

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 62: Between the Wolf and the Lion, Part One

"I've learned that one of the joys of friendship is sharing your blessings, but when there's not enough blessings to go around, having more than your friends can make you feel pretty awful. So, though I appreciate the invitation, I will be returning both tickets to The Grand Galloping Gala."

Thunderhead rumbled; the entire city vibrated with the clamor of thousands of ponies roused by the timely interruption by Lighthooves. I wondered if he'd been wearing the Perceptitron, watching me give my speech for patience and tolerance before twisting it with his claims that Neighvarro had ordered him to adapt the plague. Worse, between the efforts of Dawn and himself, any pony in Thunderhead who could have put the brakes on this was dead. Now Thunderhead roared with anger and fear. I knew that most of the ponies here didn't want a fight, but they were being dragged along by those who did.

Just like two centuries ago.

Glass smashed in the distance, and flocks of panicked ponies swirled like shattered rainbows to the safety of their homes... at least, I hoped their homes were safe. Smoke started to fill the air; I didn't want to imagine what up here could burn. The acrid smell made me choke. All across the city, the flickering signs that had shown advertisements for casual enjoyments now showed static or giant red warnings to stay at home and 'shelter in place', whatever that meant. From the confused cries and stunned features of many on the street, I wasn't the only one disoriented. Some oblivious ponies even seemed annoyed by this interruption to their daily routine.

We'd gotten out of the park easily enough; we weren't all big black flying targets in Neighvarro armor, after all. Boomer was a bloody mess; his own fellows had been particularly rough on him before the fighting had even started. I suspected that he was now a de facto Dashite. The crowd let us pass, and we made our way back towards the Striker estate. Afterburner, however, had managed to escape from the city by the hairs on her tail, darting over the park's rim, through the ventral opening, and out of sight. Most of her soldiers, battered but otherwise intact, managed to withdraw before Intelligence ponies in their fancy new white power armor arrived. But they'd be back.

And there'd be hell to pay.

As we walked along the streets, violence was breaking out as gangs of ponies targeted anypony they could accuse of being 'loyalist'. The thin skin of civility had been scraped away from Thunderhead, and all the nasty acrimonious sentiments, grudges, and disdain that had lain beneath were manifesting in the mob. The leaders, whether they'd been selected ahead of time or were simply exploiting the opportunity, gave Lighthooves what he'd needed: chaos and cover. I'd thought he'd set himself up as a martyr to discredit Neighvarro; I hadn't anticipated he'd unleash a bloodbath first.

"Get off her! Now!" I snapped at a half dozen stallions and mares who'd dragged a wild-eyed pegasus from her shop. Somepony had started a fire inside. When my shouts didn't get their attention, I fired Vigilance. That worked. "Get your hooves off her!"

"She's a sympathizer!" growled a stallion, his coat perfectly matching the color of green foal poop.

"All... all I said was that we should calm down!" the yellow shop owner said as she tried to protect herself.

"Liar! You said we should let Neighvarro in to investigate! You know they'd just take over," the stallion spat at her. "You've always been soft on them. How much have they been paying you? You've

been spying for them, haven't you?"

"No! I haven't! I haven't!" the mare screamed.

I would have liked to explain things. Tell them what was going on and try to come to some kind of understanding... but frankly, I didn't have the time or a clue where to start. "Rampage," I said sharply, and she blinked as she looked over at me. "Don't kill them. Just bruise them. A lot."

Rampage blinked at me, then narrowed her eyes at the half dozen. "Yeah. I can do bruising."

"What are you talking about? Stay back!" the poop-green stallion warned, suddenly aware that violence was about to be employed upon him. With a scream, Rampage charged, leaping horizontally like a red and white striped missile, then turning herself sideways midair to crash into the six and scatter them over the prone shopkeeper. The assaulted assaulters tried to fly away, but Rampage somehow entangled all of them, thumping, kicking, and biting whatever limbs she could, be they wing or hoof.

Glory rushed to the shopkeeper's side. She'd shed the bright orange jail clothing, and I tried to avoid staring for too long at her beauty. If only all this havoc wasn't going on... The only thing that marred her delightful appearance was the gray stump of her absent wing. I wondered which she preferred now: her old body back, or being able to fly. "Stay still," she said as she examined the prone mare. She carefully checked her eyes. "Dilated and anisocoric. Blood from the ears. Can you tell me your name?"

"I just... I just wanted them to calm down..." she muttered in a daze before passing out.

"She needs medical attention. She might have a concussion," Glory said sharply. Once again, I wished I had healing spells in my bag of tricks. Her purple eyes turned towards Boomer. "You need to get to a hospital, too. If you don't have broken ribs, I'll eat my mane."

"I'm fine," Boomer muttered, but from his wheezing and the way he pressed his wings hard to his side, I could tell he wasn't.

Twister dropped from the skies, minus her power armor. "There you are. I was stuck on frigging crowd control at the upper aperture," she said sharply. "City's gone nuts. Storm Chaser's ordered a recall."

Storm Chaser? Wait! There was still a pony left who could possibly stop all this. "I need to talk to her."

Twister blinked at me. "Hoarfrost reported that you killed Stratus. She's not going to listen to a thing you have to say."

"I still have to try," I replied. "Face to face."

"What, is your broadcaster broken?" Rampage asked.

I shook my head. "The only way she might believe me is if I'm there in person," I said with a frown, and then I looked around at the city. "But... I don't know what to do about this."

If the Tower really could fire the Core's defensive weapons, it would be an absolute nightmare. There was one chance I could think of to stop it, but I had no clue if it would work or what the repercussions might be. If Chaser kept the Raptors away, we wouldn't have to find out.

"I think I do," Glory kept her eyes on the mare, then gave me a nervous glance. "We need to split up."

"After spending so much time together?" P-21 said with a small smile.

"Yes, but I think the only way we'll get this done is if we separate," Glory said as she gazed around at her home city falling apart.

Rampage poked her head up from the pile of groaning pegasi and spat out a bright wad of fecal-green hair. "Split up? You never split the party. What are you, crazy? When has that ever worked well for us?" She pointed at me with a hoof. "Do you remember what happened the last time we split the party? Smooze? Batpony shenanigans? Balefire bomb blows bits of Hightower across the landscape while flaming ghouls tried to kill us all?" Then she blinked and grinned. "Oh yeah. Never mind. Go on."

But I regarded Glory and asked, "What's the plan?" If she had an idea, it was better than me muddling through.

Glory glanced at me; her eyes played host to dancing doubt and uncertainty, but then they hardened. Being Rainbow Dash for a bit seemed to have done her some good. "I need to get them to a hospital. Then I need to talk to Doctor Morningstar. This plague is too great a threat to the skies and the surface. If we can make a cure, then Lighthooves's bioweapon is useless." She sighed. "If I only had a sample. Some contaminated food from Stable 99 would do, but that's been flushed."

I blinked. When you wander the Wasteland, you tend to accumulate a lot of stuff in your saddlebags. I checked my inventory, sat down, and began to dig through my bags, tossing stuff on the street beside me. I stuck my head and hooves inside the enchanted bag and rifled around before I let out a whoop and levitated out a bowl of extremely stale and crumbled grass chips. The magic of my saddlebags had kept them intact despite everything I'd put them through.

"You've had those since 99?" Glory asked weakly.

"Yeah. I kinda forgot about them down in the bottom of my bags. Will these work?" I asked.

She threw her hooves around me. "If they were made from the contaminated recycler, I think so!" she said with a smile, then carefully tucked them under her wing.

Rampage left the heap of groaning ponies. "Wow, don't you ever clean out your saddlebag?"

Scotch Tape stuck her head in and started to rifle around. "What else does she got in here?" But then P-21 bit her tail and dragged her away. "Hey!"

"If Blackjack has contaminated food in her bag, I don't want to know what else is in there," P-21 said firmly. I felt a little insulted; my bags weren't any dirtier than my room had been.

Sweeping them into her own saddlebags, Glory continued, "I'll get them to the doctor, and we'll see if we can get him working on a cure. Even if it takes weeks to develop, a start's better than having nothing at all." Then she looked at her siblings and addressed Moonshadow first, "You need to get home, find Lambent and Lucent, and get them to your astronomy lab. That's going to be more secure."

She turned to Dusk, but the mare raised a hoof. "Save it, little sis. I'm not going to any hospital."

"Yes, you are. Just not here and now," Glory retorted. Dusk appeared a little nonplussed, and her sibling went on, "I know you're not going to sit this out, so you feel up to a flight?"

"Long as it's not all the way out to Neighvarro. Why?" Dusk asked in confusion. Glory stepped closer to her, talking in low tones. Then Dusk blinked, smiled, and actually gave Glory a hug. "I'll be back soon." And with that, she flew off, a bit wobbly but still airborne.

Glory paused, chewing her lower lip as her eyes dropped in doubt. "Hey, don't stop now," I said

with a grin. "You're on a roll. What's next?"

"Scotch Tape, P-21, and Boo come with me. You go with Rampage and Twister. She can commandeer a skywagon and get you to meet with General Chaser," Glory said, and the lavender pegasus nodded. Then Glory turned to P-21 and gave a smile. "Unless you'd rather go with Blackjack?"

P-21 glanced at me and then at his daughter, clearly torn between taking her somewhere safe and staying with me. "It's okay, go with her," I told him. P-21 nodded once but clearly wasn't happy with this separation. If only I knew what his answer had been.

"What? But I want to go with Blackjack!" Scotch Tape wailed.

"No," I said. "It's too dangerous. If Storm Chaser doesn't listen to me, then it's going to get ugly. Rampage can't die. You can," I told the filly firmly. She sulked at once; I could see she was upset, and I reached out and rubbed her mane. "Besides, somepony needs to take care of your dad." That mollified her just a little, but I could tell she still wanted to come with me. Then I glanced around, checking to see who was close. P-21 was watching the half dozen vigilantes as they limped away, and so I ducked my head to her and whispered, "Did he say yes?"

"Huh?" Scotch Tape asked in bafflement. P-21 glanced over, and a little immature Blackjack stomped her hooves in a huff inside my head.

"Does he... I mean..."

"Blackjack?" Glory asked, with P-21 looking on at me from behind her.

Damn it. "Ugh... Nevermind..." I groaned as I rose and turned to Glory and moved away from really important questions to issues of survival and whatnot. "What if something goes wrong?"

She lifted her PipBuck. "You have my tag. I'll have my radio on. If you need us to do something, just ask. We'll meet back at Moonshadow's lab if this works out. If not, back at Star House." That was a chilling thought... that things might go so badly that... no. I wouldn't think about it. Fortunately, I was good at *that*. I embraced and kissed her ardently, and she melted against me. Somehow, kissing her as Rainbow Dash just hadn't felt as good.

Not at all like this.

"Take care of yourself. I finally got back my cute gray mare. I don't want anything else to happen to her," I murmured in her ear.

"Knowing my luck, the professor's killing joke will get out and turn me into a stallion," she muttered, then kissed my neck... then gave me a little bite.

"Hey. That'd clear up a whole lot of problems with you, me, and P-21," I said softly, then watched her blush profusely. P-21 and Scotch didn't seem all that amused by it, though.

"No thank you," she said firmly. "I've had enough of being somepony else. I'd just rather be me," she murmured in my ear. Now there was the beautiful mare I adored.

"Ahem..." Rampage said loudly. I glanced over at everypony staring at us. "If you two need a little time out, I'm sure we can get everyone to put this civil war on hold for fifteen minutes so you two can have a quickie."

I rubbed my chin. "You really think so?" I stared speculatively at Glory. "I might be able to make it work with ten." I saw the resigned smile on her face, looked over at P-21 shaking his head, and noticed

Rampage's nonplussed expression. "Oh. You were being sarcastic. Right. No quickie." Damn it.

Rampage stared at me for a long moment, then smirked. "Well, it's official! Normal Glory makes Blackjack dumber."

We finally began to part ways when Boo suddenly darted for me. She slid on her belly and grabbed my rear hoof in a bear hug. "Boo? No! Go with Glory. Glory, Boo!" She stared up at me with wide pale eyes, and I sighed, turned around, and ruffled her mane. "It'll be dangerous." Boo wrapped her legs around my neck and held me tight. I sighed.

"Oh, bring the good luck charm along. Maybe her freakish luck will get me killed," Rampage said with a snort. I sighed, closing my eyes.

Then I smiled. "Okay. You're with me, Boo." The blank beamed and nuzzled my cheek.

As we turned away, Scotch Tape lunged. "Take me too!" she shouted, forehooves outstretched to hug my hind leg too, when suddenly she jerked to a halt and landed on her face. I raised my gaze to P-21 biting the filly's tail.

"Come on," he muttered around a mouthful of blue hair, and then met my eye. "Take care of yourself. See you soon."

"Noooo! Don't leave me with Glory! She's booooooring now!" Scotch Tape cried out as she was dragged away, hooves scratching four lines in the floor. Glory and P-21 helped the concussed shopkeeper mare to her hooves and slipped her on Glory's back. Glory sagged a little but then gave a little heave and carried her along. The filly gave a wail, "Blackjack!"

"Stay safe," I said as they departed, then turned and made my own way.

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"You know this is a bad idea," Twister shouted over her shoulder as she bore me through the air to the west. It wasn't fair that today was an absolutely beautiful day. The sky seemed exceptionally clear and the most perfect blue I could ever have imagined. If it wasn't for the ominous Tower rising from the green eye, I would have loved to have spent an afternoon just dozing in the sun. Given that Lighthooves probably didn't need me anymore, we gave the Tower and its defenses a wide berth.

