes my entire day," I said, then went through and told them about Dawn, Stratus, the Pinkie Pie orb, and how I'd 'escaped' from my cell. I was so occupied with telling them everything that had happened, minus the little scene I'd overheard, that I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. We came around a corner just in time to run smack into a power-armored pegasus next to a cut-open door.

Her gatling beam guns opened up in a spray of magical fire that sizzled and sparked off the walls and ceiling. I couldn't even poke my head up long enough to try a magical bullet. "I've got them! They're pinned at access junction 12! Hur--" she started to shout.

I teleported directly above her, landing like a ton of cyberpony. Her armor still stood, but her shooting went wild. The stinger tail jabbed down at me, nearly ripping open my back as I slowed the tip with my telekinesis, then grabbed the end and hugged it tight. My hind legs pinned her wings to her side, but that didn't stop her from going into a bucking bronco of gunfire as her tail twisted like a snake. "Stop," I shouted, my horn sending a magic bullet into the back of her head. "Stop!" I shouted again, shooting her. Each blast widened a hole in her helmet as she screamed and struggled. "Damn it! Stop it!" Two more shots.

Suddenly her body spasmed and she collapsed beneath me. "No..." I pulled off her helmet, revealing a rose colored mare with blood coming out her ears. I concentrated, trying to heal her as Lacunae had healed me. I could do it! I'd done magic with minimal instruction. I was Twilight's descendant! I could do it! I strained and pushed and envisioned her without the blood or the hole I'd punched in her head.

"Blackjack, she's dead," P-21 said.

"No! I can... I have to... I..." I faltered, staring down at her. "I came here to save ponies, damn it! I wanted to save all of you!" I shouted at her corpse. I wanted to save Thunderhead from the Wasteland. Help it grow. Help civilization to spread. "Why won't you let me help you? Just stop fighting me!"

"Blackjack," P-21 said calmly. "We can't stay here."

I knew what he meant, but he was more right than he knew. "Come on," I said as I rose to my hooves, looking up the spiral stair. "Let's see where this trail of blood ends."

* * *

Five minutes later, we emerged in an office. The beige walls were a hint to its bureaucratic nature, and the body of a slain secretary outside the door was a continuation of the carnage. Her corpse was still warm; whoever had done this hadn't gotten far. I avoided looking at the smashed head; it was too similar to the body I'd left below. I stepped into the hall, but it was eerily silent. Unanswered phones rang, and an alarm sounded. Two more ponies lay in crumpled piles down the hall. Had the survivors been evacuated, or had whoever had done this slaughtered them all before they could flee?

I followed the bloody hoofprints, adding my own to them as we walked along towards a corner office. These were pretty fancy, important offices, and I began to get an inkling of my final destination. There were unarmored security ponies lying outside the door, bullet holes in their faces. I closed my eyes a moment, then read the blood-spattered nameplate.

'Security Director Stratus'.

"Oh, son of a mule," I hissed, then slowly pushed open the door to the large office.

An impressive oak desk sat at one end, the kind of desk used by ponies who valued their position. Stratus's voice filled the air from a scratchy recording coming from a terminal. "...weapon is complete. Stargazer isn't going to be an issue, as she was tragically killed by the surfacer terrorist Blackjack. I'm securing the city. When you get here, there shouldn't be any excuse for securing the Tower. I look forward to your reply and hope you will keep my cooperation in mind when appointing the next Councilor to Thunderhead. I believe I've demonstrated my loyalty. End burst transmission. Send. Save."

Bent over the desk, his hooves splayed wide, was a dark stallion. His face had frozen in an expression of shock, as if he couldn't believe it had come to this. Buried in his back was a very familiar sword: mine. Duty and Sacrifice lay neatly on the table beside him. A shattered window lay behind him. I glanced over the scattered papers on his desk and spotted a picture next to his outstretched hoof. It

was a grainy, slightly amberish-tinted image of four dark-colored pegasi: Sky Striker, Stratus, Stargazer, and the squinty-eyed Dawn.

Suddenly, that explained his perfect timing at Dawn's house.

"Begin Burst Transmission. Councilor Ironwing. I wish to offer my condolences for the death of High General Harbinger. I hope that the GPE selects a deserving and visionary pony such as yourself to lead us in these difficult times. I wish to report that Thunderhead is ripe for plucking. I've been able to arrange things, and your pretext is in position. The bio-weapon is complete. Stargazer isn't going to be an issue..." the terminal repeated as I slowly walked up and retrieved my guns.

Suddenly, his body jerked, and he drew a wet and rasping breath. His bulging eyes turned in his head to stare up at me. "You... it's..."

"Don't move!" I said as I looked at the sword and then at him. If I pulled the sword out... "Go find a medical kit or something," I said to P-21 and Scotch. The two immediately rushed off to search as I lowered my face to his. "Where's Glory?"

"The clone? I gave her to the Enclave military. They should have a press conference any second now. Should cause quite a stir..." He laughed weakly. "She was my golden ticket..."

I resisted the urge to hit the dying stallion. "Who did this to you? Was it Dawn?"

Stratus coughed, breathing heavily. "Dawn. I thought... she was so perfect... get that damned bleeding heart out of the way..." Blood bubbled out his mouth. "She... she wanted to help. Kill Stargazer. Take you. Hand over everypony to the Enclave and... and I'm the next councilor. It was perfect," he gurgled, then shuddered and coughed a fan of crimson.

"Who did this?" I asked again. "Lighthooves?"

I was losing him. His eyes were defocusing. "Lighthooves. So eager. So devoted. So stupid. He didn't realize... nopony did..." He spasmed and lunged for me. "It... it should have been... me!" he gasped into my face before convulsing and falling over. He gurgled one last bloody breath and went still.

I levitated my sword out of his back. It still had a tiny identification tag tied to the hilt. I walked to the broken window and looked out at the bright lights of the city.

I'd been wrong.

We hadn't left the Wasteland after all. The scheming, the manipulation, the avarice, and the ruthless ambition that plagued Hoofington below were up here as well. It might not have been ponies killing each other in the streets, but there was still the Hoofington madness above as there was below. Chicanery and Lighthooves. Doctor Morningstar. Stratus.

From down the hall came the stomping of many hooves. Scotch Tape let out a shriek a moment before P-21 yelled, "Blackja--" followed by a loud thump.

I stood there with sword and pistols as power-armored pegasi stormed into his office. More appeared outside the window. These were the old designs. Neighvarro forces. I closed my eyes and groaned.

"Well well well," Captain Hoarfrost said from the door. "Isn't this interesting?"

"You have got to be kidding me!" I shouted up at the ceiling. "Twice? Getting set up once by Stratus wasn't bad enough, I have to get set up twice?" I looked at the icy blue pegasus, who seemed a little baffled and unsure by my outburst. "Let me guess? I'm now the perfect patsy to pin all this on,

right? Am I right?" Then I threw my weapons aside. "Congratulations. You win."

"I... what?" Hoarfrost said, the cool blue mare now definitely not sure what I was doing.

"You win! I surrender. I mean, Stratus sets me up. Then Lighthooves sets me up. Now you!" I said as I thrust my hooves into the air. "So you know what? I'm not going to fight it any more. Huzzah. Congratulations. Take me in. I want to talk to General Storm Chaser about this."

Hoarfrost scowled at me narrowly. "No, I don't think so. Kill her."

Okay. That wasn't quite what I'd expected.

Twenty power-armored soldiers all primed their weapons with the same ominous hum. Surrounded. Even if they hit each other, I'd be ash long before they were. And if I teleported away and left my friends in Hoarfrost's custody... would they be next? Probably.

Then one second passed. Then ten. Hoarfrost frowned. "What are you waiting for? Open fire!"

From inside the helmet of one suit of armor came a muffled, "I can't!"

"What do you mean you can't?" Hoarfrost asked coldly. "Fire. Last thing I want is General Chaser to waste more time with this terrorist."

"My suit's in repair and diagnostic mode!" wailed a stallion.

There were more muted shouts of dismay from the others.

I looked at Hoarfrost, and her eyes widened. She reached down to the beam pistol in her front holster with her mouth. I could have killed her four different ways. I could have levitated up the sword and sliced her head off. Duty and Sacrifice were nearby, too, though I wasn't sure if they were loaded. I could have managed at least one magic bullet to her face. Or simply smashed her with my hooves.

Instead, my horn glowed, and a door instantly poofed into existence right in front of her. Then it slammed shut in her face with a resounding bang. I opened it again, saw her swaying with a mildly concussed expression, her gun held limply in her mouth, telekinetically pulled her head forward, and slammed the door closed a second time. Hoarfrost thumped to the ground behind it.

I was wrong. That was a useful spell of Twilight's.

Scotch Tape walked in, staring at the immobile ponies with clear wariness as the occupants within the motionless armor grunted. "Wow. How'd you do that, Blackjack?" Boo followed her in, walking among the black metal statues.

"I didn't," I replied. P-21 entered with Rampage following behind, the Reaper lacking the chains and wearing the top half of a power armor helmet like a hat. I didn't want to think about what happened to the head that had been in that helmet. "You're okay!" I said to her, giving her a hug. She didn't quite return it... P-21 was carrying all our stuff on his back. He started passing it back, telling Scotch something about finding the evidence locker just before the soldiers arrived. I admit, the return of those six figurines helped settle the imaginary ponies in my head. I could almost hear them sigh in relief.

"Yup. Still alive," she said coolly as she looked at the power-armor-clad ponies and then smacked her hooves together. "Shall I start smashing the ones on the left while you get the ones on the right?" she asked as she rubbed her hooves.

"What? No!" I retorted. "I'm trying to find a way to *stop* this mess, Rampage. Not add to it!"

"You need to think like a Wastelander here, Blackjack, not a stable pony or cloud dweller,"

Rampage replied. "You have side A and side B. You don't want them to fight each other and hurt the sane ponies that don't want to be involved, right? So kill a side. Hell, kill both sides! Then we can set you up as ruler of Thunderhead, Glory can be your lovely concubine, P-21 your master of intelligence, and me your brutal enforcer. It'll be a blast." She grinned as she spread her hooves wide.

"What would Boo and I do?" Scotch Tape asked curiously as I tried to pointedly ignore Rampage's advice.

"Boo can be public relations. Anypony we don't want to kill who has a problem can take it up with her. As for you..." Rampage paused and rubbed her chin. "You'll be the young lieutenant who devises all the war machines we'll need to maintain our empire."

"Cool! I'm in," Scotch Tape said with a grin.

"Please stop corrupting my daughter," P-21 interjected in mild annoyance.

"Awwwww, but being in an evil empire sounds fun," Scotch Tape whined. "You'd look great in a black uniform, Daddy."

"Empress Blackjack is vetoing the Empire idea," I declared flatly. "It's all fun at first, but then some ragtag bunch of misfits rises up and overthrows you. I want to end this without any more ponies dying on either side."

"Oh. The *crazy* route," Rampage said with a snort and a wave of her hoof. "Go on, then. Give it your best shot. Worked well with the Reapers and Rangers, after all."

Oh boy, she was in a pissy mood. I ignored her as I levitated up my sword and sliced through the bolts holding a soldier's helmet in place. The terrified green mare within shouted, "Please don't kill me!"

Rather bold of her to beg that after she'd been about to kill me, but I didn't need her terrified. I needed her to listen. "I'm not going to. Is your radio up?"

"No! How did you do that? Nopony is supposed to be able to do that!" the mare blurted.

"Trade secret," I replied. "Listen. I need you to listen." The mare's panicked green eyes dilated a little. "When your systems come back up or you reboot or whatever, I need to you tell General Chaser that I didn't do this. Understand? I know the blood leads right up to him, but it wasn't me. I'm still trying to stop Lighthooves. Understand?" I really needed her to believe me. I was in enough trouble with Thunderhead. If Neighvarro thought that I'd killed their pony too, I'd never get this stopped... which was probably the point.

"But... I..." She looked over at the body behind the desk.

"I don't want to kill anypony," I said flatly. "If I did, I'd kill you too. I don't. Okay? Please just tell General Chaser that."