"Blackjack *exce/s* at bad ideas. The only way this could get any better would be if we got her drunk," Rampage replied as we flew towards the Raptors. The fleet was arranged in an arc around the perimeter of the valley, and unless I'd forgotten how to count, they'd picked up two more. "Then she'd probably commandeer one of those ships and crash it into the others by accident. While singing... and likely geld somepony for good measure, while she's at it."

"That only happened once. Or twice. Shoot, I can't even remember anymore... but that's beside the point!" I flushed and tried to refocus. "You told them we were coming, right?" I yelled to Twister, keeping my head down a little and not looking over the edge of the skywagon. Looking out was fine. Looking up... okay. For some reason the direction of down gave me a sensation like a hook pulling me towards a messy, smashy end.

"Twice. But we could be swarmed by a squad of power armor any second," she said, gazing out at the black specks that hovered in wedges around us.

"Relax. We're armed," Rampage said as she reached into a basket and pulled out a brownish-gray orb sprouting strange little tendrils with a stalk coming out of the top. According to Rampage, it tasted something like a turnip mixed with motor oil. I had to admit, it was tastier than most

food in the sky. We hadn't had time to be picky with our source of transportation and had ended up grabbing the turnip wagon. "If one gets too close..." She grabbed a pair of stalks and started swinging them wildly around her body making strange zebraesque 'waaaah' noises.

Twister glanced back and, even though she wore her own power armor again, I could almost visualize her rolling her eyes. "They don't even need power armor. They could use a turret to blast us to pieces. Or vaporize us outright with a disintegration bolt. I'd rather not be green goop, if I can help it."

"Relax. General Chaser doesn't want a bloodbath. She'll talk to me." Of course, after the talk she might try to execute me, lock me up, or ignore me, but she'd listen first.

"General Chaser's not the only pony you need to worry about," Twister said, looking up at a Raptor, its black metal armor detailed with thin crimson lines along the edges. I could barely make out the name *Sirocco* on the side. "Captain Afterburner's right there, and she does *not* like you."

"She can get in line," I replied. There wasn't much that I could do about it now, anyway, as we approached the *Castellanus*. Somepony had to stop Lighthooves. If I could stall things for a day or two, long enough for Thunderhead to calm down and Rainbow Dash to get him out of the Tower, then we could negotiate a peaceful settlement. But Lighthooves was getting ready to do... something... and if he really could use the Core's defenses... well... I didn't want to see it.

I noticed Boo staring behind us. I glanced back towards the Tower, wondering if he was spying on me with the Perceptitron, and then saw it. A tiny flash of flame towards the top of the Tower. "What the..." I said, rising a little as a white thread snaked its way through the air directly towards the row of Raptors... and us... almost straight at us! "Look out! Dive!" I shouted as I grabbed Rampage.

I don't know if it was shot at us or if it was simply my rotten luck, but the missile streaked by almost faster than I could see. Almost as fast, the air filled with countless green bolts of energy as the Enclave tried to shoot it down. We were buried in turnips as Twister followed my advice far more literally than I liked and dove, getting clear of the field of fire. When she straightened out, I popped my head clear and spun my head around wildly. "Where'd it go? Did they get it?"

They had. A rain of smoke and luminescent green particles drifted towards the cloud layer... behind the Raptors. One missile and it had very nearly gotten past them. "Wow. That was close," Rampage said.

"Too close," I said, shivering. "Was that directed at us?"

"Probably not," Twisted replied. "Maybe a test fire. Glad they got it."

I pressed my brow to the side of the cart. "Scary," I muttered.

"Oh, please," Rampage snorted, rolling her eyes. "If you want really scary, think of this: what if that thing wasn't moving at top speed?"

"Thanks, Rampage. Thanks a lot," I muttered, not able to get the thought out of my head.

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Our reception was waiting for us in the landing bay of the *Castellanus*. Two dozen power-armored pegasi were arranged in a semicircle around our wagon. This time, the general herself wore armor as well. It appeared to be a well-broken-in suit, the enamel scuffed in places from real use. The only ornamentation was a wing-flanked trio of small golden lightning bolts on her helmet, which was hung by her side. She didn't step forward to greet me. "I must confess. I hadn't expected see you again under these circumstances."

I knew my response would be one of the most important I'd ever make. I took a deep breath and a step forward. Twenty beam weapons hummed in response, and I froze. "It's a trap."

"Mmmmm," was all she said in reply, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Lighthooves has access to the Core's weapon systems. I've seen them fire right through a reinforced building," I said, panning my gaze from one to the next. "Look, I didn't kill Councilor Stargazer or Director Stratus," I began to hear a pleading note in my voice that I didn't like. It was a tone that I usually only used right before I got in a lot of trouble.

"Of course," she answered, slow and evenly. "That is exactly what you would say if you were working with Lighthooves to secure Thunderhead independence."

Oh crap. "What?"

"It's the most logical conclusion," she answered in that most dreadful voice. "Councilor Stargazer was a spineless accommodationist. Director Stratus a loyalist. You, the most dangerous pony I've seen in decades, show up from the surface and kill them both. Rumors of a Rainbow Dash clone draws in a crowd, and then you make a wonderful and impassioned speech that is then brilliantly co-opted by Lighthooves at the perfect moment, turning the city against us. Now that we prepare to send in our wings to secure the city, you appear to warn us that our enemy has firepower capable of destroying us. We stay away, and Thunderhead prepares itself for civil war. Meanwhile, Lighthooves prepares missiles capable of striking at our homes with a horrifying contagion."

"Shit," Rampage said as she stared at me with awe. "That is slick, Blackjack. I mean, normally your M.O. is just to crash through things like a drunken brahmin, but this is some evil genius shit."

"I suspect it was Lighthooves that came up with the plan," General Storm Chaser said coolly. "I admit, I was fooled at first. All that talk of doing the right thing. Of saying you're not a soldier. Quite convincing. You're far more than just a pawn, Blackjack. You are a queen, and I would be a fool not to remove you from the board."

Why did everypony have to keep making chess references? I didn't even play the game! "Then why the hell did I come back here in person?" I retorted.

"Overconfidence?" Storm Chaser answered with a small frown. "Or perhaps you wanted a chance to eliminate me from the board. Just as you did Stargazer and Strat--"

I sat down, threw my head back, and screamed as loud as I possibly could. Into that scream, I put in weeks of frustration, annoyance, and sheer disgust with everything I had been trying to do. "I am trying to save your fucking life! And their lives! Everypony I can. It's the only thing that's kept me sane since I left my stable! And you know what? I'm starting to think Rampage was right!" The striped pony blinked in amazement as I began to pace ignoring the guns trained on me. "What the fuck am I doing? You'd think that after a while I would have finally figured it out! I keep trying to save ponies, and fucking it up. My home! The Fluttershy Medical Center. Zebras. Chapel. Twice! I should do like Rampage says, try to kill everypony, and then end up saving everyone! My incompetence will save the Wasteland!" I pointed a hoof at the general. "All I want to do is save your lives, and save the lives of every pegasus caught in the crossfire! Got it? That's my motivation. You're accusing me of working with Lighthooves when the plague he's using infected my stable. I had to gas them! Everypony I knew! I don't want anypony, ever, to have to do that again! So put your damned suspicions away and work with me because otherwise I got nothing to fall back on but the Rampage plan and then we're all *fucked*!"

The general pursed her lips as she just stared at me for a very long and silent minute. Rampage waited like a steel trap ready to launch herself at everypony and let the mayhem begin. Finally, the

general said in slow, even tones, "You are either the smoothest, most dangerous operative I have ever met or the unluckiest spawn of a mule in the history of Equestria. Or worse, you might be both." She fell silent again for another long pause. "The secretaries," she said slowly and evenly. "The secretaries were killed."

I blinked at this jump as the general turned away. "Killing the security ponies was one thing. That's understandable. Killing Stratus too, understandable. But why would you kill the secretaries in the office? That's something I couldn't understand. The surveillance and response network were both down. So why kill the secretaries if they couldn't sound an alarm? It'd take time, give Stratus a chance to get away or for help to arrive. But somepony did. They eliminated all the eyewitnesses to the murder."

"They didn't want anypony alive to say it wasn't me," I answered.

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Damn, what Lighthooves could have been if he'd been loyal..."

"So you believe me?" I asked.

"No," she replied flatly. "But I suspect you slightly less than I did before. Slightly." She looked out the bay door at the nearest Raptor. "Regardless of your warning, we're going to have to move the fleet in."

"I told yo--" I began, but she cut me off.

"Yes, and while I am skeptical, I haven't discounted your warning. However, we need to move closer if we want a chance of intercepting any missiles fired from the Tower. There's a critical window of fifteen seconds where the missile is accelerating where we can shoot it down before it reaches top speed. Otherwise, our interception chance narrows dramatically. And we still need to get Thunderhead pacified. Neighvarro is bucking mad, and I've been exceptionally 'flexible' in interpreting their orders. One councilor is demanding we bombard Thunderhead till it surrenders. The bloody old fool completely ignored the true threat to himself."

I doubted Afterburner or Hoarfrost would have much problem with that. "I believe Lighthooves when he says he can access the Core's weapons. Somepony I know corroborated it."

"That warning alone could save many lives," she answered. "You and your friends, however, will be spending your time in the brig."

Rampage groaned. "Why does everypony keep trying to throw Blackjack in to jail? It never works!"

The general scowled at Rampage. "You are--"

"No. My turn. She got to rant. You got to monologue. My turn," she said as she jumped out of the cart. "The worst thing you can do right now is take Blackjack off the field. She wants to make sure all of you live. I don't know why... personally, I would have killed all of you just for fun. Seems like a thrilling challenge, and Big Daddy could never top me killing a Raptor with my bare hooves. But Blackjack wants you all to live. Lighthooves clearly wants *you* to kill *her*."

"Why would you say that?" the general asked with a scowl.

"Duh! Lighthooves didn't turn our little turnip wagon into a flaming cinder. You know he's watching Blackjack. If he killed her, then everypony who heard her little speech in the park will wonder what the fuck is up with him. But if she comes here trying to prevent the violence and you kill her, or lock her up so she dies when he blasts this Raptor to dust, then you guys are the villains," she said with a flick of her barbed tail. "You don't want to trust her, fine. Send her on her way. I'm pretty sure she'll head

straight to the Tower to take care of your little problem for you. But if you lock her up, all you're doing is tying up an asset that is opposed to Lighthooves."

The general sighed. "After some of the reports I'm getting from out west..." she began before glowering at me. "Very well. You and your friends can come with me. I don't want to set you loose just yet, but I won't remove you from play, either. Still, if you turn out to be an assassin, I should be cremated as the Enclave's greatest fool."

"Oh please," I said with a smile and a roll of my eyes. "If I were here to kill you I would have teleported directly behind you and cut your head off or blasted four magic bullets down your throat. Heck, I could probably just jump and crush you under my hooves right now!" I chuckled, and Rampage guffawed. Then I became aware that we were the only two laughing and it tapered off to a slack grin. "Um. But, um. I'm not... So. Yeah..."

"This way," the general said as she turned and started into the Raptor, then stopped and glanced back at me with an uncertain frown at presenting her back before continuing into the ship. Some of the soldiers fell in behind her while others took positions around the launch bay.

Rampage snorted beside me. "You know what, Blackjack? I don't think it's just Glory. Nopony up here has a decent sense of humor." She stalked along next to me. "I blame the altitude, personally."

"Not now," I admonished.

"See? It's even affecting you." Rampage grinned. I groaned, covering my face with a hoof. "You want me to get out of your mane, go over here, and kill somepony?" she asked, gesturing to the side and a pair of alarmed pegasus stallions. She glanced at them and grinned. "Oh stop. It'll be fun. Nothing like murder and mayhem to living things up."

"Dirt pony barbarian," one of the stallions muttered.

"Yup. And don't you forget it," Rampage replied. Then she reached over and, before he could dart away, grabbed him and kissed him hard. His eyes shot wide and his wings popped out to either side. "Want me to show you how we get down and dirty on the surface?"

The general wasn't stopping, and neither was I. "Don't, Rampage. No means no," I added as we headed up some stairs, leaving Rampage with the dozens of armored soldiers in the launch bay. "Feel free to shoot her in the head if she doesn't listen," I added to the soldiers. Then I glanced over at Boo, who'd been walking along beside me, looking back at the squirming stallion. "Don't watch, Boo. She's a bad influence." The pale mare blinked cluelessly back. "That's why I like you, Boo," I said, nudging her shoulder and getting a beaming smile in return.

I had to surrender my guns before we went onto the bridge proper. Fortunately, they were far more interested in my pistols and carbine than in my sword. I guess when you soared through the skies in war machines and power armor, you could get dismissive of an ornamental-looking, archaic weapon. Even the general surrendered her weapons; one misfire or mistake and something vital could be damaged. With my ranged weapons in a locker, though, we were allowed into the section of the ship where they kept the brains of the machine.

On the bridge were a dozen unarmored pegasus mares in a semicircle who deftly worked glowing control panels made of rainbows and pressed keys with their pinions, the feather tips protected in purple plastic. They wore headgear with a clear band across their face, the surface flickering with images rather like a poor pony's E.F.S. There were no windows; instead, there were seven large screens showing an angled arc before the ship. Above us were three smaller monitors showing views out the rear of the ship.

Four armored stallions stood at attention in the rear of the room, each saluting with a wing as we

entered. The big seat in the center of the semicircle of stations was occupied by a muscular, serious-looking stallion with a white mane and the most eye-bleedingly neon pink coat I'd ever seen. He rose to his hooves immediately. "General," he said with a crisp salute of his wing. I noticed that *he* got a gun.