"I'll... I'll pass it along," she replied. "Thank you for not killing me."

"I'm not an executioner," I replied, making Rampage groan. "You want to thank me, though? Don't kill. I know there're problems in the Enclave right now, but don't kill. These ponies didn't do anything to deserve that."

"I..." the mare began with a frown, but then took in my sword and her paralyzed companions and dropped her gaze. "Yes ma'am." I had no clue if she actually would. For all I knew, the second my back was turned, she could start slaughtering ponies. But I had to give her a chance to do better.

Otherwise, all I'd have left was a body count.

"Let's go," I said as we walked out into the hall. I needed to find Glory, and then I needed to get in contact with Storm Chaser. So long as Thunderhead didn't actively start fighting the Neighvarro, I had a chance. Even if I hadn't liked High General Harbinger or the Captains Icyhot, a Neighvarro victory was better than a bloodbath. If Thunderhead turned actively hostile against the Neighvarro forces here... well, I just had to head that off before things entered the zone of clusterfuckery.

Provided we weren't there already.

"So, what are you going to do now?" P-21 asked. "What's the plan?"

We entered an empty charnel field of a room, wide open and full of cloud cubicles; I looked around, levitated over a stack of papers from the nearest desk, and started slicing the sheets into little squares. "Well. I'm hopefully going to get some help." Everypony stared at me in confusion. "You see, I didn't override all that power armor. I'd love it if I did, but I didn't. And I'm pretty sure that none of you did," I said with a little smile. Not unless P-21 had gotten a broadcaster or special spark grenade and hadn't told me about it. "So I'm betting that the pony who *did* do it..." And my horn flared as I flung the paper about in a literal blizzard of white squares. They covered everything, including a patch of shimmery air ten feet from us down the hall. I faced it and smiled, "...is still here."

The air flashed, and the purple-caped Mare Do Well appeared. "That usually doesn't happen," the mare said in her synthesized voice.

"First rule when you think somepony invisible is around you: throw shit everywhere," I replied.

"Wow. Blackjack really wasn't crazy," Rampage said in shock as she stared at the billowing cape and wide-brimmed purple hat.

"Told you," P-21 replied smugly.

"Why were you staying invisible, though?" Scotch Tape asked with a frown.

"I wanted to see if she would kill them. If she was responsible for this," Mare Do Well answered, gesturing at the slaughter. "So I shadowed the Neighvarro when they came up, and when they wanted to shoot, I used a little backdoor in the Mark II design's repair talisman."

"And if I'd started killing, you'd have deactivated it?" I asked archly.

"I thought you were supposed to be dumb," Mare Do Well answered, oddly surprised.

"Even a not-too-bright pony learns things," I countered. "So. Are you going to help us? Because I'm guessing another squad is going to come up here, and they might not all be wearing power armor vulnerable to your trick."

Without another word, she turned and trotted away. I considered her not flashing away or disappearing a good enough answer for the moment, so we all followed.

* * *

I am really not one for stealth, but even I had to admire the purple-armored Mare Do Well's ability to evade the Thunderhead Security and Neighvarro pegasi. She didn't chat at all as we moved through the building, frequently stopping to let power armor pass, and she had to be connected to their communications because she seemed to know their precise movements. More than once she peered through the wall; I imagined her helmet had an enchantment on it similar to Penance's scope.

"That's quite some armor," I said as we waited in a janitor's closet for a squad of security ponies to stop chatting and head away so we could leave.

Mare Do Well glanced back at me, then at the wall. "Mark IV prototype for recon, infiltration, and sabotage. Twilight Sparkle herself oversaw some of the talismans that went into it. Been a nightmare keeping it up to spec. The stealth systems in particular are a headache to calibrate, but then, it's not a production model."

"That include the hat and cape?" Rampage asked.

"Yes, actually. Twilight's version of a joke, I suppose. Not all that funny to me, but then, she wasn't exactly consulting Pinkie Pie when she designed it," Mare Do Well replied tensely. "Now be quiet. I don't want to have to fight them if they hear us."

We waited till the five security ponies moved away, then dashed across the hall to a flat stretch of hall obscured by two large fake plants. Mare Do Well pressed some hidden latch or button, and a three by three foot square of wall swung in. We all filed through into a tunnel dominated by rainblastic pipes and conduits. Then she closed the door behind her.

"Who are you?" Scotch Tape asked as Mare Do Well took the lead.

"Just a pony trying to help ponies who need help. These days, that's a pretty long list," she said as she led us along the low room. Thankfully, we were stable ponies, a Reaper, and Boo. The tight quarters didn't bother us a bit. "Finding other ponies who share that sentiment is... rather new."

"Nice secret passage," P-21 said, in complete honesty. "Must make getting around easier."

"Yes. They do," the armored mare replied tersely.

"I need to find out what's going on. I need to find Glory. And with Stargazer and Stratus dead, who's in charge? The head of Enclave Intelligence?" I asked as we went down a stairway.

"No. What you need to do is go home," Mare Do Well replied.

"Not with things about to explode," I retorted. "And absolutely not without Glory."

She sighed as she stopped and pushed her hoof against a wall of cloudcrete. "I was afraid you'd say that." Then the wall swung open into a dim, cavernous space. "Welcome to the Mare Lair."

The Lair was a hexagonal room dominated by a massive computer along one wall. Numerous screens showed images from all over Thunderhead, and smaller screens showed various parts of the Wasteland. I scowled at the sight of Enclave armor walking the halls of Tenpony Tower. A second wall was an armory with three separate suits of Enclave armor and one suit of Steel Ranger armor. There were weapons of all kinds in lockers along the base. The third wall had at least two dozen disguises, half for above the clouds and half below. A series of rubber masks in a variety of colors sat like a row of dismembered heads before the apparel. The fourth wall had two enormous maps, one of the Equestrian surface and another of the Enclave settlements. I recognized Neighvarro and Thunderhead, but the rest were a mystery to me. Hundreds of pins of different colors decorated both maps. The fifth wall was dominated by spartan living quarters. A large bed, a kitchenette, a medical cart, and gym equipment rested next to several pictures. The last wall had lab equipment, including a lot of electronics and explosives. In the middle was a mechanics bay, with several talismans lying on carts and tables around an empty stand.