"Situation, Captain Racewind?" the general asked as she studied the rainbow screens at the front of the room.

"Poor, General. We're deployed too far back for effective interception. Those missiles are damned fast, ma'am. Coms is... active," he said with a glower as he looked at a station. "Both across the fleet and with command. The GPE is screaming at us to move in. The formation is holding, mostly. The *Blizzard* and *Galeforce* are... 'drifting' closer to the Tower."

"Order the two Raptors back into position and await further orders from Neighvarro. Have they appointed a replacement for Harbinger yet?" she asked, her body language noticeably tensing.

"No. It's currently contested between Ironfeather, who has seniority, and Starburst and her connections. There're a few retired generals making claims for the position, too. But they're almost unanimous in their orders for us to act immediately. Apparently, we're leadwings compared to Colonel Autumn Leaf and others out west," he said with a disapproving frown.

"Neither of those two are good news. Why is it all the good ponies are too decent for politics?" Storm Chaser asked rhetorically.

"You could try to throw your feathers in for High General," the captain suggested.

"And when I left to play political games, they'd put Hoarfrost in charge here." The general sighed, shaking her head, then snorted. "So long as they haven't confirmed a leader, this is my command. Fortunately, we're about to make our move."

A mare at her station began to work the controls. "Captain!" she said after a moment. "I've got something strange. Two signals. One's a narrow band broadcast out of our ship, but it's not on any Enclave frequency we use. The other's an access signal from the Tower targeting our ship. It doesn't seem to be trying to access any of the ship systems, though."

"Sleeper device? Explosive?" the captain asked immediately.

"No sir. But it's on the bridge," the mare said. Why was my mane suddenly crawling?

"Can you block them?" I asked earnestly.

The orange mare looked at me with an expression of wondering who was this crazy pony asking her questions and glanced at the captain, who nodded, but appeared no happier that the surfer was interfering. "Yes, ma'am. I can throw out enough ECM to scatter the signals."

"Do it. It's Lighthooves," I said to the general. "He has a spy device that lets him see what I'm doing." Everypony stared at me for a long moment, and I felt myself go red. "Look! I have a very busy life, and sometimes little things slip my attention! Sorry."

"That would have been good information to have disclosed earlier," Storm Chaser said lightly, then nodded to the technician. The mare's feathers nearly flew over the glowing control panel, and then my eyes turned fuzzy for a second before my sight returned.

"Both signals blocked," the mare said with a decisive nod.

General Chaser nodded and moved to the seat in the middle of the bridge. The captain vacated

it immediately. "General has the conn," he said as he stood to her left. The air in the middle of the bridge flashed, and a holographic display appeared showing the twelve Raptors, the Tower, and Thunderhead. It also had the dark circle of the Core beneath it.

"Now hear this. This is General Storm Chaser. We've waited. We've been patient. It is now time to act. We are going to close in, intercept any missiles, disable the Tower's launch capability, and restore order to the city of Thunderhead. Be aware that our enemy not only has the Tower's defenses but may also control the defenses of the city itself. *Sirocco, Blizzard, Galeforce*. Approach the Tower in staggered formation two two one J. Diverge at your discretion. Intercept any missiles fired and destroy the launchers the moment they're exposed." Three dotted lines zig-zagged erratically towards the Tower.

"Finally!" Afterburner blurted impatiently over the radio.

"Understood. We shall execute all orders," Hoarfrost responded.

"*Azimuth, Helicity, Hurricane, Perihelion, Sleet, and Stratus Fractus* will approach and take positions at 22AJ, 24RS, 34PP, 56TS, 57FA, and 88RD respectively." Spheres popped into view in a roughly hexagonal arrangement, covering altitude as well as arc of flight. "Intercept anything that gets past the inner three and take it out. Your wings will be dispatched to Thunderhead to restore order. Restrain your fire. They're still Enclave citizens," the general said grimly. That prompted an outcry. "This is not a debate. Those are your orders. I don't care if they throw horseapples at you, you're in power armor. Separate, disperse, and keep your cool."

"General. High General Harbinger left standing orders that traitors to the Enclave were to be dealt with extreme prejudice," Hoarfrost said coolly.

"And then he went and got himself killed at Maripony," General Storm Chaser growled in reply. The outcry went silent. "I don't care what orders he might have left. I am not going to authorize the Enclave killing its own. When this situation is taken care of, the GPE can do what it wants. It'll be out of my feathers then, but I am telling you that right now you are to order fire restraint. Thunderhead is not the target. Is that clear?"

"Transparently," Hoarfrost said in a quiet voice that made me give the intercom speaker a shooty look.

"*Castellanus, Cyclone, and Lightning* will advance and target the Tower's anti-air defenses, breach the Tower at five thousand, four thousand, and three thousand feet, and secure the weapon. Remember, we want to take the Tower and its personnel *intact*. Exercise maximum fire restraint." Three dotted lines arched to touch the Tower towards the top. She looked at me, clearly questioning if I'd changed my mind about participating. I sighed and then gave a small nod. I might not be a soldier, but sometimes security had to get in there and shut problems down. "We'll have irregulars with us. White unicorn with black cybernetics, all-white earth pony, and a z-- white earth pony with stripes. Red ones."

"Surfacer terrorists," somepony muttered just loud enough to be heard over the speaker. I saw the general grind her teeth but also caught the unsure glance at me. I had to admire her focus; she was dealing with a number of ponies that just weren't on the same page as her.

"*Azimuth* and *Fractus* are our designated reserves if we have to fall back. *Helicity* and *Sleet* will move to cover them if they have to drop position. Does everyone understand?" the general asked. There were no replies. "Execute orders in sixty seconds. Mark."

The captain immediately snapped, "Turbines to full! Sound general quarters." An alarm rang out, and the lights immediately dropped to amber. "Secure all hatches. Prime turrets one through six." The mares typed commands into their controls and repeated the orders back as they were completed. I felt a

purr run through the ship, and for the first time I felt more thrilled by a machine than I normally would have liked. Say what you wanted about the Enclave's policies, they did have awesome toys!

"Now would be the time to remember anything else you might have overlooked, Blackjack," the general said above the pinging alarm.

"What? It looks like you got the perfect plan all squared away," I said as I pointed at the holographic display with a hoof.

"A plan is like a house of cards. It tends to scatter when the winds of war catch up with it," she replied, not taking her eyes off the icons. "What orders should I give? Will they be carried out fast enough? Can we react in time? Is Lighthooves's plan better than my own? I'd be a fool not to think of that." She sighed and leaned back in the chair. "War is never so neat and clean as in the movies. If you can think of anything at all, now is the time."

I took a moment to think as she gave orders for the ship to take its position and the vessel began to move. The lights changed from amber to red. There was one thing. "He said I gave him a weapon, but I can't think of what it might be. Maybe he got his hooves on Folly and a silver bullet? He could fuck up a Raptor with that, but you have twelve of them." There was something else, though. Dawn. Her arrival in Thunderhead was convenient. Too convenient. I didn't believe it was simple happenstance that she'd come for her youngest children. To save them. Save them from what? Save them from whatever she was planning. But what? What interest could Cognitum have in the skies?

"There's something else. There's a pony... a mare named Dawn. She's... Celestia, it's a twisted story. To sum it up, she's bad news. Completely crazy and a total zealot. She's involved... but I don't know how." I sighed and rubbed my mane. "She thinks she's going to save the Wasteland by getting everypony killed for her 'goddess'."

"Wait," the general said, holding up one extended pinion, then smiled. "Did you hear it?"

I checked around the bridge, then frowned. "No. What?"

The general shook her head. "That was the sound of the cards starting to slip," she replied. "We'll have to see what others tumble down."

The ship gave a sudden lurch, and I nearly fell over Boo. The pegasi simply leaned instinctively as the *Castellanus* rose at a sharp angle. I looked out the window at the sight of the black airships breaking from their neat line, propellers blurring above the machines as they rose, dropped, twisted, and banked in the air.

I barely paid it any attention, though. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that Dawn's presence up here mattered. That meant that Cognitum thought this fight mattered. She'd killed Stargazer... the only pony with a chance of shutting things down early. But why would Cognitum care? The Core was unbreachable, even to the Enclave. I suppose if they got all their Thunderheads together, they could blast the buildings, but if Cognitum had even a minimum of power she could fight back and hide behind the Core's shields. That had been the plan in the very beginning. If it hadn't been for the spike in Enervation...

Wait. I felt a quiet horror steal over me as I slowly walked towards the display before the captain's chair. Blue beams like lines of crackling lightning out to weld the heavens, not the Core's weapons but not something I'd seen before either, were lancing out from the corners of the Tower near the crown and halfway down the side. One touched the *Castellanus*, making the ship quake under my hooves. The general was giving orders about alignment and readying fliers for boarding; I ignored her as I stared at the dark ring of the Core at the base of the display. "Cognitum doesn't have access to all the

Core's systems. She has to fight for it. That's why she needs EC-1101," I muttered to myself, rubbing my forehooves together and scraping metal on metal. "But what if another pony already had partial access? Like Shadowbolt Tower being connected to the Core's defenses.

"But if they turn on the Core's defenses, it's going to draw power, just like last time. If it does, all the Enervation rings will energize. It'll be Silverstar Sporting Goods all over again." Who knew how far past the river it could spread? I hoped it was only my imagination hearing that faint scream in the back of my mind. "She came up here to get her children out because she *knew* this was going to be a slaughter!"

"What are you talking about, Blackjack?" General Chaser asked.

I sat down hard. "Why the hell can't I get one atrocity at a time?" I asked nopony in particular. "Okay... There's really no way I can explain all this neatly. There's a life-killing radiation in the Hoof called Enervation. When they turn on the guns, it'll draw power through the system, causing the Enervation to spike. Maybe the Tokomare will activate automatically; I bet it has some sort emergency override during an attack. Maybe Cognitum will do it herself. The Enervation field will kill everypony indiscriminately. It might even reach Thunderhead, if the city is close enough!"

"But why? What would be the purpose of mass slaughter like that?" Racewind said with a scowl.

"I don't know yet, but what did you say about plans?" I asked the general archly, then looked at the display. "If the Enervation is strong enough, it'll weaken you. If it's stronger than that... It made the original inhabitants of the Core *melt*. If the draw is great enough, both sides might just drip away." The Tower's weapons were focusing on ships, scorching them where the blue-white beams touched. The cloud of power-armored ponies moved in arrowhead formations towards the Tower while a veritable swarm of defenders emerged from the building.

"What do you want me to do, Blackjack?" the general countered. "We're committed. Once Lighthooves is dealt with and the Tower is under our control, we will be able to shut down their weapon systems."

"We have power armor contact," the captain said as flickering red and blue beams began to spark back and forth between the power armored ponies. "They're fast... I knew that their armor was good, but reaction times like that are phenomenal." His eyes widened. "Several wings inbound... coming in rather disturbingly fast."

"Yeah. Lighthooves all but tap danced on me. He beat me almost as good as Dawn had..." my voice trailed away. I'd fought Enclave armor before I was augmented and won. Power armor just wasn't fast enough. It had inertia. That was the only saving grace of anypony fighting it. But Lighthooves had almost taken me apart in his brother's office. "Oh you son of a mule! That's what you were talking about." I swore as I glared at the display. "That wasn't power armor!"

"What are you talking about, Blackjack?" the general asked in tones suggesting she was tired of asking me that.

But I didn't have time to explain as the captain shouted, "Incoming fire and hostiles!"

A blue beam shot out of the corner of the Tower and lingered on the *Castellanus*, and the ship shrieked. Then a second beam swept in to meet the first. I was nearly thrown off my hooves as the air filled with the smell of burning metal. "Bank! Climb! Get that beam off us before it penetrates our armor!" the pink stallion bellowed at the mares. A third blue beam was coming up to meet the other pair.

"I can't, sir! It's going to br--" Then a sound unlike any I'd heard before pierced the ship. It was like the scream of metal of the factory abomination I'd faced in the tunnels, only this time it was as if I were inside the beast rather than before it. The entire ship reeled to the side, rolling as the bridge filled

with nostril-searing smoke. The general pulled her helmet on, but everypony else tried to breathe and work the controls. Frigid wind howled and snapped through the Raptor. I guessed the beam had penetrated right next to the bridge.

Red bars in my E.F.S. White-armored pegasi stormed into the bridge; the soldiers on guard sprang to action, but they were unarmed. Armed ponies were probably on their way, but by the time they got here, it'd be all over. Still, to the soldiers' credit, they charged the boarders with fearless skill and determination. Their blows were to deflect weapons away from the crew and computers, even if it meant putting themselves at risk. I wondered if they were trying to disarm their attackers, but the invaders' weapons were grafted to their sides beneath their wings. The soldiers' scorpion tails stabbed and flashed, but their opponents had reinforced organs and internal healing talismans repairing their injuries. They were all going to get slaughtered...

Not if I could help it. I just really wished Rampage were here right now. This was the perfect situation for an immortal death dealer.

Two of the white armored invaders stormed into the bridge, their gatling beam guns starting to glow, when I threw myself at them with my hooves wide. One limb linked around each neck as I employed every ounce of my augmented bulk against them and twisted the guns up so they raked the air above the furiously working mares. Scorpion-tipped tails arched forward and stabbed at my chest, but even though I cried out in pain, I didn't let go. I looked at the armor on my left and saw confirmation of my fears. Like Lighthooves at Chicanery's studio, the mare wasn't wearing a helmet... and her eyes glowed bright red just like mine.

At least, they did before I blasted her face with a quartet of magical bullets. The magical impacts ripped hide from the flesh beneath it, exposing gray synthetic materials bonded to bone and tissue. Her glassy orbs exploded in shards as my magic tore her face down to the metal and bone beneath it.

The mare screamed and flailed wildly as I let her go and turned my attention to the stallion on my right. He slammed his steel hooves into my chest as he struggled to knock me back. With the gouges in my chest his tail spike had inflicted, I couldn't hold on to him. He flipped in the air, pointing both guns at me. "Kill the bridge crew! Quickly!" he snapped.

Then he was slammed to the side by the worn gray armor of the general. He flipped through the air and smashed into the side of the bridge, shaking his head hard as Storm Chaser hovered in his previous position. "Captain, you have the conn."

"Yes ma'am! Get reinforcements and emergency response teams here now. Helm, climb one thousand feet and present our starboard side to the enemy while we get that hole dealt with," Racewind said coolly as he took the seat. The *Castellanus* continued to shake as alarms sounded. "Keep those beams off our engines or we're done!"

Two more invaders entered. The armored guards tried to move in to grapple and stab with their stinger tails, but it was as I feared. It was one thing to wear a shell that reinforced your body. It was another to be reinforced. And these ponies weren't just augmented like me; my augments were cobbled together from three different sources. Lighthooves must have taken Project Steelpony designs and fabricated fresh, brand-new parts. They twisted around, ignored stabbing tails, broke the wings of the stallions, and ripped out their ribcages and throats. One soldier managed to break the neck of a white cyberpony, but the others struggled just to survive.

"You're dead, old mare! We're the future of the Enclave!" the stallion roared as two more came in, bringing his guns to bear on her. Outside, in the hall, I could hear the electric crack of beam fire being exchanged.

Storm Chaser didn't reply or waste time with taunts. She swooped in high and dove at the stallion. At first, I thought she'd missed as she came in short, but her wings snapped and she performed a roll in midair. The scorpion tail of her armor blurred as it swung around and the razor tip ripped a jagged line from leering mouth to chest. Blood and mechanical fluids spilled as gray synthetic underlays were exposed. He gurgled as he clamped his hooves to his throat. Big mistake. Storm Chaser continued the roll and brought both forehooves down atop his head with an impact that dented his skull. The transfer of momentum sent him flipping forward, and as he came around, Storm Chaser performed a backflip in midair. Rising tail spike met descending stallion face in a shower of sparks and blood.

"If you're the future, I'm not impressed," she said with superb disdain. The stallion's reply was to gurgle and collapse in a heap, leaking blood and brains from the gash ripped through his head.

More white armored ponies stormed in through the smoking doorway. One balked as he got a close look at me. "Confirmed. Blackjack and the general together! What do we do?" he said as he pointed beam weapons built into his sides at me.

"If she's not dead or in the brig, kill her," the mare beside him yelled as she pointed her own integrated disintegration rifles at the general. "She's a liability now!"

"Over my dead body," I replied and drew my sword, starting to teleport when the pony I'd blinded grabbed me from behind. Lacunae had once rattled off some rather fancy words about why it was difficult to teleport other ponies and yourself. Something about mass and distance and other things that made my eyes glaze over at the time when I had eyes that could glaze. When my teleportation spell went off, I had the sensation of trying to squeeze myself down a Blackjack-sized tube that was now half the size of Blackjack. The result was I slammed to the deck with every organic part of me feeling like it'd been beaten with a belt. "Math... hurts..." I groaned, trying to pull myself together as I watched helplessly.

One lunged at Boo, his white laminate cybernetic tail ending in a glowing green crackle of energy. The blank backed away, eyes wide and tail tucked as she swayed to the side and gave ground. "Filthy dirt pony," the pegasus snarled. "Stand still!" I could only stare in shock as the faster cyberpony soldier kept missing Boo by mere inches.

Probably only the fact that I wore an equally stunned pegasus atop me saved me from being disintegrated, incinerated, or both. The stallion closed the distance, his wings glittering with razor sharp edges as he approached. A little ungroaning part of my mind took some small measure of relief they didn't have that green glow to them too. The general was not so lucky, given that her armor didn't have any ranged weapons on it and I doubted that the cyberpony mare would allow her to close the distance. The general tried anyway, going into a dive straight at the armored mare. The cyberpony mare grinned as she opened up a stream of lethal energy bolts and beams. The captain was drawing his disintegration pistol as some of the bridge crew started to move towards her...

But they were just flesh and blood ponies and would never reach the cyberpegasus in time. The mare moved with the swiftness and cold murderous action of a machine. I could only stand by and watch the rapid fire barrage strike the general with the precision of S.A.T.S. For an instant it seemed as if she'd close the gap. For an instant, I felt like I was the one stuck in S.A.T.S. Then the tips of her hooves glowed with the brilliance of a star...

Like a lightning bolt, the general struck the cybermare and crushed her between bulkhead and her metalshod hooves. That would have killed anypony without a generator for a heart. As it was, mechanical fluids and blood burst from the cybermare's throat as the sound of cracking ribs carried clear through the air. Still, her guns were wired into her brain, and one of them swiveled around and blasted wildly around her with more crimson beams. Clearly, the crippled mare wanted to take one of us with her.

Unfortunately, that was when one of the screens towards the front of the bridge exploded inwards

behind General Storm Chaser. Chunks of metal flew through the air; the mare sprawled atop me caught a piece of steel longer than my body and thick as my horn. It sliced almost completely through her and crushed me down even more. The bridge mares struggled to keep the ship under control even though more than half of them had been wounded by flying metal; Boo managed to avoid having her head taken off by a dinner plate sized chunk by inches.

More white-armored pegasi began to swarm the staggered general. Then a brilliant green bolt blasted into the lead cyberpony's head. I watched as Captain Racewind slowly advanced across the bridge. His uniform was slick with blood and one ear was gone as he walked slowly across the shaking deck. One of his targets collapsed in a shower of glowing green goop. Then a second. A third. He stood over the general before the breached wall. When his gun was dry, he flicked out the cartridge and slapped a fresh one in without removing it from his mouth.

The rest didn't enter shooting. Instead, they removed things from their armor, small metal apples with bright green bands around the middles. In unison, they pulled the pins of around a dozen magic grenades and threw them through the breach. Even if I hadn't been halfway across the room with a dead mare on my back, I would have been hard pressed to catch and return so many at once. For a pony without magic, I didn't think it possible.

I guess it wasn't, because rather than try, he dashed right up to the breach in the wall and stood upright before it, spreading his wings wide to cover the portal and deflecting the magical grenades back into the room beyond. There were panicked shouts from our attackers as he looked back at the rest of the bridge.

I'll be damned if the stoic captain didn't smile a little.

Then there was a rapid fire series of brilliant green flashes and in an instant, he was gone, reduced to a glowing green mist that settled on the deck. The general was closest to the blast, but the captain's sacrifice had kept her out of range of the explosives. All it did was knock her back.

"Racewind..." the general murmured, only audible to my ears.

"One tyrant down," wheezed a gurgling voice as the cybermare Storm Chaser'd crippled proved not quite dead yet, and managed one last well-aimed volley that raked the general with brilliant red beams. "Die, you murdering whores!" she shouted, blood and black fluids spraying from her mouth. I'd forgotten how infuriatingly resilient cyberponies could be. The general took a step back, staggered, and finally collapsed as the beams raked her from behind.

No. I needed her. The Enclave needed her.

"Captain! General!" screamed half the mares as they rushed to the fallen general and swarmed over the cyberpony, their hooves twisting her integrated guns up towards the ceiling. The cybermare wheezed a horrible, gurgling laughter as she fired wildly. I watched my last, best hope to ending this lying in a smoking heap on the deck.

A cold and hateful part of my mind pushed such simple weaknesses as pain aside and summoned up all my focus. As another cybermare rushed in and started to take aim, another of Twilight's spells, one that I'd thought exceptionally bizarre, came immediately to my mind. I imagined the newcomer with the biggest, bushiest beard and eyebrows I could. Her face disappeared into a yellow puff of dandelion-like hair, and she staggered back as I shrugged the dead pegasus off me.

My magic seized the excess mane and I yanked her head toward me. My magic brought the sword up through her neck, slicing clean through it. Another pair of Lighthooves's cyberponies rushed me. "Get Blackjack!" one yelled. Instead, he should have been paying more attention, as my telekinesis

threw the severed head into his face. He caught it, blinked down stupidly, and was rewarded with a sword swing that decapitated him just as neatly as the first. The third skidded short, deciding to shoot me rather than get in close. My hooves shoved the spurting stump of the second in his direction, and his S.A.T.S.-enhanced shooting was ruined by a blinding spray of blood and mechanical fluids. He'd need a few seconds to clear his eyes.

He didn't even get half a second before I plunged the sword through his hoof, his eye, his skull, and his brain. A twist and yank and he collapsed into a twisting, twitching heap. The sword came down in a finishing swipe and took his head as well. Even healing talismans couldn't reverse decapitation. I took three steps towards where the crippled cybermare continued to fire wildly with her arcane energy weapons and sliced them off.

The stallion with the crackling tail stinger had finally backed Boo into a corner. "Now! Hold still and die!" he roared, plunging the weapon at the terrified mare. I just needed a few more seconds and I could help her. A few seconds. That's all I needed. Then I'd wake up and find out this was all a dream. A vision. A memory orb of a pony who'd seen too many good ponies die for stupid reasons. Boo ducked at the last second, curling up into a terrified ball as the stinger ripped through plastic and metal conduits above her.

One of which read 'Warning: high voltage'. As the tail ripped through, a noise like an enormous angry bee filled the bridge. The stallion went rigid as electricity played over his body for a second, then sparks shot from his blackening metal bits as his flesh began to char, then he exploded with a sickening pop.

"Hey! Blackjack!" Rampage called from the doorway. "Did you know that there's this great big hole in the side of the ship?" One of the cyberponies fighting the soldiers in the bridge whirled on her and started to open fire. With an annoyed look, she whirled as well, wrapped her barbed tail around the cyberpony's face, and, with a jerk of her haunches, pulled him down under her backside. She sat down hard on his shoulders. She paused, then shrugged. "Tempting, but bloody pleasure before squishy pleasure," she said, then raised both her forehooves and slammed them down on the cyberpony's skull like a jackhammer until his brains dribbled like bloody tar out his mouth and nose.

I rushed to the general and wished for the umpteenth time that I had some kind of healing spell. Her blue bar was still on my E.F.S.... she was still alive, but any second I expected it to wink out. Her armor smoked from the beam blasts it'd absorbed. She wasn't moving. I didn't think she was breathing. Screw healing magic. At this point I'd be happy with something more substantial than first aid training I'd gotten years ago and slept through because any stable medical emergency would be handled by medics, not me.

Fucking idiot, Blackjack.

I felt the ship begin to list and groan with an alarming, substantial sound and turned briefly to the three mares around the general. "Keep us in the air, or we're all dead!" They nodded and rushed to their damaged stations. The most I could remember was 'ABC'. Her Airway was clear, and when I put my ear to her muzzle, my enhanced hearing could pick up shallow Breaths... and I forgot what C meant. Contact medical? Control? Concede defeat?

Rising from the twitching body, Rampage pounced on another cyberpony, grabbed his head in a hooflock, twisted, and snapped his neck. That would have been sufficient for anypony besides Rampage. The mare kept pulling, the neck starting to pinch like taffy, till the head came off completely with a wet popping sound. Holding the decapitated head, trailing wires, she tossed it to one of the horrified *Castellanus* soldiers. She whistled at the smoking, crackling remains before Boo. "Nice job. Well done. I give it a nine out of ten. You want to make sure you can take a trophy from your kills, Boo. Or eat them.

Or both.” The shivering blank wasn’t uncurling from her ball.

It was the wrong time for a quip. “Where have you been?” I asked darkly as I stared at the limp, prone form of the general. “Why weren’t you here? What were you off doing, Rampage? Fucking Fighting?”

“Uh, yeah. Well, the second one,” Rampage said with a frown. “What’s the problem?”

It wasn’t right, or fair, but I stormed over to her and shoved her hard against the wall. “The problem?! The problem is if you had been here, the general wouldn’t have been hurt! This isn’t a fucking game anymore! Glory’s family... Thunderhead... maybe even all the Wasteland... could be killed if we can’t end this nightmare.”

Then Rampage shoved back. I’d only been shoved once by Rampage, when we’d first met. Now, however, she set her back against the wall and kicked out with all four of her hooves. I found myself suddenly flying clear across the room, smashing into the opposite wall and landing in a heap. Rampage glared at me as she slowly advanced.

“I like you, Blackjack, but you’re really starting to get on my nerves.” Her voice was low, and for an instant I realized that this was the Rampage everypony else knew. The Reaper. “You’re the one who cares about Thunderhead, not me. You’re the one who gives a shit if the Wasteland lives or dies. Not. Me. I only give a marginal shit about a half dozen ponies in this world. The rest can go fuck themselves. This is war. Ponies die. A lot. Good and bad, innocent and guilty. Do not ever talk to me like that and tell me what I should be doing. Ever.”

I struggled to my hooves. “I thought you wanted to die,” I spat, not able to bring myself to face her.

“And I do. You won’t do that. So I do what I always do. Whatever else I want,” she said, and I glanced at her and saw her looking at the glowing smear that had been the captain.

Then the general’s blue bar disappeared on my E.F.S. No... no! Damn it NO! The pinned cybermare took a deep, crackling breath and shouted, “Confirmed! General is dead! Blackjack is alive! Report! Blackjack is--”

Rampage reared up, the bridge mares scrambling away. “Shut,” she said with her hooves upraised. “Up!” she shouted as with one blow, she crushed the mare into a ball of bloody metal.