Personally, I was disappointed by a substantial lack of mares.

A young unicorn mare beside the bay popped her head up. Her brown hide was smeared with oil

and other mechanical fluids. A mechanic's harness jangled with dozens of tools, and her black mane was messy and tied back with a bandana. "You're back! Are you okay? Do you need any repairs? Did you find her? And... oh..." she immediately faltered at the sight of us. "I guess you did."

"Blackjack, Monkeywrench," Mare Do Well said as she trotted to the computer. "She takes care of the magical end of things here." The unicorn balked a little, blushing and looking down. "Get them something to eat, please," Mare Do Well said as she walked over to the computer.

"What about you?" Monkeywrench asked, ears folding down a little.

"I'm fine," she replied brusquely, then said to me, "I'll see if I can find your Glory and then get you out of here."

I looked from Mare Do Well to Monkeywrench. The unicorn was already trotting to the kitchenette. "Rude much?" Scotch Tape said before heading over after her. P-21 frowned but followed, along with Boo and Rampage. I hung back, watching the mare work as she skillfully typed on the computer.

"Are you her slave?" P-21 asked in a low voice. "If you are, we can take you with us."

"Oh, no no no! I'm not a prisoner," Monkeywrench replied. "She's one of the good ponies. One of the best ponies. And normally, if things weren't so bad and you weren't here, she's a lot friendlier. She normally never brings ponies here. I'm astonished she did." She took out some bottles. "Sparkle-Cola?"

"Oooh, is that Sparkle-Cola Rad?" Rampage said in delight.

"Yeah, but those are for... for Mare Do Well," Monkeywrench replied firmly. When Rampage reached for one, the brown mare almost closed the door on Rampage's face.

"Are you two together?" Scotch Tape asked.

"I... No. Not that... I mean... ah... no," Monkeywrench replied.

"Are you from the Tower?" P-21 asked.

"Actually, I'm from the surface. She... rescued me... from some bad ponies," she replied in those delicate tones that left little to imagine what she'd been rescued from. "I've been helping her out since I was your age," she told Scotch Tape.

Mare Do Well said from beside me, "Eavesdropping is a bad habit."

"Speaking from experience?" I asked.

Mare Do Well turned her head to look at me a moment. "Maybe."

Oh fine, be all mysterious. "So what's happening?" I asked in frustration as I looked at the terminal screens. "Where's Glory?"

She hit some buttons. A diagram of the Hoofington Valley appeared. Shadowbolt Tower stood prominently in the middle, while Thunderhead was off to the east like an immense tire. Ten arrowheads were arranged along the west and southern sides of the valley in a semicircle. "The Raptors are hanging back. They sent in four formations through the cloud cover. Stratus probably gave them codes to bypass the lightning rods."

"How many in a formation?"

"Twenty five. Five five-pony wings. Each Raptor carries four formations, or a flock," Mare Do

Well answered grimly.

"So a thousand ponies, give or take?" Oh yeah, this nightmare was getting worse by the second. "What does Enclave Intelligence have in the Tower?" She turned and stared at me silently, and I smirked, "What, you don't know?"

"Five flocks, if they recalled all the reservists before this started," she replied. "If Thunderhead Security joined them, that's another five hundred, but they only have paramilitary training."

"Small wonder Neighvarro wanted Stratus on their side," I said with a frown. "Is there any way I can contact the head of Enclave Intelligence? Maybe they can help stop Lighthooves."

"The official head of E.I. is a joke. Lightning Blaze is more interested in banging her way through the well-connected ponies in Neighvarro than doing her job," Mare Do Well replied. "She doesn't even stay in the Tower. I doubt she even knows that the attack is happening."

I groaned and rubbed my face, and then I frowned. "Wait. Official head?"

"Neighvarro's always appointed one of their little scions to Shadowbolt, and they're almost always completely incompetent. The slightly less incompetent ones try for military command. And if somepony with half a brain shows up for the position, they usually don't last too long," Mare Do Well said grimly.

What I knew of Lighthooves and what I'd seen so far didn't mesh with her description of incompetence. "So then who is the *unofficial* head of Enclave Intelligence? It's Lighthooves, isn't it?"

"It doesn't matter," she replied firmly. "This has to happen."

"This... are you crazy?" I asked, gesturing to the screen. "Why does this have to happen?!"

"Because for two hundred years, the Enclave has been blind to the parasitic actions of the military and so complacent that they can't even see how the quality of life up here has decayed!" She tapped a key, and the main screen brought up a picture of a pegasus city that seemed to be falling apart, the buildings stretched and distorted. Only a few dozen pegasi seemed to be living in what were virtual cloud ruins. She hit another button and showed another city, again vast and colossal and again all but abandoned. Another showed cloud fields barely filled by weedy crops. And another showed a settlement slightly more intact but with sparking and crackling talismans that were wired and re-wired. "Every settlement that is not vitally important to the war effort suffers. Sons and daughters are sent to Neighvarro to serve and send a pittance back to their families. Command is fat and corrupt. It's time that the pegasus people see this for what it is: an untenable situation that must be ended sooner rather than later."

"You knew this attack was coming," I said in shock.

"Of course. A civil war's been inevitable for the last thirty years," Mare Do Well replied.

"Then you know about Lighthooves's bioweapon," I countered. "His missiles."

"Oh, yes," she laughed and pointed a hoof at me. "But you see, you're doing the exact same thing that Neighvarro has. A report of a viral weapon. A report of missiles. This must be evidence of an attack! And so they send their ships to threaten and rattle their sabers. But when it's revealed that the bioweapon doesn't infect a pegasus's neuroglobin and that the missiles are in fact scrap metal, then Enclave aggression will be clear. The democracy will be revealed for the sham that it is, and we can finally make the changes to the Enclave that were needed two centuries ago!"

I stared at the masked mare, then said quietly, "He adapted it."

For a second, the Lair was utterly silent. Even Monkeywrench and my friends had stopped talked and were listening in. "What?"