“Medics! Somepony get somepony! Please!” I begged. Rampage looked over as she wiped her bloody hoofclaws off on the slain mare. “Find a doctor!”

“Hush up. I’m not that kind of doctor,” Rampage said, her voice becoming oddly calm and gruff, as she knelt beside the fallen general. Her hooves fiddled around her face a moment. “Mmm. Not good.” She pointed a hoof at a bridge mare. “You. I need a medical kit. Bring it and see if it has a shot of adrenaline and some M.o.P. electropads. Healing potion too would be nice. And I’d love a sake for when this is all over.” She tugged off the bloody claws from her forehooves. “Hope this works.”

She rolled the general on her back. “Press one nostril closed and blow in the other when I tell you to.” And then, with surprising care, she began to compress the general’s chest with short bursts. I was so worried that I didn’t even gross out at the thought of putting my mouth there. “Breathe. Breathe.” She intoned every ten compressions.

“Is she going to make it?” I asked between breaths.

“Probably not, but she definitely won’t if we stop. Breathe,” she said as she continued

compressions. "I'm glad this body is so strong and this mare has a nice, flexible sternum. Breathe. Always distressing when you snap ribs. Breathe."

A mare rushed in with a plastic box. "Blackjack, after the breath after this one, cut open the chest of her armor with your sword. Breathe. Try not to cut her deeply, but be quick. She has enough problems. Breathe."

As soon as I finished blowing in her nose I levitated over my sword and sliced the armor between the plates as quickly and neatly as I could, tugging the rubbery underlayer away from her body as I sliced. To my shame, I did nick her a few times, but her armor was open. Rampage pulled the front of her armor wide and did another round of compressions. "Breathe, Blackjack. Can you find a vein, young mare?" Rampage asked the bridge mare. When she shook her head, Rampage nodded downward. "Twenty compressions, then let Blackjack breathe. Breathe. Swap." And Rampage moved away so the beige bridge mare could take her place. "Just like that. Put your whole weight into it."

"Please save her. Please. We lost the captain. We can't lose her too," she said, tears on her cheeks as she used her weight to press rapidly on the general's chest.

"I'm twenty five years out of residency, young mare, but I'm trying my best. We all are," Rampage said as she sorted through the hypodermic needles. "Why'd they have to go and relabel everything? This was complicated enough before the bombs fell." Then she picked up a bright yellow syringe. "Ah! Here we go." She bit down on the end, tugged off the cap, and said around the fat plastic cylinder, "Halt breaths." When I did, she turned the general's head and felt along her neck, pressed the needle in with care that would do a unicorn proud, and then her tongue pressed a little button. The syringe gave a hiss of compressed gas. "Hope that was her jugular. Otherwise she's going to have a doozy of a headache on top of being dead."

Suddenly the general gave a little gasp, her eyes wide as her body jerked and then went still again. Still, I saw her blue mark reappear on my E.F.S. "She's alive!"

"Stars and suns, it worked! Old Doc Hatchet would be amazed," Rampage blurted, pressed her hoof to the side of the general's throat beneath her jaw. She then grabbed a pair of thick yellow plastic blocks and cracked them neatly into two pads, revealing a clear goop on one face and pressed it to her side. Then she did the same with the other half on her other side. The backs of the pads were ripped open, and one had a bright yellow crystal. The other had a wire. She connected the pads with the wire then tapped the crystal, which started to growl like thunder. "Get back folks, especially you, Blackjack."

I did, and she tapped it a second time. The talisman flashed brightly, and there was a sound of lightning. The general jerked, coughed, and sucked in a breath of air, then promptly rolled over and puked. She spat, then immediately asked, "Racewind?" In her eyes was a mix of hope and fear I knew all too well.

"I'm sorry," was all I could think to say.

She closed her eyes, took a shallow breath as Rampage pushed the pad of her hoof to the general's throat. "Huh. You must take care of yourself, general. Weak but steady pulse. It normally takes two or three tries, if it works at all. Don't move, and we'll see if it sticks."

"Are we still under attack?" she asked.

"*Cyclone* and *Sleet* are shielding us. *Sirocco* and *Blizzard* didn't even try to intercept their flyers. They passed right on through," a bridgemare reported.

"I am going to personally pluck those two," the general muttered with a groan.

"You mean fuck? As in fuck over?" I asked, a little baffled.

"No. Pluck. It's a more serious condition when you throw them off your ship."

Ah. "Well, you could probably pull it off. That was some good fighting, especially against augmented ponies."

Then she groaned and muttered, "Ugh... fighting is for privates. Let me up."

"Stay down for three minutes. Make sure everything is stabilized," Rampage said. "Otherwise, I'll make them haul you to the medical bay and put Blackjack in charge."

I blinked. "No. No way. That's a bad idea. Of monumental proportions. I can't think of what to do with a ship besides 'shoot' and 'ramming speed'."

"Which is why the general is going to indulge me and rest a little bit before climbing back into the seat," Rampage replied, smiling down at the weakened but angry mare.

Storm Chaser clearly chafed but relented. "Since when are you a doctor? I thought you were some kind of Wasteland primitive."

"It's complicated. Even I don't understand it," she said, then regarded me. "So, Blackjack, how have you been doing with your self-destructive tendencies?"

This wasn't exactly the best time for a therapy session, but I guessed I couldn't pick and choose. "Well... I... better, I guess. I still seem to be the Wasteland's chew toy, but I don't think I'm..." then I blinked. "Wait. You're a lot more aware than the last time we met."

"Yes," the doctor said with a curious smile. "I too am wondering at it. Before, it was like being in another world with walls of dense smoke. Little by little, the smoke is clearing. Things are more lucid. For example, I know that I'm a soul in a talisman rather than a pony flying home to Manehattan after a conference. Quite astonishing really, even if I still expect to wake up and find myself crashing to the ground."

"Do the memories help?" I asked.

She nodded. "In a way. I'm also aware of others with me... some are aware of me while others aren't." Her smile faded as the doctor said, "I've been trying to treat the Angel. She's... a difficult patient. Still, it gives us something to do while I'm inside. Every time we experience another's memories it... connects us."

I swallowed, dreading this next question. "What about Rampage? Have you... do you... is she in there with you?"

She reached up to her brow to fiddle with glasses that weren't there. "I don't know. When I'm here, I'm not aware of things happening 'inside'. And when I'm not here, it's like peering through fog. I can't say for sure one way or the other. I'm sorry."

"I guess, 'I don't know' is better than 'No'." I sighed. "Well, I'm glad you're able to help others in there. Personally, I'm kicking myself over how badly I misjudged Lighthooves. I could have sworn he was going to surrender himself... but he seems like he's going all out."

Rampage's pink eyes softened, and she patted my back. "Don't be. From what I understand, and I may not understand it all, but I think that option was lost when Stargazer was killed. Lighthooves would never have turned himself over to Neighvarro. It wouldn't play in with this martyrdom idealization

he has for himself.”

“Huh?” I blinked.

Rampage gave a rueful chuckle. “He likely had quite the fantasy about how he’d surrender the weapons. Possible he had speeches written just for the event. But when Stargazer died, his perfect scenario fell apart. He seems to have a self-destructive streak as wide as yours. Perhaps wider. It’s an immature response, to be sure.”

“If he wanted to kill himself, there’re easier ways to do it,” I muttered. “I thought his big motivator was saving Thunderhead at all costs.”

“I said self-destructive, not suicidal. Subtle but different. Saving Thunderhead is an expression of his psychology, not a driver. For instance, no rational person would utilize a biological weapon as a means of defense or liberation. In fact, had he wished for Thunderhead’s security and safety, he would have aligned himself more with Stratus and Neighvarro.”

“So what is his driver then?” I asked with a frown.

Rampage arched a brow as she smiled, “What was yours? When you were running around like a madmare? What’s driven you to harm and undermine yourself?”

“I...” I opened and closed my mouth. I glanced at the general. “I... hate myself. The things I’ve done. That I’ve experienced. What I’ve become. Ways I’ve disappointed Glory and failed my friends. Even before leaving 99... I mean, even if I only count P-21, I did unforgivable things to him and didn’t even know I was doing it.” My ears dropped. “I’m trying to do better and make up for it.”

“I know.” She patted me on the back. “And that’s a healthier expression than embracing all the things you hate and becoming an utter monster. But, most importantly, you felt you deserved to suffer horribly for it. Suicide is easy, relatively speaking. A suicidal person wants pain and misery to stop. Self-destruction is complex. It reinforces denial. A suicidal person is the first to admit they’re a mess. A self-destructive person will deny it to their grave, and possibly the graves of others.”

“But why?” I asked, not just her but myself as well.

“Well, if you can convince him to surrender and schedule a few dozen therapy sessions, I’d be glad to find out. I’ll even do it pro bono. Just have him make an appointment. But other than that, somepony is going to have to stop him, and it’s going to be ugly. A self-destructive person doesn’t just want to be stopped. They want to be destroyed, and they tend to cause a lot of collateral damage in the process. It’s the ultimate expression of pettiness and ego, frequently painted over with a façade of selflessness or some higher--”

The general grunted, “Okay. That’s enough psychobabble. I’m not dying in the next few minutes. Get me up. There’s still fighting going on.”

Rampage smiled at me, then reached down and helped nudge the general to her hooves. She shrugged out of the slit armor and pulled off the yellow boxes. As she staggered back towards the captain’s seat, Rampage’s eyes unfocused and she staggered, then looked around. “What happened? I... you...” She saw the general and blinked. “She’s alive?”

“Alive enough to try and salvage this mess.” Her stern professionalism returned. “Back to your stations,” she said firmly. “I want the ship searched for any we might have missed. And get a clean-up crew in here, please.” She took a seat and closed his eyes. “General has the conn. Status?”

It took a few moments for the mares to return to their stations. Most of them had some injury or

another -- ripped feathers, lacerations, contusions -- but none of them left the bridge. "Damage to Starboard sections 2A and 4B and 6C. Breach at 5B and 11C. Engines operating at 78%. Primary systems are down, but we have backups operational and emergency response and fire crews are on," reported a red mare.

"Long range transmissions are down. We're bouncing comms through the *Cyclone*. No further breach or boarding parties," a russet mare sniffed as she glanced where Racewind had died. "Casualty list is being drafted."

A seafoam green mare stared at her console, the metal twisted, the rainbow controls shattered, and little sparks of electricity snapping in the guts. "Uh... navigation is... um... well, we're still in the air, ma'am." The general just gave her a look and moved on to the next mare as the Nav mare moved to a smaller terminal in the back of the bridge and started working from there.

"*Blizzard*, *Galeforce*, and *Sirocco* are engaged with the Tower, focusing fire on the projectors. No ship losses reported, but all are being heavily engaged by Thunderhead fliers," one ochre mare said in low tones as she too glanced at the green puddle on the floor. "*Cyclone* was boarded as well. Colonel Twilight Sonata's been critically injured and they're falling back. The *Lightning* is reporting a fire on board."

I sat down, aching and tired. No. Not just tired. Drained. Botching a spell and getting thumped by a friend didn't help. So much killing... All over a damned, stupid Tower, fear, and pride. It was the war two hundred years ago, only so much worse as now ponies were killing ponies. That'd ended with nearly everypony dying.

I stared up at the lights overhead. At the moment, I had a greater appreciation for what all the ministry mares had gone through. War had its own terrible momentum, and it seemed like it only ended when both sides annihilated each other. My eyes drifted over to Rampage helping Boo up. Was Rampage right? Should I just flip a bit, pick a side, and get to killing?

No. There had to be another way. Somehow.

The general scowled at the display. Green fire danced over the Tower, but apparently the general didn't like what she saw. "What are Afterburner and Hoarfrost doing? They haven't even scratched the launch tubes yet."

I trotted up beside her. "I have a feeling that there're going to be a lot of promotions and demotions by the time this is over," I said, a weak attempt at humor.

"My faith in command has been sorely tested of late. Ever since we've come to this place..." She shook her head, then addressed the brown coms mare, "Can the *Lightning* and *Cyclone* still breach the Tower?"

"Captain Cirrus wants to hang back and soften their defenses more. Captain Barrel Roll is directing damage control teams. He asks for fifteen minutes," the brown mare replied.

"He has five. We can't be driven off. In the state the fleet would be in if it were routed, the Enclave would be wide open." She thumped the arm of the chair with her hoof. "Tell Cirrus to get in range and do all he can to slag those missile apertures, then get us doing the same. And make sure we have some guards posted at our breaches." As they started to relay orders, she rubbed her eyes once more, and then they met mine. "What were those things, Blackjack? That wasn't any armor I've ever seen before."

"It's not. They're cyberponies made from a pre-war secret project called Steelpony. *That's* what he meant about a gift from me. He must have gotten a copy of the designs," I said as I slumped. "This is

my fault.”

She snorted. “Unless you intentionally gave him the plans with the aim of getting ponies killed, it’s not. This Lighthooves is smart. If he’d been loyal, he might have become a prominent general himself,” Storm Chaser said evenly. “What are their capabilities?”

I thought a moment. “Similar to power armor but with none of the drawbacks. If they’re using the original design I was, then you’re talking tougher and lots faster. You wear your armor. A cyberpony *is* their armor. Internal regenerative and repair talismans to prevent rejection. Major damage like a lost limb will need to be replaced, but they won’t bleed out and die. They need some kind of power talisman in the chest, but that’s beyond what I know. If I had time, I’d contact Rover and...” Hmmm...

“Weaknesses?”