"He adapted it to infect pegasi," I said evenly.

"You... he..." the masked mare stammered as she pointed a hoof at me. "You're..."

"On the surface, I came across two places where he adapted the virus to infect pegasi. And the 'scrap metal missiles'... They're intact. I think that, with a little bit of effort, they could be made to fly again."

"On the surface..." Mare Do Well breathed softly. "Son of a mule..."

She began to rapidly tap the keys, and an instant later there was a ring. Then Lighthooves's voice came over the connection, faintly buzzing and tinny. "Yes, Grandmother?"

I froze and panned from the blank terminal to Mare Do Well, feeling the shooty look establishing itself on my face. What... the... fuck?!

"Legerdemain. I want a status update on the virus," Mare Do Well said.

"All samples are accounted for and ready to go," Lighthooves replied a little too evenly.

"And there is no chance that it's infectious to pegasi?" Mare Do Well pressed.

"None whatsoever," Lighthooves replied evenly.

Mare Do Well glanced over at me. "This is very important, Grandson. Very important. It is impossible for this virus to infect pegasi?"

Lighthooves said, in a buzzing voice of annoyance, "Why so concerned, Grandmother? We've forced the Enclave's hoof. Either they attack and are destroyed, or they don't attack and Thunderhead achieves its independence. The infectiousness of the virus is moot."

"Because if it is a threat to pegasi, then our legitimacy is shot!" Mare Do well shouted. "The rest of the Enclave will never make the changes needed if they think we're a rogue state!"

"The rest of the Enclave can buck themselves," Lighthooves said in a low, ominous voice. Mare Do Well stared up at the screen, her helmet's glowing eyes somehow seeming to grow wide in shock. "They cower and crawl up to whatever pony has the power. They fear and cringe because of Raptors and Thunderheads. They deserve the military. And, when their talismans fail and they start starving to death, they'll come to us happily."

Mare Do Well sat back hard.

"I thought the last time you fought with Neighvarro, they almost destroyed you with four Raptors?" I shouted.

"Oh? Hello, Security. Thank you for your distraction. If you hadn't killed the councilor and Stratus, then we never could have gotten our reserves back to the tower. A few more hours and everything will be ready."

"I didn't kill them. But I'm guessing you did," I growled. "And you didn't answer my question: why are you so sure you can destroy the Enclave when they have more than double the forces they brought last time?"

"Grandmother hadn't told you? It's quite simple. You see, the Core is a fortress, designed to

defend against air attacks from dragons and missiles. Yes, the tower itself has limited armament... but the tower is connected to the Core."

I had an image of a green beam of energy punching straight through Hightower. "Holy shit..." I breathed. "You can access those?!"

"Oh yes. We didn't use them last time; concerns about killing our own. This time, I'm afraid I simply don't give a damn." Lighthooves chuckled. "The Enclave has just lost its High General at Maripony. The rest of the leadership is in chaos. When a quarter of the fleet is blasted from the sky for threatening Thunderhead, it will never be able to endanger us again," Lighthooves said with complete confidence. "A few judicious applications of the virus, and what remains of the military will be busy dealing with outbreaks. A few more missiles should take care of Red Eye and any other surfacer threats. Thunderhead will be secure to usher in a new era and save Equestria, just like you wanted, Grandmother."

"Not like this, you fool. Not like this," Mare Do Well groaned. "You're making the same mistake she did."

"With you on top?" I growled dangerously.

"Of course not. I will be publicly tried and executed for crimes against Equinity. I expect my monsterdom will last for centuries, but I also expect that Thunderhead will be there for those centuries," Lighthooves answered.

"I'm going to stop you," I swore. "You're going to kill thousands."

"Tens of thousands, actually. Necessary sacrifices," he said dismissively. "I would have thought you'd be more interested in saving Morning Glory. You should probably tune in to the television." He sighed. "Good bye, Grandmother. I'm sorry that I deceived you. Your plan was a good one, but you were trying to save an Enclave not worth saving." Then the connection cut off.

"You fool. You damned fool." Monkeywrench came up behind her and put a hoof on her shoulder. "Saving lives doesn't mean ending them. I thought I taught you better."

I didn't have time for this. "What did he mean about Glory?"

Mare Do Well pushed some buttons with her hoof, and the central screen lit up. The screen was split between a cute mare and a live scene in Thunderhead. It showed the central ring park of the city, a stage, and a large statue of Rainbow Dash. Twenty-five power-armored ponies stood before an angry crowd of hundreds. Twenty-five more encircled a smaller group. There were all kinds of crazy tickers saying things like 'Neighvarro declares Martial Law in Thunderhead.', 'Accusations of bioterrorism from Neighvarro officials.', and 'Rumors of renewed Rainbow Dash sightings. Illegal cloning experiments in Thunderhead?'.

"Yes. Yes. We are getting word that both Councilor Stargazer and the director of Security have been murdered by Thunderhead terrorists. Several have been apprehended, and we've been told that they're going to be transferred to Raptors for transport back to Neighvarro," the mare said as she touched an earbloom. The peach reporter standing in front of the stage went silent a moment, then nodded again. "Apparently they're going to make a formal announcement any minute. There's some reports that the surfacer terrorists working with these ultranationalists are still at large."

She disappeared, replaced by a handsome, if vapid-looking, stallion. "Thank you, Sun Sprinkles. Keep us up to date." Then he turned to another camera, smiling banally. "Rumors of Thunderhead perfidy have existed since the establishment of the disarmament treaty a century ago, but never before have we received a clearer sign that our Enclave, our place of security, our sanctuary, is under attack.

Whether it be from the surface or our own, it is clear that unity must be preserved at any cost. This is Neighvarro News Network, keeping you up to date with news, fair and balanced. We'll be right back."

I turned away as a commercial for feather shampoo began to air. "Where is that park?" She didn't respond. After finding out that her own plan had been given a deadly twist, I could imagine how she must feel. I reached over and shook her hard. "Hey! That section of the park! Where is it?"

She raised her head. "Hmm... that's the Rainbow Dash memorial park."

"You think they have Glory there?" P-21 asked.

"I think it's likely. Enclave hates traitors, right? What better place to turn over a whole bunch of them?"

"But what about Lighthooves?" Rampage asked. "I mean, I know you love Glory, but aren't the lives of thousands more important?" The question hit me like a ton of bricks. Lighthooves had said he needed just a few more hours, which meant to me that he was doing something important and final. Fueling the missiles, perhaps? If I wasted time freeing Glory, his plans might come to fruition. But if didn't...

"Don't be ridiculous. I'll deal with my grandson myself," Mare Do Well said grimly. "I'll get you to the park and then go to the Tower."

"You can get in?" I asked in surprise.

She pulled off her hat, then reached under and unclipped something on her black and purple helmet. The eyes darkened, and then the armor hissed. An acrid stench escaped as the seal broke and the helmet detached. Beneath, I gaped at the mottled grayish-blue hide and the thinning polychromatic mane. Cloudy rose eyes met mine. The right side of her face was marred by three gouges running from her brow down past her eye and alongside her muzzle to her throat. "Duh," Rainbow Dash said. "It's my ministry, after all."

* * *

We all had a million questions and no time to ask them. I wanted to take her aside and talk all about the Pinkie Pie orb. Rampage just laughed in delight. P-21 was curious how she'd survived. Boo seemed to want to know where there was more Sparkle-Cola. Before any of that, though, Rainbow Dash busied herself picking up various supplies while Scotch Tape and Monkeywrench worked to quickly clear the Enclave block on my PipBuck; I was glad to have my E.F.S. up again. Only after that, when we began making our way down one of Rainbow Dash's secret passages, did she explain what she could to our varied curiosity.

"Fact is, when I left the Enclave, they sent my childhood friend to bring me back, preferably not breathing. Hell of a fight. Best one I was ever in. Got me this," she said as her wing touched the scars running along her face. "And the fact was that I couldn't kill her in the end, not after all my other friends were dead. She didn't have the same problem, though. Ripped me to pieces, and I ended up crashing into a balefire crater. She left me for dead, which to be fair, I was. I just didn't stay that way."

"Why?" I asked. "Why go on? Why dress up as Mare Do Well?"

Rainbow Dash's cloudy eyes dropped. "Well, when you're a ghoul, you have to do something to keep your marbles together. The fact was that the Enclave thought I was dead. I didn't see any reason to correct them on that. I had access to the Tower and to Thunderhead, so I made this my base of operations and tried to make up for... for failing my friends."

"You mean when the bombs fell?" P-21 asked, and she nodded.

"Did you try and stop it after all?" I asked lightly.

She looked at me sharply, then rolled her eyes. "Oh, right. The orb in the cell. You actually got it... ugh... Pinkie..." She shook her head. "Yeah, I did. As much as I could. By then, though, the war had its own momentum. I asked questions. I even tried to get Twilight to speak to the Princess. But something that I didn't know was what triggered the exchange. The zebras claimed that one of our megaspells went off in Roam. Then Cloudsdale went up. Then Maripony. Then everywhere else. The fact is, even though I knew the bombs were going to go off, I couldn't just stand on the roof of the palace and shout that the world was going to end. I would have been locked up as a nutcase."

"And Pinkie Pie erasing her memories couldn't have made it easier," I said.

"Sure. Even she didn't believe me. Which I think was the point. Whatever her prank was, I couldn't mess with it. She couldn't mess with it. She put everything into motion and then left. All I could do was carry out her instructions, even after all my friends died." She sighed and shook her head again. "I should have done more, earlier. Before Big Macintosh died. But I was too busy fighting for Equestria."

"Personally?" Rampage asked, and the ghoul smirked.

"Hell yeah. I wasn't going to be like Rarity and sit behind a desk or hold board meetings like Applejack. I got out there and did the work that needed to get done. We were operating behind the lines, gathering intelligence and sabotaging enemy action. It was glorious. And best of all, everypony thought I was just sitting in the Tower, twiddling my hooves and making photo ops. Ha!" She laughed. But her smile quickly faded. "Wasn't worth it in the end, though. Not by half."

"What wasn't?" Scotch Tape asked.

"The Ministry of Awesome. The ministries in general. When Luna and Scarface suggested them, I thought they were crazy. But then Twilight started having ideas. Then Fluttershy. Then Pinkie. Ways that we could help make things better for other ponies. They got into it, and I came along for the ride. Because that's what Loyalty does, right?" She shook her head. "Fact is, I should have spoken up. Luna wasn't worth what we gave up."

I felt a little shocked by that. "She was your Princess."

Rainbow Dash stopped walking and faced me. "When I came up with the Single Pegasus Project, it was going to be a way to help all of Equestria. We'd get more fighters to take the heat off the Earth Ponies, and we'd be able to help countless civilians. Do you know the first thing Princess Luna said when I proposed it to her?" I shook my head slowly and the ghoul grimaced. "She wanted to know how she could use the damned thing as a weapon! Throwing hurricanes and tornadoes at her enemies. She was glad for me to weaponize the frigging sky, and I had to grin and act like it was the awesomest thing since me." She bared her teeth, her filmy eyes glowing in agitation. "Fuck. Luna."

From the pain and rage in her eyes, this wasn't something I should argue. "So, since then you've been protecting the Wasteland?"

"Pretty much," Rainbow Dash replied as we resumed walking. "Trying to save who I could. I was a corpse already, so the radiation wasn't a problem. Lightning Dust had risen to the top of the martial government that would turn into the Grand Pegasus Enclave, so there was absolutely no way I could show my face there. There were a few ponies in the Tower who knew about me, though. We did what we could to nudge, cajole, blackmail, and otherwise convince the Enclave to pull their heads out from under their wings and do something. And I kept my eyes open for this 'LittlePip' who Pinkie said was

going to fix everything.”

“Did you ever tell... Spike?” I asked, and Rainbow Dash gave a lurch, pain crossing her face.

“No,” she said, her voice rasping barely above a whisper. “I was too ashamed. He loved Twilight, and I let her die... or melt into that goop thing... never quite knew which it was. If I’d told him... maybe... maybe...” but she slumped and shook her head. “I don’t know. I just wish things could have been different for him. For all of us.” She straightened a little and went on, “He’s known the myth of Mare Do Well, and I was fine with that.”