“Similar to power armor. Spark weapons work great. If we get knocked out, eventually our systems will self-reboot. No getting trapped in power armor. Ingest metal, food, and gems to maintain yourself. The real damage is long term psychological. You stop feeling like a pony. You can never take the augments out and just be yourself. Most of the cyberponies I’ve met are pretty unhappy characters... or crazy.”

“Most non-cyberponies are the same way in the Wasteland, Blackjack,” Rampage said with a smirk. “Especially around the Hoof.” I couldn’t argue with that. And yet, there was something that I couldn’t quite accept. Everypony still wanted to be happy. They hadn’t given up on that simple, little mote of hope. Not yet. If you didn’t want to be happy, you might find contentment, but it’d be the sort that the dead shared.

So I couldn’t give up either.

One of the mares said that the ship was aligned to target.

“Open fire. Take some heat off the *Lightning*,” Storm Chaser ordered. A second later, the entire deck twitched under my hooves as a ‘Thwoom’ rolled through the ship. I could almost see the wave as it ran along the bridge. Then another. Then another.

“Let’s see some results,” the general said as she regarded the front ‘window’. I could see blue beams flickering back and forth from the cornices of the Tower and at the base of those six heavy plates. I watched as a half dozen beams seemed to hone in on one Raptor like blazing claws of energy, but the ship suddenly climbed and only one blue beam flashed over the hull with a line of deep fire. Blasts from the Raptors flickered over the surface like boiling green balefire. Several of the green bolts met one of the blue beam protectors at once, and it exploded in a blinding flash. Gaps were starting to open in its armor as well.

“Jeeze, I thought these Raptor things were supposed to be powerful,” Rampage scoffed as I saw to the trembling Boo, stroking her mane to calm her. “What’s taking so long?”

“You’re not looking at some rickety Wasteland structure, or even an ordinary fortress from the war,” Storm Chaser replied, not taking her eyes off the screen. “Scootaloo saw to it that Stable-Tec built Shadowbolt Tower for Rainbow Dash. It had the most advanced structural and magical defenses of any building in Equestria. You could level Canterlot with a Thunderhead and some effort. It’s old. But nothing short of a direct hit by a balefire bomb could take out the Tower... and even that is a maybe, given that everything in this crosswind-damned valley was made to hold up to anything the enemy could throw at it.”

“You’re just not trying hard enough,” Rampage countered. “If I wanted to, I could take it out. It

might take a couple centuries of kicking, but I could do it.”

“Not necessary,” Storm Chaser replied as another two projectors exploded. “Against a few ships, the Tower’s weapons are formidable, but we’re not allowing them to focus fire. A few more arclight projectors down and we should be able to focus fire on the launch bays directly. Lighthooves’s plague won’t be much use if he can’t deliver it.” For an instant, she smiled. “We’ll achieve victory yet.” Then Boo started looking around in alarm, followed by the bridge mares and guards, then Rampage. “Wait... what’s that noise?”

But I knew exactly what that screaming sound was.

The clouds beneath us began to glow with a horrible emerald hue, and the black cloud layer began to roil and boil as if it were a great luminescent sheet being torn and shaken by giant invisible hooves. Great twisting plumes blasted up, hundreds of feet high as the cloud layer was ripped from below. The *Castellanus* lurched and turned so far that I grabbed Boo with my hooves and slid till I was standing on the wall, the metal around us groaning as the mares shouted warnings.

And then I saw the Core.

Stripped of its clouds, the damned city now seemed alight and inhabited by forsaken souls. Black monoliths stretched towards the sky, the glassy black surfaces lit by gleaming green lines far below, as though the streets were rivers of balefire. Some of the towers had broken and leaned at haphazard angles against each other. Others were connected and draped, as if by spider webs. This was not a pony city. It may have been built by ponies, may have been inhabited by them, but there was nothing of my kind in this place. It was a city inspired by hubris. In the very center, right at the base of Shadowbolt Tower, was a horrible emerald glow within the earth.

“First breeze, what is that?” Storm Chaser breathed.

The Core answered. An emerald beam from atop one of the intact geometric spires sent a line of crackling death into the skies. It caught a climbing Raptor on the stern and I watched as it ripped right through the length of the ship, fire erupting from every port and seam as the storm clouds boiled away, before the beam exploded from the prow of the ship and continued its ascent into the skies. What remained of the Raptor fell like a flaming metal pipe to the ground far below.

“The *Azimuth*,” breathed one mare. “It’s gone!”

“Incoming fire, General!” shouted another. “Multiple weapon signatures!”

“Evasive maneuvers!” ordered the general. There were no attempts to return fire now. Even a glancing blow from one of those weapons would be a death sentence.

The *Castellanus* began to move as I never imagined anything so big or massive could. Boo clung to me, I clung to a piece of conduit, and Rampage squealed in delight as she slid around like a pinball. I’d thought the force jerking me around would have flung the ship apart as it dove and banked around the slaying beams.

“Looks like their targeting talismans haven’t been calibrated for two hundred years,” the general hissed. I watched in horror as a beam punched right through the bottom of one Raptor, the green energy slicing right through as it progressed to the heavens. The shot had been off center, possibly the only reason the ship wasn’t snapping in half. “They’re off by a few degrees.”

“Good news for us, then,” I muttered weakly, staring at the flames spreading along the side of the warship on the screen.

"Until they compensate for the deviation. Hold on!" A forest of green beams flashed around us, and I discovered that a Raptor could do a barrel roll. I grabbed on to the arm of the captain's seat, the machine's engines howling as the shots from below flared to our left. "It seems Lighthooves wants us particularly badly," the general observed coolly as the *Castellanus*'s engines roared behind us.

"He must know I'm on this ship," I replied. But why? Why would he be after me? Granted, I had every interest in and capability for killing him if we met face to face, but why single me out over any other Raptor?

"General. I'm not feeling..." a mare said weakly from her seat. I saw blood dripping from her nose.

The purple mare in my head whipped out a chalkboard and began doing fancy things with numbers. The Core was teardrop shaped, and five miles across from east to west. The Tower was three miles high. We are all fighting within five miles of the center of the city, inside the strongest Enervation in the middle.

"Get away! Get some distance!" I yelled.

"I'm barely keeping ahead of the beams," the helmsmare shouted as she frantically hit the glowing controls with her pinions and forehooves and the *Castellanus* banked hard the other way. "If we run straight for ten seconds we'll be zeroed in."

Indeed, from the screen at the front of the ship, I could see other ships furiously maneuvering to avoid the beams. A beam sliced right through the front quarter of one Raptor as neatly as my starmetal sword through a neck. Another was on fire as it tried to limp away. The only safe zone was next to the Tower; but I knew that wouldn't be safe for long. He wasn't going to risk shooting his own nose off, but he could tear us apart piece by piece while the Raptors struggled to get clear or get in.

Lighthooves was using the Core's weapons to rip the fleet to pieces. Only the fact the Core's weapons were focused on the *Castellanus* allowed them to try and get any distance. But why? He must have thought the general would have killed me or locked me up. She'd been reported as dead. If he'd been spying right before the bridge mares cut off his signal, he knew I was free. The fleet was his big priority. So why me? Personal? Not his style. I had to have something... something... something that was a threat to him.

My eyes landed on my right forehoof and lingered there a moment. It wasn't possible... was it?

The *Castellanus* jerked hard, flinging both Boo and myself off the wall and across the room to land on the ceiling, then the wall, floor, wall, ceiling, wall... and finally ended up on the floor as smoke poured into the bridge. "We've lost turrets two, four, and six, ma'am. Breach all along the C section, from sector 2 to 8."

"They got us?" I asked, looking around.

"No," the general replied grimly. "That was a near hit."

"Hey, Blackjack. Remind you of Hightower?" Rampage yelled from the corner of the room. "We're all fucked!"

Actually, it did, and that gave me an idea. Okay. At this point, there was nothing else to lose. As the decks started to list, I scrolled frantically through all my broadcast connections till I found it. 'Hoofington'. I then opened as many channels at random I could, and hoped that she'd hear one of them. It was my only chance.

“Cognitum,” I said as clearly as I could over the clamor and banging and shouting and alarms, “This is Blackjack. I’m about to die again. EC-1101 is about to be destroyed if you don’t stop the weapons.” Nothing happened as a mare called out casualty reports. “If you can’t stop them, Goddess, then tell me how.”

For the longest time, nothing. I wondered if she even heard me. Then several lines of code began to fly across my vision. I caught a glimpse of a few words that stood out. ‘OIA backchannel’. ‘Random walk encryption active’. Then a series of instructions appeared.

- >EC-1101 Priority Command
- >Backdoor Access: Password: Pokeysmoke.
- > Heir Protocol Enable
- > Ministry Mare descendant access.
- > Hoofington power grid access.
- > Luna and Celestia power generators at 97%. Authorization of Tokomare power generators pending EC-1101 access.
- > Do you wish to activate Tokomare power systems?
- >Y/N?

I froze. I’d forgotten that the Tokomare wasn’t the sole source of power in the Core. The two hydroelectric dams that flanked the Core must be running the weapons. Cognitum was trying to get *me* to turn on the Tokomare for her! “Forget it,” I countered, and hit no. The instructions repeated several times.

The *Castellanus* jerked as another beam nearly touched it. “We’re slowing down. I don’t know how much longer I can evade,” the helmsmare shouted.

“Abandon ship,” the general ordered, but the surviving bridgemares remained at their station. “That’s an order!”

“We’d be dead fifteen seconds after leaving our posts, ma’am. Just like the *Azimuth*,” a mare protested.

I hissed into my broadcaster, “You have ten seconds and then EC-1101 is dust. Horizons goes off. You lose!” Nothing. At this point I didn’t even know if we were still connected. Then, new instructions appeared in my vision.

- >EC-1101 Priority Command
- >Backdoor Access: Password: Pokeysmoke.
- >Heir Protocol Enable.
- >Ministry Mare descendant access.
- >Hoofington power grid access.
- > Substation access
- > Emergency shutdown SUB 8, SUB 10, SUB 12, SUB 13, SUB 19, SUB 20.
- >Password: Thisisgonnahurt
- >Confirm Emergency Shutdown Y/N? Emergency shutdown of power grid during power draw not recommended.
- >Y
- >Are you absolutely, positively sure?
- >Y
- > Execute: Y/N?

I closed my eyes, swallowed, and mentally hit Y.

My eyes swam with a solid block of rapidly scrolling code I couldn't begin to understand. Then one of the bridge mares shouted, "General! Look!"

Parts of the Core started to go dark. The lights flickered as one by one they died. As the streets and towers dimmed, the beams atop the roofs also halted. Then, one of the sides of a tower swelled like a glowing blister, bursting in flame and molten metal as green sparks shot out, arching along those black spiderwebs. I saw the base of one tower engulfed in flames that were crawling up the side of the building. Apparently, power substations didn't do so well when you pulled the plug on them while they were shooting energy weapons. The Enervation note receded and the cloud bank rolled in to obscure the Core once more. Still that sullen glow at the heart of the city remained like an ember.

"The attack's... stopped," one of the mares said in a daze.

"Damage control teams. I want a status update from all departments in two minutes," Storm Chaser said as she calmly wiped her brow. "What is the status of the fleet?"

A minute later, a bridge mare reported, "Only the *Azimuth* was lost, ma'am. *Perihelion*, *Lightning*, and *Helicity* are all reporting severe damage and are falling back. Only the *Blizzard*, *Galeforce*, and *Sirocco* report no significant damage."

"Of course not. We couldn't be so lucky today," she said with a grimace. "Status of the Tower?"

"It's not firing," another mare said. "I think that whatever happened down in the Core might have knocked them out too."

"Now's our chance. Contact any ship besides those three to help. Get us into a position to board--" Storm Chaser began to say, but another mare looked up.

"Transmission from Neighvarro," a brown bridge mare said as she pressed a hoof over her ear while working her flickering controls. "I can't put it on speaker, ma'am. One second..." she worked furiously with her wing tips, then thumped the keys with her hooves.

"Nevermind the speakers. What's Neighvarro telling us?" she asked.

I watched the mare's eyes unfocus as she listened, then widen in shock. "No. I..." she shook her head and blurted. "General... You... I... they say you have been relieved of your command!" The words made the general slump as if she'd just been shot. She pulled off her helmet, her eyes wide and glassy as she peered at nothing. The bridgemare went on, "We're to..." she faltered. "Oh no..."

"What is it?" the general ordered.

"We're being ordered to shell Thunderhead until Lighthooves surrenders himself and his weapons," she said weakly.

"What! Confirm that last! Who is in command? Who gave that order?" Storm Chaser barked. "Don't those idiots realize that the Tower is exposed now?"

She spoke rapidly into the microphone of her headset, then slumped back in the seat. "I don't know, ma'am. Just that the order's been repeated." The brown pegasus mare stomped her controls with her hooves in frustration. "Wait. I think I got it..." And then there was a crackle before the speakers came live.

A cold mare's voice came in over the speaker. "*Blizzard* to *Castellanus*. Storm Chaser, respond." The lack of rank was like a slap across her face. "Storm Chaser, please respond." The soft

amusement in her voice trickled through the ship like cold poison.

"This is General Storm Chaser," she said grimly.

"Oh, I'd heard a report that you'd died. So glad you're still alive." Another soft laugh that precluded any letting her off easy the next time we met. "Storm Chaser, would you please acknowledge Neighvarro's last order, or do you need me to relay it to you?" Captain Hoarfrost asked in amused tones that really made me regret not slamming her head in the door till it cracked like an egg... but then I had no one to blame but myself for that one.

"I have received a transmission from Neighvarro but I question if they are acting with full knowledge of the facts here," she said with supreme self-control. "The Tower's defenses are down, Hoarfrost. We can simply fly in and stop him!" Storm Chaser said sternly.

"I'm aware of that. The *Sleet* and *Cyclone* will secure the Tower. However, Neighvarro's ordered us to shell Thunderhead. A chastisement that is long overdue, to be sure," Hoarfrost practically purred. "I'm sure somepony will tell the rest of the council... eventually."

The general stared at the communication mare so intensely I thought she'd ignite. "I'm sorry, ma'am. Our long range transmitter is out."

"That is a civilian target! Who gave the order? It can't be with the sanction of the GPE!" Storm Chaser countered through clenched teeth. "Put us through to Neighvarro."

"This came from Councilor Ironfeather's office, and given the incompetence of the commander in the field, you have no authority to countermand it. I have been given battlefield commission to Colonel and placed in command of this exercise," Hoarfrost's icy voice dripped menace. "You can't pick and choose your orders anymore, Storm Chaser. Do you acknowledge the order, or not?"

"*Galeforce*, *Blizzard*, and *Sirocco* have weapons aligned with us," a mare intoned, her voice numb.

"Do you acknowledge the order?" Hoarfrost asked coolly.

"This is outrageous. The Enclave cannot--"

The *Castellanus* lurched as the rear of the ship was hit with something that made the whole vessel groan ominously. They were firing on their own now? "Do you acknowledge the order?"

The general looked at the battle-wrecked bridge, the battered bridge crew, the bodies that hadn't been cleared away, and the hole where the captain had vanished. "We acknowledge the order," Storm Chaser said quietly.

"General..." the helmsmare said, clearly as shocked as Storm Chaser had been moments ago.

"Do it properly, Storm Chaser. We'll relay your broadcast to the rest of the fleet," Hoarfrost replied.

The gray mare rose, her lips pressed together. There were tears on her cheeks, but her eyes were hard and furious. "This is General Storm Chaser. I acknowledge the order. I also wish to acknowledge to the fleet and the GPE that I am resigning in response to an order to kill our own. Never would I imagine that the Enclave that protected our kind for two centuries would stoop to wanton murder of Enclave citizens. It seems Rainbow Dash was right. 'Pegasi first' has become 'Military first'."

She turned to one of the bridge mares. "Please locate Lieutenant Flywheel. She needs to be

briefed on the boarding operation--”

“*Sleet* and *Cyclone* will be sufficient to capture the Tower and its launch systems intact. The *Castellanus* will not be needed,” Hoarfrost said coolly. “Move in position to fire on Thunderhead.”

“Intact? I ordered the launch facilities destroyed!” Storm Chaser blurted.

Hoarfrost nearly purred. “What a waste that would be. Neighvarro recognizes that they have a biological weapon and a delivery system that will make the quarantine a reality. With a few dozen missiles, we will be able to pacify the surface indefinitely. Ironfeather was appalled that the general wanted to destroy such an opportunity.” Now I *really* regretted not killing her. “Do you acknowledge my orders?”

Storm Chaser slumped in the seat and bowed her head. “Our weapon systems have been damaged. We will have to fall back until we can make repairs. *Castellanus* acknowledges the Enclave’s orders.”

“Very well, coward. Please make sure that whatever commissioned officer assumes command of the *Castellanus* does so as well. Civilians do not have the authority to command Enclave ships, after all.” Cold contempt came over the speakers. “Fall back to an intercept position. Storm Chaser, please confine yourself to quarters until this mess is resolved.”

“Of course,” Storm Chaser replied in a voice so hollow that it made me wonder if I’d done her wrong by saving her life.

It was too much for me. “I saved your life, Hoarfrost!” I snapped. “Don’t kill innocent ponies in Thunderhead!”

There was a pause. “Ah. The terrorist. You’re still alive.” Storm Chaser groaned as Hoarfrost continued, “Yes, you did. Let me show you my gratitude by giving you the chance to surrender.”

I glanced around the bridge. Maybe I could buy seconds. “Will you spare Thunderhead if I do?” I asked.

“Blackjack! No! That’s stupid, even for you!” Rampage snapped.

“Of course. I’ll dispatch some fliers to come pick you up. You have my word,” Hoarfrost said in amusement. “Please hold them till we arrive. That is an order.”

The former general sat back and said in a defeated voice. “Understood.”

“Signal ended,” the coms mare said. “Do you want me to try and get Neighvarro again? We might be able to get Cyclone to relay it?”

“No. It looks like they’re determined to make an example of Thunderhead. And us,” Storm Chaser said hollowly as she gazed at something a few thousand yards behind the screen displaying the Raptors. “Well, that explains why they left the missile system intact. They intended this all along.” She sighed and closed her eyes. I couldn’t imagine what she was feeling now, but she compartmentalized it and moved on to the next issue. “Blackjack, you can’t be serious about surrendering to them,” she said sharply as she frowned at me.

“No. But it might give Thunderhead a few minutes before they start firing,” I said as I opened my broadcaster and selected Glory’s PipBuck. “This is Blackjack Radio. Things are bad. General is removed from command. Tower is disabled. Enclave wants the plague and they’re going to shell Thunderhead. Give warning however you can. Love you. Promise I’ll try and stay out of trouble till I see you again.” I wished she had a broadcaster too so she could talk back. I really would like the advice of a

smart pony.

"You can communicate with someone in Thunderhead?" Storm Chaser asked.

"Sure. My very special pony is there with a radio. She's the one who stopped her Rainbow Dash impression," I said.

"And you're doing so on non-Enclave channels." She sighed, "Blackjack, you really need to learn to convey pertinent information." She reached over and lifted my hoof. "Turn it on." And then, "This is Storm Chaser. You have about five minutes to get away from the equatorial regions. Take shelter in the internal support structures. If they inflict critical damage..." she paused and looked at me. "Where's a place down below that would be safe for them?"

"In the Wasteland?" I gaped a moment at that thought. 'Safe' and 'the Hoof' did not go well together. At all. Still, I could think of a few places they wouldn't be instantly killed. "The Rainbow Dash Skyport. The Volunteer Corps had some supplies there. The Society, I suppose. The Collegiate... er, Hoofington University. Megamart. Hoofington Memorial Hospital. Fluttershy Medical Center. Even the Hoofington Sports Arena," I said to the broadcaster.

Rampage guffawed. "Oh sure. Big Daddy will just love that!"

"But he won't kill them and turn them into coats on sight, will he?" I countered.

She rubbed her chin. "Eh... mmaaybe not," she conceded with a little nod. "He tends to prefer thrashing dumbasses. And I think he wants to make a balaclava next. Refugees are kinda under his weight class."

"Just make sure they mention Security. They should be okay for a few days." I blinked and realized that I seriously believed that. Somehow, in my meandering travels across the Wasteland, I'd met horrible ponies that lived to kill and dominate, but I'd also met the good ones too. And that, hopefully, I'd done well enough that they would take them in for a while.

Past a while... well, we'd have to work something out. "Guess I better get out of here before they come and haul me off," I said as I cut off the connection.

"So you're not going to nobly trot to your death?" Rampage asked, and then relaxed as I shook my head. "I was worried for a second. You're occasionally really stupid about things like that."

"Thanks," I replied dryly. "If I thought I could trust her to keep her word, I might. I'm just not that optimistic anymore." I regarded Storm Chaser. "I'm afraid that I'm going to have to make my escape now. What about you? What are you going to do, General?" I asked. The rank seemed to sicken her.

"What is there to do?" she said simply. "I have been relieved of command. I have resigned. I suppose I should begin to prepare a defense for my court martial."

"You're not going to try and help?"

She turned away. "There is little I can do at this point. One damaged Raptor cannot combat three or more, and trying would mean the loss of this crew." I looked around at the bridge mares, but all were pretending not to hear as they kept their eyes averted from the disgraced general. "I would accompany you, but I'd be twice a fool. I'm a decade or more past the age where I could fly out, do something reckless, and pretend it was glorious."

I felt a cold, mechanical stillness sweep through me. "What about Thunderhead?" I asked numbly. She didn't answer. "What about my friends? What about all those ponies? You have to do

something!”

“What?” she asked in return a mirthless smile on her face as her eyes distant and dead. “What do you expect me to do? We lost. They got the Tower.” As if to nail the point home, on the front screen was the smoking spire of Shadowbolt Tower. “They won.”

It was that word that set me off. “This is not a game! How can you just... give up?”

“Part of being an officer is accepting the reality that bad things happen and there is nothing you can do to change that.” Her eyes turned to the glowing mass that was the captain who saved all our lives, then surveyed all the injured and battered mares at their stations, then finally the battered stallions, living and dead, who had faced an augmented enemy and won. “I can’t risk more lives for a fool’s errand. The Enclave has removed me from command, and they’ll have their damned Tower.”

I stared at her, starting to understand exactly what she was feeling. She was on a mattress of her very own. Unfortunately, I couldn’t think of what to say to snap her out of it. Rampage sighed and started towards the door. “Come on, Blackjack. She’s done.”

Storm Chaser glanced at her. “You have a better idea? Or you, Blackjack?”

“Ideas! That’s all it is with you ponies. It really isn’t just Glory!” Rampage said as she turned and sneered at Storm Chaser. “Sometimes you just have to fight! So you don’t know what exactly to do next? So what! Look at Blackjack! She makes everything up as she goes. Sure, it doesn’t always work out, but at least she’s doing something.”

“What do you expect to me to do?” Storm Chaser glowered at her. “I’ve been stripped of command!”

“Have you been stripped of respect too?” Rampage scoffed. “I served under one of the finest officers in the Equestrian Army. Colonel Cupcake. Pudgy little bastard couldn’t lick a zebra unless you dipped it in chocolate first, but we followed his orders into hell more than once. Not because Luna told us to, but because we knew he’d always do what was right. This fight isn’t over yet, and you know that plague is super bad news, so are you going to pony up and prove that you actually deserve that rank, or go sulk in your cabin and think about how absolutely and utterly you failed today?”

Twist then smiled at me through Rampage’s eyes. “I know Big Macintosh wouldn’t give up. Even if it killed him, he’d go down doing what’s right. It’s just the kind of pony he was.”

“I won’t risk the lives of this crew...” the general began.

“Permission to speak freely?” the brown Coms mare said as she rose to her hooves. The formal request made Storm Chaser sit up a little straighter in her seat and she nodded. “Every single pony on this ship, from the commanding officer down to the lowliest private, knows what’s at stake. We didn’t join the Enclave to stay safe, get connected with the powerful muckity mucks, and retire after twenty years. We serve because we believe that the Enclave does the right thing. If things really are so bad that some windbrained nag thinks shelling one of our own settlements is anything short of an atrocity, then we’re finished. We need ponies like you if the Enclave is ever going to have a chance.”

The surviving bridge mares began to stomp their hooves and cheer. Storm Chaser looked at the soldiers, but they too nodded, smiled, and even cheered as well. She seemed to be searching for somepony to disapprove, but Rampage nodded with her wide grin, and even Boo stomped her pale hooves... even if the blank didn’t seem to know what she was stomping for. I met Storm Chaser’s eyes, and the gray mare finally showed signs of life again.

Storm Chaser sighed. “I wonder if your LittlePip friend knew she was going to start a civil war

with one balefire bomb,” she asked wryly.

I smiled and answered, “Probably not. It’s just funny how things end up that way.” Storm Chaser shook her head, and her expression turned more solemn.

She closed her eyes. “I did not want it to come to this. I would have given almost anything to keep us from killing our own. It goes against everything the pegasi are. We’re competitive, passionate, and driven, perhaps unreasonably so, but we never spilled the blood of our own. I’ll have to take solace in the fact that Neighvarro ordered this, and that my surrender won’t stop it. But I’m at a bit of a loss as to what I can do with only one damaged ship.”

The brown coms mare smiled. “I’ll patch a line in with the coms officers of the *Cyclone* and *Lightning*. They have to want to stop this.”

The russet helmsmare nodded, “Colonel Sonata would have followed orders, but Captain Cirrus was a close friend of Captain Racewind. I know she’ll help.”

“Can you do it without Hoarfrost finding out?” Storm Chaser asked.

The coms mare grinned. “I will, ma’am. Even if I have to fly over a tin can tied to a string!”

“That still leaves me with the question of what I can do with a few damaged ships.”

“You could ram them!” Rampage said with a grin. “Or abandon ship and let *me* ram them! Oh! Let me do it! Please? Pretty please with murder and mayhem on top.” It seemed like Rampage was back to herself.

“That wouldn’t address the Tower,” Storm Chaser replied.

“So I’ll ram the Tower.”

“Which wouldn’t stop *Blizzard* and the other Raptors,” Storm Chaser answered smoothly.

“Okay, so I’ll ram all the Raptors into the Tower!” She twitched a moment in silence. “Ugh... you’re thinking too much again. Just let me do it! It’ll be awesome!” She looked around hopefully, but saw nopony eager to entertain that idea. “Oh come on. It’s not like we have another balefire bomb to blow them all up in one big boom!”

A sensation like lightning began at my tail and zinged right up to my scalp. I slowed, staring off into space. She couldn’t... I didn’t... I muttered quietly, “When they act like babies, you have to take it away...”

“What?” Storm Chaser asked. What indeed, but my mind was going a mile a minute down disturbingly familiar paths. It was impossible. No pony could do it. There was no way.

Unless...

Oh!

Oh shit.

“I think Rampage is right,” I said absently. If I did this wrong a lot of ponies were going to die. But if I did it right... If I dared...