“So you really do come out and save ponies?” Rampage asked.

“When I can. I perfected hit and run techniques. Sometimes one shot from a mysterious stranger is all a pony needs to survive,” she said with a smile and shrug. “Otherwise, I was up here. It’s a really big Wasteland, above and below.”

“So... Lighthooves calling you ‘Grandmother’... that’s not literal, is it?” P-21 asked.

She laughed. “I was alone in my tower with a lot of sexy soldiers and plenty of tension to work out. And work it out I did.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “But no, no time for foals. Fact is, I ‘adopted’ all of my best fliers. They became the children I never had myself.” She shrugged. “Lighthooves and his brother were Fleetfoot’s daughter’s daughter’s etc.... so they’re my ‘grandchildren’. They grew up calling me ‘grandma’. It was cute for a while. Now?” She sighed and shrugged again.

“You should get in touch with Spike again,” I said. “He’d like to know that one of his friends is still around. And I think he’d be proud of what you’ve been doing.”

“Maybe,” Rainbow Dash said. Her tone told me that it wouldn’t be anytime soon. “Maybe someday when I can think of it without feeling like I let all our friends die.” I knew a little of what she was feeling. We reached another hidden door, and she pushed it open. The tunnel on the other side sloped sharply upward. “That should take you out into the park. Once you have Glory, you should leave. Let me clean up this mess; it’s my responsibility.”

“You know, I figured you’d have realized by now that I’m not going to walk away from this,” I replied.

The ghoul smirked and pulled her helmet back on. “I got to ask: is LittlePip anything like you?”

“Um.” I frowned. “She’s a lot more sane. And cute.”

“Pff. Sane’s boring. Still, I look forward to meeting her sometime,” Rainbow Dash said. “Try to stay out of trouble.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that Blackjack can,” P-21 said.

Rainbow Dash started away, but Rampage rushed up to her. “Wait! Wait wait wait!” She moved in front of her and then grinned. “I gotta know... is that your natural mane color?” Rainbow stared at her with those impassive purple eyepieces, then stepped past her. “Oh, come on! That’s a question for the ages!” Rampage called after her. “You know this is going to keep me up all night!” With a shimmer, Mare Do Well disappeared, and Rampage slumped. “Come on, I gotta know...”

“Some mysteries will forever remain such,” P-21 said sagely, drawing a giggle from Scotch Tape.

“So what is the next step?” Rampage asked, then grinned. “Oooh! Oooh! Wait! Let me guess. It’s *not* going up there and killing everypony!”

"Yup," I replied sardonically.

"So how are we going to get Glory back?" P-21 asked as he readied Persuasion, checking the sights and inspecting the barrel.

"We're going to go up there and beat the snot out of them short of killing them till we get her back. Completely different plan," I said defensively.

Rampage gaped at me. "Blackjack, killing is a *lot* easier, especially since it's what they'd do to us! I mean, be reasonable! Slaughter is a perfectly sensible action at times."

"Not when I need to beg General Chaser not to attack," I answered.

P-21 frowned as he tugged his hat back. "There's also something bugging me. Lighthooves wanted the Enclave to attack, right? No problem there. What I don't understand is how he's going to get Thunderhead to back him. I mean, he is a terrorist with a biological weapon at this point. Not exactly somepony the masses get behind."

Pinkie had said to remember what he'd done to Glory. Betrayed? That was a given. Lied? Nothing new about that. There was something. Some trick he hadn't pulled yet. He'd turned Neighvarro against Thunderhead. He needed some way to turn Thunderhead against Neighvarro.

But what? All he'd done to Glory was brand her and make her somepony for everypony to...

Oh, shit.

"We have to move. Now," I said sharply. If I was right... things were about to get a whole lot uglier. I scrambled up the slope, my friends following behind me.

"Are we still going for your wussy 'beat them up' plan? Or have you come to your senses?" Rampage yelled after me.

"We're going with the 'Save Glory and then get the Neighvarro the hell out of here before they get killed and Storm Chaser comes in to save her soldiers' plan!" I ended at a grate and kicked it open, emerging into a green park.

And it was filled with ponies. A thousand, maybe more. They were angry and scared, but they had the numbers. All they needed was a match, and Lighthooves was holding it.

At the stage further along the park, rainbow projectors had created an immense holographic image of Captain Afterburner as she gleefully informed the crowd of the terrorists found in the Sky Striker family. The clueless red mare seemed to be missing that calling a war hero a traitor and his children terrorists was definitely not winning hearts and minds. Fortunately, the sight of my friends and me was parting the crowd enough that we could make our way towards the stage. Dusk, Moonshadow, and Glory were all wearing bright orange jumpsuits with hoods. It'd be impossible for them to run and hide in the crowd.

When Afterburner saw us, the red mare grinned broadly. "And here, just as I promised, are the final culprits! Security and her friends, surfacer savages who conspired with the Striker family to murder both the councilor and the Director of Security, Stratus."

The crowd, however, was having a decidedly different reaction. Perhaps it was the advertisements. Perhaps it was the fact that we were approaching the stage rather than running. There were grins, whistles, and cheers. A small group of mares began to chant 'Twenty-One!' and others asked where LittlePip and Calamity were. Captain Afterburner's sneer faltered. "What is wrong with you

people!? She's a murderer and a killer! Arrest her!"

"No!" came a shout from the stage as an armored pegasus launched into the air. He removed his helmet, and Boomer yelled out. "Don't believe her! Blackjack isn't a murderer. I don't know who killed the councilor, but it wasn't her!"

"Arrest him! Gross insubordination!" Afterburner shrieked. Three pegasi launched themselves up to tackle him, but they failed to drag him to the stage.

I reached the steps of the stage and started ascending. Lighthooves had probably planned on me being here. Doubt. Confusion. It was feeding into the anger and fear. But I had to head this off. "I didn't kill Captain Hoarfrost or her formation, even when they were helpless in front of me. I am not your enemy!"