“Hot damn!” Rampage said as she rushed to helm, plucked the visor from the helmsmare’s head, and popped it askew on her own. She shoved the russet mare aside and gleefully rubbed her hooves together over the controls. Then her rubbing slowed as she glared at all the buttons. “Um...” She tapped

a few and nudged the panel. "What? Are you telling me that I got a dozen souls in me and none of them can fly this thing?!" She turned to the irate helmsman. "Where's the manual? I need to learn how to crash this thing."

"Tell me you aren't seriously proposing this?" Storm Chaser said with a worried frown. "I'm not sure a Raptor ramming the Tower would bring it down, even supposing Hoarfrost didn't shoot her down."

I opened my mouth, then stopped. "No. But... I do have something that might work. And since Lighthooves might be watching me..." I looked around and spotted a chunk of charred cyberpony... well, they had attacked us... I closed my eyes and began to write on the deck four words, fifteen letters. I fought hard to resist the urge to peek. "Don't say it!" I blurted, hoping that my lines were straight and not wandering all over the floor. The bridge suddenly grew very quiet.

Then Rampage broke it with a chuckle and a sincere, "Blackjack, I fucking love you."

* * *

"You're insane," Storm Chaser said as I trotted towards the slagged, ozone-reeking hole that the Tower's weapons had ripped through the armored hull. "Certifiably mad."

"I won't argue that at this moment, but it's the only way to neutralize both the Tower and the Raptors attacking Thunderhead, and I can't do it without your help." I stepped out and was immediately blasted by a gust of cold air. Outside was a narrow ledge that ran along the hull right next to the *Castellanus's* disintegration cannons. Rampage sulked a bit having been informed that she'd have to save her Raptor ramming trick for another day. Still, something to keep in mind.

Off in the distance I could see five Raptors close to the Tower. The rest were hanging back and silently watching. I hoped that Lighthooves couldn't seize his moment and fire a missile past them. Of the five lining up to fire on the settlement, four were on one side, pointing their cannons at the distant cloudy torus of Thunderhead, while one was on the other. Any second, she'd start firing. Soon as Hoarfrost heard I'd 'escaped', probably.

"Thank the skies the *Cyclone* has agreed to help. The *Lightning* may as well if they can get that fire under control. I don't know about the *Sleet*. Captain Snowblind never lets anyone see what she's planning," Storm Chaser answered. "I can only hope one of the others comes to our side when they see that Hoarfrost is serious about shelling civilians."

"We need another ship," I said with a frown.

"Preferably one that isn't struggling just to stay in the sky," Storm Chaser agreed.

"Wait. Wait wait wait. Are you saying that we need to capture an enemy ship?" Rampage asked.

"Well, it would be nice," I said, a little sarcastically.

The armored mare pointed towards the disintegration cannons at the front of the *Castellanus*. "What's the range on those things?"

"Ten miles... why?" she asked, a little warily now.

"And if I get one of their Raptors, can I ram *that* ship into something?" Rampage asked.

Storm Chaser looked a little pained. "Raptors are just a touch precious and irreplaceable, Rampage."

The striped mare snorted and rolled her eyes. "That's what makes it awesome, duh."

I glanced at the gray pegasus, and she just shrugged. "Okay, Rampage. If you capture an enemy ship, you can crash it."

"Sweet!" She started to dance a little back and forth. "My own Raptor. This is gonna be so! Awesome!"

Storm Chaser sighed softly. "Irony. Even if he didn't outright destroy the fleet, Lighthooves might very well achieve his goals. If operations in the north and west fail, there may not be much of an Enclave left. And with your plan..."

"Shh." I tapped my head. "He might be listening." I was going to smash that Perceptitron thing to bits if it meant a little less paranoia for me.

She sighed. "Well. The fact is that the Enclave's power has been wearing thin for generations. I might not have agreed with Thunderhead's pride and certainly not their methods, but I freely admit that they were correct about the slow degradation of our war machine."

"Maybe that's a good thing. Balefire bombs, Raptors, Thunderheads... maybe the world will be a little better without them in it," I told her.

"And yet we're using tools like those to try and save lives too," she replied. "The fault lies not within our tools, but inside our hearts."

"Maybe," I said as I walked out on the edge. "So, Afterburner's ponies are in the landing bay looking for me... so all I have to do is... ah... oh..." Oh, that was a long way down...

"Don't worry. I'll make sure they don't 'relieve the general of her command'," Rampage promised. "And I'll keep Boo safe."

Now to make my escape. My brain locked up as I stared down and utterly refused to do what I needed it to do. "Um... Rampage?"

"Huh?" she blinked.

"A little help?" I asked in a tiny voice as I closed my eyes.

"Oh. Oh! Right." She moved behind me. "It must be my birthday."

"Any time now," I said, rapidly rethinking this. Maybe I could dig through the magic book for some other trick...

"One second, Blackjack. Let me savor the moment," Rampage said with a chuckle. "Pull!" And then two metal hooves clanged against my backside and launched me into the air. A second later I heard her shout, "Boo! No!"

And now I was falling. And while I understand that at times I am quite terrifying to certain ponies, I believe I set a new record for screaming like a little filly as I plunged through the air. This was the second time in two days... really, I had a feeling that there was something fundamentally wrong with having my hooves off the ground. The wind roared in my ears as I dared to look down at the rapidly approaching cloud layer. Those were fluffy clouds. Soft, fluffy clouds. I'd hit them with a great big 'pwoof' and laugh about it later.

Unless, a purple pony in my head speculated, my armored body proved too dense and punched right through the clouds to land somewhere in the vicinity of Riverside, or the river. After all, the clouds were recently disturbed and might not support-- I took that purple pony, mentally tied her up, gagged her,

and threw her in a closet in my brain. Those were soft, fluffy clouds. Soft and... soft...

"Fluffy!" I screamed a second before I hit! For a terrifying second I kept falling, but then felt myself quickly slow. I came to a rest, my forelegs catching on the cloud around me.

My rear hooves kicked open air.

"Okay. It worked! Nice and Fluffy clouds... nice... and..." I frowned as I felt my forehooves start to slip as I was tugged downward. "Fluffy... fluffy... come on!" I said as I swung my legs hoping to grab something a little more substantial and failed. My head popped free, and I suddenly had a view of the ground, and something in my brain broke as the clouds around my hooves began to pull away. My last thought was going to be that I could see my house from here.

Then I felt a pain in my scalp as my direction was reversed and I was hauled back up into the clouds. When I couldn't see the thousands of feet of empty air below me, my brain kicked in and I looked up to see Boo biting my mane and struggling to haul me up. Fortunately, she provided just enough pull for me to quickly scramble up into the cloud. Together, we sat in the middle of a fog bank, the hole I'd punched in my descent rapidly filling up. "Okay. Boo. No more falling. How is that for a plan?" Boo just cocked her head and blinked at me. I reached out and ruffled her mane. "That's what I thought. Glad we had this talk."

Soon, there was one lone cloud scudding its way over fields of rotten vegetation, propelled by my telekinesis. The Enervation had killed acres and acres of the floating crops, and they hung in the air, dangling limply, the bizarre plants dropping one by one through the clouds as their air sacs burst with flaccid hisses. Normally, that would have concerned me, but at the moment I could see green flashes along the curved wall of Thunderhead. The smooth torus now flickered and flashed, with tiny pockmarks appearing in the smooth side. Hoarfrost was taking her time. If she'd really wanted a body count, she would have taken a Raptor inside the city itself. It was my only hope, because somewhere in that cloud were three of my closest friends, one of whom had just gotten her snuggly body back!

Call me shallow, but in addition to saving tens of thousands of lives and preventing the spread of a cannibalistic plague across the world, I really really looked forward to renewing that snugglage. I wonder if that one spot behind her knee would still make her squeak...

It was times like this that I really wished that LittlePip were with me. With my cloudwalking spell and her telekinesis, we could have flown halfway to the moon with no trouble. As it was, I pattered along as fast as I could push myself and tried to ignore the fighting above.

Suddenly, the cloud layer fell away in a tattered edge, and I found myself in open air on my little cloud. Beneath me stretched the Core in every direction, the green light suffusing its black canyons. I remembered folks saying that a balefire bomb had gone off in the city. I'd seen the kind of devastation one of those could do; I felt skeptical that something like that had gone off here. It was clear that *something* had happened, though. Few of the monolithic buildings rose vertically. They all seemed to be off by a few degrees. Some actually leaned far enough over to touch. The streets were filled with green light that seemed to come up from the ground, shining from deep below. Swirling black twisters crawled along the streets and buildings. Many of the towers were breached, and cables and wires were strewn from building to building like rotten entrails. Green lightning occasionally snapped from one building to the next.

How could Dawn think ponies could ever live in such a place? How did anypony ever think of building such a place?

So close, Enervation sounded less like a scream and more like... something else. It was almost a machine noise. A staticky note that plucked at my heart. I checked Boo, afraid she'd be coughing up

blood, but the blank just blinked back at me, cocking her head in confusion. “Huh. Guess it’s not just a cyberpony thing after all.” Well, that was the second bit of good news I’d had today.

Storm Front had said there that were two ways in. One way at the top and one down at the cloud layer. First, I tried my own way in. I stuck the sword in the side of the Tower and sliced down, then around, and tried to tug open a hole. No chance. The wall was clearly thicker than my sword. So I scuttled my way around, looking up and down the massive structure for a way in. Up close, the Tower swelled to proportions that threw my sense of direction out of whack. I felt a touch of vertigo as up and down became confused with the horizontal. The hexagonal faces of the Tower were simply so large that a part of my brain wanted to walk on it.

From a distance, the Tower appeared a uniform black, but as I drew closer and closer, it appeared more of a midnight blue. The surface wasn’t metal, as I’d supposed. It was the same glassy material as the rest of the Core. A layer of ceramic coating the steel underneath. In places, the layer had chipped away and created bleeding holes of oxidization that streaked the surface like bullet wounds. I pattered my little cloud along the face of the Tower, heading down and around as I searched for the entrance.

I could feel the Enervation tugging at me, countered by that strange tuneless song within. At this point, I’d given up guessing what could be causing it. Just one of many things to ask Professor Zodiac when next we met. I looked down into the very center of the city, where six enormous towers rose from the foundations below. The ground in the midst of them had fallen away into a deep pit from which issued that soft, baleful green glow.

There! The door resembled little more than a round scar in the side of the colossal building, but when I got down to it, it was easily twice as large as myself. ‘Ministry of Awesome -- No Trespassing’. Little chance of that here. I couldn’t see any latch or control, but I doubted that the hatch was as thick as the exterior wall. After all, it was supposed to be opened. Once more I sliced around the perimeter of the hatch, then cut an X through the middle. I gave them a kick, then another, and then the triangles of steel pulled free and tumbled into the Core below. I hopped into the gap and then paused, my eyes drawn down into that emerald pit.

She was down there... Cognitum, and possibly Dawn too. I could just go down there and end it. Get my answers, stop her, and wake from this bad dream I’d been living for two months. All it would take was for me to throw the lives of thousands into the wind. “You’re lucky I have bigger things to worry about,” I growled, pointing a hoof at the glowing pit below me. “But don’t get too comfortable. The second I’m done here, you’re next.” There was every possibility that this would get me killed, but, for the first time in a long time, I didn’t feel the slightest selfish hope that I’d die.

I looked into the dark interior of the Tower. “Time to double down,” I said, smiling as I imagined Lighthooves listening in and watching me check my ammo for Vigilance. Then, with that smile, I headed into the depths of Shadowbolt Tower.

END PART ONE

(Author’s notes: Sigh... I really wanted this chapter to be the finale of the Thunderhead Arc. I really did. But after edits... revisions... more revisions... re-revisions... it got to the point where if I wrote out the whole thing, it’d be 70 pages. Much as I love Kkat’s canterlot chapter, that’s a bit much for any one chapter to read through at once. So this chapter is coming in two parts. Part Two will be in a few more weeks.

As usual, I want to give thanks to Hinds, Bronode (AKA Niphl), Swicked, Fuzzy, and Hidden Fortune for helping me get this chapter out. We went through four versions, one with no pony dying, one with the general dying, one with the general and captain dying, and one with just the captain dying. I think this version is the best, though it will change the general's arc. As always, thank you Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. And I'd like to thank everyone who has continued reading this long and provide feedback wherever it gets posted.

Lastly, I'd like a special thank you to certain people who have helped me immensely this month. As some of you may know, the teaching job I moved here for fell through and the school decided not to fill it. So I've been struggling to get into their sub teacher program, but it's been an arduous process. I'm still waiting for the background check to pass. I have a temp job, but it's only 16 hours a week and brings in less than 200 a week. I'm starting to work on an original manuscript for E-publication too; hopefully that will help me get ahead of my bills too. Still, if it weren't for these people's help, I probably wouldn't have made it.

So a very heartfelt thank you to Кутлюев, Steven, Stepan, Donovan, Michael, Mel, Alexander, Nathan, Kenneth, Frank, Michael L., Keith, Lawrence, Alexander L., Tech, Martin, Nick, Swicked, Wes, Stuart, Cory, Jeremy, Brandon, Brian, Mac, Steven Z, Spencer, Christian, Ryan, Patrick, Erick, Jeffery and all the others who helped me out. When I started writing this, I never imagined the generosity and kindness of my readers. As much as the support and feedback keep the story going, these generous folk have helped to keep me going. If it weren't for them and others like them, I wouldn't have made it. So thank you and thank you to everyone who supports this story and its creator. Any additional help will be greatly appreciated till Clark County School District gets its head out of its butt and finishes processing my paperwork.

Again, thank you everyone.