"Lies!" Afterburner screamed, then launched herself at me. Call me blasé, but she wasn't Dawn. She wasn't even wearing power armor. Some of the Enclave who *were* armored moved to grab me, but Rampage intercepted them.

"Bloodbath, Blackjack. Try it sometime!" she grunted before heaving them off me. Two more dove at me along with Afterburner. That I was unarmed seemed to be keeping them from just spraying me and the crowd behind me, something that would have done Lighthooves's work for him. *Please, don't get any more stupid.*

I teleported away to where Afterburner had been standing, and immediately I was magically magnified in the air above me. "Everypony listen to me!" I yelled, and then...

Then...

They were. Thousands of eyes all on me, Thunderheader and Neighvarro alike. "I... I... this... we... ah..." Suddenly everything I needed to say was dribbling out of my head. I couldn't even pay attention to the cards a little purple unicorn and little yellow pegasus were holding up in my head. I felt the silence growing tighter, tenser.

Then I saw a pony in the crowd. He wasn't really there. The pale stallion in the wide-brimmed hat in the front row just smiled at me, his watery pale eyes believing in me.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and then...

"I know that you're all scared. I know that you're angry. You have good reasons to be, both Neighvarro and Thunderhead alike. But I want you to think back. Two hundred years ago, we were just as scared and angry as you are now. That led to a war that nearly destroyed everypony. It killed countless people, pony, zebra, griffin, and otherwise. Now, today, there are ponies who are using that same fear and anger to start bloodshed like the world hasn't seen in two centuries!

"I came from that world below. It's a terrible place. The life you have here in the sky is better than anything down below. But you cannot keep that life through fear, indifference, and hate. It's time to do better. It's time for calm and rationality to win the day for once, rather than hate and violence."

I pointed a hoof behind me. I had no idea if I was pointing in the right direction or not. "There's a pony in the tower over there that's a real threat, to both Neighvarro and Thunderhead. I know you have little love or reason to trust, but I am asking you... I am begging you... please don't let your home become the Wasteland."

Suddenly there was a loud squeal, and my image flickered. Then it coalesced into the white-armored image of Lighthooves. "Blackjack is correct. There is a pony who is a threat. A pony with

a biological weapon capable of killing countless innocent ponies. But perhaps it should be known how this weapon came to be. A year ago, a virus was discovered on the surface... a terrible biological plague that, thankfully, miraculously, did not infect pegasi. This virus came to the attention of High General Harbinger, who ordered me to seek a method to convert it for use against our own people! A fitting weapon against ponies who seek independence, freedom, and security. Well, I did as he instructed under threat of death, but now that Harbinger's weapon is completed, I cannot give it up to him to be used against us."

The speakers drowned out all but his rising, dramatic voice. "The Neighvarro say Blackjack killed Councilor Stargazer, but I have sworn affidavits from Doctor Morningstar that a public meeting was scheduled today and was changed only when Director Stratus informed the Counselor that a midnight meeting was called for at the Striker residence. I have evidence taken from the director's terminal of burst transmissions to Neighvarro, confirming that their weapon was prepared and ready to be shipped over. And I have evidence that Captain Hoarfrost's own ponies slew Director Stratus in a bloody attempt to silence him and to bury this evidence."

Oh shit. What?

"There is a time that a pony can be silent no more! A time when a pony must take a stand against the unabashed evil that threatens their home. A time where the wrongness of others must be rejected and thrown out! That time is now! I say to you, Thunderhead, my home! Rise up and send these miserable dogs of war back to Neighvarro with their tail between their legs!"

For an instant, there was a horrible silence. It was like being on the *Seahorse* in the rapids, seconds before the boat made its terrible plunge. A rational pony would have heard that silence and perceived the threat in it. A wise pony would have left.

Afterburner was neither rational nor wise.

"Traitors!" she screamed as she drew her gun.

The crowd screamed back. It was a roar of a thousand voices, incomprehensible and mad. Somepony fired, maybe Afterburner or maybe somepony in the crowd, but there was a scream. It was the scream of the Wasteland, and it had come for us.

I'd failed. All I could do was get to Glory and her family as the pegasi of Thunderhead swarmed up in a great, vengeful cloud. One on one, they had no hope against the power armor, but these ponies were ten to one. Fifty to one. Unfortunately, I couldn't fly, and I was swept to the side. I heard one of my friends scream my name.

Afterburner, however, still had one last play to make. She swooped through the crowd, landed beside Glory, and seized her, pulling her into the projector's pickup area. "Get back! Get back! We have Rainbow Dash!" The sheer madness of the statement seemed to make the mob pause. "Get back, I say! I know you damned traitors love the rainbow-maned bitch! Get back, or I'll break her fucking neck. See?" And she bit the hood and yanked it off.

Purple mane cascaded out from beneath the orange hood. Immense lavender eyes opened and looked out at the crowd. A lovely face that I hadn't seen in so long bathed in the sunlight and brought a smile to my face, despite everything.

"Ahhh..." Afterburner gaped at the mare who obviously wasn't Rainbow Dash, and then she lunged forward and yanked the bag off of Moonshadow and then Dusk. Looking over her shoulder at the crowd, she grinned desperately from ear to ear. "Ah... whoopsie?"

Ha. Ha. Ha.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: I'd like to thank Bro, Hinds, and Swicked for putting up with an absolutely grueling chapter. This one turned out more of a pain than I ever expected, and I am thankful for them taking the time to brush out several with Gdocs being a complete nightmare. It'll be nice to be finished, put everything on FimFic and be done. Couple more chapters to go.

In other news, I am still unemployed. The part of the federal government that does background checks is apparently 'non-essential' so until Washington pulls its head out of its ass, I am broke. Any help right now would be supremely appreciated. Tips are through Paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com. If things don't straighten out soon... well, hopefully I can snag some seasonal work here in vegas. Otherwise I don't know what I'm going to do.

I'd like to thank everypony that has stayed with the story this long. It really means a lot to me that I've done something folks enjoy. Comments through Cloudsville are appreciated too. I want to get these last chapters done well. Hugs to Kkat for making FoE and hugs to everyone for reading along. Thank you.